



Comments on catechetical preaching

For several centuries catechetical sermons together with catechetical instruction of children and young people were standard fare in many Reformed congregations. Here "instruction in the faith" was provided to stimulate biblically grounded discipleship on the basis of both *kerygma* and *didache*. Today all this suffers from more than partial eclipse.

Much has been written about catechetical instruction; far too little about this pattern for preaching despite insistence on it by church orders, early Lutheran as well as Reformed, and repeated synodical decisions.

Some thirty or more years ago Klaas Dijk in a volume on preaching claimed to discern somewhat of a revival.¹ He appealed to Trillhaas who in a chapter on "Katechismuspredigt als Lehrpredigt" stated that it was again becoming commonplace in some German churches. Haitjema and Hoekstra also had been urging its necessity for the spiritual life and vitality of the Dutch churches. Echoes of these convictions were heard in other quarters, so that shortly before and after World War II the catechetical sermon seemed to be regarded with a growing measure of favour. But when the 400th anniversary of the *Heidelberg Catechism* was commemorated, scant attention was paid to its homiletical use. Especially was this true of materials written in the English language.

Today such sermons are sometimes regarded as little more than a pious tradition which need not be taken seriously. Often in churches which still profess commitment to the Reformed faith it is neglected for months on end. At times the Lord's Days, into which it has been divided for instructional purposes, are not dealt with in their proper order. Those who register complaint usually receive short shrift as troublemakers who fail to understand what the church living in today's world needs. All the well-worn objections raised since 1563 are repeated with monotonous regularity. The consequences will likely be more serious than many are ready to admit, if the regulations long held in honour become a dead letter. Soon we may find ourselves with a church membership having no more than passing acquaintance with the cardinal teachings of Holy Scripture. Even now far too few can articulate clearly and convincingly the faith which they claim to confess, much less defend and practice it consistently. We seem to be raising, as more than one church leader has complained, a generation of spiritual illiterates.

What has been happening is a divorce between "preaching" and "teaching."

J. Stanley Glen in his perceptive *The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry* offers stinging criticisms of the drift which now characterizes many Protestant churches.

*These observations suggest that the primary reason for the subordination of the teaching ministry is a false separation of grace from truth. Grace is regarded as charismatic and in principle devoid of truth, while truth is regarded as noncharismatic and in principle devoid of grace...*²

Somewhat later he signalizes the devastating results.

Instead of holding the two together in a kind of balanced and integral relation, it tends strongly to emphasize the latter at the expense of the former. What this means in plain language is that the church is more interested in religious experience of all kinds, including ecstatic wonder, aesthetic and liturgical impressiveness, sacramental mystery, conversionism, psychologism, the emotional satisfaction of moral achievement, and even the more profane thrill of institutional success than it is with the communication of intelligible

content of the faith, which is mainly represented by the substance of the Bible. By the identification of grace with religious experience it attempts to separate grace off from the truth element of its message.³

What many church members seem to want is a simplified gospel which offers cheap grace in two, three or possibly four easy steps which never tax the mind. But, to quote Glen once more,

Simplification is only another name for the gradual dissolution of the kerugmatic and didactic tradition of the church, the disintegration of theology, the disappearance of what is distinctive of the Christian faith, in the interests of a nebulous natural religion which for this reason is better able to offer the kind of security which is the goal of the secular world. The distinctiveness of the Christian faith which is always preserved by a church that hears what the Bible has to say to it is thereby threatened. More specifically, it is the Bible itself that is threatened.⁴

Only a church which recovers in the light of the mandate received from Christ and his apostles *its teaching* responsibilities, first and foremost from the pulpit, will be able to serve effectively amid the conflicting voices which clamor for attention. This requires in some form or other also "catechetical sermons."

Hopefully somewhat to redress the situation which has severely eroded the church's influence as "teacher of the nations" we address ourselves in two article to the subject of catechetical preaching.

Our attention is directed first to the content, propriety and purposes of such preaching; then also to objections raised against it, as well as to the issue of using this material more effectively for the life of the congregation. The second article thus will include suggestions and illustrations of how this can be done. In the early years of the Reformation believers learned to know, largely through catechetical sermons, *who* they were, *what* they believed and *how* they were to live before the face of the Lord in this present age. If Christ's cause is to advance in the deepening distress and darkness which is enveloping all mankind, preaching which teaches the truth as it is in Jesus Christ is the need of the hour.

Repeatedly and almost to the point of monotony we are reminded that the Christian church is in serious trouble. Already before and immediately after World War I, it had lost its hold on the masses in Europe. None of the losses were recouped during the worldwide recession of the 1930's and the indescribable horrors of the 1940's. Even the trumpet call of Karl Barth and his associates for a return to more biblical preaching failed to turn the tide.

Preaching is still being taught in every seminary. Sermons are heard in well-nigh every church. Revivals have become popular throughout much of the world. Experimentation with liturgies continues to fascinate much of the Protestant world. Small gatherings in which all the secrets of the soul are supposedly laid bare are much in vogue. But none of these efforts have enticed people to return to the churches. The comfortable pew is empty far more often than well filled. Nor are conditions any more favourable in Canada and the United States, despite record levels of church membership. Only 15% of the population is in any church on an average Sunday morning, while evening worship is fast becoming a thing of the past. Many still claiming to be Christian use the church only for baptisms, weddings and funerals. Priests and preachers are often subtly but stingingly ridiculed in the media. The ears of the masses have become deaf to the church whose messages far too seldom challenge and convince the hearts even of those who still listen. Little more seems to remain of Christian influences in our lands other than a kind of civil religion which bears no resemblance to the gospel which once shook the Roman Empire to its foundations.

Because the church in many instances has failed to teach the message of God's grace in Christ Jesus, ours is an age filled with hungry men and women who vainly search for some life-sustaining word. How closely these parallel the people of whom Isaiah wrote many centuries ago:

*Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, they will curse their King and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.*⁵

Every newscast demonstrates the truth proclaimed by that ancient seer, poignantly echoed in the poems, plays and novels so popular today. Like an overwhelming flood this sense of inner helplessness and hopelessness, despite every human advance, threatens modern man and woman. Attempts at restructuring the social and political orders have failed to satisfy the deepest needs of the soul, leading as so often they do to the exchange of one tyranny for another. Psychology and psychiatry do little more than bring people face to face with themselves without supplying those resources which alone provide light by which we can safely walk through life. When the abiding truth of God is neglected, emasculated and even denied in the church, it will be increasingly crucified on the street.

Here, then, is the challenge for the churches. Once again they must so learn to preach the Word that old and young are instructed. This is to be done clearly, systematically and fully. Only the gospel offers salvation which is "health" for body, mind and soul. As medicine which makes and keeps alive, it not only clears the mind and cheers the heart because the living Christ comes in and with and through the preached Word; it destroys all the powers of death. This is what catechetical preaching according to the intentions of those who first introduced it can do and do well.

Such authoritative address which aims at teaching deserves the title of "preaching." Because it calls attention, by divine appointment, to God and his will and ways, it can lead people out of the impasse into which they mire themselves.

We do well to remember how faithfully this was undertaken by the prophets of the Old Testament; how perfectly it was accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ; how persuasively it was pursued by the apostles and their helpers among both Jews and Gentiles. Always it gave instruction on the mighty works of God in creation, history and redemption to conclude with God's will for all those who came to trust in him. No sharp distinction was ever made between *kerygma* and *didache*; between "preaching" and "teaching."⁶ Both belonged equally and quite inseparably to "the full council of God" and "the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." It was the "deposit of faith" to be transmitted throughout all lands, from generation to generation. To that full Word nothing might be added; from it nothing taken away. And when done faithfully, those engaged in it were to assure themselves that God was accomplishing great things for time and eternity through their ministry. By this means of instruction all who believed would experience union and communion with Christ as his Spirit worked with the Word to produce repentance, faith and godly obedience. But where such preaching was not consistently practiced, the church languished, the saving light removed so that the church's presence in the world was rendered worse than useless.

But how is that Word of life and truth to be brought to bear most effectively on the hearts and lives of its hearers? For this we have no detailed homiletical prescriptions in the New Testament. But from the sacred records we know and may confidently affirm that preaching is not and may not become a shot in the dark; a sweet piece of advice to be taken or left at will; a tedious reminder of weekly happenings. Nor is it a lecture on some doctrine or rule for personal and congregational decorum. Always it begins and ends with the one true God who in Christ calls everyone to turn to him. It is the "doctrine which leads to godliness." And no pattern for sermons has incorporated this more clearly and persistently than what are commonly called "catechetical sermons."

Indication of the intimate relationship between *kerugma* and *didache* are clearly found in the New Testament.

All the sermons, in so far as recorded there in summary form, emphasize that only the truth as it is in Christ Jesus can set men free from sin and all its consequences and restore them to living fellowship with God. Here God's mighty acts are not only mentioned but also explained in their significance. All who responded in faith were now "*a new creation in Christ*," heirs of eternal

blessedness and endowed with strength and hope and peace for everyday living. Of this baptism was both sign and seal.

For the Jews who had the Old Testament revelation, the approach was an appeal to what God has already done for them and now required that they confess Jesus of Nazareth as Saviour and Lord of their lives. Among the Gentiles, lacking the Old Testament with its covenant promises and obligations, the message began with God's self-manifestation in creation, providence and the history of the nations who now proclaimed salvation also to them through Jesus Christ.

All this was a "catechizing" of sorts, an orderly presentation of the facts and mysteries which lie at the heart of the Christian faith as "good news" for mankind. No one was admitted to the Christian fellowship without some basic "instruction in the faith." And in obedience to the mandate in Matthew 28:18-20 every sermon was to be a further explication and elaboration together with application to life of Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that scholars have claimed to find in the New Testament records also the basic ingredients for the creeds, hymns and catechisms of the earliest Christian congregations.⁷

How undeniably clear this emphasis on "teaching" in systematic form becomes when we review the terms used in the New Testament, and Paul's use of the Greek word *katecheo*. Beyer, beginning with its use in the sense of "to tell about something," adds,

Paul himself uses katecheo exclusively in the sense b. "to give instruction concerning the content of faith." He can use it already with reference to pre-Christian Judaism. Thus the true Jew is katechoumenous ek tou nomou. R. 2:18. When the congregation is assembled, Paul himself would rather speak five words with an understandable sense, hina kai allous katecheso, then ten thousand words in tongues. 1 C. 14:19. This is the high value he attaches to the significance of katechein, for he realizes that faith comes through preaching. Gl. 6:6 draws a contrast between the katechen who gives instruction in Christian doctrine and the katechoumenos who receives this instruction. Hence Paul uses not only the common didaskein but also this much rarer word, hardly known at all in the religious vocabulary of Judaism, as a technical term for Christian instruction. He desires thereby to emphasize the particular nature of instruction on the basis of the Gospel. The word selected was in fact very apt to assume the exclusive sense of Christian instruction, and it finds an echo today in the word "catechism" ...⁸

Nowhere, then, does the New anymore than the Old Testament allow for any sharp cleavage between "preaching" and "teaching." Altogether too often the terms are used interchangeably for those who carried on this ministry as well as for the message itself.

Sermons which do not instruct, which do not awaken the hearers to the knowledge of God and his will are unworthy of an audience.⁹ Through the mind he addresses the will and emotions as he works the receptivity of faith in the heart. Every preacher is commissioned to be a teacher of what the Bible teaches, no more and no less. And that this may be done as clearly, as fully and as systematically as possible in humble obedience to Christ, catechetical sermons were introduced and mandated also by the Reformed churches.

Such sermons as we now know them were unknown until the days of the Reformation. Their roots, however, lie exposed in the efforts of many early pastors and bishops especially as they sought to prepare candidates for baptism.

Few sermons of the first church fathers have come down to us. How and what they preached will have to be sifted from those writings they have left us.

One of the earliest is the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve*, likely of Syrian provenance and penned about the time of the last of the New Testament writings.¹⁰ Vividly it describes the way of life and the way of death in sharp contrast. Stress is laid upon the duty to love God and fellowman, with added materials on the proper administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). It is an exceedingly simple document used, apparently, as a first step prior to more extensive

instruction in the faith. Kleist suggests that it need not be regarded as the work of one man nor as the fruit of a well-considered plan. On its importance he adds,

*Now, it is noteworthy that the very title of the **Didache** connects at least the first tract in one way or another with "the Twelve Apostles," and it is not rash to conclude that it was their method of catechizing that found its way into the **Didache**...*¹¹

It seems to have been intended for the less well-educated pagans who were interested in the Word. The *Epistle to Diognetus*, also an early document, shows how the church aimed at winning adherents among the pagan intelligentsia.¹²

These together with other writings show that the fathers of the ancient church were greatly preoccupied with godliness. Doctrines on God, man, sin, salvation and the future life were mentioned but seldom elaborated. Texts were repeated from both the Old and New Testaments, indicating an awareness of the unity of Scripture and its message of salvation. But as heresies sprang up we find the teachings much more clearly taught and elaborated, and errors more expressly refuted. It would be manifestly unfair to conclude, however, that the mighty acts of God for man's salvation were neglected in preaching and teaching. To be sure, the churches in the East stressed man's union and communion with God by way of meditation, prayer and ascetic practices, at times in a manner which obscured the need for daily grace from God. Increasingly, too, there was greater concern with the right administration of the sacraments than with preaching, which seemed at times to be little more than personal preparation for the Eucharist. But as the writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian and others demonstrate, the teaching of the churches was never alienated from the works of God in creation, history and especially redemption through Jesus Christ. To this also the catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem,¹³ the accounts of Eusebius, and especially the many writings of Augustine bear ample testimony.

Nor was the church in those early years interested only in winning adults for Christ and his cause. The accounts of its ministry to children and young people of Christian parentage are, to be sure, few. Most of the responsibility for instructing them in the faith was laid upon fathers and mothers who were expected to take them along to divine worship where they, too, were "indoctrinated." To this the account of Origen's early childhood and youth bears witness. On the basis of available materials, well researched, Trigg tells us,

As an ardent Christian, perhaps a convert, he (Origen's father) taught Origen the Christian Bible. No doubt he led his family in private worship, according to the custom of Christians at the time. They prayed three times a day, reciting the Lord's prayer and some psalms

*At least on Sundays and fast days, Origen would have accompanied his parents to the common worship of the church at Alexandria ... There were prayers and hymns. But the chief feature of these services was the exposition of the Bible. A qualified teacher read aloud extended passages from the Old and New Testaments. Immediately after each reading, he expounded the meaning of each passage to the congregation in a sermon ... If the evidence of Origen's own preaching many years later is a guide, the sermons in the ordinary service of instruction may have been designed to provide catechetical instruction...*¹⁴

Against such a background we can well understand why the early reformers appealed to the church fathers when pleading for the renewal of catechetical teaching and preaching in the churches.

With the passing of centuries the teaching ministry in the churches largely deteriorated. Ignorance and superstition, accompanied by a largely untrained clergy, seem to have been characteristic of much of the middle ages. Often whole tribes were received into the church by baptism without any proper instruction. Catechisms were, indeed, written from time to time during this period. But these were not intended for popular consumption. They served as manuals for the priests in the hope that sermons by their use would show improvement. In numerous parishes a sermon was not preached for months, in some instances, if we may believe the records, for years on end. Most of the clergy had no Bible available to them; at best only a few catechetical and liturgical manuals.

Yet the light of the gospel was never extinguished. Charlemagne with scholarly assistance laboured for a reformation of the schools, so that both priests and people might be better instructed in the ways of faith and godliness. Gerson, one of the outstanding theologians a few centuries later, urged that the hope of reforming and strengthening the church lay especially with educating children in the fear of the Lord. But this demanded adults who knew at least the first principles of the Christian message. From time to time church councils also laid down regulations for raising the level of the understanding of people who claimed to be Christian. Everyone was expected to be able to recite at very least the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. This recitation constituted the "interrogatio de fide" as a liturgical act at the time of administering baptism to infants. In this way godparents could assure the priest of their ability to give basic instruction.

A significant change took place at the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).¹⁵ Now confession to the priest was more carefully regulated and attached to the sacrament of penance. Every baptized person attaining to years of discernment was obligated to "profess his faith" to his priest at that time, and that no less than once each year. This required acquaintance with the basic articles of the Creed. Yet this hardly served the purposes of the confessional. Soon catalogues of sins were drawn up. The Decalogue, in an extended and none-too-recognizable form, was added to the instruction necessary to making a proper confession. Thus the church's teaching stressed far more what man had to do in order to gain salvation than what the God of all grace had done and was doing for sinners who sought peace with him.

How well old and young were instructed during this long period still remains a moot point. Most scholars agree that almost everywhere preaching had fallen to a low level. Even wandering friars who gathered thousands around them gave little systematic instruction in God's work of grace. In the parishes many sermons rehearsed legends and the lives of saints long dead. Pictures and images were substituted for the lively preaching of the Word. Fear of death, purgatory and hell gripped the souls of those who longed for peace with God. But many seemed quite indifferent to the standards for Christian conduct still insisted on by the priests who themselves did not always set a good example.

Reformatory movements sprang up in several countries during the late middle ages. These aimed at reviving biblical preaching and won a hearing among some. We need mention only the Waldensians, the Bohemian Brethren as followers of Wycliffe and Huss, and the Brethren of the Common Life. All these helped pave the way for the Reformation. But with preaching completely overshadowed by the "mystery" of the Mass, hardly one in a thousand could give reasonable account of the Christian faith and hope.

