

A Catechism on the Heidelberg Catechism (and on church doctrine, more generally)

1. *What is the Heidelberg Catechism?* The Heidelberg Catechism is a document that asks and answers 129 questions. These questions and answers explain the Bible's teaching about salvation and related doctrines.
2. *What is a catechism?* A catechism is church document that instructs believers about Biblical doctrine in the form of questions and answers. Catechisms are not only used in Protestant churches.
3. *When and where was the Heidelberg Catechism written?* It was written in the city of **Heidelberg, Germany**, in **1563** at the time of the Protestant Reformation (the early beginning of the Protestant Reformation can be traced to 1517 when Martin Luther wrote his 95 Theses).
4. *Who was involved in the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism?* The Heidelberg Catechism was written by two theologian-pastors, **Zacharias Ursinus** (the principal author) and **Caspar Olevanius**, and was commissioned by **Frederick III**, the Protestant ruler of the **Palatinate region**, where Heidelberg was found. Frederick III was a convert from Roman Catholicism through his Protestant wife, and sought to develop a **doctrinal consensus** which would unite Reformed and many Lutherans, against Roman Catholic teaching and some extreme Lutheran views, in the basics of the Christian faith.
5. *What makes the Heidelberg Catechism a confession of Reformed Churches if it was written by a few men in 16th century Germany?* It was adopted in 1563 by the churches of the Palatinate, and soon after adopted by churches in other European territories and nation-states. Most notably, it was adopted in the Netherlands in 1619 as one of the official church confessions (along with the **Belgic Confession** and the **Canons of Dort** to make the **Three Forms of Unity**) of Dutch Bible-believing churches. Since the 17th century, Reformed congregations in the United States have adopted these Three Forms of Unity. Good doctrine is, by its very nature, *Church* doctrine. It is not enough that a few persons wrote a great document if the Church, in its collective and official authority, has not adopted it.
6. *What makes the Heidelberg Catechism unique among Protestant Confessions and Catechisms?* Because it is thoroughly evangelical (that is, concerned with the Gospel), irenic in tone, and pastoral in its application of doctrine (consistently asking how doctrine applies to the Christian life), the Heidelberg Catechism has become one of the most beloved statements of the Reformation.
7. *What is the theme and outline of the Heidelberg Catechism?* Question 1 introduces the believer's **comfort** (think of strength and assurance not comfortable or cozy) as the main theme of the Catechism. Question 2 introduces the threefold division of the Catechism, patterned after the book of Romans:

Questions 3-11: what is my **sin/guilt** (Romans 1:1-3:20)

Questions 12-85: what is **salvation/grace** (Romans 3:21-11:36)

Questions 86-129: how am I to be given to **service/gratitude** to God (Romans 12-16)



8. *Is the Heidelberg Catechism on par with the word of God?* Absolutely not. The Heidelberg Catechism is neither inspired by God nor infallible, as only God's Word is. Only the word of God is the final and ultimate authority. The Heidelberg Catechism stands as a subordinate authority under the supreme authority of the Word of God.
9. *How is preaching the Word of God different from preaching through the Heidelberg Catechism?* When a Reformed minister preaches through the Word, this is usually done sequentially (verse-by-verse), always asking the question, "What does this *particular* text of Scripture say?" When the minister preaches through the Catechism, the guiding question is "What does the *entire* Scripture say about this doctrine?" The Catechism is an organizing tool that collates and surveys Scripture to present a succinct summary of what Scripture teaches on the doctrine of salvation and related doctrines. Textual preaching is concerned with depth (burrowing into a particular text). Catechetical preaching is concerned with breadth (surveying the expanse of all Scripture).
10. *But doesn't doctrine divide people? Why would you want to focus so much on doctrine?* In their worse expression, doctrines and beliefs have been used in the Church to divide and create sectarianism. This abuse is lamentable but should not make us pessimistic or skeptical about the role of doctrine in the Church.

The question is not, "Will the Christian church or Christians believe in doctrine" but rather "What *kind* of doctrine will she and her members believe?" Everyone has a creed ("creed" comes from the Latin word, *credo*, which means, "I believe") Everyone has doctrine: whether it's good and healthy or bad and unhealthy is the issue. Doctrine (what you believe about God, man, sin, afterlife, etc.) is inescapable. Bad doctrine divides. Good doctrine, in its Biblical and normative role, unites Christians in the truth of God. There is one Trinity, one baptism, one hope, one calling, and one body, and we should be eager to maintain unity in these fundamental truths (Eph. 4:3-5). Good doctrine builds maturity, bad doctrine creates instability and renders one open to every manner of human cunning (Eph. 4:13-14).

By the end of the Apostles' life, there was already a corpus of Apostle-approved doctrines and teachings (which had been passed down to Paul, see 1 Cor. 15:3-7; see also 1 Tim. 3:16). This was and is the basis of sound doctrine, from which we ought not deviate (1 Tim. 6:3ff.), even though many will no longer tolerate sound doctrine and surround themselves with teachers according to their own passions (2 Tim. 4:3). The Church is to teach only that which accords with sound doctrine (Titus 2:2), and ministers are themselves to follow in sound teaching (1 Tim. 4:6). Christians are instructed by God "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The Church is to warn those in their care to "not to teach any different doctrines" (1 Tim. 1:3) and Christians are even to avoid those who persist in teaching contrary doctrines (Rom. 16:17). We focus on doctrine in order to know whether we're in line with what Scripture teaches, and it is on the truth of Scripture that we must be united.

