

## COMMENTS ON CATECHETICAL PREACHING (2)

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A church without preaching is a contradiction in terms.

From its beginning our Lord has engaged in gathering the church as a redeemed people by his Word and Spirit in a dying world.

Clearly did our Lord Jesus teach this to those who were listening. "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life." Then he challenged his disciples whether they also would leave because his words had offended some. To this Peter responded also on behalf of the rest, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

His words alone are "the good news of great joy." In them Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the fulfillment of God's self-revelation by means of which we alone can know and enjoy him forever. And since Holy Scripture is the only medium by which these words come to us, preaching is true to its nature must spring from and be normed by it. It is "the chief means of grace." Apart from acquaintance with and response to its message, no transformation from death to life, from darkness to light, from enslavement to the liberty of the children of God can be experienced.

Only, too, when preaching is faithful to the Bible can believers as God's people "declare the praises of him who called"<sup>2</sup> them and "proclaim his salvation day after day . . . his marvelous deeds among all peoples."<sup>3</sup> Preaching calls for such a whole-souled response. To make this response, then, is the high calling of everyone who hears unto salvation.

This sets preaching in sharp relief from all other forms of human communication.

It is not an investigation into what may happen to be true.

It is not a discussion of possibilities and impossibilities to be tested by our ideas or insights or experiences.

Nor is it a dialogue in which we engage with the hidden depths of our selfhood or even with each other. In so far as the term "dialogue" may be used, it is God's authoritative and compelling address which always elicits a response, whether of faith unto life or of unbelief in a variety of manifestations unto condemnation. To that end preaching must be as clear, as persuasive, as comprehensive as possible, in order that the "whole will of God"<sup>4</sup> may be made known.

The conclusion to be drawn is inescapable. All sound preaching is at the same time teaching. And teaching to be effective demands the presentation of its material in an orderly, systematic form. Step by step the body of divine truth(s) which comprises Holy Scripture must be explained in its full significance for God's glory and the salvation of man. Not only are old and young to be persuaded to repentance and faith; all those incorporated into the believing community are by such ongoing instruction to "be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Far too much preaching—in the past as well as the present—has been scatter-shot.

It dabbles in and with the gospel. It picks a little here and there without pattern. Often the most basic affirmations, if not questioned or denied, are simply assumed without any explanation by preachers. Meanwhile understanding of God's word sinks to abysmally low levels. Well may we question whether the average church member today has any better knowledge of what the Bible teaches than had those to whom the reformers first began to preach.

To meet the spiritual need of that day those preachers, whether Lutheran or Reformed, turned also to catechetical preaching. Soon this practice, so we noted earlier, became widespread. It still remains one of the hallmarks of those Reformed churches which take Scripture, creeds and preaching seriously. Here the *Heidelberg Catechism* continues to be cherished, also for homiletical purposes. Ordinarily every Sunday, so several church orders mandate, one sermon shall be preached on "the sum of doctrine" which it systematically sets forth in its fifty-two Lord's Days.

Something of its origin and official endorsement as well as of its structure, content and various uses has been indicated in an earlier article. Now attention will be drawn to some practical and pastoral questions which spring up in connection with this requirement to which preachers in those churches have pledged their compliance.

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Objections have been raised against both this catechism and its homiletical use from the very beginning.

This should occasion no surprise. As soon as it made its appearance on the European scene, Roman Catholics, many Lutherans and a variety of Anabaptists had little good to say about it. Nor did sermons based on its contents always receive unstinted praise from members of Reformed congregations. Even some early preachers neglected or agitated against this demand.

Such objections have by no means died away.

We still find people who argue that such preaching is sterile. The same truths are preached again and again, and that always in the same way to the wearying of the congregation. Why not, so they insist, preach something new and interesting and challenging? Others opine that this "sum of doctrine" is much too deep and abstruse for the average congregation which always includes children and young people. Occasionally one hears that these sermons are "not evangelistic" or that they "do not answer the questions which people are asking today" or that they fail to meet the real needs of those who sit in the pews.

Whether seriously intentioned or not, these objections should not be lightly brushed aside. More may well be implicit in them than appears at first hearing. Preaching is always much too solemn and sacred to be taken for granted. Yet the response can be relatively simple.

Far too many people, including also some serious-minded believers, no longer know what preaching is and ought to be according to God's will. Some greatly prefer a dramatic spectacle or soothing music which need not engage the mind. Listening, let it be remembered, is an art learned only by long and laborious practice. Ours is not an age outstanding for such an exercise in patience. Add to this the anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian spirit which seeps daily into nearly every heart and home, and we will not be sur-

prised that sermons which deal with the lofty themes of Holy Scripture are often far from popular.