The church had failed to be a "teacher" to the peoples entrusted to its care. All the catechisms, well intentioned as were the aims of its composers, did not produce a lively faith in Jesus Christ unto godliness. Ecclesiastical rules and regulations seem to have left far too many *"holding a form of godliness but denying its power."* Every call for church reform, including a renewal of preaching, was stifled by the higher clergy more than satisfied with an ignorant people willing to pay their ecclesiastical dues.

Against this ignorance coupled with superstition and rank unbelief the reformers raised their voices. Theirs was a clarion call for reformation of the church in root and branch. And to their mind this could not be accomplished in any other way than by the pure preaching of the full gospel in language suitable to the capacities of both old and young. Out of such convictions were also born the "catechetical sermons" of those years.

How lofty their view of the church's teaching ministry was we find eloquently expressed by Calvin who did not hesitate to employ phrases borrowed from the early church fathers.

*...we may learn from the title **mother**, how useful and even necessary it is for us to know her (i.e. the church); since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh and "become like the angels." For our infirmity will not admit of our dismissal from her school; we must continue under her*

*instruction and discipline to the end of our lives. It is also to be remarked, that out of her bosom there can be no hope of remission of sins, or any salvation...*¹⁶

With this estimate of the church, also as a visible institution, all the classic reformers agreed. Their chief criticism of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the medieval period was that it had failed miserably to be "mother" whose teaching would serve as food for the soul and strength for this earthly pilgrimage. For this sad state the ignorance of the lower clergy and especially the rapaciousness of the bishops and popes were to be held accountable. Not the sacraments, so the reformers argued cogently from Scripture, but the preaching of the Word was *"the chief means of grace."* Hence, away with all images and relics, all legends and tales of long-forgotten saints, all ecclesiastical rules without solid Scriptural foundation. Only the right teaching of God's truth in Christ Jesus could and would restore the church to the glory intended for it by its Saviour and Lord.

Faced with the low spirituality of the multitudes, the reformers set themselves to write creeds and confessions, church orders and catechisms based on the Word. To their minds also these last were essential, urgently needed in order that Scripture might be rightly explained, interpreted and believed not on the basis of the passing opinions of one man but by consent of churches which embraced the evangelical faith. Here was to be no room for that rank individualism and subjectivism which characterized some of the scholars of the day who had fallen under the spell of "the new learning." In congregations truly reformed according to the Word only the "pure doctrine" ecclesiastically agreed upon was to be preached. And out of this concern for loyalty to the Scriptures and the spiritual welfare of the people arose the practice of catechetical preaching.

To Luther belongs the honour of introducing this pattern. Already as an Augustinian monk he had lectured on Romans and on the Psalms; by 1516 he had also preached a series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed. Once again the people were hearing messages on the mighty works of God for their salvation as summarized in an ancient testimony to the faith. Soon thereafter he began to preach sermons on both the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer; all three were the basic ingredients of catechetical instruction provided by the early church.

This practice he continued faithfully for several years after the German churches were liberated from the papal yoke. By 1520 he had prepared a small catechism, thereafter urging some of his colleagues to improve and expand on it in a more suitable form. This was then to serve also as a guide for preaching. When they failed to respond, he undertook this work himself and by 1529 produced *The Small Catechism*.¹⁷ It remains to this day a landmark worthy of high praise by all who love the evangelical faith.

In his eloquent "Preface" addressed *"to all godly and faithful pastors and preachers"* he tells what moved him. Shortly before he had visited congregations only to discover that much work remained to inculcate the doctrine which is according to godliness.

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christians, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed or the Ten Commandments; they live as if they were pigs or irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty...

Having said this, he scolded the bishops for their neglect of instructing those under their care. To the preachers he added the plea,

that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young.

On how this could be done effectively Luther had much to say. No changes were to be made in the order of preaching the Word.

The faithful "preacher," so he wrote, "*should adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year.*"

Only when the people were sufficiently instructed would it be permissible to change the precise wording of the explanations which he had provided. So that all might rightly understand sound doctrine, this catechism was to be learned "*word for word, so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory.*" This would make for a strong and committed congregation, able to withstand the winds of false doctrine and practice. Thus in the first Lutheran churches catechetical instruction for children and young people was not sharply differentiated from catechetical sermons for the entire congregation. According to Luther, and with this every zealous reformer of that day agreed, no one could be saved without some basic understanding of God's Word.

All who refused to submit to such instruction, he wrote, "*deny Christ and are no Christians.*" They may be allowed no Christian privileges such as participation in the holy sacraments. In fact, "*they should be turned over to the pope and his officials, and even to the devil himself.*"

But with teaching *The Small Catechism* Luther would not have the preachers stop. When this had been carefully taught and learned over a period of years, he would encourage pastors to teach from "a large catechism, so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding." This was for young people, for parents, for all citizens of village and town, even for the magistrates, so that everyone might order his ways aright before the Lord. And with the following admonition he concluded,

It is necessary to preach about such things. The extent to which parents and governing authorities sin in this respect is beyond telling. The devil also has a horrible purpose in mind ... How then can they be other than negligent, if you fail to do your duty and remain silent! So it is up to you, dear pastor and preacher!

This exhortation, along with the catechism itself, soon spread like wildfire through the German churches. Immediately various Lutheran church orders mandated preachers to follow what Luther had laid down as the pattern for sound preaching. This left room, indeed, for sermons which explained Bible passages verse by verse, since sermons were preached two or more times every Sunday as well as on week days. Not until the "pericope" system was introduced under high-church influences and services for divine worship reduced to one for every Lord's day did catechetical preaching among the Lutherans fall into disuse.

Some of these early Lutheran church orders deserve notice. The one for congregations in the territory of Lübeck (1531) urged that when the preacher in his sermons (after reading Scripture, of course) had nothing other than the catechism before him, "he did well."¹⁸ In 1533 the Wittenberg *Church Order* prescribed that the "priest" or the deacon in his sermons should follow the order of that catechism drawn up by Dr. Martin Luther for all the congregations. And when the series was completed, he was then to begin a new series dealing with the same material and in the same order, so that old and young might become well-grounded in the Word.

Even earlier similar decisions were adopted among the Reformed in Switzerland. The *Pradicantenordnung* of 1532, drawn up by Heinrich Bullinger and Leo Judae for the Zurich churches, required that every Sunday afternoon the minister was to preach a sermon on one of the basic articles of the Christian faith. The next year the catechism of Leo Judae appeared. Now expositions of this catechism in sermon form, suitable to the congregation, were mandated. A few years later Calvin's catechism was published and received with great appreciation by some of the Swiss churches to serve as a guide also for preaching.

What was done with respect to catechetical preaching in Geneva has, to the best of our knowledge, never been fully explored. We have no such sermons from the hand of Calvin. Instead we have volumes of his sermons on several Bible books. But we do know that at an early date his catechism was officially adopted and its teaching made mandatory in the homes, the schools and especially the parish churches. Every Sunday noon children and young people, having learned the

materials at home and in school, were to appear before the pastors and recite what they had memorized. This was then briefly explained to them. Were at least some of the parents, schoolmasters and others also present, perhaps including "servants" unable to attend the scheduled morning services? If so, then catechetical preaching of a kind was not ignored in that city which according to John Knox was the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles.

At an early date catechetical preaching was adopted by several Reformed churches. An interesting description of how this was conducted under the direction of John á Lasco in the London refugee congregation about 1550 has come down to us. It describes the afternoon worship service.

The minister, having taken his place on the pulpit, began as a ministry to the assembled congregation to explain the Bible text from the place where he had left off in the morning. After he had edified the hearers for one half hour, he concluded that sermon and proceeded to ask the children the questions of the *Large Catechism* of á Lasco. Each of the children in turn having answered what they had memorized, the preacher made work of explaining the questions and answers, demonstrating from Scripture the truths therein contained and binding upon the heart of the hearers its power.¹⁹

In much the same fashion the *Emden Catechism*, drawn up by the preachers of that city in 1554, was used in public worship. Every year two such series of sermons were prescribed, the one immediately following upon the other "since this was needed by the youth."

When the *Heidelberg Catechism* made its appearance shortly thereafter, it soon overshadowed in influence and impact all such previous works. Immediately it commended itself for use as sermonic material which would instruct, admonish and comfort old and young alike who longed to know more about the ways of God with his people. And at no time did this stand in the way of growing in an understanding of the Bible itself. Here was "the sum of Christian doctrine," carefully gleaned from the pages of Holy Writ. Because of the large number of services held every week, ample opportunity for variety in sermonizing was provided. No pastor could rightly complain that the regulations laid down for preaching in the church orders placed him in a straightjacket. But always the stipulation was in force that a "catechetical sermon" was to be preached as staple fare. This also voiced some of the deepest convictions of the reformers on how Scripture was to be rightly interpreted. No text was to be explained and applied in isolation from the full and complete Word. For them the notion that the Bible might possibly contain different or contradictory theologies was contraband. That Word was one, progressively revealed by God himself and always focused on his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. This conviction enabled them together with all who gladly listened to defend the pure gospel against the errors of Romanists, the vagaries of many of the Anabaptists and the sophisticated reasonings of Socinians and other heretics who cut the heart out of the good news of salvation.

No catechism has been more consistently and continuously used for homiletical purposes than the *Heidelberg*. The story of its origin, composition and purpose has been told so often that an exhaustive rehearsal is hardly needed here. Without some of the historical details, however, an appreciative understanding of its uniqueness for sermonizing will hardly be possible.

Of all the German-speaking lands in the sixteenth century few were so influential as the Palatinate. Lying along the Rhine for almost one hundred fifty miles and with Heidelberg as one of its chief cities, it served as a crossroad of cultural influences of many kinds. Its ruler was an "Elector," one among several princes entitled to choose the next sovereign of the Holy Roman Empire when the throne became vacant. Its university, founded by Rupert I in 1356, assumed a respected place among the schools for higher learning which had sprung up during the late Middle-Ages, especially after Urban VI by a special bull placed it under papal control and supplied it with substantial endowments.

Early some reformatory influences were at work here.

Jerome of Prague in 1406 lectured at the university and preached for several months in St. Peter's church. To its door he had nailed forty-five theses which called attention to errors then prevalent in the Roman church. Wessel Gansfoort, one of the Brethren of the Common Life, taught philosophy, Hebrew and Greek at the university from 1477 to 1479. Expounding salvation by faith alone, he was tried for heresy and banished from the city. Martin Luther, then still an Augustinian monk, attended a conference in the monastery of that city in 1516. Here he defended evangelical doctrines on the human will, grace, faith and good works. Among those who listened to him were Johannes Brenz, Heinrich Stoll and Martin Bucer, all to become influential leaders in the Reformation. Two years later Luther was again present to defend his positions. On his way to the Diet of Worms in 1521 he appeared in Heidelberg a third time and preached from the pulpit of the Church of the Holy Ghost. But because of strong papal control over the university and its professors this city did not become "the mother church" of evangelical Protestantism.

Not until the reign of Otto Heinrich (1556-1559) did the sound doctrine begin to take deeper root in the Palatinate. This prince was a Lutheran with strong humanistic leanings. His chief concern lay in reforming the university with its attendant schools, all of which had by that time fallen into decay.²⁰ The professors were mediocre and the students little interested in theology which was then the topic of the day almost everywhere else. Immediately Otto bent every effort to obtain competent professors, paying at the time little heed to the growing separation between Lutherans and Reformed. Although warned of this by Brenz who laboured in neighbouring Wurttemberg, the prince solicited Peter Martyr and Wolfgang Musculus who were both decidedly Reformed by conviction. These two declined their appointments. But soon the vacancies were filled by Peter Boquin and Thomas Erastus. Otto also granted asylum to Reformed refugees, especially from the Netherlands, who settled near the town of Frankenthal in 1555 and thereafter. This, too, was done despite warnings from Melanchthon who feared that giving freedom of worship to a non-Lutheran group would soon occasion friction throughout the land.

Evidences of his evangelical inclinations are clear from some of the liturgical reforms which he introduced. In contrast to practices among most north-German Lutherans Otto had every altar except the main one removed from the churches. He insisted that the rite of exorcism be removed when baptism was administered. He ordered that "pictures" which for centuries had been used as books for the laity be also taken away. This last met with such violent opposition that the decree could only be partly carried out. All this, however, paved the way for the more thoroughgoing reforms by Frederick III, "the Pious," who mandated the composition of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Meanwhile, as Melanchthon had prophesied, controversy broke out.²¹ Two strong personalities were deeply involved. Basic principles were at stake. The issue was whether the churches of the Palatinate would be Lutheran or Reformed.

Tilemann Hesshus was a high-church Lutheran with an ambitious and domineering personality. He had come to Heidelberg in 1557 to serve as both professor of theology and superintendent of the congregations. Finding many with strong Reformed inclinations, he determined to rid city and state of their presence. But equally zealous and assertive was Wilhelm Klebitz who had been installed as assistant preacher in the Church of the Holy Ghost.

The initial clash broke out when Hesshus insisted that a marble monument proposed in honour of prince Otto be placed in the central church. Klebitz at once took great offense. He also attacked his opponent for refusing to sing Psalms since they were in vogue among the Reformed, for introducing singing in Latin instead of German by the school children, and for holding a napkin under the wafer at the Lord's Supper lest some crumbs should fall on the floor. Soon after this Hexamer, minister of Edenkoben, was accused of Zwinglianism which to Hesshus was a fearful and damnable heresy. When Klebitz together with the court preacher refused to sign the charge, the quarrel rose to fever-pitch. Otto, attempting to restore peace in the churches, ordered both men to supply him with confessions of their faith in writing.

Before these matters could be satisfactorily settled, Otto died on February 12, 1559. By now the university professors were also involved, since Hesshus was vigorously opposing the granting of a

doctoral degree to Sylvius, a student from Groningen with pronounced Reformed ideas. The student had meanwhile found champions in both Boquin and Erastus.

In this situation, critical for both church and state, Frederick III began his reign. At once he ordered both contestants to cease their contentions. They agreed to keep quiet in public. But by August 29 Hesshus in a Sunday sermon again attacked Klebitz and forbade him the exercise of all ecclesiastical duties. In a sermon the following week Klebitz responded. On the next Sunday Hesshus publicly placed his opponent under ban and ordered that

*No church official was to have anything to do with him; no one was to receive the sacrament from him or attend his preaching. No sick were to send for him to comfort them, and no one was to eat with him.*²²

About this time one of Klebitz's children died. Difficulties arose in connection with the burial. Now two ministers, Velsius and Naser, took Klebitz' part in their sermons. The one placed Hesshus under ban, while the other denounced him as "*a boar who ravaged the Lord's vineyard.*"

By now the patience of the Elector was running out. He was deeply grieved that such untoward events were regularly happening at divine worship. Influenced by Melancthon, he still regarded himself as a Lutheran while refusing to dismiss those who held views on the Lord's Supper more akin to what was being taught by the Reformed.

During the three year period before the composition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* Frederick made four attempts to promote concord in the churches. The first was the adoption of a formula for use at the Lord's Supper in harmony with the *Augsburg Confession* to which he had earlier subscribed. The next year he held a conference with the leading theologians and, when this failed, he dismissed both of the chief antagonists. Finally in 1562 — and we are told that this was at the suggestion of Zacharias Ursinus — he ordered the preparation of a new catechism. Meanwhile after much searching of Scripture and prayer that "*by the aid of the Holy Spirit ... God would reveal the truth to him as well as to the most learned doctor or theologian,*" Frederick III became consciously Reformed by conviction.

By the publication and official adoption of such a new catechism the Elector hoped to silence the strident voices which had ruined the peace of the Palatinate churches. He appointed a commission to engage in the work. Brenz' catechism which had been used fruitfully for several years and Luther's which had been reintroduced in some congregations by order of Hesshus were both to be replaced, even though the values of each were not for a moment questioned. But this decision of the Elector was by no means unusual or surprising in the light of the flood of such manuals which had been produced since Luther's first effort. The chief authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism* were Zacharias Ursinus, then professor of theology at the university, and Caspar Olevianus, the court preacher of whom Frederick was very fond. Comparing the final product with the two previous catechisms penned by Ursinus, we do not doubt that he was chiefly responsible for much of its content.

Upon completion the work was thoroughly reviewed by the commission. Thereupon it was submitted to the Elector who made one change, that in answer 78.²³ By the end of 1562 this manual was ready.

Now Frederick as prince and chief member of the church summoned a synod of all the pastors serving in the churches of the Palatinate. It met January 11-18, 1563. On Sunday the 17th the Lord's Supper was solemnly celebrated. The next day he again assembled the pastors and announced,

*We have been informed that you have given the catechism your unanimous approval. This pleases me very much. It is our wish that you will faithfully adhere to it.*²⁴

On Tuesday, January 19, he wrote an inspiring preface and ordered it and the catechism to be published.

Soon it won the hearts of the preachers and people of that territory. Faithfully, if we may believe the records, it was put to use in the families, the schools and the churches. By November of that year four German editions had already been printed, the last including question and answer 80 in its final and definitive form. Here it was placed in the *Church Order* (Kirchenordnung) between the liturgies for Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Soon it was translated into most of the major European languages. And despite increasing and virulent attacks on it by Romanists, Lutherans and others, peace was restored in the churches.

