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ON THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

ABSTRACT

Reflection on the origins of the Heidelberg Catechism reveals it to be a document of understanding between Calvinistic-Reformed, Zwinglian and Lutheran-Philippistic tendencies within Protestantism. One important reason for the success of the Heidelberg Catechism was the fact that each one of these groups appreciated the Catechism. At the same time it clearly distances itself from Tridentine Catholicism and from the Gnesio-Lutheran variant of Lutheranism. This occurs mainly in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The repudiation of the mass as "condemnable idolatry" is a result of the orientation to the Reformation of John Calvin. Here papal religion was seen as superstition and a fundamental violation of the true worship of God as well as an infringement of God's honour. The experience of persecution by the Papal church in France and the Netherlands aggravated the criticism.

The most famous and influential part of the Heidelberg Catechism is its first question and answer:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

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Such a beginning of a catechism, the summary of the whole content in such a central question is very much in line with Reformation theology. It corresponds to the Reformation conviction that the centre of the Christian belief is to be found in the care bestowed upon us by a merciful God, in whom faith and trust are to be placed – contrary to all appearance and contrary to so many experiences in this world.

The first question of Heidelberg Catechism with its concentration on the consolation, the certainty, that “not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven”, agrees with common Reformation conviction. At the same time, this incisive formulation reveals the special and idiosyncratic nature of the Heidelberg Catechism as compared to Martin Luther and the Lutheran Protestantism that was so defining in Germany at this time.

This characteristic feature is directly connected with the formation of the Catechism, particularly when one takes a closer look at the participants involved, their experiences and the challenges they faced. In the following we will focus on these special experiences and challenges – mainly the persecution of Protestants in Western Europe – with three lines of thought. After that, I will briefly mention and outline the participants involved in the composition. Only against this background can the theological profile and the specific theological concerns of the Heidelberg Catechism be discerned. Before discussing the aforementioned aspects, I would like to explain the place the Electoral Palatinate has within the general framework of Reformation history.

1. THE LATE INTRODUCTION OF THE REFORMATION IN THE ELECTORAL PALATINATE

The Reformation was introduced quite late in the Electoral Palatinate (Sehling 1969:22-34; Wolgast 1998:24-32). Of course, the evangelical writings of Luther began spreading quickly as early as the 1520s. At this time Protestant churches were already being established throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In the 1530s the Reformation continued to spread with apparent relentlessness, so that by the end of the 1530s the north and the east of the Empire had become extensively Protestant. At the beginning of the 1540s the ecclesiastical prince elector, Archbishop Hermann von Wied, requested that Martin Bucer, the Reformer of Strasbourg, come to the Electorate of Cologne to reorganize this princely territory according to Reformation principles. This development seemed particularly threatening to Charles V, since the whole northwest of the Empire threatened to fall to Protestantism through the Electorate of Cologne. That would have meant

that the Habsburg Netherlands would have been cut off from the Catholic territories in the Empire. Because of this, the emperor reacted vigorously, first by instigating a “battle of printed pamphlets”. This was followed soon after by preparations for a military campaign against the Protestants. In 1546 the so-called Schmalkaldic War broke out. On April 24, 1547 the Protestants were thoroughly defeated. The leaders of the Schmalkaldic League, Elector Johann Friedrich of Saxony and landgrave Philipp of Hesse, were taken prisoners.

The tide soon turned in favour of the Protestants, however, and in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 they were able to achieve far-reaching legal security for the Reformation. With the principle “*cuius regio eius religio*” the Protestant authorities were given the right to introduce the Reformation on the terms of the Confessio Augustana of 1530. The Peace of Augsburg signalled a big improvement for the Protestants, for they now no longer had to fear imperial legal sanctions in case they should introduce the Reformation.

The peace of Augsburg in 1555 was the immediate pre-condition for an area-wide introduction of the Reformation in the Electoral Palatinate. There had previously been several isolated attempts to put Reformation ideas into practice. For example, in 1545 Prince Elector Frederick II (Elector since 1544) took communion in both kinds and enacted the first church ordinances which included the mass in German, emphasis on the Bible and restrictions on the veneration of saints. Nevertheless, he tried to assume a mediating position between the Emperor and the Protestant princes (Schindling/Ziegler 1993:9-24; Wolgast 1998:17-32).

