

THE RELEVANCE OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM
AS A GUIDING DOCUMENT IN DEVELOPING
A NEW FILIPINO CATECHISM

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Introduction

“At present, the practice of catechesis...has been almost completely lost,” laments Tim Keller.¹ The same sentiment can also be said of the majority of evangelical churches in the Philippines, including the hundreds of churches belonging to the Alliance of Bible Christian Communities of the Philippines (ABCCOP). Based on my personal observation and communications with others pastors, the bond that unites us has more to do with church planting, ministry training and social action concerns than theological distinctives. Although there has been a resurgence on discipleship, the majority of the concentration is on methods, programs, and spiritual activities, while we remain fuzzy on doctrinal matters. Vanhoozer observes that neglect of sound doctrine is fraught with danger: “There are many ideologies and agendas waiting to rush and fill the hearts and minds of the uncommitted. Bereft of sound doctrine, the church is blown about by cultural fads and intellectual trends.”²

We usually think of *catechizing* as a Roman Catholic practice. But even the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines has observed that catechesis, partly due to factors like proselytizing and modernization, “does not enjoy the special interest attracted by new initiatives.” Yet, for them, it “remains an essential—arguably the most essential—ministry of the

¹ Timothy Keller, “Introduction: The New City Catechism,” accessed November 7, 2020, <http://newcitycatechism.com/introduction-timothy-keller/>.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

church in the Philippines today.”³ They recognized that the Catholic faithful “are in dire need of a sound, systematic continuing catechesis in the faith.”⁴

However, catechizing is not a distinctively Roman Catholic practice. It is an essential part of historical Protestant tradition, rooted in biblical and apostolic mandates (Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; Gal. 6:6). It may take some time, effort and humility for evangelical churches to admit the shortcomings of our common discipleship methods, to begin to see the value of this historic practice, and initiate a large-scale catechism project. Yet I am convinced that the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) can be of immense help in this regard.

This catechism was written mainly by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in 1563 in Heidelberg, Germany, under the direction of Elector Frederick III, ruler of the Palatinate.⁵ In this paper, I will argue that in spite of its historical and cultural distance, the HC is an ideal guide for ABCCOP churches in developing our own catechism in light of its sound doctrinal formulations, devotional value, pastoral approach, and irenic potential.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s Sound Doctrinal Formulations

To recognize the contemporary relevance of the HC, we must first come to recognize its high achievement in terms of its sound doctrinal formulations. The impetus for the catechism came about because Frederick III detected among his people “an immense lack of knowledge

³ Joseph Roche, “The National Catholic Catechism Project,” *Landas* 1, no. 2 (1987): 165.

⁴ *Ibid*, 169.

⁵ Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 21.

about the Word of God and the Christian life in that Word.”⁶ So, he wrote in his original preface to the HC: “It is essential that our youth be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the Gospel, and be well exercised in the proper and true knowledge of God.”⁷ True to its purpose, the HC is sound in its presentation of biblical doctrines because it is gospel-centered, gospel-saturated, and anchored in Scripture.

Its gospel-centrality is evident in the answers to the first two questions, which serve as an introduction to the catechism. Answering the first question (“What is thy only comfort in life and death?”), our comfort depends on our union with “my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ” and is purchased with his redemptive work on the cross (“with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins”). According to Schaff, herein is “the whole gospel in a nutshell.” It is the “central idea” and “key note” of the whole document.⁸

In Question 2, we are introduced to the three-part structure of the catechism by giving the three things necessary for us to know to enjoy this gospel comfort. Beeke notes that the HC’s overall structure is patterned after the book of Romans. “How great my miseries are” introduces Part 1 (Q3–Q11) and mirrors Rom. 1:1–3:20, dealing with our guilt and miseries caused by our sin. “How I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries” is addressed in Part 2 (Q12–Q85)

⁶ Willem Verboom, “The Heidelberg Catechism: A Catechetical Tool,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching: The Heidelberg Catechism’s Enduring Heritage*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2013), 231-232.

