

# THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE 'POPISH MASS': AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF QUESTION AND ANSWER 80 OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM<sup>1</sup>

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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, it has no task more critical than that of confessing what it believes the Word teaches. Therefore, Reformed churches are always confessing churches. They subscribe to creeds and confessions, which publicly attest their faith before others. Such creeds and confessions are often referred to as “forms of unity,” since they join their adherents together in a unity of faith. Due to the importance of the confessions to the church’s testimony and unity, it is not surprising that few changes have been made to them over the centuries. And, when changes have been proposed, these have usually provoked considerable discussion and reflection in the churches.

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 of time after its first publication in January 1563, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), leader of the Reformed church in Zurich, wrote that it was “the best catechism ever published.”<sup>2</sup> Coming from the pen of one of the most influential Reformers of the sixteenth-century, this commendation of Bullinger was not only true at the time but also prescient. Now that 450 years have passed since the Heidelberg Catechism was first published, it still serves the churches as the one of best catechetical instruments for the

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1. This article is a greatly expanded and revised version of an earlier article, “The Lord’s Supper and the Popish Mass,” *The Outlook* 55/5 (May, 2005): 17-22.

2. 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, vol. 22 (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 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 reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld: Friderichs, 1858), 5:415.

instruction of church members in the Christian faith and an excellent “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) for the ministry of the Word of God through preaching. While the Heidelberg Catechism follows the classic form of traditional catechisms, expounding the Apostle’s Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer, it is distinguished throughout by its warmly pastoral style and emphasis upon the “comfort” of the gospel of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ.

Among the 129 questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism, however, there is one that has provoked considerable controversy—Question and Answer 80 on the “popish Mass.” This question and answer seems to break the mold of the Catechism’s generally moderate and genial tone, since it offers a rather severe, even harsh-sounding, condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine and practice with respect to the sacrament of the Mass. Since this question and answer was not included in the original edition of the Catechism, and only appeared in the second and then in revised form in the third edition, the severity of its condemnation of the Mass seems somewhat out of character with the moderate tone of the Catechism. Furthermore, though the severity of its language reflects the vigor of sixteenth-century polemics regarding the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, it seems out of accord with modern sensibilities, which eschew doctrinal distinctiveness and sharp delineation of the truth over against error. In the modern context with its diminishment of the importance of doctrinal precision and its commitment 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 non-confessional status.

As a small contribution to the commemoration of the publishing of the Heidelberg Catechism 450 years ago, my aim in this article is to offer a general account of the historical background and occasion for the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism, especially the addition of Q. and A. 80 in its final, received form. Before any judgment can be made regarding the continued value of Q. and 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. and 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. and A. 80 came to be included in the received text of the Catechism. Then in the third and final part of the article, I will

offer a defense of the accuracy of the Catechism's condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass. Was the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 a proper answer to the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the writing of the Catechism? And does Q. and A. 80 express important features of the biblical and Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper, which were appropriately affirmed by the Reformed churches in response to the decrees regarding the Mass by the Council of Trent that were adopted shortly before the Catechism was published?

While it is important to ascertain the accuracy of Q. and 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. and A. 80 no longer accurately reflects the present doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, then it is incumbent upon those Reformed churches that subscribe to the Catechism to consider whether it should be removed from the text of the Catechism or revised in some appropriate fashion. Since some Reformed denominations have recently chosen to relegate Q. and 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. If "tradition is the living faith of the dead" and "traditionalism is the dead faith of the living,"<sup>3</sup> then it is important for Reformed churches today to determine whether their adherence to this question and answer of the Catechism is a piece of uninformed traditionalism or an honest expression of heartfelt conviction based upon the teaching of Scripture. For this reason, I will also give special attention, in my defense of the validity of Q. and A. 80, to a recent evaluation of it by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The decision of the CRCNA to remove Q. and 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.

## 1. The Historical Occasion, Authorship and Purposes of the Heidelberg Catechism

Before I address the particular occasion and background to the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 in the second and third editions of the Heidelberg Catechism, a brief account of the historical occasion and

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

preparation of the Catechism is in order.<sup>4</sup> The name of the Catechism reminds us that it originated at a particular time (1563), in a specific city (Heidelberg, a leading city in the German state of the Palatinate), and for a particular purpose and church.

### 1.1. The Historical Occasion

The story of the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism is a fascinating one, and illustrates the close inter-relationship between the reformation of the church in Germany during the sixteenth-century and the political and ecclesiastical turmoil that accompanied it. Although the reformation in Germany was dominated by Luther and his followers, the Reformed faith initially spread into areas of Germany that were bordered by Switzerland, where the influence of Zwingli and Calvin was especially strong. As early as 1521, Strassburg, a German free city at the time, was influenced by Zwingli, and later under the leadership of Martin Bucer and John Calvin, who served an expatriate French-speaking Reformed congregation from 1538-41, became a center of Reformed faith and practice. However, Heidelberg, the city where the Heidelberg Catechism originated, remained for a considerable period a stronghold of the Roman Catholic Church. As the capital city of the Lower Palatinate in the Rhineland, Heidelberg was governed by the count palatine who also served as one of the seven electors responsible for the selection of the Holy Roman emperor. Although a popular uprising of Protestant sentiment occurred during a service at the Church of the Holy Spirit as early as 1545, the cause of the evangelical faith languished in the Palatinate until 1556, when Otto

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4. In my brief sketch of this history, I am relying upon a number of fine historical accounts of the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism. See Hendrikus Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Bard Thompson et al. (Philadelphia/Boston: United Church Press, 1963), 76-92; Lyle Bierma et al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology, With a Translation of the Smaller and Larger Catechisms of Ursinus*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, gen. ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15-74; idem, "The History and People behind the Heidelberg Catechism," in *A Faith Worth Teaching: The Heidelberg Catechism's Enduring Heritage*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 3-15; I. John Hesselink, "The Dramatic Story of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, vol. 22: Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Publishers, 1994), 273-88; Fred Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987/1988); Herman J. Selderhuis, "From Heidelberg, through Emden, and into the whole world," in *Power of Faith—450 Years of the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Karla Apperloo-Boersma and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 19-28; Bard Thompson, "Historical Background of the Catechism," in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 8-30; and Wim Verboom, "The Completion of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *The Church's Book of Comfort*, ed. Willem van't Spijker (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 27-61.

Henry became the elector and Lutheranism was officially recognized. The official recognition of Lutheranism in the Palatinate took place shortly after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, when the subjects of each territory in Germany were permitted to follow the religion of their civil ruler according to the principle, "his own region, his own religion" (*cuius regio, eius religio*). During Otto Henry's reign, the use of Luther's smaller catechism was authorized and a new church order was introduced.

The ascendancy of the Reformed faith in the Palatine stemmed largely from the efforts of Otto Henry's successor, elector Frederick III. During the brief reign of Otto Henry, the city of Heidelberg had become a strong center of evangelical theology. Not only had Otto Henry succeeded in declaring Lutheranism the religion of the realm, but he had also managed to staff the University of Heidelberg with a new faculty consisting of professors of a moderate Lutheranism in the mold of Philip Melancthon and others sympathetic to the Reformed faith. Among the faculty, only Tilemann Hesshus represented a militant Lutheran position, especially on the disputed issue of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.<sup>5</sup> From the commencement of his electorship in 1559, Frederick III promoted the cause of the reformation in the Palatinate, and steered the churches in the direction of the Reformed faith. While Frederick III never expressly identified himself as a Calvinist, and maintained that he was simply interested in the propagation of biblical teaching in the church, he clearly identified himself with the evangelical convictions of the sixteenth-century Reformation. In 1557 he expressed his agreement with the Augsburg Confession, "signing the Frankfurter Recess, a confessional statement composed by Melancthon in order to unite the various Protestant (largely Lutheran) factions."<sup>6</sup>

Not long after Frederick III's reign began in the Palatinate, his commitment to the Reformed faith became solidified in the context of ongoing polemics between more strident Lutherans, especially Hesshus, and proponents of a more moderate Melancthonian and Reformed understanding of the gospel. These polemics focused especially upon the Lord's Supper and the question of the manner of Christ's presence in the sacrament. The differences between the

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5. Hesshus (or Heshusius) was a "Gnesio-Lutheran" who militantly defended the pure doctrine of Luther (in distinction from the "Phillipists" or "Melancthonians" who were willing to modify some of Luther's teachings). For a brief account of the theological parties in the Palatinate in the period preceding the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism, see Bierma, "The History and People Behind the Heidelberg Catechism," 4-8. Hesshus is known for his vigorous polemics with John Calvin on the subject of the Lord's Supper. See John Calvin, "The True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper (in order to dissipate the mists of Tileman Heshusius)," in *John Calvin's Tracts and Treatises*, reprint with introduction and historical notes by Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 495-572.

6. Hesselink, "The Dramatic Story of the Heidelberg Catechism," 276.

Lutheran and Reformed parties regarding the Lord's Supper were especially focused upon the Christological issue of the relation between Christ's divine and human natures in the unity of his person. After dismissing Hesshus from his teaching post at the University of Heidelberg, Frederick III became convinced that the controversy regarding the Lord's Supper between Lutheran and Reformed theologians needed to be settled in order for peace and unity to prevail in the church. After undertaking a careful study of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Frederick III concluded that the Reformed doctrine was most consistent with the teaching of the Bible and a new catechism was needed that would serve to unite the churches of the Palatinate and end the fractious infighting between Lutheran and Reformed theologians. While remaining tolerant of a diversity of views, Frederick III became convinced that such a new catechism would solidify the evangelical faith of the churches and end the theological debates regarding the Lord's Supper that threatened to weaken the cause of the reformation in the Palatinate.

## 1.2. Authorship of the Catechism

Before identifying the purposes that Frederick III aimed to achieve by the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism, some comment needs to be made regarding the complicated issue of its authorship. A long-standing tradition assigned the authorship of the Catechism to a committee of two persons whom Frederick III commissioned for this task: Zacharias Ursinus, a twenty-eight year old theologian whom Frederick III had appointed to teach at the University of Heidelberg at the recommendation of his teacher, Peter Martyr, one of the most gifted Reformed theologians of the period; and Caspar Olevianus, a twenty-six year old theologian who first succeeded Hesshus at the University of Heidelberg and then began to serve as pastor of the Church of the Holy Spirit after Ursinus came to Heidelberg. Summarizing this "old, venerable tradition" regarding the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism, Fred Klooster observes that

Ursinus was responsible for the main content of the Catechism, supposedly prepared in Latin, while Olevianus was credited with the warm and lively German style. That old tradition will not stand close scrutiny, however; in fact, the authorship of the Catechism remains uncertain in several respects. Frederick III is rightly regarded the real father of the Catechism. He commissioned it in 1562, directed its production, personally made some changes, and secured its approval by the Heidelberg synod early in 1563. A few years later he courageously defended it before the imperial diet. Although we may call him the father of the Heidelberg

Catechism, he was certainly not its author. Ursinus did have a major role in producing the Heidelberg Catechism, but no one is sure how much of the work was his. The personal role of Olevianus, once considered major, now seems to recede as historical research progresses. The only clear answer to the question of the Catechism's authors is that it was in some sense a team project.<sup>7</sup>

Although considerable debate regarding the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism continues, for our purpose it is enough to note that, as Klooster's summary indicates, a consensus has emerged on three points: first, although Frederick III did not personally write or contribute much to the writing of the Catechism in its final form, he was the principal architect and proponent of the process that eventuated in the publication of the Catechism in January 1563; second, if there is one writer who played a predominant role in the writing of the Catechism, that writer is Ursinus and not Olevianus whose role, though considerable, was far less direct than that of Ursinus;<sup>8</sup> and third, the final draft of the Catechism was the product of the combined editorial labor of not only Ursinus and Olevianus, but also "the advice and cooperation of ... [the] entire theological faculty in this place, and of all superintendents and distinguished

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7. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 159-60. For extensive treatments of the question of the authorship of the Catechism, see Christina Boerke, "The People Behind the Heidelberg Catechism," in *The Church's Book of Comfort*, 62-88; Bierma, "The History and People Behind the Heidelberg Catechism," 11-15; idem, "The Purpose and Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism," 49-74; idem, "Vester Grundt and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, 289-310; Walter Hollweg, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Heidelberg Katechismus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 127-52; Fred Klooster, "Ursinus' Primacy in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate 1559-1583*, ed. Derk Visser (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 73-100; and idem, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 159-171.

