

# LuxMundi

No 2 June 2013

# 32

This year marks the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism.

This issue of Lux Mundi is dedicated to this famous catechism, which has had such an impact around the world since then.

We're happy that we can present articles which approach this important subject from different angles.

We hear a variety of voices, including some who put a strong emphasis on a personal conversion experience, in line with the Calvinistic Puritans of the 17th century.

Churches with this emphasis have established schools and other institutions and they are a distinct voice in The Netherlands.

We hope you enjoy the articles!

Published quarterly by the Committee  
on Relations with Churches Abroad  
of the Reformed Churches in The  
Netherlands



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# Editorial A 450<sup>th</sup> birthday

**Of all the documents produced by the Great Reformation, the Heidelberg Catechism ranks among the most popular and widely used. For centuries now covenant children and new-comers have been instructed in the riches of Scriptural truths via this teaching tool. It has been translated into many languages, withstood the test of cross-cultural adaptation, and is today used by churches throughout the world. Last January, the “Heidelberger” turned 450.**



To mark the occasion many conferences have been planned, some already held. One such conference was held in Hamilton, Canada, hosted by the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. With speakers from North America and Europe it attracted a wide and large audience. In fact, those who so many registered the venue had to be changed. Clearly the Catechism of the Palatinate continues to enjoy huge popularity.

The conference consisted of four main speeches and several workshops spread over a Friday and Saturday. The speakers did not disappoint.

Dr. Joel Beeke from Puritan Reformed Seminary spoke on the catechism in preaching. Upon being published preachers were encouraged to use the Catechism a guide for the preaching during afternoon services. It led to the 129 questions and answers of the Catechism soon being divided into 52 Lord’s Days, so that the whole counsel of God might be proclaimed in the course of one year. The custom of catechism preaching took root in The Netherlands and became mandatory there in 1586. From there, it has spread throughout the world. Dr. Beeke described the history of catechism preaching: how Arminians objected, how the practice fell by the way-side, and how the resurrection of this tradition breathed new life into the church.

Dr. Lyle Bierma from Calvin Seminary spoke on the concept of the covenant in the Heidelberg Catechism. He explained that, while the word “covenant” is only found in two Lord’s Days, the concept is prevalent throughout this confessional teaching tool. Small wonder, for the concept is explicitly present in other works by Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism. The prominence of the doctrine of the covenant in the background of the Catechism makes it a very personal and relational document, endearing it to God’s people.

Dr. Herman Selderhuis from the Theological University in Apeldoorn spoke next on the secret of the Catechism’s success. It was printed many times over and distributed widely throughout Europe. It soon found its way into church books containing that contained the songs and Reformed prayers. It was soon translated from German into other languages, increasing its popularity. It’s direct approach and personal tone also made it a favourite among the Reformed.

Dr. Jason VanVliet from the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary spoke on the comforted “I” of the Catechism. Many of the questions and answers in the Heidelberger have the confessor speak in either the first person singular or plural. Dr. VanVliet explored why the Catechism switches from the plural to the singular at certain points. On the one hand, the Catechism stresses the communal, covenantal nature of the faith being confessed. However, at critical points the Catechism focusses the spotlight on the individual convictions: the Christian faith is not just communal, it is also personal and heartfelt. To give the reader but a taste, ponder these lines from the Catechism: *My comfort is that I belong, with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. ... True faith ... is a sure confidence, that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation...And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of [the church].*

The fruit of all this labour has not gone lost. One highlight of this conference was the “cutting of a ribbon”, or rather, “the clicking of a button” to activate a multi-language website on the Heidelberg Catechism: [www.heidelberg-catechism.com](http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com). It is a site that brings together many resources on the Heidelberg Catechism. Among others, for those who missed the conference, one can watch the speeches here, or download them to read them.

Four hundred and fifty years is a long time. Did the authors figure their catechism would serve the churches that long? We don’t know. However, the Catechism is far from out dated. For it accurately sums up the teachings of Scripture. As those teachings are timeless, the Catechism will last too. We thank the Lord of the Church for this wonderful treasure displaying the mighty acts of God! ■

# A Dutch godfather to the Heidelberg Catechism

The thesis of this article is that Joannes Anastasius Geldrus – better known as Veluanus in the Netherlands – worked in the Electoral Palatinate (Kurpfalz) for the last fifteen years of his life and, as Superintendent, was involved in the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism. Could this Dutchman’s perspective perhaps provide new insights?



## Biography

Jan Gerritsz Versteeghen is well known as the author of *Der Leken Wechwyser* ('The Guide for the Laity', 1554). With this work the former priest from Garderen, in the Dutch province of Gelderland, wished to prove to his fellow countrymen that he had retracted his (enforced) recantation of the Reformed doctrine. I assume readers to be familiar with this period of his life. Thereafter, the minister Versteeghen employed the Latin version of his name to mark this new beginning: Joannes Anastasius, with the toponym Veluanus. The name Anastasius points to the family name Versteeghe (meaning 'ascent') and also to his rebirth from the earlier recantation of his faith, which he saw as a resurrection: Joannes, the resurrected 'Veluan' [meaning 'from the Veluwe', a wooded area in the Dutch province of Gelderland].

At this 450-year commemoration of the Heidelberg Catechism, we would like to focus attention on the period in his life when he was working across the border from the Netherlands, namely in the Electoral Palatinate in Germany. This concerns the years 1554 to 1570, the year of his death. During that time he was working in the parish of Bacharach, about 50 km south of Coblenz, on the west bank of the Rhine. In order to position Bacharach and Anastasius' performance there, we should bear in mind that Bacharach lies quite a distance away from Heidelberg. Between the two lies the diocese of Mainz. Archbishop-Elector Daniel Brendel of Homburg (1555-1582) founded the Jesuit college at the University of Mainz in 1561. The *Viertäleramt*, as this area was called in which Bacharach was situated, lay very much on the outskirts of the fragmented territory of the County Palatine.

## about the author

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Little known is the fact that Anastasius, in his function of Superintendent in the Electoral Palatinate, was involved in the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563. The method of instruction that (in its Dutch translation) was to have such an enormous influence in his homeland, was accepted and introduced with the cooperation of this representative of the Netherlands. In older research documents one finds the ornate sentence: 'It must have granted him a glorious fulfilment to have been involved in the realization of the *Heidelberger Catechismus*'.

At the end of *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher* ["The Old Catholic Guide for the Laity", written by Anastasius in 1566], Anastasius addresses his fellow countrymen, 'An etliche gute Christenfreunde in dem Niederlandt' ['To various good Christian friends in the Netherlands']. He had intended to dedicate the book to the government and inhabitants of the principality of Gelder, which had suffered severely from the Spanish Inquisition. However, the book had to be composed in a limited time, and so he transferred this intention to a later book. But he did not conclude this earlier one without mentioning his prayers for the persecuted flock in the Netherlands (241).

## Anastasius' earlier Catechismus

Inquiry into Anastasius' contribution to the introduction of the Catechism concerns his own contribution to the didactic genre of the catechisms, and in what way this contributed to (the necessity of) the implementation of the Heidelberg Catechism. In particular, we will take a closer look at Anastasius' work in *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher*, published in 1566. My thesis is that with this book, hastily published under specific circumstances in 1566, we are in fact dealing with the catechetical work of Anastasius himself. I assume that he used this material prior to the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism, and that he processed this material for publication in 1566, because he then felt the need to defend the Electoral Palatinate's policy.

The arrangement of *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher* is as follows: It is constructed as a discussion between two church founders, Ambrose and Augustine, where the former, in his role as teacher, asks the questions and the latter, in his



role as (fully equipped) pupil, provides the answers. The didactic method of questions and answers is enlivened by turning it into a catechetical discussion between two people. He claims the catholicity of the doctrine of the faith by bringing the great church father Augustine and his reputed teacher Ambrose onto the stage, as it were.

In this manner Anastasius deals first with the 'vier Christliche Leyen Büchern' [four Christian Lay Guides], namely the Ten Commandments, the twelve articles of the Christian faith, the sacraments of Christ, and the Lord's Prayer. Following these first four Lay Books, two concise and communal Lay Books were produced for everyday use, namely the book of Natural Conscience or Reason and the book of All God's Wondrous Creations. As seventh and eighth books he mentions the hearing of a good sermon and the independent reading of the Bible. This second foursome, which Anastasius mentions only briefly, we will leave out of this study of his catechetical material. Lay people were ostensibly illiterate Christians who had had no schooling, and it was for them, specifically, that Anastasius dealt with the four principal issues. These texts were still being prescribed as mandatory in Ottheinrich's (=the Elector Palatine, Otto Henry) church order.

### **A complaint from Bacharach**

What reason can there be to project a publication from the year 1566 back to the period preceding the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563? We would draw attention to a letter to the Elector in which both the mayor and the council of the so-called 'Viertell' of Bacharach complain about their Superintendent. Anastasius held this function from 1561 in the parishes of Bacharach and Kaub, and, according to the letter, this was but a short while before. In the foreword of his work, *Von dem wahren Leib Christi* ["Of the true Body of Christ"] published in 1561, Anastasius refers to 'our Christians in the Vier thelen' and to 'all servants of the church in the parishes of Bacharach and Kaub', thus seemingly addressing them as their Superintendent.

The aforementioned letter from the mayor and council is itself undated, but was located among the documents from the year 1562 in the presbytery protocols in Coblenz. The signatories charge this 'servant of the church in Steg, Iohannes Anastasius' with (1) 'a variety of modernizations and strange alterations in churches and schools, which were unknown to us and cannot be implemented without aggravating fragmentation and discord in the community, and not without doing damage to

the Christian doctrine'. The relevant innovations are spelled out clearly; this being accompanied by (2) the removal of the statue of Christ, (3) alterations through the introduction of an unusual or unorthodox catechism (4) 'in which is incorporated a number of offensive and atrocious comparisons regarding the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ'. They attribute this to the ambitiousness of the overly zealous superintendent. The mayor and council were relying on the Elector's intervention in order to return to the 'pure doctrine of Christ and to Luther's Small Catechism, which he wholly rejects and strives to forbid'. They stress their complaint by the rhetorical question: Is it not true that both young and old can cite Luther's Small Catechism, which has been taught here in the valleys for thirteen years?' It is this complaint regarding Anastasius' performance as Superintendent in the Electoral Palatinate that gives reason for further investigation of the Dutchman and his contribution to the catechetical instruction in the Palatinates.

