



Dr. Jason Van Vliet is professor of Dogmatics at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario
jason.vanvliet@canrc.org

A Blessed Commemoration: The Heidelberg Catechism is Turning 450

Next to the mirror in our bathroom is a birthday calendar. When the calendar says it's someone's birthday, we try to visit, call, or send an email to say "Happy Birthday," especially if it's a milestone birthday. (Yes, we also forget some birthdays, but we're trying. . . .)

However, what is the appropriate thing to say when the milestone birthday is not 50, or 75, or even 100, but 450 years old? Surely, a quick "Happy Birthday" seems a bit underwhelming for such an impressive event like that. But what then? That's the question that lies before us in these remaining months of 2012, leading up to January 19, 2013. On that wintery Saturday in the first month of the new year the Heidelberg Catechism will turn 450 years old. And it's still looking pretty spry for its age, wouldn't you say?

After all, the youth of the church are still learning more about "the joy of this comfort" (Q. 2) in catechism classes which occur every week during the academic year. Congregations across the continent, and indeed throughout the world, are still being fed good, solid, savory, and nourishing spiritual food every Sunday afternoon from the Catechism preaching. Missionaries are using this confession to teach new converts. On their deathbeds, God's children are still drawing strength from the unforgettable words of Q&A 1. In short, the Heidelberg is turning 450 and still going strong.

The Lord provides us with so many blessings through this document that it only seems right that we speak of a commemoration, and a very blessed one at that. So, how should we, as Reformed churches, celebrate the Catechism's 450th? Below I'd like to share some ideas and possibilities with you. But before that. . . .

Did you hear about the plumber?

It's a true story. Louis Di Baggio is a plumber in Brooklyn, New York. He's not a member of a Reformed church, but he loves the Heidelberg Catechism. In fact, he loves it so much that he hands out copies of the Bible and the Catechism, for free, to people that he meets. From time to time he has even put ads in international newspapers promising to send Bibles and Catechisms to whomever responds. And he pays personally for all the materials and postage costs. Once he spent \$1000 sending packages to Nigeria. (This story was first published in the *Banner* May 11, 1987.)

Now, if a non-Reformed plumber in Brooklyn is excited enough about the Heidelberg Catechism that he sinks hundreds, even thousands of dollars, into sharing its riches both locally and internationally, what could we be doing? Here are a few possibilities.

A new website:

www.heidelberg-catechism.com

It goes without saying that if people today want information or resources they turn to the Web. Need directions to a new store? People go to Google Maps. Want to buy a textbook? Amazon is the choice of many students. But what about the elder who is going to lead a reading service and needs a sermon on Lord's Day 39? Can he find what he's looking for online quickly and easily?

What about the pastor who is preparing to teach Lord's Day 9 to Grade 10 students for the tenth time in his ministry? Where can he go online to find some resources that will re-invigorate his Catechism teaching for that evening?

What about all those interesting articles about the Catechism which were written in *Clarion*, *Christian*

Renewal, Outlook, and also more academic journals? Are they relegated to a library shelf in a seminary, collecting dust until some theological student comes searching for them?

And what about the Christian who has just recently stumbled across the Heidelberg Catechism for the first time in his life? Maybe he does not even know what a catechism is, but he reads Lord's Day 1 and he wants to know more. Like everyone these days, he googles the name. Will he find a friendly, easy-to-understand online guide which leads him into the treasures of this cherished summary of the gospel?

The Lord willing, by January 19, 2013, the answer to all of the questions above will be: "Yes, just point your web browser to www.heidelberg-catechism.com." On that day, or perhaps the evening before, a new website will be launched, sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. The website will contain a substantial collection of sermons, teaching guides, magazine and journal articles, as well as video and audio files of speeches – all related to the Catechism. In addition, there will be web pages that provide newcomers to the Catechism with an orientation to this confession. The history of the Catechism will also be explained. And all of these resources will be available through an attractive and easy-to-use interface. If you go to the web address now, you'll see a sample of what it will look like when the full website is operational in January 2013.

The Heidelberg is turning 450 and still going strong

Moreover, just like the plumber, Louis Di Baggio, this website has international and multi-lingual aspirations. We aim to launch in two languages: English and Portuguese. The missionaries in Brazil are already providing Portuguese Catechism resource material. Under the Lord's blessing and over time, the goal is to include many more resources in different languages. In this way, Christians from many nations, tribes, peoples, and languages will be able to benefit from the spiritual treasures summarized in the Catechism. As one Canadian Reformed missionary already said, "That would be golden!"