By many this ecclesiastical document is seen as only useful for educating children and young people in the Christian faith. Its aim and subsequent use, however, are much broader. What distinguished it from many similar works is that it has always served as both a "creed" (confession) and a "catechism."

First and foremost, it is a *confessional* document. In unambiguous language it declares before the world the doctrinal position of the churches of the Palatinate. Now they were officially bound together in a common faith, clearly Reformed also in distinction from the Lutheran high-church trends which had by this time begun to prevail throughout much of Germany.

At the same time it served a *juridical* purpose. Only those preachers, school teachers and professors who subscribed to it and pledged to teach it faithfully were permitted to exercise their offices in the Palatinate. At the same time its *catechetical* use was mandated on all parents, teachers and pastors. Only so would the children of the church come to understand the way of salvation clearly and, upon making a public profession of faith, be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

But adults were by no means ignored by the authors, the Elector and the synod which had approved the manual. Many of the people were still quite unlearned in the evangelical faith and confused by the vitriolic quarrels which had resounded for several years from pulpits. Hence the catechism was divided into nine sections; these to be read consecutively at the time of public worship by the officiating minister. This *liturgical* use would remind the people of the doctrines and duties to which they as Christians had committed themselves. Only so would a "confessional" congregation truly become a "confessing" one. And to this was immediately attached its *homiletical* use. Its contents were not only to be read and memorized; these were to be carefully and systematically explained. Hence it was arranged in fifty-two Lord's Days. At one Sunday service this was to be expounded for and applied to the lives of young and old alike.

Often the *Heidelberg Catechism* has been rightly lauded for its irenic spirit. Here the Elector with his friends achieved a large measure of success in bringing about peace. Yet at no point is sound doctrine compromised. Certain refinements in classic Reformed theology, already then much discussed and debated, are to be found only by implication. The authors deliberately exercised a commendable measure of modesty and restraint, recognizing that Christians are to be trained as believers rather than as competent theologians. Yet only a Reformed believer can in good conscience and consistently agree with its statements. We find here a lucidity which permits of no vagueness in proclaiming the cardinal teachings of Holy Scripture. Sound instruction, so those who first and then for many years later used this little book believed, includes not only affirmations but also some necessary negations. Hence without name-calling this catechism has served a *polemical* purpose. Only Romanism is specifically referred to and that in connection with the "popish mass." Other teachings of that church, however, are clearly repudiated as inimical to the true doctrine of salvation by grace alone. It can hardly escape attention, however, that also high-church Lutheranism is not countenanced. Sadly the intention of this catechism to maintain the full reality and integrity of our Lord's human nature has not only been misunderstood but also at times maligned, so that closer relationships between Lutherans and Reformed — so much desired by several early reformers — were rendered impossible. At the same time, without mentioning names, this manual of instruction distantiates itself from several Anabaptistic views. It allows for no working of the Spirit in the church apart from the Word. Our Lord, so it emphasizes, received his true human nature from the virgin Mary. Children as well as adults are embraced in God's covenant and therefore also in his church. And without any theological speculations and reasonings it affirms

the full orthodox doctrine of the Trinity against the Socinians and others who became forerunners of those gospel perversions which even today haunt and harm many churches.

But, so some would argue, this catechism serves no true evangelistic or missionary purpose. In all fairness two matters should be considered. Undoubtedly this was not much in the forefront of the goals of the Elector and the authors. But how could this be expected, when the Palatinate churches were torn by division and all evangelicals attacked by their enemies? Church members in those early years often did not know and understand the basic Christian doctrines as they should. But by insisting that it be used in homes and schools and churches the catechism from the beginning did serve a uniquely evangelistic purpose. Who can say how many of the ignorant and indifferent were by its use, especially in the churches, brought to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Nor should it be forgotten that within a few years of its publication Tremelluis, one of the most competent Hebraists of that day himself a converted Jew, translated the *Heidelberg Catechism* into Hebrew praying, without doubt, that it might possibly be used for the salvation of some of his own people. None welcomed this little work more gladly and wholeheartedly than did the Dutch. They took it with them and translated it into all the vernaculars of the people to whom they preached. Even today it serves well on many of the mission fields where Reformed ministers seek to lead men, women and children to the Saviour.

This catechism has also served an *ecumenical* purpose. Frederick III, as noted earlier, always hoped for closer relationships between Lutheran and Reformed. What its composition did achieve was closer relationships between the Reformed in many lands. This was served by translations into Dutch, English, French, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Spanish and even Portuguese. Fascinating is especially its translation into Greek by Friedrich Sylburg in 1597. He forwarded such a copy to Cyril Lucaris,²⁵ later to become patriarch of Constantinople (1620-1638), with whom he had become intimately acquainted in his student years. At that time Protestant and especially Reformed views were influencing some of the leaders in the Greek church. Several years later an elegantly bound edition, including the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dort*, was printed at the expense of the Dutch government and presented to Lucaris. Again and again this godly man attempted to initiate reforms in his church but in vain. As in the Roman church before 1517 the opposition was too strong and vocal, even to point of treachery. At the age of 66 he was martyred. Even today, however, the *Heidelberg Catechism* functions in several ecumenical discussions and debates.

The rehearsal of its influence would not be complete without mention of its *devotional* use. Those who learn and believe from the heart its answers seldom forget them. It seems to sing its way into the soul. Often Reformed believers have died with the first answer on their lips, a testimony to a faith which does not flinch even in the face of death. And when troubles assail, what richer consolation can be offered than the witness of the tenth Lord's Day? In the third part the patterns for and struggles of godly living are so simply and succinctly set forth, that those who live by its message find peace and hope and joy. Would anyone learn better how to address God in daily prayers of adoration, thanksgiving and petition, few catechisms can teach this so admirably. Here the chief part of our gratitude for so great a salvation stimulates to that close fellowship with God which wipes away every tear and subdues every doubt.

But little of all this will remain in the lives of congregations who have relegated the catechism to the dusty archives of the past. All the above can and will be stimulated only in so far as its content as "the sum of Christian doctrine and duty" is preached regularly, enthusiastically and faithfully. In far too many homes and schools it is no longer mentioned, far less taught. Even in the churches for "catechetical instruction" the temptation is becoming stronger to turn away from its use. With this growing — dare we say, often deliberate? — neglect on the part of ministers and consistories we ought not be surprised when complaints are uttered that sermons are often much too shallow and sentimental.

Its message deserves to be heard again and again from every true Reformed pulpit to call sinners to repentance, to strengthen old and young in the true faith and to glorify God for his saving work *for, in and through* those who are ordained to life eternal. With that conviction Reformed churches

have for centuries mandated that one sermon every Sunday shall ordinarily teach "the sum of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism." To minimize, ridicule or openly defy this regulation is for Reformed preachers and people the betrayal of a precious legacy won at so great a cost. It is part of a spiritual birthright which ought never be exchanged for a mess of cheap pottage.

Before anyone — parents and teachers and preachers — can even begin to use the *Heidelberg Catechism* fruitfully, an understanding of this little manual is essential. Here questions of several kinds challenge us, since its composers (and with this all the churches which have adopted it as their witness) insisted that, although it was elementary, basic instruction in the Christian faith, it was thoroughly Scriptural. Clearly, it does not repeat the Word verbatim. Nor does it make mention of everything that the Bible teaches. Little is said about the long history of mankind and especially of the Israelites before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor does it deal in any depth with the materials found in many of the Old and New Testament prophecies. All this, indeed, is referred to. But whoever expects to find here an "outline" of God's self-revelation in Holy Writ demands what was never intended. Instead we find what the Reformed churches have acknowledged to be a simple and straightforward "introduction" to the way of salvation as consistently set forth in the Word. It does the work of a servant; a humble but obedient guide into the inexhaustible treasures of the gospel of the sovereign God who in Christ Jesus calls a people for his glory out of darkness into the light of his saving presence and power. It speaks out of Scripture itself; it leads back to that same Scripture, so that the experience of salvation becomes ever richer and fuller and deeper. Only that self-understanding of the catechism itself will enable anyone to use it aright.

At once this cuts off two serious misrepresentations.

Some would argue that on its pages we find a theological system which presents itself as a well-reasoned and closed pattern of truth. The appeal then is to the intellect and that quite exclusively. But this reduces the riches of the Word to a series of abstract, logically related but quite impersonal propositions capable of being endorsed by the mind without any transformation of heart and life. Hardly need it be said that this is a perversion, a fatal caricature of the very message which it aims at impressing on the total person who turns to its pages.

Others, deeply impressed by its experiential emphasis, insist on finding here a description of that process of personal salvation which the Holy Spirit works, step by step, in the lives of those who belong to Christ. By them God's work of grace is straight jacketed. According to them everyone, before attaining to any hope, must be made so fully aware of his sinfulness and all his sins that he is brought to the verge of despair. Only then, perhaps, may some glimmerings of light arise within the soul.

Such persons, seeing only what they want to see, do this catechism grave injustice. Should they so instruct others, they are guilty of dealing dishonestly. They would do well to listen to those who, over a period of several centuries, have reflected deeply on both the aim and content of this little manual.

Already Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor and himself the author of a catechism (1559) and of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), wrote about it in glowing terms to a friend.

*The order of the book is clear; the matter true, good, and beautiful; the whole is luminous, fruitful, and godly; it comprehends many and great truths in a small compass. I believe that no better catechism has ever been issued.*²⁶

No less favourable was the judgment of the English delegates to the synod of Dort (1618-19), stating,

*...that neither their own nor the French churches had a catechism so suitable and excellent; that those who compiled it were therein remarkably endowed and assisted by the Spirit of God; that in several of their works they had excelled other theologians, but that in the composition of this Catechism they had outdone themselves.*²⁷

Years later Karl Sudhoff, converted from Roman Catholicism to become pastor of the Reformed church in Frankfurt-on-the-Main, offered this evaluation in his *Theologische Handbuch zur Auslegung des Heid. Katechismus*:

A peculiar power and unction pervades the whole work, which cannot be easily mistaken by anyone. This work, therefore, speaks with peculiar freshness and animation directly to the soul, because it appears as a confident, joyous confession of the Christian heart assured of salvation. It is addressed to the heart and will as much as to the mind. Keen and popular unfolding of ideas is here most beautifully united with a deep feeling of piety, as well as with the earnest spirit of revival and joyous believing confidence. And who that have read this Catechism but once can mistake how indissolubly united with these great excellencies is that powerful, dignified, yet simple style! What a true-hearted, intelligible, simple and yet lofty eloquence speaks to us from the smallest questions.²⁸

And Philip Schaff, whose *Creeds of Christendom* remains to our day a classic, summarizes its uniqueness admirably in one paragraph

The genius of the Catechism is brought out at once in the first question which contains the central idea and strikes the key-note. It is unsurpassed for depth, comfort and beauty, and, once committed to memory, can never be forgotten. It represents Christianity in its evangelical, practical, cheering aspect, not as a commanding law, not as an intellectual scheme, not as a system of outward observance, but as the best gift of God to man, as a source of peace and comfort in life and death. What can be more comforting, what at the same time more honouring and stimulating to a holy life than the assurance of being owned wholly by Christ our blessed Lord and Saviour, who sacrificed his own spotless life for us on the cross? The first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism is the whole gospel in a nutshell; blessed is he who can repeat it from the heart and hold it fast to the end.²⁹

All these have come to understand, from out of the catechism itself, what the motives were of those who first had it published in German under the title

Catechismus oder Christlicher Unterricht wie der in Kirchen and Schulen der Churfurstlichen Pfalz geetrieben wirdt.

First of all, then, it aims at giving systematic instruction according to a definite pattern. Any tampering with the order chosen will distort the message, as it destroys the symmetry and perverts the content of that which was so carefully arranged.

Three convictions undergirded those who chose this arrangement.

They believed firmly that the gospel of God's grace by which sinners are brought to salvation can be "taught." They saw no inherent problem (other than that of man's corruption which only the Spirit could correct) in communicating the message from God to man. How they would be baffled at the notions of the champions of linguistic analysis and their followers who today confuse many a pastor and preacher. All the reformers were convinced that God who had created man with the power of speech was abundantly able to declare in human language his ways and will.

Nor was that revelation of God, either as a whole or in any of its parts, for them a *piece de resistance* capable of being understood by only a few intellectual or spiritual elite. To them the Word was for young and old, for all God's children. The high calling of his ministers was simply that of conveying the message to those under their care. The notion that no divine word can be adequately communicated in man's language has been irrefutably answered a hundred years ago by Abraham Kuyper in his series on preaching in *De Heraut*.

But, and this needs to be added, the writers of the catechism never thought that salvation was accomplished magically or mechanically by teaching. They urged the absolute necessity of the regenerating, the converting, the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, confessing as they did in Lord's Day XXV, 65,

Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?

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.³⁰

To the church as "mother of believers" and "teacher of the nations" that Word was committed with the pledge that in and with and through it the Spirit would accomplish the great purposes for which it was intended. Thus together with the church fathers those who penned and later adopted this manual for instruction could testify that "outside" of the true church which faithfully declares what God has revealed in his Word there is no salvation.

Our attention should be directed in the second place to the striking stance or starting point taken by the catechism.

At the outset it insists on laying upon the lips and, hopefully, the hearts of all who use it a personal confession of faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. This is the central and all-controlling declaration for every believer. Here all the promises of God in Christ are presented in concentrated form, yet with the implied command that this is to be believed from the heart and confessed with the mouth. Apart from that testimony not one of the questions and answers of the little manual will serve its purpose and make any sense. Nor was it doubted for a moment by the authors that even little children could, by grace, make this confession in sincerity and truth. For had not our blessed Lord himself said about those babes he held in his arms,

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these?"

However much their faith may as yet *be* quite unformed and uninformed, this testimony can be and is used as Word which both awakens and strengthens faith which is well-pleasing to God. Any notion that catechetical preaching and teaching which began here was far too complicated for young children was foreign to the writers. They as well as adults were to hear and respond, be it on their own level of understanding, to the most joyful sound of the gospel. Even common pedagogy urges that what little ones hear first and most frequently they usually remember the longest.

Already in the first answer we are challenged with that most basic affirmation of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity. Salvation is the work of the one true God who subsists in three distinct persons. No distinction is allowed between Christo-centric and theocentric teaching. So, too, salvation as the catechism will set forth in great detail is of one piece. Those whom Christ has redeemed are entrusted into the fatherly care of God and renewed by the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit.

Here is no God far removed from our world of time and space. Nor is room allowed for some single-minded preoccupation with Jesus and his life on earth. Too clearly had its writers listened to the words of the Saviour,

"Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

To "belong" to Jesus as Lord and Saviour is to have unbreakable fellowship with the triune God. All the rest of the catechism simply embroiders on that theme. It will explain what hinders such union and communion, how it is overcome both for and in the life of the believer and wherein that blessed experience for time and eternity consists. Unless this remains the "theme" when any of the Lord's Day are taught, those who hear the questions and answers explained will be left with no more than intellectual baggage which fails to satisfy the hungering and thirsty soul.

Now we come face to face with that initial word which seems to be a stumbling block to many. It is the word *comfort*. Often its use has been severely criticized. Why speak of this at the outset and so repeatedly? It seems to put man and his pleasures at the centre rather than God's glory. But the problem, if it is one, is of our making. Hageman, in an essay commemorating the 400th

anniversary of the catechism, comments that because the term has been so persistently misunderstood, he in more than thirty years of preaching looked for another English word to convey the intent of the authors. But none could he find. It is used repeatedly in the Bible itself, but then in a sense far removed from the common understanding. Schmitz defines *comfort*, after researching its varied uses, in the light of salvation-history in a single sentence.

*It expresses the divine aid which is already lavishly granted to the suffering community of Jesus by present exhortation and encouraging events, and which will reach its goal when the NT people of God is delivered out of all its tribulations.*³¹

This, then, is much more than a comfortable feeling. It is the divine word of "exhortation" which commands us to seek all our strength and hope in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. Only as we learn by faith to rest our case in him will our restless hearts find that rest for which we crave. It is God's gracious gift to all who learn to respond wholeheartedly to what he has done and is doing for man's salvation. Without that faith-activity we continue at war with God, ourselves and the circumstances of our lives.

Within that context, therefore, the catechism speaks of a triple knowledge as the activity of a living faith. This is no mere intellectual acquiescence to a fact or two, even though such faith affirms as true all that God has revealed in the Word. Nor is grace offered at a reduced price by an appeal to the emotions. It is the complete but at the same time self-conscious surrender of one's person by the activity of mind and will and heart to the speaking God. He brings salvation as spiritual health for time and eternity. He who redeemed us in Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king now through Word and Spirit redeems our lives by renewing and refreshing them with the true and only comfort. This the catechism teaches at every turn of the road. Only so are the riches found in the 52 Lord's Days with its 129 questions and answers actually experienced.

And these "truths" which God teaches, as they are arranged here in summary form as a triple knowledge, are indivisible. The one can never be satisfactorily preached without some mention of its correlation with the other two. In this sense, when rightly done, catechetical preaching is dynamic, personal, existential. It speaks to us here and now. It calls us always to look to the triune God in Jesus Christ. And in the lives of those who so look to him day after day he applies the comfort which sees us through. This is *life eternal*, that union and communion with him who has created us so that we may know and enjoy him forever.

