

## A Tradition Rooted in History

As Presbyterians, we pride ourselves on our Reformed theology and our history. The Book of Confessions, the first half of our Church constitution, was created to preserve the wisdom of our ancestors. It includes the historic creeds and documents that have shaped the faith of discerning Christians as they sought to understand the Bible in their times, and it guides us as we seek to understand Scripture in ours. As our Book of Order reminds us, “We are led by Scripture, informed by the confessions.”

But to be truly faithful to our history, we must fix the inaccuracies in the Heidelberg Catechism in our current Book of Confessions. Only in this way do we fully honor the wisdom of our forbearers embedded in the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Heidelberg Catechism was written in 1563 to promote unity between Lutheran and Reformed Christians in Germany whose disagreements over church doctrine threatened violent disruption. Yet the translation used in our Book of Confessions is inaccurate and divisive — the opposite of the spirit in which it was written.

## Seeking Unity

We must restore the spirit of unity and inclusion in which the Heidelberg Catechism was created by placing a faithful English translation of the original German into our Book of Confessions.

The Heidelberg Catechism was written as a

series of questions and answers. One passage containing a false translation is the answer to Question 87, which reads, “Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?”

A literal translation into English of the original German answer to this question is, “By no means! Because Scripture states that no idolater, adulterer, thief, drunkard, or slanderer will inherit the kingdom of God.” The Heidelberg Catechism then references Biblical passages including I Corinthians 6:9-10, Ephesians 5:5-6, and I John 3:14 as Scriptural sources.

However, when the Book of Confessions was put together in 1966, the General Assembly Committee chose a new 1962 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism that egregiously substituted the words of I Corinthians 6:9-10 from the New English Bible, just published that same year, rather than translate precisely the words of the 16th century writers as our Presbyterian standard of historical accuracy demands.

As a result, the answer to Question 87 in our Book of Confessions reads, “Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.’”

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## Historic Accuracy

The Preface of The Book of Confessions explains the delicate balance between our traditions and our present times, saying that “each confessional statement should be respected in its historical particularity; none should be altered to conform to current theological, ethical, or linguistic norms.” The insertion of a modern version of I Corinthians 6:9-10 into a contemporary translation of the Heidelberg Catechism is a clear example of altering a confession “to conform to current theological, ethical, or linguistic norms.” Professor M. Eugene Osterhaven, one of the translators of the 1962 version, admitted this intention as Jack Rogers reports in *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*, second edition, p.115.

Professor Johanna Bos at Louisville Theological Seminary confirms. She grew up in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands where the Heidelberg Catechism was the foundation of Christian education. When she came to teach at a Presbyterian seminary in the U.S., she read through the Book of Confessions and was shocked to find serious flaws in the English. She brought them to the attention of our leadership.

## The Path Forward

In 2008, an overture to repair the substitution in Question 87, as well as four other instances of poor translation in the catechism, was passed by a 60 percent majority of the General Assembly, leading to the appointment of a committee to examine our translation of the Heidelberg Catechism more closely. The committee will report to the 219th General Assembly in 2010.

If the coming General Assembly accepts the committee’s recommendation to fix the Heidelberg Catechism, two-thirds of the presbyteries must then vote in support in order to enact this correction to this document in our Book of Confessions.

In following this path, the Special Committee, MLP, and a host of good Presbyterians honor our tradition in two ways. We engage in an effort to seek unity and inclusion, just as those German divines, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, sought peace between factions in their time. And we return to our historic respect for scholarly accuracy which is a hallmark of our beloved Presbyterian part of the Body of Christ.

### For Further Study

Jack Rogers, [Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church](#), Revised and Expanded Edition, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. 111-117.

Lyle D. Bierma, [An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History and Theology](#), Baker Academic, 2005.

[Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions](#), CRC Publications, 1988.

[Frequently Asked Questions About Correcting the Heidelberg Catechism in the Book of Confessions](#), [www.mlp.org/HC](http://www.mlp.org/HC)



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