How can you participate in this website project? When it launches, by all means, make good and

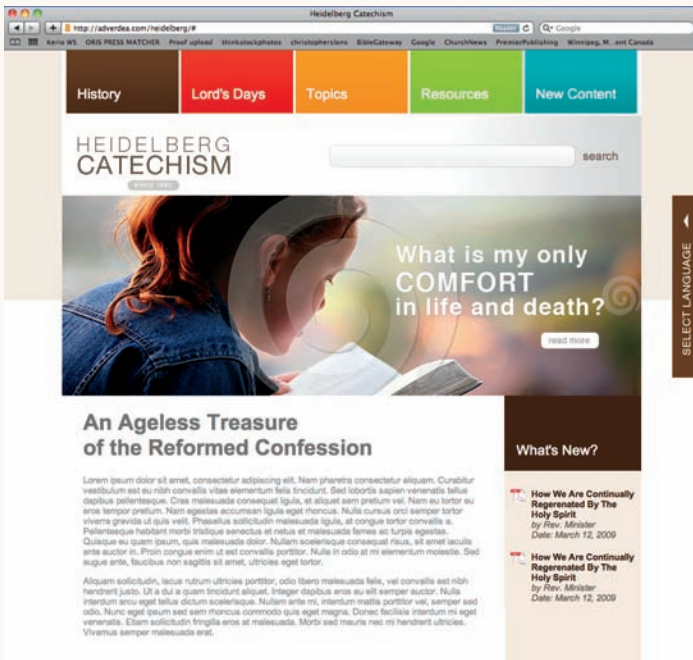
extensive use of it. If you use social media, perhaps you can blog about it or post it on your Facebook page. If you know someone who is beginning to embrace the truth of the gospel, you can point them to this online resource. And perhaps you will think of more possibilities yourself.

A Catechism Discussion Guide

Every so often it's good to take stock of where you are and where you are headed. As Reformed churches, it is healthy for us to reflect together on our present use of the Catechism, and how it might be strengthened in the future. To that end, a Catechism Discussion Guide has been prepared. This guide is divided into four sections: Catechism & Home, Church and School, Catechism Preaching, Catechism & Evangelism, and Catechism & Future Generations. In total some thirty questions are posed which aim to prompt earnest and interesting discussions about the abiding value of the Heidelberg Catechism in our Reformed church life. A copy of this discussion guide has been sent to all Canadian Reformed consistories. If they find it valuable, ministers can use some questions in the guide as part of the local catechism instruction during this fall season. However, the guide is by no means limited to the catechism classroom. Families, Bible study groups, mission and evangelism committees, teachers, and school boards might all find some questions in the guide which they deem profitable to discuss. So why not take a look and see what you find? This resource can be downloaded at no cost from the seminary's website. Go to www.canadianreformedseminary.ca and navigate to "General" and then to "Resources." You'll find it there.

A conference . . . extended to the whole federation?

For the past two years, in January, our seminary has hosted a conference. This coming year, the third annual conference will focus on the Catechism following this theme: "Your Only Comfort: Celebrating 450 Years with the Heidelberg Catechism." Various international experts on the history and present-day use of the Catechism have been invited to speak. Yours truly is also scheduled to give a keynote speech. In addition, workshops are being planned for each of the four topics that are in the Catechism Discussion Guide (see list in previous paragraph). Each workshop will be introduced by short video clips from people with experience in that



And finally a tour

There are many interesting tours available: cruises to the Caribbean, fishing expeditions, and bus tours of Israel. However, from July 11-19 there will be a very special tour through The Netherlands and Germany focussing on beautiful historical sites, all connected in one way or the other to the Catechism. How are the old Dutch fortress of Bourtange and the Bad Bentheim castle in Germany linked to the Catechism? The tour will explore those connections and many more. There's even a boat cruise down the Rhine and it all culminates in the city of Heidelberg where a special celebration is planned in the historic Molkenkur Hotel overlooking the Neckar Valley.

This ten day journey will also have a decidedly spiritual aspect to it. Each tour day will begin with a short meditation on the grace-filled truths summarized in the Catechism. The Lord's Days will be fully set aside for worship. There will even be a couple concerts on historic Dutch pipe organs.

And one more thing. Participants in the tour who enjoy photography and video will be encouraged to submit some of their best digital impressions to the website mentioned above. In this way, even after the tour is over, future generations, perhaps even your very own children and grandchildren, will be able to benefit from what you saw, heard, and learned.

Please go to www.wittetravel.com/calendar-tours/legacy-reformation for all the details.

*It is healthy for us to reflect together
on our present use of the Catechism,
and how it might be strengthened
in the future*

Well, a website, a discussion guide, satellite conferences, and a tour. There are many opportunities to commemorate the Catechism's 450th anniversary. However, considering all that we receive through this catechism, both now and for generations to come, it seems appropriate that we do more than simply say, "Happy Birthday." Let's have a blessed and memorable commemoration together.



particular area. For example, have you ever wondered how the missionaries in Papua New Guinea use the Catechism? What insight can the Canadian Reformed Teacher's College give for strengthening our catechism classes? And, as always, there will be good food and warm fellowship at the conference.

But it's in Hamilton, right? And so long as you're within driving distance of Hamilton you can attend. But what if you live in Ottawa, or Winnipeg, or Edmonton, or Vernon? Well, this time around, you may have an opportunity to join in the conference as well. After all, it's not every day that the Catechism turns 450, so we are going to try to do something special. Plans are already underway to use live stream Web technology to transmit certain parts of the conference to satellite locations throughout the federation. In many geographic areas, local committees are being formed to organize a central location where brothers and sisters, both younger and older, can gather together, watch some of the speeches live, ask questions by email, participate in a workshop or two, and yes, hopefully enjoy some good food and warm fellowship together as well. What better way to commemorate the Catechism's 450th anniversary than by celebrating together, as a federation, as simultaneously as we can in this big country of ours?

More details can be found at the seminary website. Again, go to www.canadianreformedseminary.ca and navigate to "General" and "Conference 2013."