

**ITEM C.105
 ACTION ITEM**

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| <i>FOR GAC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S OFFICE USE ONLY</i> | | | |
| | A. Evangelism | | D. Vocation |
| | B. Justice | | E. Stewardship |
| X | C. Discipleship | | F. Audit |
| | P. Plenary | | |
| | | | G. PC (USA), A Corporation |
| | | | H. Executive Committee |
| | | | I. Personnel Committee |

Subject: Comment to Overture 036 and 045 to 218th GA (2008)

Recommendation:

The GAC approve the following comment to the 218th General Assembly on Overture 036:

Overtures 036 and 045 seek to restore the Heidelberg Catechism to its “historic form” by substituting a more recent translation for the translation currently in *The Book of Confessions*.

G-2.0100a describes the role of our confessions in the life of the Presbyterian Church:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world

who and what it is,
 what it believes,
 what it resolves to do.

The verbs in this section are all present tense. The confessions, rooted in particular historical contexts, declare our contemporary church’s identity, belief, and action. Thus the confessions are more than historical documents. While they grow out of particular contexts and speak to them, they have been adopted into our *Book of Confessions* because the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes that they are authoritative for the church’s current faith and life.

The confessions are not static documents, but living witnesses to our theological tradition. Therefore, the constitutional form of each confession is that which is printed in *The Book of Confessions*, not the texts in their original forms and in their original languages. The clearest example of this is the Westminster Confession, amended over time by both northern and southern streams of the church. Nevertheless, Presbyterians have a long history of appreciation for historical and textual scholarship. Questions about translations are appropriate in determining the church’s confessional stance.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has the right to determine its confessional stance and can consider amendments to *The Book of Confessions*, guided by “The Assessment of Proposed Amendments to *The Book of Confessions*” (BOC, xxxi-xxxvi) and following the process outlined in the *Book of Order* (G-18.0200).

However, because the confessions constitute a living tradition that expresses the church’s beliefs, the decision to amend *The Book of Confessions* is a normative decision, not simply a historical decision. The primary purpose of the confessions is not to enshrine a historical perspective, but to shape the ongoing faith and life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Therefore, the question before the General Assembly

is whether a different translation of the Heidelberg Catechism would better declare to its members and the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.

Ovt 036

On Restoring the Heidelberg Catechism to Its Historic Form—From the Presbytery of Northern Kansas.

In accordance with G-18.0200, the Presbytery of Northern Kansas herewith overtures the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in San Jose, California to take appropriate steps toward the following amendment of *The Book of Confessions*, and to appoint a committee to fulfill the requirement of G-18.0200b.:

To restore The Heidelberg Catechism to an authentic and reliable English version of the historic document by replacing the 1962 translation, *The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563-1963. 400th Anniversary Edition. Copyright 1962. United Church Press*, with a translation that more faithfully renders the original text.

Rationale

The Heidelberg Catechism was formally adopted as a confessional document of the UPCUSA when the denomination adopted *The Book of Confessions* in 1967. The version of the Heidelberg Catechism approved at that time was a 1962 translation prepared for and published by United Church Press. However, according to the later recollections of Professor Edward Dowey of Princeton Theological Seminary, who chaired the committee of the General Assembly that drew together the confessions, thorough checking of this version was never undertaken and certain “illicit” changes made to the text of the Heidelberg in this translation went undetected.¹ A comparison of the text of the Heidelberg Catechism in the version included in *The Book of Confession* with the original German and the early Latin version reveals five passages in which the original text is not faithfully rendered and key theological meanings are obscured:

1. **4.019**: “...the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other *rites of the Old Covenant*, and finally fulfilled through his own wellbeloved Son” (emphasis added). The phrase “rites of the Old Covenant” is a loose translation which is not well supported by either the German or the Latin; “ceremonies of the law” is a traditional rendering which is well supported by the German (*ceremonien des gesetzes*) and the Latin (*ceremoniis legis*).² This flawed rendering is significant for three reasons. First, substituting “Old Covenant” for law obscures a traditional Reformed interest in biblical law *per se*. Second, it misleadingly suggests to readers and students that the catechism’s writers invoked here an explicitly covenantal image. Third, it suggests that the writers were working with a scheme of biblical interpretation that contrasted Old Covenant to New Covenant, a hermeneutic which is not very well represented in the Reformed theological tradition and not supported by the text of the catechism in its original form.

¹ The Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith presented a report to the 1965 General Assembly of the UPCUSA to include the 1962 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in a Book of Confessions. Presumably the committee chose this translation because it was the most recent edition. Professor Dowey acknowledged (in a letter to Professors Christopher Elwood and Johanna Bos of Louisville Seminary, dated October 21, 1996) that both he and the committee as a whole were “guilty of negligence”: “there should have been thorough editorial work on all the documents” but, because of time pressures, the committee settled for some brief spot-checking of the translation.

