

Discussion Guide

concerning

The Heidelberg Catechism

anticipating its 450th anniversary

1563–2013



by

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Introduction

On January 19, 2013, the Heidelberg Catechism will turn 450 years old. Back on Tuesday, January 19, 1563, Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, Germany, put the finishing touches on the Catechism by completing the preface. The final paragraph of his preface reads as follows:

We do herewith affectionately admonish and enjoin upon every one of you, that you do, for the honour of God and our subjects, and also for the sake of your own soul's profit and welfare, thankfully accept this proffered Catechism or course of instruction, and that you do diligently and faithfully represent and explain the same according to its true import, to the youth in our schools and churches, and also from the pulpit to the common people, that you teach, and act, and live in accordance with it, in the assured hope, that if our youth in early life are earnestly instructed and educated in the Word of God, it will please Almighty God also to grant reformation of public and private morals, and temporal and eternal welfare.

This preface mentions a number of things worth highlighting. First, from the start the Catechism was intended for use in the schools and churches. The family is not mentioned in this final paragraph, but it is mentioned earlier in the preface. The intersection of the Catechism with home, church and school receives further attention in the cluster of questions found in Section 1 of this booklet. Second, the Catechism was also written with the pulpit in view. The whole matter of Catechism preaching is explored in Section 2. Third, it is clear that the Elector had a special place in his heart for the youth of the church. As Frederick III indicates right at the end of the paragraph, the Catechism was written with the “temporal and eternal welfare” of future generations in mind. How will the youth today and generations yet unborn use the Catechism to help them understand the Word of God? That issue is dealt with in Section 4. That still leaves Section 3, “The Catechism & Evangelism, Mission and Church Planting Work.” Frederick III does not mention this explicitly in his preface, but the connection is easily made. If there is another group, beside the youth of the church, who need to be “earnestly instructed and educated in the Word of God,” then certainly it is new converts.

This guide, containing some thirty questions, can assist local congregations in celebrating the blessing of having the Catechism as part of our church life. It can also spur us on to consider how the Catechism can be used, to even greater benefit, for generations to come. Groups that may find this guide helpful include: catechism classes, Bible study groups, home or foreign mission committees, families and even councils. Each group may find certain sections, or even certain questions within sections, more relevant than other parts of the guide. Therefore, each group, or leader of the group, can freely choose the sections and questions that are most beneficial to them. This guide is simply a resource, not a strict curriculum which needs to be followed from A to Z.

The Lord willing, each of these topics will be discussed further, also with the help of experienced people, in workshops which will be part of the upcoming conference on the Heidelberg Catechism which is scheduled to coincide with the actual anniversary, Jan 18-19, 2013. More details about this conference, and possible satellite conferences in your area, can be found at:

http://www.canadianreformedseminary.ca/general/2013_conference.html.

May this guide, in some small way, serve to remind us and reaffirm for us the very special blessing that we have received in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Section 1: Catechism & Home, Church, and School

1. Does the Catechism play a role in your family's devotional life? If so, how? Also, how could the Catechism become a more regular and effective part of your family's devotions?
2. Does the Catechism play a role in your own personal devotional life? If so, how? Also, how could the Catechism become part of your personal devotional life?
3. If there is a Reformed day school in your area, do the teachers refer to the Catechism in some of their classes? If so, typically which classes? If not, why not? What resources might be available, or should be available, to make it easier for teachers to use the Catechism as one of the tools they use in their teaching?
4. Can you list three (or more) ways in which home, church and school could work together more efficiently and effectively in order to catechize the youth of the congregation?
5. Catechism classes are instructional times that in some ways are similar to classes taught in elementary or high school. At the same time, it is an opportunity for a pastor (or other catechism teacher) to connect with the youth in a more pastoral way. How do we best find the balance between instructional and pastoral in the catechism classroom? Are there ways to improve this in your local congregation?
6. Why is memory work still important in an age when so much information is only a few clicks (or swipes) away?
7. Profession of faith classes have a slightly different focus than the other catechism classes since members in that class are preparing to make a vow. What things should be included in the profession of faith class curriculum? Are there other aspects, or activities, which would be particularly helpful for profession of faith classes?
8. Some congregations have an annual profession of faith Sunday, usually in the springtime, while others encourage profession of faith vows to be made throughout the year, whenever someone is ready and has been examined by the consistory. What are the pros and cons of each approach? Spiritually? Practically and logistically?
9. Often when youth reach the age that they make a public profession of faith vow, they also stop their formal catechetical instruction. Some congregations have post-confession classes. If your congregation has post-confession classes, how are they going? How could they be improved? If your congregation does not have post-confession classes, is it possible? Desirable? Do post-confession classes have an adverse effect on attendance at Bible study groups or do they actually encourage attendance at such groups?

For from the beginning of the Christian church all the godly have been diligent to instruct their children in the fear of the Lord, at home, at school and in the church.