8. Bierma, "The History and People Behind the Catechism," 13-14: "The literary features of the HC suggest that the text was the work a single craftsman of great skill, and the circumstantial evidence for Ursinus as that craftsman is compelling. First he had considerable experience in teaching, translating, and composing catechetical material prior to and during his work on the Heidelberg project. In fact, in the two years before the publication of the HC, Ursinus authored two other catechisms, both of which left their stamp on the HC's text. His Smaller Catechism of late 1561 or early 1562 was a simple instructional tool for lay adults and children that served as a preliminary draft for the HC. Not only are the theme, threefold division and substructure of the Smaller Catechism and HC the same, but also parallel phrases from at least ninety of the questions and answers in the former can be found in 110 of the questions and answers in the latter. Ursinus's Larger Catechism, probably composed in late 1562 as a textbook for advanced courses in theology, also influenced the HC. At least twenty-eight questions have linguistic parallels in the HC that cannot be traced to the Smaller Catechism."

servants of the church,” to quote Frederick’s preface to the Catechism that accompanied the first three editions.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.3. The Purposes of the Heidelberg Catechism

Even though some uncertainty remains regarding the authorship and preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism, there is little uncertainty regarding the purposes that the authors of the Catechism hoped it would serve. The most important source for ascertaining these purposes is the preface to the Catechism, which Frederick III authored and attached to the Catechism when it was submitted for printing to the publisher on January 19, 1563. In this preface, three specific purposes are identified.<sup>10</sup>

Consistent with the circumstances that led elector Frederick III to commission the preparation of a new catechism for the Palatinate, one purpose of the Catechism was to promote harmony and peace within the churches upon the basis of a common rule of faith. In the opening paragraphs of his preface, Frederick III notes that he commissioned the Catechism in order to fulfill his duty to promote and maintain “quiet and peaceable living” among the subjects of his realm. In order for such peace to obtain in the Palatinate, the preparation of a new catechism would afford the churches a “fixed form and model” of instruction in the Christian faith and godliness. Interestingly, the preface to the Catechism does not mention the name of any particular theologian, but speaks broadly of “Christian doctrine,” “Christian instruction,” “the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel,” and a “catechism of our Christian religion, according to the Word of God.”<sup>11</sup> These phrases well represent Frederick’s intention, not to offer a sectarian or narrow statement of doctrine, but to offer a unifying and consensual statement of the teaching of Scripture that would regulate the ministry of the gospel throughout the Palatinate. The new catechism was written in significant measure to end the theological infighting that had long plagued the churches of the region, and that especially focused upon disputes pertaining to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In this connection, it should not be forgotten that the Catechism was early included as part of a more general Church Order for the churches of

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9. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 160.

10. Elector Frederick III’s preface is printed in Wilhelm Niesel, ed., *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938), 138-39, and is reproduced in English translation in Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 147-52. For an analysis of this preface and its explanation of the purposes of the Catechism, see Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 146-56; Lyle D. Bierma, “The Purpose and Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 49-74; and idem, “The History and People Behind the Catechism,” 9-10.

11. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 150, 151.



the Palatinate and was, therefore, intended to serve the cause of regulating and unifying the faith and practice of all the churches of the region.<sup>12</sup>

Next to this general purpose of promoting unity of faith and doctrine in the churches, Frederick III's preface expressly identifies two further purposes for the Catechism. The first of these purposes reflects the nature of the Catechism, which treats in traditional catechetical fashion the Apostles Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. In his preface, Frederick III observes that "our blooming youth is disposed to be careless in respect to Christian doctrine, both in the schools and churches of our principality."<sup>13</sup> In order to provide for the instruction of the young people, an "established, certain, and clear catechism" was necessary. Without the use of the Catechism as a guide to govern the instruction of the young people in the teaching of the Word of God, the likelihood was great that they would remain "perplexed with irrelevant and needless questions, and at times ... [be] burdened with unsound doctrines."<sup>14</sup> Consistent with the general purpose of catechetical instruction, the Heidelberg Catechism was prepared to serve the cause of comprehensive instruction of the young people of the Palatinate in the central tenets of the gospel and the Christian religion.

In addition to the obvious instructional use of the Catechism, Frederick III also explicitly mentions in the preface the use of the Catechism as a rule for the preaching of the gospel. According to Frederick,

we have secured the preparation of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian religion, according to the word of God ... in order that the youth in churches and schools may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine, and be thoroughly trained therein, but also that the Pastors and Schoolmasters themselves may be provided with a fixed form and model, by which to regulate the instruction of youth, and not, at their option, adopt daily changes, or introduce erroneous doctrines.<sup>15</sup>

The widespread use of the Heidelberg Catechism as an instrument to guide the preaching of the Word of God in the history of the Reformed churches represents, accordingly, a practice that conforms to the original intention of its authors.<sup>16</sup> To encourage the

12. For a text of this Church Order, see Wilhelm Niesel, ed., *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen*, 140-49.

13. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 160.

14. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 150.

15. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 151-52.

16. For treatments of the use of the Heidelberg Catechism as a rule and source for preaching in the Reformed churches, see Arie Baars, "The Simple Heidelberg

use of the Catechism in preaching, later editions of the Catechism divided its questions and answers into fifty-two Lord's Days which were to be expounded at one of the church services on the Lord's Day.

## 2. The Inclusion of Question and Answer 80

In my summary of the historical background and occasion for the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism, I noted the important role debates regarding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper played in the preparation of the Catechism. One of the principal motives of Frederick III in providing a new catechism for the churches of the Palatinate was the desire to settle disputes on the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. The prominence of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Heidelberg Catechism is further confirmed by the addition of a separate question and answer in the second and third editions of the Catechism, Q. and A. 80. In this question and answer, a specific condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass was added to the section of the Catechism that provided an extensive exposition of the Lord's Supper.

While the story of the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism is generally known, the story of the eventual inclusion of Q. and A. 80 is not as well known.<sup>17</sup> In the first year of the Catechism's existence, four successive editions were published. With one exception, these editions (three in German, one in Latin) were textually identical. The

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Catechism... 'A brief history of the catechism sermon in the Netherlands,' in *Power of Faith*, ed. Karla Apperloo-Boersma and Herman J. Selderhuis, 159-67; Joel R. Beeke, "Holding Firmly to the Heidelberg: The Validity and Relevance of Catechism Preaching," in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 35-61; idem, "Preaching the Catechism Today," in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 62-78; and Willem Jan op't Hof, "The Catechism in Preaching," in *The Church's Book of Comfort*, ed. Willem Van't Spijker, 187-210.

17. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 180, observes that details regarding these editions perplexed historians for no less than three hundred years after the Catechism's publication. For extensive accounts of the early editions and translations of the Catechism, see J.I. Doedes, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus in zijne eerste levensjaren, 1563-1567* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1867); August den Hollander, "The Distribution of the Heidelberg Catechism in print," in *Power of Faith*, ed. Karla Apperloo-Boersma and Herman J. Selderhuis, 51-59; and Karin Y. Maag, "Early Editions and Translations of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma et al., 103-17. Interestingly, Doedes argues that the first edition was not likely in print until February, 1563, and the date of elector Frederick III's preface does not coincide with the completion of the first printing (Doedes, 19-20). For a focused treatment of the origin and historical criticisms of Q. and A. 80 in particular, see the extensive study of Ulrich Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe: Sinn und Recht der 80. Frage des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), esp. 13-39. Beyer's study is the most complete account of the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 in the 2nd and subsequent editions of the Catechism, and, as its subtitle indicates, offers a theological analysis of the significance and validity of its condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass.

exception was the addition of a question and answer dealing with the difference between the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass. The story of these initial four editions of the Catechism, which were first published in 1563, is summarized concisely by Fred Klooster:

The first German edition probably left the publisher before the end of February, 1563. A second edition was probably ready before the end of March; it included an entirely new question and answer, the 80<sup>th</sup>. Before the end of March the Latin translation was also published; it included the 80<sup>th</sup> question from the second German edition. The third German edition came from the same publisher a little later—between March and November, but probably during April. A few words were added to the 80<sup>th</sup> question. The fourth German edition was a republication of the text of the third edition, and the Catechism was incorporated into the new Palatinate Church Order. It was published at Heidelberg and contained a new preface, dated November 15, 1563 at Mosbach. The fourth edition became the *textus receptus* used throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

As Klooster's summary indicates, the second edition of the Catechism was the first to include Q. and A. 80. Furthermore, in the second edition, the text of Q. and A. 80 is slightly shorter than the text in the third edition. In the third edition, the text is given in its final or received form, and expresses even more sharply the difference between the biblical doctrine of the Lord's Supper and the "Popish Mass." The text of these two editions is as follows:

(Second German Edition)

How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

The Lord's supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once for all. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but an idolatrous denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

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18. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 181.

19. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 186. Klooster notes that the most important copy of the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism is located in the Pronksaal of the National Library in Vienna, and contained a handwritten copy of Q.

(Third German Edition, the received text)

How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

The Lord's supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry.<sup>20</sup>

In the historical record, there are only two significant clues regarding the addition of Q. and A. 80. The first of these clues is an explanatory note that was appended to the last page of the second edition of the Catechism: "To the Christian reader. That which was overlooked in the first impression, especially folio 55, is now, by order of the Elector, appended."<sup>21</sup> The curious feature of this explanation of the addition of Q. and A. 80 is that it seems contradictory. On the one hand, the failure to include the question and answer regarding the popish Mass is characterized as an "oversight" in the printing of the first addition. On the other hand, the addition of the question and answer in the second edition is ascribed to the direct order of

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and A. 80 as it was printed in the second edition of the Catechism: "[I]t may well be the copy sent by Elector Frederick III to Emperor Ferdinand shortly after its publication. The unique feature of this copy is that a beautifully handwritten page containing the 80th question is pasted in at the appropriate place. If this was the Emperor's copy, it would appear that Frederick III sent him a copy of the addition that was being made in the second edition before it [sic] was actually published" (*The Heidelberg Catechism*, 183).

20. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 188. See Herman J. Selderhuis, "From Heidelberg, through Emden, and into the whole world," 20, who notes that "one translation—one only, for no such translation was produced after again—even repeated the reference to idolatry and so surpassed the addition as it had been commissioned by the elector: 'Therefore the mass is basically nothing but an *idolatrous* denial of the one suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry'; and J.I. Doedes, *De Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 104.

21. Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," 82, cites the German text: "An den christlichen Leser. Was im ersten Druck übersehen, als fürnehmlich foli 55, ist jetzunder auss befelch churfürstlicher Gnaden addiert worden. 1563."

elector Frederick III.<sup>22</sup> The statement could be read as though Q. and A. 80 was part of the original text of the Catechism, but that its absence in the printing of the first edition was merely an oversight, perhaps of the printer. But the explanatory note could also be read to imply that Frederick III decided that such a question and answer needed to be added to improve the Catechism's usefulness. Since the explanatory note speaks of the elector's "order" to include Q. and A. 80, it seems that the latter explanation is the more likely. An "order" from the elector to include this question and answer would hardly have been necessary, if the question and answer was simply mistakenly overlooked in the first printing of the Catechism.

The second of these clues is a statement of Olevianus in a letter to John Calvin, dated April 3, 1563: "In the first German edition ... the question about the difference between the Lord's Supper and the papal Mass was omitted. Admonished by me the Prince desired that it should be added in the second German and in the first Latin edition."<sup>23</sup> While Olevianus' letter seems generally to corroborate the explanatory note in the second edition, it leaves similar questions unanswered. Was the absence of this question and answer in the first edition simply an oversight on the part of the printer or those who prepared the manuscript for publication? Or was the insertion of this question and answer a true addition to the original text? Did Olevianus or Elector Frederick III originally express the need for the addition? And what role did these two key figures play in the writing of Q. and A. 80, including the strengthening of the language in the third edition? Since Olevianus informs Calvin that he urged the elector to include Q. and A. 80, it is possible that he may have authored it.<sup>24</sup> However, in the absence of further historical evidence

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22. Cf. Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," 82: "If something is overlooked, why does it need a formal order of the Elector to be added?"

23. Letter of Olevianus to John Calvin, April 3, 1563: "[I]n prima editione germanica ... omnia erat quaestio de discrimine coenae et missae pontificiae. Admonitus a me Princeps voluit in secunda editione germanica et prima editione latina addi" (*Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt annia*, ed. G. Balm, E. Qmitz, E. Reuss, et. al., vol. 19 [Brunsvigae, Schwetschke, 1863-1900], 684. We do not have any direct evidence in Calvin's writings or correspondence that he ever offered an opinion, as did his contemporary Bullinger, regarding the Heidelberg Catechism. See Fred Klooster, "Calvin's Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, 311-331. Klooster argues that Calvin's attitude toward Frederick III's reformatory work, including the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism, can be inferred from his dedication of his Commentary on Jeremiah to Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, some three months after receiving Olevianus' letter and a copy of the Catechism.

24. Though a piece of indirect and circumstantial evidence, it is worthwhile noting that the strong language of Q. and A. 80 echoes Calvin's treatment of the Roman Catholic Mass in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. If Olevianus, who was a student of Calvin's in Geneva, authored Q. & A. 80, the striking resemblance between the language of this question and answer and that of Calvin has a ready explanation. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xviii. The strong

that might shed light on the background and origins of Q. and A. 80, it is wise to refrain from offering any firm answers to these questions. Clearly, the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 was regarded by elector Frederick III, Olevianus, and the ecclesiastical authorities in the Palatinate, to be a matter of special importance. In the language of each of these clues, the absence of this question and answer was regarded as a lacuna in the first edition of the Catechism that required correction.

The desire to include Q. and A. 80, with its sharp delineation of the difference between the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass, raises a further and more general question: what motivated the authors of the Catechism to add or include this particular question? Unlike those features of the Catechism's exposition of the Lord's Supper that were addressed to differences between the Lutheran and Reformed on the presence of Christ in the sacrament, this question and answer was specifically aimed at the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. What historical factors might account for the judgment that such a strong condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass needed to be included in the list of questions and answers dealing with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

Since there is nothing in the historical record that speaks directly to the possible motives for the inclusion of Q. and A. 80, the reason it was added in the second edition and then strengthened in the third edition remains unknown. The only historical explanation that has some plausibility remains a matter of conjecture. Perhaps in the period after the conclusion of the synodical meeting in the Palatinate that approved the original text of the Heidelberg Catechism, its authors became aware of the Council of Trent's decree about the sacrifice of the Mass (*decretum de sacrificio missae*) of September 17, 1562. Since the German Protestant princes and theologians were following closely at the time the deliberations and decrees of the Council of Trent, it may be that the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 was thought to be necessary as a response.<sup>25</sup> Since the Council of Trent

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condemnation of the Mass in Q. and A. 80 parallels in a striking way the severity of Calvin's language in his evaluation of the Roman Catholic doctrine. For example, at the close of his chapter on the Mass, Calvin concludes that the "Mass, taken in the highest purity it can claim, without its appurtenances, from root to top, swarms with every sort of impiety, blasphemy, idolatry, and sacrilege" [Latin: *impietatis, blasphemiae, idololatriae, sacrilegii scaterere*] (*Institutes*, IV.xviii.18). See also Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 21-22, 60-77, for a similar sentiment regarding Calvin's influence and Olevianus's role in writing Q. and A. 80.

25. Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 17-18, acknowledges that this session may have played a role in the formulation of Q. & A. 80. However, he also rightly points out that the themes of Q. & A. 80 are consistent with the general teaching of the Catechism on the Lord's Supper, and reflect an obvious acquaintance with medieval Roman Catholic teaching and practice. The condemnation of the Mass (as an unbloody sacrifice and the idolatry of the veneration of the consecrated elements) was common to Lutheran and Reformed theologians alike.

strongly affirmed the sacrificial nature of the Mass, as well as the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the sacramental elements into the real body and blood of Christ, elector Frederick III, Olevianus and others, felt compelled to respond with the condemnations of the Roman Catholic doctrine in Q. and A. 80.<sup>26</sup> Although this is the likeliest explanation of the motivation for the inclusion of Q. and A. 80, it does not afford an explanation for its "omission" from the first addition. Nor does it shed any light on the question why the third edition of the Catechism added additional, and sharper language, to its condemnation of the Mass.

Despite these uncertainties pertaining to the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 in the final, received form of the text of the Catechism, all of the subsequent editions of the Catechism included this question and answer. The official, ecclesiastically acknowledged and received form of the text of the Catechism has until recently always included Q. and A. 80 as an expression of the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper in distinction from the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

### 3. Assessing the Past and Present Value of Q. and A. 80

While a complete explanation of the historical circumstances that led to the inclusion of Q. and A. 80 in the received form of the Heidelberg Catechism may remain elusive, the confessional validity of its sharp condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass can and must be assessed. In the centuries after the initial publication of the Catechism, the Reformed churches of the Palatinate were often found in a defensive posture, particularly when the political situation altered and they struggled to retain the protections that were granted by the Treaty of Augsburg of 1555. In the seventeenth-century, when the Palatinate came under the authority of a Roman prince, there were frequent efforts to rule against the Reformed confession.<sup>27</sup> These efforts were often fueled by

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26. Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context, 82-3. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House reprint, 1985 [1931]), 1:535-6. Schaff offers the opinion that "[t]his question was inserted by the express command of the Elector, perhaps by his own hand, as a Protestant counter-blast to the Romish anathemas of the Council of Trent, which closed its sessions Dec. 4, 1563." Cf. Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2001), 2:860: "It's clear that the addition of Q&A 80 to the catechism was an attempt to refute the errors of the Roman Catholic Church in its use of the Mass. The Council of Trent formulated the doctrine of the Mass in September 1562. Very likely this news did not reach Heidelberg until after the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism appeared in January 1563."

27. Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," 83: "In the seventeenth century when the Palatinate came under a Roman prince, the Jesuits took the words 'accursed idolatry' (*vermaledēite Abgötterey*) as a reason for their restless attempts to rule the Reformed confession out of the protection of the Treaty of Augsburg of 1555." Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 27-39, offers a fairly detailed account of these efforts, which

Roman Catholic displeasure with the sharply worded language of Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Although Q. and A. 80 was not the special focus of Lutheran polemics against the Catechism, orthodox Lutheran opposition to the Catechism's doctrine of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was also unrelenting.<sup>28</sup> Whereas elector Frederick III commissioned the Catechism in order to promote peace and unity among the churches, the teaching of the Catechism, especially on disputed aspects of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, was frequently challenged on biblical and theological grounds. These challenges often came to focus upon Q. and A. 80. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this question and answer, in the past and in the present, has always elicited the most criticism and threatened the Catechism's reputation as a moderate and unifying expression of the biblical, evangelical and Reformed faith.

While it is not my intention to trace the history of the debates regarding Q. and A. 80, it is necessary to address directly the question of the validity and truthfulness of this question and answer. Was it a proper and biblical response, at the time of its writing, to the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church? And should it be retained as a valid statement of the faith of the Reformed churches in the face of the Roman Catholic Church's contemporary doctrine and practice regarding the Mass?

### 3.1. The Teaching of Q. & A. 80

The treatment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the Heidelberg Catechism can be distinguished into three general parts.<sup>29</sup>

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included attempts to prevent the printing and distribution of the Heidelberg Catechism.

28. Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," 84-5: "From the very beginning right-wing Lutherans attacked it heavily. The Catechism was accused of deviation from the *Augustana Variata*, of Zwinglianism, of considering the elements of the sacrament not as organs of grace but as mere signs. As early as May 1563, three Lutheran princes (of Zeibrücken, Württemberg, and Baden) sent a long letter of warning to Fredeick accompanied by an indication of the errors in the Heidelberg Catechism. This was the so-called *Anweisung*." See also Hesselink, "The Dramatic Story of the Heidelberg Catechism," 285-87.

29. For a general treatment of the Catechism's doctrine of the sacraments, see Lyle D. Bierma, *The Doctrine of the Sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism: Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, New Series, Number 4, ed. David Willis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999); and idem, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 71-89. In the first of these studies, Bierma concludes "that the irenic and catholic spirit of the Heidelberg Catechism extends also to its doctrine of the sacraments. ... What past scholarship has identified in Heidelberg Catechism 65-82 as its distinctively Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Bullingerian features are in fact characteristic of one or both of the other traditions as well. And on those sacramental



In the first set of questions and answers regarding this sacrament (Q. & A. 75-77), the Catechism provides a positive statement of what it signifies and seals to believers. In the second set of questions (Q. & A. 78-79), the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper is addressed, particularly as this is distinguished from the Roman Catholic view. It is in this context that Q. and A. 80 describes the difference between the biblical doctrine of the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass. Then in the third set of questions (Q. & A. 81-82), the Catechism considers the issue of the proper recipients of the sacrament and the need for church discipline in excluding unbelieving and impenitent persons from participation.

