

THE DOCTRINE OF PREACHING IN THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

by *Cornelis P. Venema*

Introduction

DURING A RECENT teaching stint in the ancient Baltic city of Riga, Latvia, I had the opportunity to visit Rigas Dom, the largest and most prestigious church in the city. A Lutheran church today, it was originally built in the thirteenth century as a Roman Catholic facility. As I walked through this massive cathedral, I was struck by the large, ornate pulpit that was centrally located and dominated the sanctuary. The placement of this pulpit spoke eloquently of the centrality and indispensability of the preaching of the Word to communicate Christ and his saving work to his people. The Reformation's restoration of preaching to the center of Christian worship and life could not have been more dramatically illustrated. If the worship of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church was focused upon the altar and the sacrament of the mass, the worship of the Reformed churches was focused upon the pulpit. Christ's dwelling in the midst of his people was understood to be primarily mediated through the proclamation of the gospel, and only secondarily through the administration of the sacrament.¹

¹Karl Adam, in his classic study, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1954), p. 19, expresses well the historic Catholic view of Christ's presence in the church: "Thus we see that in the sacraments, and especially in the Sacrament of the Altar, the fundamental idea of the Church is most plainly represented, the idea, that is, of the incorporation of the faithful into Christ."

If this restoration of preaching to a place of centrality in the worship of God's people was a feature of the Reformation, embracing Lutheran and Reformed churches alike, it was most especially a distinctive feature of the Reformed churches. Though the Reformed churches did not abandon the historic Christian view of Christ's real presence in the sacraments, they insisted that the pre-eminent means by which Christ exercised communion with his people was through the Word preached. The sacraments are an indispensable accompaniment of the Word, but they depend for their use and efficacy upon the Word and its promises. Without the Word, the sacraments would be empty and useless.

In spite of the historic and uniform conviction of the Reformed churches regarding the centrality of preaching as a means of grace, this conviction does not enjoy a lively and ready reception among many Reformed churches today. The Reformation's view of preaching has been seriously challenged in recent years, even in churches and communions that fall within the Reformed tradition. On the one hand, there is a spirit of democratization and egalitarianism that chafes at the notion of an ordained ministry whose administration of the Word of God in preaching has a place of pre-eminence in the church. When this spirit captivates the churches, all of the members alike become equally "ministers" of the Word of God, the minister of the Word and sacraments being only a specialized expression of a more general activity. And on the other hand, there is a growing prejudice that preaching no longer serves as an effective means of communicating the gospel. This prejudice can give birth to an almost endless proliferation of new devices or strategies for preaching the gospel—from a kind of neo-sacramentalism among some evangelicals to alternatives to preaching in drama, music and other, sometimes esoteric, worship practices. The only

In the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: United States Catholic Conference Inc., 1994), the exposition of "the sacramental economy" (par. 1076ff.) makes clear that this feature of Catholicism remains unchanged: Christ's presence is essentially mediated through the sacraments. The preaching of the Word merits hardly any attention at all in this Catechism.

common thread holding these devices together is that they constitute an alternative to preaching. The sorry image of preaching today can easily be illustrated by noting that the expression, “to preach to (at) someone,” is generally thought to be objectionable.²

There are many approaches that could be taken to the subject of preaching in the Reformed tradition. None is more important, however, than one which examines the most important documents of the Reformation: the confessions of the churches. Even though many evangelical churches and traditions have forgotten their catholic inheritance in the faith, expressed as it is in the confessional documents of the churches, the Reformed churches have always had a high regard for the authority and place of the confessions in the life of the church. The confessions constitute the corporate and traditional understanding of the Scriptures on the full range of doctrinal subjects. Though these confessions do not have the kind of infallible authority alongside of the Scriptures that has characterized the Roman Catholic view of the church’s *magisterium*—they are not Tradition in the sense of an infallibly determined dogma—they represent the *confessional tradition* of the Reformation, a distillation of the church’s common understanding of the Scriptures. The confessions are a *repetitio Sacrae Scripturae*, a repetition of Sacred Scripture, whose teaching has real, albeit subordinate, authority in the churches.

In this article I will consider a number of the great confessions of the Reformed churches, commenting on their

²I mention this only for the purpose of illustrating the contrast between the historic Reformed conviction about preaching and what is often the case today. I do not intend to explore the variety of reasons—philosophical (in the development of post-modernism), theological (in the demise of Scriptural authority), cultural (individualism and relativism), and communicational (the triumph of image over word)—that may explain the demise of respect for preaching. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God. Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), for an extensive analysis of the philosophical and conceptual environment that characterizes Western culture at the end of the twentieth century. The implications of that environment for preaching are aptly suggested by Carson’s evocative title.

summary of the doctrine of preaching. Rather than taking a *synthetic* approach to these confessions, treating them systematically under a number of distinct heads or topics, I will take a more *analytic* and *diachronic* approach, tracing the confessions in their historical order and considering the teaching of each on the subject of preaching. Needless to say, my interest in what follows will not be primarily historical. There are good studies of the historical background and occasion, as well as the distinctive contributions of these confessions, some of which will be noted along the way. However, my interest is primarily to summarize the *doctrine* of preaching set forth in these confessional documents. Furthermore, I will not be treating all of the important confessions (including catechisms) produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the various Reformed churches. With the exception of the Scots Confession of 1560, my principle of selection will be to treat only those confessional documents that have become ecclesiastical standards among the Reformed churches since the time of the Reformation. Those confessions or symbols that have served the Reformed churches as ecclesiastically acknowledged and official “forms of unity” will be the focus of our attention.

After having treated these great confessional statements on the doctrine of preaching, I will conclude with a series of observations and/or theses regarding the nature and importance of preaching in the Reformed tradition.

The French (Gallican) Confession of 1559

XXV. *Now as we enjoy Christ only through the gospel, we believe that the order of the Church, established by his authority, ought to be sacred and inviolable, and that, therefore, the Church can not exist without pastors for instruction, whom we should respect and reverently listen to, when they are properly called and exercise their office faithfully. Not that God is bound to such aid and subordinate means, but because it pleaseth him to govern us by such restraints. In this we detest all visionaries who would like, so far as lies in their power, to destroy the ministry and preaching of the Word and sacraments.*

XXVI. *We believe that no one ought to seclude himself and be contented to be alone; but that all jointly should keep and maintain the union of the Church, and submit to the public preaching, and to the yoke of Jesus Christ, wherever God shall have established a true order of the Church, even if magistrates and their edicts are contrary to it. For if they do not take part in it, or if they separate themselves from it, they do contrary to the Word of God.*

XXVII. *Nevertheless we believe that it is important to discern with care and prudence which is the true Church, for this title has been much abused. We say, then, according to the Word of God, that it is the company of the faithful who agree to follow his Word, and the pure religion which it teaches; who advance in it all their lives, growing and becoming more confirmed in the fear of God according as they feel the want of growing and pressing onward. Even although they strive continually, they can have no hope save in the remission of their sins. Nevertheless we do not deny that among the faithful there may be hypocrites and reprobates, but their wickedness can not destroy the title of the Church.*

XXVIII. *In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments.*³

³The English translation of the Gallican Confession, cited here and in what follows, is taken from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom. Vol. III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds With Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House reprint of the Harper & Row edition, 1931), 356-82. The French quotations are taken from a standard collection of the Reformed confessions: Wilhelm Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (A. G. Zollikon-Zürich, 1938), 65-79. Quotations from Niesel's collection throughout this article are referenced by page number and line number (e.g. 65.17 refers to page 65, line 17). In addition to these sources, important collections of the Reformed confessions, either in the original languages or in English translation, include: E.F.K. Müller, *Die Bekennnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig, 1903); Paul Jacobs, *Reformierte Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen in deutscher Übersetzung* (Neukirchen, 1949); Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963); Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); *The Book of Confessions*,

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The first great confession of the Reformed churches that we will consider is the Gallican (French) Confession of 1559. Studies of the origin and development of the Reformed confessions in the period of the early, middle and late Reformation, generally acknowledge that this Confession belongs to the period of consolidation and more mature articulation of the primary elements of the Reformed faith, in distinction from that of the Roman Catholic church and to a lesser extent the Lutheran and other reformational churches.⁴ This confession was the first, in conjunction with the preparation and acceptance of a church order, to bind the churches of a nation together on a Reformed basis. After a dispute had arisen among the Reformed churches regarding the doctrine of predestination, Antoine de la Roche-Chandieu, a student of Calvin's, had proposed that a confession and church order be produced for the Reformed churches of

2nd ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1966, 1967); Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959); J.K.S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); and I. John Hesselink, ed., *Calvin's First Catechism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). I should also mention a collection of the Reformed confessions in English or English translation that has been produced by Mid-America Reformed Seminary: *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions* (Classroom Edition; Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991). In the following, I will indicate which source and translation I am using for each respective confession.

