

# THE HISTORY OF THE *Heidelberg Catechism*

From his castle in Heidelberg, Elector Frederick III ruled the most important German province, the Palatinate, from 1559 to 1576. In 1562 he commissioned the preparation of a new catechism for guiding ministers and teachers in instructing the people in the Christian faith. By the end of that year the new catechism was ready; it was approved by a synod in Heidelberg early in January and published in German with a preface by Frederick III, dated January 19, 1563. The Heidelberg Catechism, as it came to be known, is undoubtedly the most widely used and warmly praised catechism of the Reformation period.

An old tradition credits Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus as the primary authors of the catechism. All we know for sure, however, is that the Heidelberg was a team project. In his preface, the Elector mentions no specific names but tells us that the theological faculty, the superintendents, and the chief officers of the Palatinate church all took part in the catechism's production. Of course, a team project usually relies heavily on one or two persons who prepare preliminary drafts. Most authorities believe Ursinus had this leading role in composing the Heidelberg Catechism, though some think it may have been Olevianus. . . .

At the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, delegates from the Reformed churches of Europe gave the Heidelberg Catechism high praise for its pedagogical and doctrinal features. It soon became the most ecumenical of all the Reformed catechisms and confessions. The Heidelberg Catechism has been translated into most of the European languages and into many Asian and African languages as well. . . .

From the beginning, the biblical references in the Heidelberg Catechism were considered very important. Those who prepared the catechism intended it to be a faithful echo of the Scripture.

Excerpted from the preface to *The Heidelberg Catechism with Scripture Texts* (Faith Alive, 1989).