

AN OVERTURE CONCERNING Q. AND A. 80 OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

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

A. 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.

The Heidelberg Catechism declares that “the [Roman Catholic] Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry” (Lord’s Day 30, Q. and A. 80). For various reasons the severity of this language has proved troublesome to some, and from time to time synods of the Christian Reformed Church have been asked to deal with the issue.

In response to a request from Synod 1998 the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) presented a report to Synod 2002 and then presented the same report in a revised form together with a second report to Synod 2004. Synod 2004 then instructed the IRC to propose recommendations concerning Q. & A. 80 to Synod 2006. These two reports and the actions of Synod 2004 have been made available to Christian Reformed councils and classes in a booklet entitled *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*. References to these reports and actions of Synod 2004 in what follows will be by page number in this booklet.

In 2002 the IRC concluded on the basis of its study of Roman Catholic teaching that “significant changes in the Heidelberg Catechism may be warranted” (p. 23). In 2004 and after consultation with various Roman Catholic authorities, the IRC advanced to the point of saying that the Heidelberg Catechism was simply wrong in the sixteenth century when it was written and is wrong today in its description and evaluation of official Roman Catholic teaching on the Mass (p. 29). The IRC concludes that “it would be inappropriate for the CRC to continue, by its confession of Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, to suggest that it accurately describes or fairly condemns either the official Roman Catholic teaching or the practices that are in accordance with it” (p. 32).

In keeping with this conclusion the IRC recommended that Q. and A. 80 be printed in a smaller typeface than the rest of the Catechism and that an explanatory footnote be appended. This footnote would point out that although the answer to Q. 80 is wrong in its evaluation and condemnation of official Roman Catholic teaching, it should be retained in a smaller typeface because it serves as a warning against erroneous “teaching, attitudes, and practices” still found among Roman Catholics in certain parts of the world.

On the basis of our own study and reflection we have come to a different conclusion from that of the IRC. Our conclusion is that the Heidelberg Catechism accurately describes official Roman Catholic teaching concerning the Mass and that its condemnation of the Mass is warranted and fair. Therefore we are asking that Synod 2006 make no changes either in the language or the appearance of Q. and A. 80 and that no explanatory footnote be appended. The reasons for these conclusions and recommendations are presented in what follows.

As generally recognized, there was no Q. and A. 80 in the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism published in 1563. Scholars debate whether or not Q. and A. 80 was formulated later that year as a direct response to certain decrees and canons of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent. In any case, the Catechism addresses two doctrinal issues one of which Trent determined only months before the Catechism was published. This issue pertains to the relationship between the Lord’s supper (the Mass) and the forgiveness of sins. The second edition of the Catechism includes Q. and A. 80 in a form designed to address this issue. The third edition adds the sections dealing with the second doctrinal issue, the presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper. The Council of Trent had settled this matter earlier, in 1551. The fourth and final edition of the Heidelberg Catechism is identical with the third and places the Catechism in the context of church order and liturgical matters.

We shall consider each of these two doctrinal issues—the relationship between the Lord’s supper and the forgiveness of sins, and the presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper—by considering in turn the Catechism’s description of the Reformed view, its contrasting description of the Roman Catholic view, and lastly the Reformed condemnation of the Roman Catholic view. For statements of official Roman Catholic teaching we rely primarily on the decisions and formulations of the Council of Trent (1543–1563) and on the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1992. The IRC is correct in saying that “official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Mass has remained quite stable from the sixteenth century to now” (p. 29).

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The Reformed View

**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.**

The forgiveness of sin lies in the foreground of our Reformed understanding of the meaning and significance of the Lord's supper. As the Catechism states it, "the Lord's supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven." The forgiveness of sins immediately brings into view the doctrine of justification. In the words of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III/11/2, "Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness." Justification consists in the remission of sins grounded in the one act of righteousness on the cross, and justification is at the heart of the biblical gospel as well as the Protestant Reformation. That is what makes it so important to have a proper understanding of what the sacrament of the Lord's supper is and how it functions.

How are our sins forgiven?

Our Catechism says that our sins are completely forgiven "through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once and for all." The Scripture teaches us that by our sin we have incurred the penalty of death and eternal condemnation. The gospel is that Jesus has taken upon himself the guilt of our sin and paid the penalty of death by his death on the cross. His "sacrifice of atonement" (Romans 3:25) is the "one act of righteousness" (5:18) that secured the forgiveness of sins, and the forgiveness of sins is ours through faith in him. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way by which a sinner can be justified in the judgment of God and saved.