⁷ George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1913), 193.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 1, *The History of Creeds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878), 541.

and reflects Rom. 3:21–11:36. This central part of the HC contains meditations on the redemptive grace of Christ, including a lengthy treatment of the Apostle’s Creed and the sacraments. The question of how the believers can express “gratitude to God for such deliverance” is answered in Part 3 (Q86–Q129), reflecting Paul’s treatment of the Christian life in response to God’s mercies in Romans 12–16. This last part of the catechism deals mostly with The Ten Commandments and The Lord’s Prayer.⁹ Thus, the HC’s introductory section and its overall structure are anchored in the gospel.

Aside from the HC’s gospel-centrality, it is also worth noting that this document is gospel-saturated. References to the gospel “as of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3) can be found all throughout the document. The gospel is not just a jumping board for the HC (as seen in Q1), but the whole ocean inviting us to dive deeper into the wonders of the death and resurrection of Jesus for our salvation (Q23, Q29). The gospel proclaims that no other than Jesus Christ (Q18) is our “mediator and deliverer” (Q15) who can make “full satisfaction” of God’s righteous judgment against sin (Q12). There are multiple references to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Q31, Q37, Q39) and the benefits we receive from his finished work (Q43, Q45, Q56, Q59, Q60, Q61) by true faith in Jesus Christ (Q60). It is then necessary for all Christians to believe “all things promised to us in the gospel” (Q22) and to remember these things in the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper (Q66, Q67, Q69, Q70, Q75, Q76, Q80) and baptism (Q72, Q73).

Even in the HC’s treatment of the Christian life as “gratitude” to God’s grace, there is a deliberate effort to ground imperatives in gospel indicatives. Our good works are in response to and motivated by the gospel (Rom. 12:1; Q86). The law in the Christian life serves us by

⁹ Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory*, 22.

reminding us of our sins and driving us to our Savior (Q115). The way we relate to other people, like in forgiving others, is “for the sake of Christ’s blood” (Q126).

Another way in which the HC is biblically sound is because it is anchored in Scripture. Scriptural quotations abound and proof texts are more numerous compared to other catechisms because “its authors wanted it to be an echo of the Bible.”¹⁰ Frederick notes in his original preface that proof texts were to be treated as an integral part of the HC.¹¹

A closer look at the first few questions of the HC demonstrates that Frederick’s intentions were realized. The answer to Question 1 (“I...am not my own but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ”) is taken from 1 Cor. 6:19 (“You are not your own”), 1 Cor. 3:23 (“you are Christ’s”), and Tit. 2:14 (“a people for his own possession”). The phrase “with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins” are gleaned from 1 Pet. 1:18, 19 (“ransomed”), 1 John 1:7 (“cleanses us from all sin”), 1 John 2:2 (“propitiation for our sin”), and 1 Pet. 2:12 (“your sins are forgiven”). The phrase “and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head” is formulated from the doctrinal teachings of John 6:39, John 10:28, 2 Thess. 3:3, and 1 Pet. 1:5, and the imagery from Matt. 10:29–31; Luke 21:18. The phrase “yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation” is a deduction from Rom. 8:28. The teaching “by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life” is a summary of the sealing, guaranteeing, and securing ministry of the Spirit to believers found in 2 Cor. 1:20–22, 2 Cor. 5:5, Eph. 1:13, 14, and Rom. 8:16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The short answer to Question 3, “Whence knowest thou thy misery? Out of the law of God,” is taken from Rom. 3:20. The HC even contains lengthy direct quotations from Scripture like Question 4, about the great commandment (Matt. 22:37-40), and the introductions to the expositions of The Ten Commandments (Q92) and The Lord’s Prayer (Q119). According to Beeke, examples like these are “not an anomaly, but the norm.”¹² Though it does not contain a question directly addressing the doctrine of Scripture, its effort to be faithful to the Scripture is evident in its heavy reliance on many Scripture quotations, summary statements of Scripture teaching, and numerous proof texts that can be found throughout the catechism.¹³

That the Heidelberg Catechism is biblically sound in its doctrinal formulations can be proven in its gospel-centered thrust, gospel-saturated content and structure, and its Scripture-anchored statements. Developing a modern-day catechism with the same fidelity and devotion to the Scriptures is imperative. A significant problem observed by Ursinus in the sixteenth century is still true today: a neglect of catechesis is “one of the chief causes why there are so many at the present day tossed about by every wind of doctrine.”¹⁴ If we want our churches, then, to be grounded in sound doctrine, we must pay closer attention to catechisms like the HC.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s Devotional Value