In the opening exposition of the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism stresses its function as a visible representation of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross and the saving benefits of his mediatorial work. When believers partake of the Supper, they are provided a visible token and pledge that Christ's body was offered and his blood shed for them. The sacrament visibly confirms believers in their participation in Christ, assuring them of the benefits of his sacrifice and communicating to them his crucified body and shed blood as their spiritual food. Because of the intimate conjunction of the sacramental sign and the grace signified, believers may be persuaded that they are members of Christ "as certainly" as they see the sacramental elements with their eyes and "as assuredly" as they receive them from the hand of the minister.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, since the sacrament visibly represents the gospel, which is firstly and chiefly administered through the lively preaching of the gospel, it demands a believing reception on the part of its recipient. Unless the recipient acknowledges the truth of the gospel promise, which is visibly signified in the sacrament, it is not possible that the sacrament should serve as a means to nourish and strengthen faith. However, when believers "embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and the death of Christ," they obtain a greater assurance of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and grow into a deeper and more intimate fellowship with Christ. Through the sacrament, the believer becomes "more and more united to his [Christ's] body, by the Holy Spirit, who dwells both in Christ and in us, so that, though

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issues on which these Protestant families had previously quarreled, the catechism passes by in silence" (41-42).

30. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 75: "How is it signified and sealed unto you in the holy supper that you partake of the one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross, and of all His benefits? Thus, that Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup in remembrance of Him, and has added these promises: first, that His body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and His blood shed for me, as certainly as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me, and the cup communicated to me; and further, that with His crucified body and shed blood He Himself feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life as assuredly as I receive from the hand of the minister, and taste with my mouth, the bread and cup of the Lord as sure signs of the body and blood of Christ."

Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and live and are governed by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul.”<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to the disputed question of the nature of Christ’s presence in the Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism frames its doctrine between the alternatives of Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism. Though Elector Frederick III hoped to unite the churches of the Palatinate in their confession of the catholic Christian faith, his Reformed sensitivities on the subject of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper clearly influenced the formulations of the Catechism. In the Catechism’s exposition of the presence of the body of the ascended Christ, for example, it gives an answer that implicitly rejects the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s glorified body. Because the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation requires the local presence of Christ’s body wherever the sacrament is administered, it represents, from the point of view of the Heidelberg Catechism, a failure to maintain the distinct properties of the human and divine natures of Christ.<sup>32</sup> To affirm that, by virtue of the union of the human nature with the divine nature of the exalted Christ, the body of Christ becomes ubiquitous, is to move in the

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31. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 76.

32. The Reformed view of the local presence of Christ’s body, which denies the Lutheran teaching of its ubiquity, is clearly expressed elsewhere in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 48: “But if His human nature is not present wherever His Godhead is, are not then these two natures in Christ separated from one another? Not at all; for since the Godhead is illimitable and omnipresent, it must follow that it is beyond the bounds of the human nature [German: “ausserhalb ihrer angenommen”; Latin: “extra humanum naturam”] it has assumed, and yet none the less is in this human nature and remains personally united to it.” The Latin translation and expression, *extra humanum naturam* (“beyond the human nature”), became the occasion historically for Lutheran theologians to speak of “that Calvinistic extra” (*extra-calvinisticum*). For a treatment of this Christological issue and its significance in the debates between Reformed and Lutheran theology historically, see Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.4 and II.xvi.14; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 93-95; idem, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 234-41; E. David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966); Thomas F. Torrance, “Calvin and the Knowledge of God,” *The Christian Century* 81/22 (May 27, 1964): 696-99; Richard Muller, s.v. “communicatio idiomatum/ communicatio proprietatum,” in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 72-75; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), IV/1.180-81. In his study of Calvin’s Christology, Willis argues that the Reformed insistence upon the non-ubiquity of Christ’s human nature was no innovation of Calvin’s or the Reformed tradition. It was truly an *extra catholicum*, which affirms the presence of the whole Person of Christ (*totus Christus*) in all his words and works, but not the presence of the whole of Christ’s two natures (*totum Christum*). This Christology accords with the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A. D. (the two natures are neither to be confused nor separated, but retain their respective properties in the union of the one Person). It finds expression in a long tradition spanning the writings of Augustine, John of Damascus, and Peter Lombard (*Sentences*).

direction of a Eutychian Christology by confusing the properties of humanity and deity.

Within the context of the Catechism's exposition of the nature of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, and especially the proper sense in which Christ is present to believers in the sacrament, Q. and A. 80 addresses the specific issue of the difference/s between the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic Mass. The principal focus of Q. and A. 80 is evident in the question that it poses: "What difference is there between the Lord's Supper and the popish Mass?" The focus of this question is not upon the general doctrine of the sacrament, but upon the distinction between the true sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the false doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church on the Mass:

What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the popish Mass?

The Lord's supper testifies to us that we have full pardon of all our sins by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself has accomplished on the cross; and that by the Holy Spirit we are ingrafted into Christ, who according to His human nature is now not on earth but in heaven, at the right hand of God His Father, and wills there to be worshipped by us; but the Mass teaches that the living and the dead have not the forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ unless Christ is still daily offered for them by the priests; and that Christ is bodily present under the form of bread and wine and is therefore to be worshipped in them. And thus the Mass, at bottom, is nothing else than a denial of the one sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.<sup>33</sup>

The condemnation of the Mass in Q. and A. 80 has two, closely related foci. In the first place, Q. and A. 80 asserts that the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass teaches that the sacrament is a sacrificial offering of Christ upon the altar by an ordained priest. By treating the sacrament as a genuine offering of Christ upon the altar,

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33. The final German text (3rd ed.) reads as follows: "Was ist für ein underscheid zwischen dem Abendmal des HERRN unnd der Pöpstlichen Mess? Das Abendmahl bezeuget uns dass wir vollkommene vergebung aller unser sünden haben durch das einige opffer Jesu Christ so er selbst ein mal am Creutz vollbracht hat. Unnd dass wir durch den heiligen Geist Christo werden eingeleibt der jetzund mit seinem waren leib im Himmel zur Rechten des Vatters is und daselbst wil angebetet werden. Die Mess aber lehret dass die lebendigen und die todten nicht durch das leiden Christi vergebung der sünden haben es sey den dass Christus noch täglich für sie von den Messpriestern geopfert werde. Und das Christus leiblich under der gestalt brots unnd weins sey und derhalben darinn soll angebetet werden. Und ist also die Mess im grund Nichts anderst denn ein verleugnung des einigen opffers und leidens Jesu Christi und ein vermaledeyte Abgötterey" (Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen*, 168-69).

the Roman Catholic doctrine radically compromises the perfection and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross, which Christ accomplished once-for-all and then sat down at the right hand of God. Rather than viewing the sacrament as a visible sign and seal to the believer of the gospel promise of the forgiveness of sins through the finished work of Christ, the Mass invites the faithful to trust in the priest's capacity to offer Christ daily upon the altar of the Mass as an indispensable basis for the forgiveness of the sins of the living and the dead. In this way, the completeness and adequacy of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross is compromised, and the Mass becomes the actual basis for the believer's enjoyment of the forgiveness of sins and communion with God. In the Catechism's view, the sacrament signifies and seals to believers the finished work of Christ upon the cross. But in the Roman Catholic view, the sacrament is an integral component of Christ's continual sacrifice of atonement, which is repeated and represented in the Mass.

In the second place, Q. and A. 80 focuses upon the Roman Catholic doctrine of Christ's real presence in the sacramental elements of bread and wine. Upon the basis of its doctrine of transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine, though retaining their outward appearance and "accidents"—they continue to look, feel, and taste like bread and wine—become in substance the actual body and blood of Christ. Through the priestly act of consecrating the sacramental elements of bread and wine, Christ's real body and blood are "present under the form of bread and wine and [he] is therefore to be worshipped in them." By virtue of the identification of the sacramental elements with the body and blood of Christ that they signify, the Roman Catholic view encourages the adoration of Christ in the elements. This, in the strong language of the Catechism, makes the Mass an "accursed idolatry."

According to the Catechism's general teaching, the problem with the Roman Catholic doctrine is not its affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. The Catechism affirms Christ's presence, when it declares that the "visible signs and pledges" of the sacrament do assure us "that we are as really partakers of His [Christ's] true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of Him."<sup>34</sup> Christ by the working of the Spirit in and through the sacramental signs genuinely imparts himself to believers, and thereby becomes more intimately joined with them. The problem with the Roman Catholic understanding of Christ's

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34. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 79: "... dass wir so warhafftig seines waren leibs vnd bluts durch würckung des heiligen Geists theilhafftig werden / als wir diese heilige warzeichen / mit dem leiblichen mund zu seiner gedechtnuss empfangen" (Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen*, 168).

presence in the Mass is that it teaches that Christ, inasmuch as he is "bodily present under the form of bread and wine," "is therefore to be worshipped in them." According to the Catechism, this represents an idolatrous worship of the earthly elements of bread and wine. Rather than Christ being present under the form of bread and wine, we should recognize that the Spirit, by means of the sacrament, lifts the believer up to Christ "who according to His human nature is now not on earth but in heaven, at the right hand of God His Father, and wills there to be worshipped by us."

### 3.2. The Medieval and Tridentine Doctrine of the Mass

Any assessment of the value of teaching of Q. and A. 80 must ask whether these two elements of the Catechism's teaching were true at the time of the original publication of the Catechism, and whether they remain true today. Did the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church teach the doctrine of the Mass that Q. and A. 80 sharply condemns? And does this condemnation continue to have validity in respect to the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church today? While it is undeniable that the language of Q. and A. 80 is sharp, it should be noted that it does not expressly anathematize any persons but rather condemns the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup> Thus, an assessment of the validity of Q. and A. 80 must begin with a consideration of what the Roman Catholic Church was teaching about the Mass in the sixteenth century, and especially what was decreed by the Council of Trent shortly before the publication of the Catechism.

The development of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass during the centuries prior to the Reformation is a complicated story. In the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, the main features of the Roman Catholic view, which were codified in the decisions regarding the Mass by the Council of Trent, were thoroughly discussed and developed. Much of the theological discussion in this period focused upon the issue of the nature of Christ's presence in the Mass. Utilizing the metaphysics of the philosopher Aristotle, Roman Catholic theologians developed a sophisticated doctrine of the transubstantiation of the sacramental elements of bread and wine into the real body and blood of Christ. At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the term "transubstantiation" was first officially employed to affirm the manner in which the real presence of Christ was effected in the Mass. When the priest ministered the Mass at the altar, he was empowered by virtue of the sacrament of ordination to consecrate the elements and thereby effect a miraculous change in

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35. Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 31, notes that this point was often used by Reformed defenders of the Heidelberg Catechism in the face of ongoing political and theological opposition to it throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

the elements, which retained the “accidental” and external appearance of bread and wine while becoming in substance the actual body and blood of Christ. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Mass came to include a variety of practices in which the consecrated elements were venerated and worshipped. The Mass was increasingly exalted as the principal means whereby the faithful could enjoy communion with Christ, be infused with his grace, and increased in their experience of the forgiveness of sins and grow in a life of charity. Masses were administered regularly for the living and the dead (the souls of the faithful in purgatory). The practice of the “elevation of the host” in the administration of the sacrament became common. And the teaching that the Mass was an indispensable means for participating in the benefits of Christ’s cross was associated with its nature as an unbloody sacrifice that perpetuated the offering of Christ for the sins of his people.<sup>36</sup>

However, the development of the Medieval Roman Catholic doctrine did not reach its apex and official codification until the Council of Trent which, in its twenty-second session on September 17, 1562, offered a summary of the “doctrine on the sacrifice of the Mass” (*doctrina de sacrificio missae*).<sup>37</sup> When the Heidelberg Catechism in Q. and A. 80 distinguished the Lord’s Supper from the “popish Mass,” it did so in the immediate aftermath of the Council of Trent’s offering its decrees and canons on the sacrifice of the Mass. Therefore, the accuracy and truthfulness of Q. and A. 80 at the time of its writing can only be finally determined by comparing it to the Council of Trent’s statement of the Roman Catholic dogma regarding the Mass.

