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THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND THE SHORTER CATECHISM COMPARED

ONE of the most remarkable features of historic Christianity is that whatever it is, or amongst whatever surroundings, it has always sought to express its deep convictions in a creed. One still hears much about scrapping creeds and abolishing confessions; but the difficulty in doing so is that it simply cannot be done: because faith, like all strong conviction, seeks to utter itself before others, to give definite shape to its ideas, and to add to the conviction already felt. From the very beginning Creeds have emanated from the inner life of the Church; they are the expression of the faith which she holds. By this it is not meant that the Church is founded on its Creeds, " for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid—even Jesus Christ "; but they have served the Church as useful standards, enabling her to determine truth, and to assist her in maintaining discipline. They serve as short summaries of the great Christian doctrines where truths are stated in concise, tabloid form, and as such they are aids to sound understanding of the things which the Church should know, and on which she has got to feed her spiritual life. Another purpose which they serve is that they guard against false doctrines and heresies—although it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that there is not such a creed but has been violated in some way or other. But perhaps their greatest value of all is that they are bonds of union among all believers who feel similarly on spiritual matters. They link together men and women whose estimate of truth is the same, and who have been drawn together in a fellowship by the Spirit of God.

It is easy to see, therefore, how, after the Protestant Reformation had been started, there should be quite a number of credal statements produced in various European countries, and this is what did happen in Germany, Switzerland, France, Holland, England and Scotland. Indeed, every country which the new movement reached and influenced, either produced its own Creed or Catechism—or else they translated and imported their neighbours'. Now, such a development is what we might have expected: for brief summaries of the main doctrines were necessary to a sound understanding of the faith which many

had received in abandoning Romanism. Besides, these creeds and confessions exercised a great work in drawing the people together in a united body. The immediate causes of the rise of creeds at this time were several in number. After the first battles of the Reformation had been fought, the leaders soon discovered among the majority of the people an appalling ignorance of the very elementary principles of the Christian Faith. The new movement could not prosper so long as this was so. Faith can never flourish in the soil of doubt and ignorance. Moreover, the Reformers felt that—useful as they undoubtedly are—commentaries and controversial treatises could not grapple with this need, and they determined that their " interests would be best served by a method of catechetical instruction with questions and answers, by which the intellect is quickened, the heart moved, the conscience roused and trained ". In addition, it was obvious that if the Reformation was to be a lasting force in the world, it was necessary to win the children, and teach them the truths of their faith. It speaks much for the clear foresight, and the sagacity of the Reformers, that they recognised this fact, and took means to meet the need, although some of their methods may be considered cumbersome to us to-day.

The Reformation and post-Reformation credal statements, may be divided roughly into two groups, the Lutheran and the Reformed. Of these two the Reformed Catechisms and Confessions were much more numerous, and their productive period lasted much longer—even into the seventeenth century. They were not all in catechetical form; indeed, the majority were not; but they were documents of supreme importance. It is our task here to examine two of these Catechisms; the Heidelberg Catechism of 1562, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647. The two have much in common, and yet, in many ways they are very different.

The Heidelberg Catechism, considered by many to be the most beautiful, and the noblest of all, was composed in the midst of great strife and disorder, in the middle of the sixteenth century. One of the seven Electoral Provinces, whose princes had the right of choosing the Emperor for the German people, was the district of the Palatinate of which Heidelberg was the capital. In 1559, Frederick the Pious became its prince. He was a convinced Protestant; but he found his territory torn asunder with strife among differing Protestant parties. The ideas of

Melanchthon prevailed, although those of extreme Lutherans and Zwinglians had many followers. Matters came to a head when Tileman Heshusins, Professor in the University, and General Superintendent of religious affairs in the province, who was also a violent Lutheran, took part in a scene with his colleague Klebitz, who was favourable to the Zwinglian position. After seeking, and refusing, the advice of Melanchthon who advocated toleration, Frederick openly declared himself to be a Calvinist, and dismissed both Heshusins and Klebitz from office. Then he set out to find other teachers to take their place, and it was from among those who came that we get the two men who compiled the Heidelberg Catechism.

Zacharias Ursinus had been one of Melanchthon's best students at Wittenberg, and in later years he was called by the Magistrates of his native Breslau to be rector of their gymnasium. His leanings towards Calvinism were so strong, however, that after a time he felt compelled to resign, and resign he did, and returned to Zürich. Shortly after he arrived there, Frederick, Elector of the Palatinate, asked Peter Martyr to be one of his new men in Heidelberg, but the venerable old man begged to be spared fresh ventures, and recommended Ursinus. Thus, in 1561, Ursinus came to Heidelberg as Professor of Theology, and as Superintendent of the Seminary.

