

# From reformation to counter-reformation to further reformation: A picture of the anti-Roman background of the Heidelberg Catechism

**Author:**

 Erik van Alten<sup>1</sup>
**Affiliation:**
<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards Centre, University of the Free State, South Africa

**Correspondence to:**

Erik van Alten

**Email:**

hhvanalten@gmail.com

**Postal address:**

PO Box 31641, Totiusdal 0134, South Africa

**Dates:**

Received: 14 Dec. 2012

Accepted: 26 Apr. 2013

Published: 23 Aug. 2013

**How to cite this article:**

 Van Alten, E., 2013, 'From reformation to counter-reformation to further reformation: A picture of the anti-Roman background of the Heidelberg Catechism', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47(2), Art. #680, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i2.680>
**Copyright:**

© 2013. The Authors.

Licensee: AOSIS

OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The anti-Roman sentiment of the Heidelberg Catechism is well-documented. In its contents the Catechism often seeks to combat Roman doctrine. However, this anti-Roman sentiment did not have its origin from textbooks and it was not merely an academic exercise. It was first and foremost a reaction to the ecclesiastical context of that time. At the same time that Elector Frederick III commissioned the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Council of Trent was meeting on the other side of the Alpine mountains. Remarkably, this meeting had only recently decided to write a catechism of its own. It is very likely that the decision-makers in Heidelberg were aware of what was happening in Trent, and reacted accordingly. Underlying the decision to commission and write the Heidelberg Catechism was the acknowledgment of the importance of catechetical teaching. In several documents, which are closely related to the Heidelberg Catechism, the importance of catechetical teaching is highlighted. Interestingly, however, these documents also contrast the reformed principal of catechetical teaching with the Roman sacrament of confirmation. Whereas catechetical teaching leads children on the way from their baptism to the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of confirmation takes away the urgency for any form of catechetical teaching.

**Van reformasie na kontra-reformasie en tot verdere reformasie: 'n Skets van die anti-Roomse agtergrond van die Heidelbergse Kategismus.** Daar is reeds baie geskryf oor die anti-Roomse sentiment wat uit die Heidelbergse Kategismus spreek. Inhoudelik voer die Kategismus dikwels 'n stryd met die Roomse leer. Die oorsprong van hierdie anti-Roomse sentiment kom egter nie net uit handboeke nie en dit was ook nie bloot 'n akademiese oefening nie. Dit was eerstens veral 'n reaksie op die kerklike konteks van daardie tyd. Dieselfde tyd toe Keurvorst Frederik III opdrag gegee het vir die opstel van die Heidelbergse Kategismus, het die Konsilie van Trente aan die oorkant van die Alpe vergader. Dit is merkwaardig dat hierdie vergadering kort voor dit besluit het om op sy eie 'n kategismus op te stel. Die besluitnemers in Heidelberg was heel waarskynlik volkome bewus van wat in Trente gebeur het en het dienoooreenkomstig opgetree. Onderliggend aan die besluit om opdrag te gee tot die opstel van die Heidelbergse Kategismus, was die besef van die belangrikheid van kategese. In verskeie dokumente wat nou aan die Heidelbergse Kategismus verwant is, word die belangrikheid van kategese beklemtoon. Dit is egter interessant dat hierdie dokumente ook die kontras tussen die gereformeerde beginsel van kategetiese onderrig en die Roomse sakrament van die vormsel aantoon. Terwyl kategetiese onderrig kinders vanaf hulle doop tot by die nagmaal begelei, misken die sakrament van die vormsel die noodsaaklikheid van enige vorm van kategetiese onderrig.

## Introduction

The year 2013 not only marks the 450th anniversary of the origin of the Heidelberg Catechism for Protestants, but it is also a 450th anniversary of another kind for Christians on the other side of the confessional fence. The year 1563 was, after all, not only the beginning of the Heidelberg book-of-comfort, but it was also the year in which the famous Council of Trent came to its grand conclusion. Reformation and Counter-Reformation therefore share this remarkable year, and Christians of both Reformed and Catholic conviction will commemorate their respective heritages in 2013.

Could this shared piece of history maybe lead to a shared future, even if it means only a *little* piece of shared future? Could Heidelberg and Trent be a boost for the ecumenical dialogue?<sup>1</sup> Without necessarily answering these questions for today's context, this article will at least attempt to show what the answer was 450 years ago. In short, the answer was as follows: in 1563 Heidelberg

1. According to Refo500 (n.d.), this will be the central question at the *Trier exhibition '1563 – Heidelberg and Trent'* planned for September and October 2013.