These incipient attempts to introduce the Reformation were discontinued after the defeat of the Protestants in the Schmalkaldic War. The Augsburg Interim of 1548 imposed upon the Protestants a religious law which rolled back the achievements of the Reformation extensively. Only communion in both kinds and clerical marriage continued to be allowed, but this was only until a council would enact definitive regulations.

In the year after the Peace of Augsburg, Count Palatine Ottheinrich of the Palatine Neuburg branch line became Elector and set about at once introducing the Reformation with governmental means. Immediately after assuming power in the Electoral Palatinate, he instructed his senior civil servants in a Reformation mandate of April 16, 1556 to model the teaching and ordinances of the church on the Holy Bible and the Confessio Augustana. This meant that “false worship service” was to be “brought to an end” and the “papal mass” with communion in only one kind prohibited (Sehling 1969:112). A short time later, Ottheinrich enacted a church ordinance based upon the Württemberg Ordinance of 1553. The elector

did this, as he emphasized in his preamble, “because of the Christian commitment and zeal” he felt “on account of his office and authority” (Sehling 1969:117). In 1556, a general and comprehensive church visitation was also carried out (Sehling 1969:246-252).¹

When Ottheinrich died on February 12, 1559 after having ruled for only three years, 45-year-old count palatine Frederick of Simmern-Sponheim succeeded him as elector. He was a ruler who had become Protestant in his early years and was soon called “the Pious” (Kluckhohn 1879). Frederick III had been educated at the Lorraine court in Nancy, at the prince bishop’s court in Liege and at the court of Charles V in Brussels (Kluckhohn 1879:3s). Therefore, he understood and spoke French and had far greater access to, and understanding for the affairs of Western Europe than the other princes of the Empire did (Kluckhohn 1879:124-128, 304-338, 348-374). This led to a rapid evolvement of Protestantism in the Electoral Palatinate, turning it into a Protestantism shaped by Western Europe and guided by the Reformation of Calvin. The Palatine Elector himself was the driving force behind the Catechism and heavily involved in its composition.

2. THE ORIENTATION TO WESTERN EUROPE

The correspondence of Frederick III bears witness to the strong and continuous sympathy with which he followed developments in France (Kluckhohn 1868-1872). In the same year that Frederick assumed the Palatine Electorate, Francis II became the King of France. One year before that, on April 24¹, 1558, Francis had married Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland and Catholic heiress to the English throne. The Catholic dukes of Guise gained influence and the persecution of Protestants got noticeably worse. The number of death sentences against heretics increased by leaps and bounds (Serres/Goulart 1595).² The most prominent case was the execution of the eminently respectable jurist and councillor of parliament at the royal court, Anne Du Bourg. In November 1559 Theodor Beza came from Geneva to Heidelberg to campaign for support. Frederick responded positively and sent a letter, drawn up by Beza, to the King of France requesting that the famous jurist be allowed to join the teaching body of

1 The instruction of visitation of 1556.

2 For more on the encroachment of the Catholic House of Guise under Francis II (cf. Jouanna 1998:52-60; Cf. also Babel 1994:91-98; Pigaillem 2012). When single leaders of the Protestants began to defend themselves by means of violence and the ruefully failed conspiracy of Amboise arose, Frederick immediately intervened and warned of an expansion of the Gospel by sword (see Kluckhohn 1879:306).

the university of Heidelberg (Baum 1851:35-37; Kluckhohn 1879:305). But all these efforts could not prevent the execution of Du Bourg on December 23, 1559 in Paris – a scandal which led many, especially jurists, to join the Protestant movement (Strohm 1996:206-208, 211s).

