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An Orthodox Catechism

An Introduction

In the year 1680, a thirty-four year old Baptist pastor in London by the name of Hercules Collins published a revised edition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* which he titled, *An Orthodox Catechism*.¹ As the title suggests, Collins was interested in asserting the orthodoxy of Baptists in a day in which their credentials as such were being seriously questioned. This catechism is also thoroughly Protestant. In this introduction to the catechism, the similarities between the *Heidelberg* and *Orthodox* catechisms will be explored, as well as the changes and additions which Hercules Col-

¹ Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism: Being the Sum of Christian Religion, Contained in the Law and the Gospel. Published for preventing the Canker and Poison of Heresy and Error* (London, 1680). For the purpose of comparing the *Heidelberg* and *Orthodox* catechisms, I will reference James M. Renihan, ed., *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004) which places edited versions of *An Orthodox Catechism* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* side by side to highlight the similarities, changes, and additions. For accuracy I have compared Renihan's edition with the original printing of *An Orthodox Catechism* listed above and the *Heidelberg Catechism* as contained in Zacharias Ursinus, *The Summe of Christian Religion* (London: James Young, 1645). This edition, according to James Renihan "is obviously the edition used by Collins." Renihan, *True Confessions*, 236. For a more accessible edition of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, see *The Heidelberg Catechism: A New Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Lee C. Barrett, III (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007).

² Portions of this introduction appeared in Michael A.G. Haykin and Steve Weaver, "To 'concenter with the most orthodox divines': Hercules Collins and his *An Orthodox Catechism*—a slice of the reception history of the *Heidelberg*

lins elected to make in this historic Protestant document.² The purpose of this analysis will be to demonstrate that where Collins deviates from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, he does so based upon the Reformation's own regulative principle of worship. Thus, the *Orthodox Catechism* is even more "Protestant" than the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

The Place of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Reformed Protestantism

The *Heidelberg Catechism* is a classic exposition of the Reformed Protestant faith. It has been described as "a defining confessional document of Reformed Protestantism" and as "a document that has proven itself to be an enduring and inspiring monument to the Reformed faith."³ On the tercentenary of the Heidelberg Catechism's original publication, in a new edition of the catechism published by the German Reformed Church in America, it was asserted that: "Nowhere else have we the proper genius and life of the Reformed Church, as it stood in the latter half of the sixteenth century, exhibited and portrayed in the same happily comprehensive form."⁴ Philip Schaff adds that the catechism "is an acknowledged masterpiece, with few to equal and none to surpass it" and that it "is the most catholic and popular of all the Reformed symbols."⁵ Clearly the *Heidelberg Catechism* is a key representative of the Protestant Reformed tradition. Considering the prominence of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Reformed Protestantism makes it all the more interesting that this catechism was chosen by a seventeenth-century Baptist pastor in London named Hercules Collins as a basis for his *An Orthodox Catechism*.

Historical Setting for the *Heidelberg Catechism*

In the year 1562, Frederick III, elector of the principality of Palatinate in the Holy Roman Empire, issued an order calling for the preparation of

Catechism," in *Power of Faith: 450 Years of the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Karla Apperloo-Boersma and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 71–81.

³ Charles D. Gunnoe, Jr., "The Reformation of the Palatinate and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 15.

⁴ *The Heidelberg Catechism, in German, Latin and English: With An Historical Introduction. Prepared and Published by the Direction of the German Reformed Church in the United States.* Tercentenary Edition (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1863), 11.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2007), 1:540.

a new catechism.⁶ This event would be looked back upon as “a major step in the transformation of the Palatinate into a Melanchthonian-Reformed territory.”⁷ Although traditionally Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus have been credited with the co-authorship of this document, the most recent scholarship argues that the production of the catechism was the result of the efforts of a larger group of scholars that had been assembled by Elector Frederic III. Among these scholars was Caspar Olevianus, but his role was not as prominent as was once thought. Zacharias Ursinus, however, is acknowledged by scholarly consensus as being “responsible for crafting the final text of the HC.”⁸ Ursinus’ role is significant in that he had spent time studying at two great centers of the Reformation: in Wittenberg under Philip Melanchthon and in Zurich under Peter Martyr Vermigli.⁹ Ursinus had also visited Geneva where he met the French Reformer John Calvin, and received a set of his works as a personal gift.¹⁰ Thus, Ursinus had connections to all three strands of the Magisterial Reformation. Ursinus’ role in the final product of the document helps to explain why the *Heidelberg Catechism* would become a statement of such “remarkable consensus” between “the followers of Zwingli and Bullinger, Calvin, and Melanchthon.”¹¹ In January of 1563, the catechism was adopted at a synod convened in Heidelberg.¹² This catechism has gone through numerous editions and translations. As Philip Schaff has noted: “It has the pentecostal gift of tongues in a rare degree. It is stated that, next to the Bible, the ‘Imitation of Christ,’ by Thomas à Kempis, and Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ no book has been more frequently translated, more widely circulated and used.”¹³

The Rise of the Particular Baptists

Approximately seventy-five years after the publication of the first edition of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, there arose a group in London who had

⁶ Lyle D. Bierma, “The Purpose and Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 49.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹ Ibid., 68–70.

¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹¹ Lyle D. Bierma, “The Sources and Theological Orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 81.

¹² Bard Thompson, “Historical Background of the Catechism” in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1963), 26.

¹³ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:536.

become convinced that the New Testament teaches the baptism of believers by immersion. This group had left the Separatist congregation pastored by John Lathrop in 1633 to form their own Independent congregation after having become convinced that the New Testament taught the baptism of believers, although they remained unconvinced of the importance of the mode.¹⁴ By 1638, John Spilsbury¹⁵ had become the pastor of this congregation which met on Old Gravel Lane in Wapping¹⁶ and by 1641 the congregation had become committed to the position that the baptism of believers by the mode of immersion was the only valid New Testament baptism.¹⁷ This congregation would become the first Particular Baptist church, and until only recently it remained in existence as the oldest Baptist church in London. Each of the first three pastors would write treatises on the subject of believers' baptism.¹⁸

The third pastor of the Wapping congregation was Hercules Collins¹⁹ (1646/7–1702). Collins served as the pastor of this congregation from 1677 until his death in 1702. Collins followed John Spilsbury and John Norcott²⁰ as pastor of this historic congregation. For the first half of

¹⁴ James Edward McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 130.

¹⁵ For biographical information on Spilsbury, see James M. Renihan, "John Spilsbury (1593–c.1662/1668)," in Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638–1910* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:21–37.

¹⁶ For the history of the church, see Ernest F. Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church: Wapping 1633–Walthamstow 1933* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1933).

¹⁷ McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism*, 131–132.

¹⁸ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawful Subject of Baptism* (London, 1643); John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (1672); and, Hercules Collins, *Believers–Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution. Infants–Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention* (London, 1691).

¹⁹ For details on the life of Hercules Collins see G. Steve Weaver, Jr., *Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist: Hercules Collins (1647–1702) and Particular Baptist Identity in Early Modern England* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015). See also Michael A.G. Haykin, "The Piety of Hercules Collins (1646/7–1702)," in *Devoted to the Service of the Temple: Piety, Persecution, and Ministry in the Writings of Hercules Collins*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and Steve Weaver (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 1–30.

²⁰ For details about John Norcott, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1823), 3:295–301; Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church*, 62–64; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "Another Baptist Ejection (1662): The Case of John Norcott," in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes with John H. Y. Briggs (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 185–188.

Collins ministry (until the Act of Toleration in 1689) the congregation had to meet in secret for fear of persecution. Collins was imprisoned for his nonconformity in 1684. While in the infamous Newgate Prison, Collins penned two of the most devotional of his twelve writings.²¹ However, it is his first work, *An Orthodox Catechism*, which is the subject of our inquiry in this chapter. Given the persecution that the Baptists faced in the late seventeenth century, it should come as no surprise that Collins chose the *Heidelberg Catechism* for the basis of his catechism since it was, as Mark Noll has stated,

... a superb statement of faith for a persecuted people. Its stress, from the very first question, on God's desire to comfort his own, as well as its emphasis on the transcendent goodness of God's providence, brought reassurance to those who felt that they had been abandoned by all earthly powers.²²

The significance of Hercules Collins among the Particular Baptists of the late seventeenth century can be seen in at least three areas. First, he was a relatively prolific author among the Particular Baptists of the period,²³ publishing at least twelve distinct works between the years 1680 and 1702. Second, Collins was among the original signatories of the *Second London Confession of Faith* (1689). Third, Collins' name was affixed to the recommendatory epistle of *The Gospel Minister's Maintenance Vindicated* along with ten other prominent London Baptist pastors, including such luminaries as Benjamin Keach, Hanserd Knollys and William Kiffin.²⁴ Combined these facts demonstrate, not only that Collins was an important figure in late seventeenth-century Baptist life, but that he can also serve as a faithful representative of the broader Baptist community of which he was a part.

²¹ *A Voice from the Prison. Or, Meditations on Revelations III.XI. Tending To the Establishment of God's Little Flock, In an Hour of Temptation* (London, 1684) and *Counsel for the Living, Occasioned from the Dead: Or, A Discourse on Job III.17,18. Arising from the Deaths of Mr. Fran. Bampffield and Mr. Zach. Ralphson* (London, 1684). A complete list of Collins works can be found in Haykin and Weaver, *Devoted to the Service of the Temple*, 135–137.

²² Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 135.

²³ The only author during this period which could rival his production being his friend Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), pastor of the Horsley-Down congregation. For more on Keach, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2004).

²⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Gospel Minister's Maintenance Vindicated* (London, 1689).

Purposes of An Orthodox Catechism

Hercules Collins seems to have had at least three purposes in publishing his *Orthodox Catechism*. The catechism functions as a tool for pastoral instruction, as a polemic against false teaching, and as a plea for doctrinal unity. Having become the pastor of the Wapping congregation only four years earlier, Collins clearly modifies the *Heidelberg Catechism* for use as a tool in fulfilling his pastoral duties. A comparison of the two documents side by side reveal a number of relatively minor edits, many of which are best explained as Collins' attempts to make the catechism more accessible to his local congregation. One example of this type of editing is found in Collins' rearrangement of the section dealing with the Ten Commandments. Whereas the *Heidelberg Catechism* lists the Ten Commandments all together then later explains them individually, Collins rearranges this section to allow for each commandment to be listed separately along with its explanation and application. This rearrangement has an obvious pedagogical benefit for the *Orthodox Catechism*. Elsewhere, Collins more explicitly states his concern for the local congregation to which he ministered in the following benediction which concluded his Preface to the catechism:

And for those whom the Lord hath committed to my Charge, that the Eternal God may be your Refuge, and underneath you everlasting Arms; that Grace may be opened to your Hearts, and your hearts to Grace; that the blessing of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may be upon you, and the eternal Spirit may be with you, shall be the Prayer of your unworthy Brother, but more unworthy Pastor,
H. C.

A second use of *An Orthodox Catechism* is clearly stated by Collins on the title page: "Published For Preventing the Canker and Poison of Heresy and Error." This polemic function of the catechism was necessary, because in the mid-seventeenth century the writings of a man associated with the Particular Baptists named Thomas Collier,²⁵ had brought the

²⁵ Thomas Collier was a significant Particular Baptist leader in England during the mid-seventeenth century. A native of Somerset, he was a key leader in the Western Association's adoption of the *Somerset Confession* in 1656. His career is riddled with doctrinal instability, with some writings which are orthodox, while others were filled with heresy. For more information on the life and writings of Thomas Collier, see Richard D. Land, "Doctrinal Controversies of English Particular Baptists (1644–1691) as Illustrated by the Career and Writings of Thomas Collier" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1979).

Baptists into disrepute. In 1648, Collier had denied the historic orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Collier wrote that God:

... is not, first, as some imagine, *Three Persons yet one God*, or three subsistings, distinguished though not divided; Its altogether impossible to distinguish God in this manner, and not divide him; thus to distinguish is to divide; for three persons are three not only distinguished, but divided: Some say there is, *God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, yet not three, but one God*; Let any one judge if here be not three Gods, if three then not one;²⁶

Thomas Hall's subsequent labeling of Collier as an "Arian, Arminian, Socinian, Samosatene, Antinomian, Anabaptist, Familist, Donatist, Separatist, Anti-Scripturist, &c. An Open enemy to God, to Christ, to the Holy Ghost, to Scripture, Law, Gospel, Church, Commonwealth, Magistracy, Ministry, Army, &c."²⁷ was no doubt applied to other Baptists without distinction. Collins was clearly concerned with defending Baptists against charges of heresy while at the same time providing an instrument of instruction in order to prevent the spread of more false teaching among their number.

A final reason that Collins published *An Orthodox Catechism* was to identify himself and his fellow Particular Baptists with the orthodoxy of the Protestant divines of Europe. As Collins noted in his preface, "I concenter with the most orthodox divines in the fundamental principles and articles of the Christian Faith."²⁸ This catechism served as an attempt to express the agreement of the Baptists with other bodies of Reformed believers on the most essential matters of Christianity. To that end, Collins writes:

Now albeit there are some differences between many godly divines and us in church constitution, yet inasmuch as those things are not the essence of Christianity, but that we do agree in the fundamental doctrine thereof, there is sufficient ground to lay aside all bitterness and prejudice, and labor to maintain a spirit of love each to other, knowing we shall never see all alike here.²⁹

²⁶ Thomas Collier, *A General Epistle, To The Universal Church of the First Born: Whose Names are written in Heaven* (London, Giles Calvert, 1648).

²⁷ Thomas Hall, *The Collier in his Colours: or, The Picture of a Collier* (London: n.p., 1652). This work is actually included (with a separate title page) in Hall's *The Font Guarded With XX Arguments* (London: 1652).

²⁸ Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, Preface.

²⁹ Ibid.