**Read online:**


Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

and Trent were complete opposites. The obstacles between Heidelberg and Trent were as big as the Alpine mountains that stood between these two historically important cities. Although the delegates in Trent might not have been aware of what was happening in Heidelberg, the opposite was certainly true. Heidelberg consciously positioned itself against Trent and its canons and anathemas. In this article a picture will be sketched of the history and contents of this opposition.

To begin with, it will be shown that Heidelberg and Trent not only share a common date (1563), but that there are also more formal links: in Heidelberg the canons and anathemas of Trent had a direct influence on the decision to produce a new Catechism. Next, the opposition between Trent and Heidelberg will be focused on a specific aspect, as expressed by persons who played a leading role in the origin and realisation of the Heidelberg Catechism. This aspect has to do with the contrast between the reformers' rediscovery of the value of catechetical teaching and the Roman sacrament of confirmation. Finally, a few conclusions will be drawn.

## Rome in the background

For many Christians coming from reformed churches, the Heidelberg Catechism (HC)<sup>2</sup> is a unique writing. Unique in the sense that it is the only catechism they know and in their experience it is the only catechism that exists.<sup>3</sup> However, in sixteenth-century Europe the situation was different. It was quite common for reformed cities and territories to produce their own catechisms. Also, in the Palatinate, one of the leading principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, there were several catechisms in use at the time when the HC was written, although they had not been produced locally. One of them was Johannes Brenz's *Landescatechismus* (Gunnøe 2005:35). Consequently, Bierma (2005:49) can state that it was not surprising that the Palatinate created its own catechism. What was surprising, however, was that it had not done so earlier. Bierma does not delve into the reasons for this 'delay'.

This begs the question: Why was the HC only produced in 1563? After all, the reformation of the Palatinate had been progressing gradually from the 1520s through the reigns of Ludwig V (r. 1508–1544), Frederick II (r. 1544–1556), Ottheinreich (r. 1556–1559) and Frederick III, the Pious (r. 1559–1576), by whom the production of the HC was eventually commissioned (Gunnøe 2005:15–47). Furthermore, the reformation, albeit in Lutheran form, was already officially accepted in the Palatinate in 1546 through a series of edicts and judgments legalising the reform, and it was fixed in a Protestant church order shortly afterwards (Gunnøe *ibid*:27–28). Added to this, a church visitation, ordered by Ottheinreich in 1556, found *inter alia* that the ideas of the Anabaptists had taken root in the parishes of

the Palatinate, that there were only a few properly trained ministers available, and that many parishioners still held to the traditions of their folk piety (Gunnøe *ibid*:35) – a state of affairs that would lead one to expect a thorough reformation of the means and methods of the Christian education. And, finally, such a reformation of the Christian education would have been completely within the capabilities of Heidelberg, seeing that, especially since the time of Ottheinreich, a well-known university with a relatively strong theological faculty was readily available.<sup>4</sup> All these factors taken into account, one wonders why it had taken almost two decades, after officially accepting Protestantism, for Heidelberg to produce its own catechism. And when the commission was finally given for an own catechism, what was, at that time, the cause for its production? This question will now be explored further.

## Dating the commissioning of the Heidelberg Catechism

Elector Frederick III commissioned the preparation of a new catechism, most probably sometime in 1562. Seeing that very little documentation has survived, it has proven impossible to give an exact date for this commissioning. However, it has to be somewhere between 09 September 1561 and 19 January 1563. The first is the date of the arrival of Zacharius Ursinus, generally regarded as the person responsible for crafting the draft of the HC (Bierma 2005:70). The second is the date of Elector Frederick III's preface to the HC (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:151).<sup>5</sup> However, the *terminus post quem* [limit after which] and *terminus ante quem* [limit before which] for the commissioning of the HC can be narrowed down even more when the following facts are taken into consideration.

It is generally accepted that Ursinus' *Catechesis minor*<sup>6</sup> was used as one of the main source documents for composing the HC,<sup>7</sup> and thus had to be composed somewhere before the HC. In Reuter's 1612 collection of Ursinus' works, the title of the *Catechesis minor* is appended by the words 'written in the year 1562 by dr Zacaharias Ursinus; produced now for the first time from the library and original manuscript of the author' (Bierma 2005:137). According to this evidence, the *Catechesis minor* was composed in 1562, and therefore the latter part of 1561 can be eliminated as a possible *terminus post quem* for the commissioning of the HC. For a more precise *terminus ante quem*, reference can be made to Ursinus' inaugural address in September 1562 when taking up his position as professor at the University of Heidelberg, in which he indicates that the

4. For more on the history of the Heidelberg University, see Maag (1995).

5. This last date can even be moved backwards to the end of 1562, when the text of the HC was fixed in a meeting between the theological faculty and the ministers of the church (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:29).