But is not the catechism throughout much too exclusively concerned with the individual and his salvation? So it might seem as we focus on the repeated use of "I" and "me" and "my." But again, this rests on our failure to see the questions and answers in their total context. Always we are reminded, directly or indirectly, that believers belong to the company of the redeemed. The joys of salvation are experienced only within the context of the believing congregation. As "communion of saints" we receive a variety of gifts and graces together, always in order to use them for the benefit and salvation of others. Our good works are not only to be done for God's praise — that, of course, first of all — but also in the hope of winning others for Christ. Together we are involved in the joys and sorrows of this life as we lift up our hearts towards the world to come. Thus we call upon God as "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" And again we are instructed to pray not only for ourselves but for "*all men ... that so everyone may discharge the duties of his office and calling as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.*" Such kingdom-perspectives, perhaps more implicit at times than explicit, raise high the banner of the Saviour-King who claims all of life for his service.

Here we find no Pollyanna preaching and teaching.

Clearly the catechism urges upon us the daily tension of the "already now" and the "not yet" of our salvation in Christ. We are firmly to believe that all has been accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Yet in this life we struggle against the powers of self, sin and the world seemingly so much under the control of the prince of darkness. This realistic appraisal of our present situation is as necessary for us as it is inescapable, in order that we may be stirred to seek with increasing ardor the grace and Spirit which his Lord has won for us.

Our "old nature," too, will continue to plague us so long as we are in this life. Yet no spirit of pessimism with its attendant helplessness and hopelessness is to be tolerated. The Christian believer is commanded to "purify" himself *"from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."* Perfection while he is still on earth remains beyond his grasp. The call to daily self-examination is pressed upon mind and heart. But always with that emphasis which calls to the exercise of faith as it looks to the fulness of the Lord Jesus Christ. In him the fulness of God's love which never lets us go is guaranteed. This sounds the note of genuine Christian triumphalism, equally removed from the false optimism of the indifferent and the soul-destroying pessimism which seeing only self sinks away in the swamps of doubt and unbelief.

This catechism is such a wise and faithful teacher of the Word. Always it speaks out of faith, in order that it may by the Spirit's operation awaken and strengthen and purify faith. It speaks chiefly to those who belong to God's covenant and church. To such have come the rich promises of peace and hope and life. But never does it allow its hearers to soothe themselves with any false encouragements. The sharp distinction between life and death, between being saved and lost, between heaven and hell at the end of our earthly pilgrimage is echoed again and again. Not all who have heard the Word and receive baptism are saved. Nor may the Lord's Supper be celebrated without serious warnings against every form of unbelief and persistent ungodliness.

Only those *"who are ingrafted into Christ and receive him by a true faith"* have the right to rejoice in salvation.

To reinforce this the catechism takes gospel preaching so seriously. It is the first, the chief key of the kingdom of heaven. It indeed opens; at the same time it also shuts for time and eternity that door against all who continue to walk in their sinful ways.

True preaching, however, is above all doxological. *The Heidelberg Catechism* repeatedly calls for this response on the part of those who listen and believe. Much more is required than an occasional hymn of praise. Life in its totality is to be offered up as a sacrifice of thankfulness continually. Such is that true conversion which the Spirit works *under* the preaching of the Word. It consists not only in a turning away from self and sin; it is a *"quickening of the new man"* which demonstrates itself as *"heartfelt joy in and through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works."* On that basis the law is commended and expounded. And when the strictness with which God wants it preached humbles us because of indwelling sin, we are commanded to pray for greater grace. This is the chief part of the gratitude which we owe to our God and Saviour. In it God himself delights. Through it we receive all we need and find again the strengthening of our lives in faith and hope and love. Always the seeking soul gets far more than ever is asked.

Within brief compass, therefore, this catechism has in obedience to Holy Scripture joined together the glory of God and the salvation of those who trust his grace in Christ Jesus. It is "instruction," indeed, but for mind and heart and soul and strength; for worship, witness and daily work. It begins with a simple yet profound expression of faith; it concludes with that same faith whose "Amen" resounds to the highest heaven to gladden the hearts even of the angels. Although not everything in this little book can be preached at the same time, this self-understanding of the catechism does indicate how it wants to be used.

To it as "the pattern of sound words" Reformed churches have, pledged themselves in their proclamation of the unsearchable riches of God's grace. Where this has been done faithfully, rich spiritual fruits have been harvested for the lives of individuals, families and congregations. It is not the only mold in which our sermons should and may be poured; it is, however, in our day of ignorance, indifference and much spiritual compromise a highly necessary and effective one.

Two basic and at times bothersome questions remain.

Is such preaching truly the proclamation and teaching of God's Word? Or are we, perhaps without being willing to admit this, substituting man's speech for God's?

And, if it be granted that such preaching is indeed biblical, can it still serve well, year after year, in our ever changing and much confused world? Will not its repeated use lack that freshness, spontaneity and vitality so essential to challenge both preachers and people?

A church without preaching is a contradiction in terms.

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

Clearly did our Lord Jesus teach this to those who were listening.

"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life."

Then he challenged his disciples whether they also would leave because his words had offended some. To this Peter responded also on behalf of the rest,

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."³²

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

Only, too, when preaching is faithful to the Bible can believers as God's people *"declare the praises of him who called"*³³ them and *"proclaim his salvation day after day ... his marvelous deeds among all peoples."*³⁴ Preaching calls for such a whole-souled response. To make this response, then, is the high calling of everyone who hears unto salvation.

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

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

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

Nor is it a dialogue in which we engage with the hidden depths of our selfhood or even with each other. In so far as the term "dialogue" may be used, it is God's authoritative and compelling address which always elicits a response, whether of faith unto life or of unbelief in a variety of manifestations unto condemnation. To that end preaching must be as clear, as persuasive, as comprehensive as possible, in order that the *"whole will of God"*³⁵ maybe made known.

The conclusion to be drawn is inescapable. All sound preaching is at the same time teaching. And teaching to be effective demands the presentation of its material in an orderly, systematic form. Step by step the body of divine truth(s) which comprises Holy Scripture must be explained in its full significance for God's glory and the salvation of man. Not only are old and young to be persuaded to repentance and faith; all those incorporated into the believing community are by such ongoing instruction to

"be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ."³⁶

Far too much preaching — in the past as well as the present — has been scattershot.

It dabbles in and with the gospel. It picks a little here and there without pattern. Often the most basic affirmations, if not questioned or denied, are simply assumed without any explanation by preachers. Meanwhile understanding of God's word sinks to abysmally low levels. Well may we

question whether the average church member today has any better knowledge of what the Bible teaches than had those to whom the reformers first began to preach.

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

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

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

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

Such objections have by no means died away.

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

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

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

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

with what they regard as unnecessary and unprofitable details in the Bible which they still claim to believe.

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

*We need also take account of the fact that the religious atmosphere of our time in America is genially uncritical and unfriendly to the making of theological distinctions. Religion is popular, but there is an unwillingness to define with any exactness what is meant by religion...*³⁷

To which he adds,

*In fact, so vague are the supposedly Christian definitions of religion in some quarters that even the agnostic and the atheist can give assent to them. Tolerance seems to many to demand the viewpoint that all religions are merely diverse expressions of the one religion to which we all hold.*³⁸

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

The blight of ignorance, indifference and superficiality with respect to God's truth has by no means left Reformed churches unscathed either. True and saving faith is more than a religious feeling. It knows what it believes and in whom it trusts. Without sound knowledge of God as he reveals himself in the word, faith is reduced to fantasy which deceives for time and eternity. It is always under attack from without and within. Everything conspires against learning to know and enjoy him rightly, so that faith needs to be regularly and repeatedly strengthened by the facts and mysteries of the Christian religion.

On this our Lord also insisted when commanding the disciples to engage in "*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"³⁹

Only then, according to the testimony of Paul, "*will we no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*"⁴⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The Christian estimate of man alone does justice to the complexities of our human situation and provides us with a vantage point from which to understand both man's nature and his destiny. We may safely assert that it is only those who have this faith who can rightly understand man's condition, and speak words of healing for our mortal hurt.*⁴¹

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

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

*It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge, until he has seriously contemplated the face of God, and comes down after such contemplation to look into himself ... Until God reveals himself to us, we do not think we are men, or rather, we think we are gods; but when we have seen God, then we begin to feel and know what we are.*⁴²

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

To that end catechetical sermons have been mandated and maintained.

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

*Far from being an instrument for the enslavement and the bludgeoning into submission of the human mind and spirit, a truly Christian creed is a banner of liberty, a bulwark of freedom of the Christian man. The New Testament has much to say about this freedom ... It is the unbeliever who is the prisoner, bound by the chains of his sin and ignorance, and unable to take one step in freedom. Christian salvation is liberation. There is no empty rhetoric but penetrates to the heart of the human problem.*⁴³

Is the language of our catechism, as some still urge, too antiquated or too technical? Then let preachers remember to what they have been called by God. They are to teach old and young; some only recently attracted by the gospel and others whose lives have been steeped in Scripture for many years. But all need teaching. And this is a work worthy of all his energies and efforts. Creativity in expressing old truths in a new and illuminating way is the art which he does well to seek to master. He will attempt to explain patiently. He will make use of apt illustrations drawn from both the Bible and contemporary life-situations. He will demonstrate the applicability of God's truth to daily life, convinced that sound doctrine is no end in itself but aims at godliness which delights the One who has commissioned him to preach. When this is consistently and conscientiously done, also these objections soon melt like snow before a warm and radiant sun. Dislike of catechetical preaching, however, stems not alone from the attitudes of some people. Preachers may well have to bear their share of blame.

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

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

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

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

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

This *Gouda Catechism*⁴⁴ appeared on the scene about 1607. It was exceedingly brief, consisting of only some thirty questions and answers. Most of the latter appeared as direct quotations from Scripture without explanation. Thus anyone who employed it could expound the passages as he pleased. All distinctive evangelical Reformed affirmations were conspicuous by their absence. No mention was made, for example, of man's total depravity in consequence of the sin of our first parents, of the two natures of our Lord, of justification by faith alone and of predestination. By this they demonstrated an unwillingness to keep the solemn pledge made when they had signed the Form of Subscription.

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

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

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

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

*heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, do fully agree with the Word of God.*⁴⁵

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

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

To do so is dishonest. It insinuates the lie into Christ's church called to manifest itself as *"pillar and foundation of the truth."*⁴⁶ It breaks faith with every sister-congregation and, what is worst of all, with the Lord before whose face the promise was made.

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

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

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

No sermon — and on this all will have to agree — is simply a verbatim recitation of a large number of biblical texts. If this is what our Lord had wished, he would never have ordered his apostles to "preach" and to "teach." Nor would he have said to them after speaking his parables,

*"Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*⁴⁷

In a similar vein Paul urged Timothy, "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth,*" supplementing this with the command, "*Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage — with great patience and careful instructions.*"⁴⁸

These and many other passages demonstrate that the gospel is to be explained and applied to those who hear.

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

This is by no means limited to a few outstanding verses or chapters in the Bible. Nor did God's self-revelation in Scripture, now entrusted to his church for preservation and propagation, fall in a single day from the heavens. Instead, over a period of many centuries, making use of servants selected and inspired by him, God has declared his ways and will. This he was pleased to do progressively, always addressing people in their own life-situations and yet so that his truth is authoritative and valuable for all men everywhere. Nor did this produce a Bible (somewhat like the Koran) containing a series of unconnected and perhaps even contradictory statements, theories or "theologies" as some would claim. In all its teachings a most remarkable unity demonstrates that the human authors were indeed superintended by the Holy Spirit. No section simply repeats what had been set down earlier. Always we encounter new, richer, fuller revelations which complement and supplement what God had declared before.

Only when this is clearly seen will a preacher avoid like a plague preaching on any "text" in isolation from its immediate context and from the total message of Scripture. We dare not expound Old Testament passages as do the Jewish rabbis. Nor should we isolate the psalms and the prophecies from their historical context. Even the significance of the four Gospels is not clarified apart from some reference to the doctrines set forth in the apostolic sermons and writings. The terms so repeatedly used like "God," "man," "sin," "deliverance," "grace," "faith" and a host of others take on richer coloration and clarity as we study, step by step and book by book, this marvelous word of the Lord. Only together do they begin to display "*the manifold wisdom*"⁴⁹ of the God who saves and uses the church to the praise of the glory of his grace. Our high calling as a redeemed and refreshed people and how often do we make the congregations aware of this? — is to "reflect" all this not only before the world but above all before "*the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*" Even preachers and people who exercise themselves daily in the word have seen only "*the fringes of God's ways.*" Most of us are little advanced beyond kindergarten in the school wherein Christ has enrolled us.

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

Let us then on longer be ashamed, if such we are, of using the questions and answers of this catechism as "texts" for our sermons. Nor should a single Bible verse or two be added to serve as apology or even basis for such a message.

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

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

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

Our fathers rightly understood that the systematic proclamation of the basic teachings of our confession is only possible when the truth is drawn from not one but from ten or twelve texts and all of these together. Therefore catechetical preaching for them was not no-preaching according to Scripture, but preaching on all these texts which were deliberately placed under each answer. The enumeration of texts therefore is not incidental but essential. It is not: so also does Holy Scripture think about this matter, but: from these and these veins of the Bible this gold has been mined.⁵⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First of all, the aim of this catechism is not to outline and comment on every portion of Holy Writ. Demanding this would defeat the very purpose for which it was composed. It seeks rather to provide, and that also by being used year after year, that elementary (which is something other than simplified or childish) instruction in the basic, indispensable "*doctrine which is according to godliness*" (KJV).

Here it does not deal selectively with Scripture to include what its authors liked and exclude what they disliked. Conscientiously they attempted to survey and then summarize all that the Bible has

to say about those doctrines which are necessary to know and worship and serve God in all things according to his word.

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

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

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

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

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

Large numbers, to be sure, were drawn from the several epistles of the New Testament. But many were also selected from the historical books; others from the Psalms, Proverbs and the prophetic writings. All had to be carefully studied in their respective settings by pastors in preparing their sermons and then assimilated into the messages heard from the pulpits. In this way the voice of the Lord was to be proclaimed.

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

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

That this catechism speaks in such detail and at such length about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to occasion no surprise. In the events of his life and death and resurrection he has brought salvation.

This is to be experience as *"the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness — a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time; and at his appointed season he brought his world to light through the preaching..."*⁵¹

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

Does the catechetical sermon or even a whole series of such sermons, then, say everything about God's way with mankind that can and must be said? No, no more than can any series of sermons on isolated texts and passages. The word, so Reformed believer confess, can be adequately but never exhaustively preached. But where catechetical preaching is properly done, pastors and people may be assured that none of the central affirmations are neglected to the spiritual impoverishment of those who have come to be fed.

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

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

*Let me add, further, that long observation has satisfied me that a principal reason why instruction and exhortation from the pulpit are so little efficacious, is that they presuppose a degree of information or an acquaintance with the truths and doctrines of divine revelation which, by a great part of the hearers, is not possessed, and which would best of all have been supplied by catechetical instruction. It is needed to imbue effectively the minds of our people with "the first principles of the oracles of God," to indoctrinate them soundly and systematically in revealed truth, and thus to guard them against being "carried about with every wind and doctrine," as well as to qualify them to join in the weekly service of the sanctuary with full understanding, and with minds in all respects prepared for the right and deep impression of what they hear.*⁵²

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

By so opening up the word, under the Spirit's impulses who always works with the word, God's people need never feel themselves lost and alone in an alien world. We recognize ourselves as belonging in the company of Adam and Abraham, of the prophets and the apostles and the saints of all ages. With them we learn to rejoice in *"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*⁵³

So explained and applied, this catechism is a confession which produces a truly confessing congregation. It as a gentle guide leads us into the storehouse of God's truth which feeds to life everlasting. It tells us where we stand together with all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It binds the very words of Scripture upon our hearts, so that with lip and life we are *"always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks ... the reason of the hope"*⁶⁴ which is ours. Without that kind of response we are not a church in which our God delights.

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

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

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

*The believer's act of confession is first and above all else a religious act. It is an act of prayer and adoration. It is not a system of philosophy. It is not even a system of Christian philosophy. Nor is it a system of dogmatic theology. It is an act in which all the members of the congregation can participate.*⁵⁵

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

*Any intelligible revelation and any intelligible response to revelation involves conceptual response on the part of the person making this confession.*⁵⁶

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

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

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

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

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

To that end, unsatisfied with having people content themselves with quoting an occasional text or two, they seek without apology to "indoctrinate" all who hear in the *"whole will of God."* For this task, so they remain convinced, their catechism springing from the very word and words of God still

serves them well. It doesn't say all that needs saying. Occasionally it may not even say everything it says as well as it, perhaps, could be said. But what it does say are "those things most surely to be believed," As servant of the word it enables men and women and even children to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*"⁶⁷ And that is what being church in today's world is first of all about.

With this our comments on catechetical preaching are not yet concluded. Some suggestions on how such sermons may perhaps be somewhat more profitably prepared should not be considered out of place.

Like sermons of every kind these meet with mixed response. Some appreciate them highly; others urge that they have long outlived their day. Then we find those who remain indifferent.

For such reactions each hearer must bear his own responsibility. At the same time, however, preachers worthy of their office dare not take their task lightly. They are to speak no more and no less than the gospel of grace. Always the preparation and delivery of a sermon demands the best he has to offer. He speaks in the name and on the authority of the God of salvation to people, old and young, whose faith is often far from stable, in order to draw them into an ever more fruitful fellowship with the heavenly Father whose grace and glory know no limits. Never is this more urgent than when "the sum of Christian doctrine" set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism serves as the "text" or foundation for the message. With its word preacher and people have to a large degree grown familiar. Such familiarity easily breeds contempt.