#### ***Special Supervision***

The instruction for Superintendents from 1556 makes it quite clear what the function entails. There is talk of a *specialis superattendent* in every municipal parish. The adjective *specialis* indicates a surveyor who has special supervision over the other ministers in his area. He is to visit his colleagues, the schoolteacher, and the deacon twice a year. He is also, for example, to examine whether the minister 'maintains the Catechism', meaning whether it is proclaimed and taught. A Superintendent could also turn up unannounced in a church service to hear the minister preach. In this way Anastasius also supervised the work, catechism included, in the municipality of Bacharach.

Let us consider whether the material of that 'unusual' catechism can be found in the first four Lay Books of the *Alte Katholische Leyenbücher*. There is an irregularity in the composition that points in this direction. When Anastasius takes stock, he mentions 'das Buch der zweien Sakrament' [the Book of the second sacrament] as fourth, while he actually – against the common custom - dealt with the sacraments as third, and the Lord's Prayer as fourth in the foregoing sequence of material. It is to be considered that he did indeed conclude his original catechism with the discussion of the second sacrament, the Lord's Supper. Which 'gleichnissen' [comparisons] does he name there? One can find the paragraph in which he pleads for the use of ordinary bread and speaks in favour

of abolishing 'des päpstlichen Götzenbrots' [the Papist bread idolatry] upon which many blind people fasten their hearts as if it were the Lord God, not only under Roman domination but also in many evangelical places. The Lutheran-minded people could easily have taken offence against comparison of the (reverence for the) Host with the Lord God Himself. In addition, he sums up examples of sacramental expressions in the Old Testament: 'Such language has always been used in the world and is still being used in such a manner that one can name all sorts of simple indicators after the matter itself, to which they point', for example, a painting of which one says that it is 'The suffering of Christ' (though it is no more than an image). Such everyday and biblical comparisons are extensively discussed. When read together with his firm assurance that Christ's body is in heaven and not to be found in bread and wine, one can imagine how the faithful, who have made the transition from Roman-Catholic to Lutheran teaching, might find the comparisons very crude.

With the above, we believe we have demonstrated that the complaint from 1562, from the municipality of Bacharach addressed to Friedrich III, was directed at Anastasius's own catechism. The treatment of the four books in *Die Alte Katholische Leyenbücher* fits the profile described in the complaint about his 'ungepreuchlichen cathechismi' [unorthodox catechism].

#### **The Catechism in the Electoral Palatinate**

Anastasius had become familiar with this regular sequence of the doctrines in the Lutheran Catechisms, spelled out in the church order of 1556 under the rule of Elector Palatine Ottheinrich (or Otto Henry). As a minister, he was pledged to follow this church order and teach the catechism in accordance with it. It is this order that provides the framework for Anastasius' work, which came to us as *Die Alte Katholische Leyenbücher*.

One of the things for which the mayor and council of the Viertälerramt Bacharach reproached the Superintendent was that he 'wholly rejected and refused to submit himself to the pure doctrine of Christ in Luther's Small Catechism'. At various instances in *Die Alte Katholische Leyenbücher* we do indeed come across criticism of Luther, and especially Johannes Brenz. The criticism of Luther touches upon another point in the 1562 letter of complaint to the Elector, namely the 'tearing down of statues of Christ' from the church walls, that is, Anastasius' criticism of Luther's position



concerning the second commandment. This begins with the question of how to count the Ten Commandments. 'How should we count the Ten Commandments: according to the practice of the priests, or following Luther's example?' asks Ambrose in the Lay Book. And Augustine answers with reference to God's sequence of the commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Luther's Small Catechism had used an abridged version of the Decalogue from the Middle Ages, in which the prohibition of holy statues and the extension (punishment and blessing) was lacking in the second, third and fourth commandments. Answering the question why Luther had not restored the second commandment to its full glory, it is said 'The good man made a serious mistake regarding this issue'. In practice, in the Palatinate, the transition from Ottheinrich's church order to the rule of Friedrich III made it possible to lay aside the Catechisms of Luther and Brenz and to abolish Lutheran customs such as crucifixes in the church. In his explanation of the second commandment, Anastasius allows God to speak, as it were: 'Being man, you shall consider well the following: I will tolerate not a single image or idol in my service, no image of my own Divine Self, nor fantasy images of my Trinity....' (183)

### **The men behind the Heidelberg Catechism**

There is nothing to indicate that Joannes Anastasius Geldrus belonged to the group of theologians that

composed the Heidelberg Catechism itself. His parish was situated far from Heidelberg. Although he published on the Lord's Supper in 1557 (*Vom Nachtmal Christi*) and also on Christology in 1561 (*Bekanntenisz Joanniz Anastasii von dem waren Leib Christi*), the work viewed as his catechism (*Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher*) does not contain passages that can be considered a literary source for the texts in the Heidelberg Catechism.

His activities in the Palatinate do, however, illustrate the reason why the Elector decided upon composing a new Catechism. In the introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism, Friedrich III wrote in the foreword, dated January 1563: 'the youth of our Electorate are being instructed carelessly, and sometimes not at all, in the Christian Doctrine; in part they are also being admonished and instructed very differently from, and not following, a thorough, trustworthy, and commonly accepted catechism'. Criticism also resounds in the lines following: sometimes the youth were being burdened with 'elaborate and unnecessary questions'. The complaints from Bacharach against Anastasius' catechism had also reached his notice. This visitation of the catechetical education, writes Friedrich III, 'led to the decision, upon the advice of the whole theological faculty located here, in cooperation with all the superintendents and the most important servants of the church, to commission the composition and writing of a brief instruction book, or catechism, in both German and

Latin'. When the concept of the new Catechism was complete, the superintendents of the Electorate, including Anastasius, were invited to be present on 12 January 1563 in Heidelberg. In the following week, from 13 to 18 January, the design of the new catechism was discussed. Following a communal worship service and celebration of the Lord's Supper on Sunday, the Catechism was signed by all on 18 January. On 19 January, Friedrich III commissioned the Catechism to be printed. Elector Friedrich III was still in power when Anastasius died in 1570.

### The Diet of Augsburg 1566

What inspired Joannes Anastasius Geldrus to publish his work *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher* in 1566 is now the remaining question, especially if we assume that it concerns the publication of catechetical material from before 1563. Walter Hollweg extensively described Anastasius' publication as a defence of the confessional course of the Palatinate with a view to the Diet of 1566. The foreword in *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher* bears the date 12 March 1566, while the Diet was to be opened on 23 March. There, a statement was to be agreed on whether the Palatinate, with its catechism, could still participate in the 1555 religious Peace of Augsburg and, by implication, whether there was sufficient agreement with the *Confessio Augustana* [Augsburg Confession]. Anastasius addresses his book to 'the Emperor, Electors and States of the German Nation, now assembled at Augsburg', and defines the content as 'wie man Gott mit rechter Reformation nach heiliger Schriftt sällig solt dienen'. ['How to gloriously serve God with true reformation according to the Holy Scripture']. How could catechetical material serve to motivate representatives attending the Diet not to obstruct the confessional course of the Palatinate with reference to the Augsburg Confession? By proclaiming the old and catholic character of the so-called Lay Books and by giving it the subtitle: 'On the true faith and life of the joyful Christian rulers and subordinates', with a plea to the ministers: 'with faithful admonishment to the Christians, lords and subordinates, in this dangerous discordance of faith, in all places'.

What, in summary, was the merit of Joannes Anastasius from Gelderland in the Netherlands, minister since about 1554 and Superintendent of the Palatinate since 1561, in the introduction of the Heidelberg catechism?

In the text of *Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher* we find material of his own catechism, composed in German, that met with resistance from the (Gnesio-)Lutheran party. This served as an illustration to Friedrich III of the necessity of ongoing reformation.

*Die Alte Catholische Leyenbücher*, when read as his former Catechism, gives insight into the transition within the Palatinate from the use of Luther's and Brenz' Catechisms to more Calvinistic faith instruction.

In his publications, written during his years in the Palatinate, he proves himself to be a theologian who aligns himself upon the church founders and constantly attempts to demonstrate the catholic character of the Reformation. He was familiar with the confessional positions and debates of his time and participated in this debate, in particular concerning the doctrine on the Lord's Supper and Christology. In the years prior to the composition of the Heidelberg Catechism, he had through his publications at the very least contributed to the forming of opinions of theologians in the Palatinate.

Anastasius cannot be seen as one of the fathers of the Heidelberg Catechism. Nevertheless, this Dutchman was present, as a godfather, when the Heidelberg Catechism was baptized in January 1563. He also accepted it personally, helped introduce it, and ultimately publicly defended it. His publications in 1557 and 1561 on the Lord's Supper and Christology, belonging to the founding territory of the Heidelberg Catechism, deserve further research. ■

### For further study

- *Handboek Heidelbergse Catechismus*, ed. Arnold Huijgen, John V. Fesko, Aleida Siller (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Kok, 2013).
- Joannes Anastasius Veluanus, *Wegwijzer voor gewone gelovigen (1554)*, translated and introduced by William den Boer [Klassiek licht] (2012).
- G. Morsink, *Joannes Anastasius Veluanus. Jan Gerritsz. Versteghe. Levensloop en ontwikkelingsgang* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1986).

### Note

*This article is a translation of a presentation made in the Dutch language at a conference entitled The Heidelberg Catechism: yesterday, today and tomorrow held on January 19, 2013 at Gouda, the Netherlands, to mark the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. This translation by Sabrina Bosscha-Timmermans, May 2013, by arrangement with the author.*



# The Coming of the Heidelberg Catechism to the Netherlands

**How did the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) find its way into the northern 'Low lands', the present-day Netherlands? Surprisingly, when the 400th anniversary of the HC was commemorated fifty years ago, this question received very little attention. In this contribution we will trace the way in which the Catechism found its way from Heidelberg into the Netherlands.**



*'In many Christian congregations of the Netherlands'*

Early in 1567, a package was sent from Deventer in the northern province of Overijssel to Antwerp, the largest city in the southern Netherlands (now Belgium). It contained hundreds of copies of the northern edition of the HC, which rolled from the presses in the same year as the Spanish Duke of Alba and his 'Blood Tribunal', which persecuted protestants with a 'Spanish Inquisition', made their entry. The title page of the Deventer edition explained that the doctrine set out in the Catechism had already been '...introduced, propagated and taught in many Christian congregations of the Netherlands' (in veelen christelicken ghemeinten der Nederlanden, aenghevanghen is, ghedreven ende gheleert wordt).

Upon Alba's arrival, the provinces of Holland and Zeeland were the first to rise in revolt. Dordrecht, the largest city of Holland, was soon liberated, and without delay the printing presses began to roll there also. Here – and shortly after in Leiden – the Catechism was published. By 1584, the year of Antwerp's fall and the division between the northern and southern Netherlands, as many as 30 editions of the HC in the Dutch language saw the light of day. At least 23 editions were printed in the north, most of them in the heartland of the rebellion: Delft, Leiden, Dordrecht and Rotterdam.

