

# AN OVERTURE TO THE 218<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

to Restore the Heidelberg Catechism as Printed in the Book of Confessions to its Historic Form

The Presbytery of Boston herewith respectfully overtures the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in San Jose, California, to direct the Stated Clerk to:

1. Request permission from the Christian Reformed Church in North America to print their 1988 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions,
2. If such permission is granted, to use that text as the official text of the Heidelberg Catechism until such time as directed otherwise by the General Assembly,
3. If such permission is not granted, to make a recommendation to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly regarding the choice of an appropriate translation of the Heidelberg Catechism to be the official text in the Book of Confessions.

## Rationale:

Our form of government, in G-1.0501, specifies the documents that are to form the Book of Confessions and in G-2.0500b expresses that these “creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God’s people”. Thus, the precise original text of these documents should be respected and understood in the context of their place in history.

And, indeed, we would not seriously consider “fixing” the texts of native English documents to adapt them to current insights or circumstances. They were written in English and can be understood with reasonable study.

That is not the case with documents that have their origins in foreign languages. To make these accessible they need to be translated into English first. But, in order to treat them with the same respect that, for instance, the Westminster or the Scots Confessions command, such translations should follow as closely as possible the original texts, without embellishment or adaptation. Regrettably, this is not the case with the translation<sup>1</sup> of the Heidelberg Catechism that is printed in the Book of Confessions. One or two other overtures enumerate in their rationales the shortcomings of this translation. Suffice it here to quote one of the translators, Professor Eugene Osterhaven, and the chair of the committee that redacted the Book of Confessions, Professor Edward Dowey. Professor Osterhaven, commenting in 1997 on the changes in the text of the answer to Question 87, asserted that that change had been entirely intentional. In the light of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, “it would be well to be more specific [about sexual practice]... than [the author of the Heidelberg Catechism] had been in his [sic!] day.”<sup>2</sup> Professor Dowey expressed in 1996 that he was “dumbfounded that I and such careful scholars as Trinterud, Hendry, Smart, et al., failed to discover the illicit change.”

As indicated above, our Form of Government specifies that the Heidelberg Catechism is to be included in the Book of Confessions. However, it does not specify a particular translation and neither does the 1967 action of the General Assembly which established the UPCUSA Book of Confessions nor any

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<sup>1</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563-1963, 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Copyright 1962, United Church Press.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Osterhaven’s letter to the editor of *Monday Morning*, dated November 25, 1996, which appeared in edited form in *Monday Morning*, Vol. 62, No. 4.

subsequent action of the General Assembly, including the Articles of Agreement which established the current Book of Confessions. What this indicates is that, although the addition or deletion of a confessional document would clearly be considered an amendment to the Constitution, the choice of a specific translation (and in particular when a translation is chosen that is more faithful to the original text) should be considered an editorial matter which the General Assembly has authority to decide.

There are various translations available that would constitute a marked improvement over the current one. For a reliable and dependable choice we may turn to a sister denomination that is to be counted among those that most respect the Heidelberg Catechism, the Christian Reformed Church. In their own words:

The 1968 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church appointed a committee to prepare "a modern and accurate translation ... which will serve as the official text of the Heidelberg Catechism and as a guide for catechism preaching." A translation was adopted by the Synod of 1975, and some editorial revisions were approved by the Synod of 1988.

The English translation follows the first German edition of the catechism except in two instances explained in footnotes to questions 57 and 80. The result of those inclusions is that the translation therefore actually follows the German text of the third edition as it was included in the Palatinate Church Order of November 15, 1563. This is the "received text" used throughout the world.

This translation is faithful and reliable, providing the text of the first, second, and third editions of the Heidelberg Catechism as they have been used in the Reformed churches for more than four centuries. Alternatively, one might consider adopting the translation authorized by the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, as posted on the website of Westminster Theological Seminary.