Opposition to systematic instruction in the Christian faith, also by way of preaching, frequently springs from such cliches as "no creed but Christ" and "Christianity is not a doctrine but a life." Here are false dilemmas which the Bible itself refutes. Unless we "know" Jesus Christ (and this involves doctrinal content as well as commitment of heart and life), we cannot confess him before men, which is our chief calling and without which there is no salvation (Matt. 10:32-33). Nor can we engage in any Christian duty without proper instruction in the *what* and the *why* and the *how* of godly living according to the word. Here rank-and-file Communists usually put to shame many who belong to the churches. The former can state and defend and propagate their convictions and life-style, while many of the latter are tongue-tied. They may still attend church with a degree of regularity. But failing to ask seriously the right questions about God, themselves and their relation to others and the world in which they live, their minds remain untouched and their hearts unchanged. Preoccupied with pleasures and profits of the daily round, they fall under the apostolic judgment of "having a form of godliness but denying its power." They simply will not be bothered with what they regard as unnecessary and unprofitable details in the Bible which they still claim to believe.

James D. Smart has aptly signaled this attitude in *The Creed in Christian Education*.

We need also take account of the fact that the religious atmosphere of our time in America is genially uncritical and unfriendly to the making of theological distinctions. Religion is popular, but there is an unwillingness to define with any exactness what is meant by religion . . . .<sup>6</sup>

To which he adds,

In fact, so vague are the supposedly Christian definitions of religion in some quarters that even the agnostic and the atheist can give assent to them. Tolerance seems to many to demand the viewpoint that all religions are merely diverse expressions of the one religion to which we all hold.<sup>7</sup>

Much as on many points we may differ with Smart, the thrust of his statements is too clear and convincing to be ignored.

The blight of ignorance, indifference and superficiality with respect to God's truth has by no means left Reformed churches unscathed either. True and saving faith is more than a religious

feeling. It knows what it believes and in whom it trusts. Without sound knowledge of God as he reveals himself in the word, faith is reduced to fantasy which deceives for time and eternity. It is always under attack from without and within. Everything conspires against learning to know and enjoy him rightly, so that faith needs to be regularly and repeatedly strengthened by the facts and mysteries of the Christian religion.

On this our Lord also insisted when commanding the disciples to engage in "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."<sup>8</sup> Only then, according to the testimony of Paul, "will we no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."<sup>9</sup>

How else, then, can an individual or a congregation grow strong in faith, firm in hope and abounding in love? All who despise instruction in the Christian religion soon cease to deserve the name Christian.

But can God's truth, so some who object to catechetical preaching would protest, be put into words which have abiding value and validity? Is not truth in its depth-dimension really relational, so that all statements and propositions which attempt to reproduce it are at best only poor approximations?

Here, it must be realized, the attack is not levelled only against creeds and confessions; it ranges itself against the very form and content of Scripture itself. To explain and explode this objection lies outside the scope of this article. Let it simply be affirmed that all who argue in this fashion can never, if true to what they claim, say anything meaningful about anything. Nor have they learned to listen reverently and believingly to what the prophets, the apostles and especially our Lord Jesus taught.

But can a creed, especially one formulated some hundreds of years ago, meet the spiritual needs of today? Is not its language much too antiquated and the questions which it asks and answers far too irrelevant to the everyday concerns of our time? Not a few, especially philosophers and scientists and theologians bewitched by the explosion of knowledge characteristic of the twentieth century,

would answer the above with a resounding insistence that we have outgrown the past.

What should be faced at this juncture is whether human nature has been so radically changed that a totally new approach is demanded. Also, has not language itself, especially that of ordinary folk, undergone such great changes that we no longer understand what then was put on paper?

Reasonable responses to such assertions, it seems to us, lie at hand.

Has man's nature actually changed so much, despite all that has happened to our physical and spiritual environment, so that we can discount the past? Are not all men, then as well as now, endowed with the ability to think and speak and so communicate with each other? Are not all sinners in need of divine salvation? And do not our problems, no matter how seemingly complex and difficult of resolution, stem from the same alienation from God, ourselves, others and the world around us even as they did centuries ago?

Few will deny that the temper of our times is radically other than that which affected our grandparents, let stand those of far earlier generations. Mass media—including newspapers, magazines, novels which flood the marketplaces as well as radio and television—impinge on old and young every day. All these affect what we think and feel and do, not only by the facts which they often purport to present but much more profoundly by explanations and interpretations which are inescapably added. Always there is more than we can assimilate, much less evaluate with any degree of discernment. The world, as someone so aptly remarked, is too much with us late and soon. All this seems to raise barriers between us and the life- and world-view presented in the Bible and summarized in the evangelical confessions of the church. Preachers and people alike will have to keep this always in mind. Man, much more perhaps than in the past, has become a problem to himself and to others. Increasingly he feels himself alone and lost in a wilderness with no way out. Life for such persons has become directionless, because they are without chart and compass.