As the title of the twenty-second session intimates, the main burden of the Tridentine dogma is that the Mass is a true sacrifice of Christ, offered by his priests upon the altar for the benefit of those who receive him through these means. In the first chapter of this session, “On the institution of the sacrifice of the Mass,” Christ is said to have instituted the Mass as his means of offering himself through the ministry of the priest on behalf of the faithful:

[B]ecause that his priesthood was not to be extinguished by his death, in the Last Supper, on the night in which he was betrayed,—that he might leave, to his own beloved Spouse the Church, a visible sacrifice, such as the nature of man

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36. My description of these features of the developing doctrine of the Mass in the period prior to the sixteenth century summarizes the following two essays: Stephen E. Lahey, “Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology,” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy et al. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 499-539; and Gary Macy, “Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages,” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy et al., 365-98.

37. The complete text of this session, with its decrees and canons, can be found in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:176-86.

requires, whereby that bloody sacrifice, once to be accomplished on the cross, might be represented (*repraesentaretur*), and the memory thereof remain even unto the end of the world, and its salutary virtue be applied to the remission of those sins which we daily commit, ... he offered up to God the Father his own body and blood under the species of bread and wine; and, under the symbols of those same things, he delivered [his own body and blood] to be received by his apostles, whom he then constituted priests of the New Testament; and by those words, *Do this in commemoration of me*, he commanded them and their successors in the priesthood to offer [them]; even as the Catholic Church has always understood and taught.<sup>38</sup>

In these opening words of the twenty-second session, the Council of Trent clearly affirms the essential nature of the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice through which Christ himself, in the person of his priestly representative, offers himself up to God for the sins of the faithful. The sacrifice of the Mass is a direct expression of Christ's priestly work in offering himself up on behalf of his own, and is described as "the consummation and perfection" of all the sacrifices "during the period of nature, and of the law."<sup>39</sup>

After the opening chapter of the twenty-second session, which defines the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice of Christ for the faithful, the Council of Trent goes on to insist that the Mass is a true propitiation for the sins of both the living and the dead:

And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice, which is celebrated in the Mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner (*idem ille Christus continetur et incruente immolator*) who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace *in seasonable aid*, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence. For the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof, and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives even heinous crimes and sins. For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone being different.<sup>40</sup>

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38. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:176-77.

39. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2: 178.

40. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:179.

By means of his unbloody sacrifice in the Mass, Christ appeases God and obtains thereby the benefits of the forgiveness of sins and the grace and gift of penitence. According to this affirmation of the Council of Trent, the Mass is a kind of repetition and unbloody representation of the sacrifice Christ once offered upon the cross. In every celebration of the Mass, the sacrificial offering of Christ upon the cross is repeated. The only difference between Christ's sacrifice upon the cross and his sacrifice upon the altar is the "manner" of the sacrifice; the one was a bloody and the other is an unbloody sacrifice. In keeping with the nature of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, several further chapters of the twenty-second session are devoted to the propriety of celebrating Masses in honor of the saints (Chapter 3), and the appropriate apostolic constitutions and ceremonies that belong to a proper administration of the sacrament (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). Because the priest offers Christ in the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass for the benefit of the faithful, the Council of Trent also affirms the benefit of Masses performed by the priest alone on behalf of "all the faithful, who belong to the body of Christ" (Chapter 6).

To these positive affirmations about the nature and efficacy of the Mass as an unbloody and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, the twenty-second session of the Council of Trent concludes with a series of "canons," which "condemn" and "eliminate from [the] holy Church ... whatsoever is opposed to this most pure faith and sacred doctrine."<sup>41</sup> These canons do not merely condemn those who teach doctrines regarding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that are contrary to the Catholic faith. But they also anathematize those persons who may be responsible for disseminating or teaching such doctrines. In the customary manner of the decrees and pronouncements of the Council of Trent, these canons correspond negatively to the positive affirmations of the preceding chapters of the twenty-second session. Among the more important canons are the following: Canon 1, which anathematizes any who teach that the Mass is not "a true and proper sacrifice ... offered to God"; Canon 2, which anathematizes those who deny that Christ has appointed priests to offer the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass; and Canon 3, which anathematizes those who deny that the Mass is a "propitiatory sacrifice" offered both for the living and the dead.<sup>42</sup>

While the twenty-second session of the Council of Trent does not expressly address the manner in which the consecrated elements of bread and wine become the true body and blood of Christ, this subject was earlier considered by the Council in its thirteenth session, held on October 11, 1551. The thirteenth session issued a "decree concerning the most holy sacrament of the eucharist" (*decretum de sanctissimo eucharistiae sacramento*), which officially

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41. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:184

42. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:185.



defined the nature of the “transubstantiation” of the sacramental elements.

[I]n the august sacrament of the holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really, and substantially contained under the species of those sensible things (*vere, realiter, ac substantialiter sub specie illarum rerum sensibilibus contineri*). For neither are these things mutually repugnant,—that our Saviour himself always sitteth at the right hand of the Father in heaven, according to the natural mode of existing, and that, nevertheless, he be, in many other places, sacramentally present to us in his own substance ....<sup>43</sup>

In its further exposition of the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements, the Council of Trent offers a defense of the “cult and veneration” of the holy sacrament, as well as the preservation of the consecrated elements in the “sacrarium” for later distribution to the sick.<sup>44</sup> According to the Council, “there is no room left for doubt, that all the faithful of Christ may, according to the custom ever received in the Catholic Church, render in veneration the worship of latria, which is due to the true God (*qui vero Deo debetur*), to this most holy sacrament.”<sup>45</sup> In the concluding canons of the thirteenth century, those who deny these features of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church are anathematized. Because the consecrated elements become through transubstantiation the actual body and blood of Christ, an anathema is pronounced against those who say that “in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, is not be adored with the worship, even external of latria; and is, consequently, neither to be venerated with a special festive solemnity, nor to be solemnly borne about in procession....”<sup>46</sup>

When these decrees and actions of the Council of Trent are borne in mind, particularly those that belong to the twenty-second session “on the sacrifice of the Mass,” the strong language and condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass in Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism is not difficult to understand. In the historical context of the preparation of the Catechism, the evangelical and Reformed

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43. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:126. Cf. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 130: “...by the consecration of the bread and of the wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of the blood; which conversion is, by the holy Catholic Church, suitably and properly called Transubstantiation” (The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Thirteenth Session, Chapter IV).

44. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:131-133.

45. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:131.

46. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:137.

doctrine of the Lord's Supper was under severe and harsh attack by the Council of Trent. When measured by the standard of the anathemas issued by the Council of Trent, the language of Q. and A. 80 is, relatively speaking, far more defensible as a necessary and suitable response. Whereas the Council of Trent anathematized the persons whose doctrine of the Lord's Supper was objectionable, the Catechism chooses to aim its condemnation, not against the persons who teach, but against the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Mass.

On the two points at issue—the essential nature of the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness and purification of the faithful, and the propriety of the worship of the consecrated elements that are identified with the body and blood of Christ himself—Q. & A. 80 offers an accurate statement of the official Roman Catholic teaching. Consistent with the Reformed understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper and the manner of Christ's presence in it, Q. & A. 80 offers a valid and truthful condemnation of the Mass. Either Christ's sacrifice upon the cross is a perfect and complete sacrifice for sin, not to be repeated, supplemented, or prolonged in any manner, or it is not. In the judgment of the Reformed authors of the Catechism, the doctrine of the Mass as a true sacrifice of Christ could only be regarded as injurious to the sufficiency of Christ's bloody sacrifice upon the cross. Moreover, the endorsement of the practice of a public and solemn veneration and worship of the consecrated elements could hardly be construed than anything other than a violation of the biblical prohibition against the worship of any creature in the place of the true God.

For these reasons, it seems fairly evident that, however severe the language of its condemnation, Q. & A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism properly expressed at the time of its writing the heartfelt conviction of the evangelical and Reformed churches of the Palatinate and elsewhere.

### 3.3. The Continued Value of Q. and A. 80: A Present Case

If the condemnation of the Mass in Q. and A. 80 was justified at the time of its original publication, this does not mean that it necessarily continues to offer a valid condemnation of Roman Catholic teaching and practice. In the course of time, it is possible that the Roman Catholic view may have changed sufficiently to warrant a reconsideration of the continued viability of Q. and A. 80 as a living statement of Reformed churches. Indeed, in recent decades, at least two denominations, which historically subscribed to the Heidelberg Catechism, have relegated Q. and A. 80 to a non-confessional status. These denominations, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America

(CRCNA), have long had a reputation for confessional fidelity and adherence to the Heidelberg Catechism. Hence, their decisions to alter the status of Q. and A. 80 as part of the official text of the Catechism is a matter of some historical significance, and compels a reconsideration of the continued value of this question and answer's condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass. Since the Christian Reformed Church made its decision recently, and only after a period of careful study, I will treat its handling of Q. and A. 80 as a kind of test case for an assessment of its continuing value.

### 3.3.1. The Christian Reformed Church and Q. and A. 80

The decision to alter the CRCNA's adherence to Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism resulted from a recent and relatively brief process of study and reflection dating back to 1998.<sup>47</sup> In 1998 the Synod of the CRCNA received two overtures regarding the Catechism's treatment of the Roman Catholic Mass. The first overture asked that Q. and A. 80 be removed from the Catechism for three reasons: one, the language of "condemnable idolatry" should only be used against the actions of those who deny the gospel of justification by faith in Jesus Christ; two, the harsh language of Q. and A. 80 does not meet the requirements of Christian love or unity; and three, the original version of the Heidelberg Catechism did not include Q. and A. 80.<sup>48</sup> A second overture, which was formulated in response to the first, argued that Q. and A. 80 ought to be retained in its present form, since the Roman Catholic Church has never repudiated the official decisions of the Council of Trent and its statements about the Mass.

Though the CRCNA Synod of 1998 did not accede to the first of these overtures, which asked that Q. and A. 80 be removed from the Heidelberg Catechism, it did direct its Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) "to make an attempt to dialogue with the leadership

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47. It is interesting to observe that twenty-one years earlier the CRCNA Synod of 1977 decided not to alter the status of Q. and A. 80 in the context of the preparation of a new translation of the Catechism. The decision of this Synod upheld the contemporary validity of Q. and A. 80. Due to the importance of its grounds, this decision deserves to be quoted in full: "That synod make no changes in Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism. *Grounds:* a. The small number of responses from the churches indicates that this is not a troublesome issue for the churches. b. A historical creed must not be altered without weighty reasons. c. Answer 80 appears to be historically accurate. The statements of Trent which answer 80 rejects have not been repudiated by the Roman Catholic church. d. Although the language in answer 80 appears sharp, such indignation at the withholding of assurance of salvation from believers is not inappropriate to a confessional statement. Trent speaks rather sharply too. And the acts of teaching and refuting are frequently coupled in the New Testament. e. Answer 80 must be understood in terms of its main emphasis: our assurance of salvation is through the 'full pardon of our sins by Christ's only sacrifice.'" (*Acts of Synod 1997* [Grand Rapids: CRCNA, 1977], 88-89.