To escape that snare preachers should take heed not only to what but also to how and why they preach such sermons as they do. Wise mothers soon learn the art of serving healthful food in ways which whet the appetite; preachers called to break the bread of life ought do no less. For such preparation Scripture is the instructor without peer.

For everyone commissioned to bring the gospel few writings are as pertinent as Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus.

These evangelists faced situations which largely parallel life as it is lived in our day. Ephesus was a thriving commercial center. Its theatre catered to those who loved pleasure and sports. Its temples offered a strange mix of Asian fertility cults and somewhat more respectable Roman deities. Meanwhile Crete had lapsed into an imperial backwash with natives of ill repute for their untrustworthiness.

In both places churches had been established. Now their members needed further instruction in faith and godliness. Paul therefore summarized for both preachers their awesome responsibilities. Only so would the gospel bear fruit to the glory of God and Saviour whom these people had professed.

The heart of their messages was always to be the same: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15). This for the apostle is "*the mystery of godliness.*"

*He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

(1 Tim. 3:15)⁵⁸

Only by living according to this "rule" which is "the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13) would the congregations be safeguarded in a wicked and wayward world. Always the gospel was intended to elicit a whole-souled response from those who listened, in order that they might be sustained and strengthened in their struggles:

If we died with him,

we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

(2 Tim. 2:11-13)

Always the appeal is to the sacred writings which alone make a man wise unto salvation. These the Lord Jesus has come to fulfil in his person and work. Specific patterns of conduct are laid down for all ages and classes and situations. Throughout sharp demarcation is drawn between believers and unbelievers and also between the past and present positions of those who have now become God's dear children. Grace received by faith becomes the motive for a life well-pleasing to the Lord, for,

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:3-7)

Repeatedly Paul urges that "*these things*" shall be taught by the two preachers. This leaves neither time nor interest for engaging in foolish speculations about myths and genealogies which by titillating the curiosity of some easily lead into false doctrine which imperils salvation. Not only is that blessed gospel firmly rooted in God's acts in Christ Jesus; it produces sound faith and conduct as it calls for a recognition of the sure hope of his appearing.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearance of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

(Titus 2:11-14)

This charge is laid on every preacher who would be true to his calling, not the least when he engages in presenting the Word of life as systematically arranged and explained by the catechism. As in the inspired guide which Paul provided for the two young evangelists, so in every catechetical sermon people should be taught and exhorted, encouraged and rebuked and comforted according to each one's need. Always *kerugma* and *didache*⁵⁹ are woven into the seamless robe of God's will for those who belong to him. Much more is demanded than repeating a few simple Bible texts; here "*the full council of God*" is to be preached even to the same congregation and by the same minister repeatedly, lest anything essential to growth "*in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet. 3:18) be lacking.

Ours is an age not reputed for serious contemplation of things spiritual. For many the God of heaven and earth seems at a far remove from their lives. Large segments of the daily round such as education, politics, social relationships together with work and play have lost their rootage in the created order as well as all hope for their renewal by the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. Life for multitudes today, much as in Paul's time, has largely lost its meaning. To pressing questions few are able to supply satisfactory answers. Here are errors which need correction; wounds which require a healing touch; hearts hungering for some word which can bring peace and joy and strength.

This preaches the church faithful to "the good deposit which was entrusted to it." It will not allow its preachers to dabble with the Word of grace. While reaching out to a sinful and often stubborn humanity, it confesses its need to be diligently nurtured in the Christian faith and godliness. To satisfy its hunger the heavenly bread must be continually broken; to slake its thirst living water must be drawn for it out of wells of salvation. And to guide its steps in paths of loving service to God and fellowman, it can never do without timely instruction and exhortation. All this it does first and foremost through preaching in proper order and form all that God has so graciously revealed in his Word.

In order that within the Reformed churches nothing of this may be lacking in a given year its ministers of the Word are pledged "ordinarily" to preach one sermon every Sunday "the sum of doctrine contained in the *Heidelberg Catechism*." Here is no option left to the discretion of pastor, consistory or congregation. And for more than four centuries this ecclesiastical regulation has yielded a rich and rewarding harvest.

Earlier, note was taken that such systematic instruction in the Christian faith is not something new or strange.⁶⁰ Already the early church fathers engaged in a kind of catechetical preaching as creeds were developed and adopted. Later this practice was revived and strengthened by the Reformers as they called their followers back to the fulness of Holy Scripture. The history of the production as well as the homiletical use of the catechism was also traced. An article was devoted to reflecting on the objections raised against such preaching. Our concern, however, is not only with *what is* to be preached, but also with *how* this can be done as effectively as possible by those called by God to serve his purpose and his people.

Several questions immediately spring to mind.

When can such messages really be "sermons" and not addresses or lectures or devotional talks? How may they be constructed in such a way that the needs of the people are best met? Can this material, intended to serve as "text" year after year even to the same congregation and by the same pastor, be presented without becoming a dull and dreary repetition of what almost everyone has already heard?

For every catechetical sermon the *sine-qua-non* is that it shall be a "sermon."

Although this seems to be self-evident, few care to dispute that today many no longer know what a sermon really is. Even preachers do well to remind themselves of the place and power which an evangelical pulpit is intended to occupy in the life of a believing congregation. Here the minister of the Word is a teacher, but always far more than a teacher. To instruct he needs mastery of the message to be presented, yet far more urgent is that he himself shall be mastered by what he preaches. He is a spiritual guide in word and deed, but especially here he points away from himself to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom all the fulness of God dwells together with "*all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" (Col. 2:3). He speaks with authority, indeed, but that authority is always God's. It flows not from some human person no matter how attractive, well-educated or competent, but solely from the divine Word which is brought.

The pulpit, as someone has aptly said, is "*the earthly throne from which the heavenly King rules the world.*"

Attempts have been made again and again to summarize the nature of preaching in a simple and straightforward definition. While these are indeed helpful, few seem capable of summarizing its many-sidedness as indicated in the New Testament. It is a human activity, but as Paul reminded the Thessalonian congregation, replete "*with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction*" (1 Thess. 1:5). At no point is man in control of its effects, even though the preacher bears responsibility for how he does his work and the people for how they hear and receive it. Nowhere is this "mystery" by which God is pleased to bring men to salvation (while at the same time penalizing all who reject the gospel) more succinctly stated than in his doxology incorporated in 2 Cor. 2:14-17:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death, to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

This is the tension which every faithful minister of the Word experiences, also when preparing and presenting catechetical sermons. He is to be deeply aware of being sent by and standing before the living God who weighs his every thought, word and deed. He is bound always to the message which God has commissioned him to bring. His concern is at the same time with those who hear, since they will be judged in time and eternity according to the responses which they give. Only "in Christ" can such a high calling be discharged with any degree of peace and confidence. Here he is to steep himself again and again in what God himself has declared about preachers and people and preaching itself.

Of all this and much more those committed to preaching catechetical sermons should be aware. Nothing dulls the Word which is "the sword of the Spirit" more effectively than when the preacher who presents this material year after year thinks of himself as master of the material. Soon he neglects both prayer and study as well as the ever-changing needs of those who hear him. He speaks perhaps with great show of oratorical effectiveness, but all his words under God's judgment are "*only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*" (1 Cor. 13:1). Without love of God, for the Word and for the people who are addressed, his sermon — whatever he or anyone else may say about it — is no sermon at all.

Since such and similar corruptions of preaching can invade a pulpit quickly (no one is immune to them!), definitions can serve a salutary purpose.

C. H. Dodd said that preaching is the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world.⁶¹ But this is less than helpful, unless one knows what is "proclamation" and what is "Christianity."

Commenting on Dodd's explanations, R. H. Mounce feels compelled to add by way of warning that "the current popular understanding of preaching as biblical exposition and exhortation has tended to obscure (the) basic meaning" of proclamation.

Preaching is not the relaxed recital of morally neutral truths: it is God himself breaking in and confronting man with a demand for decision.⁶²

In his *Education unto Religion* (the scope of which includes, but is far broader than, sermons) A. Victor Murray takes several pages to delineate what he regards as essential to bringing the gospel.

In the full-orbed Christian faith there seem to me to be five elements. There is something to know, something to feel, something to choose, something to do, and something to belong to...

- 1) Christianity is a historical religion. Therefore we must have recourse to history. The Old and New Testaments are the basic documents of the faith and they are historical records without which there could be no Christian faith...
- 2) The root of all religion is feeling, by which I mean not an emotional excitement but rather a deep sense of concern with the unseen world ... Knowledge about God is a matter of study and instruction; knowledge of God comes by feeling and intuition, not opposed to the intellectual process (although often assumed to be) but completing it, and informing and disciplining it
- 3) Christianity also involves moral choice. There is warfare in human life, and the fact of sin is inescapable...

- 4) Then action is needed ... The externalizing of an emotion helps to prevent it becoming morbid and also to recall it when it has gone...
- 5) Christianity has come down to us through the agency of the Christian community ... And the Christian community is an essential part of the Gospel, for it is through the life and witness of the community that Christ is made known to men.⁶³

Having reminded his readers of this, he ends with the quip,

*There is no expeditious road
To pack and label men for God
and move them by the barrel load.*

How pertinent are the comments of H. H. Farmer when he reminds us that "Christianity is *sui generis*."⁶⁴ Its proclamation and presentation therefore, if true to the gospel, will allow for no comparison with an address, a lecture, a drama, a spectacle, or for that matter, a sensitivity session. And while formally its dialogical character can be admitted, it is not dialogue or discussion in the commonly understood sense of those terms. It depends on and draws from the decisive work of God which he has accomplished and still accomplishes for us men and our salvation.

Fundamentally it is dogma declared on the basis of unimpeachable sources that God in Christ has reconciled the world to himself and charged his servants to deliver that message to all within hearing. Its address, though given within the context of the believing church, is always personal, direct and challenging.

*...it is not merely telling me something. It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour, through the medium which the nature of His purpose permits Him to use, the medium of a personal relationship.*⁶⁵

All this is done, so Reformed churches are fully persuaded, by divine decision and arrangement. God has not sent his Word into this confused world of ours without plan or pattern or purpose. In Christ he has formed the church as "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to*" him, who engage in declaring his praises (1 Pet. 2:9). For that church he provides the official ministry of the Word, not leaving it to chance or human choice how and when and by whom that Word shall be brought. The more consistently faithful churches and pastors observe what Scripture says about their calling, the richer will be on them the outpourings of his favour. Here he is always at work to the praise of the glory of his grace in Christ Jesus, not only to call men and women and children to salvation, but at the same time

to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

(Eph. 4:12-15)

Here *kerugma* and *didache* join hands in a successful unity which, despite whatever differences of emphasis may be legitimate, should never be dissolved. To that unity no other kind of sermonizing can serve so effectively as that of systematic, continual and persuasive catechetical preaching.

Such sermons, shall they be pleasing to God who hears with far keener ear than any man, and profitable for the people, deserve to be crafted with great care. Certain standards with respect to content and form are to be met to the best of the preacher's ability. All superficiality and slovenliness are contraband as incompatible with the sacred purpose for which he who sends his servants has commissioned them. Recognizing this and the ever-present danger of dealing too

casually with familiar material, Reformed churches have repeatedly insisted that such sermons shall "especially" evidence on the part of the pastor "diligent study."

What is before all else demanded is that these shall be consistently biblical. Here the catechism is no substitute for Scripture; it draws from the record of God's mighty acts which find their fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence the texts which give shape to the catechetical questions and answers have been drawn not only from Paul's epistles but from the whole round of Scripture itself. This already provides some clue to the possibility of varying approaches to the same subject, whether doctrinal or devotional or dealing more explicitly with ethical responses, to its several Lord's Days. Only because these churches are convinced that every phrase and statement is biblically defensible have they insisted on the regular homiletical use of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. No other creed, confession or catechism, in their official judgment, can serve as a guide to set forth the facts and mysteries of the gospel so clearly, succinctly and persuasively to those who need instruction in the Christian faith.

Always, therefore, when faithful to the Word from which this catechism derives, such sermons will be truly *evangelical*. With God's love in Christ Jesus it begins and ends. Throughout, also when dealing with the call to repentance, faith and daily obedience, it magnifies the person and work of Jesus Christ together with the Holy Spirit who regenerates, leads into all truth and strengthens for service those who receive the Word gladly. Even the "knowledge" of our sinfulness and our daily sins — a theme repeatedly introduced — springs only from the gospel as the Word of life and light and liberty. More, much more than some helpful counsel on how to meet a pressing problem is to be presented, if the message is to be truly a sermon.

Always the controlling emphasis is that *"God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

(2 Cor. 4:6)

Therefore these sermons are doctrinal. In season and out of season they teach, despite any disinclination on the part of many to be instructed. In view of the palpable ignorance which characterizes many who claim to be Christian this facet of preaching can hardly be overstressed. Such teaching the catechism insists on giving without hesitation or apology. Because it aims to be truly evangelical and evangelistic it dare not and cannot avoid being theological, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones so appropriately urges:

I would be prepared to argue that in many ways evangelistic preaching should be more, rather than less theological, and for this good reason. Why is it that you call people to repent? Why do you call them to believe the gospel? You cannot deal properly with repentance without dealing with the doctrine of man, the doctrine of the Fall, the doctrine of sin and the wrath of God upon sin. Then when you call men to come to Christ and to give themselves to Him, how can you do so without knowing who He is, and on what grounds you invite them to come to Him, and so on. In other words, it is all highly theological. Evangelism which is not theological is not evangelism at all in any true sense. It may be a calling of people to come to religion, or to live a better kind of life, or the offering of some psychological benefits; but it cannot by any definition be regarded as Christian evangelism, because there is no true reason for what you are doing apart from these great theological principles.⁶⁶

At long last, so it would seem from reading much that has been written recently about preaching, many begin to realize that people need more of the "strong meat" of the Word. Too many sermons by their shallowness and sentimentality fail to provide people with what they need to stand and to withstand in the struggles of daily life. Nor can meaning and purpose and hope be recovered unless the fulness of God's Word and work is explained in the light of his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Here the mind must first of all be addressed clearly and carefully lest the faith to which men are called withers on the vine. How aptly John H. Leith comments on this when writing,

*A commitment which does not serve God with the mind is always dangerous and irresponsible. Indeed, the articulation of faith in intelligible words not only clarifies faith but becomes itself the means of deeper commitment of heart and mind. Theology and the creeds are the service of God through the life of the mind and are indispensable to any other service which may be rendered to God.*⁶⁷

To which Alan Richardson adds his warning,

*The demand of a "non-theological" language may often harbour a dislike, not of words, but of the theological truths which lie behind them ... too often the attempt to avoid 'theological' language and to use only an ordinary work-a-day vocabulary has resulted in the substitution of a prudential ethical or topical address in place of real Christian preaching.*⁶⁸

Those faithful to the catechism will never fall into this snare. It teaches, using all the cardinal biblical terms with a few beside, and by its explanations does its teaching well.

Of course, more needs to be added about such sermons. But here our comments can be brief since much of this should be obvious to every preacher. Catechetical sermons, like all good sermons, must be *challenging*. They are to speak to the needs of the people where they are and in the light of what they experience in today's world. None of them may ever be crude representations of those delivered fifty or two hundred years ago. Here the preacher is to serve as a pastor with the pastoral responsibilities of leading and feeding, correcting and healing those in his care.

The minister of the Word aims at awakening, stimulating and strengthening the response of faith which is far more than intellectual acquiescence to the truth. Always the appeal, while first addressed to the mind by means of intelligible words, is to the total person. New and God-approved emotions are to be kindled. The will is to yield obedience to the demands of the Word. The lips are to speak and sing the praises of the Lord. Always the call is for a conscious return to God and the ways which he prescribes for his people. True religion according to the New Testament is *eusebeia*, perhaps best translated as piety or godliness which learns to respond on the deepest levels of selfhood to the will of God. It is a heart-response involving an involvement quite other than the undisciplined thrill of the moment. Always the Word of life when received rightly produces awe, humility, gratitude which delights in obedience. Here we may read with much profit that too much neglected work of Phillip Doddridge entitled *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Divine truth also when mediated by the preacher's message is more than a set of carefully formulated propositions. These are foundational, indeed, but on them the believer is to build a life of faithfulness, of loyalty to the God who graciously calls all who hear to a life of covenant fellowship with him. James states the matter so crisply!

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says ... (But) the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

(James 1:22, 25)

Such *confessional* preaching will by the promised blessing of God produce a confessing people, one which seeks to serve him and fellowman in both word and deed.

But catechetical sermons, no matter what the subject to be explained and applied, can and should always be *doxological*.⁶⁹ Does much at times seem dull and drab even to the point of lifelessness? Likely one of the chief causes for this lies in the failure of the preacher to begin and end with God who is the overflowing fountain of all good, whose judgments are true and righteous altogether, who never fails to supply the needs of those who diligently seek his face and whose mercies shine so brightly that the way into the future is never dim. All true doctrine rightly calls for songs of praise.

