



Using the Heidelberg Catechism in Pastoring, Training, and Evangelism

The Catechism and Education of God's People

In his excellent high school (and adult) catechism textbook titled *Before the Face of God: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism*, Louis Praamsma summarizes well the reasons for the church to have and use creeds: (1) as a brief, concise summary of what the church believes; (2) as a refutation of all heresy; (3) as a teaching handbook for children and young people.

But is the Bible not sufficient? Certainly! The Bible has everything we need to know. The need for confessional writings can perhaps be best explained through an analogy. The Bible is much like a huge country through which we travel. It is so large, in fact, that it is useful to have a map that shows direction to the most important places.

Many faulty maps have also been made of the Bible. Each false teaching has its preaching. Confessional writings warn of these dangerous teachings. The Catechism, then, has no other purpose than to mirror the main points of Holy Scripture. These words provide a good understanding of how creeds have historically been viewed among many confessionally Reformed churches. Consequently, I don't expect that I need to convince you that the Catechism is useful for education and training, both for children and adults. Nor do I expect that readers of *The Outlook* will need much of a reminder of the value of thorough indoctrination in the Catechism as a crucial means of developing faith within our youth.

However, I want to make a couple of practical points in this section. First, I want to make the observation (based on rather subjective criteria, I'll acknowledge) that the most spiritually mature young people I've met are young people who know well and can formulate their faith according to the concepts and themes of the Heidelberg Catechism. Several college professors I know who teach at Christian colleges tell me the same. The freshmen who enter their Bible (or philosophy) courses who have been thoroughly trained in the Heidelberg Catechism are head-and-shoulders above the majority in both comprehension and integration of faith and life. (And contrary to popular belief, the professors and I agree that students who are well-versed in the Catechism are the rare exception, not the general rule.) These students already know the fundamental life principles of Scripture, because the Catechism is based upon them. They already know the underlying fundamentals of a Christian worldview, because the Catechism builds upon such in Lord's Day 12. These students grasp the spiritual principle that all of life is religion, in contradistinction to modern dualism, because the Heidelberg Catechism articulates a biblical faith that is as broad as life itself. In short, the Heidelberg Catechism is a wonderful and hearty confession of a Calvinistic worldview.

Second, a thorough knowledge of the Heidelberg Catechism provides students with a working apologetic. That is to say, it equips the students to articulate, explain, and defend the Reformed faith over against challenges, opposition, and questions. Where I live, the Reformed faith is always on the defensive against the aggressive challenges of anti-Calvinistic Arminian dispensationalism; and biblical Christianity of any confessional formulation (and especially Calvinism) is always on the defensive against the unbelieving challenges of modern post-Christian secularism. In all my years of ministry, the only Christians I've known who have been genuinely effective apologists for the Reformed faith are men and women who have been thoroughly shaped by the Heidelberg Catechism or a similar Reformed creed. And by that, I mean that they have been, on the one hand, articulate and persuasive in convincing non-Reformed Christians of the biblical basis of Calvinism,

and, on the other, they have been effective in explaining in a clear, concise, and unified way the biblical Christian faith to those outside of it.

Why is that? I suspect it is so because of the inner strength of the Catechism, namely, a simple reproduction of biblical basics. As you know, the Heidelberg Catechism is an extraordinarily simple document, linking explanations of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. These explain the content of saving faith, the shape of covenant living, and the focus of biblical piety, respectively. But the educational genius of the Catechism also lies in the introductory questions to these main sections. Lord's Days 1-6 are indispensable to lay open a person's heart prior to any discussion of real faith and what it believes. Lord's Days 32-33 are a penetrating articulation of the whole matter of the relation between faith and works and of the nature of true conversion, both essential prerequisites to any instruction in obedience to God's law. And Lord's Day 45, though pithy, is nonetheless pregnant with meaning as it explains piety from a distinctively covenantal perspective, opening the door to the Lord's Prayer as a living model and method for our praying, and not just as a memorization exercise. Any student who truly knows and deeply believes the foundations of the Christian faith contained in these three formulas will be unalterably shaped by them and will have sufficient ammunition with which to respond to the challenges and accusations of naysayers.

So, allow me to appeal to you to do two things: (1) Renew your commitment to teach the Heidelberg Catechism in your church. Recent trends in many denominations are much more generic, with topical or ethical studies called "church school." Some even argue that teaching catechism isn't a legitimate component in a Bible-based curriculum. In fact, the Catechism is an essential component of such a curriculum. Nothing can surpass the use of the Heidelberg Catechism as the principal teaching tool to shape the doctrinal knowledge and depth of mature and effective Reformed believers. Make sure your church uses it! (2) Challenge the Heidelberg Catechism teachers in your church, whether they are your pastor or the elders, to teach it with an intentional focus upon apologetics, upon equipping students to articulate and defend the faith. In and of itself that focus will help keep the teacher fresh, will keep the presentation dynamic and interesting, and will enliven student interest to the living relevance of the material.

The Heidelberg Catechism and Evangelism

The final component of this article is the use of the Heidelberg Catechism in evangelism. I reiterate that the Heidelberg Catechism is not the Bible, nor does it directly share in Scripture's character as the living Word of God, God-breathed in its very words. Only God's Word, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is said to create faith (Rom. 10:14-17); only God's Word, proclaimed faithfully, is called the "seed of regeneration" (1 Peter 1:23-25). Only God's Word is called the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17) and is described as "sharper than any double-edged sword" as a living and active power to lay bare the secrets of the heart (Heb. 4:12-14). Only God's living and faith-giving Word can be the foundation upon which evangelism (literally, the work of the gospel, or "gospelizing") is built; only it is the source and possesses the power to convert sinners.