The proof texts offered in the Christian Reformed edition of the Heidelberg Catechism in support of this doctrine stress the sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of this one sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. In John 19:30 we hear Jesus saying from the cross, "It is finished." The Son has completed the work assigned to him by his Father in heaven. He has offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of his people and has thereby secured the forgiveness of their sins. There is no need for more sacrifices and there are no more sacrifices to be offered.

This is the point in the references to a series of passages in Hebrews. Jesus does not need to offer sacrifices day after day like the priests appointed to serve under the Law of Moses. "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (7:27). By his blood he obtained eternal redemption (9:12). By his sacrifice Jesus has done away with sin. "Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the

creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:25, 26).

The emphasis falls again and again on the complete sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of the one sacrifice offered once for all that stands in radical contrast to the thousands upon thousands of sacrifices offered under the old covenant. These animal sacrifices could never take away either the penalty or the power of sin (10:4, 11; cf. Romans 3:25). The sacrifice of the body of Christ is once for all (10:10) and there is one sacrifice for sins for all time (10:12). By this one sacrifice “he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (10:14). When our sins have been forgiven by this one sacrifice offered once for all time “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (10:18).

This emphasis on the complete sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross to obtain the forgiveness of sins is an integral part of the Catechism’s understanding of both sacraments, both baptism and the Lord’s supper. In Lord’s Day 25 on “The Sacraments” we learn that God promises in his gospel “to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone,” and he does this “because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross” (Q. and A. 66). Then in the next question and answer the same thought is reiterated. Both the word and the sacraments are intended to focus our faith “on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.” “Our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross.” Therefore when we partake of the Lord’s supper we “accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing [we] receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life” (Lord’s Day 28, Q. and A. 76).

The Catechism’s teaching on the Lord’s supper is simply a further outworking of what we confess in Lord’s Day 1. Our only comfort in life and in death is our union with our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus “has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood” and on that ground we are justified (forgiven) and saved. There are no other sacrifices for sin and there is no need for other sacrifices. He has *fully paid* for *all my sin* with his precious blood.

In Q. and A. 80 our Catechism shows us how the Lord’s supper functions in relation to justification (the forgiveness of sins) when it begins by saying that the Lord’s supper *declares to us* that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered once for all on the cross. The gospel brings to us the good news that Jesus has died and is risen to save us from sin and its consequences. Through faith in Jesus we receive the double grace of forgiveness (justification) and renewal (sanctification). The Holy Spirit produces faith in us by the preaching of the gospel and that same gospel is remembered and proclaimed in the Lord’s supper.

Thus the Lord’s supper serves to strengthen and confirm the faith wrought in us by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lord’s Day 25, Q. and A. 65). When we receive the bread and the wine in faith we are receiving Jesus Christ by faith just as we do when we believe the gospel preached to us from the word of God. What comes to the fore in Lord’s Days 28 through 30 on the Lord’s supper is the centrality of the word received by faith in our conversion and salvation. To this word the sacraments are appended as visible signs and pledges so that our faith is confirmed and

strengthened, and we are assured of eternal life on the sole ground of the sacrifice offered for us once and for all time on Calvary's cross.

The Reformed Understanding of the Roman Catholic View

**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.**

The question here is whether this paragraph accurately describes the Roman Catholic view of the Mass. In setting out this view the Catechism makes four points.

First, the Mass is a sacrifice. The Catechism says, "Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests."

This offering of Christ is a sacrificial offering and for this reason Roman Catholics characteristically speak of the "sacrifice of the Mass." The Mass is a sacrifice. The decrees and canons determined by the Session 22 of the Council of Trent bear the title, "The Doctrine on the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass." Chapter 1 declares that the priesthood of Christ was not extinguished by his death in that he left to his church "a visible sacrifice" to represent and memorialize the bloody sacrifice once accomplished on the cross. Chapter 2 declares, "in this divine sacrifice, which is celebrated in the Mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who on the altar of the Cross 'once offered Himself' in a bloody manner." The same victim who once offered himself on the cross is now offered "by the ministry of priests." Canon 1 makes this teaching abundantly clear. "If anyone says that in the Mass a true and real sacrifice is not offered to God, or that the act of offering is nothing else than Christ being given to us to eat: let him be anathema." Thus the curse of Rome falls on any and all who deny that the Mass is truly and properly a sacrifice.

In addition we may note the importance of a daily sacrifice of the Mass. In the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) said, "Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. In it the work of our redemption continues to be carried out. For this reason, priests are strongly urged to celebrate Mass every day, for even if the faithful are unable to be present, it is an act of Christ and the Church."

