

# The Heidelberg Catechism at the Synod of Dordt (1618-19)

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**Introduction:** Heidelberg Catechism in the early Dutch Reformed churches.

1563: 2 Dutch translations for Dutch exile churches (same year Catechism was written)

1566: first used in Netherlands; 1<sup>st</sup> Dutch edition published in Netherlands

By 1585: 61 Dutch editions of Catechism

## Six Ways the Heidelberg Catechism was discussed at Dordt:

### 1. Policy for Catechism Services:

- Decision*: -Reaffirmed Church Order art. of national Synod of The Hague: “Pastors in all places shall ordinarily in the afternoon service briefly explain the summary of doctrine contained in the Catechism presently adopted in the Dutch churches, in order that it can be completed in this way every year by following the divisions introduced in the Catechism for that purpose.”
- All pastors always to preach catechism sermons on Sunday afternoons, even if only to their own families.
- Ask government to prohibit all everyday labor and violations of the Sabbath.
- Avoid pastoring 2 churches; otherwise alternate catechism services every other Sunday.
- Church visitors to check that pastors are faithful.
- Reformed people refusing to attend catechism services are worthy of ecclesiastical censure.

### 2. Policy for Catechetical Instruction:

- Decision*: (1) For *Youth*: threefold manner of catechizing:
  - (a) In Home by parents:
    - Instruct children in basics, engage in family prayers, take children to services, review catechism sermons, assign Bible passages to memorize.
  - (b) In School by teachers:
    - State should establish schools everywhere, and pay adequate salaries.
    - Teachers to be Reformed, trained in catechism instruction, subscribe to Confession and Catechism, teach students 2 days a week to memorize and understand Catechism, take students to Sunday catechism services.
    - Use 3 forms of catechism: simple for young children, compendium for more advanced, Heidelberg Catechism for older youth.
    - Ministers to visit schools; if teachers negligent, magistrates to replace them.
  - (c) In Church by ministers, elders, sermon readers or sick visitors:
    - Ministers to preach brief catechism sermons at level of youth; review sermons
- (2) For *Adults*:
  - Have weekly class to discuss main points of Christian religion and review catechism sermons.
  - Separate pre-confession catechism class for 3-4 weeks before Lord’s Supper.

### **3. Remonstrant Observations on the Catechism:**

- General Observations on the Catechism
- Particular Observations on specific Questions
  - on 74 of the 129 Qs

### **4. Palatinate Delegation's Response to the Remonstrant Observations:**

- Response to General Observations
- Response to Particular Observations

### **5. Examination and Approval of the Catechism:**

- Palatinate theologians give short history of the Catechism.
- Decision*: "It was declared, unanimously by all the foreign as well as Dutch theologians that the doctrine contained in the Palatine Catechism wholly agrees with the Word of God, and it does not contain anything inconsistent with it, which needs to be changed or corrected."
  - "This Catechism is a completely accurate compendium of orthodox Christian doctrine, adapted with singular wisdom not only to the level of tender youth, but also for the proper instruction of adults; and therefore this Catechism can be taught with great edification in the Dutch churches, and by all means ought to be retained."

### **6. Approval of Forms of Subscription:**

- Decision*: "It was decided that a carefully prepared form of subscription shall be drawn up, by which ministers of the church shall subscribe to the Confession, the Catechism, and the synodical Explanation concerning the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, so that they may clearly bear witness to their orthodox views and to prevent the wrongful evasions of some about subscription."
- Form of Subscription for ministers*: "all the articles and points of doctrine contained in this Confession and Catechism of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, together with the Explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine [the Canons] made by the national Synod of Dordrecht, 1619, do fully agree with the Word of God;"
  - Promise to diligently teach this doctrine and oppose all errors.
  - If objections to this doctrine, promise not to teach them, but reveal these to church authorities, and be willing to give a further explanation, under penalty of suspension.

### **Conclusion:**

Synod of Dordt officially confirmed and strengthened the authority of the Heidelberg Catechism in its two primary roles within the Dutch Reformed churches—(1) as a confessional standard to ensure orthodox Reformed teaching in the churches, by use of forms of subscription; and (2) as the principal pedagogical tool to provide instruction in the fundamentals of the Reformed faith, by standardizing existing practices—catechetical instruction in the home, school and church; Sunday afternoon catechism services; and pre-confession catechism classes.