Caspar Olevianus was the fellow worker of Ursinus. He was a native of Trèves, and had intended to be a lawyer; but after seeing the drowning of a friend, he had become a declared Protestant, although it is evident that even before this he secretly held the Protestant faith. He studied at Geneva under Calvin; at Zürich under Peter Martyr, and at Lausanne under Theodore Beza. He also came into contact with William Farel, and urged by him, ceased his studies and went home to preach in his native town. Here the common folk listened gladly, but the ruling powers rose up, and Olevianus was forced to flee. It was just at this time that he accepted the invitation of Frederick to seek the shelter which the Palatinate held out to him.

Now, these two were very different from one another. Ursinus was a man of assiduous labour and study, and he worked unceasingly for the Reformed faith in Heidelberg; but he was not a preacher, and could not effectively move men. On the other hand, this is just what Olevianus was; as Smellie says of him, " with his business habits, with his buoyancy and energy,

with his warm and intense devotion, Olevianus was the real organiser of the religious life of the Palatinate". Certainly he attracted crowds to St. Peter's Church, and his faithful and enkindling words moved the multitudes as nothing else. "A nature so joyous, so active, and so ardent, was the fitting complement of the erudition, the scholarly industry and taste, and the brooding sensitiveness of Ursinus." These, then, were the two men to whose genius and devotion we are indebted for the Heidelberg Catechism.

The compilation of the Shorter Catechism took place after a very different fashion. In England there was going on a fierce struggle between the Anglicans and the Puritans, and matters eventually came to a head in 1640, with the calling of the Long Parliament. This Parliament, although its leaders were Episcopal, was strongly Puritan in spirit, and when it was petitioned to carry out reforms in the Church, its influence was on the side of reform. Consequently, in 1641 it demanded the abolition of images, altars and crucifixes, and in 1642 Parliament abolished episcopacy and the liturgy in the country. The Parliament and Royalist armies were struggling together with little prospect of securing a lasting peace in religious matters. Eventually came the "Grand Remonstrance", demanding such a religious assembly as should discuss and arrange matters ecclesiastical. This was called in 1640 by Parliament, and its object was stated to be, "to settle the Government and liturgy of the Church of England, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and vituperations, as should be agreeable to the Word of God, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and bring it into near accord with the Church of Scotland, and the Reformed Church abroad".

They published, in all, four different treatises; but the most remarkable of all their symbolical works was the Shorter Catechism. It has been described as "the matured fruit of all their consultations and debates: the quintessence of that system of Truth in which they desired to train English-speaking youth, and faithful training in which, I believe, has done more to keep alive on both sides of the Atlantic, reverence for the old theology, than all other instrumentalities whatever".[1] Truly a noble description. The interest in Catechisms at this time may be

[1] A. F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 407 f.

judged from the fact that at least twelve or fourteen members of the Assembly had already published Catechisms of their own. The first step was made in 1643, when a Committee was set up, in charge of Herbert Palmer, together with four others, and the delegation of Scottish Commissioners from the Scottish Assembly to frame a directory for public worship which should contain a Catechism for instruction purposes. The suggested text of Palmer was not favourably received, and after much discussion and many sessions it was rejected when presented to the Assembly in May 1645. This rejection was more a rejection of Palmer's method than of his teaching, that method being that of " making each answer a distinct and complete proposition, and of breaking down the principal answers by subordinate questions, which could all be answered by Ay and No ".

Various efforts were made to speed up the production, the committee being reconstituted in 1645; but it was further delayed by the decision in 1646 to publish two Catechisms, one more large and another more brief, in the preparation of which they were to have an eye to the Confession of Faith, and the matter of the Catechism already begun. From this time forward, Palmer does not seem to have been followed so closely, but rather other contemporary Catechisms, especially that of Ezekiel Rogers and Archbishop Ussher. To the latter's work we owe the questions on the decrees of God, the Prophetical, Priestly and Kingly Offices of the Redeemer, effectual calling, justification, adoption and sanctification, the perseverance of those who have been made partakers of redemption, and even the detailed and specific statements as to the sinfulness of the estate into which man fell. At last, in 1647, when the Larger Catechism was ready for Parliament, final adjustments of the Shorter Catechism were put into the hand of Messrs. Tuckney, Marshall and Ward, with the celebrated mathematician, Dr. Wallis, as Secretary; and it had passed both Houses of Parliament and been accepted by the Scottish Assembly, by September 1648. Thus there came into existence a Catechism with a tremendous influence and power in later days.

And now we must compare more minutely these two striking symbolical documents, the Shorter and the Heidelberg Catechisms. They may be compared and contrasted in a variety of ways, and from several points of view.