6. Although the authorship of the *Catechesis minor* has been debated through the years, the outcome of this debate has no direct bearing on the argumentation followed above. For the purpose of this article, I accept the authorship of Ursinus. For a short background on this debate, see Bierma (2005:137–138).

7. This is primarily based on a comment by Reuter in his 1612 collection of Ursinus' works where he says that the *Catechesis minor* and *Catechesis maior* had been composed by order of the magistrate, and that from the *Catechesis minor* a large part was taken over into the HC. Scholars noting the similarities in contents between the *Catechesis minor* and the HC have confirmed this comment. Bierma (2005:139) notes that parallels in phrasing of at least 90 of the questions and answers in the *Catechesis minor* can be found in 110 of the questions and answers in the HC.

2. Hereafter the Heidelberg Catechism will be designated only by 'HC'. For references to the *textus receptus* of 1563, I have used the editions of W. Niesel (1938) and of J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (1976).

3. Most reformed Christians are, of course, also familiar with, or at least aware of, the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, but these confessions were produced almost a century after the HC.

new catechism was almost ready (Bierma *ibid*:137–138). Thus, by September 1562 good progress had been made on the production of the HC. From these snippets of information, one can conclude that the *Catechesis minor* had to be composed in the first half of 1562, and that Frederick III's commission for the production of the HC was either given shortly before (so that the *Catechesis minor* was composed as a 'trial run' for the HC), or shortly afterwards (using the *Catechesis minor* as a source for the HC).

The reason for trying to establish the date of Frederick III's commission so precisely, is brought about by the interesting fact that the third and last session of the Council of Trent started on 18 January 1562 (and continued until its final adjournment on 04 December 1563) – thus, shortly before the time when the HC was commissioned and drawn up. In itself, of course, this proximity in time does not prove a connection between these two important events. However, there are a few indicators that do suggest a link between the final session of the Council of Trent and the commissioning, as well as the contents, of the HC.

### The Council of Trent and the Heidelberg Catechism: A coincidence?

Firstly, during its eighteenth session (26 February 1562) the Council of Trent commissioned the composition of the very first Roman catechism. As a matter of fact, it was already decreed by the council during its fourth session on 5 April 1546 that a catechism, to be compiled by capable persons, must be published in Latin and in the vernacular for children and uninstructed adults. But, as the council was occupied by more pressing matters, nothing is heard of this decision again until the eighteenth session in February 1562, when it was brought up by Archbishop Carlo Borromeo. During this session a commission was appointed to commence with the work. Although individual catechisms had been in existence in the Roman Catholic Church before that time (e.g. the catechism of the Jesuit Petrus Canisius), this would become the very first church-wide catechism for the Roman church (Halsall 1999). It was surely an historic moment.

Frederick III could hardly have known the contents of this catechism before he commissioned the production of the HC, as it was only published in 1566. But the mere fact that he commissioned the preparation of what would become the HC only months after the Council of Trent's decision to compose the *very first* Roman catechism, certainly attracts attention. There is a very real possibility that Frederick's commission came as a direct result of receiving word of the decision made at Trent, or at the very least, the Tridentine decision served as the final impetus for the Elector to do what seems to have been long overdue.

Secondly, not only the origin, but also the contents of the HC was, at least partly, influenced by Rome, and more specifically by the Council of Trent. Of course, the anti-Roman sentiment of the HC is well-known.<sup>8</sup> Again this is in itself no proof of a

8. Some explicit examples of this anti-Roman sentiment are the repudiation of trust in saints (Q/A 30, 94), justification by good works (Q/A 62–64), worship of images (Q/A 97 and 98). Further examples, see Bierma (2005:79).

connection between the final session of the Council of Trent and Frederick III's commissioning of the HC. However, the anti-Roman sentiment of the HC receives its most explicit articulation in question and answer 80, which deals with the Roman Mass;<sup>9</sup> a question and answer that is surrounded by an interesting piece of history. HC 80 was, after all, not part of the first edition of the HC. For a very short period of almost a month, the HC had only 128 (instead of 129) questions and answers (Doedes 1867:22).<sup>10</sup> But at the behest of Frederick III (and after some urging by Olevianus),<sup>11</sup> HC 80 was added to the second and – in an expanded form – to the third German editions of 1563.<sup>12</sup>