48. *Agenda for Synod 1998* (Grand Rapids: CRCNA, 1998), 233-36.

of the Roman Catholic Church to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the Mass.”<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, the IRC appointed a special subcommittee to carry out these instructions from Synod.<sup>50</sup> During the course of the subcommittee’s work, two meetings were held with official representatives of the Roman Catholic Church to ensure that the Committee’s representation of the Roman Catholic view of the Mass was accurate, and that its assessment of the language of Q. & A. 80 was based upon a fresh understanding of contemporary Roman Catholic teaching and practice.

After the subcommittee of the IRC completed its initial dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in North America, it presented a preliminary report of its findings and judgment regarding the continued usefulness of Q. and A. 80 to the CRCNA Synod of 2002. A copy of the subcommittee’s preliminary report was also forwarded to the Conferences of Catholic Bishops in the United States and Canada in order to invite their opinion whether the report offered an “accurate representation” of the contemporary Roman Catholic view of the Mass. Copies of the report were also sent to a number of churches with whom the CRCNA enjoys ecclesiastical fellowship, inviting their response to its findings. After receiving a favorable response from representatives of the Roman Catholic bishops in North America, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who affirmed that the report accurately summarized the modern Roman Catholic conception of the Mass, the subcommittee made some minor revisions to the report and prepared a second, briefer report that it submitted to the CRCNA Synod of 2004.<sup>51</sup>

The actions of Synod 2004 in response to this second report marked a turning point in the CRCNA’s opinion of the continued value of Q. and A. 80. Upon the basis of the IRC subcommittee reports, Synod 2004 adopted an important set of recommendations, which laid the ground work for the action of subsequent synods in changing the status of Q. and A. 80. The two most important of these recommendations were as follows:

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49. *Acts of Synod 1998*, (Grand Rapids: CRCNA, 1998), 427.

50. This subcommittee was composed of Dr. David Engelhard, Dr. Lyle Bierma, Dr. Henry De Moor, Dr. Ronald Feenstra, and Dr. George Vander Velde.

51. The original report of the IRC sub-committee of 2002, together with the brief supplemental report of 2004 and the decisions of the CRCNA Synod of 2004, was published in booklet form: *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist* (Grand Rapid: CRCNA, 2004). Hereafter I will cite this booklet as *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80*. See also Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 116-18. In Bierma’s assessment of the “ecumenical limitations” of the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 80 is identified as a particularly significant example.

- That synod declare there are significant differences between the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass and the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper.
- That synod declare Q. and A. 80 can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession given our study of official Roman Catholic teaching and extensive dialogue with official representatives of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>52</sup>

Synod 2004 also adopted several motions that invited churches in ecclesiastical fellowship, as well as CRC churches and classes, to respond to the proposed change in Q. and A. 80 before its implementation. While the decisions of Synod 2004 included a recognition of features of the Roman Catholic Mass that remain problematic—for example, the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine, the emphasis upon the Mass as a sacrifice, and the role of the sacrament in mediating salvation to the faithful—the burden of its evaluation of Q. and A. 80 was that it no longer properly and truthfully expressed a condemnation of the official Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

The official story of the CRCNA's handling of Q. and A. 80 concluded with the actions of two recent synods, the first in 2006 and the second in 2011. The actions of these synods brought the study and evaluation of the continued validity of Q. and A. 80 to a close, and determined the present status of this question and answer. The CRCNA Synod 2006 adopted a motion that, in future printings of the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, the last three paragraphs should be placed "in brackets and an italicized footnote be placed below the bracketed text" as follows:

Question 80: How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

Answer: The Lord's Supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him.

[But the Mass teaches us that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass

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52. *Acts of Synod 2004* (Grand Rapids: CRCNA, 2004), 629.

is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry.]

Footnote:

*Q. and A. 80 was altogether absent from the first German edition of the Heidelberg Catechism (January 1563) but appeared in a shorter form in the second German edition (March 1563). The translation above is of the expanded text of the third German edition (ca. April 1563). Its strong tone reflects the setting in which the Catechism was written.*

*In response to a mandate from Synod 1998, the Christian Reformed Church's Interchurch Relations Committee conducted a study of Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Mass. Based on this study, Synod 2004 declared that "Q. and A. 80 can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession." Synod 2006 directed that Q. and A. 80 remain the CRC's text of the Heidelberg Catechism but that the last three paragraphs be placed in brackets to indicate that they do not accurately reflect the official teaching and practice of today's Roman Catholic church and are no longer confessionally binding on members of the CRC.<sup>53</sup>*

While the actions of Synod 2006 were conclusive for the determination of the CRCNA's official view of Q. and A. 80, a further decision of some interest was made by Synod 2011. At the recommendation of a joint committee of the RCA and the CRCNA, which was mandated to produce a common translation of the three confessions held to by these denominations (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort), Synod 2011 approved a common translation of Q. and A. 80. In deference to the RCA, which retains the full text of the Catechism while recognizing that it was "written within a historical context which may not accurately describe the Roman Catholic Church's current stance," Synod 2011 approved the new translation for inclusion in the text of the Catechism and decided to append the explanatory footnote adopted at Synod 2006. While these actions adjusted slightly the decisions of Synod 2006, they did not materially alter the present status of Q. and A. 80. The official status of Q. and A. 80 remains that it no longer represents the CRCNA's judgment of the Roman Catholic Mass, and is not confessionally binding upon its officebearers or members.

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53. *Acts of Synod 2006* (Grand Rapids: CRCNA, 2006), 710-11.

### 3.3.2. An Evaluation of the CRCNA's Treatment of Q. and A. 80

The obvious question that the CRCNA's judgment regarding Q. and A. 80 raises is: has the burden of proof for an alteration of the status of this question and answer been met? If we acknowledge the historic significance of any change in the text of a long-standing confession of the churches, then the bar should be set rather high to warrant the revision or even, as in this case, the removal of the confessional status of one of the important articles of the confessions. Since Q. and A. 80 has stood largely unaltered as a consensus statement of the Reformed churches regarding the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass for four and one-half centuries, were the arguments mustered by the study committee reports of the IRC of the CRCNA sufficiently compelling to warrant the significant step of effectively removing Q. and A. 80 from the official text of the Heidelberg Catechism? To answer this question, we need to identify the arguments that persuaded the IRC subcommittee and served as grounds for the eventual actions of the CRCNA. And we need to identify with special care and accuracy the present, official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Mass.

Both of the subcommittee reports of the IRC begin by observing that Q. and A. 80 registers two principal objections to the Roman Catholic Mass.<sup>54</sup> The first objection to the Mass focuses upon its nature as an unbloody sacrifice, which is offered daily by priests on behalf of the living and the dead. Because believers enjoy the forgiveness of sins only on the basis of the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass, which is offered to God on their behalf as a propitiation for sins, the Catechism declares that the Mass "is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Christ." The second objection to the Mass focuses upon the way Christ is worshiped in the form of the bread and wine, which through the miracle of transubstantiation have become the true body and blood of Christ. Though the consecrated elements appear outwardly to be bread and wine, they are the actual body and blood of Christ and are to be venerated accordingly. Q. and A. 80 declares such worship to be a "condemnable idolatry," because it requires believers to venerate the bread and wine as the true body and blood of Christ. The strong language of Q. and A. 80 is expressly directed against these two elements of the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

In their evaluation of the Q. and A. 80's application to contemporary Roman Catholic teaching, the IRC subcommittee reports and synodical decisions of the CRCNA adduce at least five arguments that allegedly invalidate it as a contemporary statement of the Reformed faith today.

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54. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80, 6-7, 28.*

First, though Q. and A. 80 properly calls attention to the Roman Catholic view of the Mass as a sacrifice, it tends to present an unduly restrictive and narrow portrait of the Roman Catholic doctrine. Q. and A. 80 leaves the impression that the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass focuses exclusively upon its sacrificial nature. While the Roman Catholic view undeniably emphasizes the Mass as a kind of sacrifice, it also includes a number of additional emphases that Q. and A. 80 overlooks or misrepresents, when it uses the language of the Mass as “nothing but an accursed idolatry.” In Roman Catholic teaching, there are several prominent features of the Mass that do not coincide with its nature as a sacrifice. The Mass is also regarded as “a meal, spiritual nourishment, offering of thanksgiving, memorial, sign of unity, bond of love, source of grace, and pledge of future glory.”<sup>55</sup> Because the Roman Catholic Church also recognizes these various features of the sacrament of the Mass, Q. and A. 80 misleads, when it treats the Mass primarily, if not exclusively, as a sacrifice. The condemnation of the Mass in Q. and A. 80 does not reflect the whole truth regarding the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of the Mass.

Second, an important argument in the CRCNA’s evaluation of Q. and A. 80 is the claim that Q. and A. 80 misrepresents the Roman Catholic view of the relation between Christ’s one sacrifice upon the cross and the daily sacrifice of the Mass. When Q. and A. 80 speaks of Christ being offered “daily” in the Mass, it judges that the Roman Catholic view denies or compromises the unique and unrepeatable nature of Christ’s bloody sacrifice upon the cross. However, the Roman Catholic view, according to the IRC subcommittee report, actually teaches “one sacrifice [that] is offered in different manners.”<sup>56</sup> The sacrifice of the Mass is not another sacrifice, but a sacramental “representation” and “perpetuation” of the one sacrifice of the cross. In the IRC subcommittee report on Q. and A. 80, the contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine is as follows: “Since the sacrifice of the Mass is a re-enactment and representation of *the one final, sufficient, and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross*, the Mass by its very nature as sacrament of that once-for-all event cannot detract from the one sacrifice of Christ.”<sup>57</sup> Because the Mass is not another sacrifice than the one Christ once offered upon the cross, its re-enactment of that sacrifice should not be interpreted as though it compromises the sufficiency of Christ’s bloody sacrifice upon the cross. In the opinion of the IRC subcommittee, “the

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55. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 10-11. This is the IRC subcommittee’s summary description of the richness of the Mass from Vatican II (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 47) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [2nd ed.; Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000], 1328-32, 1358-65).

56. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 8.

57. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 9 (the emphasis is the committee’s).