11. *Isn't Catechizing (doctrinal instruction) an extra-biblical practice?* No. Throughout Scripture we have examples and commands to teach the faith to others (especially the little ones). Israel was to be catechized in the fear of the LORD and was to teach her children this knowledge (Deut. 4:10). Israel was to diligently catechize her children in the words of God (Deut 6:7; 11:19). The post-



exilic people of Israel had a 6-hour worship service with readings from the Law including instruction and interpretation regarding the Law's meaning (Neh. 8:8). Beginning with Isaiah 53, Philip explains the good news of Jesus Christ to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:27-35). See, #10 above for more NT commands to teach sound doctrine. Historically, when the practice of catechism waned, the church's doctrine suffered and slowly corrupted, and detrimental innovations were introduced (like images and statues as visual instruction), moving the Church away from the text-centered instruction of the Word.

12. *But isn't the Heidelberg an extra-Biblical document? Are you saying that we can use words and phrases outside of the Bible to support the Bible?* Yes, to both. God's will for His Church is that she apply the Bible through wisdom to life and the challenges presented to her. When Paul commands the Church to teach the truth and train her ministers teach the truth (2 Tim. 2:1-2; Titus 2:1), he's not saying to use only the Bible. Paul is urging the Church to conscript human words and phrases to serve the Word of God. To think that no words, phrases, or verbal articulations (e.g. creeds with words) outside of Scripture should be used by the Church assumes that human language is necessarily deficient, and unless words are given to us directly by God, then human language is utterly tainted and untrue. This assumption is simply not true. God gives us His Word in the words of men; not in an angelic language but in earthy and quotidian human language. The nature of the Bible—the eternal Word of God in and through the words of holy men— gives us a paradigm and model after which to pattern theology and theological words, phrases, and documents like the Heidelberg Catechism.

In Christ, human speech is transformed and renewed so that the Church can speak truthfully and aright (though never exhaustively). God's truth can be communicated through human words, speech, and technical terms. However, theological words must communicate the substance of Scripture, and must follow the grain of Scripture. Creating theological words for the sake of its creation is absurd and to be condemned. Yet, necessity often compels the creation of words, phrases, and credal statements to communicate the truth of Scripture, especially in times where heresy is acutely threatening the peace and purity of the church.

13. *Why is it necessary to know what the doctrines of the Church are?* See #10 above. Good and healthy doctrine (deriving from Scripture) protects the Church from heresy, guides her worship of God in all of life, and unites her to the catholic church and her teaching. How else besides developing a high consciousness for what the Scriptures teach, and instructing others in her doctrines, will the Church “guard the deposit of faith” for generations (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14)?

14. *The Heidelberg Catechism is divided up into 52 Sundays (or Lord's Days) in order to cover one section per Sunday. Is this done every year? Isn't repetition a bad thing?* Repetition is not inherently bad. Scripture speaks of both Peter and Paul writing and speaking about the same things over and over again, in order to further ground the Church from which they were soon departing (because of their impending deaths) (see 2 Peter 1:12-14; 3:1; Phil. 3:1).

15. *How does the Heidelberg Catechism help protect the Church from everything between mistaken notions and heresies? Isn't the Bible enough?* Everyone says they believe the Bible and adhere to it. Fair enough. It is not the case, however, that everyone believes the truth in the Bible. The Church is called to examine a teacher's confession to see if it true or not (1 John 4:1-3; false teachers speak twisted



things with false words, see Acts 20:29-30; 2 Pet 2:1-3). The Heidelberg Catechism, like any other good creed or catechism, serves as an objective and public declaration of what the Church believes by creating necessary distinctions. The Heidelberg Catechism says, *the message of the Bible is this and not that, Scripture says that God is this and not that, Man is this and not that, salvation consists in this and not that.* And so on. Necessary distinctions are a function not just of the Heidelberg Catechism but of good doctrine in general. Distinctions and differentiation is necessary because not all notions of God are true, not all beliefs about man are Biblical, not all ways of talking about salvation are accurate, etc. In other words, good doctrine exists, in part, because not all things that could be said about God, man, life, sin, salvation, faith, etc., are Biblical. Good doctrine separates healthy churches from unhealthy even false churches.

16. *Where does the doctrine in the Heidelberg Catechism come from?* The doctrine in the Heidelberg Catechism comes from Scripture itself. Good doctrine is not man-made. It is God-revealed. It is derived from God's revelation, that is, His Holy Scripture.
17. *Does Scripture contain doctrine? I thought it was a hodgepodge of different ideas.* Scripture does not reveal bare facts, nor is it a collection of loose, incoherent thoughts. It does not give us grain and wheat, and then ask us to make edible bread. Scripture (which is Jesus speaking) *is* the bread of life. Scripture gives us the connections between its different parts. Creeds and Catechisms simply read the doctrine *out of* Scripture, and organize those truths spread out over Scripture. In other words, there is a *system* of doctrine in Scripture to which we must hold fast. That is what Paul means when he speaks of having taught the Ephesians "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). [Thanks to Nicolaas H. Gootjes for the bread analogy.]
18. *Doesn't all this focus on doctrine make us irrelevant? Shouldn't we focus on that which is practical, like doing good works and loving our neighbor?* There is nothing more practical than good doctrine. To be sure, orthodoxy (right believing) must lead to orthopraxy (right living). The two always go hand-in-hand, in that order. Simply look at Paul's letters (Ephesians and Romans, for starters), and see how he divides his writing: first, what God has done and what we are to believe, and second, what effect should this have upon His people's living. Or, take a summary of 1 John 4:9-11: John is saying, *There's nothing more relevant for understanding how you are to relate to your fellow Christian than knowing who the Father is, who Christ is, and what exactly God did in sending Jesus Christ, and why was this necessary.* We live *in light* of who God is and what He has done, not *in spite* of His person and work.