All the more reason, then, to get back to the teachings of Scripture, also as these are so pointedly, practically and pastorally summarized in the creeds including the *Heidelberg Catechism*. In subordination and subservience to the Bible it attempts to ask the right questions and provide the only satisfying answers to the riddle of

our existence. Babbage convincingly reminds us of the urgency of this task.

The Christian estimate of man alone does justice to the complexities of our human situation and provides us with a vantage point from which to understand both man's nature and his destiny. We may safely assert that it is only those who have this faith who can rightly understand man's condition, and speak words of healing for our mortal hurt.<sup>10</sup>

Nor can man know himself in isolation. Left to themselves, all without exception have lost the *way*, which is the Lord Jesus Christ in his fulness, and so also the *address*, which is the triune God of all grace and glory.

Here lie exposed the deep roots of man's problems and perplexities. Life to him becomes a troubled sea whose contrary and contradictory waves threaten his very existence at every point. No rest of soul can be his, unless he learns to rest in the word and will of God who is Creator, Savior and also Lord of and over all. Calvin, that master preacher and pastor and theologian, so correctly insists,

It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge, until he has seriously contemplated the face of God, and comes down after such contemplation to look into himself . . . . Until God reveals himself to us, we do not think we are men, or rather, we think we are gods; but when we have seen God, then we begin to feel and know what we are.<sup>11</sup>

How much also we as Christian believers should be reminded of this repeatedly. We need clear, penetrating and persuasive instruction in that which alone can give abiding meaning and purpose to our lives whose existence has become too much enslaved by what we can touch with hands which grow weaker with the years. Our souls need to be lifted up far beyond the hills. Our spirits can be sustained only by food which abides into that eternity which awaits all who partake in faith.

To that end catechetical sermons have been mandated and maintained.

In obedience to the life-giving word they supply preachers and people with a pattern which prevents them from majoring in minors and so wandering into bypaths from which there is no exit. Reformed churches, therefore, need never feel apologetic about making use of their catechism for homiletical purposes. Again we

quote from Smart who pleads for the use of "a truly Christian creed" in our anti-creedal age.

Far from being an instrument for the enslavement and the bludgeoning into submission of the human mind and spirit, a truly Christian creed is a banner of liberty, a bulwark of freedom of the Christian man. The New Testament has much to say about this freedom . . . . It is the unbeliever who is the prisoner, bound by the chains of his sin and ignorance, and unable to take one step in freedom. Christian salvation is liberation. There is no empty rhetoric . . . . but penetrates to the heart of the human problem.<sup>12</sup>

Is the language of our catechism, as some still urge, too antiquated or too technical? Then let preachers remember to what they have been called by God. They are to teach old and young; some only recently attracted by the gospel and others whose lives have been steeped in Scripture for many years. But all need teaching. And this is a work worthy of all his energies and efforts. Creativity in expressing old truths in a new and illuminating way is the art which he does well to seek to master. He will attempt to explain patiently. He will make use of apt illustrations drawn from both the Bible and contemporary life-situations. He will demonstrate the applicability of God's truth to daily life, convinced that sound doctrine is no end in itself but aims at godliness which delights the One who has commissioned him to preach. When this is consistently and conscientiously done, also these objections soon melt like snow before a warm and radiant sun.

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Dislike of catechetical preaching, however, stems not alone from the attitudes of some people. Preachers may well have to bear their share of blame.

It cannot be denied that some sermons of this kind are dull, pedantic, even boring to the extreme. They may be so poorly structured or preached that no one really knows what is being said. Some also seem to use the catechism only as a springboard from which to dive into a murky pool of their own ideas which sustain little connection with what they have promised to explain and apply. Others have been known to preach the same sermons with the same themes and divisions year after year. Such warmed-over fare will hardly whet the appetite of even the most longsuffering congregation.

To be sure, there are longsuffering pastors who suffer much unfair criticism for their work; there are also longsuffering congregations whose spiritual rations are less than adequate for even the most modest growth in the knowledge and grace of our Lord.

But these are not objections to catechetical sermons as such. The fault here lies not with the material but with its preparation and presentation. The most fascinating subject soon becomes dark and dull when taught by someone who has not mastered the material or shows little enthusiasm for it. Of this Reformed synods have been keenly aware. Even now they mandate inquiry at the time of annual church visitation into whether especially these sermons give evidence of diligent study on the pastor's part. All the above "problems" (if such exist) can with good will and genuine effort be in large measure corrected.

Much more serious is the case against such sermons, of course, when Reformed ministers no longer believe what the catechism affirms.

Such a situation arose in the early days of the Remonstrant controversy which agitated the churches in the Netherlands for some decades. Not a few pastors who sympathized with the views of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) showed their distaste in a variety of ways. Some used the *Heidelberg Catechism* rarely in the course of their preaching. Others argued for revisions without following proper ecclesiastical procedure. Still others, insisting that they too were Reformed, took matters in their own hands. Two pastors of the Gouda congregation wrote their own catechism, at first distributed only in hand-written form. With their friends they argued for freedom to preach the word as they, rather than as creed and catechism officially taught, understood the Bible.