Eucharistic sacrifice [of the Roman Catholic Church] is not another sacrifice but is the perpetuation and memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross."<sup>58</sup>

Third, based upon the report of the IRC subcommittee, the synodical actions of the CRCNA judged that the veneration and worship of Christ in the sacramental elements ought not to be viewed as idolatrous. Though the Roman Catholic Church continues to teach that Christ is "present under the appearance of the consecrated bread and should be worshiped in the adoration of those consecrated elements," this teaching encourages the worship and adoration of Christ, "not the elements" themselves.<sup>59</sup> Q. and A. 80 fails to address adequately the Roman Catholic understanding that the object of the worshiper's adoration is Christ himself, even though the form of worship involves a veneration of the sacramental elements in which Christ is present. Since the veneration of the elements is in actuality intended to be a veneration of Christ, the Roman Catholic Mass no more approves idolatry than does the Heidelberg Catechism itself, when it encourages the worship of Christ at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Since Christ is the object of the veneration given to the consecrated elements in the Mass, this veneration does not necessarily constitute a form of idolatry.<sup>60</sup>

Fourth, in respect to the claim of Q. and A. 80 that the sacrifice of the Mass is truly propitiatory, and obtains the forgiveness of sins for believers, the IRC subcommittee report notes that a distinction needs to be made between the unrepeatably sacrifice of Christ on the cross that "obtains" propitiation and the representation of the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass whereby "the fruits of Christ's propitiation become ours (a transfer that happens only in the context of grace)."<sup>61</sup> Since the Mass is not another sacrifice than the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, it does not diminish the sufficiency of Christ's work of redemption. Furthermore, when the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Mass benefits believers who die in a state of grace and undergo further purification in purgatory, it is important to remember the difference between what lies "in the area of justification" with what lies in the area of "(final) sanctification."<sup>62</sup> In the language of the IRC subcommittee report, "[t]he eternal state of those who die in the Lord is not in question. They are simply being purified for the state of full glorification."<sup>63</sup> Because the purification of believers in purgatory, which is partly a fruit of the celebration of

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58. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 9.

59. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 21.

60. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 28: "[W]hen the Catechism adds the statement, 'where Christ is therefore to be worshiped,' it sets up a misleading contrast between worshipping Christ in heaven and worshipping him in the consecrated bread and wine."

61. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 8.

62. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 10.

63. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 10.

the Mass on their behalf, does not determine the final state of believers, it should not be confused with the teaching that the final state of believers depends upon any other basis than the “the finality of the redemption (as the certainty of forgiveness and of eternal life) accomplished on the cross.”<sup>64</sup> Since the forgiveness that is mediated through the sacrament of the Mass applies to the believer’s present and future holiness before God, it should not be viewed as the forgiveness of justification or acceptance with God. The fruit of the Mass for believers in purgatory no more detracts from the finality of the cross than does the “Protestant affirmation of sanctification as a continuing process in the lives of believers.”<sup>65</sup>

And fifth, in the reports of the IRC subcommittee, a distinction is drawn between “official” Roman Catholic teaching and the “practice” of the Roman Catholic Church in some places. Though Q. and A. 80’s criticism of the Mass may apply to the practice of some parts of the Roman Catholic Church, it does not fairly represent the official standpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in light of the reforms and improvements introduced by Vatican II.<sup>66</sup>

In my reflection upon these arguments for the CRCNA’s decision to relegate Q. and A. 80 to non-confessional status, there does not appear to be much in them that approximates a sufficient warrant for such an action. Though it may be true that Q. and A. 80 speaks rather strongly in its condemnation of the Mass, the primary issue is whether it accurately described the Roman Catholic view at the time of its original preparation and whether any substantive changes have occurred in Roman Catholic doctrine that render its condemnation no longer viable. The remarkable feature of these arguments, and particularly of the IRC reports that express them, is that they offer more evidence for than against the accuracy of Q. and A. 80. Although Q. and A. 80 may speak the truth in language that is more severe than our contemporary ears will allow, it does speak the truth, and on a topic that remains a matter of no small significance to the Christian church, namely, the relation between the redemptive work of Christ on the cross and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. To illustrate the weakness and implausibility of the arguments adduced

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64. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 10.

65. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 10.

66. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80*, 31: “Roman Catholic practices regarding the Mass vary considerably today. In North America and in many other parts of the world, the reforms of Vatican II have had a dramatic effect; the reception of the reforms advocated by Vatican II varies considerably within the Roman Catholic Church. In some places, the Catechism’s description and evaluation of what is taught or communicated to people by a certain way of conducting the Mass may yet apply.” It is noteworthy that, despite this statement of the IRC subcommittee report, there is no evidence in the record that an alternative handling of Q. and A. 80 was considered, namely, a revision to the language that would distinguish the true doctrine of the Lord’s Supper from the kinds of errors that it condemns wherever and by whomever they may be taught.

by the CRCNA for its assessment of Q. and A. 80, I will respond briefly and directly to each of the five arguments identified.

With respect to the first argument, though the Roman Catholic Church recognizes today the many different features that belong to the "richness" of the Mass, it continues to view the Mass *principally* as an unbloody sacrifice.<sup>67</sup> Though more recent Roman Catholic statements may acknowledge non-sacrificial aspects of the mystery of the Mass, these do not represent any fundamental change in respect to what belongs to the essential nature of the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice. The statements of the sixteenth century Council of Trent and the more recent twentieth century Vatican II Council fully concur in representing the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice that priests offer upon an altar to God.<sup>68</sup> Though Vatican II emphasizes more than the Council of Trent that the whole people of God are joined with the priests in making this sacrifice *to* God, it remains an unbloody sacrifice, not merely of thanksgiving (a proper Eucharist), but of oblation and propitiation.<sup>69</sup> Q. and A. 80 can hardly be faulted for neglecting the Roman Catholic Church's teaching that the Mass is more than a sacrifice, when its interest is to distinguish the true Supper of the Lord from its corruption in the sacrifice of the Mass. The evidence presented in the IRC subcommittee reports of the

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67. See e.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1362-1372. It is important to note that in these paragraphs of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the most important decrees of the Council of Trent regarding the Mass as essentially an unbloody sacrifice of Christ are approvingly cited as proof for the contemporary doctrine taught in the Roman Catholic Church. For a more extensive summary and critique of the contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass than the one I am able to offer, see Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 148-77. Cf. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort*, 2:861: "While some Christians may regret the addition of Q&A 80, it is a true statement of the Mass. The second part of answer 80 correctly states what the Council of Trent maintained. Since that time, changes have occurred in the Roman Catholic Church, but the doctrine of the Mass as adopted by the Council of Trent has never been refuted. In fact, Vatican II (1962-1965) reaffirmed it in its doctrine of the liturgy ...."

68. *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery, 16: "At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again ...." ("The Most Sacred Mystery of the Eucharist").

69. See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1986), 264-73. Stott, who is a generally fair and irenic theologian, argues that the Vatican II failed to change substantially the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of the Mass. In some ways Vatican II only aggravated the problem by including the people with the priests in making the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass to God. Q. and A. 80 reflects the Reformation view that the Lord's Supper is a gracious means whereby Christ communicates himself to his people, not a propitiatory sacrifice that the church presents to God. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xviii12.: "But after Christ's sacrifice was accomplished, the Lord instituted another method for us, that is, to transmit to the believing folk the benefit of the sacrifice offered to himself by his Son. He has therefore given us a Table at which to feast, not an altar upon which to offer a victim; he has not consecrated priests to offer sacrifice, but ministers to distribute a sacred banquet."

CRCNA only confirms this aspect of what Q. and A. 80 says about the Mass, rather than disproving it.

The second argument of the IRC subcommittee is especially important, since it addresses the critical issue of the nature of the Mass as an unbloody sacrifice. The IRC subcommittee's two reports appropriately observe that contemporary Roman Catholic teaching prefers to speak of the sacrifice of the Mass as a "perpetuation" rather than a "repetition" of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross. It is, strictly speaking, not correct to say that the Roman Catholic Church regards the sacrifice of the Mass as "another" offering. However, the subcommittee reports indulge in a bit of wishful thinking, when they conclude that this protects the contemporary Roman Catholic Church against the charge that the Mass is a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Christ. The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ upon the cross can no more be "perpetuated" or "re-presented" than it can be "repeated."<sup>70</sup> To speak of the Mass as an unbloody sacrificial participation in the one sacrifice of Christ is nothing other than a denial of the *finished* work of Christ upon the cross. If I may be permitted an analogy, a mother who has given birth to a child may now enjoy features of motherhood that are a result of her child's birth. But these features of motherhood are in no proper sense to be conceived of as a perpetuation or prolongation of the act whereby she gave birth to her child. In a similar way, Christ, our high priest, having made sacrifice once-for-all for the sins of his people, may continue to apply and communicate the benefits of that sacrifice through Word and sacrament. However, Christ's work of applying the benefits of his unique, indispensable sacrifice should not be confused with the sacrifice itself. On this point, a comment of Calvin seems as appropriate today as when it was first written: "Nor am I unaware of the tricks by which the father of lies is wont to disguise his fraud: that these are not varied or different sacrifices, but the same one often repeated."<sup>71</sup> The contemporary RC claim that the sacrifice of the Mass is not "another" sacrifice than the sacrifice of the cross remains no more plausible today than it was in Calvin's day.

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70. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1366-1366, where these kinds of terms are employed to argue that the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross and the unbloody sacrifice of Christ upon the altar are "one single sacrifice." The *Catechism* then adds to its con-fusion of Christ's sacrifice and the Mass, the characteristic assertion that the Mass is part of the church's acquisition of "new value" to the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross: "The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering." It is difficult to imagine a more clear denial of the sufficiency of Christ's work upon the cross, or a more clear assertion of a synergistic view of salvation by grace "plus works," and not by grace alone on account of the work of Christ alone.

71. *Institutes*, IV.xviii.3.

The third argument of the IRC subcommittee report—that the Roman Catholic Mass does not constitute a form of idolatry—is also unwarranted, even belied by the evidence adduced to confirm it. According to the IRC subcommittee report that provided a basis for the CRCNA's actions relative to Q. and A. 80, the Roman Catholic Mass is not a form of idolatry because those who venerate or adore the consecrated elements are actually venerating or adoring Christ who is bodily present in them. Indeed, in the opinion of the IRC subcommittee, the charge of idolatry, if it applies to the Roman Catholic view,<sup>72</sup> could likewise and for similar reasons be applied to the Reformed view. For in the Reformed understanding, believers are encouraged through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to worship the ascended Christ who is bodily present in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

The implausibility of this third argument stems from its failure to define properly the nature of idolatry. Idolatry is not simply a matter of the worshiper's intention. It is not enough for the worshiper to intend to worship Christ, whether Christ is worshiped in the earthly sacramental elements of bread and wine or at the right hand of the Father to which the faith of the believer directs him or her. The object of the believer's worship must be Christ himself, and not something earthly that is wrongly substituted as the focus of the worshiper's veneration. If the IRC subcommittee's attempt to exonerate the veneration of Christ in the Mass from the charge of idolatry were plausible, it might equally well be applied to various acts that are described as idolatrous in the Scriptures. Few are the idolaters who profess to have any other intention than worshipping the true and living God, even though the immediate object or means whereby their worship is offered is a golden calf or some other creature. When the children of Israel worshipped the golden calf, they no doubt intended to worship God alone. To say that the Roman Catholic Mass does not constitute idolatry because the worshiper believes that the bread and wine *are the real body and blood of Christ* is a self-defeating argument. If the worshiper venerates the bread and wine *in order to*

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72. That the contemporary Roman Catholic Church still officially approves of the veneration and adoration of the consecrated elements in the Mass is evident from the following statement from a post-conciliar document of Vatican II: "There should be no doubt in anyone's mind 'that all the faithful ought to show to this most holy sacrament the worship which is due to the true God, as has always been the custom of the Catholic Church. Nor is it to be adored any the less because it was instituted by Christ to be eaten.' For even in the reserved sacrament he is to be adored because he is substantially present there through that conversion of bread and wine which, as the Council of Trent tells us, is most aptly name transubstantiation" (from *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery, "Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery," 104). For a similar presentation of contemporary Roman Catholic teaching, see *Catchism of the Catholic Church*, 1373-1381, esp. 1378.