I

First, a striking contrast is noticed if they are examined from the point of view of the time and causes of their compilation. The Heidelberg Catechism was cradled in the midst of religious strife, and it is doubtful if any sort of strife can be greater than that. Men differed, even within the confines of the city of Heidelberg itself, and feelings were often frayed, and yet it is amazing how conciliatory and musical its sentences for the most part are. The Shorter Catechism was composed at a time when the Reformation movement had long since secured its footing in England, and when there was no danger of an anti-Reformation movement. It is true, of course, that there were very sharp differences felt among the members of the Westminster Assembly; but the fierce fires of the Reformation eruption had died down to a great extent, and men were able to survey calmly how things stood, and in consequence, were more able to state calmly their position. This may, in some measure, account for the difference in tone which is noticeable. The Heidelberg Catechism is passionate, while there is a distinct absence of emotion in the answers of the Westminster Catechism. The one is personal and informal; the other is impersonal and legal.

II

They may again be compared and contrasted from the point of view of the plan and arrangement that is employed. Each may be roughly divided into three parts. The Westminster Catechism treats first of all of the great fundamental verities of the faith. Unlike the Heidelberg or the Lutheran Catechisms, the Shorter Catechism abandoned the Apostles' Creed as the basis of doctrinal expression, and substituted a new logical scheme of doctrine for the old historical order of the Creed. The second part of the Westminster Catechisms treats of the Ten Commandments; and the third part, of the Lord's Prayer. On the other hand, the Heidelberg Catechism follows the scheme of the Epistle to the Romans. Part I is occupied with the sin and misery of man, and into this is worked the Ten Commandments, as being a mirror of our sinfulness in God's sight. Part II deals with the question of man's Redemption by Christ, and in it is included a commentary on the Apostles' Creed, which became,

in the hands of Ursinus and Olevianus, a panorama of the facts of Redemption, as they move from the purpose of the Father in the untrodden past, to the Everlasting Life which awaits His sons and daughters in the untrackable future. It also deals with the exposition of the Sacraments, for it is to be inferred that having seen our sin and misery in Part I, the Sacraments have much to tell us of the Saviour and His salvation. Part III is particularly characteristic of the whole Catechism. It deals with the thankfulness of the redeemed, or the Christian life; showing the easy yoke, and the light burden, to which the Christian is voluntarily subject. Part III also treats of the Lord's Prayer, the aspirations of which are the out-breathings of the spiritual and holy nature that has been implanted in the twice-born man. It also sets forth the Ten Commandments in detail, so " that we may continually strive and beg from God the grace of the Holy Ghost, so as to become more and more changed into the image of God, till we attain finally to full perfection after this life ".

The order and arrangement of the Shorter Catechism may be more correct and logical, viewed from a theological point of view; but that of the Heidelberg Catechism is undoubtedly more natural and experiential.

III

But great as is the glory of the Heidelberg Catechism in its plan and arrangement of material, it is even greater when we come to study the questions in detail. The compilers have used the choicest diction possible, although to us to-day, of course, it is tinged with contemporary peculiarities in phraseology. There is a complete absence of all bitterness and rancour, save in one question, where the Mass is said to be nothing else than a denial of the one Sacrifice and Passion of Jesus Christ (and an accursed idolatry). It is now ascertained beyond controversy, as Schaff points out, that this question, No. 80, was no part of the Heidelberg Catechism, but was inserted by the express order of Elector Frederick III, as a counterblast to the anathemas of the Council of Trent. The question was inserted in the second edition; but the passage in brackets above did not appear till the third edition was issued. There is a very marked moderation throughout in its statement of doctrine, and it has been

pointed out that if its Protestantism is convinced and robust, it is a Protestantism without petulance and rancour. This moderation in tone is seen all through; unswervingly Calvinistic, it is nevertheless measured and quiet. It does not, for instance, try to solve the mystery of the origin of sin, nor to reconcile Divine Sovereignty and human liberty, nor to affirm that the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is necessary and absolute.

Moreover, as has been pointed out before, the Heidelberg Catechism is personal and subjective rather than impersonal and objective. It examines the truths of the Protestant Faith, as vital elements in the religious life and experience. As Smellie says, "the writers prefer to tell out what has touched and transfigured their own souls"; and they do this perhaps most of all by making use of the personal pronouns. The result is that the questions and answers are very intimate, and at times even emotional and enthusiastic. This is seen in the very first question, "*What is thy only comfort in life and in death?*" The glad answer which follows is:

> "That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with His Precious Blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him."

The aptitude and harmony of the phrasing of the Heidelberg Catechism is again seen in the answer to the question, "*What is Faith?*"

> "It is not only a certain knowledge whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a hearty trust which the Holy Ghost works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God merely of Grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits."

Compare and contrast the answer of the Shorter Catechism to this question.

> "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the Gospel."

This latter is a very accurate and carefully worded statement of what faith is; but it lacks the warmth which contact with human personality gives to the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism.

This preciseness of words and accuracy of phrase, which is characteristic of the Shorter Catechism, is perhaps seen even more strikingly in the answer to the question, "*What is effectual calling?*"

> "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered in the Gospel."

