

Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus: Birth of the Heidelberg Catechism

During the Reformation period, God used men of great intellect and spiritual maturity to develop the reformed doctrines. Many great works were written during this time, including the three creeds that we use today: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordrecht. Here we take a look into the lives of the men God used in the making of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Timid. Cautious. Hesitant. Moody. This was Zacharias Ursinus. Yet he was brilliant, dedicated, and gifted as well. He was a tool created and fashioned precisely into the man that God needed him to be, a tool to cut, chisel, and sculpt the Protestant church of the 1500s into the church that God would continue to reform down through the ages.

Zacharias Ursinus used his God-given abilities wisely. Throughout his whole life, he was learning more and more about God. He was brought up from his early years to be a fighter and defender of the faith, even with his Lutheran upbringing. As a young man, he began to study under Philip Melanchthon. Through Melanchthon he came to understand that the teachings of Calvin aligned closely with the teachings of scripture, and when he was still quite young, he wrote a catechism based on comfort.

Zacharias was one of the great fighters of the faith in his time, and he constantly defended the faith wherever he went. He had to rely heavily on his faith when as a young man, his preaching was rejected by the people of Breslau. His Calvinist views of the Lord's Supper were despised, the Lutheran people of his birthplace hated him for his views, and they wanted to get rid of him.

When he heard of the death of Melanchthon, Zacharias decided he wanted to study in peace without the worries of preaching for a people who would not receive him. He left Breslau and sought refuge in Zurich, where he could study with the great theologian Peter Martyr. Of the theologians in Zurich he wrote, "They are pious, learned, great men in whose company I am inclined henceforth to spend my life. "As regards to the rest, God will provide" (Van Halsema, 1982, p.30).

The death of Melanchthon, his teacher and friend, greatly influenced Zacharias. Melanchthon was known to love peace and unity in the church, and Zacharias, his friend, sought that peace as well. Yet God chose him to take a stand in this time of doctrinal upheaval. Zacharias, the shy yet determined teacher, was the theologian whom God prepared to take the place of Melanchthon and to eventually write the Catechism for the people. God used his quiet nature and staunch personality to make him a fighter for the truth.

Diligent. Loyal. Dedicated. Faithful. This was Caspar Olevianus, who from his earliest years was surrounded with Roman Catholicism. He then learned Lutheranism and became convinced that the Roman Catholic Church was wrong. He then became influenced by the French Calvinists, the Huguenots, and realized that Calvin agreed with the teachings of scripture more than Luther. He began to explore the teachings of Calvin even more.

When Caspar was a young man, through a boating accident God worked in his heart to be a minister. Caspar and his friend, a German prince, were walking next to a river when they came across some men in a boat. The men invited them aboard, but Caspar refused because the men were drunk. His friend, however, agreed. The men in the boat were rocking the boat so much that it tipped and Caspar's friend fell out. Caspar immediately dove in to save his

friend, but the current was so strong that it prevented him from saving his friend and endangered his life. He made a vow to God that if he made it out alive, he would proclaim the gospel. He was rescued and he did not forget his promise (Hanko, 1999, p.210). He went to Geneva for the purpose of talking to Calvin and preparing for the ministry.

Caspar Olevianus was an eloquent preacher. He was warm-hearted and the people loved his preaching so much that they locked their Roman Catholic leader out of the city. Their leader attacked the city, threw Olevianus in prison for ten weeks, banished those who upheld Protestant views, and restored Roman Catholicism in the city. In this too God was good, because it made Caspar stronger and even more zealous for the faith.

Strong. Ardent. Brave. This was Frederick the Pious (III), the Protestant ruler of the Palatinate. He saw the confusion and doubt of his people and began to look for a good confession that would serve to unite his people spiritually. He had read Zacharias' earlier catechism based on comfort and knew that the people needed a catechism that they could easily understand and use—a catechism that would comfort them by showing them their sin, their deliverance, and how to live a life of gratitude for that salvation. They needed to be assured that they received their salvation by grace alone. The more Frederick studied the reformers' ideas, the more he leaned toward them, their ways, and their doctrines from the word of God.

Frederick decided to have the reformers write a catechism. He brought Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus to Heidelberg and asked them to write the Heidelberg Catechism. He wanted them to write the catechism with proof texts from the Bible so that no one could say that it was not true. They readily agreed to do it. So it was that both a professor gifted in theology, Ursinus, and a

preacher eloquent and faithful in the preaching, Olevianus, were in God's providence chosen to write the Heidelberg Catechism (Hanko, 1999, p. 213). Frederick was a great spiritual leader who loved the truth and wanted his people to love it also.

God shaped these three men differently, but for the same purpose, by his sovereign hand. Here we see that God governs and controls all things. We still sit under the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism today to test and strengthen our faith. It is a confession and a summary *for the people* of the doctrines of scripture. It can be easily understood, yet it speaks of the deep truths of scripture. Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Here Paul states that God uses all things for the good of his church. God used Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, through trials and triumphs, to write the Heidelberg Catechism for the good of his church, not only in the sixteenth century, but through the ages. He also used Frederick III to watch over the writing and to see it through to its completion. How perfect is God's plan! Praise be to God!

Works Cited

Hanko, H. (1999). Portraits of Faithful Saints. Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association

Van Halsema, T. B. (1982). Three Men Came to Heidelberg. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House