And yet, the Heidelberg Catechism is not in any way inimical to this gospelizing work. In fact, it has been my own pastoral experience, and it is the theme of these paragraphs, that the Heidelberg Catechism is a most effective tool for evangelism. This is so for several reasons.

First, the Heidelberg Catechism serves as a checkpoint for the church in her evangelism efforts to reach the unsaved. That is, its threefold experiential structure (sin, salvation, service) stands as a constant reminder of the essential components of any genuine conversion and therefore holds the church focused on biblical priorities in an age of evangelistic gimmickry. Evangelism methods abound (such as Evangelism Explosion and Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws), and churches spend fortunes learning variations of each. Many of these are helpful, indeed. But the core teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism—that to enjoy truly the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, one must truly know his sin and its misery, that his salvation is only by grace through faith in Jesus, and that his life is to be lived in self-conscious response as covenant service to this great Lord and God—provides us with a consistent and biblical standard. Conversion experiences vary

greatly: some people are radically converted out of paganism, others experience the grace of the Holy Spirit as they grow up in a Christian home, still others are converted from non-Christian cults. Yet all who are genuinely in Christ share the triple knowledge of which the Catechism speaks. And that serves as both a teaching tool for inquirers (as well as new converts) and as a checkpoint for elders, who must ascertain the presence of genuine faith as they open the table of the Lord to true believers. And, not to be missed is the Catechism's insistence that genuine religion is of the heart, Calvin's marvelous biblical emphasis that will not allow for the mere construction of a religious formalism, but lays claim to all that a man or woman is, does, thinks, feels, and says. Indeed, keeping that point central in the Catechism forces elders to keep it central as they pastor people from the heart, to the heart, for the heart.

Second, the Heidelberg Catechism is a wonderful tool for training new disciples. As I suggested in the previous section, I believe its comprehensive doctrinal scope, as well as its apologetic usefulness, equips new disciples to know and defend their newly confessed faith. New disciples of Christ often face inordinate challenges from their former unbelieving life—including friends, relatives, and sometimes even immediate family members. Careful training in the Catechism equips them to answer these doctrinal challenges and, at the same time, bear careful witness to these beloved people to the faith in Christ that now lives within them. I have used it to train people one-on-one. A class in the Heidelberg Catechism for adults is a high priority of our local church ministry, which has an aggressive evangelistic setting and focus. It is simply a marvelous tool!

Furthermore, the Catechism confronts head-on the main idol enthroned in the heart of every human: the self (see LD 2, Q. 5; 3, Q. 8; 5, Q. 12-14). By so doing, it serves as an effective tool to penetrate and transform people who have been locked in the loop of their own unbelieving way of thinking (note the importance of this in Romans 12:1-2).

Finally, the Catechism provides thorough grounding in the biblical basis for the doctrines confessed. And, make no mistake about this, the citations of Scripture printed as footnotes to the Catechism are crucial for those being discipled. It establishes the fact that the clear basis of doctrine is Scripture rather than the church—this particular church, this particular minister, or anything else.

Third, the Catechism provides a careful articulation of the proper place and role of the law in the life of the Christian. So many people first hear the good news of Christ with ears accustomed to hearing the legalism of counterfeit Christianity. They've lived their entire lives hearing how they must become better in order to get right with God. They've agonized, as did Luther, over the curse of God upon their sins, and even come to hate the God they view as so horribly unfair. How remarkably fresh and liberating the true gospel must sound! And to be able to point them to a carefully worked out confession that is nearly a half-millennium old is of great comfort, because it assures them that they are not, in fact, wandering from the faith (even if they've been in a church), but are, in fact, just now tasting the joys of life in Christ, which true believers throughout all the centuries have celebrated!

Fourth, I must say a word about teaching and learning language and hermeneutics. Those of us who grew up in Christ learned the language of Zion in our homes. That is, we learned to speak of faith, of unbelief, of sin, salvation, the gospel, conversion, justification, sanctification, the law, the means of grace, Christian piety, and prayer. For those who did not grow up in such an environment, such language must be learned somewhere else. It is, frankly, difficult to learn a coordinated and unified theology from the straight reading of Scripture. It is also difficult to read Scripture without a theological vocabulary. Learning the language of God's Word from such a tool as the Catechism aids greatly in learning how to read the Bible. Again, learning how to approach the Bible as the Catechism approaches it and uses it aids greatly in teaching a method of reading and approaching the Bible, thus teaching a Reformed hermeneutic right from the start.

Finally, we must understand the critical role the Heidelberg Catechism plays in forming a consciousness of the church within the heart and mind of each disciple. Remember, the "church consciousness" of most North American people is thoroughly unbiblical. They view the church as optional, a human invention, a voluntary association. How spiritually invigorating it is to shape a

new disciple's faith with an understanding of the church as the living body of Jesus Christ, which He is gathering according to His Word and Spirit and equipping with His gifts to accomplish His mission on earth! The confessional material set forth in Lords Days 21 and 48, for example, develops a deep commitment to Christ in and with the local body of believers, and, at the same time, an abiding love for the church universal of which every true believer is a living member. And that's a fresh component of the transformed mind of all who are new in Christ.

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