Why was HC 80 initially omitted, and why was it later added and even expanded? According to Doedes (1867:27; cf. Bierma, 2005:79), who carefully compared the different editions, the initial omission of HC 80 was not a matter of mere oversight, although this impression is created.<sup>13</sup> It is quite possible that Frederick III insisted on this addition as a result of the decrees on the mass made by the Council of Trent in its 22nd session in September of 1562.<sup>14</sup> Probably these Papal decisions reached the Elector and his advisors too late to react to them before the approval of the final text in December of 1562, and therefore it was not included in the first edition, but only got its place in the second edition almost a month later. Doedes (*ibid*:35) is of the opinion that, after the Elector had the opportunity to study the official anathema of the Council of Trent, he decided to expand on HC 80 even more for the third edition (again almost a month later). It can therefore be said that Rome's anathema surrounding the doctrine of the mass, forced the Elector into a strong-worded, reformed rejection of the mass. The Papal anathema was countered by a Reformed condemnation: '... and a condemnable idolatry' (last words of answer 80, added in the third edition).

It seems therefore that we have here another indicator (the first being the coinciding dates, both in 1562, of Trent's decision to compose a Catechism and Elector Frederick's decision to do the same) that Frederick III was very aware

9. For more on HC 80 and the conflict with Rome, see Mulder (2010).

Q. How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

A. The Lord's Supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him.

But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in 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.

10. The questions and answers were, at that time, still unnumbered. Only from the first Latin edition, this specific question and answer would be known as question and answer 80 (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:32).

11. *Calvini Opera* 19:684, in a letter from Olevianus to Calvin, dated 03 April 1563.

12. According to Doedes (1867:24), Bakhuizen Van den Brink (1976:30) and Oberholzer (1986:12), the second edition probably saw the light at the end of February or the beginning of March 1563, whilst the third edition followed almost a month later. The fourth and final edition has a preface dated 15 November 1563.

13. On page 96 of the second edition it is written: '*An den Christlichen Leser. Was im ersten truck übersehen, als fürnemlich folio 55. Ist jetzunder ausbefelch Churfürstlicher Gnaden addiert worden 1563*' ['To the Christian reader. What was missed in the first edition, especially page 55, is now added on demand of the Elector 1563'] (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:194).

14. For Trent's decrees and anathemas on the Roman Mass, see Waterworth (1995).

of what was happening at the Council of Trent, and that the Tridentine decisions influenced some important aspects of the contents of the HC.

## Preliminary conclusions

The pretention of the above is not to say that Rome and the Council of Trent was the one and only reason for the birth of the HC. History and contents would defy such a pretention.<sup>15</sup> But users of the HC should at least take note of Frederick III's acute awareness of what was happening in Northern Italy, where the Council of Trent was meeting. That awareness made the Elector realise that the Papists answered the Reformation with a Counter-Reformation, especially when they decided to put the Roman doctrine, officially reconfirmed by the Council of Trent, on paper in a catechism. That in turn led Frederick III to further reformation. He realised that the true doctrine needed to be taught time and time again to children in the schools and common people from the pulpit.<sup>16</sup> Reformation was, after all, not a once-off event on which the church could look back with satisfaction, but rather a process of continuous reformation (*semper reformanda*). Therefore, in his preface to the first edition of the HC, Frederick III can state that what was done before by his predecessors needed to be further improved, reformed and further established, as the exigencies of the time demanded (*da es die nothwendigkeit erfordert*; Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976:150). It is very possible that this *nothwendigkeit* is *inter alia* a hidden reference to what was happening at Trent. It can therefore be stated, with a considerable degree of certainty, that the commissioning of the HC was, at least partially, a reaction to what was decided at Trent.

But Frederick III did not stop listening when he received word of Trent's intention to write its own catechism. He continued to take note of what was decided at Trent. That helped him, not only to react to Trent's catechism with Heidelberg's own catechism, but also to use this new catechism to answer 'Trent's doctrine' with 'Heidelberg's doctrine'. This is very apparent with the addition of HC 80. This addition shows that, even when the contents of the HC was fixed at the end of 1562, the Elector had no problem in adding to it in a second and third edition when news arrived of the Tridentine decisions surrounding the mass.<sup>17</sup>

## The arrow aimed at the heart of Rome

In light of the role that Heidelberg's conscious opposition towards Rome, and more specifically the Council of Trent,

15. Bierma (2005:50–52), for example, argues strongly that Frederick III commissioned the new catechism as a standard preaching and teaching guide around which the major Protestant factions in his realm could unite. Thus, he emphasises the ecumenical purpose of the HC. This, however, does not exclude the anti-Roman purpose of the HC.