This *Gouda Catechism*<sup>13</sup> appeared on the scene about 1607. It was exceedingly brief, consisting of only some thirty questions and answers. Most of the latter appeared as direct quotations from Scripture without explanation. Thus anyone who employed it could expound the passages as he pleased. All distinctive evangelical Reformed affirmations were conspicuous by their absence. No mention was made, for example, of man's total depravity in consequence of the sin of our first parents, of the two natures of our Lord, of justification by faith alone and of predestination. By this they demonstrated an unwillingness to keep

the solemn pledge made when they had signed the *Form of Subscription*.

Against these high-handed tactics the Reformed soon raised their voice in protest.

They realized that such a catechism easily allowed for the infiltration of Pelagian, Socinian and other humanistic notions into the congregation. Repeatedly the matter was brought for adjudication to provincial synods but to no avail. Not until the synod of Dordt (1618-19), which took disciplinary action against the Remonstrants, were the underlying issues for a time resolved.

What is at stake should be crystal-clear to all who belong to Reformed churches which still mandate that one sermon every Lord's day shall be preached on "the sum of doctrine" contained in this creed. Here "ordinarily" does not mean once-in-a-while according to the whims of the preacher or the wishes of the people.

These churches claim to be "confessional." Solemnly they affirm again and again that their creeds are completely subordinate to Holy Scripture as the only rule for faith and life. But all holding office in their congregations have declared "sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord" that they

. . . . heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-19, do fully agree with the Word of God.<sup>14</sup>

On that basis they pledge themselves "diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same by our public preaching or writing." To implement and regulate this, also for the instruction of all, the *Church Order* prescribes faithful catechetical preaching.

No one in the churches having made profession of the Reformed religion—least of all ministers of the word, elders in the congregations and teachers in their schools—has the freedom to ignore, deny or contradict these standards.

To do so is dishonest. It insinuates the lie into Christ's church called to manifest itself as "pillar and foundation of the truth."<sup>15</sup> It breaks faith with every sister-congregation and, what is worst of all, with the Lord before whose face the promise was made.

More serious than every other objection raised against such catechetical preaching, however, seems to be the one which challenges its very legitimacy.

Here, so the argument runs, the words of men are substituted for the word of the Lord. Every sermon must have as its "text" a verse or passage taken word-for-word from the Bible.

Here, we believe, are palpable and patent misunderstandings which need to be cleared away. Not only does this reveal a simplistic and biblicistic view of Scripture; it also springs from a strange and erroneous conception of preaching. Neither of these notions will serve believing congregations well.

No sermon—and on this all will have to agree—is simply a verbatim recitation of a large number of biblical texts. If this is what our Lord had wished, he would never have ordered his apostles to "preach" and to "teach." Nor would he have said to them after speaking his parables, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein Paul urged Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth," supplementing this with the command, "Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instructions."<sup>17</sup> These and many other passages demonstrate that the gospel is to be explained and applied to those who hear.

To this must also be added that "the whole will of God" is to be set forth.

This is by no means limited to a few outstanding verses or chapters in the Bible. Nor did God's self-revelation in Scripture, now entrusted to his church for preservation and propagation, fall in a single day from the heavens. Instead, over a period of many centuries, making use of servants selected and inspired by him, God has declared his ways and will. This he was pleased to do progressively, always addressing people in their own life-situations and yet so that his truth is authoritative and valuable for all men everywhere. Nor did this produce a Bible (somewhat like the Koran) containing a series of unconnected and perhaps even contradictory statements, theories or "theologies" as some would

claim. In all its teachings a most remarkable unity demonstrates that the human authors were indeed superintended by the Holy Spirit. No section simply repeats what had been set down earlier. Always we encounter new, richer, fuller revelations which complement and supplement what God had declared before.

Only when this is clearly seen will a preacher avoid like a plague preaching on any "text" in isolation from its immediate context and from the total message of Scripture. We dare not expound Old Testament passages as do the Jewish rabbis. Nor should we isolate the psalms and the prophecies from their historical context. Even the significance of the four Gospels is not clarified apart from some reference to the doctrines set forth in the apostolic sermons and writings. The terms so repeatedly used like "God," "man," "sin," "deliverance," "grace," "faith" and a host of others take on richer coloration and clarity as we study, step by step and book by book, this marvelous word of the Lord. Only together do they begin to display "the manifold wisdom"<sup>18</sup> of the God who saves and uses the church to the praise of the glory of his grace. Our high calling as a redeemed and refreshed people—and how often do we make the congregations aware of this?—is to "reflect" all this not only before the world but above all before "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." Even preachers and people who exercise themselves daily in the word have seen only "the fringes of God's ways." Most of us are little advanced beyond kindergarten in the school wherein Christ has enrolled us.

