

THE THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

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1. Introduction

The theological orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) has been a matter of debate ever since the catechism first appeared in 1563.¹ The modern discussion of this question, however, really began in the second half of the nineteenth century, triggered by three figures in particular: Heinrich Hepppe, who identified the catechism as ‘deutsch-evangelisch,’ or Melancthonian; Karl Sudhoff, who considered it Calvinist in origin; and Maurits Gooszen, who traced the primary influence on the catechism to neither Melancthon nor Calvin but to what he called the ‘original Reformed Protestantism’ of Zwingli and Bullinger.²

Since then little consensus has emerged. Some have continued to apply a single theological label to the catechism. Dahlmann, for example, found in the HC ‘a clear, definite and popular statement of Reformed doctrine over against Lutheranism.’³ Lang was even more specific, maintaining that ‘in its characteristic features, the Heidelberg Catechism

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- 1 The following overview of the theological character of the HC is based on my chapter ‘The Sources and Theological Orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism’, in: Lyle D. Bierma e.a., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, Grand Rapids 2005, 76-77.
 - 2 Heinrich Hepppe, *Geschichte des deutschen Protestantismus in den Jahren 1555-1581*, Marburg 1852-59, 1:446, n. 2; Karl Sudhoff, *Olevianus und Z. Ursinus: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformierten Kirche, vol. 8, Elberfeld 1857, 113-18; M. Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche catechismus: textus receptus met toelichtende teksten* [‘Inleiding’], Leiden 1890, x, 149-50, 155-56; idem, *De Heidelbergsche catechismus en het boekje van de breking des broods, in het jaar 1563-1564 bestreden en verdedigd*, Leiden 1892, 276, 331-32, 401, 406, 408-9, 411.
 - 3 A.E. Dahlmann, ‘The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism’, *The Reformed Church Review*, 4th ser., 17 (April 1913), 176.

is not Lutheran, nor Melancthonian, nor Zwinglian, nor Bullingerian, nor Bucerian, but Calvinistic.⁴ Klooster, too, described the HC in its general disposition and many of its features as ‘thoroughly Calvinistic.’⁵

Others, however, have found in the HC a juxtaposition of more than one Reformation tradition. According to Neuser, one can detect the distinct voices of at least four ‘fathers’ of the HC: Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and Zwingli and his followers, with Calvin’s voice by far the strongest.⁶ In Schnucker’s view, the HC ‘espouses Reformed theology as dictated by Frederick III, but Lutheran ideas were not slighted.’⁷ And Prof. Verboom concluded that although the HC can be considered ‘authentically Reformed,’ one finds within it a combination of some of the characteristic views of several major reformers, such as Melancthon (on law), Bullinger (on covenant), and Calvin (on creation).⁸

Still others refrain from using traditional theological labels at all because they see the catechism either as a unique blend of different Protestant traditions or as an ‘ecumenical’ statement of theological consensus. Goeters, for example, understood the HC in its broadest terms as an amalgamation (*Verschmelzung*) of Melancthonianism and Calvinism into a new theological genus that he termed ‘German Reformed’ [*deutsch-reformierten*].⁹ Scholars such as McCord, Lekkerkerker and Hageman also traced the theology of the HC to a variety of influences but in the end regarded it as essentially an ecumenical confession, not favoring any one of the traditions that gave it nurture.¹⁰

4 A. Lang, ‘The Religious and Theological Character of the Heidelberg Catechism’, *The Reformed Church Review*, 4th ser., 18 (October 1914), 462.

5 Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Grand Rapids 2001, 1:46. Cf. also idem, *A Mighty Comfort: The Christian Faith according to the Heidelberg Catechism*, Grand Rapids 1990, 35-37.

6 W. Neuser, ‘Die Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus’, *Theologische Zeitschrift* 35 (1979), 177-199.

7 R.V. Schnucker, ‘Heidelberg Catechism’, in: Walter A. Elwell (red.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids 1984, 504.