In 1574, soon after the provinces of Holland took the side of the Prince of Orange, the churches there convened a provincial synod in Dordrecht. It was agreed that all churches would adopt the same catechism, that of Heidelberg. In addition, the decision was made to preach from

the Catechism, and that all ministers would, by rotation, participate in a programme of training to expound the HC. This was done so that ministers might support each other in Catechism preaching, in order to strengthen the quality of this preaching. Moreover, ministers were charged to ensure that schoolmasters teach the HC to their students. In this early period, the Catechism sermon was sometimes preceded by a cycle of public reading of one-fifth of the 52 Lord's Days. This reading from the pulpit of the five 'Capita Religionis' was intended to ensure that everyone, young and old, became familiar with the confession of the Church.

These decisions of Dort in relation to the Catechism preaching were in line with existing practice. In 1566, the year of the 'Beeldenstorm', Pieter Gabriel of Amsterdam, had at great risk to his life preached from the Catechism in open-air services each Sunday. Under the leadership of Jan Arentsz, a former itinerant open-air preacher, the Synod of North-Holland had agreed that henceforth all the northern churches would use the HC as a book of instruction. It was to be taught to all children in the schools. The same practice was also introduced in the province of South-Holland.

In Dordrecht, the Catechism had been expounded in the afternoon services from an early date. (Even so, the city governors did, for some time, protect one minister who had ceased such preaching.) Ten years later, however, Jeremias Bastingius, one of Dordrecht's ministers and a student of Zacharias Ursinus, published his extensive commentary, *Verclaringe op den catechisme* (Exposition of the Catechism)<sup>1</sup>, which was to become widely known. In rural areas, the introduction of Catechism preaching was less smooth. In the province of Gelderland, rural ministers were admonished because many of them neglected the Sunday afternoon preaching from the Catechism. The same occurred in the 1580s in many places within the classis of Rotterdam.

In 1593, Gouda was still resisting the trend. The preachers there were urged to continue with Catechism preaching, just as the other churches were doing, as long as even one child might attend who could recite the answers.

## About the author

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***‘In order that the little children might be instructed in the Catechism’***

The exhortation directed at the ministers of Gouda illustrates the custom that children attended the worship services, listened to the Catechism sermons, and were examined during the service on their knowledge of the Catechism. The need was seen for instruction in the chief parts of Reformed doctrine, in order that young people might come to profession of faith. After the minister, the schoolmaster was seen as the most important link in this chain. He was an important instrument in the hands of the classis to ensure the acceptance of Reformed doctrine. Where schoolmasters neglected this aspect of Reformed education, admonition by the classis inevitably followed.

In the smaller villages where there were no schoolmasters, the ministers themselves took up this task ‘...in order that the little children might be brought up in the fear of the Lord, and instructed in the Catechism’ (‘Opdat de kynderkens in der vresen des Heeren opgetogen ende in den Cathecismo geleert mochten worden’).

From the very beginning, the Reformed churches – often in collaboration with the civil authority – had been intensively involved with religious instruction. The States of Friesland instructed ministers and classes to diligently ensure that schoolmasters guided the children in their church attendance, and to ensure that their knowledge of the Catechism was properly tested in the services. Some minutes of Frisian church councils even note the number of children who were able to recite the answers. The classis of Rotterdam agreed with a civil school regulation which stipulated that children of Anabaptists could be enrolled in the schools if they were able to learn the Catechism and accompany the schoolmaster to church, but that those whose parents withheld consent should not be admitted.

At the same time, within the classical region of Dordrecht there remained some

resistance to instruction in the Catechism at school. In some villages, parents kept their children home from school because the schoolmasters there wished to instruct them in the Catechism.

***Preserving the quality of the Catechism Preaching***

Sound preaching of the Catechism requires solid preparation. One of the means of achieving this was the adoption of resolutions that sermon proposals on the catechism be regularly presented before classis. This practice occurred in all provinces. Within the classes of Overijssel, ministers met each Monday for this purpose. The evaluation of these proposals included consideration whether the sermon was really guided by the questions and answers of the part of the Catechism being dealt with, and whether the sermon was thorough, edifying, and Scriptural. In practice, however, the decisions made in this regard were not always followed up. In the classis of Dordrecht, the evaluation of sermon proposals was already being crowded out in the early 1580s. The same occurred in the classis of Gorinchem. In the early years, instructions to this effect were still noted, but the execution of such decisions was only sporadically recorded. The classis of Sneek, in Friesland, took a different approach. Here, the practice of a regular disputation, a discussion concerning the content of the Catechism, was adopted, which was already the rule at the Franeker Academy, beginning with the first question and answer. It appears, however, that this idea, while readily accepted, never made much progress beyond the planning stage. The intentions of the classes to discuss themes from the Catechism proved to be beyond their reach.

Ecclesiastical examinations of candidates for the ministry were another important safeguard for the quality of the Catechism preaching. A booklet used as part of preparatory examinations, with 150 questions, has been preserved. The Catechism was used as a guide for these classis examinations. Simply repeating the answer given in the Catechism was not sufficient: at each point the positions

taken were to be defended, and supported with evidence from Scripture. Broad connections had to be understood, and any objections raised by the examiners were to be answered.

Similarly, in the region of Holland, it was stipulated that candidates would not be allowed to present sermon proposals unless they had first been ‘sharply’ examined concerning the Catechism. The candidate was required not only to recite the text from memory but also to explain the sense and meaning of its words and expressions, and support them with references from Scripture.

The quality of Catechism preaching was also linked to the size and quality of the ministers’ libraries. In 1601, one of the ministers in the classis of Nijmegen was reprimanded for not having a satisfactory library. He was instructed to purchase, at his own expense, a copy of Ursinus’ Latin commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, along with Bullinger’s Huysboeck (consisting of 50 sermons) and Spindler’s Postilla. A second minister, whose sermon proposal was judged to be unsatisfactory, was directed to study diligently, and to ensure that he thoroughly understood the text of the Catechism, in order that his audience might be truly instructed and edified. He too was required to purchase copies of the aforesaid books.

A year later (1602), the classis of Nijmegen proposed an even more far-reaching action to improve the preaching. It was deemed advisable that each classis not have just one, but two sermon proposals on the Catechism, one at the beginning of the meeting, and another at the end. Here too, however, there was a large disparity between the expressed intention and its practical execution: the rules adopted by the classis set high standards, but the practice proved to be resistant to improvement.

***The Heidelberg Catechism, object of study and discussion.***

From the beginning, the status of the Heidelberg Catechism as a confessional document was the object of discussion. In most provinces, proposals for revision of



The conference was organised by Refo500, the international platform for knowledge, expertise, ideas, products and events, specializing in the 500 year legacy of the Reformation. See [www.refo500.nl](http://www.refo500.nl)

the text met with strong reluctance, since the Catechism was widely regarded as fully Scriptural.

A polemical publication from a Roman Catholic source, the *Catholijcke Catechismus* of 1594, gives an entirely different evaluation. According to its author, the Heidelberg Catechism was replete with 'ignorant disregard of Scripture' (*schriftshoorich onverstant*); its doctrine had been 'brought up from hell' (*van der helle gebrocht*) and had its source 'in Lucifer'. The Catechism is characterized as a 'Pseudechismus, Parechismus and Antichismus'. In other words, as anything but a real catechism.

With regard to discussion of the Catechism, the first collection of Catechism sermons in the Dutch language, published in 1588 by Johannes Gerobulus, is worthy of note. Entitled *Vier ende vijftich predication*, ('Fifty-four sermons') it includes as an appendix Gerobulus' *Censuren ofte berispingen over den christelijken Catechismus* ('Censures or reprimands concerning the Christian Catechism'). This appendix consists of a public defence of both the Catechism itself, as well as its use in the preaching. Apparently, towards the end

of the 1580s there was a need for such a defence. In turn, this defence of the Catechism provoked a critical rejection by the humanist-spiritualist Dirck Volkertszn Coornhert in his *Dolingen des Catechismi* ('Errors of the Catechisms', 1590). Toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the first set of commentaries on the Catechism appeared: *Wtlegghinge des catechismi der gereformeerde Christelicke Kercke in Neerduytslandt*, (*Explanation of the Catechism of the Reformed Christian churches in the Netherlands*), a large volume of 860 pages by Cornelis Corstens. In his preface to this earliest exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, Corstens emphasizes the continuing need for instruction in the Catechism. All Christians must train themselves in the foundations of Reformed doctrine, for ignorance is dangerous: it leaves believers vulnerable to the attractions of sectarianism and a worldly life-style. Around the same time, some members of the congregation in Delft took the initiative for regular mutual edification by means of the Catechism. They asked the church council for permission to meet each Sunday after the morning service, to train themselves in the Word of God by discussing the questions and answers

of the Catechism. The council granted its permission to this form of Bible study and mutual training in the faith, on condition that a minister was present. In his absence, the participants could study Bastingius' *Verclaringe op den Catechisme* (*Exposition of the Catechism*) instead.

### Conclusion

This contribution shows how, already within the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Heidelberg Catechism filled an important role in the Netherlands: in ecclesiastical examinations, in the Sunday preaching and recitation during the worship services, and in the catechesis at school. From the very beginning, the Reformed churches involved themselves intensively in religious instruction. Ecclesiastical assemblies set high standards in safeguarding the quality of preaching and instruction, although they were rather less successful in putting these standards into practice. From the beginning, the Heidelberg Catechism was the object of study and discussion, throughout the Netherlands. Taken together, this evidence clearly shows that the Catechism of Heidelberg filled a pivotal role in the Netherlands, in defining and shaping its Reformed identity. ■

### Note:

- 1 *Jeremias Bastingius, Verclaringe op den catechisme, Amsterdam 1591; Dordrecht 1591 and 1594.*

*This article is a translation of a presentation made in the Dutch language at a conference entitled *The Heidelberg Catechism: yesterday, today and tomorrow* held on January 19, 2013 at Gouda, the Netherlands, to mark the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. The original article is in publication as *'De komst van de Heidelbergse Catechismus naar Nederland'* in: F. van der Pol and W. van Vlastuin (eds.), *Leven met de Heidelbergse Catechismus. 450 jaar omgang met het Troostboek. Serie Studium Generale Driestar-Educatief Gouda (Heerenveen: Groen, planned for October 2013)*. This translation by Aart Plug, May 2013, by arrangement with the author.*

# The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism

By now, hasn't everything that could be said about the Heidelberg Catechism already been said? From a historical perspective, we might still discover a few more details, but theologically? Hasn't this document spoken for itself for 450 years already? In itself, that might be true. Nevertheless, it is surprising how little examination there has been of the Heidelberg Catechism's distinctive theological structure. Such an



examination would fill a need.