What all believers therefore need for enrichment of their spiritual understanding and experience is a "sum," a summation of what on every basic teaching necessary unto full salvation that Bible gives. This the *Heidelberg Catechism*, according to the testimony of Reformed churches in many lands also today, provides. For that reason its responses are replete and resonant with biblical terms, phrases and even sentences; all the while striving so to explain these that believers can respond to what God has said with heart and mouth and deed. Such preaching, when done as its composers intended, shows more clearly than sermons based on a single verse or passage far more of the length and breadth and depth of the treasures displayed on the sacred page. These we are to teach people to "see" with the Spirit-enlightened eyes of their understanding.

Let us then no longer be ashamed, if such we are, of using the questions and answers of this catechism as "texts" for our sermons. Nor should a single Bible verse or two be added to serve as apology or even basis for such a message.

This matter has been debated from time to time in the Reformed churches. Echoes of it are even heard occasionally in our own time.

To it few have addressed themselves more clearly and persuasively than did Abraham Kuyper in a series of articles in *De Heraut* years ago. His explanation still deserves thoughtful consideration.

When our catechism was composed, it was understood at once that the testimonies of Scripture might not be omitted from such a catechism. But how were these supplied? Did they (i.e. the authors) place at the head of each Lord's Day a text from which that entire Lord's Day was deduced? Indeed not; rather, sometimes twelve or more declarations of Holy Scripture were included with each answer, thereby to demonstrate that only the gathering together of that which was revealed in all these statements produced the result arrived at. In sharp contrast this organic conception of Holy Writ was afterward forsaken and the practice introduced of selecting a single text for the catechetical sermon. This was, indeed, a step backward . . . .

Our fathers rightly understood that the systematic proclamation of the basic teachings of our confession is only possible when the truth is drawn from not one but from ten or twelve texts and all of these together. Therefore catechetical preaching for them was not no-preaching according to Scripture, but preaching on all these texts which were deliberately placed under each answer. The enumeration of texts therefore is not *incidental* but *essential*. It is not: so also does Holy Scripture think about this matter, but: *from these and these veins of the Bible this gold has been mined.*<sup>19</sup>

To a casual and somewhat uncritical listener this may seem to be a kind of "topical" preaching which the Reformed have usually deplored. Yet it stands at the farthest remove from what usually passes for such sermons today. The subject or "theme" here derives directly and inescapably from Scripture itself. Never is it left to the choice of either preacher or people to determine what subject shall be explained. Nor is only the subject assigned. Rather, also what and how and in what order and frequently why this, and not something else, is to be expounded and applied has been carefully crafted, all in dependence on and in conformity with what Scripture in several places unmistakably affirms.

Such, then, can become biblical preaching at its best.

It allows none of the essentials of God's gospel of salvation to be ignored in the course of a year or two.

It safeguards against having ministers selecting only those materials, whether from the Bible or elsewhere, which may happen to please them at some given moment.

It assures God's people that the word itself, as the first key of the kingdom of heaven, shall be explained as clearly and fully and effectively as is humanly possible. Here they can receive a spiritual diet both adequate and balanced in its life directing power.

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But—and let us listen here to one last objection raised from time to time—does not the *Heidelberg Catechism* omit many significant parts of the Bible? What of the history of the children of Israel as preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the fulness of time? How about the many prophecies in both Old and New Testament which should serve as instruction, warning and consolation for us today? And are not the parables and miracles of our Lord, none of which are included in this creed, part of that instruction which God has provided for our edification?

To state the issue simply: by mandating catechetical preaching according to this prescribed pattern have not the Reformed churches made themselves guilty of adopting "a canon within the canon"?

Also here the answer can be relatively simple and, hopefully, straightforward.

First of all, the aim of this catechism is not to outline and comment on every portion of Holy Writ. Demanding this would defeat the very purpose for which it was composed. It seeks rather to provide, and that also by being used year after year, that elementary (which is something other than simplified or childish) instruction in the basic, indispensable "doctrine which is according to godliness" (KJV). Here it does not deal selectively with Scripture to include what its authors liked and exclude what they disliked. Conscientiously they attempted to survey and then summarize all that the Bible had to say about those doctrines which are necessary to know and worship and serve God in all things according to his word.

This becomes irrefutably clear, when we carefully review the texts from which the answers are drawn.

The composers, competent theologians as they indeed were, showed throughout their deep concern for the congregations. People in their day were in dire need of instruction in the Christian faith. For centuries the Bible had remained a closed book even to many parish priests. Now, available also because of the invention of movable type, it could be placed in the hands of everyone able to read. Soon contradictory interpretations began to disturb and destroy the peace of the churches. To stem this growing discord Elector Frederick set Ursinus and Olevianus to work on a catechism in all things conformable to Scripture. For far too long had some passages been played out against others.