8 W. Verboom, *De Theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus—twaalf thema’s: de context en de latere uitwerking*, Zoetermeer 1996, 24-25. Jan Rohls, too, finds in the HC an ‘integration of very diverse doctrines.’ *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, Louisville 1997, 20.

9 J.F.G. Goeters, ‘Christologie und Rechtfertigung nach dem Heidelberger Katechismus’, in: Ernst Bizer (red.), *Das Kreuz Jesu Christi als Grund des Heils*, Gütersloh 1967, 34.

10 James. I. McCord, ‘The Heidelberg Catechism: An Ecumenical Confession’, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (February 1963), 13-14; A. F. N. Lekkerkerker, *Gespreken over de Heidelberg*, Wageningen 1964, 24-26; Howard Hageman, ‘The Lasting Significance of Ursinus’, in: Derk Visser (red.), *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate 1559-1583*, Allison Park 1986, 229-230.

2. Context

Perhaps the best way to approach this question is to start not with the *text* of the HC, as so many in the past have done, but with a brief review of the historical *context*. The progenitor of the HC was, of course, Elector Frederick III, who commissioned it in 1562 as the flagship of a reformation that had been in process ever since the Palatinate had officially adopted Lutheranism in 1546. Hovering over this entire Palatinate reformation, however, was the figure of Philip Melanchthon.¹¹ Melanchthon was actually a native of the Palatinate, a graduate of Heidelberg University, and a trusted political and theological advisor to the Palatine electors from the 1540s until his death in 1560. Indeed, his influence on electors Otto Henry and Frederick III was so profound that both they and the reforms they instituted are sometimes characterized by historians as ‘Melanchthonian’ or ‘Philippist.’¹²

Melanchthon also left his mark on Zacharias Ursinus, who in all likelihood served as the primary author of the HC. Not only was Ursinus Melanchthon’s pupil for seven years at Wittenberg University, but he also used a catechism by Melanchthon as a textbook in his first teaching post and even publicly defended the view of the Lord’s Supper that it contained. Following his teacher’s death, Ursinus gradually moved into the Reformed orbit, but Melanchthon’s imprint on his person and theology was never fully eradicated by later influences.

Finally, Melanchthon’s work would indirectly affect the character of the HC itself. According to the Peace of Augsburg (1555), all non-Catholic princes and territories of the German Empire were required to adhere to Lutheranism as defined by Melanchthon’s Augsburg Confession; no other varieties of Protestantism were permitted. The problem was that Frederick III, a Melanchthonian Lutheran, had also been increasingly drawn to certain Reformed doctrines and had been filling some of the key positions in his realm with Reformed personnel. In designing a new catechism for the

11 For an overview of the Palatinate Reformation, see Charles. D. Gunnoe Jr., ‘The Reformation of the Palatinate and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism, 1500-1562’, in: Bierma e.a., *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 15-47. For a summary of Melanchthon’s influence on the Palatinate Reformation, see Lyle. D. Bierma, ‘What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Heidelberg? Philip Melanchthon and the Heidelberg Catechism’, in: Karin. Maag (red.), *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, Texts & Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, Grand Rapids and Carlisle 1999, 103-121.

12 E.g., James. I. Good, *The Origin of the Reformed Church in Germany*, Reading 1887, 128, 134; Fred. H. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History*, Grand Rapids 1982, 83, 104; Walter. Henss, *Der Heidelberger Katechismus im konfessionspolitischen Kräftespiel seiner Frühzeit*, Zurich 1983, 1; Christopher. J. Burchill, ‘On the Consolation of a Christian Scholar: Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83) and the Reformation in Heidelberg’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37, no. 4 (1986), 569.

Palatinate, therefore, Frederick found himself in a delicate position. How could he as a Lutheran elector achieve confessional harmony among the Melanchthonians, Calvinists, and Zwinglians in his realm and still comply with the terms of the Peace of Augsburg? His answer was the HC. The HC represented a theological consensus designed to fit within the framework of Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession.

