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## The Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism

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Edited by  
Arnold Huijgen

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T. Theo J. Pleizier

## Heidelberg as Best Practice Catechism

### A Practical-Theological Exploration of Constructing Catechisms in a Post-Christian and De-churched Context

Catechisms present the essentials of the Christian faith. They do this in a specific manner: as a didactic instrument for religious instruction. For centuries the Heidelberg Catechism has served as catechetical text, although its confessional status gradually took over its didactic function. In contemporary pedagogics, there is considerable doubt concerning its viability as catechetical text for contemporary religious education (Schoberth: 2012; Dressler: 2013). This is strengthened by the fact that catechetical methods that indeed include the HC in their curriculum primarily use the HC as a confessional standard. These catechetical materials also demonstrate a didactic insecurity to use the HC as a means for religious instruction (Pleizier: 2013). Obviously, this is not a problem of the HC itself. Its *textuality* and *historicity*, however, raises various objections against the use of catechisms in the contemporary religious context as we will see.

On the other hand, the popularity of catechetical missionary courses such as the Alpha Course, but also the theological apologetics for catechesis (Parrett/Kang: 2009; Packer/Parrett: 2010) or new pedagogical agenda's for catechetical practices (De Kock: 2013), leaves the impression that the premodern phenomenon of a catechetical text did not die a modern or postmodern death. Further, in recent years a variety of authors presented new instances of the genre of 'catechism'.<sup>1</sup> This fits a broader observation, namely that several theologians both in academical and in church positions, have offered fresh introductions in the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Though these introductory books do not properly count as catechisms, they at least indicate that a new interest in the basics of Christianity has arisen. While the cultural, social and religious explanations may yet have to come forward, the phenomenon itself is noteworthy. Added to that, the 450th anniversary of the HC also called forth several publications that demonstrate the actuality of the HC for contemporary Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is located between the postmodern reluctance concerning fixed

1 "New City Catechism," last visited July 16, 2013, <http://www.newcitycatechism.com/>; Strengtholt: 2013, Van der Deijl: 2010, Wentsel: 2012.

2 I only mention Wright: 2006 and Williams: 2007. This British connection has its continental counterparts. Both in translations of these English works, but also in similar products in The Netherlands, such as Veldhuis, 2005.

3 Among many others: Plasger: 2012, Verboom/Vergunst: 2013.

catechetical texts on the one hand and the factual reassessment of catechetical practices in contemporary Christianity on the other hand. The first part explores the phenomenon of a catechism as a literary genre. The second part explores a few objections against the use of catechisms and presents some methodical aspects of writing new catechisms. The hinge that integrates both parts is the idea that the Heidelberg Catechism exemplifies a 'best practice' catechism.

### 1. Catechisms as Literary Genre: Christian Spirituality Taught

A wide diversity of religious texts has shaped the self-understanding of Christianity, its spirituality and its theology. The various strands and traditions in Christianity have their own formative literature, yet some books stand out as 'classics'. They have found their way across the traditions in mutual enrichment and a catholic recognition of speaking the same faith. The list obviously Western texts like Augustine's *Confessiones*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Thomas a Kempis' *De imitatione Christi*. These texts did not survive in Western Christianity only, but travelled around the globe and continued to be read through the centuries. No doubt, the *Heidelberg Catechism* takes its place in this series of Christian classics,<sup>4</sup> albeit not as theological auto-biography, nor as apocalyptic allegory or Christian fantasy. It represents a specific genre of Christian texts:<sup>5</sup> the genre of catechism.

As a literary genre, a catechism has spiritual, didactic-rhetorical, and confessional features. First, a catechism is a *spiritual* text. It is an instrument in spiritual methodology:<sup>6</sup> it moves the human mind towards understanding who God is, how salvation works and how the world runs; it guides into methods of how to interact with God and provides a pattern for living a religious life. It can be studied, memorised, meditated upon, and used to deepen the commitment to Christian faith. The question-and-answer form creates involvement. Spiritual here means that a catechism aims to involve the mind of the believer to deepen the knowledge of faith. Its textual aim is to involve the readers religiously. This goes beyond representing a mere list of 'frequently-asked-questions' or informational guide. A catechism is a form of spiritual formation through presenting the believer religious concepts, such as the inhabitation of the Spirit, forgiveness, creation, church, or being in Christ;

it explains these concepts and helps the believer to become more religiously competent. The spiritual aspect does not coincide with one particular piety. Contemporary catechisms have a different tone and atmosphere, yet their essence is still to communicate and shape Christian spirituality, whether in the form of a prayer (B. Wentsel's *Brief Protestant Catechism*) or in a witty, apologetic style (Strengolt's *Small Catechism for Freethinkers*). In the case of the HC, it breathes Reformed spirituality.