venerate Christ, he commits idolatry.<sup>73</sup> What is particularly odd about the IRC's attempt to mitigate the seriousness of the adoration of Christ in the sacramental elements is that it is set within the context of an express acknowledgement that the Roman Catholic Church continues to teach that the bread and wine are, through the miracle of transubstantiation, the actual body and blood of Christ.<sup>74</sup>

Fourth, perhaps the most troublesome claim in the IRC subcommittee's report is the claim that the Mass does not compromise the finality of redemption accomplished once-for-all upon the cross of Christ. To support this claim, the subcommittee report notes that a distinction must be made between justification and final sanctification. Those who argue that the Mass compromises the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for sin fail to recognize that its benefit relates only to the believer's sanctification, not his justification. Though one can admire the subcommittee's ingenuity in trying to defend the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, this argument fails completely. Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Mass continues to be that it is an unbloody and *truly propitiatory* sacrifice that obtains the forgiveness of sins on behalf of those who benefit from it. The forgiveness of sins that believers enjoy through the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass is *an important part of the process whereby believer's are justified and made holy and acceptable to God*, whether as living members of the church or those who have died in a state of grace but need further purification in purgatory. Though the IRC subcommittee report, and the synodical decisions based upon it, insist that the forgiveness obtained through the Mass relates only to a (final) sanctification, this is not the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The distinction between justification and sanctification, as it is drawn by the IRC subcommittee in its report, is a *Protestant*, not a Roman Catholic distinction. In the Roman Catholic conception, justification embraces the entire process, whether in this life or in purgatory after death, whereby the faithful are made righteous and fit for communion with God. According to Roman Catholic teaching, past and present, the bloody sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is an insufficient basis for the justification of

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73. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), Q. XXX, 3:547: "They who by a right direction of the mind teach that the bread is no longer bread, but the body of Christ, do not adore the bread, but from a supposition (although false), the body of Christ. They then would not adore if they knew the body of Christ was not there. A right direction of the mind or a false supposition cannot deliver from sin; otherwise no one could be called idolater, because there is no one who does not sin from some false hypothesis and good direction of the mind." With this observation, Turretin exposes the fallacy of confusing good intentions with obedience to the biblical prohibition against idolatry.

74. *Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80, 17*: "The Roman Catholic theologians with whom the committee met affirmed that the Heidelberg Catechism is substantially correct in its presentation of the Roman Catholic teaching regarding Christ's bodily presence in the consecrated bread and wine."

the faithful. On this core element of the evangelical faith, Q. & A. 80 speaks clearly and faithfully.

And fifth, the IRC subcommittee reports offer little or no evidence to warrant the assertion of a significant divergence between "official" Roman Catholic teaching, which does not warrant the condemnation of Q. and A. 80, and the actual practices of many sectors of the Roman Catholic Church that do warrant its condemnation. As we have observed, Q. and A. 80 was most likely written in direct reply to the decrees and canons of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, which concluded its session on the sacrifice of the Mass in September 1562, shortly before Q. and A. 80 was included as part of the text of the Heidelberg Catechism. While the IRC subcommittee suggests that Q. and A. 80 might have originally addressed the practice of the medieval Roman Catholic Church more than its official teaching, no historical evidence is provided to support this suggestion. The likeliest explanation of Q. and A. 80 is that it intends to condemn the official teaching and corresponding practice of the Roman Catholic Church. That remains its proper purpose to the present day. Where the Roman Catholic Church continues to teach and practice the doctrine of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, and to approve the adoration and veneration of Christ in the consecrated elements, it remains liable to the condemnation set forth in Q. and A. 80. In the report of the IRC subcommittee, remarkably, it is acknowledged that this is precisely what continues to obtain in many parts of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world.

Lest my evaluation of the proposed change to Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism be misunderstood, I wish to note that I have no quarrel with the CRCNA's desire to ensure that this question and answer speak the truth in the present context. Even though the IRC subcommittee's study may not finally warrant their conclusions, they remain fairly thorough and useful treatments of Q. and A. 80 in comparison with contemporary Roman Catholic teaching. Reformed believers who confess Q. and A. 80 should have no objection in principle to a fresh reconsideration of their confession, and to an honest discussion with Roman Catholics whether it properly presents their teaching regarding the sacrament of the Mass. Indeed, those who would defend the retention of Q. and A. 80 in its present form owe it to themselves and to the cause of truth to read the reports of the IRC subcommittee and to study contemporary Roman Catholic teaching on the subject. If a compelling argument can be made to show that the Heidelberg Catechism misrepresents the Roman Catholic Church's teaching regarding the Mass, then the Catechism should be revised accordingly. Since the Roman Catholic Church recently updated in the documents of Vatican II some of its formulations regarding the Mass, a re-examination of Q. and A. 80 is all the more proper.

The problem with the proposed change, however, is that it is not warranted by the kind of arguments presented in the IRC subcommittee reports. Rather than showing that Q. and A. 80 misrepresents the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of the Mass, these reports could just as easily be read to confirm the accuracy of Q. and A. 80. Both of the IRC subcommittee reports provide numerous official Roman Catholic statements that the Mass is an unbloody sacrifice, which perpetuates the sacrifice of cross upon the cross and procures propitiatory benefit for those who participate in its offering. Likewise, ample documentation is provided for the Heidelberg Catechism's claim that the Mass is a "condemnable idolatry." By the subcommittee's own admission, Roman Catholic teaching continues to affirm the propriety of worshipping Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine. Furthermore, though the documents of Vatican II exhibit a tendency to soften the severe language of the Council of Trent, the subcommittee reports also confirm that the position of the Council of Trent was reaffirmed by Vatican II. No evidence is presented to show that the contemporary Roman Catholic Church has withdrawn the Tridentine anathemas against Reformed believers who do not embrace its view of the sacrament.

When all of this is taken into account, one is left to wonder whether the real objection to Q. and A. 80 is that its language is simply too harsh and condemning. Should we continue to use language like "nothing but a denial" or a "condemnable idolatry," when speaking of the Roman Catholic view of the Mass? Is such language consistent with the requirements of Christian love and unity? Perhaps this is the primary motivation that undergirds the proposed change to Q. and A. 80. But if this were the only reason for the proposed change, it would be preferable to consider an alternative proposal that retained the substance of Q. and A. 80, while removing the offending language "nothing but" and "a condemnable" idolatry.<sup>75</sup> One could easily envision a proposal to change Q. and A. 80 that might read: "Thus the Mass *in effect denies* ... the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and is ... *a form of idolatry.*" However, rather than propose a change in Q. and A. 80 along these lines, the action of the CRCNA amounts to a piece of more radical surgery, namely, the removal of Q. and A. 80's condemnation of the Roman Catholic Mass.

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75. Another revision might be to adopt the language of Q. & A. 80 from the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Heidelberg Catechism: "Thus the Mass is basically nothing but an idolatrous denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ." This language acknowledges that there may be other features of Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Mass that have validity, and it avoids the language of "condemnable" or "accursed" idolatry.



#### 4. Conclusion

The history of the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism confirms that elector Frederick III and its principal authors desired to provide the churches of the Palatinate with a clear statement of the evangelical and Reformed faith. Within the context of continuing strife among militant Lutherans, more modern Melanchthonian Lutherans, and Reformed theologians regarding the teaching of Scripture in general and the doctrine of the sacraments in particular, the authors of the Catechism aimed to provide the churches with a moderate, unifying statement of the evangelical faith. The long history of the use of the Heidelberg Catechism by Reformed churches throughout the world bears testimony to its reputation as a confession that, if anything, exceeded the expectations of its authors.

The most controversial feature of the Heidelberg Catechism in the past and in the present is its inclusion, since the second and third editions of 1563, of a strong condemnation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass in Q. and A. 80. While this question and answer has often imperiled the Catechism's reputation as a warm, moderate statement of the evangelical and Reformed faith, it was clearly regarded by the Catechism's authors to be a necessary part of the official text of the Catechism. Even though there are historical uncertainties regarding the precise circumstances that led to its inclusion in the second and third (and all subsequent) editions, there is no uncertainty in the record regarding elector Frederick III's, Olevianus's, and the church authorities' desire that it be added to the Catechism in order to complete its statement of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and to refute the errors of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>76</sup> Published shortly after the twenty-second session of the Council of Trent on the sacrifice of the Mass, Q. and A. 80 was prepared in order to distinguish the truth from error with respect to the nature of the sacrament.

Though it may not comport with modern sensibilities, there remain good reasons for the Reformed churches to retain Q. and A. 80 in their officially approved translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. Though some have appealed to the fact that this question and answer was not in the first edition of the Catechism as a reason not to continue to include it today, it is clear that the original authors of the Catechism regarded it to be an integral and necessary part of their confession regarding the Lord's Supper. The desire to offer a

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76. Beyer, *Abendmahl und Messe*, 40-59, offers extensive evidence for the thesis that Q. & A. 80 expressed a clear consensus among the Heidelberg theologians regarding the Mass. Q. & A. 80 was integral to their teaching with respect to the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, it should not be viewed as a kind of postscript to the Catechism's treatment of the Lord's Supper, as though nothing important were lost by omitting it.

moderate statement of the evangelical faith did not trump in their estimation the need to repudiate the serious errors of the Roman Catholic doctrine. Nor should such a desire trump the contemporary Reformed confession of the truth that is expressed in Q. and A. 80. There is not only ample evidence in the documents of the Council of Trent that Q. & A. 80 properly describes the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass. But there is also sufficient evidence that the contemporary Roman Catholic Church has not retracted in any significant way the errors that compelled the writing of Q. & A. 80 in the first place. Though the language of Q. and A. 80 may be strong, it reflects a fundamental evangelical passion to uphold the perfection and sufficiency of Christ's one sacrifice upon the cross and to condemn idolatry in whatever form, even if it be born of the most pious of intentions. Real progress toward unity in the faith on the important doctrine of the Lord's Supper will not come by removing strong, yet true statements like Q. and A. 80 from the Reformed confessions.

As its stands written, Q. and A. 80 still expresses the truth that John Calvin articulated so eloquently in his *Institutes*: "But when it is most clearly proved by the Word of God that this Mass, however decked in splendor, inflicts signal dishonor upon Christ, buries and oppresses his cross, consigns his death to oblivion, takes away the benefit which came to us from it, and weakens and destroys the Sacrament by which the memory of his death was bequeathed to us—will any of the roots be too deep for this most sturdy ax (I mean the Word of God) to slash and upturn?"<sup>77</sup>

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77. *Institutes*, IV.xviii.1. Though an energetic proponent of ecumenical engagement and dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, Karl Barth expressed a similar sentiment in his comments on the controversial Q. & A. 80: "To think that the sacrifice of Christ can be repeated in this way is to give it over to the control of man. 'Another Christ' appears. ... We must understand this secret attack on the exclusive authority of Jesus Christ if we are to understand the angry explosion of the Heidelberg Catechism at this point. It is a very naïve tendency of many Protestants today to think that our differences from Catholic doctrine are insignificant and that we can find common ground in an *Una sancta* movement. Certainly we can carry on genuine theological conversation with Catholics. ... [But we] have to decide between 'Christ alone' and 'Christ and ...'" (*The Heidelberg Catechism for Today*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie [Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964], 112).