Without some pattern that Bible would remain a confused mass of passages for most people. Hence the need for a kind of "system." And here as demonstrated earlier, the authors chose one which harmonized with the chief aim of Scripture itself and at the same time directly addressed the basic needs of the people. Hence the stress on "comfort."

Salvation, so it was affirmed again and again, came as God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit who alone can apply the word savingly to heart and life. But this was not thought of as some purely personal and mystical experience. It was received and enjoyed and enriched within the fellowship of those believing communities where the word was faithfully and fully preached. By it, as the very voice of God, men and women and children were summoned to faith. Rich and poor, old and young, learned and unlearned alike might never regard themselves as exempt from it and its claims upon their lives. Thus throughout this catechism the ongoing interchange between "I", "me" and "my" with "we" and "us." Nor might, as not a few did in those days, law and gospel, Old and New Testament, faith and works be sharply sundered from each other. For patriarchs and prophets as well as for people in their own times the authors insisted that in Christ Jesus believers were not only reconciled and redeemed; they were also by God's grace renewed to walk in his ways. This, so they who wrote and those who endorsed the *Heidelberg Catechism*, was the clear, consistent teaching of Scripture.

Hence the many "texts" ranging all the way from Genesis to Revelation. These constituted an integral part of this manual for instruction.

Large numbers, to be sure, were drawn from the several epistles of the New Testament. But many were also selected from the

historical books; others from the Psalms, Proverbs and the prophetic writings. All had to be carefully studied in their respective settings by pastors in preparing their sermons and then assimilated into the messages heard from the pulpits. In this way the voice of the Lord was to be proclaimed.

How this can be more effectively done than sometimes appears to be the case will be considered later. But the avowed aim of including so many specific references was that of instilling in the minds and hearts of all who listened that here God was speaking authoritatively as well as comfortingly and challengingly.

Let us not forget, either, that far more historical material is enunciated in this little book than many are willing to admit. It speaks about creation, man in Paradise, the instigation and devices of the devil, the fall of our first parents and the consequences of that disobedience for all mankind. Nor will any right-thinking person ignore the profound affirmation of the unity of Old and New Testament set forth in Lord's Day VI, QA19. Repeatedly it also addresses our life-situations in the light of God's dealings with people in days when first his special revelation was proclaimed. We read of "barren and fruitful years" as well as of "riches and poverty," "sickness and health" and life and death as governed by his almighty and all-wise hand. By all these references drawn from the wells of nearly every Bible book we may now learn how by grace we can live joyfully before God's face.

That this catechism speaks in such detail and at such length about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ ought occasion no surprise. In the events of his life and death and resurrection he has brought salvation. This is to be experienced as "the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time; and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching . . . ."<sup>20</sup>

In this it simply follows the order of the *Apostles Creed*, that summary used for centuries to summon all who hear to appropriate "the facts and mysteries" of the gospel unto salvation.

Does the catechetical sermon or even a whole series of such sermons, then, say everything about God's ways with mankind that can and must be said? No, no more than can any series of sermons on isolated texts and passages. The word, so Reformed believers confess, can be adequately but never exhaustively preached. But

where catechetical preaching is properly done, pastors and people may be assured that none of the central affirmations are neglected to the spiritual impoverishment of those who have come to be fed.

Or do Reformed churches insist that only such sermons have legitimacy in an evangelical pulpit? Far from such a notion. Rather, from the beginning their church orders have required that services for divine worship, in which the sermon always takes precedence over all else, shall be held "at least twice on every Lord's day." In other services, also those held during the week and on the Christian festivals, every preacher is at liberty to choose as "texts" for his sermons those not dealt with directly or in depth by this catechism. But even in such sermons, as the worthy Ashbel Green reminded his readers years ago, a sound biblical creed renders invaluable service to every preacher who wants to be faithful to the Bible.

For myself I have no reluctance to state here publicly what I have frequently mentioned in private, that in the composition of sermons one of the readiest and best aids I have ever found is my Catechism.

Let me add, further, that long observation has satisfied me that a principal reason why instruction and exhortation from the pulpit are so little efficacious, is that they presuppose a degree of information or an acquaintance with the truths and doctrines of divine revelation which, by a great part of the hearers, is not possessed, and which would best of all have been supplied by catechetical instruction . . . . It is needed to imbue effectively the minds of our people with "the first principles of the oracles of God," to indoctrinate them soundly and systematically in revealed truth, and thus to guard them against being "carried about with every wind of doctrine," as well as to qualify them to join in the weekly service of the sanctuary with full understanding, and with minds in all respects prepared for the right and deep impression of what they hear.<sup>21</sup>

In the light of spiritually sensitive catechetical sermons much of the unity and variety found in the Bible begins to stand out clearly and convincingly. It helps to introduce the hearers again and again into what for so many, also in this time of conflicting ideologies and paralyzing temptations, seems to be for them "the strange new world of the Bible." There is much room, you see, even in such messages to engage in narration. What we are to believe and how we are to live is deeply imbedded in that greatest of all stories

which spans the entire Scriptures, the story of the marvelous grace of God for a wayward and wicked world.