What we find in the Palatinate of the early 1560s, therefore, is a territorial reform movement, an elector, and a theologian all with roots in the Melanchthonian tradition but open to Reformed influences from both Geneva and Zurich. It should come as little surprise, then, if what we find in this *context* of the HC is what we also encounter in the *text*, namely, a Melanchthonian vine into which, in one way or another, several Reformed branches have been carefully grafted.

3. Text

One way to demonstrate this thesis would be to show the compatibility of the Reformed elements in the HC with Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession (AC), but the relationship between these two documents is the topic of the next lecture. Suffice it to say here that, in my judgment, the HC always respects the boundaries of the AC. Sometimes, for example, the HC honors the silence of the AC by keeping such doctrines as predestination and covenant to a mere whisper. On other issues on which the AC is silent, such as the offices of Christ, the descent of Jesus into hell, and the numbering of the Ten Commandments, the HC speaks with a clear Reformed voice, but never in such a way as to contradict anything in the AC. Even the HC's inclusion of the controversial *extra calvinisticum* doctrine in its treatment of the two natures of Christ can be construed as a legitimate Reformed gloss on an article of the AC (Art. 3) that leaves itself open to more than one interpretation. And the HC's explanation of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper appears to follow the lead of the Altered AC in avoiding a precise statement of the relationship between the eucharistic signs and that which they signify.

3.1. Threefold Division

Other evidence of a Melanchthonian foundation on which elements of a Reformed edifice are built can be found in the structure of the HC itself. The most visible feature of the catechism with roots in Melanchthon is its threefold division, outlined in HC 2: the greatness of one's sin and misery, deliverance from such sin and misery, and gratitude for such deliverance.¹³ The most likely source of HC 2 is not difficult to identify. It

13 This summary of Melanchthon's influence on the threefold division of the HC is based on my chapter 'The Sources and Theological Orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism,' in Bierma e.a., *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 81-86.

follows closely the wording of the so-called *Catechesis minor*, or Smaller Catechism, probably composed by Ursinus as a preparatory document for the HC sometime in 1562. But what were the roots of the Smaller Catechism's tripartite structure? Gooszen and others have suggested that this is a pattern found already forty years earlier in Melanchthon's 1521 edition of the *Loci communes*, which itself might have been inspired by the outline of the book of Romans. Romans proceeds from a treatment of human sin (chs. 1:18-3:20) to the great drama of redemption (3:21-11:36) to the Christian life of thankfulness (12:1-16:27), and the *Loci* too treats, generally speaking, first the topic of law and sin, then the gospel and justification, and finally the life of Christian love.¹⁴

This triad is found also in later works by Melanchthon – his Visitation Articles of 1528, for example, of which sorrow for sin, faith, and good works form the basic structure.¹⁵ Moreover, in the AC of 1530 he speaks of a triple work of the Holy Spirit, according to which the Spirit produces knowledge of sin, faith, and the virtues that God requires of us in the Ten Commandments.¹⁶ This is then echoed in Melanchthon's 'Apology of the Augsburg Confession' a year later, when he asserts that repentance consists of two parts, contrition and faith, and that he will not object if one adds a third part, namely, the fruits worthy of repentance.¹⁷

There is also another way by which Melanchthon, and perhaps even his AC, might have influenced the threefold division of the HC. In the early 1900s Johann Reu drew attention to an anonymous summary of Christian doctrine published in Regensburg in 1547 and reprinted in Heidelberg in 1558. This treatise included a forward by the Gnesio-Lutheran Nicholas Gallus, a former student of Melanchthon's who had later become a strong critic of his teacher's theology. What is so remarkable about this document is not only its threefold structure but also the content of each of the three divisions. Part 1 is entitled 'The Law, the Origin of Sin, and Repentance'; Part 2 'The Gospel and Faith'; and Part 3 'Good Works.' Even more striking is the terminology in each section that would later appear in both the SC and the HC. It is through the law that we come to know our frailty and 'misery' (*elend*), through Christ that God has 'delivered' (*erlöste*) us from such misery, and through the keeping of the commandments that we show ourselves 'thankful' (*danckbarlich*) to God for what he has done on our behalf. Reu concluded that if the structure of Melanchthon's *Loci* and the Book of Romans exerted any in-

