

The Heidelberg's Place in Church History

Stephen Griffith

Most introductions to the Heidelberg Catechism talk about Frederick III, Elector Palatine of the Rhine and his determination to put forth a catechism in 1559. He laid the duty of preparing it upon Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, the two individuals credited with the Heidelberg Catechism.

Although the above facts are correct, it is flawed and unsatisfactory. It does not consider the Church's hard fought battles for the understanding of God's Word throughout the preceding fifteen centuries, which was absolutely necessary to the content and structure of the Heidelberg Catechism..

For Christ gave us “. . .the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–12). Paul is referring to those upholding the teachings of the church in his generation, but it also includes those to whom Christ gifts within this local church, this generation, and throughout two thousand years of church history.

The struggles of the church are many and continual. But a few momentous acts bear mentioning as turning points in Church history, creating a foundation built upon by the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Fall of Jerusalem

The first of these earth-shaking occasions was the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This cut the cord of Christianity as just being an appendage, or cult, of Judaism. It helped push the faith into the rest of the world. And this spreading out of the church also moved overseers of the church to strengthen the administrative structure, adding bishops in charge of groups of churches, to the elders and deacons delineated by Paul and Timothy.

Then, to feed the spiritual hunger of the new Christians and churches, the church needed basic materials. As Mark A. Noll says in his excellent book, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*:

“New Testament canon grew out of the lived realities of the church’s life. The church required standards for worship and models for prayers, liturgies, and sermons. The church needed reading material for public and private devotion. The church needed a theological standard for responding to non-Christian critics and for adjudicating doctrinal disputes within its own ranks, and it needed a set text to translate as the gospel message moved out of the Hellenistic Mediterranean into the Latin west and then farther east toward Asia and north into Europe.”

In addition to the eventual canonizing of the four gospels, letters, and histories, the church developed short statements of belief summarizing Christian teaching and introducing inquirers to the faith, which helped stabilize the Church.

One of the earliest creedal statements on record is from Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110):

Turn a deaf ear to any speaker who avoids mention of Jesus Christ who was of David’s line, born of Mary, who was truly born, ate and drank; was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, truly crucified and died while those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth beheld it; who also was truly raised from the dead, the Father having raised him, who in like manner will raise us also who believe in him— his Father, I say, will raise us in Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have not true life.

The Council of Nicea (325)

Another decisive moment in church history was the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Just as Roman’s attempted the destruction Judaism and Christianity in the razing of the temple, Nero and Diocletian tortured and murdered Christians during their reigns. Politics also played an important role in the Council of Nicea, albeit in the opposite way.

The Emperor Constantine (272-337), for both spiritual and political reasons, did an about face and embraced the Christian faith, and ended oppression for all religions.

A further historical truth was his expansion of the Roman Empire which allowed the forming church to call its first great council in 325.

The need for clarification of doctrine became necessary because of a teacher named Arius. He was a popular figure and his view of the person of Christ spread like wildfire, especially through songs and hymns (#1 on the pop charts). His catch-phrase “there was a time when the Son was not” had a wide acceptance. Constantine, knowing of the controversy, either did not understand the implications fully, or merely turned it back on Church leadership to decide. For seven weeks a diverse group of leaders from churches across the empire argued and discussed the controversy, ending with the statement of the Nicene Creed, still used in churches today.

The Nicene Creed stated Christ was true God from true God. He was of one substance with the Father and this statement was held to be a true summary of Jesus’ own teaching that, “I and the Father are one” (*John 10: 30*). Christ was begotten, not made. Christ became human for us humans and for our salvation.

The Council of Chalcedon (451)

Heresies continued to flourish and this time it concerned the dual nature of Christ. Was Christ all God, all Human, mostly God, or mostly human? Because of the heresies floating around (one church father noted 271 different departures from established beliefs), another council was called. Not all Christendom united behind this council’s statement, but most did. And heresies continue to abound on this particular subject even today (see *Taking The Shack to the Shed*, Christianity Today <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2008/june-online-only/taking-shack-to-shed.html>>)

But the statement of Chalcedon is a deep and thorough defense of the Catholic and Protestant view of the Trinity. Perhaps a later Sunday School series can parse the particulars of this historic creed.

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

The Diet of Worms 1521

An unusual heading I agree, but a historic event. Martin Luther had been summoned to Worms, Germany to recant his heresy, which in boiled-down form was that in Christ, the sinner could receive the righteousness of God as a gift. His statement:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.”

This statement of Luther's shook the world! Why the explosion at this time? Others had said the same thing earlier, like Augustine in the 300s,

John Hus in the early 1400s, or John Wessel of Gansfort (d. 1489). But according to Mark Noll, it was the availability of the printing press and “only when Luther began to protest against current church practices, which he thought obscured the free gift of grace to be found through faith in Christ, that his private discoveries led to public antagonism.”

The Diet of Worms dismissed Luther’s argument and therefore lit the fuse to the Protestant Reformation. Thirty-eight years later when there was doctrinal tension between Lutherans and Calvinists, Frederick III called for the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Ursinius made use of other catechisms in the writing of the Heidelberg (such as Luther’s Small Catechism (1529), Brenz’s Smaller Catechism (1535), Jud’s Shorter Catechism (1541), Calvin’s Genevan Catechism (1545), Lasco’s (Large) Emden Catechism (1546), Lasco’s Small Emden Catechism (1554), and his own Smaller Catechism (1561/62) and Larger Catechism (1562) but it was his pastoral heart and doctrinal purity that led the Heidelberg Catechism to become more widely circulated than any other book except the Bible, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a catechism of unusual power and beauty, an acknowledged masterpiece.

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The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.