After the early death of Francis II in 1560, his mother, Catherine de' Medici, again tried to reach an amicable settlement by convening the religious colloquy of Poissy in 1561, but failed (Polenz 1859:47-80). On March 1, 1562 the troops of duke Francis of Guise slaughtered a group of Protestants who had assembled for a worship service in a barn in Vassy (Champagne). Some seventy believers fell victim to the Vassy massacre (Jouanna 1998:106-110). This event signalled the begin of the first religious war, because Louis de Bourbon, prince of Condé, now called the Protestants to arms and occupied Orléans on April 2, 1562 (Holt 1995). The civil war quickly spread across the whole of France. Atrocities were committed by both parties. On December 19, 1562 the Protestants suffered an annihilating defeat in the Battle of Dreux. Francis of Guise thereupon sieged Orléans, held by the Protestants, but suffered an assassination attempt on February 18, 1563 and died a few days later as a result of his wounds.

This escalation of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in France, the outbreak of the so called First French War of Religion, is a fundamental context of the composition of the Heidelberg Catechism between January and March 1563.

3. CONTROVERSY OVER THE LORD'S SUPPER FROM 1559 ONWARDS

A second important context of developments in the Electoral Palatinate which lead to the drawing up of the Heidelberg Catechism, needs to be mentioned. Soon after Frederick came to power, serious disagreements over the understanding of the Lord's Supper broke out. This was no marginal issue. The sacrifice of the mass had traditionally been at the very centre of the worship service, being perceived as the most important sacrament, having an essential role in the mediation of salvation. In this issue, the Reformation arrived at a fundamentally new approach. For according to Reformation teaching, salvation is mediated by consolatory words of promise, received in faith and then made effective. The Lord's Supper thus was given a new function, a new dimension: Because the body of Christ is constituted in the Lord's Supper, the community of faith manifests itself and the presence of Christ becomes a reality in it.

Among the reformers, the doctrinal details of the Lord's Supper were the subject of controversy. Luther insisted that Christ literally and physically gives himself to all who receive the bread and wine. The Zurich reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, in contrast, saw in the Lord's Supper only a meal of fellowship and commemoration, in which the congregation confessed to the Lord for all the world to see. In the eyes of the humanistically inspired Zwingli, Luther's understanding was still tied down in medieval and Catholic thinking.

These opposing understandings of the Lord's Supper collided so severely in Heidelberg that even fistfights resulted. One of those responsible for this development was the Lutheran General Superintendent Tileman Heshusen who vigorously advocated the position of Luther in all points (more rigidly than Luther himself!). But the deacon of the Church of the Holy Spirit, Wilhelm Klebitz, bore some of the blame, for he was no less uncompromising in advocating the teachings of Zwingli. The conflict assumed such proportions that the Elector saw himself forced to admonish all parties to be more conciliatory. When this came to no avail, he asked Philipp Melanchthon, who hailed from the Electoral Palatinate, to issue a memorandum on this matter.

In November of 1559, Melanchthon sent a memorandum to Heidelberg, shortly before his death in February of 1560 (Melanchthon 1955:482-486; Scheible 2012:384-386). Therein he argued for a quite open understanding of the presence of Christ: this presence is not bound to the elements, but instead comes about through the whole act of the Lord's Supper. The Elector found Melanchthon's opinion convincing – in contrast to Heshusen – and he dismissed both the Lutheran General Superintendent and his Zwinglian opponent. The violent attacks by Heshusen, who had also threatened with excommunication, provoked Frederick III to seek a rapprochement with the more open understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper typical for Calvin's Reformation, and which the late Melanchthon had also advocated. This, along with the growing attention focused upon the Protestant battle for survival in Western Europe, led to an estrangement from the Lutheranism predominant in Germany.

4. THE PRESENCE OF WESTERN EUROPEAN PROTESTANT REFUGEES IN THE ELECTORAL PALATINATE

Already under Ottheinrich, the Electoral Palatinate had welcomed religious refugees from neighbouring regions of Western Europe. The most famous one was the former Carmelite prior of Bourges, Pierre Boquin (1518-1582),

who then was appointed to a professorship of theology by Frederick III (Wolgast 1998:32).