By so opening up the word, under the Spirit's impulses who always works with the word, God's people need never feel themselves lost and alone in an alien world. We recognize ourselves as belonging in the company of Adam and Abraham, of the prophets and the apostles and the saints of all ages. With them we learn to rejoice in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."<sup>22</sup>

So explained and applied, this catechism is a confession which produces a truly confessing congregation. It as a gentle guide leads us into the storehouse of God's truth which feeds to life everlasting. It tells us where we stand together with all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It binds the very words of Scripture upon our hearts, so that with lip and life we are "always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks . . . the reason of the hope"<sup>23</sup> which is ours. Without that kind of response we are not a church in which our God delights.

That much more is required here than a purely intellectual response to "the good news of great joy" does deserve to be stressed. The danger of over-intellectualizing the gospel is, of course, just as threatening to sound spirituality as that of making it little more than a matter of the emotions or of the will. True confessing is ever the offering up of ourselves totally to the triune God of the covenant for his praise and in his service. His ways with us in Christ Jesus not only enable us to know him rightly but at the same time stir us to live in all things according to his will. That the *Heidelberg Catechism*, by setting before our minds and hearts so many "texts," never wearies of emphasizing.

Since catechetical sermons (as do also many preached on incidental texts) often seem to fall far short of this avowed aim, we do well to listen to what Van Til has said about the act of "confessing."

So much that passes for Christian testimony in today's world is shallow. We say so little to ourselves and others, because we still know and believe and with heartfelt conviction respond to so little of the fulness of God's speaking to us through his word. Out of this impasse catechetical preaching seeks to help us. Hence Van Til's comments in *The Triumph of Grace: the Heidelberg Catechism*.

The believer's act of confession is first and above all else a *religious* act. It is an act of prayer and adoration. It is not a

system of philosophy. It is not even a system of Christian philosophy. Nor is it a system of dogmatic theology. It is an act in which all the members of the congregation can participate.<sup>24</sup>

And agreeing wholeheartedly with this, we who are Reformed also insist with the writer that

Any intelligible revelation and any intelligible response to revelation involves conceptual response on the part of the person making this confession.<sup>25</sup>

How deserving of much repetition these statements are in our days of anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal and anti-creedal propaganda. Truth as it comes to us from the lips of God is always meaningfully communicated. Such is true even when it is despised. It is never simply a "happening" that somehow may or may not stir the soul. It has been put into words which say what God says and mean what God means. Despite all the nuances found in biblical terms for "to know," none are devoid of a large measure of intellectual content to be apprehended and appropriated. This was the conviction of those who penned our catechism. It is still the conviction of those who would use this "sum of doctrine" to proclaim God's peace to the ends of the earth.

Without such a view of God's truth and the purposes for which he has intended it, the church can no longer communicate the gospel.

Without it preachers might as well stammer or stand tongue-tied in their pulpits.

Without it we have nothing meaningful to say to ourselves, to each other or, for that matter, to a world which lies wallowing despite all its activities in darkness and despair.

Confessional Reformed churches call for confessing people who know what they believe and are eager to articulate this in word as well as deed.

To that end, unsatisfied with having people content themselves with quoting an occasional text or two, they seek without apology to "indoctrinate" all who hear in the "whole will of God." For this task, so they remain convinced, their catechism springing from the very word and words of God still serves them well. It doesn't say all that needs saying. Occasionally it may not even say everything it says as well as it, perhaps, could be said. But what it does say are

“those things most surely to be believed.” As servant of the word it enables men and women and even children to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>26</sup> And that is what being church in today’s world is first of all about.

With this our comments on catechetical preaching are not yet concluded. Some suggestions on how such sermons may perhaps be somewhat more profitably prepared should not be considered out of place. To that we plan to address ourselves specifically in the next issue of this journal.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John 6 67,68 These words follow immediately upon our Lord’s discourse about himself as the Bread of Life with its demand, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” In his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) Calvin discusses the passages in great detail. Here and regularly in his explanations he demonstrated how necessary it is for Christians not only to make proper theological distinctions drawn from Scripture but also to connect one passage with many others to illumine the message of salvation. Scripture for him contained one unified message. Such principles of hermeneutics guided his careful exegesis. From him the composers of our catechism learned also this and imbedded the fruits in their work. Notice then the detailed explanation about the two natures of Christ here, 262-3.

<sup>2</sup>1 Peter 2 9

<sup>3</sup>Psalms 96 2b,3b

<sup>4</sup>Acts 20 27 The earlier translation “counsel” are much to be preferred over “will” (NIV) which too often is explained as ethical demand. Paul certainly includes much more than this in the term when reminding the Ephesian elders of his preaching and teaching. “kept back nothing that was profitable to you” (vs 20), “testifying repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs 21), “preaching the kingdom of God” (vs 25). Schrenk in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* I, 635,

In the NT, however, *boule* is mostly used of the divine counsel. The writings of Luke favour such usage. All the Lucan statements are elements in a total conception of the divine *boule*. The *boule* fills the whole content of apostolic preaching. In Acts 20 27 Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he has declared to them the whole counsel of God.

<sup>5</sup>Ephesians 4 12,13 which stresses the lofty goal of Christian preaching and teaching. Clearly it is linked to office as “gift” of the exalted Christ. By it, and not by the speaking of anyone at random, are God’s people equipped for service. Hence not only are apostles and prophets but also pastors and teachers “his gift, who when bringing his work, speak with his authority.”

<sup>6</sup>James D. Smart, *The Creed in Christian Education* (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1962), 21

<sup>7</sup>Smart, 21

<sup>8</sup>Matthew 28 20a, where *matheusate* precedes *didaskontes* Whether this implies a step-by-step procedure has occasioned debate, although it certainly seems apparent R V G Tasker in his commentary rightly adds the practical remark which should direct all teaching by the church, 'A disciple is not one who has already learned, but one who is always learning The school-days of a Christian are never over'

<sup>9</sup>Ephesians 4 14-16

<sup>10</sup>Stuart Barton Babbage, *Man in Nature and in Grace* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1957), 54 Few books so thoroughly expose with ample quotation and elucidation the false views of man found in ancient writers, heretics, rationalistic philosophy, the writers of romantic prose and poetry, Marxists, existentialism, nihilists, etc As introduction and compendium it deserves more attention than it seemingly has received

<sup>11</sup>Babbage, 114, quoting Calvin in *Institutes* I,1,2 and *Commentary* on Isaiah 6 5

<sup>12</sup>Smart, 27

<sup>13</sup>On the *Gouda Catechism* and its role in the Remonstrant controversy little has appeared in the English language aside from J H Berg's translation of Van Alpen, *The History and Literature of the Heidelberg Catechism and its introduction into the Netherlands* (Philadelphia William S and Alfred Martiens, 1863) That the Reformed viewed it with great alarm appears also in a letter which Lubbertus wrote to John van Oldenbarneveld,

Catechismus Goudensis praecipuae doctrinae capita tollit, ne saltem omittit Caetera quae retinuit, ita explicate, ut Servetus, ei reviviscat, ut illis libenter subscripturus Res ipsa docet, auctoram Catechismi omnia ad imitationem Fausti Socini, qui est genuinus Serveti discipulus censuisse' Berg 137

Although many believed that Arminius had composed it, he denied this in a letter to Conrad Vorstius It, like the *Heidelberg*, was arranged under the three sections of sin deliverance and gratitude which made it appealing and apparently innocent Faukelius of Middelburg also prepared a Compendium which was widely used It never received official synodical endorsement Nor did Dordt order a shorter catechism for young children, even though this was discussed, likely because it feared that the authority and influence of the *Heidelberg* could then quite easily be undermined

<sup>14</sup> Form of Subscription in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids Publication Committee of Christian Reformed Church, 1959), 41,

<sup>15</sup>1 Timothy 3 15 The distinction which Paul makes between *stulos* and *hedraionoma* is not entirely perspicuous Certainly Scripture according to him does not depend on the church for its authority Bouma in *Korte Verklaring* on this epistle (Kampen J H Kok 1953) suggests,

With some shift in the figure of speech chosen, the same thought is expressed in both words the church supports the truth, the truth rests on it as

a building does on a pillar or on a foundation," 74.

<sup>16</sup>Matthew 13:52; cf. the explanation of "this somewhat difficult saying of Jesus" in R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 140.

<sup>17</sup>II Timothy 2:15 and 4:2.

<sup>18</sup>Ephesians 3:10. On "manifold" cf. the lengthy discussion of Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 159. Important for our discussion is the emphasis that this glorious divine wisdom is "to be made known through the church." And how can this be done, unless it receives thorough instruction in the divine work of salvation in all its parts?

<sup>19</sup>*De Heraut*, 18 Maart 1888. Comments on this issue are found in *Van den Dienst des Woords* by F. Guillaume (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1944), 169-179, and especially in C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord: Gedachten en beschouwingen van Dr. A. Kuyper over de prediking* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, n.d.), 212-218.

<sup>20</sup>Titus 1:1b-3a. Calvin's comments on this passage also helped shape the conviction of Reformed churches on instruction in the faith as to its nature, necessity and contents. Cf. his *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 281-283.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in McClintock and Strong, *Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1879), V, 149.

<sup>22</sup>Ephesians 4:5.

<sup>23</sup>I Peter 3:15b.

<sup>24</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *The Triumph of Grace: the Heidelberg Catechism*, I, 12,13.

<sup>25</sup>Van Til, 13.

<sup>26</sup>II Peter 3:18.