While all these aspects of "a good sermon" are involved, they should derive both from the central "theme" of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the teaching of each of its fifty-two Lord's Days. The aim is to proclaim the comfort known and experienced only in a living faith-relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This prevents any message from becoming a sterile intellectual and

impersonal address. But for the sake of sound and clear understanding the authors (and therefore the church by its official adoption of this confession also for homiletical ends) insist that it consists in the triple "knowledge" of our misery on account of our sinfulness and sins, our salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ and our obligation to live by that grace a life of service in loving obedience and prayer.

Nothing is more destructive of such preaching than to isolate these three from each other. This danger perhaps threatens most when treating Lord's Days II-IV without clear reference to Lord's Day I as the living confession which the church lays upon the lips of its members. The temptation to proclaim for some weeks only a "fire and brimstone theology" may have its appeal in days of spiritual and moral declension, but should be resisted at all costs. Any diagnosis of the ills which afflict people without pointing unmistakably to the remedy provided by our gracious God soon proves fruitless to awaken the sinner to that godly repentance which leads to life. Whatever one may think of Heinrich Ott's understanding of the Word, he is on target when affirming that

*an autonomous doctrine of pervasive universal justice and of retribution and recompense, a preaching of future punishment in hell would be of no use. For in a time of nihilism and the dissolution of values it simply would not be believed. And this is perhaps just as well. Only when they proclaim the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ ... can the message of the law, of sin, and of judgement be convincing.*⁷⁰

Always the God made known in Scripture summons us "to flee from the wrath to come" and in the same breath to seek salvation only in the One on whom he has laid our iniquities and through whose stripes we are healed.

Such looking to the Lord Jesus does not desensitize men to the fearful reality and consequences of sin. Rather, in and through him we see by faith the costliness of divine grace. Here, of course, the preacher does not elaborate on those rich provisions; that is to be done painstakingly and persuasively in the second section and to a large degree, though from a somewhat different perspective, in the third section of this little guide into the truth. But all catechetical proclamation with its instruction and call for decision is a summons to "know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified" as the only ground and foundation of salvation.

Nor need this become tedious.

Each Lord's Day has its own message. But the thread woven throughout the seamless fabric of the Word and obediently patterned in the catechism is "the (great) mystery of godliness" summarized by Paul in his letter to the evangelist (1 Tim. 3:15).

While undeniably Christocentric, such sermons will also be profoundly God-centered and trinitarian. Never does the Saviour's work end in and with himself; in redeeming his own from sin he reconciles them to the everlasting Father who as Spirit renews and refreshes the lives of everyone who draws near in Christ's name and pleads his person and work. This the beloved disciple has affirmed in language which expresses the heart of all sound preaching:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make (y)our joy complete.

(1 John 1:3-4)

This delineates that new spiritual life which is God's gift. It is a fellowship (*koinonia*) in which the vertical and horizontal are happily wedded. Never does the gospel hold out the promise of fruitful life with others apart from its rootage in saving communion with the triune God.

Today it seems that the term "God" speaks with little clarity or relevance to many. Countless folk live in ignorance of him, of his being and works and ways. At best they retain a vague awareness of some supernatural being or powers. At worst his is a name which slips carelessly and profanely from the tongue when things go wrong. More than ever it is incumbent on the church and its

ministers to make him known. This is the "dogma" which people need more than bread and water. It needs explanation which is saturated with Scripture throughout. It alone meets the true needs of those who listen with a sensitive and believing heart. Only so will the preacher be able in his messages to avoid the moralizing clichés which often pass for sermons on the third part of this catechism. There is diversity throughout a wholesome series of such catechetical sermons, but only when their unity as God's message of grace in Jesus Christ is made unambiguously clear. Without this a preacher serves stones for bread or a serpent whose bite is as deadly as it is painful.

Such instruction is at the same time exhortation and admonition. It comes in the form, indeed, of affirmations, of definitions and propositions and explanations which are the fruit of the church's wrestling for centuries with the heights and depths of God's truth. But imperatives are included at many a turn in a wholesome sermon. Someone has commented that Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are not so much a theological summary as "*a treatise in Christian piety*." To that aim the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism* strove to be faithful and have admirably succeeded. This, then, should be the avowed purpose of every catechetical sermon irrespective of what doctrine is set forth. Here the sheep of the great and good Shepherd are to hear his voice and follow in faith which is productive of good works.

Always it is dangerous, even more than a little presumptuous at times, to write on *how* any sermon, including those which are catechetical, should be structured. Both the gifts of the preacher and the needs as well as the capacities of the people are so varied that any straight-jacketing may appear to be an exercise in futility. How different in style and therefore in structure were most of the sermons delivered by the early fathers from those preached by the Reformers. Yet both served their times well under the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

This, however, does not imply that every message delivered from a pulpit is a sermon. Some are little more than pious exhortations; others a form of rambling without coherence to confuse the people even when they attempt to listen intently. Never should it be said of an evangelical minister what was remarked about one pastor's sermon by, an elderly lady, "Today he said nothing, but he said it so well!"

With this in mind we excuse ourselves for making some comments on structure which should control especially catechetical sermons intended to be based on the same Lord's Days year after year.

Some five or six qualities should characterize such sermons, shall they serve their purpose well.

We mention *unity* as a first requisite. In conformity with the catechetical material one "theme" is to be drawn here in subordination to Scripture and stressed throughout. Although many Lord's Days mention several topics, one always stands out as that which is to be emphasized. Several answers, for example, speak about the Holy Spirit or the blood of Jesus Christ. Yet in every instance this is done in relationship to that which is the concern of the specific question and answer. When such related but subordinate matters are treated at great length, the point which that Lord's Day makes is soon lost to the minds and hearts of the hearers. Such a sermon actually sails under a false flag and carries illegal cargo.

Also essential to a sermon is *progress* as development of the basic thought. Nothing confuses listeners more quickly or produces ennui with its accompanying indifference to God's truth than be labouring a minor point. Some measure of repetition, indeed, is necessary for sound instruction and exhortation, as Gregory pointed out in *The Seven Laws of Learning*. But to be effective this needs to be done with caution and care. Illustrations and examples serve well in illumining the truth, but even these should be employed with restraint. One or two usually are more than ample. When indulged in frequently and at great length the "story" is soon remembered at the expense of the truth it was intended to explicate and confirm.

Closely related to the above is *coherence*, lest the connection of one part of the message to the others mystifies those who listen. Without logic (not to be identified exclusively with argumentation)

the sermon soon becomes confused. Nor will it engage in addressing itself clearly to the total person, mind as well as will and emotions. Sermons are to be like tapestries woven from the "text" selected, here the questions and answers which the given Lord's Day supplies.

Which brings us to what for want of a better term may be called *elegance*. Nothing but the best in the way of style and structure which the preacher has to offer is acceptable. With every skill at his disposal he strives to bring God's message to bear upon the full life of everyone who has come to worship.

This is a far cry from that strained artificiality and ostentatious display of learning against which early Reformed synods warned the preachers of that age. Simplicity of speech, even when treating the loftiest themes, is the norm which Scripture itself both commends and illustrates. Neither is there room for banality or vulgarity. Did not Paul remind the cultured Corinthians that he *"did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom,"* but that his *"message and ... preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power"* (1 Cor. 2:1, 4, 5)? And were not many messages of our Lord, himself the highest wisdom, often couched in parables drawn from everyday life to astound and entrance those who gladly heard his words to accord them an authority far exceeding that of the learned scribes and Pharisees? But lest the point be misconstrued, we add the warning of Raymond Abba:

Here colloquialisms and provincialisms are as out of place as a secular vocabulary is quite inadequate for the adoration of the Creator who is also the Redeemer of mankind and for the expression of man's deepest needs.⁷¹

This holds as true for sermons as it does for the prayers which are offered and the hymns which the congregation sings. As preachers we should fix in our minds the words of R. H. Mounce,

Preaching is not the relaxed recital of morally neutral truth; it is God himself; breaking in and confronting man with a demand for decision.⁷²

This makes the message truly authoritative and the ring of *authority*, not from man, should resound. Not everything, to be sure, deserves equal emphasis. But without this a sermon will not only be dull; it will surely be self-defeating.

Only so will the messages, also here, be truly *person-directed* as well. Preaching is far different from beating the air vainly with a spate of words no matter how orthodox they happen to sound. Here God calls, pleads, commands everyone within range of the preacher's voice to seek his face and walk in his ways. Always he speaks with unmistakable urgency. His Word (*Wort*) elicits, whether those who listen are conscious of this or not, an answer (*Antwort*). In accordance with it they will be judged.

These responsibilities are integral to the sacred calling of preparing and delivering an effective sermon. Of this Paul reminded his co-worker,

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly ... and they destroy the faith of some.

(2 Tim. 2:15-16, 18)

At its most obvious level *"preaching is the oral communication of divine truth."* Words are and must always be spoken. Yet much more than words flowing from a minister's mouth are involved. Pictures and pantomime, even when associated with dance, are no substitute for words. But like the prophet of old, every gospel minister is summoned while *"eating the scroll"* to sit down where the people themselves sit. Here he identifies himself with them as completely as possible, knowing that in preaching he is always preaching to himself first of all. H. H. Farmer has summarized this well:

*Preaching is that divine, saving activity in history, which began two thousand years ago with the advent of Christ in His personal relationship with men and women, and has continued throughout the ages in the sphere of redeemed personal relationships (which is the true Church), now focusing on me, confronting me, as a person indissolubly bound up with other persons at this present time.*⁷³

To underline its unique, its "distinctive nature... derived from the distinctive nature of the Christian faith," he adds that "it is God's activity, that it is God encountering human souls in what may at any moment prove to be the supreme crisis of their life." This, then, calls for that careful exposition and application of the gospel which demonstrates that he who brings the message is first receiving it into the deepest levels of his own life. Catechetical preaching will then show itself to be

*God's great activity of redemption in history, in the world of persons, focusing itself in challenge and succour on "these persons here present," who listen to your words and look into your eyes; nay it is that activity focusing on you, the preacher, also, for no man has truly preached who has not tremblingly felt the sermon penetrating his own soul also. Comments and impressions of life, theology, challenges, and rebukes on social questions, moral instruction, anything in fact of **truth** that might conceivably be given to the best and humblest reflexion of a serious Christian mind, these all become specifically **preaching** precisely as they are informed by this sense that here and now God's saving activity in the world in Christ once again encounters the souls of men.*⁷⁴

This is an "administration" of "the keys of the kingdom." It is God's Word. It is that; it does not merely become such when appropriated by faith. Never, of course, does it work mechanically or magically. Full responsibility for how we handle and receive it rests with us, to remind especially the preacher that consideration of structure and style also has its appropriate place. These are not dispensable addenda to be lightly dismissed.

Sermon-making, more than congregations realize, is arduous labour. It calls for the development of a high degree of skill. It demands a structure and a style appropriate to the high purpose for which God has ordained it. Without proper preparation no man, however gifted he may happen to be, will serve his heavenly Sender well. And again, because of great familiarity gained over several years with catechetical material, this should be underscored lest we engage in the work carelessly.

Here craftsmanship is to be developed by continual and consistent practice. There is "theory" about sermon-making which can serve a pastor well. It does not consist, except in a general way, of inviolable rules and regulations. Rather, remembering the basic guidelines helps to shed light on snares into which some fall unawares. They help to shape the message so that it may be more easily assimilated when proclaimed.

The "text," which is a specific Lord's Day, deserves to be read carefully again and again, even when preparing to preach the material for the eighth or ninth time. Always there are nuances springing before the mind's eye which were never seen so clearly before.

This should be done in the light of those biblical passages from which the catechetical formulation derives. Here we need not argue with ourselves whether the statements are true to the sacred writings; of that a Reformed minister has been convinced before he begins his sermon preparation. What he seeks is some new perspective for himself from which to address his hearers so that he may bring out of his treasure together with the old that which is new. This enriches the understanding; this strengthens the faith-life of himself and those who heed what he will say.

What ought not be ignored is the setting of each Lord's Day. What has gone before laid a foundation; what will follow often provides further elucidation and application of the riches of salvation. Occasionally this can be profitably included somewhere at the beginning of the sermon to stress anew the unity, coherence and fulness of God's work of grace.

Upon such careful and prayerful reflection — recognizing that he deals with sacred truths — he sets himself to formulate his "theme." This is possibly the most difficult as it surely is the most

essential. It is to derive strictly from the question(s) and answer(s) of the Lord's Day. It is to be a statement, not merely a topic. It should as much as possible be brief, crystal-clear and attention-getting. This he will seek to bind upon minds and hearts throughout the course of the sermon. Here he aims at encouraging a "confessional" congregation to engage in confessing in word and deed the gospel wherein they can find rest in Christ for time and eternity.

But this theme needs elaboration. It must be explained adequately and applied personally as well as practically. This calls for a carefully crafted series of divisions. Each of these is to be properly related to the theme, flowing directly from it as explications of the central and all-controlling thought and yet exclusive of each other lest the preacher fall into idle repetition.

Hardly does it seem necessary to add that throughout the sermon his hearers need application of truth to their lives. Here the danger is that the preacher contents himself with broad, general remarks which fail to demonstrate that he is pastor and guide as well as teacher. Only when addressing himself to specific life situations — of the young as well as the old — will he be able to involve his hearers more effectively with the gospel. Without falling into the extremes which characterized some pietistic and Puritan preachers in the past, we can learn much from them as "physicians" skilled in applying God's remedies to those who suffered from spiritual diseases of many kinds. One of the weaknesses of much preaching today is its failure to recognize that people, buffeted by life's distressing circumstances, come for help and healing. Some of the finest "pastoral counselling" is done week after week from the pulpit. Here, when done well, an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. This is a far cry from simple moralizing; it is rather leading the listeners to the Lord Jesus Christ whose sympathetic touch through the gospel, also when brought in catechetical fashion, transforms life. Him who fills all faithful preaching with his presence and power Isaiah already introduced as saying,

The Spirit of the sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

(Isa. 61:1-3b)

Unless catechetical sermons do this, they fall short of the mark; they afford no remedy or relief, because they fail to lift up, as every sermon should, the crucified, resurrected and glorified Lord. Such sermons have cut the heart out of the good news of our God.

Often people come to church with little appetite for listening. Here the minister is to exert himself as a fisher of men in obedience to the Saviour's summons. This calls for baiting the hook well. It is an art learned best through long practice of close associations with a congregation. He who would serve them with "pure spiritual milk" as well as with "strong meat" must be eager to walk and talk with people in their daily round. He is man among fellowmen, sharing their joys and sorrows. To nothing human should he feel himself estranged, not even to the temptations and trials which test the faith of God's children. Nor may he forget, when entering the pulpit, that often it is as strenuous a discipline to listen as it is to speak. To make this as easy as possible when dealing with divine truth is an aspect of his calling which may not be forgotten.

Much can be done to achieve this without compromising the glory of the gospel. Here we learn much from the prophets and apostles and especially from our Lord himself. Repeatedly he adorned his messages with figures of speech and illustrations which spoke directly to everyday experiences. Nor did he hesitate to vary the length of his sentences or to change from the indicative to the imperative or interrogatory mood when addressing either individuals or multitudes.

The beginning of the sermon always deserves attention. This calls for preparing the introduction with unusual care.

What congregation cares to listen to sermons which begin every time with such stereotypes as: "Last week we learned from the catechism that..., now we will consider the next question and answer." or "Today the subject for our sermon is..."?

Let us take to heart, especially when preaching catechetical sermons, what several competent preachers have penned for our profit. H. H. Farmer does not hesitate to insist that

our gospel is an unchanging gospel, obviously; but the way in which we present it, and the things in it which need to be proclaimed, or re-proclaimed, with special emphasis and clarity, are determined (largely) by the situation, the mental and spiritual particularly, of those to whom we speak. The spirit of the times is a very real, if tangible, thing, and it has always something of the pressure and challenge of God in it. Eternal as the gospel is, there must be some translation of it into the present tense, some welding, to change the metaphor, of a hard, sharp point of thrusting relevancy on to the shaft of it, or to use a somewhat worn but useful simile, we must get on to the right wavelength, if we are to be heard.⁷⁵

To which John R.W. Stott in his *Between Two Worlds* adds:

Coming away from the "tube" and into the pew, it is little wonder that many people are unable to listen to a sermon which is not produced from a variety of camera angles, replete with make-up, and divided by commercial breaks.⁷⁶

While fully cognizant of the dangers of introductions which are not brief, not interesting, not arresting, W.E. Sangster pleads for their propriety and profitability.

*It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the beginning of the sermon. Most of the hearers give us their attention at the start. However convinced they maybe that preaching is boring, hope springs eternal and the thought lingers in the mind of the most blasé that perhaps on **this** occasion something of the awful majesty and arresting power they would associate with a message from God may be evident in what the preacher has to say. If he does not take a firm grip on their attention in the first few minutes, how can he hope to hold it to the end?⁷⁷*

And since the themes of the Lord's Days are so well-known and possible even well-worn to large numbers in Reformed congregations, the demand for beginning well ought never be ignored.

Which brings us to the conclusion. Here all that has long since been learned in a good course on Homiletics will serve the concerned preacher well. Fully as well as the first impressions do, the last which a preacher seeks to leave deserve careful thought. Here, too, a single kind of conclusion, used with every Lord's Day, is as inexcusable as it is inappropriate.