After 1559, a multitude of theologians, law professors and councillors, who either came from Western Europe themselves or had studied there, or were in some way affected by the persecution of Protestants in England, the Spanish Netherlands and France, assumed leading positions in the Electoral Palatinate. On February 22, 1560, the jurist and theologian from Trier, Caspar Olevian, matriculated at the university of Heidelberg and in the same year he became a member of the consistory of the Electoral Palatinate.³ Furthermore, he became the head of the Collegium Sapientiae, which was inaugurated in November of 1556, and assumed the third professorship (dogmatics) of the theological faculty on July 8, 1561. Olevian had studied law in Paris and Orléans from 1549/50 and in Bourges from 1556 and had moved to Geneva in March of 1558 and later to Zurich to study theology. He played a substantial role in the Electoral Palatinate's transition to Calvinistic-Reformed Protestantism by drawing up a draft of the Palatine church ordinance (Sehling 1969:333-408), the final version of which was published in November of 1563 and by composing further ordinances, as well as by assuming an active role in the consistory. Mention should be given as well to further persons who came to the Electoral Palatinate in the 1560s and 70s who had either experienced persecution first hand or were at least familiar with circumstances in Western Europe.

Someone who deserves particular attention is the Flemish preacher Petrus Dathenus, who came to the Electoral Palatinate in 1562, the year before the Heidelberg Catechism was drawn up. He arrived in Frankenthal in early June 1562 accompanied by some 70 families, who found a new home in the former Augustinian canons monastery in this city. Dathenus soon belonged to the circle of leading theologians in the Electoral Palatinate (Cuno 1887:22)⁴ and became the court chaplain to Frederick III in the late 60s. Before that, in 1566, he returned temporarily to the Spanish Netherlands to assist his persecuted brothers in the faith. Further congregations of refugees under the leadership of pastor Franciscus Junius were to follow in the 1560s, settling in the former Cistercian monastery of

3 About Olevian cf. Sudhoff 1857; Goeters 1988/89; Drüll 2002.

4 "Seine Tüchtigkeit erkannte auch bald der Kurfürst, welcher ihn in der Folge zu seinem Hofprediger ernannte, aber auch schon vordem öfters nach Heidelberg kommen ließ, um ihn an den wichtigen kirchlichen und politischen Beratungen teilnehmen zu lassen. Gleicher Eifer für das Haus des Herrn und gleiche Gesinnung befreundeten ihn bald mit Olevian, Ursin und den übrigen Männern Gottes daselbst. Mit denselben begegnen wir ihm als Abgeordneten auf dem Maulbronner Gespräch, im April 1564, wo er in maßvollstem Benehmen auftritt, als suche er alles im rechten Geleise zu erhalten."

Schönau as well as in Otterberg and Lambrecht. The presence of refugee congregations in the Electoral Palatinate led to the emergence of a network closely connected to the milieu from which the staff of the Heidelberg court, administration and university would be recruited in the following decades until 1618 (Zwierlein 2006:42s).

Whether or not Dathenus participated in the formulation of the Heidelberg Catechism is a particularly intriguing question. In the Preamble of the catechism, which is dated January 19, 1563, Frederick III explicitly stated that it was written not without the participation of the entire theological faculty, of all the superintendents and of the most prominent theologians of the Electoral Palatinate.⁵ However, we have no proof that Dathenus participated in the consultations on the draft of the catechism which were convened for January 12, 1563 in Heidelberg and took place from January 13 to 18, 1563.

These open questions place us at the heart of current research on the Heidelberg Catechism, which wrestles with the central problem of authorship.

5. THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORSHIP (AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROFILE) OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

As a result of the near-complete destruction of Heidelberg in the War of the Palatine Succession or Nine Years' War 1689/93, no documents concerning the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism have survived. Research, therefore, must rely on studying the correspondence of the period, in which we can find a limited number of remarks on work in

5 "Und demnach mit rhat und zuthunVnserer gantzen Theologischen Facultet allhie, auch aller Superintendenten und fürnemsten Kirchendienern, einen Summarischen underricht oder Catechismus vnserer Christlichen Religion auß dem Wort Gottes, beides in Deutscher und Lateinischer Sprach verfassen und stellen lassen" (1563. *Catechismus Oder Christlicher Underricht, wie der in Kirchen und Schulen der Churfürstlichen Pfaltz getrieben wirdt*. Heidelberg: Johannes Mayer, 8s). In his letter to duke Johann Friedrich den Mittleren from March 30th 1563 the Elector also explicitly mentions the participation of all his leading theologians in the composition of the catechism: „Das ist aber nit one, das ich alle meyne superintendenten fürnehmste kirchendiener und theologos beyaynander gehabt [...]“ (Kluckhohn 1868:390). Cf. also Olevians notes in a letter to Heinrich Bullinger from April 14th 1563: *Bemerkung in einem Brief an Heinrich Bullinger vom 14. April 1563*: „Non unius, sed multorum collatae sunt piae cogitationes“ (Sudhoff 1857:483).

progress on the catechism. We can also gain certain insights by comparing the text of the catechism with the writings of its potential authors. Because of this dearth of sources, competing hypotheses on the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism have flourished since the nineteenth century. How we answer this question of course has consequences for how we assess the theological profile of the Heidelberg Catechism. Instead of presenting the different answers in detail, I will only provide you with a brief summary of each of the potential authors and influential theologians.

The multiplicity of answers given in response to the question concerning the Catechism's theological profile is astonishing and very revealing.⁶ August Ebrard spoke of "Melanchthonian-Calvinist influences" in 1846 (Ebrard 1846:604-606), Heinrich Heppe saw a clear Melanchthonian imprint, prompting him to characterize it as "German-Evangelical" or "German-Protestant" (Heppe 1865:446 Anm. 2). In contrast, Karl Sudhoff in his biography of Caspar Olevian attested an unequivocally Calvinist character (Sudhoff 1857:113-118), Maurits Gooszen, on the other hand, discerned towards the end of the nineteenth century clear Zwinglian influence (Gooszen 1890:149,155). These positions had often been repeated in the twentieth century and complemented with proposals of compromise.⁷ More recently, the significance of Thomas Erastus, who was not only the personal physician of the Prince Elector but also a member of the Church Council, has been emphasized (Gunnoe, Jr. 2011:107-131). Finally, the important influence of the catechisms of Johannes a Lasco and his Strangers' Churches has been underscored. One section of the latter under the leadership of pastor Petrus Dathenus was offered sanctuary in the Palatine village of Frankenthal in June of 1562.⁸

The enormous variety of answers attempting to find a convincing interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism is indicative of the fact that this

6 An overview of the extensive discussions on the question of authorship is offered by: Goeters (1963); Metz (1985); Bierma (1999:1-7.)

7 "Der Heidelberger Katechismus charakterisiert die Verbindung melanchthonischer Formeln mit der calvinischen Lehrweise. Er ist das berühmteste Zeugnis des entstehenden deutschen Reformiertentums. Der Beitrag Calvins [...] dominiert, derjenige Bullingers tritt demgegenüber zurück" (Neuser 1988:290). Cf. Rohls 1987:24s.; more evidence in: Bierma 1999:4s. At a Symposium in Heidelberg from the 9th to 11th of May 2013, Emidio Campi alluded to the important, but not observed until now influence of Petrus Martyr Vermigli.

8 Bard Thompson sees in the small Emden Catechism of 1554, which goes back to a Lasco, one of the most important sources of the Heidelberg Catechism. In at least 35 of 129 questions conformity with the work of a Lasco is so big that a direct dependency has to be supposed (cf. Thompson 1954).

Catechism was a consensus document that brought together a number of quite different tendencies within Reformed Protestantism.