There is more. The Heidelberg Catechism, seen and properly understood in its historical and theological context, is clearly a dated document. For example, the extended treatment of the Lord's Supper is typical for the theological landscape of its era, but in our time the theological agenda is quite different. There is no discussion concerning the position of Israel in the Catechism, and while it does confess God the Father as Creator, we can be sure that Ursinus and his contemporaries would not have heard of 'sustainability' (even though their way of living would have been 'cleaner and greener' than ours). In short, we experience a discernible distance, from a historical-spiritual perspective, between the Heidelberg Catechism and ourselves. This demands that we make the Catechism our own in a manner that fits our time and context.

Obviously, this article cannot provide an exhaustive treatment of the theology of the HC. We confine ourselves to developing two central points that typify the theology of the HC; (1) Theology that gives a sure footing to our faith; (2) Reformed theology. Actually we should also add (3) Trinitarian theology and (4) theology that opens the Scriptures, but the limited space does not permit us to do so.

## ① Theology that gives sure footing to our faith

The theology of the Heidelberg Catechism can first of all be characterized as theology that provides a sure footing. This is my rendering of the word 'comfort', that so prominently stamps the first question and answer. In our culture, 'comfort' is largely associated with sorrow and mourning, as a counterweight to the harsh realities of life. Life

was hard in the 16th century too: there were no painkillers, no antibiotics; there were pandemics of the plague, high infant mortality, extreme poverty and political instability. If the word 'comfort' would only have referred to such conditions, the Catechism would stand far from us, who live in a prosperous, politically stable welfare society, where high quality healthcare is available to all.

## The meaning of 'comfort'

The word 'comfort' however, does not so much mean counterweight as 'holdfast', something to cling to with one's whole being. It is firm ground under one's feet in a chaotic and uncertain world, firm ground that allows one to look forward in hope. This meaning of 'comfort' is very close to the concept of 'confidence' (Q&A 21). Understood in this way, 'comfort' is not a distant idea at all. We might live in relatively prosperous circumstances, but a strong sense of confidence for the future is hard to find. Economic and environmental crises cause widespread pessimism about the future. In addition, our postmodern times have taught us just how precarious human knowledge can be, and Darwinist thinking would have us believe that we humans are really no more than highly evolved animals. Taken together, these developments do not leave us with much room for a hopeful perspective or a firm footing.

We would, however, misunderstand the Catechism if we understood 'comfort' in a purely spiritual sense. Of course, this comfort is fully spiritual, but it is not only spiritual. It is not just my soul that belongs to Jesus Christ; my body does also. Not only in death, at the limits of life, but also in the middle and the fullness of life, the only firm footing I have is that I belong to Jesus Christ. In other words, this 'comfort' encompasses all of life.

Here, the Catechism takes on an existential tone, one that you will not find quite like in Calvin's Genevan Catechism or the Westminster (Shorter) Catechism. This existential approach is one of the most characteristic features of the Heidelberg Catechism. For here we are dealing with theology. The comfort it holds out is not a response to the universal human need for assurance. In the words of K.H. Miskotte: "We never sought this comfort; it came to us. It is a work of God that we never asked for." In other words, here the Catechism doesn't

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bring some kind of generalization about the human condition, nor does it begin with a discussion of the properties of God. Rather, the firm ground for mankind that God sets the tone for the Catechism's first question and answer, and actually for everything that follows. God truly is our refuge (Psalm 46)!

This central statement opens up the whole Catechism for us, and hence its whole theology also. This comfort determines its whole structure. In this, the Heidelberg Catechism departs from the structure of most other catechisms: their order and structure might be quite deliberate, but it rarely happens that one perspective is overarching for the whole. By contrast, the Heidelberg Catechism does have such an overarching perspective. In the discipline, this is often referred to as the 'analytic approach'.

After beginning with the confession of the 'only comfort', the Catechism proceeds to unfold this comfort. Q&A 2 describes the three things we need to know to *'live in the joy of this comfort'*. We should note well: to *live in* this comfort. The Catechism does not describe these three parts as some kind of path to find this comfort: not even the first part, where it describes our misery. On the contrary, especially at its transitional points, the Catechism brings us back to the confession of our only comfort, and of the three parts that give us the knowledge of this comfort. At the conclusion of its treatment of the Apostles' Creed, the Catechism twice (Q&A 57 and 58) brings us back to our comfort. In the third part (Q&A 115), where the Catechism has completed its discussion of the law, the purpose of the preaching of the Ten Commandments is explained in terms of misery (*'that throughout our lives we may become more and more aware of our sinful nature'*), deliverance (*'that we may seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ'*) and thankfulness (*'that we may never stop striving more and more to be renewed after God's image'*). Here again, the focus is on the 'only comfort'.

### **The idea of ownership**

Still, in this overarching perspective lies a significant stumbling block: the idea of ownership. Does this confession *'that I am not my own, but ... belong to Jesus Christ'* really give me, a 21st century person, a firm footing? It sounds terribly feudal, as if I were his serf or even his slave. If there is one idea that runs counter to our culture, a culture in which the greatest good is to be your own person, where your life does not follow a script that another

has devised, it must be this idea of being someone else's possession. You belong to yourself, and not to someone else: this is an inalienable right. Isn't this idea of ownership a threat to our freedom?

At this point, I'd like to stand up in defence of the Heidelberg Catechism. It's true: intuitively the idea of ownership is quite foreign to us. At the same time, it lies so closely to the very core of the Gospel. This idea of 'ownership' gives us a valuable opportunity to critique contemporary attitudes to life. The emphasis on authentic self-actualization that we experience in our time brings with it a tremendous paradox. After all, our self-actualization demands that others acknowledge and recognize us. People want to be seen and noticed, on television, on social media, and if necessary in the church. We need 'exposure'. But how authentic, really, is this need for continuous recognition? Who are you if no one pays attention to you, and what does that say about the authenticity of the self-image you have constructed?

All too often, people lose their sense of identity, and feel alienated. Who am I, really? The freedom to be who you are is ultimately self-defeating. After all, I need someone else to tell me who I am, preferably someone I can trust.

In this context, the only comfort, the firm foothold that the Heidelberg Catechism holds out, is truly liberating. In my deepest self, I am known and accepted by the living God! I am set free from the tyranny of the self, henceforth to live for God. And that truly is liberating. For to belong to Christ means that his Spirit comforts me, renews me to be his image, and always remains with me. The justification of the unrighteous has become the substance of my freedom. That, ultimately, is the core of the Gospel.

### **② Reformed theology**

The second characteristic feature of the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism is that it is *Reformed*. On the face of it, that is not at all surprising; in fact it seems quite predictable. Of course the HC is Reformed, imagine that it might not be! Still, it is worth considering what we mean by that, and in what specific ways this Reformed character becomes evident.

### **Covenant and election**

In examining what is specifically Reformed about the Catechism, we note that two themes we would regard as typically Reformed are rarely mentioned at all, at least not explicitly: the covenant and election.

The covenant is explicitly referred to only once, in Q&A 74. Here, in connection with baptism, the Catechism argues for the baptism of children of believers. In what we would consider a crucial place to discuss the covenant, it is simply mentioned, and for the rest the HC doesn't refer to the covenant at all.

Election is explicitly referred to in the confession concerning the church (*a church, chosen to everlasting life*, Q&A 54). Earlier, in connection with Christ's return, the HC states that '*He will take me and all his chosen ones into heavenly joy and glory*' (Q&A 52). In Q&A 20, it implicitly refers to election, where we read that not all men are saved, but '*only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ*' (emphasis mine, AH). The Catechism is also not unclear about the perseverance of the saints (Q&A 1, 21, 28).

While it is true that neither the covenant nor election receive much explicit attention, there can be no doubt that the position the HC takes is clearly Reformed. More importantly, both of these doctrines, especially the doctrine of election, are very much present in the background. After all, the essential function of the doctrine of predestination is to show that the work of God always precedes the actions of people. The doctrine of predestination already resonates in the central statement of Q&A 1, '*that I am not my own, but belong ... to Jesus Christ*'. The comfort of this election takes centre stage: Now that I am, I shall forever remain a living member of the church of God (Q&A 54). In the doctrine of election the theme of *assurance* has a prominent place.

Seen in this light, it is truly sad that in later years the doctrine of election led so often to uncertainty and doubt. And that as a reaction, so many Christians have sought their assurance in the strength of their own choice to believe – a strength that cannot endure to the end. Not my holding fast to God, but His holding fast to me, is ultimately my sure foothold. Here, the Heidelberg Catechism gives a thoroughly Reformed corrective to an unhealthy view of election on the one hand, and Arminian optimism on the other.

### **Law and Gospel**

There is another point at which the Heidelberg Catechism can be characterized as typically Reformed. This is in its view of the function of the Law in relation to the Gospel.

Often, the Lutheran view is portrayed as emphasizing the accusatory character of the Law, whereas the Reformed view would highlight its

role as a rule of thankfulness in the lives of God's children. While the distinction is not quite as sharp as that, there is enough truth in it to help to make things clearer.

It is typical of the Heidelberg Catechism that it does justice to the Law in its accusatory function, as well as its role as rule of thankfulness, without playing the one off against the other. In its discussion of the Ten Commandments, the chief accent clearly lies on the aspect of thankfulness; after all, it is placed in this section of the Catechism, and not, as Luther did, at the beginning. This choice of the HC is fully consistent with Calvin's theology. In his *Institutes*, Calvin explicitly describes the role of the Law in our sanctification as its 'principal use' and 'best instrument' (2.7.12).

This does not mean, however, that the Catechism neglects the function of the Law as our accuser. Q&A 3 asks: '*How do you know your misery?*' and answers: '*From the Law of God*'. We should note carefully that this does not refer to a past condition for believers. It doesn't say 'How *did* you know your misery?' but 'how *do* you know?' It isn't regarded as a something that comes before salvation, for it is treated as part of our only comfort. In this way, the Catechism provides a framework for the Law.

As we consider the place of the Law, Q&A 4 is equally significant '*What does God's Law require of us?*' We might expect to be confronted with the Ten Commandments here. That would be consistent with Lutheran thinking: the Old Testament Decalogue, carved in stone, accusing and convicting us of sin. Instead, the answer says: '*Christ teaches us this in a summary...*' The accusatory role of the Law cannot be separated from Christ or from the Gospel. From start to finish, they are inextricably connected. For the Law is the Law in the hand of Christ.