² All references to the German and Latin texts come from *Catechismus oder Christliche Unterricht, wie der Kirchen und Schulen der Churfürstlichen Pfaltz getrieben wirdt* (Heidelberg: Johannes Mayer, 1563) and the first Latin edition of 1563: *Catechesis religionis Christianae: quae traditur in ecclesiis et scholis Palatinatus*. These have been published together in a facsimile edition published by Theologischer Verlag of Zurich in 1983. The German original has been compared with the modern critical edition by Wilhelm Niesel in *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (Zurich, 1938).

2. **4.033:** “Christ alone is God’s *own* eternal Son, whereas we are *accepted* by God for his sake as children of God by grace” was traditionally rendered “Christ alone is the eternal *natural* Son of God, but we are *adopted* to be children of God through grace for His sake” (emphasis added). The significance of this change is that it obscures the authors’ use of the image of adoption—an important theme in Reformed reflection on Christ, Christ’s work, and the justifying and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The translation “adopted” is very well supported by the original German (*angenommen*) and the Latin (*adoptati*).

3. **4.055:** “...believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, *shall share* in one fellowship” (emphasis added): The future tense is not indicated in the original text, which has the present tense. This translation differs from traditional versions which indicate that sharing or fellowship with Christ is a present reality.

4. **4.074:** “This was done in the *Old Covenant* by circumcision. In the *New Covenant* baptism has been instituted to take its place” (emphasis added). The original German supports “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” The Latin has *in Veteri foedere* and *in Novo foedere*, which could support “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant,” although the German has generally been preferred as the text from which translations are to be made. (The German text was the basis of the translation of 1962.) The difference between “covenant” and “testament” may seem subtle or insignificant to some readers. But in fact there was a significant difference in connotation through theological use in the sixteenth century. The Reformed tended to emphasize the singularity and antiquity of God’s covenant with God’s people; thus they tended not to emphasize a distinction between two *covenants*. On the other hand, they emphasized that a single covenant had somewhat different applications in two distinct *times* or epochs: the time of the law and the time of the gospel, or (to use an alternative designation) the time of the Old Testament and the time of the New Testament. The use of the word “Testament,” then, resonates with other Reformed allusions to a distinction in times, which is not the same thing as a distinction in covenants.

5. **4.087:** two elements in the answer to question 87 are supplied by the translators and do not appear in the original text (nor in any translations produced prior to 1962). Neither the original German nor the Latin has texts corresponding to the following phrases:
“Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake:” and “or of homosexual perversion.”

The remaining items in the vice list supplied in the answer to question 87 have equivalents or rough equivalents in the original text (although some singular nouns have been rendered as plural nouns). This innovation was created by the translators’ decision to ignore a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism answer 87 and instead to replace it with the New English Bible translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. In 1997, one of the translators, Professor Eugene Osterhaven, disclosed that this replacement was entirely intentional. In 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 day.”³ This “amendment” to a traditional Reformed document was the creation of two translators and was never deliberated upon by a body of the church before The Book of Confessions was adopted.⁴

³ 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.

⁴ Professor Dowey expressed in 1996 that he was “dumbfounded that I and such careful scholars as [Leonard J.] Trinterud, [George S.] Hendry, [James D.] Smart, et al. failed to discover the illicit change.”

GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL
April 24, 2008
Theology Worship and Education Ministry
Item C.105

Every ordained minister, elder and deacon is required to answer in the affirmative the following question: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do?” G-14.0207c, G-14.0405b (3). In so doing, church leaders trust that the translated versions of the historic confessions are, as far as humanly possible, authentic transmissions of the faith of our forbearers and reliable expositions of what they understood Scripture leading them to believe and do. That the 1962 translation of The Heidelberg Catechism has proven to be unreliable casts a shadow on all the translations in *The Book of Confessions*. Trust in all these historic documents can be restored by replacing that translation of The Heidelberg Catechism with a version that is more authentic and reliable. The 1988 translation in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (CRC Publications) is one such version.⁵

⁵ Other reliable English translations may be found in the following texts: *The Heidelberg Catechism in German, Latin and English, with an Historical Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1863); *Reformed Standards of Unity*, ed. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Society for Reformed Publications, 1957); Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: James Clark, 1959).

Ovt 045

On Restoring the Heidelberg Catechism to its Historic Form—From the Presbytery of Boston.

The Presbytery of Boston herewith respectfully overtures the 218th 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 219th 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 translation⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 subsequent action of the General Assembly, including the Articles of Agreement which established the current Book

⁶ *The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563-1963, 400th Anniversary Edition*. Copyright 1962, United Church Press.

⁷ 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.

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.