Reformed Protestantism encompassed a wide range of positions, all the way from convinced Zwinglians to the followers of Philipp Melancthon and so-called “Upper Germans” intent on preserving unity with the Wittenberg Reformation along the lines set forth by Martin Bucer and the 1536 Wittenberg Concord. Among the Reformed there were also proponents of a church closely tied to the state, the later so-called Erastians, who considered church and moral discipline to be affairs of the civil magistrate, but there were also advocates of a church discipline organized along strictly consistorial or Presbyterian lines. Even more blatant were the differences in background between those seeking to carry out a moderate Reformation in cooperation with the civil authorities and those who formed part of refugee congregations. The latter had not only gained practice in the patterns of a voluntary and confessing church, but also brought with them vivid memories of harsh persecution by the Pope and by Catholic authorities.

The Electoral Palatinate thus became a collecting point for extremely diverse groups, and those in leadership – especially Frederick III – succeeded in making the best out of this situation. One could say that the Electoral Palatinate became a laboratory of sorts, in which the different tendencies of Reformed Protestantism were forced to work together, a challenge which they, despite all tensions, succeeded in mastering. The Heidelberg Catechism is the outstanding document of the theology of irenicism and consensus of the Electoral Palatinate, but it also preserved enough profile of its own so that it could provide orientation. We will now focus more precisely on what this means for the theology of the catechism.

Scholars today agree that Zacharias Ursinus played the major role in the origins of the Heidelberg Catechism.⁹ He came originally from Silesia and was appointed a successor to Olevianus in the Collegium Sapientiae in the autumn of 1561. From August 1562 he assumed the third professorship, i.e. that of theology (dogmatics). From the autumn of 1557 to the spring of 1558, besides studying in Zurich, he undertook a study trip to France and Geneva, but what had a greater formative influence on him was studying under Melancthon in Wittenberg. Being a professor of dogmatics, Ursinus was the obvious candidate to be entrusted with a task of this kind, especially since he had already drafted two preliminary works – a *Summa theologiae* and a *Catechesis minor* (Lang 1967:151-199, 200-218). We thus have every reason to assume he was the main author

9 In the wake of the presentation of Heinrich Alting, Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevian were referred to as authors. Cf. Alting 1702.

of the Heidelberg Catechism (Goeters 1963:11-15; Staedtke 1978:215-217). Ursinus's *Catechesis minor* already displays the three-fold structure of misery, salvation and gratitude, which dominates the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism (Lang 1967:200, 211). Departing from the assumption that Ursinus was the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is natural to deduce that this work has a strong Melanchthonian character. Ursinus had, after all, studied under Melanchthon and maintained close ties to his teacher, although he was also influenced by later stays in Geneva and Zurich.¹⁰ And by drafting a memorandum for the Heidelberg dispute over the Lord's Supper in November of 1559, Melanchthon had personally contributed to the transition of the Electoral Palatinate to Reformed Protestantism after 1559.

There is a problem, however, which calls into question whether the Heidelberg Catechism really has a Melanchthonian character. The notorious question 80 expresses a doctrine on the Lord's Supper which goes beyond what Melanchthon taught, and it has a tone to it which does not quite fit in with Melanchthon. It is striking that question 80 did not exist in the first edition. Three editions of the Heidelberg Catechism were released in the period from January to April of 1563, each with characteristic differences. The second edition, which was written during the printing of the first edition in March 1563, contains a new question and answer, which explicitly distances itself from the Roman Catholic doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass. This question 80 was intensified in the third, final edition, which was adopted in the church ordinance of November 1563.

The difference between the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass is described as follows: But the Mass teaches that [...] *Christ is bodily present under the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped*. Thus, the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a *condemnable idolatry*.¹¹

Regardless of who drafted these formulations, probably Olevian¹² or maybe also Dathenus, they definitely correspond with the experience of the Protestant refugees, who had a first-hand knowledge of Papal religion

10 So can Zwinglian and Calvinian heritage be proven in the sacramental theology of the Heidelberg Catechism, where the intricacies of the confessional differences appear clearest (cf. in summary Bierma 1999:41s.).