Our Catechism is accurate in representing the Mass as a sacrifice in which the priests offer up Christ daily.

Second, the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice designed to obtain the forgiveness of sins. The Catechism says that this sacrificial offering is the way in which the living and the dead "have their sins forgiven."

Trent develops this theme most fully in Session 22, Chapter 2. The chapter heading reads, “The Sacrifice is a Visible Propitiation for the Living and the Dead,” and the holy Synod declares that this sacrifice is “truly propitiatory.”

The IRC reports that “In our conversations, the Roman Catholic representatives interpreted ‘truly propitiatory’ to mean that in the Mass the fruits of Christ’s propitiation become ours (a transfer that happens only in the context of faith)” (p. 8).

This interpretation appears to us to be disingenuous because in effect it denies what the language of Trent clearly affirms. It is not simply the death of Christ but the Mass itself that is propitiatory. By “propitiatory” Trent means that the sacrifice of the Mass appeases the wrath of God. Chapter 2 says, “For the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof, and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives even heinous crimes and sins.” The Mass is offered “for the sins, punishments, [and] satisfactions” of the faithful.

Further, Canon 3 places a curse on those who deny this doctrine. “If any one says that the sacrifice of the Mass is only one of praise and of thanksgiving; or that it is a mere commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the Cross, but not one of propitiation; or that it is of profit to him alone who receives; or that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead, for sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities: let him be anathema.”

Whereas the Heidelberg Catechism says that the Lord’s supper simply “declares to us” that we secure the forgiveness of sin through faith in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross, Trent teaches that the Mass itself is propitiatory and secures the forgiveness of sin for the faithful.

Third, the sacrifice of the Mass is necessary for the forgiveness of sin. The Catechism says that according to Romanist teaching 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.”

Here the Catechism recognizes the role played by the suffering and death of Christ on the cross in the forgiveness of sins according to Rome, but maintains that this atonement remains fruitless for the believer without the sacrifice of the Mass. In the language of Trent (Session 22, Chapter 1), the Mass is the means by which the “saving grace” of the sacrifice once accomplished on the cross is “applied to the remission of those sins which we daily commit.” According to Chapter 2 the fruits of the bloody oblation of the cross “are received most abundantly through this unbloody one,” that is, through the sacrifice of the Mass.

The 1992 Catechism teaches that the Eucharist cleanses us from past sins and preserves us from future sins (#1393). “As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity *wipes away venial sins*” (# 1394; emphasis original).

The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were well aware, of course, that in the Roman sacramental system the Mass is not the only sacrament that secures forgiveness of sin. Baptism as a sacrament of initiation secures the forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins (1992

Catechism, #1279). The sacrament of Penance (now called the sacrament of Reconciliation) is designed to secure the forgiveness of mortal sins, sins that exclude persons from Christ's kingdom and bring them into the eternal death of hell (1992 Catechism, #1861). But the Mass is pre-eminent among the sacraments and is the way in which the faithful ordinarily receive the forgiveness of venial sins. Venial sins do not deprive the sinner of eternal happiness but they must nevertheless be forgiven if he is to enjoy eternal happiness. If these sins are not forgiven while the believer is still alive they must be forgiven after he has died. This is the function of time spent in Purgatory.

The emphasis on the necessity of the Mass for the forgiveness of sins stands in marked contrast to the way in which believers receive the forgiveness of sins according to the Reformation. The suffering and death of our Lord is the sole ground for the forgiveness of sin. The suffering and death of our Lord is made efficacious for our salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. We do not need the sacrament of the Lord's supper in addition to what Jesus has done once for all on the cross. We are justified by faith alone, not by faith plus the sacrifice of the Mass. In the Roman Catholic view forgiveness is mediated through the sacraments and pre-eminently through the sacrifice of the Mass. This is what makes the sacrifice of the Mass necessary for the forgiveness of sins. In the Reformed view forgiveness is received directly from Christ through faith without the intervention of the sacramental system.

Fourth, the sacrifice of the Mass secures forgiveness of sin not only for the living but also for the dead. The Heidelberg Catechism says that according to Rome, "the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven . . . unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests."