In describing what the Law demands, the Catechism points not to the Old but to the New Testament. On the other hand, its description of the Gospel does not begin with the New Testament, but with the Old. After describing the necessary characteristics of a true Mediator, it asks: '*From where do you know this?*' and it answers: "*From the Holy Gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise ... proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the Law*' (Q&A 19). The Gospel was already present in the Law – and this implies that there can be no opposition between the Law and the Gospel.

Both Law and Gospel are focused on Christ: what the Law demands, Christ teaches, and the Gospel has been fulfilled in Christ. The Gospel and the

Law are not identical, but there is a very close connection between them. And this is where the Reformed emphasis on the covenant and its history is brought to the fore. Old and New Testament are not placed in opposition, Law on the one side and Gospel on the other. Instead, they are viewed together as two parts of one and the same history of the covenant.

This balanced treatment of Law and Gospel are a reflection of the irenic disposition of Ursinus, the student of Melancton. He neither over-accentuates nor glosses over the points at issue; instead, with thorough and perceptive theology he does justice to the breadth of emphases found within the Protestant family. Not that the Lutherans were especially pleased with the result, for the position the Catechism takes is clearly and fully Reformed.

### Faith and Justification

The conception of faith, as set out in the Heidelberg Catechism, emphasizes a strong link between *knowledge* and *confidence*. These are two sides of the same coin: believing what you know, and knowing what you believe. The wording of Q&A 21 might suggest that these are two consecutive phases: first knowledge and then confidence. In that respect, the choice of words is not the most fortunate. Still, that is not the intention: at least, the treatment of these two aspects in the elaboration of the content of the Christian faith does not point in this direction: knowledge on the one hand versus confidence on the other.

Nowhere does that Catechism suggest or assume that there needs first to be knowledge of an objective truth before the growth of confidence can follow. This unity of the two aspects already becomes apparent in Q&A 22, immediately following the definition of 'true faith'. Christians must believe '*all that is promised us in the Gospel, which the articles of the Christian faith teach us in a summary*'. There is no separation here between head and heart, for head and heart are focused together on the promise of God. Here too, we believe what we know, and we know what we believe.

How does such faith help you? '*In Christ I am righteous before God*' (Q&A 59). Quite rightly, Gerhard Goeters has rightly called this statement 'the systematic heart of the Heidelberg Catechism'. Lines are brought together here: the line of *sola fide*: I am righteous before God only by a true faith; the line of *sola gratia*: Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned ... yet God, out of

mere grace, imputes to me the merits of Christ; and therefore also the line of *solo Christo*: In Christ alone I am righteous before God. Sinner and justified at the same time: that is who I am, that is my identity. And just to be sure, Q&A 61 emphasizes that *sola fide* and *sola gratia* do not exclude but include each other: faith as such brings no merit, but it accepts grace as grace. Hence, it is already a gift of grace to be able to receive that grace. Consequently, the sanctification that proceeds from grace is not so much a matter of works as of fruits.

### In conclusion

This brief overview of the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism shows that it is the existential approach of the Catechism that makes it so valuable in our present-day context. The Reformed doctrine and spirituality that are so characteristic of the Heidelberg Catechism are not just of historical interest: theologically they are as relevant as ever. Even when we (rightly!) take account of its historical distance from us, there are still plenty of good things to be learned from the old 'Heidelberger'!

- *This article is a translation of a presentation made in the Dutch language at a conference entitled The Heidelberg Catechism: yesterday, today and tomorrow held on January 19, 2013 at Gouda, the Netherlands, to mark the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. The original article is in publication as 'De Theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus' in: F. van der Pol and W. van Vlastuin (eds.), Leven met de Heidelbergse Catechismus. 450 jaar omgang met het Troostboek. Serie Studium Generale Driestar-Educatief Gouda (Heerenveen: Groen, planned for October 2013).*
- *This translation by Aart Plug, April 2013, by arrangement with the author. All quotations from and references to the Heidelberg Catechism are taken from the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 9th edition, Premier, Winnipeg, 2008.*

# Spirituality in the HC

Choosing a suitable angle of approach for the theme ‘Spirituality in the Heidelberg Catechism’ was no easy task: not because spirituality is hard to find in this catechism, but rather the opposite. The problem is more one of an abundance of spirituality than of the lack thereof. Whoever wishes to address spirituality in the Heidelberg Catechism must address the whole Heidelberg Catechism [henceforth to be referred to as HC in this article].



Undoubtedly, this has to do with the HC’s point of entry, the question of our only comfort in life and death, a most existential question. This existential tone is retained throughout the whole catechism. Whether it is dealing with knowing our sin, the meaning of the facts of salvation, the relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the function of the Law or the function of prayer, spirituality comes to the fore in every aspect.

One could even maintain that the spiritual dimension in the HC is one of the distinguishing characteristics of this confession. A comparison with the Geneva Catechism makes it clear that, while it is largely parallel to the HC, the differences are to be found in the existential applications that can be found in the HC<sup>1</sup>.

Comparing it with the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, we see that while the English catechisms speak more explicitly of the *ordo salutis*, the language is less existential.

W. van ’t Spijker calls this spiritual-existential aspect of the HC not just a distinguishing characteristic of this confession, but also the secret of its lasting power of expression<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore remarkable that the spirituality of the HC has received so little attention<sup>3</sup>. The sources, the history, the people behind the catechism, the influence and theology of the HC have all received abundant attention, but up till now a thematic analysis of the spirituality of the HC has been lacking. Let this be a humble attempt at filling that gap.

A discussion of the spirituality of the HC can be undertaken in different ways. In this article I would like to formulate the core question as follows: What does a Christian experience in, or according to, the HC? What happens in the believer’s soul? To this

end I have walked through the HC attempting to map this out. In this way I hope to gain a greater insight into the spirituality of the HC.

It goes without saying that this outline is open to discussion. Some concepts of experience could be categorized differently [*Translators note*: Due to the difficulty of finding the exact same concepts of experience in the English version of the HC, these concepts have been left out in this outline; only the number of times per category has been retained]. The choice of categories, too, is open to criticism. Quantifying these concepts can also be misleading as the use of a word in one context can differ greatly from its use in another. Taking these remarks into account, this schedule can be useful as a starting point for viewing spirituality in the HC. At the very least it proves that spirituality in the HC is very much alive. The number of spiritual moments in this schedule amounts to 135, meaning that a spiritual moment can be identified, on average, in almost every catechism question. There are, however, more reflections to be made.

## Where is the spirituality in the section on our misery?

It is apparent that very few experiential words occur in the chapter on our misery. Moreover, the words found in this chapter were not exactly the clearest examples of what happens in the soul. Does this mean that the misery is not experienced? The whole of the catechism shows that this is clearly not the case. On the contrary, the whole catechism is characterized by deep bass tones of repentance and mortification. Almost at the end of the HC, the Christian speaks of his sins as transgressions (Q. 126). Nevertheless, the total number of words regarding sorrow and remorse are limited. In comparison to the number of words spent on the *vivificatio*, this is noticeable. When dealing with the Ten Commandments, the Law is also continuously presented as a mirror of discovery. Without doubt, the intention is to evoke the experience of mortification, yet this emotion is not named as such.

## The spirituality of faith

It appears that there are numerous notions connected to faith. Apparently, we cannot speak of faith in a single manner, for various aspects can be distinguished. Faith is knowing, trusting, accepting, assurance and union with Christ.

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Category	Misery	Redemption	Gratitude
<b>Faith</b>			
source		1 X	
knowing		6 X	4X
trusting		4X	3X
accepting		5X	
comforting	2X	10X	2X
union		12X	3X
<b>Voluntary/affective</b>			
repentance	1X	1X	3X
hatred			4X
love		2X	13X
joy		2X	1X
struggle	2X	4X	1X
prayer			5X
<b>Effective</b>			
process		5X	4X
obedient	1X		5X
fruit		5X	10X
God's glory		3X	6X
<b>Hope</b>			
		3X	2X
	<b>6x</b> <i>(in 11 questions)</i>	<b>63x</b> <i>(in 73 questions)</i>	<b>66x</b> <i>(in 43 questions)</i>

There are 52 references in total to the spirituality of faith in the HC. At the risk of quantifying, this is a sign of the spirituality of faith in the HC, and it illustrates how much the soul is directed towards salvation extra nos. Believers do not find salvation within themselves, but they seek salvation outside themselves.

Believers know of their salvation through the promises. The number of references to knowing is a sign of the central position of spiritual knowledge. Word and Spirit lead us to the knowledge of God's salvation in Christ, whom believers are called upon to trust and then accept in their hearts.

Because salvation lies outside ourselves, it remains something constantly under attack. It is thoroughly clear that salvation is not something we can master, or put in our pocket. Spiritual life in the HC characterizes itself as a restless possession. Believers are people who are constantly in need of being comforted by the assurance of faith. Thus they hear of Christ and His temptations, and in this way Baptism and The Lord's Supper function to keep the trust in God's promises alive. That is why trust and assurance are such important aspects of this catechism.

Although salvation comes from outside ourselves, more is to be said about our sharing in this salvation. We cannot tear Christ away from the Christians as though they were independent of one another. This is made evident in this catechism by the central position of the concept of union with Christ, in faith (*unio mystica cum Christo*). Christ is not only the object of faith and the source of faith, but the Christian 'grows into one being', as it were, with Christ. A Christian not only believes in Christ but he is in Christ. Or to put it another way: he is not only saved by Christ, but is in Christ. In short, the Christian cannot be divided from Christ, while Christ can no less be divided from the believer. We do not receive salvation on an abstract spiritual bank account, but spiritual life is very personal: being embodied into the person of Christ. Here the person of Christ receives more attention than in the famous words of Melancthon that we know Christ if we know his benefits.

### The spirituality of love

Subsequently we see that the ground of salvation outside of us is not at the expense of the inside (in nobis) of faith. Through the spiritual unity with Christ, spiritual life is accompanied by inner experience. As categories, I have made use of the terms voluntary and affective. The first concept is directed towards the operation of the will, the other concept can be recognized as an indication of the deepest feeling. The word emotion is unsuitable, although the literal meaning of this word does poignantly depict that we are driven by these feelings.

In love, the voluntary and affective come together. If joy can be seen as an expression of love, and if remorse and hate can be seen as the 'other side of the coin' of love, then there are a total of 27 references to the power of heartfelt love. One could call it the spirituality of love.

This love manifests itself in various forms. A paradoxical form of love is remorse. If there is no love, there is no remorse. Remorse springs from the realization of the goodness of the Other, which then crushes our heart. We realize how good God is to us and how much we grieve Him. We would never have this experience if we did not see the goodness of the Other. If we see God as a tyrant, we ought not to repent of our disobedience, but keep it up.