11 Italics mark text which first exists in the third edition.

12 Olevian reported in a letter to Calvin that he had ensured the intensification of the criticism of the papal doctrine of the Lord's Supper. „in prima editione germanica [...] ommissa erat quaestio de discrimine coenae et missae pontificiae. Admonitus a me Princeps voluit in secunda editione germanica et prima editione latina addi“ (Olevian an J. Calvin, 3.4.1563, in: Calvini opera, vol. 19:684).

and had found it to be very threatening. The strong anti-Roman polemic of these formulations is also a reaction to the condemnation by the Council of Trent of Protestant teaching on the Last Supper in September of 1562.¹³ Today it is clear that the Heidelberg Catechism does not adequately reflect the Catholic understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass. One should also keep the historical context of the persecution of Protestants in mind, a situation which today is entirely nonexistent, before feeling compelled to repeat those phrases. At the same time, by clearly distancing itself from, and defining itself in opposition to, this Eucharistic doctrine, a fundamental concern of the Heidelberg Catechism comes to the fore: the concern that worldly things be imbued with religious significance and be granted the worship that only befits the sole true God. More on this will now follow.

6. THE THEOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE CATECHISM WITHIN THE REFORMATION

1. Our reflections on the origins of the Heidelberg Catechism and on the historical theological currents which found their way into it, reveal it to be a document of understanding between Calvinistic-Reformed, Zwinglian and Philippistic tendencies within Protestantism.¹⁴ At the same time the catechism clearly distances itself from Tridentine Catholicism and from the Gnesio-Lutheran variant of Lutheranism. This occurs mainly in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The decisive point of repudiation is not, as usually emphasized by the Reformers, the understanding of the Mass as a good deed and a sacrifice which creates merits. Rather, it is above all its being perceived as a "condemnable idolatry" (Q. 80). The rejected Papal doctrine of the Lord's Supper is diagnosed as being an illicit mingling of things divine, on the one hand, and worldly or human, on the other – a mingling which contradicts God's being and implies superstition. The term "condemnable idolatry" ("*exsecranda idololatria*") expresses a fundamental violation of the true worship of God and an infringement of God's honour.
2. The prohibition of images is dealt with in three questions (Q. 96-98). They also concern the true worship of God, which is violated by any iconographic representation of God.

13 Sessions of July 16th 1562 and September 17th 1562 (sessio 22).

14 Thorsten Latzel's research *Theologische Grundzüge des Heidelberger Katechismus* chooses a different access to the theology of the catechism. He undertakes, as expressed in the subtitle of his work, „eine fundamentale theologische Untersuchung seines Ansatzes zur Glaubenskommunikation“.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism also shares in the goal of completing the reformation of doctrine initiated by Luther (*reformatio doctrinae*) with a reformation of life (*reformatio vitae*). This concern typical for Reformed Protestantism is presented in a form that is moderate and amenable to consensus. Q. 59-64 are a clear presentation of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. “Q. How are you righteous before God? A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ” (Q. 60).¹⁵ The imputative dimension of Luther’s doctrine of justification is preserved.¹⁶ Here the Catechism begins with the use of the law which convicts human beings of their inability to fulfil the will of God. In the beginning of part I: Misery (“Von des Menschen Elend”) the law is introduced in the meaning of the *usus elencticus legis*: “Q. How do you come to know your misery? A. The law of God tells me” (Q. 3). But unlike Luther’s Catechisms, this is not followed by a detailed discussion of the law by means of an interpretation of the Ten Commandments. In fact, the detailed exegesis of law is found in part III: Gratitude (“Von der Dankbarkeit”). Not until there does an exegesis of the Ten Commandments take place, which sketches the basic lines of Christian ethics (Q. 92-113). Therefore, not the convicting use, but the third use of law, the *usus legis in renatis*, has priority in the Heidelberg catechism. This has been seen as distinguishing the Heidelberg Catechism from Lutheran Protestantism. However, there are two points of view we must not neglect. For one thing, the Heidelberg Catechism does not speak of the *tertius usus legis* as the *usus praecipuus legis*, as Calvin did, beginning with the second edition of the *Institutio* in 1539 (Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, in: *Calvini opera*, vol. 1:433), whereas Luther considered the convicting use to be the *usus theologicus legis*. Furthermore, the teaching of the *tertius usus legis* had even spread into Lutheranism. This already began with Melancthon’s *Loci communes secundae aetatis* of 1535 and can also be found in the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* of 1577. In any case, the discussion of ethics under the title “gratitude” (“Von der Dankbarkeit”) corresponds directly to Lutheran concerns.