Not only is the HC sound in its biblical formulations, it also has tremendous devotional value. The first question contains not only the HC’s doctrinal summary, but also its overarching

¹² Joel R. Beeke, “Holding Firmly to the Heidelberg,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), 16.

devotional theme. The line of questioning in the first two questions makes this plain (“thy only comfort,” “enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily”). This rare combination of doctrine and devotion makes the HC “unsurpassed for depth, comfort, and beauty.”¹⁵ Godfrey notes that the answer on the first question alone “is remarkably personal, intimate, and full of comfort,” containing “the heart of the Christian religion.”¹⁶

The authors were aware that sin causes not just guilt but miseries. As such, we live in a world hostile to God and the gospel. Both Ursinus and Olevianus “suffered deposition and exile” for their faith.¹⁷ Not only was this personal for them, they were also sensitive to their own historical and cultural context. There was ongoing and increasing religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants during that time.¹⁸ The devotional purpose of the HC is sensitive to this context.

The design of the doctrine of the catechism is our comfort and salvation. Our salvation consists in the enjoyment of the highest good. Our comfort comprises the assurance and confident expectation of the full and perfect enjoyment of this highest good, in the life to come, with a beginning and foretaste of it already, in this life.¹⁹

How does the HC accomplish this? First, there is a recognizable gospel flow in the heart of the catechumen as the catechist helps her move from guilt to grace to gratitude, or from repentance to faith to obedience. Willem van ’t Spijker notes, “The questions posed in the HC

¹⁵ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:541.

¹⁶ W. Robert Godfrey, “The Heidelberg Catechisms among the Reformed Catechisms,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 215.

¹⁷ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:533.

¹⁸ C. Strohm, “On the Historical Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism,” *Acta Theologica*, 2014, 20.

¹⁹ Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 16.

direct us slowly toward the gospel. In fact, the entire structure of the HC’s questioning takes its point of departure from the gospel.”²⁰

Second, the HC accomplishes this by an emphasis on the doctrine of divine providence as very comforting and reassuring (Q1, Q26–Q28). Strohm explains why, “To focus the message of salvation on a piety that centred on God’s providence was a characteristic feature of Reformed Protestantism. The many persecutions and threats which the Reformed had to endure made this theological accentuation attractive.”²¹ In a nation heavily affected by the pandemic, economic ills, and frequent natural disasters, this doctrine also offers us rest and refuge.

Question 26 of the HC explains that calling God “Father” means that “he will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body and further, that he will make whatever evils he sends upon me, in this valley of tears turn out to my advantage; for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing, being a faithful Father.” The comfort this doctrine brings is made plain in Question 28.

What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by his providence does still uphold all things? That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love; since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot so much as move.

This line of questioning, “What *advantage*...” is typical of the HC. This use of applicational language is the third contributing factor to the HC’s devotional value. Aside from *advantage*, it also asks questions about what *profit*, *comfort*, *benefit*, *admonition*, or *assurance* a

²⁰ Willem van ’t Spijker, “Scholasticism in the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 248.

²¹ Strohm, “On the Historical Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism,” 29.

certain doctrine provides for us (Q28, Q36, Q43, Q45, Q49, Q51, Q52, Q57, Q58, Q59, Q69, Q75). This demonstrates what is needed in Christian discipleship today, that is, “doctrinal truths are not to be divorced from practical ends, namely, the direction, help, and comfort for a Christian living in a tumultuous world.”²² Seeing how the HC accomplishes this, it is not an exaggeration when Beeke makes the conclusion that the HC “abundantly addresses practical, personal, and experiential concerns better than any other Reformed doctrinal standard.”²³

A discernable gospel movement, an accent on the doctrine of providence, and the use of applicational language—these are just some of the contributing factors why the HC is treasured for its rare combination of doctrine and devotion. Good makes the same comment: “The combination of head- and heart-faith in the Heidelberg, of intellectual faith and personal experience, has been one of the most striking peculiarities of our catechism.”²⁴

The Heidelberg Catechism’s Pastoral Approach

The relevance of the HC for the contemporary church can be seen not only in relation to its content (doctrinal and devotional), but also in the purpose and the methodology it uses to achieve that purpose—hence, the HC’s pastoral approach. Frederick’s original preface suggests several pastoral purposes for the HC. It is designed to be an educational tool that parents and teachers can use in introducing the gospel to children and young people: “that the youth in churches and schools may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine, and be thoroughly