The love towards God becomes apparent in a radical attitude. It brings the Christian who breathes the HC to an intense hatred of everything God hates. The reverse is also true: being directed towards God also brings with it that we love what

God loves, such as good works, our own soul, our neighbour, the truth, and that we long to serve God in every way.

It is also beautiful that the HC speaks of the joy in God. While Calvin was reticent about speaking of joy in God, the HC uses the term to characterize the renewal of man. It also shows that this joy in God should not be restricted to one single question but that it permeates the whole of the service to God. It is a service of love that does not bring sorrow.

### **The spirituality of the conflict**

At the same time we see that spirituality is taking place in conflict with the old world. Should we expect the HC to complain of the political situation, religious tensions or persecution in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we will be disappointed. Although the historical context has undoubtedly placed its mark on the spirituality of the HC and made the authors aware of the reality of the contradiction between the new in Christ and the old in this history, the essence of the conflict can be found at a deeper level. It does not concern a conflict that is taking place in the centre of an arena so that we can watch from a distance how the drama develops and concludes; rather, it is taking place in our own inner self.

The Christian therefore has a harder time than the non-Christian, because the latter is unaware of the powers stacked against him. Whoever wishes to lead a life of comfort should not reach out for Christianity because it is that which submerges us in the most intense conflict imaginable, or rather, beyond our understanding. The Christian life is far from perfect, and living as a Christian, out of grace, is not a guarantee for a successful life. The HC even uses the concept 'enemies to the death', in order to point out that our enemies are only satisfied when they achieve our eternal death. It is, once more, an indication that there is a tough conflict in our inner self, and that losing has consequences for eternity.

The wonderful part, though, is that all the powers stacked against us are not able to extinguish the fire of faith and love in our hearts. However small that fire of faith may be, in the spiritual warfare the prayers rise up to God in heaven. The HC speaks of the sighing of prayer, which is on the one hand an indication that the prayer rises up from the depths of our hearts, and, on the other, a symptom of the prayers rising up in the realization that we are helpless. Even this sigh is a sign of Christ's triumph in which the Christian participates. Think of the rower rowing upstream against powerful currents, yet being able to stay in one place.

### **The spirituality of renewal.**

In this intense struggle between the old world and the new world, a process of renewal is taking place. Faith is not a view or an opinion, but a power. Fellowship with Christ is effective in the deepest layers of the human personality. Fellowship with Christ manifests itself both in the old self dying and in the new self rising. This resurrection of the new man manifests itself in self-sacrifice, humility, commitment and obedience.

In this context of self-sacrifice, the mystery of the daily renewal by the Spirit becomes evident. It is remarkable how variedly the HC speaks of the fruit of the Spirit, the fruits of faith and the fruit of repentance. It is able to display the shape of humility, of enduring suffering, of respect for all that is holy, of the fear of the Lord that permeates all, of the blazing zeal for the Lord and his service, as well as of the laying down of sin and grudges against our fellows.

The other facet of this renewal, which blossoms out of self-sacrifice, is the glorification of God. The spirituality of the HC is characterized by a perceptive sense for discerning God's hand in the smallest things, and honouring Him for it. In this regard, the HC speaks uninhibitedly of honouring and praising God and professing His Name. Although renewal in this life is provisional and broken in character, it is, nevertheless, a portion of eternal life. It therefore calls out for the completion of Christ's kingdom. The fact that the Christian already feels a small part of that eternal joy in his heart is an indication that the Christian life is seen as the modus of eschatological life, although it is not named as such. Remarkably, in the Christian hope, a concrete depiction of the new earth is lacking. The judgment stands at the centre of this spirituality, and the perspective of being with Him who loved us so outstandingly. ■

#### **Notes**

This article is a translation of a presentation made in the Dutch language at a conference entitled The Heidelberg Catechism: yesterday, today and tomorrow held on January 19, 2013 at Gouda, the Netherlands, to mark the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. This translation by Sabine Bosscha-Timmermans, May 2013, by arrangement with the author.

1. *Whereas the Geneva Catechism speaks of the purpose of human life, the Heidelberg Catechism takes as its starting point life's comfort. When discussing God as Father, Calvin refers to God's providence in an*

objective manner, while the HC is quick to bring it into relationship with our experiences, be they for better or for worse. Regarding the three offices of Christ – prophet, priest and king – it is noticeable that the HC is more direct in delineating the value of these offices of Christ. As far as the title ‘Lord’ is concerned, the HC relates this directly to Christ’s payment on our behalf to rescue us from the devil’s dominion, whereas Calvin does not make this existential application. These examples are illustrative and not restrictive.

2. W. van 't Spijker (ed.), *Het troostboek van de kerk. Over de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, Houten: Den Hertog, 2005, 292-293.
3. I consulted the 1963 reference book, L. Coenen, *Handbuch zum Heidelberger Katechismus*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1963; K. Exalto addressed the subjects of history, character, controversies, theology, ethics and use of the HC, *De enige troost. Inleiding tot de heidelbergse*

*catechismus*, Kampen: Kok, zj; E. Busch addressed the free man, without addressing the spirituality, *Der Freiheit zugetan. Christlicher Glaube heute – im Gespräch mit dem Heidelberger Katechismus*, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998; T. Latzell presents a mostly theological analysis, *Theologische Grundzüge des Heidelberger Katechismus. Eine fundamentaltheologische Untersuchung seines Ansatzes zur Glaubenskommunikation*, Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2004; L.D. Bierma pays attention to the sources, history and theology of the HC, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism. Sources, History, and Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005; Likewise, F.H. Walker’s research is directed towards theological sources, *Theological Sources of the Heidelberg Catechism*, diss. 2010; W. Verboom, *De theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus. Twaalf thema’s: De context en de latere uitwerking*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996.

T. Pleizier

## A future for the HC in tomorrow’s instruction?

It was 406 years ago this year that the Goudse Catechismus appeared in the Dutch city of Gouda. This was an instruction method for children and families, indeed for the whole city of Gouda. It came about because one of its authors, Reverend Herman Herberts, had been fit to preach something other than from the Heidelberg Catechism in his former congregation of Dordrecht. He had chosen his own subject for the sermon and was of the opinion that this was far better.



He had not enamoured himself to his fellow office bearers in the church of Dordrecht by so doing. One dispute followed another, and he was alternately expelled and restored to office. In the more liberal city of Gouda he wrote the Goudse Catechismus, which soon became a part of the dispute between Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants. The critical reception of this booklet soon showed that it was being seen as an alternative for the Heidelberg Catechism. In spite of its mild and irenic tone, it was given a political edge: critics claimed that liberal Gouda, in the wake of Erasmus and Coornhert (humanistic theologians

who influenced Gouda), was trying to educate the people with a theology that gave no offence, with the ultimate purpose of replacing the Heidelberg Catechism as the Reformed Confession of Faith.

Some observations can be made from this short description of events. For example, how quickly the Heidelberg Catechism had become a confessional document: an authoritative text for catechetical instruction in the congregation and the expression of the Reformed identity of the Dutch church born of the Reformation. What also stands out is how a pedagogic goal – bringing up young people in the faith – could become the main issue in confessional, theological, and even political strife. This battle was being fought over the heads of the youth. Here, at the festivities of the 450-year anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism, this is an example of one of those historical incidents where the value of the catechism was challenged.

Yet this article is about the Heidelberg Catechism and not about the presentation of a new Goudse Catechismus. I would like to bring forward a thesis at the end of this contribution, but first I would like to share a few personal experiences with you.

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These will then be placed within some broader observations and, in conclusion, I will discuss the three characteristics of the catechism in faith education for today and tomorrow.

### **Personal experiences**

Let me begin with my own period of catechesis, in which a catechist and 30 catechumens were seated around a table. Every week the catechist would write a new sentence on the blackboard and after 8 weeks we had worked our way through Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Although one might have some reservations about this from a didactic point of view, I remember it with gratitude. I learned Lord's Day 1 by heart there, an inheritance that has lasted a lifetime.

The following experience testifies to that. An elderly sister from my church had suffered a stroke and was no longer able to speak. All she could say was 'yes'. Her daughter sung the psalms to her and these had become so internalized that her mother could get in touch with them. But once all the psalms had been sung, they discovered something else in their mother. Reciting Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism awakened a deep memory within her. She could not speak, except for those old words of faith.

Yet there is another side to be mentioned. In the same period I was giving a catechism course to prepare the older youth for their public professions of faith. The catechism textbook that I was using had fragments of the Heidelberg Catechism incorporated into the lessons. One day I handed out books containing the Confessions of Faith to the group, to give them a chance to read the whole Catechism, rather than just the fragments in the Catechism textbook. While paging through it, one of the participants, a motivated and very much involved student, in his twenties, remarked: "Hey, I used to have to learn this by heart. I remember thinking: What's this about? What does it mean?"

These experiences say something about the catechism in the learning process within the congregation: the catechism as a means of internalizing the central matters of the faith. Sometimes that works, and sometimes it does not. Of course, the catechist's competence and the youth's motivation play a part. Yet there is a larger picture to be drawn. I would therefore like to place these personal experiences within certain broader observations.

### **Confessional text and/or teaching method**

The Heidelberg Catechism is no longer the main method for catechesis. In spite of its confessional status, the use of this book is not at all guaranteed in the 21st century. This can easily be ascertained by taking a look at the available catechism materials. There are methods that have remained close to the catechism: they follow the main lines of the catechism lessons in their content, and the working methods are directed towards ensuring that the catechumen becomes familiar with the catechism. In the meantime, this way of working illustrates how the method itself has become the object of study. The Heidelberg Catechism was originally a teaching method, but as a confessional text, it has itself become the object of learning. The learning process is directed towards becoming familiar with the catechism; while the catechism was originally directed towards internalizing one's faith. In other catechism methods the catechism is introduced into the text as authoritative material from the church's confessions. The catechism itself then appears to have no didactic function, only a confessional one. A catechism fragment is used to introduce the confessions of the church. Teaching methods with the purpose of teaching the catechism have deviated from using the catechism itself as method; likewise with catechism teaching methods that introduce the catechism as confessional material. It appears, ultimately, that we are at a loss how to put this old booklet with questions and answers to good use in the life of today.