14 Gooszen, 'Inleiding', in: *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 75. On the influence of Romans on Melanchthon's *Loci*, see Timothy. J. Wengert, 'Philip Melanchthon's 1522 Annotations on Romans and the Lutheran Origins of Rhetorical Criticism', in: Richard. A. Muller and John. L. Thompson (red.), *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, Grand Rapids 1996, 131.

15 Timothy. J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, Grand Rapids and Carlisle 1997, 144-145.

16 *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 4th ed., Göttingen 1959, 83.

17 A.w., 257.

fluence on Ursinus at all, it could only have been through this more developed form of the structure in the Regensburg ‘Summa.’¹⁸

It is not our intent here to decide the question of the exact source of the threefold structure of Ursinus’s catechisms. That task is next to impossible anyway, since by the middle decades of the sixteenth century the triad of Law-Gospel-Good Works had appeared in a variety of Protestant sources. What is significant for the subject at hand is that this Pauline triad found its earliest and most prominent Reformation form in the Lutheran tradition, especially in the works of Melancthon, and eventually became one of the noteworthy features of one of the noteworthy catechisms in the Reformed tradition.

This basic Melancthonian skeleton of the HC, however, is sometimes fleshed out with Reformed theological material.¹⁹ We shall look at three examples of this in particular: the themes of law and gospel in Parts 1 and 2 of the HC, law and good works in Part 3, and the twofold benefit of salvation in Parts 2 and 3.

3.2. Law and Gospel

A striking illustration of the Lutheran roots of the HC is the contrast between law and gospel that is wedded to its first two sections on misery and deliverance. Part 1: How do we know our misery? From the *law* of God (HC 3). Part 2: How do we know our deliverance? From the holy *gospel* (HC 19). Misery and law; deliverance and gospel. Graafland has suggested that the way Ursinus proceeds here and in his commentary on the HC is very different from Calvin in the 1559 *Institutes*. Calvin, too, treats the law immediately before his discussion of redemption through Christ the Mediator, but, Graafland notes, both topics are subsumed under Book 2, whose title is ‘The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and Then to us in the Gospel.’ That means that the section in the *Institutes* on deliverance or redemption begins not with the doctrine of the Mediator, as does the HC, but with the doctrines of sin and law. In other words, for Calvin both law and gospel are treated within the framework of redemption.²⁰

18 J. Reu (red.), *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600*, Hildesheim 1976, pt. 1, vol. 1:198-199, 201-203. The Regensburg treatise, ‘Ein Kurtze Ordenliche summa der rechten Waren Lehre unsers heyligen Christlichen Glaubens’, is found a.w., 720-734.

19 Cf. Hutter’s comment that ‘der Heidelberger Katechismus ist eine Verbindung melancthonischer Lehrformeln mit der calvinischen Lehrweise.’ Ulrich Hutter, ‘Zacharias Ursinus und der Heidelberger Katechismus’, in: *Martin Luther und die Reformation in Ostdeutschland und Südosteuropa: Wirkungen und Wechselwirkungen*, Sigmaringen 1991, 97.

20 C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme*, Zoetermeer 1994, 2:19-20.

This interpretation of the HC, however, is not borne out by a closer examination of the text. The contrast between law and gospel is not as sharply drawn as the outline of the catechism might imply, for there is already a hint of gospel in Part 1 on the law and much more than a hint of law in Part 2 on the gospel. First of all, it is worth noting how the answer to Q. 4 in Part 1 begins: ‘What does the law of God require of us? *Christ* teaches us . . . ,’²¹ and then follows the summary of the law found in the *Gospel* of Matthew. It is Christ, the end of the law, the fulfillment of the law, indeed the one who fulfills the gospel proclaimed already in the Old Testament (HC 19), who teaches us what the law requires of us. What it requires is first that we love God with all our heart, something that, according to HC 6, God created us in his image to do and, according to Part 3 of the HC, Christ is recreating us in his image to do as we respond to the gospel in faith and obedience to the law (HC 86, 92, 114). By placing law on the lips of Christ in Part 1, the HC is hinting already in this section on human misery that the law can really be understood only within the broader context of gospel.

