

**An Overture to the 218th General Assembly
of
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
To Restore the Heidelberg Catechism to Its Historic Form**

In accordance with G-18.0200, the Pittsburgh Presbytery herewith overtures the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in San Jose, California to take appropriate steps toward the following amendment of The Book of Confessions, and to appoint a committee to fulfill the requirement of G-18.0200b.:

To restore The Heidelberg Catechism to an authentic and reliable English version of the historic document by replacing the 1962 translation, *The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563-1963. 400th Anniversary Edition. Copyright 1962. United Church Press*, with a translation that more faithfully renders the original text.

Rationale

The Heidelberg Catechism was formally adopted as a confessional document of the UPCUSA when the denomination adopted *The Book of Confessions* in 1967. The version of the Heidelberg Catechism approved at that time was a 1962 translation prepared for and published by United Church Press. However, according to the later recollections of Professor Edward Dowey of Princeton Theological Seminary, who chaired the committee of the General Assembly that drew together the confessions, thorough checking of this version was never undertaken and certain “illicit” changes made to the text of the Heidelberg in this translation went undetected.¹ A comparison of the text of the Heidelberg Catechism in the version included in The Book of Confession with the original German and the early Latin version reveals five passages in which the original text is not faithfully rendered and key theological meanings are obscured:

1. **4.019:** “...the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other *rites of the Old Covenant*, and finally fulfilled through his own wellbeloved Son” (emphasis added). The phrase “rites of the Old Covenant” is a loose translation which is not well supported by either the German or the Latin; “ceremonies of the law” is a traditional rendering which is well supported by the German (*ceremonien des gesetzes*) and the Latin (*ceremoniis legis*).² This flawed

¹ The Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith presented a report to the 1965 General Assembly of the UPCUSA to include the 1962 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in a Book of Confessions. Presumably the committee chose this translation because it was the most recent edition. Professor Dowey acknowledged (in a letter to Professors Christopher Elwood and Johanna Bos of Louisville Seminary, dated October 21, 1996) that both he and the committee as a whole were “guilty of negligence”: “there should have been thorough editorial work on all the documents” but, because of time pressures, the committee settled for some brief spot-checking of the translation.

² All references to the German and Latin texts come from *Catechismus oder Christliche Unterricht, wie der Kirchen und Schulen der Churfürstlichen Pfaltz getrieben wirdt* (Heidelberg: Johannes Mayer, 1563)

rendering is significant for three reasons. First, substituting “Old Covenant” for law obscures a traditional Reformed interest in biblical law *per se*. Second, it misleadingly suggests to readers and students that the catechism’s writers invoked here an explicitly covenantal image. Third, it suggests that the writers were working with a scheme of biblical interpretation that contrasted Old Covenant to New Covenant, a hermeneutic which is not very well represented in the Reformed theological tradition and not supported by the text of the catechism in its original form.

2. **4.033**: “Christ alone is God’s *own* eternal Son, whereas we are *accepted* by God for his sake as children of God by grace” was traditionally rendered “Christ alone is the eternal *natural* Son of God, but we are *adopted* to be children of God through grace for His sake” (emphasis added). The significance of this change is that it obscures the authors’ use of the image of adoption—an important theme in Reformed reflection on Christ, Christ’s work, and the justifying and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The translation “adopted” is very well supported by the original German (*angenommen*) and the Latin (*adoptati*).

3. **4.055**: “...believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, *shall share* in one fellowship” (emphasis added): The future tense is not indicated in the original text, which has the present tense. This translation differs from traditional versions which indicate that sharing or fellowship with Christ is a present reality.

4. **4.074**: “This was done in the *Old Covenant* by circumcision. In the *New Covenant* baptism has been instituted to take its place” (emphasis added). The original German supports “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” The Latin has *in Veteri foedere* and *in Novo foedere*, which could support “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant,” although the German has generally been preferred as the text from which translations are to be made. (The German text was the basis of the translation of 1962.) The difference between “covenant” and “testament” may seem subtle or insignificant to some readers. But in fact there was a significant difference in connotation through theological use in the sixteenth century. The Reformed tended to emphasize the singularity and antiquity of God’s covenant with God’s people; thus they tended not to emphasize a distinction between two *covenants*. On the other hand, they emphasized that a single covenant had somewhat different applications in two distinct *times* or epochs: the time of the law and the time of the gospel, or (to use an alternative designation) the time of the Old Testament and the time of the New Testament. The use of the word “Testament,” then, resonates with other Reformed allusions to a distinction in times, which is not the same thing as a distinction in covenants.

and the first Latin edition of 1563: *Catechesis religionis Christianae : quae traditur in ecclesiis et scholis Palatinatus*. These have been published together in a facsimile edition published by Theologischer Verlag of Zurich in 1983. The German original has been compared with the modern critical edition by Wilhelm Niesel in *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (Zurich, 1938).

5. **4.087**: two elements in the answer to question 87 are supplied by the translators and do not appear in the original text (nor in any translations produced prior to 1962). Neither the original German nor the Latin have texts corresponding to the following phrases:

“‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake:”

and

“or of homosexual perversion.”

The remaining items in the vice list supplied in the answer to question 87 have equivalents or rough equivalents in the original text (although some singular nouns have been rendered as plural nouns). This innovation was created by the translators’ decision to ignore a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism answer 87 and instead to replace it with the New English Bible translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. In 1997, one of the translators, Professor Eugene Osterhaven, disclosed that this replacement was entirely intentional. In light of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, “it would be well to be more specific [about sexual practice]... than [the author of the Heidelberg Catechism] had been in his day.”³ This “amendment” to a traditional Reformed document was the creation of two translators and was never deliberated upon by a body of the church before *The Book of Confessions* was adopted.⁴

Every ordained minister, elder and deacon is required to answer in the affirmative the following question: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do?” G-14.0207c, G-14.0405b(3). In so doing, church leaders trust that the translated versions of the historic confessions are, as far as humanly possible, authentic transmissions of the faith of our forbearers and reliable expositions of what they understood Scripture leading them to believe and do. That the 1962 translation of *The Heidelberg Catechism* has proven to be unreliable casts a shadow on all the translations in *The Book of Confessions*. Trust in all these historic documents can be restored by replacing that translation of *The Heidelberg Catechism* with a version that is more authentic and reliable. The 1988 translation in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (CRC Publications) is one such version.⁵

³ Professor Osterhaven’s letter to the editor of *Monday Morning*, dated November 25, 1996, which appeared in edited form in *Monday Morning*, vol. 62, no. 4.

⁴ Professor Dowey expressed in 1996 that he was “dumbfounded that I and such careful scholars as [Leonard J.] Trinterud, [George S.] Hendry, [James D.] Smart, et al. failed to discover the illicit change.”

⁵ Other reliable English translations may be found in the following texts: *The Heidelberg Catechism in German, Latin and English, with an Historical Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1863); *Reformed Standards of Unity*, ed. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Society for Reformed Publications, 1957); Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: James Clark, 1959).