



The Lord's Supper
and the
"Popish Mass"

**Explorations in
Reformed Confessional Theology**

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The Lord's Supper and the “Popish Mass”

A Study of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80

Cornelis P. Venema



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The Lord's Supper and the "Popish Mass"

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Contents

Series Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. The Historical Occasion, Authorship, and Purposes of the Heidelberg Catechism	7
2. The Inclusion of Q&A 80	19
3. Assessing the Original Validity of Q&A 80 ...	31
4. Assessing the Continued Value of Q&A 80 ...	53
5. The Benefits of Retaining Q&A 80	81
Bibliography.....	93
Scripture Index.....	101
Confessions Index	103

Series Preface

The creeds of the ancient church and the doctrinal standards of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed churches are rich theological documents. They summarize the essential teachings of Scripture, express biblical doctrines in meaningful and memorable ways, and offer pastoral guidance for the heads and hearts of God's people. Nevertheless, when twenty-first-century readers pick up these documents, certain points may be confusing, misunderstood, or seem irrelevant for the church.

The Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology series intends to clarify some of these confessional issues from four vantage points. First, it views confessional issues from the *textual* vantage point, exploring such things as variants, textual development, and the development of language within the documents themselves as well as within the context in which these documents were written. Second, this series views confessional issues from the *historical* vantage point, exploring social history and the history of ideas that shed light upon these issues. Third, this series views confessional issues from the *theological* vantage point, exploring the issues of intra- and inter-confessional theology both in the days these documents

were written as well as in our day. Fourth, this series views confessional issues from the *pastoral* vantage point, exploring the pressing pastoral needs of certain doctrines and the implications of any issues that cause difficulty in the confessions.

In exploring our vast and deep heritage in such a way, our ultimate goal is to “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

—Daniel R. Hyde and Mark Jones

Acknowledgments

The focus of the following study, consistent with the intent of the series of which it is a part, is the exploration of a controversial feature of Reformed confessional theology: the Heidelberg Catechism's strong condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass. Though the Heidelberg Catechism has a justly deserved reputation as one of the warmest and most pastorally sensitive statements of the Reformed faith, the inclusion of Q&A 80, which contrasts the biblical view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper with the Roman Catholic Mass, is often viewed as an unhappy exception. For this reason, a number of churches in recent decades have relegated this question and answer to the status of a footnote. What the Catechism declares in this question and answer is viewed largely as a museum piece, an example of the uncharitable polemics of the Reformation.

My purpose in writing this study is to help clarify why the Catechism's condemnation of the Mass was appropriate in its original setting and remains an important testimony to the truth today. Though many may regard its language as too sharp and condemning, the purpose of

the Catechism's confession is to preserve unimpaired the perfection and sufficiency of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of His people. It also aims to guard the church from idolatry in its worship of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. These are laudable aims and of perennial importance to the Christian church and her members.

I am grateful for the invitation of the editors, Daniel R. Hyde and Mark Jones, to include this study in the series. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Glenda Mathes, who edited the manuscript; Rachel Luttjeboer, who helped prepare the bibliography; Annette Gysen, who completed the editing process; and Jay Collier, who prepared the manuscript for publication. I am especially thankful for the willingness of the publisher, Reformation Heritage Books, to publish books that take seriously the summary of Scripture's teaching in the historic confessions of the Reformed churches, even when aspects of this summary do not conform to contemporary standards.



Introduction

One of the primary tasks of the church of Jesus Christ, which the apostle Paul calls the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), is to confess its faith before the world. The church owes its life to the work of Christ, who by His Spirit and Word calls it into existence and preserves it in the way of faith. Because the church is born out of and nourished by the Word of God, no task is more critical than confessing what it believes the Word teaches. Reformed churches, therefore, are always confessing churches. They subscribe to creeds and confessions that publicly attest their faith before others. Such creeds and confessions are often referred to as “forms of unity” since they unify their adherents in faith. Due to the importance of confessions to the church’s testimony and unity, few changes have been made to them over the centuries. When changes have been proposed, they have usually provoked considerable discussion and reflection in the churches.

2 The Lord's Supper and the "Popish Mass"

Of all the confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism is one of the most loved and widely used in the history of the Reformed churches. Within a short period after its initial publication in January 1563, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), leader of the Reformed church in Zurich, wrote that it was “the best catechism ever published.”¹ Coming from one of the most influential Reformers of the sixteenth century, this commendation was not only true at the time but also prescient. Now that more than 450 years have passed since the Heidelberg Catechism was first published, it still serves the churches as one of the best instruments for the instruction of church members in the Christian faith and an excellent rule of faith (*regula fidei*) for the ministry of God's Word through preaching. While the Heidelberg Catechism follows the classic form of traditional catechisms, expounding the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, it is distinguished throughout by its warmly pastoral style and emphasis on the “comfort” of the gospel of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ.