At the beginning of Part 2 of the HC, the relationship between law and gospel is even more fully developed. The first lines of both Q 12 and A 12, which introduce this section on deliverance, pick up some of the very language found in HC 10 and 11, which conclude the first section on misery: the righteous judgment of God, the demand for satisfaction, and the temporal and eternal punishment to which we are liable. The first thing we encounter in this section on the gospel, therefore, is a reiteration of our condemnation under the law. Ursinus then goes on at the end of A 12 to lay out two ways in which the demands of the law can be satisfied: either by ourselves—what Goeters has called the *modus legalis*, which the law reveals to us but is ruled out as a possibility in HC 13—or by another, what Goeters calls the *modus evangelicus*, which, according to HC 14-18, is the way of the Mediator, truly God and truly human.²² This, says HC 19, that is, this whole doctrine of the Mediator viewed against the background of the law, we know from the gospel, a gospel foreshadowed even ‘by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.’ Part 2 of the HC is not just about gospel, but about law and gospel, or gospel as it relates to law in both a moral and ceremonial sense. The sharp distinction, therefore, between law and gospel suggested by the Melancthonian structure of the HC is mitigated by a more typically Reformed discussion of the interconnection between law and gospel and, as in Calvin, by the placement of that discussion under the doctrine of redemption through Christ the Mediator.²³

21 All translations of the HC are my own. As much as possible, I have followed the English translation in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, Grand Rapids 1988, 13-77, but I have introduced several alterations based on my reading of the German text in A. Lang, *Der Heidelberger Katechismus und vier verwandte Katechismen*, Leipzig 1907, 2-52.

22 Goeters, ‘Christologie und Rechtfertigung’, 38.

23 Cf. also Hutter’s conclusion that ‘die melancthonische Reihenfolge von Gesetz und Evangelium wird mit calvinischem Inhalt gefüllt.’ Ursinus und der Heidelberger Katechismus’, 96.

3.3. Law and Good Works

The third part of the HC provides another example of a Melanchthonian foundation over which a layer of Reformed teaching has been placed. Some have claimed that Part 3's treatment of the law as the norm for a life of gratitude, the so-called third use of the law, is characteristically Reformed,²⁴ but this is a theme that one finds already earlier in Melanchthon. As far back as the 1521 *Loci*, Melanchthon had stated that 'when we have tasted the mercy of God through faith . . . , the mind . . . witnesses to its own thankfulness for such great mercy by some form of reciprocated service.'²⁵ In the Augsburg Confession he identifies thanks to God as one of the virtues required in the Ten Commandments that is reawakened in the regenerate by the Holy Spirit.²⁶ A year later he stated in the 'Apology of the Augsburg Confession' that good works ought to follow faith as thanksgiving to God and that thanksgiving is one of the good fruits of repentance that are taught us in the Commandments.²⁷ This theme would appear again in his 'Scholia' of 1534 and in the Regensburg 'Summa' by his student in 1547.²⁸ Furthermore, it was Melanchthon, not Calvin, who first introduced the concept of a third use of the law into Protestant theology (1534).²⁹

The one place where the HC comes closest to an explanation of the uses of the law, HC 115, it clearly bears this Melanchthonian stamp. Why does God want the Ten Commandments preached so pointedly? First, says the answer,

so that our whole life long we may more and more come to know our sinful nature and all the more earnestly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Second, so that we may strive without ceasing and pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to be renewed more and more after the image of God

The first part of this answer appears to be straight out of Melanchthon. In his 1543 edition of the *Loci*, Melanchthon distinguishes two aspects to the third use of the law. First, the law reveals the remnants of sin in the believer's life so that he or she may grow in both knowledge of sin and repentance. Second, it teaches the particular works by which

24 See, for example, Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, CI; Klooster, *Mighty Comfort*, 37; Berard Marthaler, *The Catechism Today and Yesterday: The Evolution of a Genre*, Collegeville 1995, 30; and Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 20.