⁴Benno Gassmann, *Ecclesia Reformata: Die Kirche in den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften* (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), divides the history and development of the Reformed confessions into five periods: the period of first reflection and consolidation (e.g. Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523); the period of new orientation (e.g. Calvin's Geneva Confession of 1536); the period of the national confessions of Reformed churches "under the cross" (e.g. the Gallican Confession of 1559); the period of the second reformation (e.g. the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563); and the period of the confessions of Reformed "posterity" (e.g. the Canons of Dort and the Westminster standards). This is a useful, albeit rather rough, periodization of the development of Reformed confessionalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

France. This proposal met with favor and, at a constituting synod held in Paris in 1559, a draft confession originally written by Calvin and revised by Chandieu was adopted as the Gallican Confession.⁵ Subsequently, this confession was presented by Beza to Charles IX, at Poissy, 1561, adopted by the Synod of La Rochelle in 1571 (hence it is sometimes called the “Confession of Rochelle”), and sanctioned by Henry IV. It stands, therefore, as one of the first binding statements of faith to be produced by the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century.

The Gallican Confession treats the subject of preaching within the sequence of articles that take up the doctrine of the church. Like the Belgic Confession, for which the Gallican Confession was a model and archetype, the Gallican Confession has the following outline: Article I confesses who God is; Articles II-VI deal with the subjects of revelation and Scripture; Articles VII-VIII speak of God’s works of creation and providence, respectively; Articles IX-XI articulate the doctrine of sin; Articles XII-XVII treat God’s purpose of election and provision for the redemption of his people through Christ; Articles XVIII-XXIV consider the application of this redemption by the Spirit through the gospel; Articles XXV-XXXVIII set forth the doctrine of the church, its ministry and sacraments; and Articles XXXIX-XL conclude with a brief statement regarding the ordinance of and limits upon the authority of the state.

The subject of the preaching of the gospel surfaces in this confession in the first article addressing the doctrine of the church. Since “we enjoy Christ only through the gospel” (*pourve que nous ne iouissons de Jésus Christ que par l’Evangile*, 72.8-9), the pressing question becomes, where is the gospel to be found? According to this Confession, Christ has entrusted the gospel to the church and its ministry. Christ is pleased to communicate himself through the gospel *as it is ministered through pastoral*

⁵See Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 16-17. Rohls points out that Calvin himself had some reservations about this synod’s decision to revise his draft confession and adopt it as a unifying confession of faith for the French Reformed churches.

instruction or teaching. Pastors or ministers of the Word, when they have been “properly called and exercise their office faithfully” (*quand ils sont deuenement appelés et exercent fidèlement leur office*, 72.12-13), deserve to be respected and reverently obeyed. Through their ministry of the Word, Christ’s saving presence is communicated to the faithful. Though the Confession is careful to note that God is not “bound to such aid and subordinate means” (*attaché à telles aides, ou moyens inférieurs*, 72.14), he is nonetheless pleased to be governed by such restraints (*qu’il lui plaist nous entretenir sous telle bride*, 72.15). This understanding of the indispensable place of the preaching ministry to the enjoyment of Christ is contrasted with the false teaching of the “visionaries” (*fantastiques*, 72.16) who would destroy the ministry and preaching of the Word and sacraments.

In addition to this principal article so far as the preaching of the gospel is concerned, the Gallican Confession adds in three subsequent articles two related points: that no one is at liberty to be by himself or herself, refusing to keep and maintain the unity of the church and submitting to “the public preaching” (*se soumettans à l’instruction commune*, 72.28-9); and that the Word of God and its faithful reception is the primary distinguishing mark of the true church of Jesus Christ. With these articles, the Confession confirms the central and important place of preaching in the church, though without adding anything further to its earlier explanation of the function of preaching as means of grace.

The Scots Confession of 1560⁶

CHAPTER XVIII. THE NOTE BY WHICH THE TRUE KIRK SHALL BE DETERMINED FROM THE FALSE, AND WHO SHALL BE JUDGE OF DOCTRINE. *The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare;*

⁶The following text of the Scots Confession of 1560 is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 2nd ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the UPC in the USA, 1967), 3.18.

secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.

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The Scots Confession of 1560 does not elaborate in any substantial way upon the doctrine of preaching. Originally drafted by John Knox while he was serving English refugee congregations in Frankfurt and Geneva, this Confession was adopted by an act of Parliament in 1560. Shortly thereafter the first General Assembly of the Scottish church prepared a church order, *The First Book of Discipline*. Destined to be supplanted by the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, the Scots Confession of Faith represents the first and original expression of the Reformed faith on the British Isles. The structure of the Scots Confession resembles that of the Gallican Confession of 1559, but it omits to consider in any substantial way the doctrines of revelation and Scripture, the Trinity, creation and providence. The one significant reference to the preaching of the gospel is found in a rather extensive section devoted to the doctrine of the church. This section is noteworthy for its treatment of the power and authority of General Councils, and the sacraments.

The one important statement about preaching in the Scots Confession occurs in Chapter XVIII, "The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From the False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine." Though there was some variation among the Reformers regarding the number of the marks of the true church, the Scots Confession designates three: the "true preaching of the Word of God," the "right administration of the sacraments of Jesus Christ," and "ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered."⁷ Without elaborating upon the subject of

⁷Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. by John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) only designates two marks of the true church: "where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard (*ubi*

preaching, this designation of it as the pre-eminent and first mark of the church says a great deal, even if only indirectly, about its importance. For the Reformers, the “marks” of the true church were those *authenticating* features that distinguish the true church from the church falsely so-called. The marks of the church were those normative standards which, when applied to any company that claimed to be an expression of the church of Jesus Christ, allowed a separation to be made between the genuine and ingenuine. According to the Scots Confession, what especially distinguishes the true or genuine church is its faithful preaching or proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To paraphrase an ancient dictum of Roman Catholicism (*ubi episcopus est, ibi ecclesia*; “where the bishop is, there is the church”) in terms that conform to this confession, the Scots Confession maintains in effect that “where the true preaching of Christ is found, there is the church.”

The Belgic Confession of 1561⁸

ARTICLE XXVIII. EVERY ONE IS BOUND TO JOIN HIMSELF TO THE TRUE CHURCH. *We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it. . . .*

ARTICLE XXIX. THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH, AND WHEREIN IT DIFFERS FROM THE FALSE CHURCH. *We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is*

reverenter auditur Evangelii praedicatione) and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen” (IV.i.8). Among the Reformers, Bucer spoke of discipline as a third mark of the true church, an addition that is reflected in the Scots Confession and the Belgic Confession.

⁸The following English translation is taken from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, 317-36. The citations from the French are taken from Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 383-436.

the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church....

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.

ARTICLE XXX. THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH AND ITS OFFICES. *We believe that this true church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated....*

ARTICLE XXXI. THE MINISTERS, ELDERS, AND DEACONS. *We believe that the ministers of God's Word, the elders, and the deacons ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the Church, with calling upon the name of the Lord, and in that order which the Word of God teaches.*

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So far as the doctrine of the preaching of the gospel is concerned, the Belgic Confession reaffirms some of the themes we have already discovered in the Gallican Confession of 1559 and the Scots Confession of 1560. However, it also elaborates upon the “official” character of preaching as the calling of those whom Christ appoints in his church as pastors and ministers of the Word. Thus this Confession deserves to be considered in its own right, not only because it remains one of the great standards of the Continental Reformed churches, especially the churches of the “lowlands” or the Netherlands, but also because of the way it clarifies the authority of the preaching office.

It is called the *Belgic* Confession because it originated in the southern provinces of the Netherlands which are known today as Belgium. The Belgic Confession was originally drafted by Guido de Brès in 1561 and was self-consciously patterned after the Gallican Confession of 1559. Like its predecessors, this Confession was written to articulate the main tenets of the Reformed faith and to defend the Reformed churches before the civil magistrates and others that maligned their testimony. Originally presented as an apology to Philip II of Spain, the text of this Confession was adopted first by the Synod of Wesel (1568) and then the Synod of Emden (1571). After having undergone a number of revisions and translations, the Synod of Dort adopted a revision of the text and commissioned the preparation of an official Latin translation of it.⁹ Following almost exactly the structure of the Gallican Confession, the Belgic Confession takes up the doctrine of preaching in its extensive consideration of the doctrine of the church in Articles XXVII-XXXV.

The Belgic Confession's doctrine of preaching must be understood as itself an expression of its general doctrine of the church. In Article XXVIII, a most decisive affirmation is made regarding the true church of Jesus Christ. This church or "holy congregation" (*sainte ...congrégation*) is "an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation" (*l'assemblée des sauvés, et qu'il n'y a point de salut hors d'elle*).¹⁰ Unlike the Gallican Confession which qualifies this by noting the freedom of God to save beyond the use of the ordinary means, the Belgic Confession, speaking of the church as a gathered assembly under the authority of Christ and his appointed officers, embraces the teaching (though without using the words) that the church is the

⁹The English translations of the Belgic Confession historically in use in North America have been based upon this authorized Latin translation commissioned by the Synod of Dort. This Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, pp. 119-36. However, in 1985 the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted a translation based upon the French text of 1619.

¹⁰Latin: *atque extra eam nulla sit salus* (Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 130.41).