Nor may the delivery of such a sermon be minimized. Especially messages which aim especially at instructing people in the Christian faith can, when the basics of effective address are ignored, send many a hearer into sound sleep. Here peppermints and chewing gum will be of little avail. Never should the style of the pulpit be equated with that of the classroom. Rather, the lively preaching of the gospel seeks direct, personal contact on the deepest levels of life with old and young, the businessman, the housewife and teenager. Delivery, contrary to what some seem to suppose, does not take care of itself. Nor is it an art beyond the reach of anyone willing to train himself; think of Demosthenes who, according to the story often told, learned to become a gifted speaker by putting pebbles in his mouth as he tried to make himself heard and understood within sound of the Greek sea. To be sure, the dignity of God's message of life and grace and hope ill comports with incessant Bible-thumping or wild and meaningless gesticulations. But neither is there room on the pulpit for the droning voice, the stern-set visage or hands feverishly clutching the pulpit for support. The message takes shape visibly when its words impinge upon the mind and heart. Instinctively the alert congregation senses whether or not the truth has mastered the man who is bringing it. And if not, how dare we expect that it will grip the souls of those who hear?

Here a clear and resonant voice is a great asset, quite indispensable for effective communication. But it is to be modulated according to the truths which are explained or reinforced or applied. And

this, too, can be cultivated as the preacher reviews what he has prepared before the season of worship. By no means does every sentence require equal emphasis. Here we learn from everyday conversation whose charm lies in its direct and personal appeal. Always the eye is to be engaged as mind and heart open themselves to those whom we are addressing. Here, and of this we need not feel ashamed, we seek "to win friends and influence people" for our Lord Jesus Christ who as the friend of sinners calls them to discipleship.

Catechetical sermons, then, because so often they are taken for granted and even lightly esteemed, are among the most difficult to preach appropriately.

They deal with the most essential and profound truths of the Christian religion; at the same time they are intended to be the most practical and personal. And this is done in a congregation rather than on a one-to-one basis. They treat the same fundamentals again and again, yet always with the challenge to shed new and richer light on God's plan of salvation. They are to teach, to plead, to warn, to rebuke and to comfort; all within the space of some thirty to forty minutes. And this should be done in such orderly (yet vibrant) fashion that those who hear with even modest concentration will leave with something to ponder and practice in the days ahead.

Important as the manuscript may be as foundation for the actual hour of preaching in order that precision, clarity and beauty of diction may be preserved, it is best left behind somewhere in the pastor's study. Only those who have trained themselves thoroughly in the art of reading can engage the attention of some several hundred successfully when bound to a manuscript. Far better for the pulpit is a brief but lucid outline with a quotation or two to cover up a possible lapse of memory.

Most of all, what every minister needs is that quiet hour before he goes to the pulpit. This he spends alone with the Lord who alone can see him through with confidence that the Word will not return fruitless. Then even moods whether high or low which may afflict him for a moment will not turn him from the task to which he has set himself. He knows that faithful labour in the Lord is never put to shame.

Possibly much of what has been written to this point may seem too theoretical, general or even repetitious of what is already well-known. Yet without principles to guide, our practice may soon lead us astray. Now an attempt will be made to demonstrate the propriety and usefulness of what has been stated to this point. Here we draw far more from the experience of others than from our own.

Without apology it has been affirmed that every catechetical sermon, while refreshing the lives of the hearers with truths already known, must do so in as "attractive" a way as comports with the material itself. This can be done without any sacrifice of the integrity of content.

In the English-speaking world, where we find many Reformed congregations, little has been published to assist pastors in this work, in sharp contrast to the flood of such literature in the German and especially Dutch languages. To fill this gap in a small and introductory way these articles have been written.

Not only individual sermons but also series of such messages should meet the requirement of unity within a large measure of variety. How wearying for a congregation to know before the sermon begins not only what, but also how the minister will say what he has to say.

Now the *Heidelberg Catechism* (more than any isolated Scripture text) allows for wide variety in its treatment. As a summary of several biblical passages its Lord's Days cannot be exhausted in a single sermon on each. This allows, upon careful reflection, for presenting the message from more than one perspective.

Again it must be underscored that "concrete" rather than abstract terminology, especially in selecting the theme, should be chosen to attract the attention of the hearers. Words have an "emotive" quality whether favourable or unfavourable. Little interest will usually be aroused, even when faithful to the subject material, by such impersonal topics as:

"The Holy Trinity."

"The Atonement of Christ," or

"Some Basic Rules for Prayer."

Far more appealing when we are informed that the message will address itself to:

"The Incomparable Glory of Our God,"

"By His Sufferings Our Lord Brings Us Life," or

"Lord, Teach Us How to Pray."

Here we have not "topics" but "themes." Each makes a statement intended to stir the heart as well as the mind. Each draws the hearers closer to the gospel. At the same time it can be easily remembered. Yet the statement, because of its relative brevity, calls immediately for elucidation. This, of course, does not ignore the warning sounded by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that

*...in presenting the Christian gospel we must never make a **direct** approach to the emotions or to the will. The emotions and the will should always be influenced through the **mind**. Truth is intended to come to the mind. The normal course is for the emotions and the will to be affected by the truth after it has entered and gripped the mind. It seems to me that this is a principle of Holy Scripture.⁷⁸*

But because it aims at flooding the soul with life and peace as well as light, the message always deserves to be summarized in an arresting way. *"A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver"* (Prov. 23:11).

Even when working on a first series of such sermons this deserves careful thought. Here the central affirmations of the Christian faith can be expounded and applied well when taking our cue from the Scripture passage read before the catechism is quoted as the specific "text." Perhaps some of the following suggestions for the early Lord's Days may illustrate how variety in approach need not impair faithfulness to content as well as coherence and challenge in its development.

Lord's Day I: *"Your Only Comfort in Life and Death"* (Isa. 40:1-11)

Lord's Day II: *"Our Comfort in Knowing Our Misery"* (Rom. 7:7-13)

Lord's Day III: *"Do You Know the Source of Your Misery?"* (Gen. 3:1-7)

Lord's Day IV: *"Look into the Depth of Your Misery"* (Rom. 3:1-20)

Lord's Day V: *"Salvation Does Not Come Cheaply!"* (Isa. 52:14-53:6)

Lord's Day VI: *"What a Wonderful Saviour is Jesus My Lord!"* (1 Cor. 1:19-31)

Lord's Day VII: *"Salvation is For All who Truly Believe" or "See the Many-sidedness of Faith!"* (John 3:1-18)

Such and similar themes lend themselves readily to three or even four principal divisions; not more, lest few will be able to remember them! These when properly formulated will under the Spirit's blessing make that impact which produces faith, hope and loving obedience.

Much the same should be attempted when preaching on the Ten Commandments. These are not only integral to the structure of the catechism as they were to the catechetical lectures of many of the early Christian fathers; their validity and value for spiritual growth is consistently affirmed throughout the Bible. Here is always more than "Do this!" and "Don't do that!" Here is no room for meticulous casuistry even though the various forms in which we sin against God's law are to be exposed. What is essential is grounding the God-pleasing life in the work of redemption and renewal by divine grace. None of our works can please the Lord or be expressive of wholesome

gratitude, unless they proceed from true faith, are done in conformity to his will and aim at his praise. Remembering this, we will hardly dare plague our people with such banalities as "Today, my friends, we will reflect on the first ... or the eighth ... or the tenth commandment." Such cheap and casual formulations may serve as "topics" for the lazy preacher; they are not "themes" appropriate to expounding God's will which ought to be esteemed by his children as more precious than silver and gold.

Also the treatment of the Lord's Prayer deserves more than some commonplace affirmations. To be sure, it rests on substantial doctrinal and theological formulations. Only those who come to the heavenly Father in Christ's name may assure themselves that they will surely be heard and answered. Nor may the believer ask for anything that happens to cross his mind at some given moment. But here the catechism speaks devotionally, personally, with a tenderness to be emulated in explaining each part.

For those well versed in Scripture it should not be too difficult to express this in each instance and from several wide-ranging perspectives. Here we enter a holy place, far richer indeed and yet clearly symbolized in the pattern of that earthly tabernacle which the Lord commanded Moses to construct for Israel's approach to Him. Already Lord's Day 1 can appropriately refer, even in theme and structure, to that tabernacle in the wilderness which foreshadowed its fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ who is our access to the throne of God. Through the shedding of his blood we may cry "Abba, Father!" Our entrance is rendered sure and stable. As a "kingdom of priests" we seek no other priest than the One who has entered heaven as our intercessor and through whom even our feeblest petitions find acceptability in the Father's heart.

But note further the parallel which may be carried out when expounding the several petitions. We come, as did the priests of old, to render our praises to God by hallowing his name. We approach his throne as we ask for grace to do his will. We confess him as our King even as once he was enthroned in symbolical fashion above the golden mercy-seat surrounded by cherubim. Upon that throne in glory, as once within the ark, rests the law for our lives. Our needs are all supplied, even as were those of the children of Israel in the desert by daily manna. Here is all we need. And confessing this, God's people adore him with that doxology which echoes the benediction which long ago the priests laid upon the people.

Other approaches are equally deserving of attention. From the many prayers recorded in Holy Writ, both Old and New Testament, all can learn much both with respect to content and form. Nor would we forget the close relationship between the Ten Commandments and the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. In all things we are to glorify the God of salvation by our thoughts, words and deeds. Knowing that even the holiest believer cannot attain this perfectly we are to pray daily for grace to grow in that godliness which by drawing near to God receives strength for every turning along life's way.

Such unity and coherence in a series of catechetical sermons is profitable for both preacher and people.

This has been attempted by Dutch ministers from time to time. Occasionally strong stress was placed by a few on *comfort*, undeniably the approach to divine truth which the authors of the catechism deliberately chose for their day. Another has urged throughout that the church's confession is to be *confessed* always and everywhere. Still another — and his sermons appear on the printed page — dealt in each Lord's Day with *love*, the love of God in Christ for an unlovely and loveless people who are not only summoned but also by grace enabled to love in response. But unless done with great insight and finesse, such treatments soon dull the spiritual appetites of the hearers. Nor does the material of the catechism require this.

Some *Church Orders* still prescribe that the series "shall be completed as much as possible within a year." This should be taken with the seriousness which the church intends. A pastor who preaches such sermons only once every month or two deserves to be reminded of his responsibility to the congregation by the elders. Yet this rule need not be interpreted as a "law of the Medes and the Persians." What is intended by it is that the central truths by which believers are

called to live every day shall always stand out clearly in their minds and hearts. Hence repetition of the material has been made mandatory in those Reformed churches which take their confessions seriously.

For the first series, not only at the beginning of his ministry but also when assuming a new charge, a pastor does well to follow the regulation as faithfully as possible. He thus lays solid foundations for any further treatment of this "sum of Christian doctrine" in the years allotted to him. Soon, however, he discovers that certain Lord's Days are so laden with material that they deserve occasionally two, three, or even four sermons. Lord's Day VI, for example, not only proclaims Jesus Christ as the only Saviour who meets all the requirements; it also explains how the entire Old Testament foreshadowed and prepared for his coming into the world to fulfil all righteousness. Or again, Lord's Day VII deals with faith from its several aspects, none of which ought ever be overlooked. And how, if the details are to be somewhat carefully explained and applied, can Lord's Day XII receive its just due in one sermon? Should the treatment of Lord's Days XV and XVI be scheduled in a given year during the Lenten weeks, the questions and answers lend themselves well to a series of sermons on our Lord's sufferings, condemnation, crucifixion, death, burial and descent into hell.

Returning more directly to the matter of "variety within unity," we call attention to three Dutch ministers who have dealt with it in their publications. Of their work they provide us with copious examples, some in the form of detailed sketches while others in barest outline. For none of these would they claim even a modest amount of "homiletical perfection." Nor should they be followed slavishly. Few men can wear the suit of another with dignity and decorum, not to speak of the "sin" of stealing another man's wares. Also catechetical sermons, in the nature of the case, are not always suited to the occasion, to the here-and-now of a pastor speaking according to divine truth to his own people. But what those men have written does merit our appreciation and reflection.

The venerable Jan Kok began his two volume work with reminiscences on his experience with catechetical preaching.

In my youth I had little taste for catechism preaching. Much rather would I listen to messages on historical materials. When I entered the ministry, it was no pleasant prospect for me to think of beginning every year again with catechism sermons. To deal with this once, so I thought, might go well, but how would this work out ten or even twenty times, if I were to live that long? And then to remain fresh?

*But I did not know the good old Heidelberg, even though I had recited it many times. Not too long afterward that concern of mine was taken away. I found abundant material. Indeed, the longer I preached in accordance with it, the better I found I could do it...*⁷⁹

Thereupon, so he informs us, "I attempted to make catechism preaching more attractive by changes in form without short-changing the content." Appealing to the adage that "a change of diet makes for eating," he likened this to rice which is consumed at almost every meal in Indonesia but prepared in no less than thirty-five or forty different ways.

This he illustrates by providing for each Lord's Day eight to fifteen different "sketches" or outlines of varying length. Some are strongly doctrinal in their development, others more devotional or geared to challenge the hearers to obedience. At times the apologetic concern of a faithful pastor expresses itself by way of sharp contrast between sound and false teaching. Each is introduced by a selection from Scripture (to be read) which "colours" the approach taken. Again, these range widely throughout the Old as well as the New Testament, indicating that no minister need feel bound to appeal to some Pauline epistle. At times his terminology will strike us as somewhat old fashioned, even abstract and topical rather than thematic. But the development of thought, in so far as it is supplied, demonstrates deep pastoral concern. Anyone in a position to obtain these volumes does well to do so without hesitation.

About that same time Pieter Biesterveld, serving as professor of preaching after many years in the pastorate, provided his students with practical directives on how monotony could be avoided when following the catechism faithfully as homiletical guide. Some of these are the following:

1. sermons which explain the Lord's Day phrase by-phrase, much after the fashion of a homily;
2. sermons which develop systematically the specific doctrine in the given Lord's Day;
3. sermons which illumine the doctrine in the light of salvation-history, enabling the minister to engage in telling the "story" of when and how and why that doctrine was set forth at a specific time;
4. sermons which in the light of Scripture show the correlation between the catechism and the two other Forms of Unity;
5. sermons which defend the sound doctrine against errors of various kinds;
6. sermons which emphasize especially the personal and practical application of God's truth to everyday living.⁸⁰

Fifty years later Klaas Dijk, not without much hesitation but at the urging of his publisher, prepared a volume similar to the work of Kok.⁸¹ Reflecting perhaps the temper of the Dutch churchgoer in the troubled post-war years, his "sketches" are far shorter and simpler. But again the insistence throughout is on providing a stimulus to variety without sacrificing content.

All three for their generations did their work well. Even at this late date they are worthy of being consulted. But something similar, geared to the need and mood of our time, is urgently needed in the English medium, even though most publishers would shy away from publishing such materials for fear of lack of interest and financial loss.

With all this we — at long last — present some gleanings from the ripened sheaves of several experienced preachers. From whom these derive matters far less than what they have supplied to stir us who are called to make catechetical material vital and vibrant. Usually an appropriate Scripture passage will be included. In every case only the "bare bones" — theme with divisions — are mentioned, even though this fails to do justice to the sermons for which these supplied only the framework. But anyone at all conversant with the *Heidelberg Catechism* soon will sense the direction in which the sermons moved.

Illustrations will be provided only for some of the Lord's Days, chosen quite at random. Nor will the "suggestions" follow the order of the catechism itself. No more is intended than, hopefully, to stir those who review these pages to stimulate their own capacities and energies to prepare both thought-provoking and soul-stirring sermons on this material.

Let us begin with Lord's Day I of which that famous German preacher Kohlbrugge affirmed, "All our life we should study the first question and answer of our Catechism." Here are a few suggestions supplied by Dijk:

Our only comfort in life and death

which according to Isaiah 40 speaks of

1. the Comforter; and
2. the Comforted.

We are the Lord's! (Rom. 14:1)

1. Wherein this "right-to-possession" consists; and
2. How this "right-to-possession" is received.

All tears wiped away (Rev. 21:4)

1. What are these tears?
2. How are they wiped away?

The path to the only comfort (Ps. 130)

1. Wherein it consists; and
2. How it is to be walked.

From the volume of Kok:

Our only comfort (John 17:8)

1. is revealed in Scripture;
2. is prepared by Christ;
3. is applied by the Spirit;
4. is enjoyed in life and death; and
5. is received by faith.

Confessing our only comfort (Isa. 66:10-13)

1. to be necessary;
2. to be sufficient; and
3. to be glorious.

For a message based only on the second question and answer, he has among other suggestions this one:

Christ, the fountain of our comfort (Matt. 11:28)

as he

1. in the first part directs us to this fountain;
2. in the second part opens this fountain; and
3. in the third part enables us to drink from this fountain.

Many perspectives can also be opened when dealing with the material of Lord's Day XVII.

The profit of Christ's resurrection (Col. 3:1a)

1. for our faith;
2. for our love; and
3. for our hope.

The resurrection of our Lord (1 Cor. 15:55-58)

1. as the victory over death;
2. as the seal of justification;
3. as the source of new life; and
4. as the guarantee of complete salvation.

Christ, the first-fruits of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:29)

proclaims to us that our resurrection

1. begins with him;
2. proceeds from him; and
3. is assured by him.

The power of the Saviour's resurrection (Phil. 3:9-11)

1. unto righteousness to appear before God;
2. unto new life to serve him; and
3. unto glory in perfect fellowship with him.