25 C.G. Bretschneider (red.), *Corpus Reformatorum: Philippi Melanchthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*, Halle 1834-60, 21:181.

26 *Bekennnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 83.

27 A.w., 197.

28 For Melanchthon's 'Scholia,' see Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 188-189. For the 'Summa,' see Reu, *Quellen*, 731.

29 Timothy. J. Wengert, 'The Origins of the Third Use of the Law: Philip Melanchthon's Commentary on Colossians (1534)' (paper presented at the annual Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, San Francisco, CA, October, 1995), 1.

God wants us to exercise obedience.³⁰ This second, or didactic, dimension to the third use of the law is found also in Calvin,³¹ but the first, or pedagogical, dimension of the third use is not. Where it does appear in Calvin is only in reference to unbelievers or to believers prior to conversion, not in reference to the redeemed after conversion.³² This first part of A 115, therefore, is a uniquely Melanchthonian formulation.

However, the second reason for preaching the law in HC 115, namely, to encourage believers to strive for renewal, has a distinctly Calvinian ring to it. Similar language can be found in Calvin's *Institutes* and the Genevan Catechism, but not in Melanchthon.³³ What we have in HC 115, therefore, is a remarkable splicing of two aspects to the third use of the law: a Calvinistic emphasis on the exhortation to good works as well as a Melanchthonian emphasis on the exposure of residual sin in the believer.

3.4. Double Benefit of Salvation

A last example of a Reformed overlay on the Melanchthonian structure of the HC is an emphasis on what might be called the double benefit of faith or salvation, namely, righteousness and new life, or justification and sanctification. As some have suggested, the several references in the HC to the believer's incorporation into Christ and his benefits (e.g., Q/A 20, 53, 55, 65) may reflect the influence of Melanchthon's dictum, 'To know Christ is to know his benefits,'³⁴ although this language is certainly found in Calvin as well.³⁵ But the clear identification of these benefits as specifically the double grace of righteousness and new life has its roots in Calvin. Indeed, Calvin sometimes describes them as the two benefits of the covenant of grace,³⁶ something Ursinus repeats in his Larger Catechism when he states that what happens when we believe the Apostles' Creed is that 'all the things that God promised in his covenant are valid for us, that is, that we are justified and heirs to eternal life.' This same question and answer appears in Ursinus's Smaller Catechism (Q/A 45) and the HC (Q/A 59) in almost identical words, though without reference to the covenant. HC 59, for example, reads, 'Q: What does it

30 *Corpus Reformatorum*, 21:719.

31 *Institutes* 2.7.12; Genevan Catechism Q/A 229, in: Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel (red.), *Ioannis Calvini opera selecta*, Munich 1926-52, 2:112.

32 *Institutes* 2.7.6-9; Genevan Catechism Q/A 228, in *Opera selecta*, 2:111-112.

33 See n. 24 above.

34 Goeters, 'Christologie und Rechtfertigung,' 45; Neuser, 'Väter', 183-184.

35 See, e.g., Genevan Confession (1536), arts. 7, 8, 15, in: *Opera selecta*, 1:421, 423; *Institutes* 3.1.1, 3.3.1.

36 Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.45, 4.13.6, 4.16.3; Ursinus, 'The Larger Catechism' Q/A 132, in: Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, 171 (English translation: Bierma, *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 187).

profit you now to believe all this? A: In Christ I am righteous before God and an heir to eternal life.'