“mother of the faithful” (*mater fidelium*), the assembly within which the children of God are born and nurtured in the faith. Echoing the ancient dictum of Cyprian, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the church there is no salvation”) and the uniform conviction of the holy catholic church, the Belgic Confession insists that Christ is to be found and known only through the ministry and communion of the church.¹¹

However, when it comes to the particular means or manner in which Christ saves his people through the ministry of the church, the answer of the Belgic Confession focuses upon the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Echoing the teaching of the Gallican and Scots confessions, the Belgic Confession distinguishes several marks of the true church, the first of which is the preaching of the “pure doctrine of the gospel” (*la pure prédication de l’Évangile*). In the church of Jesus Christ, Christ’s authority as the “only Head of the church” comes to expression when all things are managed according to his Word and ordinances. As the Head of the church, Christ has been pleased to govern her “by that spiritual polity” (*la police spirituelle*) taught in the Word. Specifically, this means that there are to be three kinds of officebearers—pastors, elders and deacons—who together comprise the spiritual council of the church and manage her affairs. By means of the ministry of these officebearers, provided they are lawfully called and serve in obedience to Christ, “the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church, true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated.”

According to the Belgic Confession, Christ is present as the bishop of his people through the ministry of those whom he appoints and commissions. When the minister of the Word

¹¹Calvin expresses the same conviction in his *Institutes* where he argues that the visible church is the mother of all the faithful: “But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under care and guidance away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation” (IV.i.4).

preaches the holy gospel or administers the sacrament, he does so in the name and authority of Christ himself. By these means, Christ is pleased to dwell in the midst of his people, gathering them into his communion and nourishing them in the faith. Chiefly through the means of preaching and sacrament, Christ speaks to his people, giving birth to and confirming them in the Christian faith.

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563¹²

20. Q. Are all men, then, saved by Christ as they perished through Adam?
- A. *No; but only those who by a true faith are ingrafted into Him and receive all His benefits.*
54. Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church?
- A. *That the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a Church chosen to everlasting life; and that I am, and forever shall remain, a living member thereof.*
65. Q. Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?
- A. *From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.*
83. Q. What are the keys of the kingdom?
- A. *The preaching of the holy gospel, and church discipline or excommunication out of the Christian Church. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.*

¹²The English translation in what follows is taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 37-58. The German text cited is taken from Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 149-181.

84. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel?

A. *By proclaiming and openly witnessing, according to the command of Christ, to believers, one and all, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ's merits; and on the contrary, by proclaiming and witnessing to all unbelievers and such as do not sincerely repent that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation abide on them so long as they are not converted. According to this witness of the gospel God will judge, both in this life and in that which is to come.*

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Thus far we have considered the doctrine of preaching in the first great confessions of the Reformed churches in France, Scotland, and the Netherlands. With the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, we turn to a confession that represents the presence and development of the Reformed faith in Germany during the middle of the sixteenth century. This catechism is called the *Heidelberg* Catechism because it originated in the city of Heidelberg, the capital of the German Electorate of the Palatinate. Elector Frederick III, out of a desire to promote the Reformed faith in his realm, commissioned the preparation of a catechism by Zacharius Ursinus, professor at the Heidelberg University, and Caspar Olevianus, the court preacher.¹³ Since the

¹³I am simply representing the traditional view of the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism. There has been a considerable debate in more recent literature regarding the respective role of Ursinus, Olevianus, Elector Frederick, and others in the authorship of the Catechism. For an introduction to this debate, see: Lyle Bierma, "Olevianus and the Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism: Another Look," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 13/4 (1982):17-27; Lyle Bierma, "*Vester Grundt* and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism," chapter 15 of *Later Calvinism, International Perspectives* (ed. W. Fred Graham; Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1994): 289-309; and Fred H. Klooster, "The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and*

Peace of Augsburg in 1555, the princes of Germany who adhered to the Augsburg Confession were given imperial protection. Though Frederick III was in agreement with the altered Augsburg Confession, including its statement on the Lord's Supper, he wished to prod the churches of the Palatinate into a more fully Reformed position. The Heidelberg Catechism was the instrument by which he proposed to achieve this end. Little could Frederick III have realized that this Catechism, augmented with a question and answer on the Lord's Supper that condemned the doctrine of the mass as set forth at the Council of Trent, would prove to be one of the most endearing and widely embraced confessions of the Reformation. Soon after it was first printed, it was translated into a variety of languages and was subsequently adopted by the Synod of Dort as a confessional standard of the churches in the Netherlands.

The structure and distinctive content of the Heidelberg Catechism are remarkable. The Catechism is divided into three major divisions: the first division deals with human sin and misery, the second division deals with redemption in Christ, and the third division deals with the Christian life of gratitude.¹⁴ Some doctrines receive only minimal expression in the Catechism, particularly the doctrines of Scripture and of election. Others, such as the doctrine of the sacraments and the Lord's Supper, receive sustained consideration. Following the ancient pattern of Christian catechesis, the Catechism treats the Apostle's Creed (in the section on redemption), the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer (both in the section on the Christian life of gratitude). Distinctive features of the Reformed tradition, in distinction from the Lutheran, include the treatment of the "communion of the attributes" of Christ's divine and human natures, and the use of the Ten Commandments in the context of the Christian life.

the Palatinate, 1559-1583, ed. Kidran Y. Hadidian (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 73-100.

¹⁴The three divisions of the Catechism may reflect the influence of Melancthon's tripartite exposition of the gospel: law, gospel, and the Christian life. It certainly reflects the pattern of the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans.

The structure of the Heidelberg Catechism is particularly significant when it comes to its consideration of preaching as the means of grace. After having established in the first main section of the Catechism that all human beings are lost in Adam, the Catechism treats extensively in the second section the Person and work of Christ as Mediator. Christ is the only Mediator through whom sinners can be restored to communion and life in fellowship with the Triune God. Without Christ's atoning work on their behalf, believers could not escape God's judgment against them on account of their sins or enjoy renewed favor with God. In the context of its exposition of Christ's work as Mediator, the Catechism asserts a most important point regarding the *manner in which believers become partakers of Christ and his saving work*. In answer to the question, "Are all men, then, saved by Christ as they perished in Adam?" the Catechism declares, "No; but only those who by a true faith are ingrafted into Him and receive all His benefits." Only through union or fellowship with Christ can the fallen sons and daughters of Adam be restored to favor with God, and that union is effected by means of a true faith which the Holy Spirit "works in my heart by the gospel" (*welches der heilige Geist durch's Evangelium in mir wirkt*).

If the only way sinners can be restored to favor with God is through faith in Jesus Christ, then the critical question becomes, How is faith produced? In what way does the Holy Spirit, on behalf of Christ, work faith in our hearts so that we become members of Christ?

To this question the Catechism answers with its doctrine of the church and the means of grace. Within the setting of its exposition of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed dealing with the Holy Spirit and the church, the Catechism maintains that salvation is mediated through the Spirit's working by means of the Word and sacraments. The Spirit of Christ works within and through the holy catholic church, gathering, defending and preserving "a church chosen to everlasting life" (*eine auserwählte Gemeinde zum ewige Leben*). More specifically, the Spirit works *by means of the Word of Christ*. Christ gathers his church "by His Spirit and Word." Thus, the church-gathering work of Christ occurs

neither by the Spirit apart from the Word nor the Word apart from the Spirit.¹⁵ Only by the Spirit working with the Word does Christ communicate himself and his saving work to those who belong to him.

Like a series of concentric circles, the order of questions and answers in the Catechism moves *from* asserting the necessity of faith to partake of Christ and his benefits *to* the work of the Spirit through the church *to* the specific means of grace. Thus, when in Question 65 it is asked, “Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?” we are at a kind of decisive point in the Catechism’s progression. This question really wants to focus upon the *central and primary means, the ordinary and Christ-ordained method, by which the Spirit is pleased to work faith in our hearts*. To this question, the Catechism responds, “From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts *by the preaching of the holy gospel*, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments” (*wirket ...durch die Predigt des heiligen Evangeliums, und bestätigt ihn durch den Brauch der heiligen Sacramente*). Though the Catechism in subsequent questions concentrates at length upon the doctrine of the sacraments, it is clear from this answer that the preaching of the gospel is pre-eminent. The sacraments, though an indispensable accompaniment of the preaching, only “confirm” faith, whereas the preaching of the gospel “works” faith. Without the preaching of the Word, the sacraments would be *empty*. They would have nothing to signify or seal. However, when they accompany the Word preached, they are gracious and visible tokens of God’s grace toward us in Christ.

The one additional prominent mention of preaching in the Heidelberg Catechism occurs in connection with the doctrine of

¹⁵Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 611-2, makes in this connection an important observation: “The Reformed indeed regarded the Word of God as always powerful, either as a savour of life unto life or as a savour of death unto death, but maintained that it becomes efficacious in leading to faith and conversion only by an accompanying operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of sinners. They refused to consider this efficaciousness as an impersonal power resident in the Word.”

the “keys of the kingdom.” At the conclusion of an extensive consideration of the sacraments generally, and the Lord’s Supper particularly, the Catechism raises the subject of the keys of the kingdom in the context of the supervision of the table of the Lord. Because the church is obligated to bar from the table those who “by their confession and life, show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly” (Q & A 82), the church must exercise the keys of the kingdom by excluding such persons. These keys are the preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline or excommunication.