Here we have an answer that is marvellously accurate and true, whether viewed theologically or psychologically. It is a truly noble description, even though it does not breathe the freshness of the Heidelberg answers. This contrast is again seen in the answers to the question as to what do we mean by the Providence of God? The Shorter gives a very precise and all-inclusive statement.

> "God's works of Providence are His most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions."

The Heidelberg takes more words in which to express the same truth; but it, at the same time, infuses a new reality and nearness into them.

> "The Almighty and everywhere present Power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still holds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them, that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty; yea all things, come not by chance, but by His Fatherly hand."

And this is intensified in answer to the question, "*What does it profit to know that God has created and by His Providence upholds all things?*"

> "That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity; and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father: that no creature shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move."

One could go on quoting; but enough has been shown to give an idea of the similarities, and yet the striking differences, between the two Catechisms. Only one thing more may be contrasted: that is, their treatment of the Sacraments, especially of the Lord's Supper. In dealing with this the Heidelberg seems to show itself to be a combination of several views; and, in consequence, it is distinguished less by clearness than by an effort to bridge over existing differences. First of all, it brings the Lord's Supper into relation to the sufferings of Christ, and

therein shows the influence of Zürich. Again, there is the emphasis on the mystical union of the believers with the Heavenly Body of Christ, very clearly manifesting the influence which Calvin's views had. The Shorter Catechism took shape at a time when men's opinions on the Lord's Supper were not such a hot-bed of strife and bitterness, and there was not this accommodating of divergent views. It does not, however, adopt a strict Calvinistic view of the elements of the Supper, and it goes further than the Zwinglians were prepared to go. The two Catechisms are agreed as to who are to come unto the table of the Lord—so well answered by the Heidelberg:

> "Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, yet trust that these are forgiven them, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by the passion and death of Christ; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But the impenitent and hypocrites eat and drink judgement to themselves."

And now, having seen somewhat of the contents of the two Catechisms, we can the better sum up the advantages and disadvantages of each. Both are, of course, definitely Reformed and Calvinistic in outlook; this is seen especially in the Heidelberg, by its conception of the intimate social connection in the congregation as the real source of discipline. But they are different in many other ways. Schaff holds that the difference between them is chiefly one of nationality—suited to the needs and temperament of the nations which give rise to them.

The Heidelberg Catechism has this great advantage over the Shorter Catechism, that it couches its answers in language much more experiential and akin to life. But it may be objected: Is it wise to put into the mouths of young people truths of which they have not had actual knowledge, and affirmations about an experience of which they know practically nothing as yet? This is, indeed, an argument which could be urged against it. But it is one which could be argued against every Catechism almost. Besides, if the objection were made to the compilers of the Heidelberg Catechism that it were unwise to allow the children to use the answers, when they might never know anything of what they affirmed, they would readily have replied that the children are included in the covenant and are heirs to its blessings. But a more formidable objection which might be put forward is that the Catechism is not entirely adapted to a child's capacity, since its answers are much too long to enable

anyone, much less a young person, to commit them to memory. Now, while this is true, it must be noted that they are not couched in the sombre, heavy type of expression, such as is used in the Shorter Catechism; but in noble language, captivating in its clearness, as well as by its fervent joy of faith. And this might well justify, to some extent, its being offered to school children for memorising. In addition, it might be noted that the essential elements of true repentance are found in short form, so that the very youngest could understand. For example, repentance is set forward as the dying of the old man and the quickening of the new. The dying of the old man is then further explained as " heartfelt sorrow for sin, causing us to hate and turn from it more and more "; and the quickening of the new man is said to be " heartfelt joy in God, causing us to take delight in living according to His will in all good works ". It could scarcely be put in simpler form.

On the other hand, it can scarcely be denied that the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly surpasses all others in its clearness and careful wording: and in the verity, terseness, and accuracy of its definitions. It was the opinion of the saintly Richard Baxter that it was the best Catechism he had ever seen, " the answers being a most excellent summary of the Christian faith and doctrine, and a fit test to try the orthodoxy of teachers themselves ".

It is difficult to contrast more fully the two Catechisms, since they represent two different types of piety and devotion; each equally sincere in its love of Christ; but not of such a nature as to admit their being fused together. One cannot help but feel, however, the attraction of the Heidelberg composition; and one is inclined to agree with Dr. Bonar, of the Free Church of Scotland, when he said: " It may be questioned whether the Church gained anything by the exchange of the Reformation standards for those of the seventeenth century. There is something about the theology of the Reformation which renders it less likely to become obsolete than the theology of the covenant. The simpler formulas of the older age are quite as explicit as those of the later; while by the adoption of the Biblical—in preference to the Scholastic—mode of expression, they have secured for themselves a buoyancy which will bear them up when others go down."

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