

## Restoring the Heidelberg Catechism for the Church

We write as faculty members of Presbyterian seminaries who teach theology and church history to express our support for overtures asking the General Assembly to provide for a better translation of the Heidelberg Catechism.

According to the PC(USA) Book of Order, “those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church” (G-6.0106b).

As theologians and church historians we feel a particular responsibility to make sure that the translations of our confessional documents accurately represent the Reformed heritage that office holders pledge to uphold. We see this responsibility as in keeping with the mandate given to the Peace, Unity, and Purity taskforce: “to deepen our understanding of our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological and constitutional heritage” (PUP Report, lines 269-70). Though we have different perspectives on several of the issues that divide Presbyterians today, we are united in the desire to clarify the teachings of our confessional standards.

We are grateful to all who have come before us, preparing translations of historic texts for the edification of Christians and the upbuilding of the church. Yet because of key errors in translation, the version of the Heidelberg Catechism currently in the Book of Confessions presents at several points obstacles to contemporary readers who want to gain a clear understanding of the historic Reformed theological witness.

Specifically, it distorts Reformed accounts of God’s covenant (4.019, 4.074) and of redemption and eschatology (4.055) and obscures the Reformed teaching of our adoption in Christ (4.033). Moreover, it misleads the reader by suggesting that this historic text took a clear stand on issues of sexual orientation and practice that are lively issues before us in the church today—when in fact these were not subjects of discussion in the sixteenth-century church (4.087).

Professor Edward Dowey, as chair of the Special Committee that oversaw the production of the Book of Confessions, has acknowledged that he and the committee as a whole failed to notice these errors, and are in this respect “guilty of negligence.”

Now is the time to set things right. An accurate translation of our confessional standards is critical for a church that requires its office holders be guided by them. Moreover, accurate translations of the Heidelberg Catechism are not in short supply. Several alternative translations are readily available, including contemporary translations that reliably render the original text in lively, contemporary English.

We therefore ask the church and its representatives to make use of the best tools available to us—the best and most faithful translations—to assist our students, and the church at large, as we seek seriously and honestly to engage the Reformed witness of the past for the sake of the church today.

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