The definition provided in the Catechism of preaching as the primary exercise of the keys of the kingdom is instructive. God’s judgment will ultimately be executed “according to the witness of this gospel” (*Nach welchem Zeugnis des Evangelii Gott*). When believers embrace the gospel promise by a true faith, the ministry of the Word has the power to declare them forgiven of God for the sake of Christ’s merits. This represents a legitimate administration of the holy gospel, an exercise of the power and authority of Christ *through the official ministry of the gospel by his ministers*. In such gospel preaching, Christ’s voice resounds and his authority is exercised. When, by contrast, unbelievers despise the gospel promise and refuse to turn from their sin in repentance, the ministry of the Word has the power to declare them to remain under the wrath and condemnation of God himself. Such a declaration does not merely represent the opinion or sentiment of the minister of the Word. Rather, it too represents the voice and authority of Christ as these are administered through the preaching of the holy gospel.

Thus, it is hard to imagine a more robust affirmation of the preaching of the gospel than that provided in the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566¹⁶

¹⁶The English translation of the Second Helvetic Confession in what follows is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 5.001-5.260. The Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 219-275.

CHAPTER I. OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE BEING THE TRUE WORD OF GOD.

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. *Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.*

Neither do we think that therefore the outward preaching is to be thought as fruitless because the instruction in true religion depends on the inward illumination of the Spirit, or because it is written, 'And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor ... for they shall all know me' (Jeremiah 31:34), and 'Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth' (I Corinthians 3:7). For although 'no one can come to Christ unless he be drawn by the Father' (John 6:44), and unless the Holy Spirit inwardly illumines him, yet we now that it is surely the will of God that his Word should be preached outwardly also. God could indeed, by his Holy Spirit, or by the ministry of an angel, without the ministry of St. Peter, have taught Cornelius in the Acts; but, nevertheless, he refers him to Peter, of whom the angel speaking says, 'He shall tell you what you ought to do.'

INWARD ILLUMINATION DOES NOT ELIMINATE EXTERNAL PREACHING. *For he that illuminates inwardly by giving men the Holy Spirit, the same one, by way of commandment, said unto his disciples, 'Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation' (Mark 16:15). And so in Philippi, Paul preached the Word outwardly to Lydia, a seller of purple goods; but the Lord inwardly opened the woman's heart (Acts 16:14). And the same Paul, after a beautiful development of his thought, in Romans 10:17 at length comes to the conclusion, 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God by the preaching of Christ.'*

At the same time we recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power; but we speak of the usual way of instructing men, delivered unto us from God, both by commandment and examples.

CHAPTER XIV. OF REPENTANCE AND THE CONVERSION OF MAN.

OF THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. *Concerning the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven which the Lord gave to the apostles, many babble many astonishing things, and out of them forge swords, spears, scepters and crowns, and complete power over the greatest kingdoms, indeed, over souls and bodies. Judging simply according to the Word of the Lord, we say that all properly called ministers possess and exercise the keys or the use of them when they proclaim the Gospel; that is, when they teach, exhort, comfort, rebuke, and keep in discipline the people committed to their trust.*

OPENING AND SHUTTING (THE KINGDOM). *For in this way they open the Kingdom of Heaven to the obedient and shut it to the disobedient. The Lord promised these keys to the apostles in Matthew 16, and gave them in John 20, Mark 16, and Luke 24, when he sent out his disciples and commanded them to preach the Gospel in all the world, and to remit sins.*

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION. *In the letter of Corinthians the apostle says that the Lord gave the ministry of reconciliation to his ministers (2 Corinthians 5:18ff.). And what this is he then explains, saying that it is the preaching or teaching of reconciliation. And explaining his words still more clearly he adds that Christ's ministers discharge the office of an ambassador in Christ's name, as if God himself through ministers exhorted the people to be reconciled to God, doubtless by faithful obedience. Therefore, they exercise the keys when they persuade to believe and repent. Thus they reconcile men to God.*

MINISTERS REMIT SINS. *Thus they remit sins. Thus they open the Kingdom of Heaven, and bring believers into it: very different from those of whom the Lord said in the Gospel, 'Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.'*

HOW MINISTERS ABSOLVE. *Ministers, therefore, rightly and effectually absolve when they preach the Gospel of Christ and thereby the remission of sins, which is promised to the one who believes, just as each one is baptized, and when they testify that it pertains to each one peculiarly. Neither do we think that this absolution becomes more effectual by being murmured in the ear of someone or by being murmured singly over someone's head. We are nevertheless of the opinion that the remission of sins in the*

blood of Christ is to be diligently proclaimed, and that each one is to be admonished that the forgiveness of sins pertains to him.

CHAPTER XVI. OF FAITH AND GOOD WORKS, AND OF THEIR REWARD, AND OF MAN'S MERIT.

FAITH IS THE GIFT OF GOD. *But his faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives to the elect according to his measure when, to whom and to the degree he wills. And he does this by the Holy Spirit by means of the preaching of the Gospel and steadfast prayer.*

* * * * *

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 is not as well known as the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism. However, it represents the standard of Reformed confessionalism for the Swiss Reformed churches. It is called the *Second* Helvetic Confession because it followed and ultimately displaced the First Helvetic Confession of 1536 written by the first great Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. The Second Helvetic Confession was originally written in 1562 by Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, as a private confession of his faith. First published in Latin, German and French in 1566, this Confession exhibits a modified form of Zwinglianism. Not only was this Confession to become the primary statement of faith of the Reformed churches in Switzerland, but it also was either adopted or approved by many other Reformed churches of the Continent and the British Isles. It shares with the Heidelberg Catechism, then, something of the distinction of being among the more "catholic" of the Reformed confessions. Philip Schaff describes it as "rather a theological treatise than a popular creed" because it is much more elaborate and extensive in its expression of the Reformed faith than most of the confessions of the sixteenth century.¹⁷

In the first chapter of the Second Helvetic Confession, "Of the Holy Scripture Being the True Word of God" (*De Scriptura Sancta, Vero Dei Verbo*, 222.3), the doctrine of preaching is set

¹⁷Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 233.

forth in the context of the doctrine of Scripture. After having affirmed that Scripture *is* the Word of God, sufficient to teach fully all godliness, the Confession makes a strong statement in a marginal heading: “The Preaching of the Word of God is God’s Word” (*Praedicatio Verbi est Verbum Dei*, 223.21). This statement and its confessional elaboration clearly are intended to parallel the confession regarding Scripture. Just as Scripture *is* the true Word of God, so preaching, when it faithfully and expounds the Scriptural text, *is* the true Word of God. Commenting on this statement, Edward A. Dowey, Jr. writes:

The dramatic and widely quoted marginal heading, “The Preaching of the Word of God is God’s Word” (223.21), reflects an authentic lifelong preoccupation of Bullinger with the *viva vox*, whether the *viva vox Domini* to patriarchs, prophets, and apostles (*Decades* I.i), or the oral and audible passing along “as if by hand” of the gospel from Adam to Moses, or the living preaching which even “today” is the usual means of announcing the Gospel.¹⁸

When the minister of the Word of God explains and applies the biblical text, God himself speaks in a living voice to the congregation of Jesus Christ. God himself is heard in the hearing of the preached Word.

The importance of this statement for the doctrine of preaching requires that it be carefully considered. To grasp fully what the Second Helvetic Confession means by this kind of identification of preaching with the Word of God, two significant qualifications need to be noted.

First, though the Confession clearly wants to parallel the affirmations that Scripture and preaching are the Word of God, the correspondence is *not a simple identification*. The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God *insofar as it faithfully expounds and applies the Scriptural Word*. Unlike the Scriptural Word which is

¹⁸“The Word of God as Scripture and Preaching,” Chapter 1 in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. by W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Publishers, Inc., 1994), 9.

given by inspiration and constitutes a *normative* and *sufficient* revelation from God, the preaching of the Word is *sub-normative*, that is, subject to the norm and text of Scripture. Only those preachers who have been “lawfully called” (*legitime vocatos*, 223.22) and whose preaching does not contain any inventions which go beyond or are contrary to the Word of God, deserve to be heard as those who proclaim the very Word of God. This does not mean that the efficacy or truthfulness of the preached Word depends upon the person of the preacher.¹⁹ So long as the preaching of the Word faithfully echoes the teaching of Scripture, it deserves to be received as the very Word of God. Thus, when the Second Helvetic Confession boldly asserts that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God, it does not mean to assert that the preaching of the Word of God is not subject to the supreme rule of faith, the Word of God in Scripture, or that the preacher is not subject to the regulation and governance of the church in his preaching office. The preaching of the Word of God is *instrumental* and *reflexive*, when contrasted with the *original* and *primary* authority of Scripture.²⁰

¹⁹Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, pp. 178-9: “On the basis of Luke 10:16: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me,’ Bullinger can even dare to propound the thesis that ‘the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God’ (ibid.). However, this identification, carried out from the standpoint of faith, is not to be understood in such a way that preaching would be simply identical with the word of God. Instead, the purpose of making this identification as an interpretation of Luke 10:16 is to assert, in opposition to a Donatistic understanding of the office of ministry, that the validity of the proclamation of the word is independent of the subjective character of the person occupying the ministerial office. The validity of the proclamation of the word depends solely on its content: that is, it depends on whether or not the sermon does in fact give expression to God’s word.”