There can be no question but that this is an essential element of Roman Catholic teaching concerning the Mass. Session 22, Chapter 2, of Trent is entitled "The Sacrifice is a Visible Propitiation for the Living and the Dead." It concludes by saying, "Therefore, it is offered rightly according to the tradition of the apostles, not only for the sins of the faithful living, for their punishments and other necessities, but also for the dead in Christ not yet fully purged." Citing this passage from Trent, the 1992 Catechism declares, "The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for *the faithful departed* who 'have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified,' so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ" (#1371; emphasis original).

In Report 2002 the IRC denies the accuracy of the Heidelberg Catechism in this connection when it says that the eternal state of those who die in the Lord is not in question. "They are simply being purified for the state of full glorification" (p. 10). The summary statement reads, "The effect of the Mass on those who die in the Lord lies not in the area of justification but of (final) sanctification" (pp. 22, 23). Report 2002 claims that whereas the Heidelberg Catechism makes the effect of the Mass on the dead to lie in the area of justification (the forgiveness of sins), the official Roman teaching makes the effect of the Mass to lie in the area of sanctification (purification). For this reason the IRC claims that the Catechism is wrong in the way that it represents Roman Catholic teaching.

The IRC errs, however, in that it takes a distinction that is of crucial importance to the Reformation and applies it as though it were also a distinction made by Rome. The Reformation distinguished between justification and sanctification and claimed that justification consisted in

the remission of sins. The Council of Trent responded by declaring that justification “is not merely remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man, . . .” (Session 6, Chapter 7). In other words no distinction is made between justification and sanctification. Justification is defined as a sanctifying process. Therefore Rome can describe what happens in Purgatory as a process of purification; but this sanctifying process is the forgiveness of sins. That is why Trent describes the sacrifice of the Mass as “propitiatory both for the living and the dead.” The Heidelberg Catechism is entirely accurate in representing Roman Catholic teaching as claiming that both the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven unless Christ is offered (sacrificed) for them in the Mass.

The summary conclusion of Report 2004 is that “it would not be an accurate description of [official] Roman Catholic teaching to say 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’” (p. 28). On the contrary, every element in this statement of the Heidelberg Catechism can be verified by reference to principal and authoritative statements of official Roman Catholic teaching as demonstrated above. The Catechism is accurate in the way that it describes Roman Catholic teaching. The difference with Rome does not arise with the Catechism’s characterization of Roman Catholic teaching but with the evaluation of this teaching.

The Reformed Condemnation of the Roman Catholic View

**Thus the Mass is basically
nothing but a denial
of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ**

The Heidelberg Catechism condemns the Roman Catholic Mass in the strongest terms as “a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ.” No doubt this was not the first time that such a charge had been made from the side of the Protestant Reformation. This is evidenced by the fact that the Council of Trent considered and dealt with this kind of complaint before the Heidelberg Catechism was written.

Far from denying the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, Trent holds that the sacrifice of the Mass does not in any way derogate or detract from the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In chapters 1 and 2 of Session 22, Trent makes three points in order to support this contention.

First, Trent affirms the uniqueness of what Christ accomplished on the cross. Christ offered himself “once to God the Father upon the altar of the cross” (Chapter 1). With an allusion to Hebrews 9:27, Trent says that Christ “on the altar of the Cross ‘once offered Himself’ in a bloody manner” (Chapter 2). This is an historic event and as such is unrepeatable.

Second, the Christ who offers himself in the sacrifice of the Mass is the very same Christ who once offered himself on the altar of the cross. The only difference lies in the manner of the offering. In the cross we have a bloody sacrifice; and in the Mass, an unbloody sacrifice. From Chapter 2, “And since in this divine sacrifice, which is celebrated in the Mass, that same Christ is

contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who on the altar of the Cross ‘once offered Himself’ in a bloody manner, the holy Synod teaches that this is truly propitiatory” And further in the same chapter, “For, it is one and the same Victim, the same one now offering by the ministry of the priests as He who then offered Himself on the Cross, the manner of offering alone being different.”

Third, the sacramental sacrifice is the means by which the benefits of the sacrifice of the cross are conveyed to the faithful. Therefore the sacrifice of the Mass does not detract from the sacrifice of the cross. From Chapter 2, “The fruits of that oblation (bloody, that is) are received most abundantly through this unbloody one; so far is the latter from being derogatory in any way to Him [Christ].” This point is restated in Canon 4 which goes so far as to lay a curse on all who say “that blasphemy is cast upon the most holy sacrifice of Christ consummated on the Cross through the sacrifice of the Mass, or that by it He is disparaged.”

The same doctrine is taught in the 1992 Catechism using these same citations from Chapters 1 and 2 of Session 22 (#1367).