16. See this double purpose that comes out of Frederick III's preface to the first edition of the HC (Bierma 2005:50–52).

17. This is, of course, not the only place in the HC where Roman doctrine is countered (see Bierma 2005:79 for other examples), but the history surrounding this question and answer (see the section above *The Council of Trent and the Heidelberg Catechism: A coincidence?*) makes clear how involved Frederick III was with what was happening in Trent.

played in the establishment of the HC, as described above, this chapter wants to dig a little deeper into the motivation for this opposition. What was at the heart of Heidelberg's anti-Roman polemic when it came to the issue of Christian education? More generally stated: Where did Rome and the Reformation differ exactly on the issue of catechetical teaching? Two concise, but important citations – one from the introduction to the fourth edition of the HC and one from Zacharias Ursinus' commentary on the HC – may be of help to find the heart of the matter.

## The fourth edition of the Heidelberg Catechism

The HC was published in four different versions in 1563, a testimony to its immediate success. The fourth and final edition did not differ from the text of the third edition, but it did differ in the 'packaging'. The fourth edition of the HC did not stand on its own, but received a place within the whole of a new Palatine church order, entitled *Kirchenordnung, wie es mit der christlichen Lehre, heiligen Sacramenten, und Ceremonien, inn des durchleuchtigsten Herrn Friedrichs Pfaltzgraven bey Rhein ... gehalten wirdt* (Maag 2005:105). This church order consisted of a whole range of church ordinances, including instructions on celebrating baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as formulary prayers for use during church services (Niesel 1938:23). In addition to a general preface, the HC received its own introduction (*vom Catechismo*; Niesel *ibid*:148–149), dated 15 November 1563 (Niesel *ibid*:140–141), attached to the whole church order. In this introduction it is stated that, from the beginning of the church, all the godly taught their children in the fear of the Lord, 'doubtless because of the following reasons' (*one zweifel auß nachfolgenden ursachen*; Niesel *ibid*:148, line 14). Three reasons are subsequently provided. The first reason pertains to the natural depravity of the heart of even the small children, which should be countered with wholesome teaching. The second reason makes clear that this teaching is commanded by God.

But it is the third reason that is of special interest to the topic of this article. It says that just like the children of Israel, after circumcision and when they came to their senses, were instructed in the covenant and the signs of the covenant, so our children should be instructed in the baptism they received, as well as in the true Christian faith and repentance, so that they can confess their faith before the whole Christian congregation before they are allowed at the table of the Lord.<sup>18</sup> According to this reasoning, catechetical teaching is given a very important position between receiving the baptism and celebrating the Lord's Supper. Catechetical teaching receives the function of instructing the children in the covenant and in the signs of the covenant (the sacraments), thereby guiding them from their baptism to their confession of faith, and ultimately to the celebration of the Lord's Supper together with the congregation. It is therefore no surprise to see that, in the register of the Palatinate church order (*Register an welchen*

18. 'Endlich auch gleich wie der von Jsrael kinder nach der Beschneidung wann sie zu jrem verstand kamen von der geheimnuß desselben Bundzeichens und auch vom bund Gottes underricht wurden also sollen auch unsere kinder von jrem empfangnen Tauff warem Christlichen Glauben und Buß underrichtet werden auff daß ehe zie zum Tisch des Herrn zugelassen werden sie für der gantzen Christlichen gemein jhren glauben bekennen' (Niesel 1938:148, line 24–31).

*blatt ein jeder Titel zufinden*), the HC is placed exactly between holy baptism and the Lord's Supper (Niesel 1938:141, line 24–32). This is not merely a trivial decision of order, but a deliberate, theological placement. Children are led from their baptism, by means of catechetical teaching, towards their confession of faith and attending the table of the Lord.

The introduction to the HC, however, does not stop with the third reason for catechetical teaching. After this final reason, it continues without interruption by saying that this important custom of using the Catechism, originating as it did from the command of God, had been destroyed by Satan through the Papal Antichrist (*den Antichrist den Papst*). The Papists have substituted catechetical teaching with the abomination of the confirmation (*die Firmung*; Niesel 1938:148, line 31–36). Here the veil is lifted briefly, albeit in very vehement language,<sup>19</sup> on what might have been at the root of Heidelberg's anti-Roman polemic concerning Christian education. When it came to Christian education, it seems that Heidelberg was in essence fighting the Roman sacrament of the confirmation, because through the sacrament of the confirmation, the century-old and biblical custom of catechetical teaching had been abandoned. The process of instructing children from baptism to Lord's Supper had been interrupted and eventually replaced by a non-recurrent sacrament. This was not only a battle surrounding catechetical teaching, but it also reflected diverging views on the sacraments.

### Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism

Zacharias Ursinus was not only the primary author of the HC,<sup>20</sup> but also its chief expositor and apologist. His main expository work was his commentary on the HC. This commentary was a compilation of his lectures on the HC, revised and published in a number of editions by Ursinus' student, David Pareus (1548–1622).<sup>21</sup> As part of the prolegomena to this commentary, Ursinus discusses five specific questions concerning catechetical teaching, and it is at this point that he reveals some of the anti-Roman sentiment that also underlies the HC.

Under the first heading, 'What is catechisation?', Ursinus (1634:10–11) describes the system of catechetical teaching as it was practiced in the primitive church. There were two classes of catechumens – those of adult age, converting to Christianity from the Jews and the Gentiles, and the small children of the church, also referred to as the children of the Christians. Regarding this last group he then says:

These children, very soon after their birth, were baptized, being regarded as members of the church, and after they had grown a

19.'... also auch diese zerrissen und an statt derselben sein schmierwerck und backenstreich, und andere gewel hat gesetzt welche er die Firmung nennet' (Niesel 1938:148, line 34–36).

20. Bierma (2005:52–74) makes a convincing argument for Ursinus as the primary author of the HC, although he does not deny that the HC was in essence a team project.

21. See note 103 in Bierma (2005:72). In this article, the 1634 edition of this work, *Corpus doctrinae Christianae*, is used—for the digital version see <http://www.dilibri.de/rlbdfg/content/titleinfo/425480>

little older they were instructed in the catechism, which having learned, they were dismissed from the class of Catechumens with the laying on of hands, and were then permitted, with those of riper years, to celebrate the Lord's Supper. (Ursinus 1634:10–11)

Although this is a description of an earlier ecclesiastical practice, Ursinus shows his implicit agreement with this practice when, at the end of the section, he encourages his readers to consult *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* if they want to learn more about it. Two aspects are important for the purpose of this discussion.

Firstly, the practice of the early church was characterised by the same three elements that were already identified in the introduction to the HC (see *The fourth edition of the Heidelberg Catechism*), namely baptism, catechetical teaching and the Lord's Supper, and they appear here in the same chronological order. Just as in the introduction to the HC, it is clearly the intention that the children, having grown a little older, should be led from baptism towards the Lord's Supper by means of catechetical teaching.

Secondly, however, Ursinus makes no mention in this description of the confession of faith as a distinctive step, something that the introduction to the HC does mention. Instead, he mentions the laying on of hands, by which persons were dismissed from the class of catechumens. Could this imply that the confession of faith and the laying on of hands were part of the same ceremony? What can be said with certainty is that the act of the laying on of hands was the culmination and completion of a process of catechetical teaching, as the catechumens were subsequently dismissed from the catechism class and permitted to celebrate the Lord's Supper with those of riper years. Seeing that in the introduction to the HC in the Palatine church order the confession of faith fulfils the same function, it justifies the conclusion that the confession of faith *and* the laying on of hands were both part of the same ceremony by which a person concluded the process of instruction and was allowed to the Lord's table.

Under the next heading ('What is the origin of catechisation, and has it always been practiced in the church?'), Ursinus (1634:11–13) claims that catechetical teaching was instituted by God, and he proves it with examples and Scripture passages from both the Old and the New Testament. When discussing his final proof-text, Hebrews 6, Ursinus deducts the following heads of doctrine from this passage: repentance from dead works, faith towards God, *baptism, the laying on of hands*, the resurrection from the dead and eternal judgment. These points of doctrine had to be known by both the catechumens of adult age before their baptism, and by the children before the laying on of hands. According to Ursinus, this distinction between the catechumens of adult age (who received baptism) and the children (who received the laying on of hands) is the reason why the apostle, in the list of doctrines in Hebrews 6, first speaks of the doctrine of baptism and afterwards of the laying on of hands. As with the previous citation from Ursinus' prolegomena, the laying

on of hands again refers to the end of a process of catechetical teaching, specifically for those who have been baptised in the church as little children. In other words: for the catechumens of adult age, the process of teaching ends with baptism, and for the children it ends with the laying on of hands.