²⁰The Second Helvetic Confession’s affirmation that the preaching of the Word of God “is” the Word of God needs, accordingly, to be distinguished from Karl Barth’s well-known understanding of the “threefold form” of the Word of God (as preached, as written, and as revealed). In Barth’s understanding, only Jesus Christ, as the Word become flesh, is in the strictest sense to be *identified* as the very Word of God. Both preaching and Scripture are only *derivatively* and *instrumentally* the Word of God; they *become* the Word of God, when the Spirit is pleased to use them in their unique and privileged “witness” to Jesus Christ. In this construction, preaching and Scripture, as

Second, the preaching of the Word of God is, *when accompanied by the “inward illumination”* (*interna Spiritus illuminatione*, 223.29) of the Holy Spirit, the ordinary means Christ is pleased to use to work faith in the hearts of his people. Here too the Second Helvetic Confession clearly compares the inward illumination of the Spirit in the believer’s reception of the written and preached Word of God.²¹ The “external preaching” or the “external

forms of the Word of God, are *equally* the Word of God. However, the Scriptures are, no more than preaching, to be identified as God’s Word, given under inspiration as revelation from God. In a sense, the preaching of the Word and the inscription of the Word function as the Word of God *only in the here and now, as the Spirit sovereignly employs them as instruments to make Christ known to his people*. The inspiration of Scripture and the illumination of the mind of the believer become virtual synonyms for that sovereign and free work of the Spirit that always occurs in the event of revelation. This understanding differs in important respects from the Reformed confessions which identify Scripture as the inspired, true Word of God, and speak of preaching as a form of the Word of God *only so far as it faithfully administers and applies the prior and normative Scriptural Word*. Barth discusses his understanding of the threefold form of the Word of God in his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 98-140. The following statement regarding preaching and Scripture is typical of his view, p. 114: “To make matters clearer, note what was just called the phenomenal similarity between Church proclamation and the second element contrasted with it in the Church, the canon of Holy Scripture. It consists in the fact that obviously even in Holy Scripture we are dealing with Scripture not in a primary but in a secondary sense: for it itself is the deposit of proclamation made in the past by the mouth of man. But even in its form as Scripture it claims to be not so much an historical monument as rather a Church document, proclamation in writing. Thus primarily *both entities stand side by side within one genus: there Scripture as the beginning, here preaching to be carried out today, as the continuation of one and the same event*; Jeremiah and Paul at the beginning, the preacher of the Gospel to-day [sic] at the end of one and same series” (emphasis mine).

²¹Dowey, “The Word of God as Scripture and Preaching,” provides a helpful summary of this kind of formulation in the theology of the Reformers, p. 11: “For Bullinger and the Second Helvetic Confession, as for Calvin and most Reformed Confessions, there is a twofold or two-level approach of the Spirit consisting of ‘outer’ words (written or spoken) and ‘inner’ *illuminatio, inspiratio, or persuasio*. The latter are elements of saving faith, of regeneration (242.47ff.), of the distinction between letter and spirit (241.8)—in short, of the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit.... The ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ modes through

ministry” is indispensable, to be sure. The Spirit does not ordinarily speak apart from the Word. However, only through the powerful working of the Spirit *together with* the Word, illuminating the heart and mind of the Word’s recipient, does the Word effectively produce a true and living faith. There is, in this respect, a sense in which the preaching of the Word of God “becomes” the Word of God in the hearing of the believer, when and where the Spirit unstops the heart and grants a ready reception to the Word.²² Only as the external ministry is accompanied by the inward illumination of the Spirit does the believer recognize it to be the true Word of God. However, though God is free to “illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry,” in the ordinary exercise of his power, he has bound himself to the preaching ministry as the effective instrument for producing and strengthening faith.

Though one has to beware a simple identification of preaching with the Word of God for the reasons mentioned, preaching remains the living voice of Christ in the church, having the power to open and shut the door of entrance into the kingdom of God. In Chapter XIV of the Second Helvetic Confession, a striking confession is given regarding the power of preaching as an administration of the keys of the kingdom. When

which the Spirit works are inseparably bound together, barring only the freedom of God to ‘illuminate whom and when he will’ (223.47). Together they constitute the *usitata ratio* (223.49), the ordinary or normal way by which the Word comes to men.”

²²I am aware of the danger of subjectivism in this language. The Word of God, written or spoken, is *objectively* the very Word of God, whether it is subjectively embraced or refused by those to whom it comes. The Second Helvetic Confession even openly affirms this in the marginal statement, “Inward Illumination Does Not Eliminate External Preaching” (*Interior illuminatio non tollit externam praedicationem*, 223.39-40). However, because the preaching of the Word of God finds its source and norm in the Scriptural Word, there is an important sense in which that preaching only “becomes” the Word of God for us, when it is received by faith as the Spirit inwardly illumines the heart. The theological expression of this distinction uses the language of “inspiration,” the punctiliar (non-repeated) work of the Spirit in the giving of Scriptural revelation, on the one hand, and “illumination,” the continuing work of the Spirit in the reception of the Word, on the other.

the holy gospel is faithfully and lawfully preached by the ministers of Christ, the ministry of reconciliation takes place. As Christ's ambassadors, the ministers of the Word are authorized to "persuade to believe and repent" and thus "reconcile men to God" (*illi reconciliant Deo*, 243.19) In the administration of the gospel of Christ, such ministers have the authority to open the door of the kingdom of heaven and declare the remission of sins to those who believe and repent. Contrariwise, they have the authority in Christ's name to declare the door of entrance closed to those who remain unbelieving and impenitent. In this chapter, the statement regarding "how ministers absolve" sins is especially significant. Though it criticizes the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly the notion that the effectiveness of the absolution pronounced depends upon its being "murmured in the ear" or "murmured singly over someone's head," it endorses a biblical practice of absolution. The minister of the Word does legitimately have the power, as a representative and instrument of Christ in the administration of the gospel, to proclaim diligently the absolution of sins and to admonish individual believers "that the forgiveness of sins pertains to him."²³

The Canons of Dort of 1618-19²⁴

THE FIRST MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: DIVINE ELECTION AND REPROBATION

Article 3

²³I call attention to this exposition of the role of the ministry in the absolution of sins not only because it properly reflects the classic Reformed view of preaching, but also because it is liable to make many, even confessionally Reformed, Christians uncomfortable today. The kind of language about preaching used in the Second Helvetic Confession would likely, upon first hearing, make many a Reformed Christian today wince.

²⁴The English translation of the Canons of Dort is one that was adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1986 and is included in the volume, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 59-82. The Latin text is found in Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 550-79.

In order that people may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends proclaimers of this very joyful message to the people he wishes and at the time he wishes. By this ministry people are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified. For how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without someone preaching? And how shall they preach unless they have been sent? (Rom. 10:14-15).

Article 7

...And so he decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ's fellowship through his Word and Spirit....

THE SECOND MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: CHRIST'S DEATH AND HUMAN REDEMPTION THROUGH IT

Article 5

Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation and discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.

THE THIRD AND FOURTH MAIN POINTS OF DOCTRINE: HUMAN CORRUPTION, CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE WAY IT OCCURS

Article 6

What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God accomplishes by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word or the ministry of reconciliation. This is the gospel about the Messiah, through which it has pleased God to save believers, in both the Old and the New Testament.

Article 11

Moreover, when God carries out this good pleasure in his chosen ones, or works true conversion in them, he not only sees to it that the gospel is

proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds.

Article 17

Just as the almighty work of God by which he brings forth and sustains our natural life does not rule out but requires the use of means, by which God, according to his infinite wisdom and goodness, has wished to exercise his power, so also the aforementioned supernatural work of God by which he regenerates us in no way rules out or cancels the use of the gospel, which God in his great wisdom has appointed to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason, the apostles and the teachers who followed them taught the people in a godly manner about this grace of God, to give him the glory and to humble all pride, and yet did not neglect meanwhile to keep the people, by means of the holy admonitions of the gospel under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So even today it is out of the question that the teachers or those taught in the church should presume to test God by separate what he in his good pleasure has wished to closely joined together....

THE FIFTH MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Article 14

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

* * * * *

With the Canons of Dort of 1618-19, we enter upon a different period in the history of the formation and adoption of the Reformed confessions of the Reformation. Thus far we have considered confessional statements that express the consensus of the Reformed churches in the middle of the sixteenth century. These confessions represent the mature and formative distillation of the distinctive features of the Reformed faith at the height of the reformatory movement in the sixteenth century. However, when we consider the Canons of Dort, we are considering a confession that was written in the early seventeenth century, at a time not so much of *consolidation* among the Reformed churches as of *adjudication* of post-Reformation disputes that had begun to emerge among the Reformed churches.

The Canons of Dort are the product of a genuinely international synod of the Reformed churches that was convened at Dordrecht, the Netherlands, in 1618. The Synod was called by the States General of the Netherlands to adjudicate the conflict that was raging within the Reformed churches of the Netherlands over the doctrine of election and reprobation. The two parties to this dispute were the orthodox Calvinists and the Arminians or Remonstrants.²⁵ In addition to the delegates from the Dutch churches, twenty-six delegates from eight foreign countries were present for the deliberations. The Canons do not represent, accordingly, a complete or comprehensive statement of the Reformed faith. They have, rather, the character of a judgment rendered regarding the controversy over the doctrine of election as it was expounded in Article XVI of the Belgic Confession. Entitled “The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands,” the Canons consist of a series of doctrinal affirmations and rejections of errors touching the five disputed points of doctrine between the orthodox Calvinists and the Arminians. The selection and sequence of these points follows the order adopted by the

²⁵For a brief account of this history, see Louis Praamsma, “The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618),” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), 22-38.