²² Beeke, “Holding Firmly to the Heidelberg,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 60.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Its Newest Light* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1914), 297.

trained therein.”²⁵ Aside from that, it is also designed to serve pastors by giving them a model and a guide for preaching and teaching: “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 doctrine...and also from the pulpit to the common people, that you teach and act, and live in accordance with it.”²⁶

To achieve this, the catechism’s 129 questions are divided into 52 “Lord’s Days,” each section to be used each Sunday for the whole year. Instructions were given to pastors to designate the Sunday afternoon service to preach through the HC.²⁷ That the HC had been used for this purpose is evident in the “exceedingly numerous” commentaries and sermons about HC written not long after its inception.²⁸ Especially noteworthy is the massive volume written by its chief author, Ursinus.

Another reason why the HC’s pastoral approach makes it relevant for our church’s discipleship program today is its question-and-answer methodology. The use of second person singular in questions (like in Question 1, “What is *thy* only comfort...?”) makes a direct question to the catechumen. The use of the first person singular in answers (like in Question 1, “That *I*...am not *my* own...”) are aimed at encouraging expressions of one’s own faith and immediate personal application (see also Q5, Q32, Q39, Q44, Q52, Q58, Q59, Q60, Q61, Q94, Q103, Q104,

²⁵ Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

²⁷ Beeke, “Holding Firmly to the Heidelberger,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 39.

²⁸ Schaff, *Creeds of Cristendom*, 1:530.

Q105, Q111, Q112 and Q129).²⁹ “The aim,” according to Beeke, “is not simply to promote a vague ‘spirituality’ in the hearers but rather to lead them to Christ and to help them find the comfort they need in Him and His salvation.”³⁰

The HC’s doctrinal direction, devotional value and pastoral approach make it a relevant guiding document in formulating new catechisms like *The New City Catechism* (NCC) to address the deficiencies found in many modern discipleship programs. Tim Keller intimates the HC’s contribution to the development of the NCC. It “is based on and adapted from Calvin’s Geneva Catechism, the Westminster Shorter and Larger catechisms, and especially the Heidelberg Catechism.”³¹ Following the HC’s pattern and structure, though relatively shorter, the NCC is also divided into 52 questions. There are two sets of answers—a shorter one for children, and a longer one for adults. The way to recovering this lost art of catechizing looks promising, especially if we pastors are concerned with how we can shepherd families in our churches well. Keller gave this assessment on the pastoral value of catechisms, compared with most modern discipleship methods:

Catechetical instruction is less individualistic and more communal. Parents can catechize their children. Church leaders can catechize new members with shorter catechisms and new leaders with more extensive ones. Because of the richness of the material, catechetical questions and answers may be integrated into corporate worship itself, where the church as a body can confess their faith and respond to God with praise.³²

²⁹ Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 296.

³⁰ Beeke, “Holding Firmly to the Heidelberg,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 56.

³¹ Keller, “Introduction: The New City Catechism.”

³² *Ibid.*

The Heidelberg Catechism's Irenic Potential

The HC's doctrinal, devotional, and pastoral benefits can be a unifying factor not just for a local church but even for a community of churches like ABCCOP. According to Bierma, "Many scholars regard it as the most irenic and catholic expression of the Christian faith to come out of the Protestant Reformation."³³

In pre-Enlightenment Europe, Christians found it difficult to "agree to disagree" because politics and religion were intertwined. There were heated debates then on differing views on the Lord's Supper among Lutherans, Philippists, Calvinists and Zwinglians. Some conflicts became so intense in Heidelberg, causing public scandals prior to the writing of the HC.³⁴ In response to this, Frederick III charged the theology faculty to lay to rest arguments about theological issues like the Lord's Supper, inviting different denominations to gather in agreement. His aim is to make "a catechism which would heal the differences in his land."³⁵

What came out is a catechism that "both captured the essence of Protestant theology but still managed to avoid being vague or general."³⁶ It is a remarkable achievement that different

³³ Bierma, "The History and People behind the Heidelberg Catechism," in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, 3.

³⁴ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:531.

³⁵ Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 287.