Among the 129 questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism, however, one has provoked considerable controversy—Q&A 80 on the “popish Mass.”

1. Quoted in Fred H. Klooster, “Calvin's Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 22:315. A German text of this letter is reprinted in Carl Pestalozzi, *Heinrich Bullinger: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften, Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformirten Kirche* (Elberfeld: Friderichs, 1858), 5:415.

This question and answer, which was not included in the original edition of the Catechism and appeared in the second and then, in revised form, the third, seems somewhat out of character with the Catechism's moderate and genial tone in its strong, even harsh-sounding condemnation of the Mass. Furthermore, the severity of its language reflects the vigor of sixteenth-century polemics regarding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and jars modern sensibilities, which eschew doctrinal distinctiveness and sharp delineation of the truth in opposition to error. In a modern context that is often committed to ecumenical engagement with diverse church communions, Q&A 80 seems unnecessarily polemical and even injurious to the Heidelberg Catechism's usefulness as a contemporary statement of the Christian faith. For this reason, some churches that historically embraced the Heidelberg Catechism have in recent years decided that Q&A 80 no longer expresses a legitimate judgment regarding the Roman Catholic Mass and ought to be relegated to a nonconfessional status.

My aim in this book is to offer, in the first place, a general account of the historical background and occasion for the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism, especially the addition of Q&A 80 in its final, received form. Before any judgment can be made regarding the continued value of Q&A 80, it is important that the original occasion and background for the addition of its condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass be accurately understood. Because Q&A 80 was not included in the first edition of the Catechism, the circumstances and reasons for its inclusion

require special attention. Accordingly, my account of the preparation of the Catechism will include a review of what we know about the way Q&A 80 came to be included in the received text. Then, in the main part of the book, I will offer a defense of the accuracy of the Catechism's condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass. Was the inclusion of Q&A 80 a proper answer to the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church at the time the Catechism was written? And does Q&A 80 express important features of the biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper, which were appropriately affirmed by the Reformed churches in response to the decrees regarding the Mass adopted by the Council of Trent shortly before the Catechism was published?

While it is important to ascertain the accuracy of Q&A 80's condemnation of the Mass in the context of the sixteenth-century Reformation, it is also necessary to consider its contemporary validity. If the teaching of Q&A 80 no longer accurately reflects the present doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, then it is incumbent upon Reformed churches that subscribe to the Catechism to consider whether it should be removed from the text or revised in some appropriate fashion. Since some Reformed denominations have recently chosen to relegate Q&A 80 to the status of a footnote, arguing that it violates ecumenical sensitivities and no longer fairly represents the Roman Catholic view, the need for an assessment of the confessional value of this question

and answer is especially pressing.² If “tradition is the living faith of the dead” and “traditionalism is the dead faith of the living,”³ then it is important for Reformed churches today to determine whether their adherence to this question and answer is a piece of uninformed traditionalism or an honest expression of heartfelt conviction based on the teaching of Scripture. For this reason, I will also give special attention, in my defense of the validity of Q&A 80, to a recent evaluation of it by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The decision of the Christian Reformed Church to remove Q&A 80 from the text of the Catechism provides an important test case for ascertaining whether it should remain an integral part of the confession of the Reformed churches regarding the Lord’s Supper.

2. As we will see, two historic denominations, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, have removed Q&A 80 from the text of the Heidelberg Catechism to which they adhere. For descriptions of a similar action taken by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, see Erik A. de Boer, “Adoration or Idolatry? HC 80 in the Context of the Catechetical Teaching of Joannes Anastasius in the Palatinate,” *The Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism: Papers of the International Conference on the Heidelberg Catechism Held in Apeldoorn 2013*, vol. 24 of Refo500 Academic Studies, ed. Arnold Huijgen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 130; and Wim H. Th. Moehn, “A Lasting Controversy on Mass and Supper? Meaning and Actuality of HC 80,” in Huijgen, *Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 156.

3. The language is that of Jaroslav Pelikan in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

6 The Lord's Supper and the "Popish Mass"

My concluding chapter will offer a defense of the retention of Q&A 80 in the received form of the Heidelberg Catechism. In my estimation, the retention of Q&A 80 is not only important for historical reasons but also for the benefits that derive from a living commitment to its confession about the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work on the cross.