Preface to Heidelberg Catechism, 4th edition

Section 2: Catechism Preaching

1. It's been said that in the morning worship service the minister focuses more on *preaching*, and that in the afternoon he concentrates more on *teaching*. Is that a helpful distinction or a false dilemma? If it is a helpful distinction, how should that distinction become evident, in practical terms, in the worship services?
2. One question that always arises with Catechism preaching is this: "Is it preaching God's Word or man's word because the Catechism is not the inspired Word of God?" Discuss together how this question should best be answered. Also, what can a minister do to make it clear that his Catechism preaching is a proclamation of God's Word and not man's word?
3. Catechism is a kind of topical preaching. However, in Catechism preaching, the topics are already chosen by the Catechism for the preacher. What are the advantages of having the topics chosen by the Catechism? Moreover, you could also say: "In the end, the topics are not chosen by the Catechism, but by the church." Discuss that statement.
4. By dividing the Catechism into 52 Lord's Days it is obvious that the intention is to preach through the Catechism in one year. Due to vacations and pulpit exchanges that rarely works out. However, is there room for having a series of sermons on one particular Lord's Day, thereby lengthening the time it takes to work through the Catechism? What are the pros and cons of doing this? How much lengthening is too much lengthening?
5. Particularly if a minister is in a congregation for a longer period of time, he may vary his approach in Catechism preaching in an effort to keep it fresh and relevant. To what degree is this necessary? Try to list at least four different ways in which a minister could vary his approach to catechetical preaching.
6. Article 52 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches calls for preaching from the Catechism once per Sunday. Article 34 of the Proposed Joint Church Order, composed in conjunction with a URC committee says "the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word of God as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism... and may give such attention also to the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort." What are the advantages and disadvantages of preaching the Word of God as summarized in the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort? In particular, think about the differences in content among these confessions. For example, the Canons of Dort has more on the doctrine of election; however, neither the Belgic nor the Canons even comes close to the amount of attention the Catechism gives to the Ten Commandments and prayer.
7. Sometimes the complaint is heard that Catechism preaching is too doctrinal and not practical. Is that complaint valid? Is it a false dilemma? The Heidelberg Catechism is widely recognized as one of the most personal and pastoral catechisms ever written. Shouldn't it be natural that Catechism preaching is also personal and pastoral? If it isn't, why not?

The congregation, however, should not lose sight of the great themes, the underlying structure of the Bible. This prevents unintentional one-sidedness, and gives resistance against false teachings and the vanities of our own time. The faith of the congregation needs a backbone. This is provided by the Catechism.

Dr. N.H. Gootjes
Teaching and Preaching the Word (2010), 409.

Section 3: Catechism & Evangelism, Mission, Church Planting Work

1. Broadly speaking, do you think using the Catechism in evangelism or mission work is a positive thing which attracts and helps new Christians? Or is a negative thing which hinders or discourages new Christians?

not easily be understood by people from different backgrounds or nations? If so, please be specific and give examples. If there are cultural gaps, how could these be overcome?

2. In evangelism, mission and church planting work is it wisest to start directly with the Bible and introduce a catechism later? Or is it better to use both right away? In other words, how should the relationship of Scripture and confession work out on the mission field?

After working with a group in our new members' class for about eighteen months and using various curricula, we began with LD 1 of the Catechism. After several weeks of study one of the regular students exclaimed, "So that's what it's all about!"

3. Is the Catechism too difficult for those with little or no knowledge of the Christian faith? If so, give specific reasons. If not, also give specific reasons.

Rev. J.L. Van Popta during a recent discussion

4. Scan through the Catechism, or at least LD 1-31, and try to pick out words or phrases that: a) someone new to the faith might not understand and b) is not explained by the Catechism. Please note that both a) *and* b) must apply to each word or phrase you choose. For example, "providence" might be an unfamiliar word to those who are new to the faith, but in LD 10 the Catechism explains what this term means. So, you wouldn't include "providence" in this list. At the end, were surprised by how many words you have on your list? Or surprised by how few?
5. Do you think there is need for a simplified Catechism in the context of mission work and church planting? (Also see question 4.4 regarding the Compendium)
6. The Catechism was written in the 16th century in Germany. Are there cultural elements in the Catechism which would

7. The first question of the Catechism has the power to grab almost anyone's attention. Who wouldn't want to know about a comfort that lasts throughout life and even in death? However, the concern has been raised that this opening question might focus people too much on their own comfort and not enough on God's glory. What do you think about this concern? Does connecting Q. 1 with A. 1 make a difference?

Section 4: Catechism & The Next Generations

1. The Heidelberg Catechism has been used by Reformed churches for 450 years—almost one half of a millennium. In an age in which computers and software become obsolete within a matter of a few years, it is not surprising that some people think it's time for a new catechism. Yet why does the Heidelberg Catechism outlast computer software. Is it just a matter of tradition, or is there more involved? If so, what is that "more"?
 2. List *three* reasons why people sometimes become negative about the Catechism and its use within the life of the churches. Then provide solid, yet compassionate, responses to each of the three reasons.
 3. Since we live together as members of one body, we should help and encourage each other, also to remain thankful for and enthusiastic about the Catechism. In what practical ways can the following groups help each other?
 - a. Parents helping their children and children helping their parents;
 - b. Grandparents helping their grandchildren;
 - c. Ministers helping the youth of the congregation;
 - d. Teachers helping their students;
 - e. Youth helping fellow youth;
 - f. Youth helping older members.
 4. Already for centuries an abridgement of the Heidelberg Catechism has been available. In English it's called the Compendium (in Dutch it's called the Kort Begrip). Do you think there is a future for the Compendium? How could it be used effectively? How could it be used in such a way that it does not supplant the full Catechism?
 5. Are there ways in which modern technology could improve our knowledge of, appreciation for, and use of the Catechism? If so, list a few concrete examples.
 6. Our churches have a rich history with using the Catechism and we have Catechism resources at our disposal (sermons, articles, teaching guides, commentaries, etc). Are there ways in which we can share the heritage we have with other more effectively and more widely?
- I'll never forget sitting in my Christian education class at my evangelical, non-Dutch, nondenominational seminary. One of our assigned texts was the Heidelberg Catechism.... My fellow students at seminary marveled at this piece of work. "Where has this been all our lives?" "This will be perfect for Sunday school!" "I'm going to use this for new members' classes!" Most of the Dutch Reformed kids I knew were ready to see the Heidelberg Catechism go the way of the dodo bird. But at seminary my classmates were seeing something many of my peers had missed. The Heidelberg Catechism is really, really good.*
- Kevin DeYoung
The Good News We Almost Forgot (2010), 15.