Ursinus, however, continues that since the time of Pope Gregory, who placed images and idols in the church to serve as books for the laity and the children,<sup>22</sup> doctrine became corrupt through the negligence of the bishops and the priests, and catechetical teaching grew into disuse. Eventually catechetical teaching was changed into the ridiculous rite of the confirmation (*in ludicrum confirmationis ritum transformata*), which today is called *die Firmung* (1634:13). Again, catechetical teaching as a process of instruction that results in the laying on of hands and admittance to the Lord's table, is contrasted to the Roman sacrament of the confirmation. At this point, it will be beneficial to put this contrast in a broader framework.

### Catechetical teaching versus confirmation

For Rome the sacrament of confirmation was just as closely connected to baptism as catechetical teaching was connected to baptism in the view of the reformers. However, this connection was interpreted quite differently. For Rome the sacrament of baptism was not complete without the sacrament of confirmation; baptism needed confirmation. John Calvin (1864), who also battled against the Roman sacrament of the confirmation, writes as follows:

Those anointers say that the Holy Spirit is given in baptism for righteousness, and in confirmation for increase of grace; that in baptism we are regenerated for life, and in confirmation equipped for contest. And, accordingly, they are not ashamed to deny that baptism can be duly completed without confirmation. (Inst. 4.19.8; CO 2:1071)

Thus, for Rome the sacrament of confirmation is the indispensable completion of the sacrament of baptism. The sacrament of confirmation adds something that baptism cannot give: an increase of grace, equipping the Christian for battle. Calvin's (1864) reaction to this view of baptism speaks volumes:

How nefarious! Are we not, then, buried with Christ by baptism, and made partakers of his death, that we may also be partners of his resurrection? This fellowship with the life and death of Christ, Paul interprets to mean the mortification of our flesh, and the quickening of the Spirit, our old man being crucified in order that we may walk in newness of life. What is it to be equipped for contest, if this is not? (Inst. 4.19.8; CO 2:1071)

According to Calvin, everything believers need is received in baptism; nothing extra is required. However, the contents of baptism must, through time, be understood and believed. And this is where the importance of catechetical teaching comes in. Against the sacrament of confirmation, Calvin puts the necessity of catechetical teaching. He says:

<sup>22</sup>These words are reminiscent of question and answer 98 of the HC: Question 98: But may not images be tolerated in the churches, as books to the laity? Answer: No, for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have his people taught, not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of his word.

I wish we could retain the custom, which, as I have observed, existed in the early Church, before this abortive mask of a sacrament appeared. It would not be such a confirmation as they pretend, one which cannot even be named without injury to baptism, but catechising by which those in boyhood, or immediately beyond it, would give an account of their faith in the face of the Church. And the best method of catechising would be, if a form were drawn up for this purpose, containing, and briefly explaining, the substance of almost all the heads of our religion, in which the whole body of the faithful ought to concur without controversy. A boy of ten years of age would present himself to the Church, to make a profession of faith, would be questioned on each head, and give answers to each. If he was ignorant of any point, or did not well understand it, he would be taught. Thus, whilst the whole Church looked on and witnessed, he would profess the one true sincere faith with which the body of the faithful, with one accord, worship one God. (Inst. 4.19.13; CO 2:1075)

Calvin, just as the fathers of the HC, makes clear that the custom of catechetical teaching existed in the early church, but was gradually replaced by the sacrament of the confirmation. He calls confirmation an injury to baptism (*quae sine baptismi iniuria nec nominari potest*; Inst. 4.19.13; CO 2:1075). What the church needs, however, is catechising by means of a form containing the heads of doctrine. In this way children will come to a confession of the one faith. Baptism, therefore, needs no addition. Rather, children need to be instructed in their baptism.

### Preliminary conclusions

Both the introduction to the HC in the Palatine church order *and* the prolegomena to Ursinus' commentary on the HC highlight the fact that catechetical teaching is an institution of God that has been practiced from the beginning of the church. This catechetical teaching plays a very important role in children's progress from the time of their baptism until the time when they are allowed to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It prepares the children of the congregation to confess their faith – an act that was apparently accompanied by the laying on of hands – and subsequently be allowed to the Lord's table together with the rest of the congregation.

In both documents this instrument of catechetical teaching is contrasted with the Roman sacrament of confirmation, where the laying on of hands received a sacramental function. According to the fathers of the HC, the institution of catechetical teaching has gradually been neglected and eventually it grew into complete disuse and was substituted with the sacrament of the confirmation.