Secondly, a catechism has specific *didactic-rhetorical* features. Most notably, of course, is its question-and-answer structure. The questions and answers frame the user of the catechism into a particular role. This is quite obvious in for instance Calvin's *Catechism of Geneva* in which questions are posed by the 'minister' and answers are provided by the 'pupil'. This role-taking in questioning and answering shapes the didactics of the catechism. Quite different is Strengolt's approach in his apologetic *Small Catechism for Freethinkers* in which he answers atheist's objections against the Christian faith and presents it in a catechetical style. The questions are fierce, sharp, sometimes even blunt and offensive. The answers are witty, sharp, and sometimes as offensive as the questions are. Between the questions and answers a rhetorical fight is going on, a debate as part of a didactic situation.

When questions and answers are the micro-level of the didactic-rhetorical structure, the macro-level of a classic catechism is about the way it structures the canon of Christian teaching. Sometimes Catechisms are structured according to the Creed. At other times, Catechisms present a full-blown presentation of the fore core elements of Christianity: the Creed (the doctrinal aspect of faith), the Decalogue (the ethical aspect), the Lord's Prayer (the devotional aspect), and the words of institution concerning the sacraments (the ritual or worship aspect). The HC is a clear example of having these four core elements as its secondary textual structure.<sup>7</sup> The student in Christianity is taught how to trust the gospel (HC 7) and the Creed follows accordingly; she has to learn how to acquire faith and salvation by participating in the sacraments as signs of God's grace (HC 25) and the Sacraments are presented. A Christian has to behave in a certain way, to show a desire of living a good life, a life of 'conversion', turning away from the old self and being renewed into a new being (HC 33), so the Decalogue follows as exposition of those works that are 'good' according to God. Finally, living in a close relationship with the heavenly Father, a Christian exercises prayer. The Lord's Prayer, the fourth catechetical kernel, closes the catechism's didactics of Christian faith. A similar pattern is visible in other sixteenth century protestant catechisms. Each putting the four central elements of the Christian faith in different orders, fitting to the overall, primary didactic structure.<sup>8</sup>

4 The reception of the HC is documented in chapters 9–11 in Huijgen: 2013.

5 In theology the analysis of literary genres emerged in biblical exegesis. The idea of 'genre' has become influential, yet not uncontested, through Form criticism, practiced by German exegetes such as Hermann Gunkel and specifically applied to the Psalter. Cf. Barton: 1996, 30–44. Genres are classifications of literary works, see "Genre" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 2005), 252.

6 For the idea of 'spiritual methodology', see Josuttis: 2002.

7 The primary structure consists of the three parts: misery, deliverance and gratitude. The four catechetical kernels are arranged within this larger pattern.

8 For Calvin this primary structure is given in question 7 of the *Genevan Catechism that inquires*

The next two features point to a twofold connection between spirituality and didactics: (1) the spirituality taught in a catechism is closely connected to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament; (2) a catechism is not a free floating interpretative exercise and embodiment of highly individualised spirituality, but it connects the believer to the wider church. In other words, a catechism has also *hermeneutical* and *confessional* features.

As a form *hermeneutics*, a catechism aims to provide a framework for understanding the canonical text of the Scriptures. Christian doctrine and practice is presented as summary of the Bible implicating that there is a narrative plot or substance that unites the diversity of voices in the Scriptures. So, essentially a catechism offers a hermeneutical model to read and interpret the Scriptures. This hermeneutical function of a catechism becomes apparent in three ways: through explicit quotations of biblical texts; by means of implicit allusions to biblical passages or ideas; or in suggesting interpretative rules. In the HC all three of these hermeneutical devices are present: HC 2 inquires into the 'law of God', and answers: 'this is taught by Christ' followed by an explicit quotation from Matthew 22. In this Q&A the third device is also apparent: the fact that the Catechism explains the law as 'the law of Christ' functions as an interpretative rule to understand the relationship between law and gospel.

Finally, a catechism unites believers. It has a *confessional* function. Generally speaking, a didactical text turns knowledge into a common good. Textbooks disperse knowledge in a wider scale and creates shared knowledge among a body of learners. This makes education an important instrument for creating and maintaining a society that consists of free subjects that nonetheless belong together because they share certain values and have access to a body of knowledge. A religious text that is primarily meant for educational purposes and not just for personal devotion, has a similar inherent capability to create a religious community. The text does not only helps new individuals become part of the community of faith through communicating its values, practices, and doctrine, the text also expresses the shared beliefs and practices of the church. Confessions express the common faith of the church.