15 Cf. Q 61: “Why do you say that through faith alone you are righteous? A. Not because I please God by the worthiness of my faith. It is because only Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me righteous before God, and because I can accept this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than through faith.”

16 Cf. Q 60: “[...] without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, [...]”

4. Finally, the Heidelberg Catechism is underlain by a fundamental theological decision, typical for Reformed Protestantism in general. As mentioned, the catechism adheres unreservedly to Luther's evangelical understanding of justification by faith alone.¹⁷ But at the heart of the message of salvation lies not justification by faith alone, but God's providence (*providentia*). The catechism responds to the first question about the only comfort in life and dying, by saying that the believer is owned by Jesus Christ. Christ's saving action consists of the threefold work that "he has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation" (Q. 1). The *providentia*-piety expressed here is explained further in the questions which deal with creation and providence within the doctrine of God (Q. 26-28). After defining the concept of divine providence, the Heidelberg Catechism asks: "How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?" Answer: "We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from his love. For all creatures are so completely in God's hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved" (Q. 28).

To focus the message of salvation on a piety that centred on God's providence was a characteristic feature of Reformed Protestantism. The many persecutions and threats which the Reformed had to endure made this theological accentuation attractive. It is significant that the Heidelberg Catechism avoided centring its providence orientation on a doctrine of predestination or even on an idea of double predestination. In his later commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus – unlike the catechism itself, which in the spirit of Melanchthon deals only cautiously with predestination – discussed predestination and providence in much greater

17 It is appropriate that the Heidelberg Catechism, besides the gratitude for the blessing of Christ and the role model effect with an eye towards the neighbour as motif for good works also mentions "that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits" (Q 86). But this is not a danger of the access to salvation (*sola fide*). In the face of the plurality of biblical (also New Testament) testimonies (cf. 1 Petr 1,6f; Mt 7,17; Gal 5,6) it is adequate to mention this aspect. It incidentally also corresponds to the experience that faith is always the work of the Holy Spirit, but that he also benefits from forms of practice and consolidation (practice of piety, diaconial acting).

detail and in a form much more akin to Calvin (Ursinus 1645:204, 677-844, 705-717 and 817-844),¹⁸

In the doctrine of the sacraments, the description of the relationship between faith and works, and the discussion of the *providentia Dei*, the Heidelberg Catechism provides answers which are capable by and large of finding a consensus within Protestantism. Its rejection of Luther's understanding of Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper cannot be denied. Fifty years ago, in 1973, the Leuenberg Agreement brought about an understanding in this issue, and relativized these differences, so that they no longer need to divide the Protestant churches.

7. CONCLUSION

The Reformation started late in the Electoral Palatinate. When Prince Elector Frederick III came to power in 1559 he continued to participate in the development of the Reformation in Western Europe, where he had spent time in his youth. The Heidelberg Catechism reflects an orientation to the Reformation of Calvin. Papal religion was seen as superstition and a fundamental violation of the true worship of God as well as an infringement of God's honour. The experience of persecution by the Papal church in France and the Netherlands aggravated the criticism. Biblical texts, the Old Testament law, and especially the prohibition of images of God were considered to be the sole legitimate foundation. At the same time, the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus, was strongly influenced by Philipp Melanchthon and sought to hold together the different groups making up the growing Reformed Protestant camp. The Electoral Palatinate had become a home to followers of Zwingli and Calvin, to adepts of Melanchthon, and to the members of Dutch and French refugee churches. One reason for the success of the Heidelberg Catechism is the fact that each one of these different groups appreciated the Catechism.

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18 The first, shorter edition was compiled from the notes of students of Ursinus (cf. Ursinus 1584).

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