

ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of the Heidelberg Catechism as site of memory in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the period 1862 to 1963. It assumes that there is a dynamic entanglement between recollection and confession as sources of identity in Reformed communities. To put it differently: how a community remembers confessional documents plays a role in how it confesses and embodies its faith at a particular point in time and what it means for them to do so. The study examines and explicates the characteristics and effects of this entanglement in the history of the DRC.

The main questions that the study sets out to answer are as follows: How was the Heidelberg Catechism remembered by the DRC between 1862 and 1963? What stimulated the DRC's commemoration of the Catechism? How did memories of the Catechism influence the DRC's confession and embodiment of its faith? What collective shared knowledge did the DRC express by way of the Catechism?

To answer these questions, archival material from newspapers and journals from the period is studied through the theoretical lens "site of memory." The aim is to identify the *places* and *instances* where the DRC's memory of the Heidelberg Catechism was formed, expressed and crystallised. Therefore, instead of being interested in exactly what happened during any particular event involving the Heidelberg Catechism or what the outcome was, the driving question is rather why the Heidelberg Catechism is relevant to an event at all. Or to give another example: instead of asking whether the DRC's memory of the Heidelberg Catechism was correct or not, the focus is on *how* it was remembered and what kind of identity construction this memory facilitated.

The body of the study consists of four chapters.

Chapter 2 analyses and discusses the Heidelberg Catechism as a pivotal aspect of the so-called Liberal Struggle of the 1860s. It provides a short overview of the theological context of the 1860s and focuses on the "outbreak" of the Liberal Struggle at the synod of 1862 as a result of a remark about the Heidelberg Catechism by one of the members of the synod. It shows that the preservation of the Reformed heritage was closely connected to the Heidelberg Catechism for both sides of the conflict, and accordingly explicates the different understandings of tradition that are at the heart of this theological conflict.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of the Heidelberg Catechism in the infamous Du Plessis case of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In this controversy, the Catechism had a subtler presence than was the case in the theological conflicts of the 1860s. However, it is argued that the memory of the Liberal Struggle had a defining influence on how the Du Plessis case was framed and eventually concluded.

Chapter 4 deals with the 1930s and 1940s as a period in which the DRC was faced with social problems specifically caused by widespread poverty and urbanisation. The time was depicted as one of decline and deterioration. The chapter discusses how the DRC responded to the zeitgeist by defining itself as a *confessional* church. It also shows how a “return to the past” functioned as a point of stability and orientation and how “heritage” as a concept became a central aspect in the DRC’s identity construction. In defining its heritage, the DRC merged various aspects of its past into one narrative, including Reformed Confessions, Protestant history, Dutch history and South African history.

Chapter 5 investigates and explicates the close link between commemoration and identity. It delves deeper into the *return of history* that started in the mid 1930s, and discusses the DRC’s concern with *how* its past was remembered and ritualised. The specific memories of the Heidelberg Catechism between 1948 and 1963 are also discussed and analysed, with special attention being paid to the 400th commemoration of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1963. In the final section the unification of the five DRC synods is discussed as an event supposedly following from a shared confessional basis but shown to be clearly influenced by the DRC’s commemorative practices.