HC 59 then becomes a pivotal question for understanding the structure of the HC. It appears about two thirds of the way into the section on deliverance as a capstone to the exposition of the creed that began all the way back in HC 22. However, it also points forward to what follows, for the two benefits obtained by faith, righteousness and everlasting life, form the outline for the entire rest of the catechism. HC 60-64 deal with the first benefit, our righteousness before God; 86-129 (the whole of Part 3) treat the second benefit, our renewal by the Holy Spirit that issues forth in good works and prayer; and 65-85 on the sacraments form something of a bridge between the two. HC 70 on baptism, for example, looks back to the first benefit of salvation in the first part of the answer ('to have forgiveness of sins from God') and looks ahead to the second benefit in the second part of the answer ('to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be a member of Christ').

Moreover, the entire catechism is knitted together by references to this double benefit. Christ must be true God so that he might restore us to 'righteousness and life' (HC 17). Faith is the assurance that I have been granted not only 'forgiveness of sins' and 'everlasting righteousness' but also 'salvation [*seligkeit*]' (HC 21), a term which the catechism later uses to define everlasting life (HC 58). Christ suffered on the cross to obtain for us God's grace, 'righteousness and eternal life' (HC 37). The resurrection of Christ benefits us because it enables us to share in both the 'righteousness' won by his death and the 'new life' we enjoy by his power (HC 45). Sacraments are signs and seals of God's promise 'to grant us forgiveness of sins and eternal life' (HC 66). As we saw earlier, God wants the Ten Commandments preached so pointedly, first, so that we may more earnestly look to Christ for 'forgiveness of sins and righteousness,' and, second, so that we may pray and strive for renewal (HC 115). Finally, the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is for forgiveness, i.e., for God not to 'impute to us' any of our sins or the evil that clings to us, and the sixth petition is for renewal, for God to 'uphold and strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit' in our ongoing struggle against sin (HC 126, 127). These are just a few of many places in the catechism where this Reformed emphasis on the double benefit of salvation, what elsewhere in the Reformed tradition is called the double benefit of the covenant, gives a distinctive color and texture to the underlying Melanchthonian structure of Misery-Deliverance-Gratitude.

4. Conclusion

How, then, should the theology of the HC be characterized? Not with a single theological label, as so many in the past have done. To describe it as either Calvinist or Zwinglian or Melanchthonian does justice neither to the text of the catechism nor to the historical context in which it was produced. The Palatinate Reformation was an attempt to forge a consensus among these Protestant parties, and as such the HC is a consensus document. It sought to find common ground and to avoid, or at least to downplay, con-

troversial issues that threatened the peace of the territory. What Prof. Verboom has said about the doctrine of the sacraments in the HC can really be applied to the catechism as a whole: the goal was always ‘maximal consensus’ and ‘minimal dissensus.’³⁷

What made this theological project distinctive, however, was not the catechism’s consensus per se but the particular kind of consensus it sought to achieve. The HC marked out common ground not only between Reformed parties in the Palatinate, the followers of Bullinger and Calvin, but also between the Reformed and the Lutherans, or at least the Philippist and non-ubiquitarian Lutherans in the territory. No major confessional document since the Tetrapolitan Confession and First Helvetic Confession of the 1530s had attempted that, and it had certainly never been tried within the borders of a single political state. This consensus was shaped by the boundaries of Melancthon’s Augsburg Confession and by the structure of Melancthon’s triad of Law-Gospel-Law. But within this Melancthonian framework one finds not only the elements of a generic Protestant theology but also the several Reformed emphases and nuances that we have identified above. When viewed in its historical context, this theological hybrid represented not the emergence of a new species of Protestantism but rather a way for several established Protestant traditions to live side by side in harmony in the Palatinate of the 1560s.

37 ‘In de *HC* is getracht formuleringen te gebruiken waarin zoveel mogelijk protestanten zich zouden kunnen herkennen en zo weinig mogelijk onnodige aanstoot aan niet-gereformeerden zou worden gegeven. Men zocht een maximale consensus en een minimale dissensus.’ Verboom, *Theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 215.