³⁶ Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), chap. 9.

groups appreciated the HC.³⁷ Strohm calls it “a consensus document that brought together a number of quite different tendencies within Reformed Protestantism.”³⁸

While clearly making a complete break from key Roman Catholic doctrines like those related to the mass, the Lord’s Supper and justification, the HC “attempts to find a mediating position on several of the issues that proved contentious among Protestants.”³⁹ It did not take sides on heated debates surrounding double predestination, the order of divine decrees, and limited atonement. Its intention is to squelch conflict, not by drawing lines in the sand but by coming in broad agreement on the fundamentals. Holcomb notes that the HC “demonstrates its brilliance in handling controversial issues” by focusing “heavily on the major issues central to the gospel” and leaving “the minor issues of the faith for personal conviction.” Based on these observations, he concludes that the HC is “the most inclusive of all Reformed confessions.”⁴⁰ Though Reformed/Calvinistic in tone, its doctrine “is herein set forth with wise moderation, and without its sharp, angular points.”⁴¹

There is a popular sentiment among many evangelical pastors that the reason we avoid talking about doctrine is because doctrine divides. While that is true in some sense, we must also remind ourselves of the unifying power of doctrines rooted in Scripture. We must be zealous and united not just in doing social actions, but also in “[contending] for the faith that was once for all

³⁷ Strohm, “On the Historical Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism,” 16.

³⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

³⁹ Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, chap. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:540.

delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). This is where the HC will prove to be a reliable guide. For it is not just biblical in its doctrinal formulations, it is also devotional and pastoral. That is why Good concludes that the HC “is truly irenic, for it holds to fundamentals, and yet is favorable to union. It gives us a solid foundation on which to base our union.”⁴²

Conclusion

Though written more than 450 years ago in a different context, the Heidelberg Catechism is an ideal guide for ABCCOP in developing its own catechism in light of its sound doctrinal formulations, its devotional value, its pastoral approach, and its irenic potential. Lyle Bierma observes similarly that the overall tone of the HC is “biblical, devotional, and to a certain extent, ecumenical.” It “was a document with an exquisite blend of doctrine, piety, and pastoral concern.”⁴³

Its sound doctrinal formulations are evaluated in terms of the HC’s faithfulness to the Scripture and its presentation of the gospel as “of first importance.” Its devotional value is demonstrated in how its structure moves the heart toward gospel-driven obedience, its usage of applicational language, and its unique accent on the doctrine of providence. Its pastoral approach is evident in its 52-part structure that is designed for use for each Lord’s Day, and its personal and experiential use of question-and-answer approach. Lastly, its irenic potential is seen in its deliberate attempt to come up with a document that different Protestant groups can find

⁴² Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 287.

⁴³ Lyle D. Bierma, “The History and People behind the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, ed. Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck, 15.

agreement. Frederick's original preface sets the tone for the HC to eventually bear these four distinguishing marks.

There are already a number of churches in the Philippines that are using the HC's English and Filipino translations, especially Reformed churches holding on to the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Canons of Dordt, and Heidelberg Catechism). Bierma reminds us that despite the HC's popularity, it originated in a particular context.⁴⁴ As such, we may find it more helpful if we will strive to develop a new catechism "in line with older catechisms that are true to the Word"⁴⁵ but with an emphasis that is unique to our own cultural setting.

Because ABCCOP is composed of churches which are generally unfamiliar with catechizing as an instructional tool, further studies must be pursued in order to motivate our pastors to begin collaborating for this significant project. The HC is by no means a perfect document. Its length may appear intimidating for Christians who are yet to familiarize themselves with catechizing, so a shorter version can be a good starting point for our churches. It will also be helpful to do more extensive research regarding how other catechisms like the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms or the Baptist Catechism address the deficiencies found in the HC. A survey of our own evangelical landscape can also be helpful in guiding us in deciding what particular theological emphases must be included in a new catechism that will equip Filipino Christians in facing the challenges of today's world.

⁴⁴ Bierma, "The History and People behind the Heidelberg Catechism," in *A Faith Worth Teaching*, 3.

⁴⁵ Keller, "Introduction: The New City Catechism."

The tasks required for a project like this seem daunting. Writing the Heidelberg Catechism by theologians in their twenties for a small German province was no easy task either. But if divine providence has used this document to make a lasting spiritual impact to many generations, it is not farfetched to hope that God may be pleased to do the same with this new initiative.

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