

From the Pastor's Desk 1980-1989

Catechism preaching

The Reformed Churches have always advocated -- and maintained two worship services. These two services were not to be identical-in scope and nature. True, in both services the Lord meets with His people. However, there is a difference in approach. In the first service, the Word of God is opened through the Bible text chosen by the pastor. Through this Word exposition the Lord comes to His people. In the second service the congregation comes to the Lord. This is the confession. So traditionally the confessions have formed the basis for the message in the second service. Why confessional preaching--sermons based on the Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, and in particular the Heidelberg Catechism? The Catechism lends itself beautifully to this type of preaching as it is divided into 52 Lord's Days. The Church Order even states: "At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, following its sequence" (Art.54b). The Catechism gives a brief and practical summary of the way of salvation as revealed in Scripture. It covers the whole field of doctrine. Catechism preaching safeguards churches from the danger of one-sided preaching. It assures the congregation regular instruction in all the fundamentals of the Christian faith. If confessional preaching would be neglected, certain truths would seldom be touched upon in sermons. According to an old tradition, all the Reformed churches had to follow the same order in Catechism preaching. So if a family went on holidays or out of town for a weekend, they would not miss out on regular Catechism preaching. This would aid God's people in the up building of their faith. However, I don't think that a restoration of such a tradition is possible in our time. The Reformed Churches are spread all the way from Alaska to Florida. Furthermore, the tradition has never really functioned well as there were always circumstances that led a consistory or a pastor to switch a service or to skip the Catechism sermon.

From the very beginning the Heidelberg Catechism was given for the instruction of covenant youth. This is clearly stated in the inscription on the title page of the first edition: Catechism or Christian Instruction as it is given in the churches of the Patinate to city of Heidelberg by John Mayer, 1563. One of the first items on the Agenda of the Synod of Dordt was the question of Catechism instruction. On November 28, 1618, Dr. Johanness Bogerman, the president of. Synod, introduced the subject and stressed the importance of Catechetical instruction, and traced it from the Reformers, back through Origen (c.185-c.254), to the days of apostolic fathers. But why treasure the Catechism today? Why use it to communicate the Gospel to our computer generation? Of course we don't treasure the Catechism just because it is historic. Antiquated documents belong in a museum. And many wonder, whether or not in our churches, the Catechism is taking the place of the Bible. Shouldn't our youth study the Bible more? Look at the Sunday-School materials for the older youth in evangelical churches! They

have so many references to and quotes from the Bible. Shouldn't we adopt the same method of instruction?

The Bible and education go hand in hand. The Jewish festivals and the sacrifices offered were of such nature that children did have to ask their parents about their meaning. So the parents told their children about the mighty acts of their God and taught them His Word. The psalmist said, "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done"(Psalm 78:2-4).

In obedience to Scripture, the Reformed Churches have always stressed the parental responsibility in instructing their youth. The Synod of Dort (1618-19), in their 14th, 15th and 17th sessions dealt with catechetical instruction. It stressed three kinds.

1. Bible texts were memorized. The weekly catechism sermon was discussed, and the catechism itself was taught. Over the years this type of instruction fell by the wayside. But its principle is still valid for today. In his New Revised Church Order Commentary, Rev. Monsma observes, "What a noble work and beneficial exercise it would be for the parents themselves, and would not this work faithfully performed draw parents and children closer together, and make them more confidential regarding matters spiritual?"
2. The Christian elementary school was another place where catechism was taught. But in the 17th century the governmental schools in the Netherlands were all Reformed. Those days are long gone.
3. The Synod of Dort also encouraged catechetical instruction by the Church. And so for many years the Church, both in Europe and in North America, has been involved in educational programs for its youth. Article 63 of our Church Order states, "Each church shall instruct its youth and others who are interested in the teaching of the Scriptures as formulated in the creeds of the church, in order to prepare them to profess

Though the catechism is an old confession, it is enduring because of its Scriptural character. All literature withers like grass but the Word of God remains. The Catechism leads us to the Word, forces us to study the Word. Every sentence is backed by Scripture references. Since the 3rd German edition the margins of the Catechism contain 700 Scripture references. In my library I have a publication entitled Teksten the Heidelbergse Catechisms (Texts with the Heidelberg Catechism). Its 81 pages contain nothing but Scripture texts.

The Catechism's constant appeal to Scripture keeps this confession alive, well and relevant for all time. Let me point you to the evangelical nature of the Catechism by showing you how the authors relate it to Scripture.

We know the mediator through the gospel (Q. & A.19). What is true faith? Everything God reveals in His Word is true (Q. & A.21). What must a Christian believe? Everything God promises us in the Gospel (Q. & A.22). We speak of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit "because that is how God has revealed Himself in His Word (Q. & A.25). Christ is King who governs us by His Word and Spirit (Q. & A. 31). The Son of God gathers His Church through His Spirit and the Word (Q. & A.54). The Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Holy Gospel (Q. & A.65). The sacraments help us to understand more clearly the promise of the Gospel (Q. & A. 66). The Holy Spirit teaches us in the Gospel (Q. & A.67). Through the preaching of the Gospel, the Kingdom of Heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers (Q. & A. 84). These references show that the authors of the Catechism wanted nothing but the living Word of God proclaimed and taught.

I pray that more and more church members will confess their faith with, and become instructed through confessional preaching in the second service.

Johan D. Tangelder