The resurrected Lord reveals Himself (Rev. 1:17- 18)

1. as the Saviour who died;
2. as the Deliverer who lives; and
3. as the Royal Guard who holds the keys.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ

as announced in Matt. 28:6

1. in its majesty;
2. in its significance; and
3. in its fruition.

Are you at times disturbed and distressed when you have to preach sermons on the two sacraments? Often these are taken for granted by the congregation, especially Holy Baptism. To it the Bible refers frequently and that in many different ways to indicate its great significance for our lives as believers. Because some of the questions and answers seem rather long, complicated and even abstract, we tend to treat the material too casually or else shy away from some of its implications. Here pointed suggestions are provided.

We are baptized into Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:1-11)

1. at his command;
2. into his fellowship; and
3. to his praise.

Baptism as the first seal of God's grace

1. How it seals; and
2. What it seals.

Baptism as the seal of God's covenant

in the light of Gen. 17 and Rom.4, viewed

1. from the side of God; and
2. from the side of the believers.

In a land where many attack the baptism of children of believing parents, the appropriate Question and Answer deserves a special sermon from time to time. Again the approach can be varied.

Questions about children's baptism

with sustained stress on parental understanding and practice

1. concerning your children;

2. concerning your God; and
3. concerning your calling.

Baptism as a sign calling for children's praise

with reference to Matt. 21:15-16, showing that

1. God paves the way for such praise; and
2. God seeks and delights in such praise.

Children of believers should be baptized

because Scripture plainly teaches that they too are

1. embraced in God's covenant;
2. included in Christ's church; and
3. recipients of the promises.

Another preacher dealt with the same material in greater depth and detail.

Being, remaining and becoming clean

as called for by Ezek. 36:25-27

1. The first by Christ's blood and Spirit (QA 69);
2. The second by the Spirit's renewal (QA 70); and
3. The third by faith in the triune God which lays a triple obligation on all who receive it.

The washing away of our sins

on the basis of 2 Kings 5 where Naaman's cleansing is seen as a "foreshadowing" of the washing of regeneration mentioned in Titus 3:5,

1. as signified and sealed in baptism;
2. as given by God's grace; and
3. as manifested in a new and godly life.

Grace signified and sealed in baptism (Titus 2:11-14)

1. as a twofold cleansing;
2. with a twofold benefit; and
3. unto a twofold pledge.

The Lord's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:4)

brought to its fulfilment in the new covenant to remind us of

1. the Giver and the receiver...
2. the content and the sign...
3. the extent and its permanence..., and
4. the comfort and demand of the covenant.

Holy baptism according to the Word (Acts 2:37-39)

1. Not just water but also the blood;
2. Not just a sign but also a seal; and

3. Not just for adults but also for children.

Baptism and Christ's once-for-all sacrifice

Baptism

1. Points to the need for this sacrifice;
2. Assures participation in this sacrifice; and
3. Proclaims the fruitfulness of this sacrifice.

These examples could be multiplied more than a thousand-fold. Instead of continuing, we will show how one preacher, in the days of World War II, treated many catechetical materials from a strong redemptive-historical perspective.

Lord's Day XIV – Christ conceived by the Spirit and born of the virgin

according to Luke 1 and 4, to reveal Him

1. as the son and Lord of Adam;
2. as the son and Lord of Abraham; and
3. as the son and Lord of David.

This treatment could surely make an appropriate message for a Christmas service.

Lord's Day XV – Christ's sufferings and those of our present time

as his sufferings

1. offer comfort in our sufferings today;
2. provide explanation of our sufferings today; and
3. find fulfilment in our sufferings today.

Lord's Day XX – The Holy Spirit and our sanctification

in the light of 1 John 5:1-13, so that we may learn to confess him in word and deed as

1. the Spirit of faith;
2. the Spirit of consolation; and
3. the Spirit of perseverance.

Lord's Day XXXI – Christ delivering the church by key power

with explicit reference to Luke 12:35-48 to show how the power given to his church demonstrates

1. the competence of the church;
2. the seriousness of the church; and
3. the salvation of the church.

Lord's Day XXXVI – Listening to the 3rd commandment in New Testament light

on the basis of Hebrews 10:19-31, "The Blasphemy of the Spirit"

1. the character of this sin;
2. the judgment on this sin; and
3. the road to this sin.

Lord's Day XXXVIII – *Christ writes the Sabbath-law on our hearts*

to remind us of and comfort us with

1. the Sabbath-offering which in gratitude we owe to God;
2. the Sabbath-peace by which we are assured of the sincerity of our faith; and
3. the Sabbath-light with which we may win our neighbours for him.

Lord's Day XLVII – *Hallowing God's Name as the chief factor in world history*

(Ps. 8 and Heb. 3)

1. the manner of this hallowing;
2. the meaning of this hallowing; and
3. the results of this hallowing.

This approach, of course, need not and perhaps cannot be carried out as consistently as the series from which the examples above were drawn.

Lord's Day XXV – *The Spirit working in our hearts with the means of grace*

to instruct us in

1. the priority of the Word to the sacraments;
2. the confirmation of the Word by the sacraments; and
3. the unity of the Word with the sacraments.

Lord's Day LII – *Lord's Day 52*

reminding us of

1. the last petition...
2. the last foundation..., and
3. the last word of our prayers.

With this random sampling we conclude the examples.

Again, none of the above can be rightly judged apart from the sermons which developed the theme and divisions in each case. Of the more than sixteen-hundred published sermons which we have perused over a period of some forty years, from no less than thirty preachers, we found only a handful either superficial or stereotyped. Those works, dated as they are, can help many a pastor to see into the material of the catechism far more than is apparent at first review. More than that, they also indicate how much variety can be provided in any given series of catechetical messages without sacrificing the unity of God's one great and gracious plan of redemption.

Such preaching should regain the honoured place which once it had in Reformed congregations throughout the world. This may well be one of the best services which a pastor in our day can render to his people.

To do these demands much, perhaps more than many of us are willing to give in these days when the media tempt both old and young to appreciate little more than froth and frill.

Here the pastor must wrestle in prayer each week anew with the Word as reflected and rehearsed in the catechism.

He will have to walk and talk with his people, sharing their lives on every level so that he can bring the gospel more pointedly and practically and yet with solid foundations in the truth.

Above all he will then recover a deep sense of his calling to "administer the Word" in its fulness, from the Old as well as New Testaments as the church has learned to confess it, so that sinners may be drawn to the wells of salvation, believers refreshed with truths both old and new, and the God of all grace glorified more consistently by those who know him as their heavenly Father for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Engaging in such a labor of love he will experience at least two passages tugging repeatedly at his soul. These help him pour "new wine" into the "new wineskins" which will not break under the pressures of our times.

Our Lord minced no words when teaching his disciples, *"Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old"* (Matt. 13:52).

And long centuries before, the prophet, commanded to *"speak tenderly to Jerusalem,"* responded to the voice which said,

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

(Isa. 40:9)

Obedient to such directives a preacher soon learns to preach also catechetical sermons gladly

PY De Jong

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¹ Klaas Dijk, *De Dienst der Prediking* (Kampen: J. H. Kok), 1955.

² J. Stanley Glen, *The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 19.

³ Glen, 25.

⁴ Glen, 61.

⁵ Isaiah 8:21, 22.

⁶ C. H. Dodd's views expressed in *The Apostolic Ministry and its Development* (1951) challenged scholars and pastors to take seriously the content of N.T. preaching. To his positions responses were not lacking. A critical but appreciative response is found in Robert H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), 60f.; also "Summary," 150.

⁷ On Creeds cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950); Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (trans. by J. K. S. Reid (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949). With the appearance of Philip Carrington's *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1940) a startling approach to the epistles, esp. 1 Peter, was presented. This was carefully scrutinized and put into more balanced proportion by E. G. Selwin, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 439 f.

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), vol. III, 638-39.

⁹ Craig Skinner in *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) summarizes the need for pastors and congregations today who have forsaken too much the need for continual teaching in sermons. "In his pulpit-role, then, the pastor-teacher is the voice of the body, as well as of its Head. He verbalized the divine revelation, articulates the congregation-held truth, displays its liturgy, and focuses it in application. His basic task is exposition and application. He interprets, guides, and teaches in patient, authoritative proclamation to all. He is a minister to the ministry, seeking to build up the body of Christ to maturity." 71.

¹⁰ *Ancient Church Fathers*, (6) ed. and tr. by James H. Kleist (Westminster, Md.; Newman Press, 1948). "Didache," 15-28.

¹¹ Kleist, 5; Also 11-12.

¹² Kleist on "Epistle to Diognetus." 135-147.

¹³ Cyril's lectures demonstrate that despite a large degree of moralizing, the early fathers grounded such exhortations in the doctrinal truth of Scripture. Cyril expounds all the articles which over a period of time were fashioned into the Apostles' Creed. Cf. *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Edessa*, ed. by William Telfer in *Library of Christian Classics* IV (London: SCM Press, 1935). On his catechesis cf. 30-43; also his lecture on doctrine the "The Ten Dogmas," 98-120.

¹⁴ *Origen*, by Joseph William Trigg (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 10.

¹⁵ Few changes so radically affected the lives of church members during the middle ages as the new emphasis on "penance" as a sacrament. Steven Ozenant in *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1880) describes it as "the centerpiece of late medieval piety," 216.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; tr. John Allen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) vol II, 273, 4.

¹⁷ *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1960). Here Luther's Small Catechism together with the 'Preface,' 109-122, is published from *Book of Concord*, tr. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert. All quotations in this article are taken from the above.

¹⁸ Quoted by Wm. Heyns, *Homilietiek*, class notes. (Grand Rapids, 1910) from Richter I, 150. "unde wen he alleine des hilgen dages dat hilgedagesche Evangelion predigde, and yn allen anderen prediken nycht anders vor syck nehme wen den Catechismus, so dede he sere wel."

¹⁹ Heyns quoting from Ypey and Dermout, I, 499.

²⁰ On the contributions of Otto Heinrich to the university and its library cf. Edward J. Masselink, *The Heidelberg Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 47f.

²¹ Details on the struggles are taken largely from James I. Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in its Newest Light* (Philadelphia: Publ. and S. S. Board of the Reformed Church in the U.S. 1914) esp. Part III, ch. 1 "The Conversion of Elector Frederick III to the Reformed Faith." 123-172

²² Good, 139.

²³ Cf. Good, 168 for a comparison of Q. 78 with Q. 68 in the *Short Catechism* of Ursinus.

²⁴ Good, 168.

²⁵ On Cyril Lucaris, cf. *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), vol. III, 335-336.

²⁶ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1919), vol. I, 351.

²⁷ Schaff, 351.

²⁸ Schaff, 352.

²⁹ Schaff, 341.

³⁰ Quotations from the *Heidelberg Catechism* are taken from the Christian Reformed *Psalter-Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Publ. Comm. of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959), 22-43.

³¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. V, 799.

³² John 6:67, 68. These words follow immediately upon our Lord's discourse about himself as the Bread of Life with its demand, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." In his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), Calvin discusses the passages in great detail. Here and regularly in his explanations he demonstrated how necessary it is for Christians not only to make proper theological distinctions drawn from Scripture but also to connect one passage with many others to illumine the message of salvation. Scripture for him contained one unified message. Such principles of hermeneutics guided his careful exegesis. From him the composers of our catechism learned also this and imbedded the fruits in their work. Notice then the detailed explanation about the two nature of Christ here, 262-3.

³³ 1 Peter 2:9.

³⁴ Psalm 96:2b, 3b.

³⁵ Acts 20:27. The earlier translation "counsel" are much to be preferred over "will" (NIV) which too often is explained as ethical demand. Paul certainly includes much more than this in the term when reminding the Ephesian elders of his preaching and teaching: "kept back nothing that was profitable to you" (vs. 20); "testifying ... repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (vs. 21); "preaching the kingdom of God" (vs. 25). Schrenk in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* I, 635,

"In the NT, however, *boule* is mostly used of the divine counsel. The writings of Luke favour such usage. All the Lucan statements are elements in a total conception of the divine *boule* ... The *boule* fills the whole content of

apostolic preaching. In Acts 20:27 Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he has declared to them the whole counsel of God."

³⁶ Ephesians 4:12, 13 which stresses the lofty goal of Christian preaching and teaching. Clearly it is linked to office as "gift" of the exalted Christ. By it, and not by the speaking of anyone at random, are God's people equipped for service. Hence not only are apostles and prophets but also "pastors and teachers" his gift, who when bringing his work, speak with his authority.

³⁷ James D. Smart, *The Creed in Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962). 21.

³⁸ Smart, 21.

³⁹ Matthew 28:20a, where *matheusate* precedes *didaskontes*. Whether this implies a step-by-step procedure has occasioned debate, although it certainly seems apparent. R.V.G. Tasker in his commentary rightly adds the practical remark which should direct all teaching by the church. "A disciple is not one who has already learned, but one who is always learning. The 'school-days' of a Christian are never over."

⁴⁰ Ephesians 4:14-16.

⁴¹ Stuart Barton Babbage, *Man in Nature and in Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 54. Few books so thoroughly expose with ample quotation and elucidation the false views of man found in ancient writers, heretics, rationalistic philosophy, the writers of romantic prose and poetry. Marxists, existentialism, nihilists, etc. As introduction and compendium it deserves more attention than it seemingly has received.

⁴² Babbage, 114, quoting Calvin in *Institutes* I, i, 2 and Commentary on Isaiah 6:5.

⁴³ Smart, 27.

⁴⁴ On the *Gouda Catechism* and its role in the Remonstrant controversy little has appeared in the English language aside from J. H. Berg's translation of Van Alpen, *The History and Literature of the Heidelberg Catechism and its introduction into the Netherlands* (Philadelphia: William S. and Alfred Martiens, 1863). That the Reformed viewed it with great alarm appears also in a letter which Lubbertus wrote to John van Oldenbarneveld,

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

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

⁴⁵ "Form of Subscription" in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of Christian Reformed Church, 1959), 41.

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

"With some shift in the figure of speech chosen, the same thought is expressed in both words: the church supports the truth; the truth rests on it as a building does on a pillar or on a foundation," 74.

⁴⁷ Matthew 13:52; cf. the explanation of "this somewhat difficult saying of Jesus" in R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 140.

⁴⁸ 2 Timothy 2:15 and 4:2.

⁴⁹ Ephesians 3:10. On "manifold" cf. the lengthy discussion of Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 159. Important for our discussion is the emphasis that this glorious divine wisdom is "to be made known *through the church*." And how can this be done, unless it receives thorough instruction in the divine work of salvation in all its parts?

⁵⁰ *De Heraut*, 18 Maart 1888. Comments on this issue are found in *Van den Dienst des Woords* by F. Guillaume (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1944), 169-179, and especially in C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord: Gedachten en beschouwingen van Dr. A. Kuyper over de prediking* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, n.d.), 212-218.

⁵¹ Titus 1:1b-3a. Calvin's comments on this passage also helped shape the conviction of Reformed churches on instruction in the faith as to its nature, necessity and contents. Cf. his *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 281-283.

⁵² Quoted in McClintock and Strong, *Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1879), V, 149.

⁵³ Ephesians 4:5.

⁵⁴ 1 Peter 3:15b.

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- ⁵⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Triumph of Grace: the Heidelberg Catechism*, I, 12, 13.
- ⁵⁶ Van Til, 13.
- ⁵⁷ 2 Peter 3:18.
- ⁵⁸ All quotations taken from NIV except where RSV or KJV seemed preferable.
- ⁵⁹ For evaluation of some consequences of C.H. Dodd's distinction between *kerugma* and *didache* see R.H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of N.T. Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) and Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 20-30.
- ⁶⁰ Two earlier articles on this subject appeared in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (1985) 2:155-189 and *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (1986) 2:149-170.
- ⁶¹ R.H. Mounce, "Preaching" in *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 Vol. (Wheaton: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 3:1260c.
- ⁶² R.H. Mounce, "Preaching," 1261b.
- ⁶³ A. Victor Murray, *Education into Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 14-26.
- ⁶⁴ H.H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1942), 5.
- ⁶⁵ H.H. Farmer, *Servant*, 15.
- ⁶⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 65.
- ⁶⁷ John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963), 2.
- ⁶⁸ Alan Richardson, *Preface to Bible Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 84.
- ⁶⁹ Without thanksgiving, praise and adoration a sermon can hardly be regarded as complete. Note what P.T. Forsyth said in *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 97: "The sermon is the Word of the Gospel returning confession to God who gave it. It is addressed to us, indeed, but in truth it is offered to God."
- ⁷⁰ Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 27.
- ⁷¹ Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 69.
- ⁷² R.H. Mounce, "Preaching," 1261b.
- ⁷³ H.H. Farmer, *Servant*, 15.
- ⁷⁴ H.H. Farmer, *Servant*, 16.
- ⁷⁵ H.H. Farmer, *Servant*, 89.
- ⁷⁶ John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 89.
- ⁷⁷ W.T. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction and Illustration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 119.
- ⁷⁸ This statement is repeated in several ways in the writings of Lloyd-Jones and elaborated from a pastoral perspective in his *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 44-46 and 51-64.
- ⁷⁹ J. Kok, *Schetsen over den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 2 Vo. (Kampen: J.H. Kok and Grand Rapids: B. Sevensma, 1903) 1v.
- ⁸⁰ Klaas Dijk, *De Dienst der Prediking* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1955) 415.
- ⁸¹ Klaas Dijk, *De Catechismus-preek in haar Verscheidenheid* (Franeker: T. Weyer, n.d.).