Catechism materials illustrate that we should "do something with the Heidelberg Catechism". But how this should be done is not so clear. A parallel development is the attention to the preaching through the catechism. The number of articles and books about Catechism preaching is undiminished. Ministers are looking for creative ways to do it, because preaching about the 52 Lord's Days in a row during the course of the year is not working in many congregations. And in the churches where it does still work, one cannot just flip the pile of sermons over at the end of the year and start again. As a component of the three Forms of Unity, the Catechism has become far more than just an instruction method. It is an authoritative confessional text. And in educational church services (as the afternoon service is often called in Dutch reformed churches) the church speaks freely about and from her confession. At the same time, it must be said that it can no



longer fulfil the original function of a didactic instrument. In addition, this could lead to the church laying a claim on it: whoever adapts the Catechism for didactic purposes is then attacking the church's confession. The catechism as pedagogical instrument and as confessional text then get in each other's way.

### **A future for the catechism?**

From the aforementioned, we might conclude that the Heidelberg Catechism will continue to make its way through history as confessional text, but that it has left behind the days of being a 'catechism'. Yet, it would be premature for that conclusion to be drawn. Prof. W. Verboom wrote a children's version of the catechism, followed by a rewritten new 'modern rendition' of the Catechism. Verboom starts his modern rendition with the remark that he was often asked the question whether a more updated edition of the Heidelberg Catechism would be possible. In this, I discern an underlying question requesting a modern teaching method for the ordinary Reformed faith. This is part of a bigger picture. In 2010, the Doornse Catechismus appeared, with the subtitle 'Old questions, new answers'. The first question 'What is your only comfort' sounds all too familiar. In 2012, Dr B Wentzel's publications, Grote en Kleine Protestantse Catechismus (a large and small Protestant Catechism), appeared.

Perhaps even more interesting is a recent American project. Stimulated by a publication about the practice of catechizing by J.I. Packer, the evangelical Anglican from Vancouver, the New City Catechism appeared in New York in November 2012 as part of a project by Tim Keller, the minister of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. 'What is our only hope in life and death?' reads the first of the 52 questions. And the answer: 'That we are not our own but belong, body and soul, both in life and death, to God and to our Savior Jesus Christ'. A new catechism, grafted onto the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms. And with the original didactic intention: memorizing. The New City Catechism is a digital publication: an iPhone/iPad app and website, constructed in such a way as to stimulate learning the questions and answers by heart – including an explanatory introduction with memorization tips, in short, a catechism that is meant as a catechism.

I ascertain that the catechism has not had its day. As the influence of the Heidelberg Catechism on current day projects testifies, its role is far from being sidelined, although its role could become a different one in the future. Young and old will be increasingly questioned as to what they, as Christians, believe. In times in which you have to account for the hope that is in you in sentences with the length of a tweet or a one-liner, short memorized kernel messages of faith could be of great importance. Not only in apologetics but also for the personal assurance of faith.

### **Instruction with the aid of a catechism**

What makes a catechism a catechism, and what role can the Heidelberg Catechism play in this context? In conclusion, I now list the three characteristics of instruction using a catechism.

***Initiating into the tradition.*** A catechism presents a practice through which the tradition can be learned. It helps as a manageable way to internalize or appropriate the assets of faith that have been grasped in the confession. Faith must be experienced and lived, and concepts, faith expressions and definitions are important in this experiencing of faith. Not as abstract words, but as sentences that form relations. Questions and answers create a relational connection – like the relation between a teacher and a pupil. In order to live the faith, questions will have to be discussed that confront the Reformed faith with the specific needs and alternative religious convictions of

our present culture. That makes the catechism a didactic aid for initiating believers of today into the tradition of faith.

***Believing from the basics.*** There is a deep longing for believing from the fundamentals. The Alpha course is an example of this, with its 15 chapters, all of them starting – like a catechism – with a question: how can I be sure of my faith, why did Jesus die on the cross, and what is the church about? It is remarkable to see how many Christians belonging to a church for years have taken this course during the past 15 years. In this, a longing can be discerned to learn faith by revisiting the fundamentals. Offering the content of the gospel concisely, clearly and systematically, the catechism remains a suitable instrument. The content has been determined by the faith of the church down the ages, the Divine commandments, Christian prayer, and the sacraments.

***Competently speaking of faith.*** In a secular context, in which the church has become a marginal phenomenon and not much remains of the familiar corpus christianum, there is no place for retreat from the world: not in a Reformed group, not in a safe house, not in a traditional robe of words. Christians must acquire the competence of speaking about and out of faith. This demands a healthy self-understanding, a solid identity, but also a vocabulary and linguistics. The Heidelberg Catechism is an example of a text from which believers can extract their self-understanding and identity: from their comfort at the beginning (Lord's Day 1), right up to the assuredness of the praying human in the word 'Amen' (Lord's Day 52). A catechism helps believers to appropriate the language of faith, to express themselves in it, and to approach reality out of a framework that has been fundamentally shaped by the Christian Faith.

### **A thesis**

The abovementioned forces us to choose a position. What will the future of the Catechism look like? Or should we put the question differently: the Heidelberg Catechism will persist through history as an important confessional document, but what of its educational role? In asking this, do we mean the future of the catechism, namely the Heidelberg Catechism, or is the question whether a catechism, as an educational tool, has a future? In that light, I arrive at the following thesis: it is time for a new catechism.

No, we should not adapt or change the existing confessional documents. That route is ecumenically impassable and historically undesirable. But how was it possible, in the times of the Reformation, to develop and try out tens, even hundreds of catechisms? Perhaps it was in the calm realization that one was bound to surface that would outlast all the others.

A new catechism: it does not have to last 450 years: a little longer than the 'Catechism of Gouda' would be nice; and especially it should not be an occasion for strife fought over the heads of young believers. If a few generations can make good use of it, that is sufficient. All that is required is a good understanding of what is going on in our secular culture, a clear Reformed spirit, the capacity to formulate theology concisely and clearly, and, to conclude, a group of young and old Christians who are willing to take a chance and tackle it – a Christian congregation that attaches importance to impressing God's words and deeds in Christ upon the young (Deut. 6). Then let a catechism come forth from Amsterdam, Grand Rapids, Pretoria, Kampen or, for my part, Gouda.

It should be a catechism in which the questions are not formulated by the church educator, the schoolteacher, or the church minister. The questions should be those being asked today by others, by secular contemporaries of the young believer. For instance, the question could be asked:

***Question:*** *Are you responsible for your own happiness?*

***Answer:*** *Happily not! My only security is that I am not my own, but belong, in life and death, to God, through Jesus Christ, my Saviour and Lord.* ■

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# Renew or Retain?

## The place of the HC in school, church and catechesis<sup>1</sup>

As we commemorate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism, there is value in considering its place in schools and churches in the year 2013. The question should be raised: Should the HC retain the place it has always had, or has the time come for a new Catechism? Can the HC, dating from 1563, still be used without change in church services, catechesis and the school classroom? Should we perhaps make an addition to the original document, or even – as Tim Keller has recently done with his *New City Catechism*<sup>2</sup> – write a completely new one?



### The present situation

Before we are able to ask such questions, we need to know what the current situation is. Is the HC, in its original version of 1563 (aside from modernised spelling and sentence structure), still being used in 2013? This investigation is limited to the Netherlands, and addresses the present situation, first of all in the (elementary) schools, and further in the catechesis and the church services.

### In the schools

The system of education in the Netherlands is unique: the government funds public and Christian schools equally. There is diversity among Christian schools: some are broadly Protestant, others are specifically Reformed<sup>3</sup>. The so-called 'Protestant' schools vary widely: some regard all religions as being of equal value, while others wish to be guided by the Bible alone. The latter group often feels a strong affinity with Reformed schools.

At present, there are approximately 300 Reformed and conservative Protestant schools in the Netherlands that still use the HC. In many of these schools, a period of instruction will typically take place on Monday mornings for students in the higher elementary grades (aged 11 and 12). 20 or so questions and answers are dealt with in the course of a year, most of which are memorised. In most cases the text of the Catechism is little changed from the original version of 1563; only archaic terms, spelling and sentence structure have been updated. This Catechism is explained by the teacher, and

applications are made to link this material to the time and context in which these children live. A visitor to the school, on entering a classroom, might hear the whole class recite the week's question and answer together.

In the elementary schools, this practice is not likely to change in the near future. And most of these schools do not appear to be asking for a revision of the HC either. This is probably due to the fact that for most of these schools, the HC is one of the confessional documents that form the basis of the school<sup>4</sup>.

Reformed secondary schools generally do not set aside time for explicit instruction in the Catechism. However, in the religious studies courses, frequent reference is made to the Reformed Confessions in general, and students are expected to draw on them as they study a range of topics.

Most Protestant secondary schools, on the other hand, devote little or no attention to the HC at all.

### In the churches

In many Reformed churches in the Netherlands, the Heidelberg Catechism is still dealt with every Sunday, usually in the afternoon service. Again, the version in use is the original from 1563. The practice will vary: some congregations have a set schedule, beginning with Lord's Day 1 in January and completing the cycle within the year, while other congregations may take up to three years to complete the cycle.

Regrettably, the catechism sermon is often limited to an explanation of the text, and a spiritual application; its relevance to the questions that face believers in their day-to-day lives does not always receive the attention it deserves.

In most congregations of the Dutch Protestant Church (PKN), however, the Sunday-afternoon service – devoted especially to instruction – is losing its place, and there is no requirement from the side of the synod that attention is to be given to the HC. Where it does happen, it is usually packaged within a topic or theme considered relevant to the present-day congregation.

This change in approach reflects a changing view of the HC. Is instruction in the Catechism an end

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in itself, or is it a resource to be used when the congregation reflects on a certain topics? Reformed churches still regard the HC as a confession of faith, and maintain its position fully in original form. And in these churches, there is almost no desire for revision of or addition to the HC. Instead, there is a strong sense of thankfulness that we still have the HC, and any suggestions for change generally meet with resistance and suspicion.

### *In catechesis*

The use of the HC in catechesis is by no means a given. The great Synod of Dort (1618-1619) stipulated that the HC was to be used in the churches and in the schools. M Golverdingen has shown that the HC was rarely used in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as a resource for catechesis<sup>5</sup>. Instead, the much shorter Voorbeeld der Goddelijke Waarheden by Abraham Hellenbroek was far more widely used<sup>6</sup>.

In our time, there is a renewed focus on catechesis in most churches. The approach, however, is much different from what was used previously. Again, this has to do with the view of the HC.

In the Dutch Protestant Church the HC is seen primarily as a resource for instruction in the faith, and knowledge of the Catechism is not seen as an end in itself. The first years of catechesis are often devoted to stories from the Old and New Testament, since children who have not attended Reformed schools are often greatly lacking in knowledge of the Bible. In addition, various Biblical themes are discussed, and here the HC does fill an important role. However, the HC as such is often not covered, and students are rarely expected to memorize any of it. Catechesis leading to profession of faith may require students to explore important themes and work them out for themselves.