It can therefore be concluded that, in their discussion of the importance of catechetical teaching, both these important documents essentially aim their arrows at the Roman sacrament of confirmation. That this was at the heart of Heidelberg's anti-Roman polemic on the issue of Christian education becomes even clearer in light of Trent's canon on the sacrament of the confirmation. Canon 1 on the confirmation states:

If anyone says that the confirmation of those baptized is an empty ceremony and not a true and proper sacrament; or that of old it was nothing more than a sort of instruction, whereby those approaching adolescence gave an account of their faith to the Church, let him be anathema. (Waterworth 1995)

Rome already drew this battle line in March 1547.

## Conclusion

Frederick III most probably received word that Rome was about to write its first church-wide catechism, but it did not convince him that reformation was really taking place in Trent. Instead of viewing Rome's proposed catechism as a possible olive branch for renewed relations between Rome and the reformers, the Elector may rather have seen it as an instrument of distributing Rome's false doctrine. After all, the mere existence of a catechism did not change the doctrine contained in it. And in addition, the existence of a catechism did not mean the reformation of catechetical teaching, because the sacrament of confirmation was still a reality, even more so now that the Pope would soon officially endorse it in a catechism. That had to be countered with the true teaching of Scripture. The HC became Frederick III's instrument for further reformation.

The Roman sacrament of confirmation had a detrimental effect on the church's custom of catechetical teaching, which was based on Scripture and had been in practice since the early church. The idea that baptism was completed by another sacrament – confirmation – led to the gradual neglect of catechetical teaching. The same can also be formulated within a broader framework: the sacramentalism of the Roman church, whereby grace is conveyed *ex opere operato*, makes knowledge and acknowledgement of the doctrine of Scripture superfluous. The fathers of the HC saw the dangers of this view, and countered it by, negatively, showing the dangers of the Roman sacrament of confirmation and by, positively, showing the Biblical command to teach the children.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## References

- Bakhuizen van den Brink, J.N., 1976, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften in authentieke teksten met inleiding en tekstvergelijkingen*, Uitgeverij Ton Bolland, Amsterdam.
- Bierma, L.D., 2005, *An introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, history and theology*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.
- CO vide Calvin, J., 1864, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt Omnia (vol. II Pars prior)*, in G. Baum, E. Cunitz & E. Reuss (eds.), *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. XXX, Braunschweig. [= CO 2]
- CO vide Calvin, J., 1879, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt Omnia (vol. XIX Pars prior)*, in G. Baum, E. Cunitz & E. Reuss (eds.), *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. XLVII, Braunschweig. [= CO 19]
- Doedes, J.I., 1867, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus in zijne eerste levensjaren*, Kemink, Utrecht.
- Gunnoe, C.D., 2005, 'The Reformation of the Palatinate and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism, 1500-1562', in L.D. Bierma, *An introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, history and theology*, pp.15–47, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.
- Halsall, P., 1999, 'Council of Trent: Catechism for parish priests', in *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, viewed 08 October 2012, from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/romancat.html>
- Maag, K.Y., 1995, *Seminary or university? The Genevan Academy and Reformed higher education 1560-1620*, Scholar Press, Ashgate.
- Maag, K.Y., 2005, 'Early editions and translations of the Heidelberg Catechism', in L.D. Bierma (ed.), *An introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, history and theology*, pp. 103–117, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.
- Mulder, J.F.K., 2010, 'n Vervloekte afgodery? Vraag 80 van die Heidelbergse Kategismus: 'n Dogma-historiese studie', ThM thesis, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State.
- Niesel, W. (ed.), 1938, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche*, Evangelischer Verlag, Zurich.
- Oberholzer, J.P., 1986, *Die Heidelbergse Kategismus in vier teksuitgawes, met inleiding en tekstvergelijking*, Kital, Pretoria.
- Refo500 n.d., *Trier Exhibition '1563 – Heidelberg and Trent'*, viewed 19 November 2012, from <http://www.refo500.nl/calendars/2/2557/trier-exhibition-1563-heidelberg-and-trent>
- Ursinus, Z., 1634, 'Corpus Doctrinae Christianae Ecclesiarum a Papatu Romano Reformatorum: Ex ore quondam Magni Theologi D. Zachariae Vrsini in explicationibus Catecheticis rudi Minervâ exceptum: ac postea crebris Editionibus auctum, castigatum, & consummatum / a venerabili Theologo D. Davide Pareo: Antiquissimae Academiae Heidelbergensis olim Professore primario', in *Dilibri Rheinland-Pfalz*, viewed 19 November 2012, from <http://www.dilibri.de/rlbdfg/content/titleinfo/425480>
- Waterworth, J. (ed.), 1995, 'The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent', in *Hanover Historical Texts Project*, viewed 17 April 2013, from <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct22.html>