Due to their educational purposes, catechisms are bearers of the confession. They are confessional literature, in the sense that they enable the church to pass on its faith. For the HC this is true in a particular sense due to its historical circumstances. While it was written as a statement of faith as well as an educational instrument, it acquired an official status as confessional standard in many—mostly—Reformed churches in Europe and beyond. For the HC it meant that its didactic and confessional *functions*, became inseparable from

its confessional *status* that it acquired already a few decades after its publication in January 1563. It must be noted here that the confessional *function* of the text must be distinguished from its confessional *status*. The former being an inherent function of religious texts that aim to disperse the knowledge of faith among a body of believers; the latter refers to its ecclesial authority as a 'founding document'. The social-religious fact that a catechism does unite believers, not always results in the institutional fact that a catechism is accepted as confessional standard for a particular denomination. During the period of the Reformation hundreds of catechisms did not make it into the Church Orders of the various Reformed churches that emerged in Europe during the sixteenth century. The HC—and a few other catechisms, such as the Genevan Catechism and the Westminster Catechisms—did play a part in the subsequent period that is indicated as the era of 'confessionalisation' of Protestant Orthodoxy by becoming institutionalised in Church Orders.

These four features—the confessional, the didactic-rhetorical, the spiritual and the hermeneutical—indicate the textual *functions* of a catechism. In his work on the classification of types of discourse, Matthias Dimter (1985) distinguishes between three other categories: text content, text form, and the communication situation of the text. Hence, a catechism is also characterised by a certain textual *content*. This has been discussed above when the four catechetical kernels—Creed, Decalogue, Lord's Prayer and Sacraments—were discussed as part of the didactic feature. The text *form* has also been touched upon, when the issue of questions and answers came up as specific textual form that shapes a catechism. The final category Dimter mentions is the '*communication situation*' of a text. Texts determine and shape a communicative situation. The communicative situations shaped by catechisms are religious educational practices.

Faith is lived in the everyday practices of believers (Immink: 2005). These practices entail actions, words, symbols, rituals, texts, roles and various other elements. The practice of preaching, for instance, entails the meeting of a speaker and a religious community, in an oral situation in which a sermon is performed. Religious practices are intentionally directed towards contact and interaction with God, yet they remain human activities and consist of a certain, socially constructed, patterned behavior. Catechetics in church communities embodies a religious practice: in an educational environment (De Kock, 2013), religious interactions take place. Religious discourse, the personality of the teacher, the relationship between teacher and class, the material and sources used, constitute a specific arrangement of interactions that is not only 'about' religion but is in itself practicing religion. Catechisms are texts that represent the reflective dimension of this practice of learning in the Christian tradition. Kathryn Tanner's (2001) notion of 'explicit theological reflection' is relevant here. Reflection 'fills' practices with a historical, contextual, and theological richness that would be lost otherwise. Certain practices in Christianity are designed and acted-out in order to pass on this

after the 'method' of honoring God. As a secondary structure, Calvin sums up four elements or practices: to put our trust in God (the Creed), serve and obey God (the Decalogue), to call upon God in our needs (the Lord's Prayer) and to seek salvation in God (the Sacraments).

richness in a more reflective way. Catechisms represent examples of practices that are saturated with 'explicit theological reflection' in the way Tanner describes.

In his influential discussion of practices, the ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, 190–196; McCabe: 2005, 19–26) states that every practice has excellent standards. In order to learn to skate or to practice skating, one has to look for great examples in which the practice of skating has been exemplified in a unique way as a standard for all other skaters. In a similar way, the catechism from Heidelberg can be assessed as a paradigm, an exemplary example or excellent standard of the literary genre of catechisms. When catechisms are texts that embody spirituality and aim for religious teaching, the HC has proven itself to be an 'excellent standard'.

## 2. Constructing New Catechisms?

According to Bernard Dressler (2013, 206), "we can hardly imagine how in contemporary educational processes the HC will still be the structuring and guiding text." He concludes that catechetical instruction by means of catechisms is a phenomenon that no longer suits modern educational insights. New pedagogical insights stress experiential modes of learning, a variety of learning-styles, and incorporate a different understanding of the dissemination of knowledge. A. de Kock distinguishes between three paradigms of learning in a catechetical situation: a behavioural, developmental and apprenticeship paradigm. At first sight, a catechism as expert 'text' fits the behavioural paradigm of learning, while the developmental paradigm centres around the student as meaning-making subject and the apprenticeship paradigm stresses the relationship between the teacher and the student (Cf. De Kock: 2013). But their eventual use in catechetical environments, however, must be reflected upon methodically. Why can they not be used for students in their own process of meaning-making?