By contrast, within Reformed churches, where the HC in its full and original form is maintained as a confessional document, knowledge of the confession itself is regarded as a goal in its own right, to ensure grounding in the sound doctrine of the faith.

It is remarkable, though, that the HC itself is often not covered in the catechesis. The use of Hellenbroek's Voorbeelden is still very common. In a few congregations, the HC itself is used, supplemented by contemporary resources that aim to bridge the gap with the present-day world of the students. In addition, for pre-confession classes, some churches use the Kort Begrip of H Faulkelius, a brief summary of the Catechism, consisting 74 questions and answers, intended to be memorised.

To conclude: In many Reformed churches, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 still has a very important place. The degree of desire for revision depends very much on the position given to the Catechism. In those churches where the Catechism is regarded as a foundational confession, there appears to be little prospect of adapting or renewing the HC

### **The HC: do we renew or retain it?**

We take a step further: how can the HC, dating from 1563, retain its place, now and into the future? For Reformed churches, that continue to regard the HC as a confessional document, one to which they are spiritually bound, the problems will be different than for the PKN, for whom the Catechism is chiefly a resource for instruction in the faith. We will begin by looking at the PKN.

### *Renewing the HC*

Churches within the PKN frequently ask for adaptations and sometimes even wholesale additions to the Catechism, in keeping with the circumstances of our own time. The expressed need for these changes arises from a changed view on teaching and learning, consistent with current practice.

### *Teaching and learning*

Contemporary insights into teaching and learning have shown that new knowledge must build on existing knowledge. Where it does not, actual learning will be minimal. In their *Altijd Leerling*, W Verboom et al. have considered the pedagogy and didactics of catechesis<sup>7</sup>. There is a shift in focus from content to the learner. The learner must actively participate in the learning process, and learning takes place through interaction. This might happen through questions asked by the teacher, to which the learner responds; however, an approach where the learner summarises the key thoughts of an article or idea in their own words is often just as effective. This has important implications for catechesis, but that need not exclude the learning of the text of the Catechism itself.

In recent decades, there has been another shift. Now, there is more attention for the world in which the learners live, for their own context. The context of the learner has become increasingly important for the approach to content. Obviously, the step from a 16<sup>th</sup> century booklet about faith to the day-to-day world of our students is huge. And it goes without saying that this has implication for catechesis. Were an instructor to list the themes





or topics his students would choose to discuss, it is not very likely that matters such as the Trinity, the doctrine of justification, or the bodily presence of Christ in the Sacraments would come up. Contemporary methods of catechesis often choose to begin with the world and life context of the learners. For example, A. de Kock takes what he calls an ‘adductive approach’, where the teacher and the learner interact in a kind of master/apprentice relationship. However, a catechesis that takes its starting point in the experience and context of the learner will not address important theological themes, like those mentioned above. It is by no means a given that new insights into didactics can be prescribed as normative for the order of learning. It is not true that one must always first consider the life context of the learner before deciding on the content to be learned. It is quite possible to begin with what must be learned. Obviously, connections must be made with the life experience of the learners – otherwise the content will be left hanging. The church has a large stake in transmitting the core truths of the Christian faith to a new generation. Sound doctrine and knowledge of the faith must be passed on. It should be clear, then, that catechesis must give ample opportunity for the voice of God to be heard, and that is equally normative for all generations.

***Writing a new Catechism?***

Within the more conservative congregations of the

PKN there is still a high level of appreciation for the HC as a spiritual monument, but in practical terms, it is no longer useable in the catechesis. Many young people in these churches are in search of the truth, and are looking for existential answers. Often, these are questions that are not directly addressed in the HC: the existence of God, the origin of evil and suffering in this world, or how to display a truly Christian attitude in an increasingly secular world. If our instruction in the faith is defined by these questions, so goes the argument, then the HC will have little to offer, and it is time to write a new Catechism.<sup>8</sup>

Actually, I question whether any new catechism, such as Tim Keller’s Catechism referred to above, would even be accepted as authoritative. I wonder to what extent young people still see the need for Biblically-based truths that are normative for their spiritual lives.

**Retaining the HC**

Reformed churches choose to maintain the HC in its original and unabridged form, now, and into the future. This position, too, needs to be examined. Should the HC be so maintained, and if so, what problems does that raise for learners and teachers? Should the Catechism need some additions or elaborations, perhaps?

***The Catechism, a product of its time.***

The HC dates from 1563, and by now, in 2013, it

has receded from us by 450 years. It is obviously a product of its own time, and to some extent bound by its time. We note a few examples:

- The theological points of departure in the HC are very much determined by the issues of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Then, there needed to be great attention for the struggles with the church of Rome on the one hand and the Anabaptists on the other. Some of the questions of the HC are not so relevant today, such as q&a 101, about the swearing of oaths.
- We live in the time after the Enlightenment, and that has implications for the way in which we see the content of the HC<sup>9</sup>. Questions such as the authority of Scripture, the historic truth of Christ's resurrection, and the relationship between a loving God and suffering in the world, are very prominent for us. Such questions were not even raised in the HC.
- Reformed churches are confronted by theologians such as Rick Warren and John Piper, who predict that traditional Protestantism has had its day, and that the future belongs to the evangelicals. In their catechesis, Protestant and Reformed churches will have to give account of the evangelical movement. They must also be alert to the dangers of Arminianism and the charismatic movement. One wonders how useful the HC is in dealing with these matters.

New theological themes have arisen, and these too ask our attention. The HC is a textbook of Reformed doctrine, and it addresses issues that were dominant in its own time. If the churches still want to give the HC a place in its catechesis, they will also have to pay attention to themes and topics that are prominent today: Mission and Evangelism, Apologetics, Israel – to mention just a few.

#### ***Translating for today.***

Reformed churches that wish to hold fully to the HC must take these changes into account in their instruction. This can be done in two ways: 1. They can continue as always with the HC, and add to their catechesis material that deals with contemporary issues; 2. They can adapt the HC itself, by means of an addition to the document, dealing with these newer themes. Such additions need not be given the status of a confession: rather they could be more of an actualisation, in our own time and context, of the Reformed confession in matters of theology and ethics.

#### ***Today's context.***

For our young people today, the content of the HC

seems to have little relevance to their own context and everyday experience. But we may ask: does it have to? The teacher could simply accept the context and experience of his students as a given, and hold out to them a new and different view on life, one which can only enrich them.

We are told that new knowledge needs to connect with prior knowledge for it to take hold. In itself, that is true, but at the same time, we must realise that knowledge about God always comes to us from the other side, and will therefore come to us as new knowledge. The substance of instruction in the faith need not – often it cannot! – connect to one's own context and experience; the method of instruction, however, must make such connections. Links with prior knowledge and experience are essential. For example, the Biblical notion of 'covenant' can best be conveyed using the known concepts of 'agreement' and 'relationship'. It is not hard for children to understand that relationships will suffer if agreements are not kept. There are, however, core understandings of the faith – such as the doctrine of the Trinity – that cannot be drawn from their own experience. When that happens, it is the instructor's task to show the relevance of this truth as clearly as possible.

#### ***The form of instruction.***

Within catechesis, the HC can retain its place, but there is room for a different approach in doing so. The Catechism need not necessarily be covered in a linear sequence of 52 Lord's Days. One might consider subdividing the content into four themes per year, in such a manner that every year the central themes of faith, obedience and prayer receive due attention.

The language of the Catechism, also, is in need of revision. A re-translation for young people is desirable: it could make the content much more understandable. There is a real need to explain the Catechism's special terminology, and to rewrite its long and complex sentences.

A different question is whether memorization in its question-and-answer format is still suitable for our time. As such, the form still has value. And the suggestion that there is no value to memorising the truths of the faith is simply wrong. Knowledge that has been committed to memory fills and shapes the spirit of the person who learned it. Facts that have been learned become the lasting possession of the learner. They become the learner's spiritual baggage, as it were. That is why the memorisation of the HC is as relevant now as it ever was.

Of course, these learned understandings must be

applied by the Holy Spirit, so that by the grace of God the learner does believe and repent.

### Summary and Conclusion

When, in conclusion, we again ask: 'should the HC be retained or renewed?', it should be clear that both options raise their own questions and present their own problems.

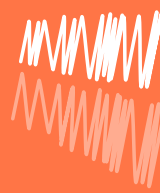
Personally, I lean towards the position of Reformed churches that wish to retain the HC of 1563 in its original form. However, this is not to say that newer catechisms cannot be any good, or that the HC is the only good catechism.

In my view, the spiritual level at which the HC expresses the truths of the Reformed faith is without parallel. I would have difficulty finding myself in attempts to modernise or add to the HC, the better to relate it to our time.

At the same time, it is important to develop a contemporary approach that properly addresses contemporary issues, alongside the questions and answers already found in the Catechism. For that, we will need instructors who are well trained, both theologically and didactically, and who are capable of giving sound spiritual guidance to young people. In this way, the gold that is to be found in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 can be passed on to coming generations. ■

### Notes

1. This is an abridged version of an article in the Dutch language entitled *Vernieuwen of behouden? De plaats van de Heidelbergse Catechismus in school en catechese to be published in the near future by Driestar Educatief. This translation by Aart Plug, May 2013.*
2. The 'New City Catechism' published in 2012 by Rev. Tim Keller of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New York, is available as a free app.
3. Translator's note: Within the Dutch context, there is a distinction between 'gereformeerde kerken' on the one hand, and 'reformatorische kerken' on the other. This distinction may be confusing to English speakers, as both terms translate as 'Reformed'. While both streams are confessionally grounded on the Three Forms of Unity, those who identify themselves as 'reformatorisch' tend to place a greater emphasis on 'experiential preaching', focus strongly on election as a marker of membership of the covenant, and generally tend to be more conservative in worship practice. The author of this article writes from this perspective, and describes the practice common in this stream.
4. In their constitutions, most Reformed schools in the Netherlands explicitly found the education they provide on the teaching of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity.
5. M. Golverdingen, 'De Catechismus in het kerkelijk onderwijs' in: 'Het troostboek van de kerk. Over de Heidelbergse Catechismus', ed. W. van 't Spijker. Houten, 2005
6. This booklet was first published in 1706. It is still available in several editions, published by De Banier in Utrecht.
7. J de Cock and W Verboom, *Altijd Leerling* Zoetermeer, 2011, 197.
8. T Pleizier in *Handboek Heidelbergse Catechismus* argues that the HC should be replaced by an entirely new catechism. Utrecht, 2013, 337
9. C. van der Kooi *Als in een spiegel, God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth*, Kampen 2002. This study highlights the influence of the Enlightenment on the way we read and learn from earlier works.



**Jesus said, “I am  
the light of the world.”** John 8:12