

# The Heidelberg Catechism

*Catechism, or Christian Instruction, according to the Usages of the Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate*

## What?

- 129 questions and answers
- 52 Lord's days
- 3 sections
  - The Misery of Man (Guilt)
  - The Redemption of Man (Grace)
  - The Thankfulness Due from Man (Gratitude)

## Where?

- Heidelberg, chief city of the Palatinate
- Palatinate, princely state of the Holy Roman Empire
- Germany

## Who?

- Elector Frederick III – a prince of the Holy Roman Empire commissioned, directed its production, secured its approval by Heidelberg Synod, and defended it before the imperial diet
- Zacharius Ursinus – theology professor, friend of Frederick III primary responsibility for the final draft, chief expositor, chief apologist
- Caspar Olevianus- court preacher to Frederick III
- other pastors and theologians from the city and the University of Heidelberg

## When?

- Commissioned in 1559 by Frederick III, elector of the Palatinate
- First published in 1563
- Adopted as one of the Three Forms of Unity by the Synod of Dort in 1618

## Why then?

- Upheaval: church and state
  - Late 1550's saw move from Catholicism to Lutheranism, then to a more Reformed position
  - Frederick III strove to ensure consistency of belief and practice, to settle disputes
- Read the preface written by Frederick III

## Why now?

- a road map, a guide to a great wealth of information
- product of many centuries of study by a great company of believers
- the Heidelberg Catechism has been tested
- we do not have to reinvent the wheel!

Things to ponder:

1. *Why is it wise to begin learning the Christian faith by using a catechism?*
2. *Where are we to find our ultimate authority? Luke 1:1-4, John 2:22, John 16:13, 1 Peter 1:10-12, 2 Peter 1: 16-21*

These are some of the main motives that Elector Frederick III had in his heart when he commissioned the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. If you want to read the entire preface for yourself, it's one of the resources on this website. <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/new/?s=8#sthash.G9eaLHXH.dpuf>

## **The Church always needs to improve**

Frederick III gratefully acknowledged that some of his predecessors had worked hard to advance people's understanding of the Bible, as well as their application of it in their daily lives. Still, as the saying goes, there's always room for improvement. However, the Bible is a large book, with many truths, some of which are revealed in historical writings, others in poetry and still others in visions. At times it's challenging to fit all these details together in one coherent picture. And if someone doesn't grasp the big picture, how he will comprehend the details, let alone apply them in his daily life? Precisely here is where the Catechism helps the church move forward. It provides an easy-to-understand guide to the "big picture" and also shows Christians how to begin applying Scripture to the nitty-gritty of daily living.

## **The youth are the future of the Church**

Whether they lived back in the sixteenth century or whether they are sitting in your family room right now, children are still children, and teenagers are still teenagers. By nature they are not necessarily inclined to pick up God's Word and read it from cover to cover. Yet at the same time, if they don't learn the gospel of salvation well, the future of the Church begins to look pretty bleak, doesn't it? The Catechism is especially geared toward youth. It speaks at a level they can understand. It asks questions for which they want answers. Using the Catechism with the youth of the church will bring forth a bountiful harvest of righteousness for generations to come.

## **Pastors are not always consistent with each other**

Most preachers are sincere, hard-working individuals who are worthy of our respect (**1 Tim 5:17**). They do their best to explain God's Word to their congregations. However, truth be told, each pastor has his favourite doctrines that he loves to speak about. Even if it's not intentional, he might skip over other doctrines. Beyond that, one pastor may explain the significance of Christ's death in one way, while the pastor in the next congregation does it differently. Sometimes the two approaches are complimentary, but other times it's confusing. Preachers don't have to be carbon-copies of each other, but consistency among them would go a long way toward strengthening the church. The Catechism was written to encourage consistent and coherent preaching and teaching among pastors.

## **Curious believers sometimes get stuck on irrelevant questions**

Generally speaking, curiosity is a good thing. You learn by asking lots of questions. However, there's another side to that coin. Sometimes Christians get tangled up debating questions for which there are no answers in the Bible. Or the matter under discussion is really quite trivial in the grand scheme of things. What was God doing before the world was created? Do angels have two or six wings? The Catechism teaches us to ask genuinely important questions. In fact, many of the questions asked in the Catechism have significance not only for this life, but for eternal life. Learning to ask really profitable questions is another strong reason for using the Catechism.

## **Spotting heresy is often more tricky than you think**

Many heretics sound surprisingly orthodox. They refer to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They proclaim Christ's death on the cross, and call people to put their trust in God's eternal Son. Still, like the Bereans (**Acts 17:11**), we are called to compare everyone's teaching with the inspired standard of God's Holy Word. But who has the time to do that consistently? Who has enough knowledge of the Bible at his fingertips to discern truth from error, efficiently and accurately? Certainly, any help we can obtain for pinpointing heresy is most welcome. And that's another thing the Catechism has to offer. It does not shy away from the task of pointing out errors, and pointing us away from them, for our own spiritual well-being.

We hope you'll see that Frederick III's reasons for having a catechism are still relevant in the church today. If God's people needed a faithful summary of Scripture back in the sixteenth century, we still need it in the twenty-first century--perhaps even more urgently.