Next, the use of catechisms is also *culturally* rather spurious. As a religious text, a catechism suggests authority and normativity. This is especially felt, when a catechism—such as the HC—is part of the confessional standards of a denominational church. In a post-Christian culture this ecclesial authority is at least doubtful. A catechism stands for a Christian monoculture and assumes an institutional view of the church, both very much at odds with a culture in which knowledge is socially constructed, truth is democratic, institutions are spurious systems of power, and Christianity is a religious option among many others. Multiple systems of meaning co-exist and a text with peculiar proposition-like statements hardly fits in a pluralist society. Also from the inside, a catechism does not fit the way how many Christians think about their faith. Spirituality has become much more de-churched. In these de-

institutionalised forms of Christianity a catechism appears as a relic from sixteenth century Western-European Christendom and is simply culturally outdated as a means for Christian learning.

Thirdly, is faith something that you can be instructed in? Is it a form of knowledge such as driving a car or doing mathematics? Can faith be taught? The *un-teachability* of faith (Schweitzer) is a pneumatological precaution that Reformed theology is ready to make against the suggestion as if faith is like math which can be taught with the right mix of educational competency of the teacher and intellectual capacity or will-power on the part of the student. In its famous HC 21, the Heidelberg Catechism states that it is the Spirit of God who makes the human mind trust in God's promises of forgiveness and eternal life. Faith is a gift from God. Yet faith is also an act of the human mind. There cannot be trust in God's promises without human cognition. The other half of Heidelberg's definition of faith entails the learnability of faith. It thus seems that faith is simultaneously unteachable and learnable (cf. also Schweitzer: 2006, 26; Schoberth: 2012, 188). One way to deal with this dialectic is another classic idea in Reformed theology: the Spirit of God and the spirit of man interact in the creation and maintenance of faith. The Pelagian controversy over free will lies right around the corner: faith remains a gift, not a human product. Yet with the Heidelberg Catechism we have to retain the intimate connection between the Divine Spirit, the presentation of the gospel and human understanding. Faith is shaped through cognitive practices, and a catechism is one means among others. In the end, as a gift of the Spirit, faith is a phenomenon that is thoroughly anthropologically grounded. Practices, such as preaching and catechetics, are means to engage the human mind through which faith is shaped and survives.

Finally, though one does not have to agree with Dressler's dismissal of catechisms as texts in religious-pedagogical situations (Dressler: 2013, 218), there is one problem in particular that is barely touched upon in many studies that were published on account of the HC's 450 years. Various books and articles attempt to revive the 'actual message' of the HC or stress its continuing significance. Despite the worldwide confessional acceptance of the HC, there is a hermeneutical problem with the text that especially emerges in contexts of learning: it's a sixteenth century text. Not its *textuality*, yet its *historicity* poses a specific problem in educational environments. The books and articles that stress the vitality of the HC present hermeneutical solutions and offer interpretations of the HC in order to show its actuality. By implication, its actuality has to be demonstrated. Yet this is rather problematic for a textbook. Implicated in its 450-year anniversary is its historicity and the historical distance that has to be dealt with accordingly. The HC addresses sixteenth-century theological issues, for instance its approach to the sacraments; it frames religion in the everyday life of its ages, such as the use of 'comfort' in a society that is burdened by religious wars, persecution and with medical insecurities, including a high rate of child-deaths; and it presents the narrative

of salvation in terms of the biblical-theological categories of the time. These aspects are not at all problematic for a conscious appropriation of the confessional history of the church. Yet for a text to function as bearer of Christian faith for new Christians and to articulate the substance of Christianity in new contexts, it poses a particular hermeneutical challenge. A text that is meant to provide a framework for interpretation has become the object of interpretation. Commentaries and reflections on the HC aiming to demonstrate its actuality, silently confirm the fact that the text itself is not a text that originates from our world. Its actuality emerges serendipitously when the contemporary world meets the sixteenth century text or it is consciously stipulated by means of interpretation and extrapolation.