The IRC gives extensive attention to this argumentation of Rome in Report 2002. “Both in Trent and in the Second Vatican Council, the difference between the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass is that the one sacrifice is offered in different manners” (p. 8). Various words are used to describe the relationship between the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass. In the Mass the one sacrifice of Christ is “re-enacted,” or “represented,” or “re-presented” (apparently in the sense of both “presented again” and “made present”). The Mass is a “perpetuation” or “memorial” of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The IRC believes that these ways of describing the connection do not jeopardize the uniqueness or indispensability of the sacrifice of the cross.

Report 2002 records, apparently with agreement, the response of the Roman Catholic representatives in their reaffirmation of Trent. “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” (p. 9). These representatives conclude that the Heidelberg Catechism has misconstrued Roman Catholic teaching in declaring that the Mass detracts from the sufficiency or finality of Christ’s sacrifice. The Mass does not stand in competition with the cross (p. 9).

In its stated conclusion the IRC accepts this explanation and argumentation of Rome in determining that “the difference between the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass is that the one sacrifice is offered in different manners,” and that “the Eucharist sacramentally represents and perpetuates the one unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross” (p.22). This is the basis (in part) for its observation that “significant changes in the Heidelberg Catechism may be warranted” (p. 23).

Report 2004 takes the further step of declaring the Heidelberg Catechism’s “denial” as unwarranted. “Official Roman Catholic teaching affirms that Christ offered a final, sufficient, unrepeatable sacrifice on the cross and that the Mass reenacts or represents that sacrifice and suffering in an unbloody manner” (p. 28).

Now just as the Council of Trent was aware of the kind of objection the Reformers were making to the Mass, no doubt the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were aware of the kind of response that Rome was making to this charge. Why did they not concur with the explanation offered by Trent, as does the IRC? Why did they nevertheless insist on calling the Mass “a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ?”

The Heidelberg Catechism obviously does not intend to say that Trent denies what Trent repeatedly affirms, namely, the historical fact that Jesus died on the cross, that this occurred only once in human history, and that it never was and never will be repeated.

The Catechism calls the Mass “a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ” because the Mass denies the sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of this one sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin (justification). Therefore the Mass struck at what was at the heart of the Reformation—justification by faith alone.

As we have observed, it belongs to the essence of the Roman Catholic view to insist that the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice to secure the forgiveness of sin. Although the claim is that the victim is the same, the claim is also that the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross is unrepeatable. Therefore it is a propitiatory sacrifice distinct from, separate from, and in addition to the one unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The use of words like “re-enactment,” “representation,” “re-presentation,” “perpetuation,” and “memorial” cannot mask or cancel out this undeniable fact.

The distinction made between a bloody sacrifice and an unbloody one also confirms the fact that we have not one, but two different sacrifices. One sacrifice cannot be both bloody and unbloody at the same time. Of course Rome does not have just two sacrifices, but millions of them as priests continue to offer up Christ daily on the altars of the Roman church.

But does this multiplicity of sacrifices of Christ amount to a *denial* of the *one* sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ?

At this point we must recall what we find in the Book of Hebrews as presented earlier in our description of the Reformed view of the Lord’s supper. In Hebrews the emphasis falls again and again on the complete sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of the one sacrifice offered once for all. This stands in radical contrast to the thousands upon thousands of sacrifices offered under the old covenant that could never take away either the penalty or power of sin (10:5, 11; cf. Romans 3:25). The sacrifice of the body of Christ is once for all (10:10), and there is one sacrifice for sins for all time (10:12). By this one sacrifice Jesus “has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (10:14). When our sins have been forgiven by this one sacrifice offered once for all time “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (10:18).

In preaching the gospel and in celebrating the Lord’s supper we are teaching sinners to have recourse to this one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This is the explicit teaching of Lord’s Day 25, Q. and A. 67, in distinction from the teaching of Rome. If, on the other hand, we ask sinners to have recourse to the sacrifice of the Mass to find the forgiveness of sin we are asking

them to look for forgiveness where it cannot be found. The Mass is admittedly an unbloody sacrifice; but the Scripture says that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22). The sacrifice of the Mass cannot secure the forgiveness of sins as a *re-presentation* of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross any more than the sacrifice of bulls and goats could secure the forgiveness of sins as a *pre-presentation* of the sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:4).

If the argument is that behind the sacrifice of the Mass lies the once-for-all bloody sacrifice of Christ on the cross, then we ought to send sinners directly to the cross so that they can find forgiveness in the blood of him who alone has the power to forgive sin. It is unnecessary to have other and additional sacrifices for sin. Such sacrifices not only *detract* from the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, they are a *denial* of the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ because they deny the sufficiency, efficacy, and finality of that one sacrifice.