Arminian party, when it presented its statement of faith in five points as the *Remonstrance of 1610*.

Admittedly, because the Canons of Dort address only one important doctrinal dispute, they do not address the doctrine of preaching with as much specificity as some of the confessions we have considered in the foregoing. However, the doctrine of preaching set forth in the Canons is consistent with what we have seen in the confessions previously considered. Furthermore, due to the peculiar focus of this confession upon the doctrine of sovereign election, it is all the more significant that it reiterates the consensus of the earlier Reformed confessions that *the salvation of God's elect is effected ordinarily and properly through the ministry of the Word in preaching*.

It is primarily in the third and fourth main points of doctrine (“Human Corruption, Conversion to God, And the Way it Occurs”) that the doctrine of preaching is expounded in the Canons. However, already in the first and second main points of doctrine, two aspects of the doctrine of preaching are emphasized: its indispensability as the means of drawing believers into the fellowship of Christ; and the obligation to preach the gospel to all nations and people without exception.

In the first main point of doctrine, the subject of the indispensability of preaching comes up almost immediately. Since all people are sinners in Adam and liable to God’s judgment (Article 1), and since God has sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that those who believe in him might have eternal life, the preaching of the gospel of his Son in which all are called to faith is most necessary (Article 3). Quoting Romans 10:14-15, the Canons give pre-eminence to preaching as the appointed means through which all people have opportunity to hear the gospel and be called to repentance and faith. The doctrine of unconditional election affirms that those who are saved belong to the number of those whom God from before the foundation of the world chose in Christ unto salvation (Article 7). However, the means to the furtherance of this electing purpose are the working of the Spirit and Word, bestowing true faith in Christ upon all those who are the elect of God. In the article that defines God’s

purpose of election, we read that God “decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ’s fellowship *through his Word and Spirit*” (Article 7, emphasis mine).

A second and more controversial aspect of the Canons’ doctrine of preaching is its insistence upon the preaching of the gospel to all nations and people without exception. This aspect finds expression within the second main point of doctrine which deals with the extent or design of Christ’s work of atonement. The atoning work of Christ is definite and particular; it was accomplished for the purpose of providing satisfaction or atonement for the elect people of God. However, this does not place any limitation upon the value and worth of Christ’s death. Christ’s death is “of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” Nor does it restrict in any way the mandate to preach the gospel to all. The promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ shall not perish but have eternal life, “together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and peoples, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel” (Article 5). In the third main point of doctrine, this insistence upon the universal preaching of the gospel is further explained as a serious and genuine calling. Often called the “well-meant offer” of the gospel, this call is extended through the preaching of the gospel.

Nevertheless, all who are called through the gospel are called seriously. For seriously and most genuinely God makes known in his Word what is pleasing to him (*quid sibi gratum sit*): that those who are called should come to him. Seriously he also promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe.²⁶

²⁶The article in the Latin reads: “*Quotquot autem per Evangelium vocantur, serio vocantur. Serio enim et verissime ostendit Deus verbo suo, quid sibi gratum sit, nimirum, ut vocati ad se veniant. Serio etiam omnibus ad se venientibus et credentibus requiem animarum, et vitam aeternam promittit*” (Schaff, 565-6). Though this is not the place to address the whole subject of the so-called “well-meant offer” of the gospel, this Article of the Canons clearly suggests the doctrine. If God declares

The most extensive statement regarding the doctrine of preaching in the Canons is to be found in the third and fourth main point of doctrine, in the explanation of the manner in which sinful people are brought to true conversion. Having set forth the doctrines of unconditional election and definite (limited) atonement, the focus of this part of the Canons is upon the *means God is pleased to use in the actual salvation of his people*. It is not enough to speak of God's electing purpose or of the

in the Word what *pleases* him, and if he seriously calls through the Word all to believe and repent, then it seems to follow that he is pleased to save those whom he calls. Those who reject the well-meant offer are not only uncomfortable with the language of this Article in the Canons but also unwilling to distinguish between God's *sovereign intention to save the elect only* and his *desire that all should be saved*. The insistence that the latter distinction amounts to a logical contradiction is born from a failure to distinguish, to borrow terms from Dabney (see below), between God's "executive volition" to save the elect only and his "propension" to show mercy to all. What to our understanding may appear to be a tension or contradiction, is only due to a limited comprehension of the things of God. The supposed contradiction between God's sovereign decree of election and the well-meant offer of the gospel is what Cornelius Van Til properly termed an "apparent contradiction," something which is mysterious to us but *known by God to be fully harmonious and consistent*. For representative treatments of this issue, see: Robert Lewis Dabney, "God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy, As Related to His Power, Wisdom, and Sincerity," in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 1 (1891; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982); John Murray, "The Free Offer of the Gospel," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4: *Studies in Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 113-132; Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995); A. C. De Jong, *The Well-Meant Gospel Offer: The Views of H. Hoeksema and K. Schilder* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1954); David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism & the Call of the Gospel*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1994). The studies of Iain Murray and De Jong are historical in nature, though they join Dabney and John Murray in defending a doctrine of the well-meant offer. Engelsma represents the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches: though there is a universal call extended through the gospel to all, this call does not express any favorable disposition, good-pleasure or desire on God's part that all should believe and repent and so be saved. See Joseph Hall's article in this collection for a treatment of one chapter in the history of the debates in the Reformed churches regarding the well-meant offer.

provision of atonement through the work of Christ. It is also necessary to speak of the way in which believers are united to Christ and become his beneficiaries. To this question, the Canons, following the precedent of the confessions previously considered, answer by insisting that these means include principally the preaching of the gospel. Neither the “light of nature” nor “the law” is able to bestow salvation. Only through the “ministry of reconciliation” has it “pleased God [to] save sinners” (III/IV.6).

In a manner reminiscent of the language of the Second Helvetic Confession, the Canons of Dort distinguish, but do not separate, between the proclamation of the gospel “outwardly” and the Holy Spirit’s inward enlightening of the mind so that believers “may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God” (III/IV.11). The work of the Spirit in regeneration is an “entirely supernatural work,” as real and as incomprehensible as creation or the raising of the dead (III/IV.12). But it is *nonetheless a work which the Holy Spirit is pleased to accomplish by the means of “the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word”* (III/IV.17). Thus, what God has joined together—the regeneration of his chosen people and the use of the ordinary means of preaching—may not be separated in the practice of the church.²⁷ Similarly, the perseverance of the saints whom God

²⁷In the history of Reformed theology, there has been a great deal of discussion whether regeneration is “immediate” or “mediate.” Advocates of a doctrine of “immediate” regeneration maintain that the *Spirit alone is the direct and immediate Author of regeneration*; to ascribe the working of regeneration to the instrumentality of the Word would be, on this view of things, to transfer the authorship of salvation from God to a creaturely medium. On the other hand, advocates of a doctrine of “mediate” regeneration have maintained that the Spirit of Christ is *ordinarily pleased to effect regeneration by the use of the means of grace*. Because the Spirit grants new life in Christ to the believer *through the instrumentality of the Word*, regeneration is *mediated* through the Word. Though some of the debates regarding this subject have been rather arcane and unduly complicated, a genuine issue is at stake in this discussion. Advocates of immediate regeneration have been properly concerned to insist that the Spirit is the Author of regeneration, not the Word *as such*. The Word of God preached does not *by itself* possess *an inherent power* that can grant new life to otherwise dead sinners. Only God by his Spirit has the power to grant the new

sovereignly and graciously saves is accomplished “by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments” (V.14).

The Canons of Dort, therefore, clearly teach that the salvation of God’s elect people is accomplished by those means which he is pleased to use, namely, by the Spirit working in and with and through the preaching of the holy gospel, to which the sacraments are appended. Contrary to the prejudice that the Canons so emphasize the sovereign electing purpose of God as to diminish the responsible use of the God-appointed means of grace, the Canons are adamant in their insistence upon the *concrete manner in which through the proclamation of Christ believers are brought to salvation*. Far from displacing these means, the decree of election constitutes their source and dynamic. The effectiveness and power of preaching are the fruit of God’s unfailing purpose to use this method to bring salvation and blessedness to his people.

The Westminster Confession of 1647²⁸

birth. However, once this point has been granted, it has to be acknowledged that the Reformed confessions typically insist that the Spirit ordinarily grants that new birth *through the use of the means of grace*. Consequently, though it is proper to be clear about *who* authors the new birth, it is just as proper to be clear about *how* (by what means) that new birth is authored. As always, the Reformed insist upon a *distinction, without separation*, between the Spirit and the Word of Christ. For a discussion of the subject of immediate and mediate regeneration, see: Herman Bavinck, *Roeping En Wedergeboorte* (Kampen: P.H. Zalsman, 1903); L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 474-5; Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 293-342; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 712ff. In this list of authors, Kuyper argues most vigorously for the idea of an immediate regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. However, Kuyper also acknowledges that the Spirit’s work of regeneration is ordinarily accomplished by means of the Word and sacraments.