In order to overcome this hermeneutical problem without completely discarding the phenomenon 'catechisms' in Christian teaching and practice, another route may be worth pursuing: constructing new catechisms. From the previous reflections, this direction should not be dismissed too quickly. Why not produce contemporary texts that aim to function as some kind of spiritual didactics, presenting a hermeneutical framework of understanding the Scriptural narrative and providing a confessional context for believers to feel connected to the worldwide church and to learn to speak the language of faith? Why not methodically turn to the HC as 'best practice' catechism or 'excellent standard'?

When constructing new catechisms, four specific characteristics of the HC must be taken into account: (1) its religious intentionality; (2) its theological structure; (3) the relationship between the theological structure and the four key-texts of Christianity or kernels of faith; and (4) the choice for and definition of theological issues that were relevant for the Reformed movement in the 16th Century.

The first famous question and answer of the HC illustrates the importance of the *religious intentionality* of a catechism. Though the notion of 'comfort' reoccurs only occasionally in the HC, the first question and answer gives a definite direction to the catechism as a whole. The catechism puts the questions of life and death, salvation and Christ's Person and work in the framework of comfort. Comfort in a world of sadness, of wars and of persecution. Thus the intentionality of the HC is deeply embedded into the world in which it is written. Though not an exclusive biblical notion, comfort resounds with many Scriptural passages. So, a need of the day is taken, brought into contact with the Scriptures and the rich Christian tradition, and directs the whole text accordingly. In constructing new catechisms we can learn from this approach. In the context of the 21st Century Western Europe, a notion like 'happiness' refers to a need that is addressed in magazines, movies, philosophical analyses, and countless advertorials. We 'should' be happy, though we do not know how or what it is supposed to be. Happiness also connects to the biblical language such as the various beatitudes in the Old and New Testament, it refers to a state in which human beings enjoy fulfillment and

have gone beyond a broken world and a state of frustration. Happiness is a rich concept that may help to address shame and guilt as well as God's original intent with this world and its final restoration. Hence, a religious intentionality provides a catechism with a coherent direction, in which contemporary (spiritual) needs are transported into the biblical world and transformed accordingly.

Next, the HC has an elegant, easy to grasp, *theological structure*. From 'comfort' it moves to the question what should be known in order to live and die faithfully. This question gives way to a practical-epistemological theological structure in which three aspects of 'self-knowledge' of the believer are expounded: I should know my misery, I should know I will be delivered from my misery, and I should know how to demonstrate gratitude towards God for my deliverance. Misery, deliverance, and gratitude are not just theological concepts, they are exercises in self-knowledge, in knowledge of salvation, and in practical knowledge of being a grateful human being. This theological structure is easy to memorise, and it has changed the Reformed self-understanding for centuries. A catechism needs a theological structure in which for instance is explained how a Christian finds happiness. Finding happiness may consist for instance in trusting God and following Christ.

Thirdly, the *four kernels* (Creed, Decalogue, Prayer and Sacraments) have to fit this structure accordingly. The HC connects the knowledge of deliverance with the Creed and the Sacraments, while living a life of gratitude is expressed in the Decalogue and in Prayer. This demonstrates a clear connection between the theological structure and the four central texts. Therefore, the placement of these kernels needs careful reflection. For instance, if finding happiness consists of trusting God's character and following Christ (or: discipleship), then the four kernels can be distributed along these two acts of faith: the Creed and the Sacraments explain how trust works; Prayer and the Commandments explain discipleship.

Finally, the HC addresses the *theological issues of the day*. Its definitions and theological interests are derived from the context of the Reformed church that expresses its foundational teachings in the light of the controversies with Rome. Though not a polemical document, its theological context is visible in the way the Sacraments are dealt with as signs of God's promise; how justification and sanctification are defined christologically; and how 'good works' are part of the teaching, but placed in the third part on gratitude. The way HC introduces its burning theological issues and how it defines its theological concepts is illuminating. One does not need to introduce evolutionbiology in a question on God the Creator. The answer to the question, however, will no doubt resound a worldview in which nihilism and naturalism are dominant. Similarly, in explaining the Decalogue, modern medical ethics or the omnipresence of the media do not have to be included on the level of questions. They do form the background against which discipleship is illustrated.



### 3. Conclusion

A catechism teaches spirituality, in a methodical way with a contextual awareness and an eye to the worldwide church. The HC is widely accepted as a best practice catechism. Yet in a post-Christian culture, new issues need to be addressed and different theological definitions may be provided. An individualised spirituality, though, still requires a common articulation of Christianity on the side. The resurgence of introductions in Christian faith indicate a need for a newly formulated basic Christianity and new catechisms fit into this broader trend in constructing religious texts.

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