By faith we have direct access to Christ and the benefits he offers on the basis of his death and resurrection. We have that access by faith alone, and not through the mediation of an ecclesiastical invention known as the sacrifice of the Mass, nor by the intervention and authority of an ordained order of human priests.

Rome claims that the Mass is simply a sacramental representation of the sacrifice of the cross and as such is a necessary means for obtaining the fruit of this one sacrifice. But this is exactly what the Reformation denied. The benefits of the cross are obtained by faith alone without any intervening sacramental sacrifice or any other kind of sacrifice. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper serve to confirm and strengthen the faith wrought in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we were to insist on reintroducing a sacrificial system with daily bloody sacrifices offered by sinful human priests, even though at one time this system was divinely ordained, we would fall under the condemnation the Apostle Paul once directed against the Galatians. "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4). How much more do we fall under the same word of condemnation if we approve of a sacrificial system with no warrant from the word of God and a system of sacrifices that offer the forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood.

The Roman Catholic sacramental system amounts to seeking forgiveness by humanly devised works of the law rather than by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Session 7 of the Council of Trent delivered a series of "Canons on the Sacraments in General." Canon 4 declares: "If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation, but are superfluous, and that, although all are not necessary for every individual, without them or without the desire of them through faith alone men obtain from God the grace of justification: let him be anathema." Canon 5 adds, "If anyone shall say that these sacraments have been instituted for the nourishing of faith alone: let him be anathema." Here Rome has clearly stated the radical difference between the reformational justification by faith alone and its own doctrine of justification by works of the new law.

In Report 2004 the IRC takes significant account of Roman Catholic “teachings, attitudes, and practices” related to the Eucharist that obscure the finality and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord” (p. 32). Because of this ongoing problem the IRC does not propose discarding Q. and A. 80 altogether, but recommends a change in the way it appears in printed form and the addition of an explanatory footnote.

The abuses in Roman Catholic practice signaled by the IRC arise directly out of its faulty teaching. The way to curb these abuses is not to affirm the official teaching that lies behind them as the IRC proposes, but to do away entirely with the sacrifice of the Mass. This is exactly what the Protestant Reformation proposed and accomplished.

Our conclusion is, therefore, that the Christian Reformed Church must continue to confess and testify that the Roman Catholic Mass “is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ.” This rejection of the Mass is warranted, fair, and necessary.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE LORD’S SUPPER

The Reformed View

**[The Lord’s supper] 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.**

In setting out the Reformed view of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper the Catechism makes three points.

First, the incarnate Christ “with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father.” In the incarnation the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. The divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus Christ. This Jesus died on the cross, rose bodily from the tomb, and ascended bodily into heaven. He is and remains incarnate, and we look for his return from heaven in bodily form at the end of the present age.

Second, Christ wants us to worship him in heaven. Heaven is now the special place of his presence just as heaven is the special place of the presence of the Father. We pray to our Father in heaven. Jesus ascended into heaven where he is present with the Father in the glory that he had prior to the incarnation (John 17:3). Just as we worship the Father in heaven so also we worship the incarnate, risen, and ascended Christ in heaven.

Third, though believers are on the earth and Christ is in heaven, we are united to the incarnate Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who “grafts us into Christ.” Just as husband and wife remain “one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31) even though they may be separated by many intervening miles, so we remain united to Christ even though he is in heaven and we are on the earth. Ephesians 3:17 tells us that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. Faith is the bond of this union from our side; and the Holy Spirit sent from the Father and the Son and living both in Christ and in us is the bond of this union from the side of the Lord.

Q. and A. 80 focuses on the presence of the incarnate Christ in heaven, but this emphasis does not impinge upon a recognition of the presence of Christ everywhere as confessed in Lord’s Day 18, Q. and A. 48. The IRC refers to the teaching in Q. and A. 76, that Christ “is in heaven and we are on earth” as the *extra Calvinisticum* (p. 16). It is our understanding that the *extra Calvinisticum* is actually the teaching in Q. and A. 48 that “Christ’s divinity is surely beyond the bounds [*extra*] of the humanity he has taken on.” The Reformed affirmed the omnipresence of Christ as to his divine nature, and in this sense his presence in the Lord’s supper. The Reformed denied the presence of the flesh of Christ in the Lord’s supper in distinction from both Lutheranism (consubstantiation) and Romanism (transubstantiation).