²⁸The text of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms that I am using is found in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 87-168.

CHAPTER X. OF EFFECTUAL CALLING

I. *All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so, as they com most freely, being made willing by his grace.*

III. *Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.*

CHAPTER XIV. OF SAVING FAITH

I. *The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.*

CHAPTER XXI. OF RELIGIOUS WORSHIP AND THE SABBATH DAY

V. *The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God....*

CHAPTER XXV. OF THE CHURCH

II. *The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

The Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648

72. Q. What is justifying faith?
- A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.*
76. Q. What is repentance unto life?
- A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God*
108. Q. What are the duties required in the second commandment?
- A. The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.*
154. Q. What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?
- A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.*

155. Q. How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convicting, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

158. Q. By whom is the Word of God to be preached?

A. The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to their office.

159 Q. How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of men's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

160 Q. What is required of those that hear the Word preached?

A. It is required of those that bear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

* * * * *

It is fitting that we should conclude this survey of the doctrine of preaching in the Reformed confessions with a consideration of the Westminster Confession of 1647 and the

Larger Catechism of 1648. For these confessional standards represent the apex of doctrinal development and formulation in historic Presbyterianism and Puritanism. Though these standards do not have the nature of an adjudication of a doctrinal dispute, as was the case with the Canons of Dort, they do represent a rich and full statement of the Reformed faith formulated in the context of political and religious ferment on the British Isles in the early and middle part of the seventeenth century. They have been popularly characterized as the “ripe” fruit of the Reformation, a mature and precise statement of the Reformed position at the close of the great period of reformatory activity that commenced at the beginning of the sixteenth century and closed about the time of the writing of these great confessional documents.

The historical occasion for the calling of the Westminster Assembly is a complicated story whose details and significance lie outside the purview and focus of this article.²⁹ For our purpose, it is enough to note simply that the Assembly met during the period of the Puritan revolution and ascendancy in England. Convened by an act of Parliament, the Westminster divines included representatives of the church of Scotland who attended as commissioners of their government (after the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant) and representatives of the church of England. At the time of the writing of the Confession, certain departures from the historic consensus of the Reformed churches, the “liberal” school of Saumur in France and the teaching of Arminius, were extant. These departures were effectively resisted by the Westminster divines in the formulations of the Westminster Standards. With the completion of the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the confessional standards of the

²⁹ Among the classic treatments of the Westminster Assembly and its work, see: W. Beveridge, *A Short History of The Westminster Assembly* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904); A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith. A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding The Westminster Confession* (1869; reprint, London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958); Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly And Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931).

Presbyterian churches were established. These standards were adopted in Scotland and England and are the dominant standards of the English-speaking Presbyterian churches to the present day.³⁰

The doctrine of preaching in the Westminster standards, consistent with their nature as a mature and precise statement of the Reformed faith, represents a kind of codification of all the major emphases that we have witnessed in the Reformed confessions previously considered.

The first important mention of preaching in the Westminster Confession occurs in the chapter on effectual calling (or regeneration). In this section of the Westminster Confession, a series of chapters are devoted to what, in theological parlance, is known as the *ordo salutis*, the order and aspects of the application of Christ's saving work to believers. The chapter on effectual calling addresses the "first" of these aspects; the application of salvation begins with the Holy Spirit's work effectually calling sinners into fellowship with Christ. So far as the doctrine of preaching is concerned, this chapter makes it clear that this effectual calling occurs "by his [God's] Word and Spirit." Through "the ministry of the Word" sinners are "outwardly called" into the fellowship of Christ; and through the work of the Holy Spirit who attends that ministry sinners are spiritually enlightened and made receptive to its summons. This is the *usual* and *ordinary* manner of the Spirit's working, though the Confession carefully adds the qualification that, for example, in the case of "[e]lect infants, dying in infancy," the Spirit is free to work "when, and where, and how he pleaseth". By adding this disclaimer, the Confession anticipates its affirmation in Chapter XXV that "there is no *ordinary* possibility of salvation" (emphasis

³⁰The Westminster Confession was adopted by the Congregationalist churches in England and New England, and forms the basis for the Baptist confessions, the London Confession of 1677 and 1688, and the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742. The Confession has been subject to several minor revisions through the years by the Presbyterian churches. The version of the Confession and Catechisms that I am using is the revision in use today by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America.

mine) outside of the communion of the visible church. This disclaimer is not added to minimize the force of the Confession's insistence that effectual calling and the salvation of sinners are effected through the Spirit's use of the ministry of the Word. Rather, it only means to reserve to God the freedom to act, should he be pleased to do so, beyond the means with which ordinarily he is pleased to work.³¹

One of the distinctive features of the Westminster standards' doctrine of preaching is the rather extended treatment they give to the practice and ordinances that govern the preaching of the gospel. In Chapter XXI, "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day," the "reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience to God," are designated as essential "parts" or components of the worship of God. How these parts of worship are to be understood and exercised receives further elaboration in the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648. In Q. & A. 108, the duties required in the second commandment include "the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word." Both in the Westminster Confession and Larger Catechism, a special point is made to distinguish between the *reading* and *preaching* of the Word. It is not enough that the Scriptures are read in public worship. *The Word must especially be preached.* This becomes quite explicit in Q. & A. 155 of the Larger Catechism. When the question is posed, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?" the preaching of the Word is particularly underscored:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convicting, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of

³¹We have already discovered a similar emphasis in the Gallican Confession of 1559. This reservation of freedom to God to act beyond the ordinary use of the means of grace is a commonplace among Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through unto salvation.³²

In the context of this kind of emphasis upon the pre-eminent value and importance of preaching as a means of grace, the Larger Catechism also comments on the practice of preaching. The ministry of the Word of God is an *official* ministry. Only those who are “sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to their office” (Q. & A. 158) are authorized to preach the Word of God. This official ministry of the Word places both preacher and hearer under solemn obligations and duties. The preacher is required to “preach sound doctrine,” and to do so “diligently,” “plainly,” “faithfully,” “wisely,” “zealously,” and “sincerely” (Q. & A. 159). Those who hear the Word of God preached are, for their part, obligated to “attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer” and to “examine what they hear by the Scriptures” (Q. & A. 160). The last requirement, that believers should examine what they hear, indicates that the authority of the official ministry is carefully circumscribed and bounded by the Word of God. The preaching of the gospel grants the preacher no license to impose his own opinions upon the people of God. Rather, he is under the obligation to *minister the Word entrusted to him*. The authority of the preaching office, therefore, is ministerial in nature, not legislative so as to bind consciences beyond the Word of God.

One interesting feature of the Westminster Larger Catechism’s doctrine is its designation of prayer, in addition to the Word and sacraments, as a kind of means of grace. In answer to the question, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?” the Larger

³²There is a considerable body of implication in this answer for the practice of the church and individual believers. Whereas we are tempted to think that private devotions and the reading of Scripture are of greatest value, preaching being of lesser value, the Larger Catechism says that *nothing quite compares in its value and use to the public preaching of the Word of God*. Alan Strange, in his article “Comments on the Centrality of Preaching in the Westminster Standards,” pages 185-238, considers some of these implications in greater detail than I have occasion to do so here.

Catechism asserts that these means include “all his ordinances; especially the Word, sacraments, *and prayer*; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation” (Q. & A. 154, emphasis mine). Does this inclusion of prayer as an “outward means” represent a unique, possibly novel, feature of the Westminster standards’ doctrine of the manner of the Spirit’s application of the benefits of Christ’s saving work? Or, to put it more sharply, does the Westminster Larger Catechism conflict at this point with the more common affirmation of the Reformed confessions that the Word and sacraments are the ordinary means of grace?

To answer this question, several points need to be observed. The Larger Catechism clearly distinguishes in this answer between “all” the ordinances of God that may be used by him in bringing his people to salvation, and those *special* ordinances that have a particular use. The Catechism does not intend to be restrictive in its answer—excluding the variety of ordinances or means that God may well use in his redemptive work—but approaches the question comprehensively and inclusively. By mentioning prayer as a kind of “outward means,” the Catechism need not be understood to teach that it is an “objective” or “official” means of grace in the same way as the Word and sacraments are.³³ Rather, the Larger Catechism may only be affirming here what is also taught about prayer, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism answers the question, “Why is prayer necessary for Christians?” by

³³Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 604-5, makes a useful distinction between prayer as “instrumental” in strengthening faith, and the Word and sacraments as alone “objective channels” for the communication of God’s grace in Christ: “Moreover, faith, conversion, and prayer, are first of all fruits of the grace of God, though they may in turn become instrumental in strengthening the spiritual life. They are no objective ordinances, but subjective conditions for the possession and enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant. Consequently, it is better not to follow Hodge when he includes prayer, nor McPherson when he adds to the Word and sacraments both the Church and prayer. Strictly speaking, only the Word and the sacraments can be regarded as means of grace, that is, as objective channels which Christ has instituted in the Church, and to which he ordinarily binds Himself in the communication of His grace.”

declaring that “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them” (Q. & A. 116). Because of the important and indispensable role of prayer in the Christian life, and because God has ordained to give his gifts only in the context of the practice of prayerful seeking, prayer can be termed a kind of “outward means” of grace. The Larger Catechism, moreover, is not alone in making this kind of affirmation. The Second Helvetic Confession also affirms that God grants faith “by the Holy Spirit by means of the preaching of the Gospel and steadfast prayer” (*per spiritum sanctum, mediante praedicatione evangelii, et oratione fidei*; 246.15-16). Using the language of “outward means” in this more general and loose sense, the Larger Catechism may only be emphasizing the importance of prayer as an indispensable accompaniment of preaching and sacraments. Since the means of grace are only effective through the working of the Holy Spirit who uses them instrumentally, prayer for the Spirit’s blessing upon their use may not be neglected.

