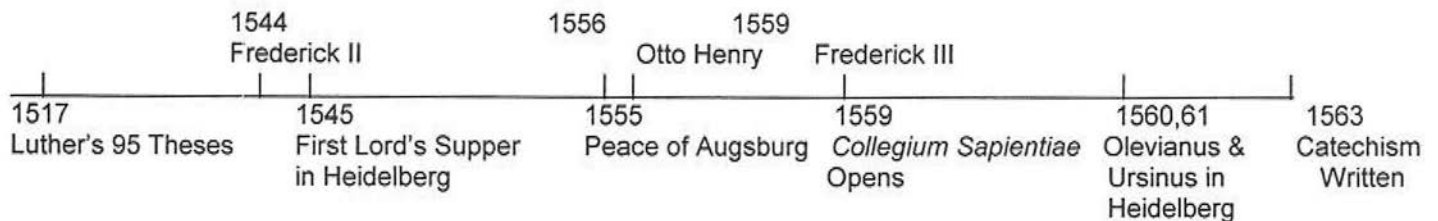


## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

### SOME INTERESTING FACTS

- The Heidelberg Catechism is the confession of more than 5,000,000 Christians today.
- More than 100,000 books based on the Heidelberg Catechism are sold every year.
- The Heidelberg Catechism has been translated into 30 different languages. (This is only a few languages less than Shakespeare.)
- The Synod of Dort 1618/19 is famous for producing the Canons of Dort. However, it also made some decisions about catechism teaching. At that time it happened that people other than the minister often taught catechism. This synod decided that in such a situation the minister should still visit the class "to encourage the pupils with a friendly word, as well as with small prizes, these to be furnished by the magistrates...." (Maybe you could talk to your minister bringing along some prizes!)

### A TIMELINE OF THE REFORMATION IN THE PALATINATE



### THE SETTING: HEIDELBERG, GERMANY

Situated along the Neckar River in Germany Heidelberg was the capital of a German mini-state (like a province) called the Palatinate. This city became well known for its higher education. Its main church was the Church of the Holy Spirit. The Elector (like a premier) of the Palatinate lived in the Heidelberg Castle.

### THE REIGN OF FREDERICK II (1544-1556)

Ever since Luther nailed his theses on the church door of Wittenburg, Germany was torn between Roman Catholics and Protestants, most of whom were Lutherans. Frederick II sided with the Protestants but was cautious because the Emperor Charles V was Catholic and very determined to stamp out the Reformation. In 1548 Charles passed the Catholic Interim which required that Catholic forms of worship be used. Nevertheless, during his reign the first Lord's Supper was celebrated in the Church of the Holy Spirit.

### THE REIGN OF OTTO HENRY (1556-1559)

Otto was the nephew of Frederick II and was much more aggressive than his uncle. It was also easier for him to operate because the Catholic Interim was lifted in 1555. Instead, the German princes agreed that every prince could decide for himself which religion would be in his territory. This agreement was called the Peace of Augsburg. Otto decided for Protestantism. He quickly sent out a visitation team of three men to evaluate the Christian lifestyle of the average people in the Palatinate. The results were dismal. In general people were ignorant of the Word of God and its teaching. In order to improve the situation he approved the use of the small Wurttemberg Catechism to teach people. He also brought Protestant liturgy to the Palatinate. Finally, he established a theological college called Collegium Sapientiae in 1559. The Palatinate was becoming a predominantly Protestant state.

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## THE REIGN OF FREDERICK III (1559-1576)

Almost as soon as Frederick III became governor he had to settle a squabble between two men. The first, Dr. Hesshuss, was a professor at the new Collegium Sapientiae and a pastor at the Church of the Holy Spirit. The second, Mr. W. Klebitz, was a student at the Collegium and a deacon in the same church. Their dispute was over the Lord's Supper. Hesshuss leaned a little more in the direction of the Roman Catholics. Klebitz leaned a little more in the direction of John Calvin. Since these men were causing a raucous at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Frederick kicked them both out of town. But in the meantime he knew that he must resolve this lingering controversy about the Lord's Supper. Since he had kicked them out of town, the Collegium lost one of its professors and the church lost its pastor. Frederick appointed Zacharius Ursinus as the new professor and Caspar Olevianus as the new pastor.

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## CASPAR OLEVIANUS

Olevianus was born in Treves, Germany in 1536. His parents were wealthy Roman Catholics so he went to study in France and Switzerland. John Calvin was one of his teachers. During his studies Olevianus was converted to Protestantism. At this time he also met Frederick III's son, Herman—something that would help him out later. After his studies he went back to his hometown of Treves in order to introduce the people he grew up with to the Bible and the Protestant doctrine. Yet his Roman Catholic hometown did not appreciate this and eventually threw him in prison when he became too vocal. When Frederick III heard about this he paid for Olevianus' bail, brought him to Heidelberg and made him pastor of the Church of the Holy Spirit,

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## ZACHARIAS. URSINUS

Ursinus was born in Breslau, Germany in 1534. Unlike Olevianus he was born into a poor family. However, with the help of a rich doctor he went to university in Wittenberg, where Luther nailed the 95 Theses. He also became a staunch supporter of the Protestant cause. When he returned to his hometown after his studies, he was not thrown in prison like Olevianus but he did feel uncomfortable in his teaching position at the University of Breslau. Here, too, there were people with Roman Catholic leanings- Eventually he took a friend's suggestion and accepted the teaching position in Heidelberg left open by Hesshuss.

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## THE WRITING OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Frederick III was glad to have these two young men, only 26 and 28 respectively, in Heidelberg, He felt that with this "new blood" he could perhaps solve some of the controversies about the Lord's Supper and also come with a better catechism to teach the people than the Wurttemberg Catechism which was small and inadequate- In 1562 he charged Olevianus and Ursinus to write a new catechism. His strong desire was to have the Catechism based firmly on the Bible. (That is why there are so many Bible passages in the footnotes of the Catechism). They did so and presented it to Frederick III in January of 1563. He was very pleased with the result and immediately had it printed and approved for use in the Palatinate,

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## FREDERICK III CALLED TO DEFEND THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Some of the neighbouring princes were shocked with the Catechism and said that it contained "seductive error, directly contradicting the holy divine Scriptures." Controversy raged until finally in 1566 Frederick III was called to the Diet of Augsburg 1566 to defend the catechism. His opponents managed to convince the Emperor that the catechism was heresy and the Emperor ordered Frederick to retract his catechism. In an emotionally moving defense Frederick said, "What I have elsewhere publicly declared to your Majesty in a full assembly of princes; namely, that if any one of whatever age, station or class he may be, even the humblest, can teach me something better from the Holy Scriptures, I will thank him from the bottom of my heart and be readily obedient to the divine truth..., [but] I shall comfort myself in this that my Lord and

Saviour Jesus Christ has promised to me and all who believe that whatsoever we lost on earth for His name's sake, we shall receive an hundredfold in the life to come." At this, one of the princes said, "Fritz, you are more pious than all of us." The Catechism and its sponsor, Frederick III, were vindicated on the basis of Scripture.

'Much of the history presented in this introduction is a summary of Visscher, J. "The Heidelberg Catechism; A Historical Look" in *I Belong: The Teacher's Lesson Book*. (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1988).