Although the Heidelberg Catechism denies the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper, it does recognize that in the institution of this sacrament our Lord said of the bread, “This is my body,” and of the wine, “This is my blood.” Therefore when we partake of the Lord’s supper there is, as Paul writes, a participation in the body of Christ and a participation in the blood of Christ (I Corinthians 10:16, 17).

Q. and A. 76 in Lord’s Day 28 explains how this language is to be understood. “What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood?” The answer is, “It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.” We commune with the body and blood of Christ, not because bread and wine have in some way become the actual body and blood of Christ, but by faith as we receive and rest upon the crucified and risen incarnate Lord for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

The Reformed Understanding of the Roman Catholic View

**[The Mass] also teaches
that Christ is bodily present
in the form of bread and wine
where Christ is therefore to be worshiped.**

In describing the Roman Catholic view of the presence of Christ in the Mass the Catechism makes two points, the second flowing out of the first.

The first point is that “Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine.” This is the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation as defined by Trent in Session 13, Chapter 4. “By the consecration of the bread and wine a conversion takes place of the whole substance of bread into

the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood. This conversion is appropriately and properly called transubstantiation by the Catholic Church.”

Report 2002 points out that the Roman Catholic theologians with whom the IRC consulted “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.” These theologians “emphasized that what is important is affirming the real presence of Christ and the change of the elements of bread and wine” (p. 17). The bread and wine retain the appearance of ordinary bread and wine to be sure, but they have been changed to become the body and blood of the Lord. This presence is not a “localized or fleshly presence,” but a real presence none the less because of the change that has taken place. The whole Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity, is present under the appearance of bread and wine (p. 17).

The second point made by the Heidelberg Catechism concerning the Roman Catholic view is that Christ is to be worshiped in the form of bread and wine. By virtue of transubstantiation the whole Christ is present on the altar and that is where he is to be worshiped. This is the teaching of Trent in Session 13, Chapter 5, bearing the title, “The Worship and Veneration to be Shown to this Most Holy Sacrament.” According to Chapter 5, “There is, therefore, no room left for doubt that all the faithful of Christ in accordance with a custom always received in the Catholic Church offer in veneration the worship of *latría* which is due to the true God, to this most Holy Sacrament.” Trent endorses the celebration of a special feast day in honor of the sacrament (*Corpus Christi*) and carrying the sacrament about publicly in procession so that it can be worshiped by the faithful.

With a citation from Pope Paul VI the 1992 Catechism affirms that “The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist the cult of adoration” (#1378). The faithful genuflect or bow deeply in the presence of the consecrated hosts as a sign of faith in the real presence of Christ and adoration of him. The consecrated hosts are to be venerated not only during Mass but also outside of Mass as they are exposed to the adoration of the faithful and carried about in procession.

The IRC tells us that on this issue the Roman Catholic representatives with whom they consulted insisted along with Trent “that the holy sacrament is to be venerated with the worship of *latría*” (p. 21). *Latría* is the worship that is due to God alone in distinction from the veneration due to the saints or the Virgin Mary.

From both the official documents and the testimony of the Roman Catholic representatives consulted, we must conclude that the Heidelberg Catechism gives an accurate description of Roman Catholic teaching concerning the presence of Christ in the Mass. He is present bodily in the form of bread and wine and is therefore to be worshiped as present on the altar in the form of bread and wine.

Again, what Rome really objects to is not the description of its view as found in the Heidelberg Catechism but the condemnation of that view.

The Reformed Condemnation of the Roman Catholic View

**Thus the Mass is basically
nothing but . . .
. . . a condemnable idolatry.**

The question here is whether we are warranted in condemning the Mass as idolatry. The question arises because of the worship that is offered to the sacrament (the Eucharist) as authorized and commended in official Roman Catholic teaching. Both the Council of Trent and the 1992 Catechism are quite clear that the worship that is due to “this most Holy Sacrament” is the worship due to the true God. The consecrated hosts are elevated and exhibited so that they can receive this worship.

But is this idolatry?

The Roman Catholic representatives with whom the IRC consulted denied that the Mass involved the Roman Church in idolatry. They did insist that the holy sacrament (the bread and wine) is to be venerated with the worship of *latría*, but they claimed that this does not constitute idolatry because “in the adoration of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ is being worshiped, not the elements” (p. 21).

We find this response to be misleading for at least two reasons.

First, this response does not fairly represent the criticism offered by the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism does not charge Rome with idolatry because the faithful are worshipping the elements and not Christ. The Catechism accurately describes the Roman view as holding that it is Christ who is being worshiped. The point is that he is being worshiped where he is thought to be bodily present, namely, on the altar in the form of bread and wine.