Conclusion

With this summary of the doctrine of preaching in the Westminster standards, we come to the close of our consideration of the doctrine in the historic Reformed confessions. Now that we have treated in historical order these confessions, we are in a position to set forth in more *synthetic* form the *common* emphases articulated in them with respect to preaching as a means of grace. The points of conclusion that follow, therefore, are those themes that belong to the common confessional inheritance of the Reformed churches. It is not my purpose in these points of summary and conclusion to enter into a theological analysis or evaluation of them. That would require another and different kind of article. Rather, it will be my purpose in conclusion to illustrate those *key points of consensus* that emerge from a consideration of the Reformed confessions.

First, the doctrine of preaching as a means of grace in the Reformed confessions is undergirded by, and an expression of,

their doctrine of the church. The holy catholic church is an assembly or congregation of believers, *outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*. The Reformed confessions breathe, in this respect, the spirit of catholic Christianity, insisting upon the church as the unique medium of Christ's dwelling and presence. Those who would have part in Christ must partake of him through the communion and ministry of his church, the common "mother of the faithful" in whose bosom Christ's members are conceived and through whose ministry they are nurtured and protected. The individualism and parachurch methodism that so often mark contemporary evangelical practice in North America are remarkably different from the doctrine of the church found in these confessions.

Second, the Reformed confessions are careful to safeguard God's freedom to save his people, "when and where and how he pleases," on the one hand, without diminishing or neglecting a proper emphasis upon *those means he is pleased to use in granting salvation*, on the other. Though they acknowledge God's freedom to save by other means of his choosing, they insist that God has bound himself to those ordinary means that he has appointed to this end. It would be, accordingly, folly for the church to neglect these means or treat them as of little consequence, because God is at liberty to act in other ways. This would be incompatible with God's faithfulness and his promise to attend these appointed means with his blessing. The Reformed confessions do not underscore God's freedom from these means in order to diminish their importance. Rather, they acknowledge this freedom to accentuate the aspect of God's good pleasure *in using precisely these means* to accomplish the redemption of his people.

Third, the pre-eminent means that God has appointed for the communication of salvation in Christ is *the preaching of the holy gospel*. However important and indispensable may be the sacraments, as visible accompaniments and confirmations of the gospel promise, the sacraments depend wholly for their content and efficacy upon the prior Word communicated through preaching. Preaching as means of grace *produces* and strengthens faith. The sacraments as means of grace *only confirm* faith. The

danger lurking in this kind of formulation, of course, is that of minimizing the sacraments.³⁴ However, the sacraments are essentially *appendices* to the Word, signs and tokens of God's favor and promise *first proclaimed in the gospel*. Though the sacraments are necessary by virtue of God's having mercifully appointed them as aids and props to our faith, they add nothing to the Word and wholly depend for their efficacy upon the Spirit working through the Word that they signify and seal. Thus, the ministry of the Word is the *first*, the *pre-eminent*, means of grace, whereas the sacraments are the *second*, the *subordinate*, means of grace.

Fourth, when the Reformed confessions speak of preaching as the pre-eminent means of grace, they refer to the *official administration of the Word by lawfully called and ordained ministers of the Word and sacraments*. However important and useful the reading and hearing of the Word of God may be in other contexts and by other persons, the Reformed conception of preaching means that it is especially the lively ministry of the holy gospel, the faithful exposition and application of the Word of God in the context of the calling of the ordained ministry, that God is pleased to use to communicate Christ and his benefits to his people. Though the Word of God may be and is ministered in a variety of ways—all believers, for example, are partakers of Christ's anointing as prophets and have the calling to bear witness to the truth of the Word of God³⁵—the official ministry of the Word is the divinely

³⁴Perhaps this is the place to note that, in their emphasis upon the pre-eminence and priority of preaching in comparison with the sacraments, the Reformed confessions never betray any hint of anti-sacramentalism. In some respects, this article, by virtue of its concentration upon the preaching of the Word, neglects to give proper attention to the function of the sacraments as means of grace in the Reformed confessions. But that must await another article. Suffice it to say that the danger of a diminishing of the sacraments is as great today as that of diminishing preaching. As official means of grace, both are threatened by the kind of spirit and practice mentioned only briefly in my introduction.

³⁵Cf. The Heidelberg Catechism, Question & Answer 32, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, p. 42: "*Q. But why are you called a Christian? A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of His anointing, that I may confess His Name, present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and with a free and good conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him*

appointed means of grace. According to the confessions, the language of *preaching* and *the ministry of the Word* designates a particular form of administering the Word of God. Christ is pleased to use the minister as an instrument through whom his voice is sounded and grace communicated. Though the minister of the Word may preach and teach in a variety of settings and contexts, this preaching and teaching are to be regarded as an official administration of the Word of God.³⁶

Fifth, the power, authority and effectiveness of the official ministry of the Word of God is, according to the testimony of the Reformed confessions, *dependent upon and inextricably joined to the working of the Spirit of Christ by these means*. Christ, who is pleased to use the preaching of the holy gospel to impart himself to his people, does so, not by transferring his authority or power to the minister, but by the working of his Spirit through the Word. The preaching of the Word of God has, accordingly, an *instrumental*, but not an *inherent*, authority and power. Typically, the Reformed confessions emphasize this point by distinguishing the *external ministry of the Word* and the *inward illumination of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit, on Christ's behalf, works in and with and through the preaching of the Word to impart faith and new life to the believer.

Thus the effectiveness of the Word as a means of grace, in a manner analogous to the effectiveness of the sacrament, is founded upon the use Christ's Spirit makes of the Word as his tool in gathering and strengthening the church. Preaching *is* the Word of God in this *instrumental* and *derivative* sense. When the Spirit accompanies the exposition and application of Scripture through preaching, creating and strengthening faith in the hearer,

eternally over all creatures." Readers of this article should not conclude from our treatment of the priority of preaching as means of grace that the Reformed tradition lacks a proper appreciation for the office of believer in the communication of God's Word. It is just that preaching alone has the official, pre-eminent place the confessions ascribe to it.

³⁶This means, for example, that, though the teaching of catechism or the counseling of a congregational member may not be preaching in the context of public worship, these acts of the ministry should nonetheless be regarded as a kind of "extension of the pulpit."

Christ himself speaks in a “living voice” (*viva vox*) to the church. The high view of preaching in the Reformed confessions rests upon this conviction that the Spirit works through the faithful ministry of the Word. It does not rest upon any *magical* view that would ascribe an *inherent* power and effectiveness to the person of the minister or the words of the sermon. Just as the Reformed confessions reject any view of the sacraments that ascribes an intrinsic effectiveness to the sacraments, so they reject any view of preaching that would ascribe effectiveness to it *apart from the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit*.³⁷

Sixth, the power of the keys of the kingdom, namely, the power to open or to close the door of entrance into the kingdom of God, is primarily exercised through the preaching of the gospel. Even though the Reformed confessions warn against the abuse of ministerial authority in the Roman Catholic practice of absolution, they do not shrink back from granting an appropriate *ministerial* authority to the preaching of the gospel. Ministers of Christ, when they do not legislate or bind consciences beyond the proper limits of Scriptural authority, are called to minister the gospel of reconciliation in the name of Christ. In so doing, they have the right to declare sins forgiven or sins retained, and to do so in a pointed and direct manner. Preaching, therefore, has an awesome and holy responsibility to declare the grace of Christ to those who embrace the gospel promise, and the judgment of Christ to those who are unbelieving.

By the standard of these emphases of the Reformed confessions, the practice of many Reformed churches today belies their claim to stand in the tradition of the Reformation. Reformed churches, if they are Reformed by the measure of this confessional tradition, are convicted that Christ’s dwelling with his people is principally effected through the ministry of the holy gospel. Where Christ is preached by ministers of his choosing, lawfully called and faithful in the discharge of their holy office,

³⁷No more than in the case of the sacraments does preaching work by its simple performance (*ex opere operato*). Only when the Spirit works through the Word preached to create faith in the hearer does, as we argued earlier, the sermon become the Word of God for us.

there the true church of Christ is to be found. Only in this way, through the ministry of the Word of God and the sacraments, does the Spirit gather, nourish and preserve the people of God in the unity of the true faith. The uniform testimony of the Reformed confessions can be summarized in the formula, *ubi Verbum Dei est, ibi ecclesia*: (“where the Word of God is, there is the church”). Or, to express it in alternative terms familiar to the Reformed tradition, *ecclesia nata est ex Dei Verbo* (“the church is born of the Word of God”).