Second, the Roman Catholic response is misleading and disingenuous because it fails to take account of the identity of Christ with the elements that is an essential part of Roman teaching. According to this teaching the bread and the wine have become the real body and blood of Christ. They have become the whole Christ (transubstantiation). Worship is, indeed, offered to the elements, and it is offered to the elements because of the belief that these elements have become the very body and blood of our Lord.

The IRC does not challenge this Roman Catholic defense of the position of Trent, and in Report 2004 takes the further step of expressing its concurrence with it. The IRC calls the Catechism’s evaluation of the Mass as a condemnable idolatry “unwarranted.” “Roman Catholic teaching holds that one is to worship the ascended Christ through the veneration or worship of the consecrated bread and wine, which have become the body and blood of Christ” (p. 28). Although the IRC rejects as erroneous the idea that the words of our Lord, “This my body . . . this is my blood,” should be taken literally, it does come to the conclusion that “it seems inappropriate to charge Roman Catholics with idolatry when they are worshipping the ascended Christ through the consecrated elements.”

The way the IRC describes the Roman Catholic view as worship of the “ascended” Christ through the veneration of the consecrated bread and wine is gratuitous and also misleading. It is Reformed to speak of worshipping the “ascended” Christ, but the official Roman Catholic language cited and referred to does not speak of worshipping the “ascended” Christ. It speaks of worshipping Christ who is bodily present on the altar under the form of bread and wine. The IRC itself acknowledges at a later point in Report 2004 that “by encouraging the worship of Christ through venerating or worshipping the consecrated bread and wine, the Roman Catholic Eucharist may in significant ways detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord, Jesus Christ” (pp. 31, 32).

Why does the Heidelberg Catechism condemn the Roman Catholic Mass as idolatrous?

The Roman Catholic Mass is idolatrous because the bread and the wine consecrated in the Mass are and remain exactly that—bread and wine. Although Roman Catholics sincerely believe that the bread and the wine have become the body and blood of Christ, they are sincerely mistaken. The doctrine of transubstantiation is a false doctrine. The incarnate Christ is not present on the altars of Rome.

The bread and the wine of the Mass are created elements and remain created elements. They do not become the body and blood of our Lord. When human beings take a piece of God’s good creation and call it God, and when they offer worship (*latría*) to something created as if it were God, that worship is idolatry. All idolatry falls under the condemnation of God.

The rejection of the Roman Catholic Mass as “a condemnable idolatry” is both warranted and fair. In condemning the Mass as idolatrous the Heidelberg Catechism testifies against a serious error in the Roman Church that the Christian Reformed Church must continue to warn against and reject. We confess in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession that “the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them” is one of the marks of the true church.

The IRC recognizes that there are “teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist that are idolatrous” (p. 32) and sees the importance of testifying against these things. Again we must realize that these abuses arise directly out of official but erroneous Roman Catholic teaching. The Mass draws attention away from the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross received by faith and focuses attention on these created elements of bread and wine as the source of forgiveness and salvation. Idolatrous attitudes and practices are bound to arise in this atmosphere. The way to combat these practices is not to soften our protest against the official teaching, but to encourage Rome to abandon its errors and to reform its teaching and practices according to the word of God. This is what happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The IRC declares that the Catechism's evaluation of Roman Catholic teaching "is either accurate both now and in the sixteenth century or inaccurate in both time periods." The IRC concludes that the Catechism was wrong at the time of the Reformation and that it is wrong now (p. 29).

Our own evaluation leads us to the opposite conclusion. The Heidelberg Catechism was and is accurate in its description of the Roman Catholic view of the Mass, and is warranted in rejecting the Mass as both a denial of the suffering and sacrifice of our Lord and a condemnable idolatry.

Further, we believe that in the Canons of the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church has unjustly condemned biblical teaching by repeatedly pronouncing its curse (*anathema sit*) not simply on views that it rejects but specifically on the people who hold the views we confess in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Therefore we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation:

That Synod 2006 determine to leave Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism unchanged and that this be declared Synod's answer to the overtures concerning Q. and A. 80 submitted to Synod 1998.

Grounds:

- a. The Heidelberg Catechism presents a fair and accurate description of both the Reformed view of the Lord's supper and the Roman Catholic view of the Mass;
- b. Official Roman Catholic teaching warrants our continued rejection of the Roman Catholic Mass as "a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry."