



## Preaching the Word – Catechetically

### **What has happened to the Heidelberg?**

Something appears to be happening in our churches to what is called "catechism preaching." What? It is no longer the type of preaching that was once common or expected. Instead of the minister using the Heidelberg Catechism as his point of reference or guideline, there is an emerging tendency to take one of the proof texts listed below a particular Question and Answer, or something closely connected, and then to preach on it. As for the Lord's Day itself, it will be read and it may be referred to but there is a sense that it no longer occupies centre stage.

Needless to say, there are consequences to this approach. The first is that the congregation comes away with the impression that while the Catechism has been referred to, it is more in the sense of "lip service." Perhaps in a formal way what the Church Order in Article 52 means by "catechism preaching" has been adhered to, but that is about the extent of it. The second consequence follows from the first and it is that the older style of catechism preaching has now been shunted aside or become a shell of its former sense.

"Catechism preaching" has given way to "textual preaching", and that in both services. Invariably this leads some people to ask, "What really is the difference now between our two worship services on a particular Lord's Day?"

### **Biblical texts only – please**

No doubt some members and pastors will applaud this development. According to them, preaching needs a text and that text has to come from the Scripture, and the Scripture alone. At the same time using the Catechism as "text" is frowned on because then one is making use of a human document. It may be a confession but it is still a man-made product.

This last comment indicates that preachers in our circle have a strong desire to be biblically based and rooted in all of their preaching. And that is a good thing! At the same time one cannot get away from the impression that this development may also be a reactionary one. We have become so sensitive to the accusation coming from broader evangelical circles that "catechism preaching" is preaching on a man-made text that we now shy away from it and have opted for the purist (or shall we say fundamentalist) approach.

### **Variety**

What shall one say to all this? For a start let me be clear and say that there are a variety of approaches possible when it comes to catechism preaching. One has only to consult the book of Dr. K. Dijk, *De Catechismuspreek in Haar Verscheidenheid* (Franeker: Weyer) to see that. He gives at least seven different suggestions as to how a preacher can approach and preach on each particular Lord's Day. Among these suggestions at least one is textual in nature.

In many respects this too is understandable. Indeed, if a minister has been pastoring one church for a long period of time he may well want to vary his approach occasionally. For one preaching cycle he may stick very close to the actual text of the Catechism. For another he may want to use a special theme be it "comfort", "covenant" or "life". Or else for still another cycle he may want to approach each Lord's Day from out of a Trinitarian perspective. In short, there is nothing wrong with mixing it up.

## **One approach only**

Yet that is not what is happening at present. In some cases the minister always takes a biblical text that somehow connects to the subject of the Lord's Day and preaches on it. The new development is not that we have different approaches to catechism preaching today but that now we have only one approach, namely the textual one.

Now I understand why some of my colleagues are going down this road but I would like them to reflect seriously on the merits of this approach. At the same time, let no one assume that I am in any way accusing my colleagues of unfaithfulness. I have the utmost respect for them and for their preaching labours.

## **Different kind of preaching**

Getting back to the matter as such, I am from the school which believes that "catechism preaching" is a different kind of preaching than what is commonly called "textual preaching." Let me hasten to add that to a large extent the terms "catechism preaching" and "textual preaching" are misnomers. They convey the impression that the one uses the Bible as its basis, while the other uses the Catechism as its basis. They insist that "textual preaching" is all about expounding the Scriptures and "catechism preaching" is all about expounding the Catechism. From this we then get the further deduction that while the one type of preaching uses a "divine" text, the other makes use of a "human" text. You can see, no doubt, where this is going in terms of implications and conclusions.

## **Revising our terms**

It is for this reason, and others, that we do well to revisit and revise our language. I would ask your consideration for a change of terminology. Why not say that what happens on the Lord's Day in the morning service is that the minister preaches the Word "textually", whereas, what happens in the afternoon or evening service is that he preaches the Word "catechetically." Hence in both services the Word stands central. It is not so that in one service we preach on an inspired text and that in the other service we preach on a non-inspired (human or confessional) text. No, in both services the Word is being expounded.

So what's the difference? The difference is that in the first service the minister usually expounds on only one text; whereas, in the afternoon or evening service he expounds on a whole series of texts. Or you can say that in the first service we have "textually specific" preaching; whereas, in the second service we have "topically specific" preaching. In the morning the minister leads his flock into an in-depth exploration of a chosen biblical passage. In the afternoon or evening the minister takes the whole Bible as his text and shows his flock how different parts of Scripture have a bearing on this or that particular biblical doctrine or teaching.

## **Not carbon copies**

Now, what this approach does immediately is underline the fact that the first and second services are not carbon copies of one another. The first is very specific and focused; whereas, the second is more general and topical. In both Scripture is being expounded but then in a different manner. In this way it will also become obvious that while in the one service the stress is on "preaching as heralding", in the other the stress is more on "preaching as teaching."

Another benefit from this approach is that it gives the preacher an opportunity to vary his preaching. Currently when you sit under "preaching the Word – textually" in both services, the preacher is following one and the same approach every time. He is, by the very nature of this type of preaching, confined to one text.

This, however, is not the case with "preaching the Word – catechetically" for then the preacher can range far and wide. His starting point then is that he has to preach on a certain topic, doctrine or teaching, be it comfort (LD 1), faith (LD 7), providence (LD 10), the resurrection of our Lord (LD 18), sacraments (LD 25), good works (LD 32), the Fourth Commandment (LD 38), the Second petition (LD 48) and so forth. Thereafter, he has to make choices as to which Bible passages to use to teach these

topics. When he goes through the Catechism cycle of preaching one time he may choose to expound on certain foundational passages. The next time he may choose a set of different passages. The point is that true Catechism preaching is always biblically flexible. It allows a preacher to approach the Scripture as a whole and to show the congregation how rich and diverse it is when it comes to its central doctrines and key teachings.

## **The whole Lord's Day**

In this connection it may have struck you as well that when a preacher uses only one text and somehow ties it to the Catechism, something happens. It is then impossible for him to present the entirety of that doctrine as summarized by the Catechism. The preacher says to himself: "Next week I need to preach on Lord's Day 17 and so I am going to take 1 Cor. 15:16-20 as my text." Fine, but the problem is that this passage from 1 Corinthians 15 touches on only one of the three benefits of the resurrection of our Saviour as mentioned by the Heidelberg Catechism. What you then get is a truncated catechism sermon on Christ's resurrection. For this Lord's Day tells us that overcoming death is but the first benefit of His rising. Being raised to a new life is the second benefit. Receiving a sure pledge of one's own resurrection is the third benefit. So why not craft a sermon that covers the entire Lord's Day and all three of its glorious benefits? Take for example, 1 Cor. 15:16-20; Col. 3:1-5 and Phil 3:20, 21 as your texts and explain this doctrine in all of its fullness.

Speaking personally, I have had the privilege of being allowed to "preach the Word – catechetically" for almost forty years and I have never found this approach to be either problematic or tiresome but always fresh and challenging.

## **A concrete example**

Let me illustrate what I see as the advantages in preaching catechetically by referring to a particular LD.

### ***Lord's Day 1***

How does a text specific preacher approach this most famous of all Lord's Days? I suspect that he will look for a Bible passage that incorporates as many aspects of Answer 1 as possible. A well-known passage in this regard is 2 Cor. 1:3-11.

Looking at it closely and considering it carefully he may decide that the best theme would be something like,

"The God of All Comfort" and thereafter his points may be something like:

- a) "the broad extent of His comfort" (cf. v. 4a),
- b) "the purpose of our comfort" (cf. v.4b, 6, 7, 8-11), and
- c) "the source of all comfort" (cf. v.5).

Sounds like a pretty good plan. It's biblical and it deals with comfort.

But in what way does this approach differ from that used in the morning service? What's so special or different about this second service? Is it not a carbon copy of what happens in the morning, with the only difference being that we have brought the Catechism into the picture and read from it?

So, is this catechism preaching? Is this preaching catechetically? I think not! For what does a catechism sermon on this Lord's Day look like? How does the preacher do justice to it?

First of all, he does not search for and zero in on one specific Bible passage and hope that it is enough of a catchall text so as to include most of the elements of the Lord's Day. Rather he looks first at the biblical matter to be addressed. And what is that matter? In the case of LD 1, it is all about the scriptural concept or teaching of comfort.

Secondly, whereas the text preacher will begin almost immediately to exegete his source text, the catechetical preacher will look at the main elements in both the question(s) and answer(s) contained in the Lord's Day.

With respect to LD 1, he will note the following features:

- this is an opening or introductory Q & A and thus it sets the theme for all that follows;
- the language here is very personal ("only"), exclusive ('only'), loaded ("comfort") and comprehensive ("in life and death");
- the answer too is very personal ("I am not my own", look at all the "my's" and "me's") and even more comprehensive (life and death are repeated, but "body and soul" are added);
- the answer zeroes in on "my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" and on the reality of "belonging" to Him;
- it is very Christological in its explanation because all of the verbs refer to the Son as the One who pays, sets free, preserves, assures and encourages. Clearly, our Lord Jesus Christ is the prime mover in this answer; yet He is not the only mover, for look He is also doing the will of the Father and accessing the power of the Holy Spirit. It is thus profoundly Trinitarian as well;
- finally, the believer is given guidance on how to live forever and always in the joy of this comfort. It comes down to guilt, grace and gratitude.

After taking a careful look at the contents of the LD, the preacher next looks closely at the source material for this answer. "Where does Scripture say this? Is this answer firmly rooted in and faithfully extracted from the Word of God?"

Next, he will take note of the most pertinent biblical references and illustrations and jot them down. Loaded down with all of this biblical and catechetical material, he will start with identifying the main thrust of this LD. In this case the answer is rather obvious. It's all about *comfort, my comfort, my comfort for living and dying*.

Hence the theme will be something like "My Only Comfort" or "Comfort" or "Life's Most Basic Question" or "How Do You Cope?" A wide range of possibilities exists here.

The points too are obvious, as they are all about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

"what He has done for me" (past),

"what He does for me" (present),

"what He will do for me" (future)

and "what He now is to me" (confession).

One should note here that a catechism sermon is *subject based and not text based*. What I mean by that is that it is the subject of the particular LD that determines the theme and thrust of the sermon. If LD1 is about comfort, then LD 2 is about the knowledge of our sin and misery, LD 3 is about sin's origin, LD 4 is about God's involvement and response, LD 5 is about escape, LD 6 is about the only way of escape, and so forth. In each case a certain subject dominates.

Now, of course, that subject needs to be explained and expounded biblically. After all, we are talking about biblical subjects, teachings and summaries here.

At the same time we are not dealing here with one text, but many texts. It is a matter of many texts under one heading.

And that is what gives catechetical preaching a number of advantages. For one it is much more *flexible*. When I step forward in the morning, I am a text preacher who needs to stick to his text. When I step forward in the afternoon or evening as a catechism preacher, I need to stick to my subject.

But then the subject is usually very wide and dealt with in any number of texts and passages. For example, if my text is 2 Cor. 1 then I need to stick to it and speak about what it says about the matter of comfort. On the other hand, when my text is LD 1, I can travel far and wide looking for both biblical definitions and examples of comfort. I am no longer bound to one passage but may make use of many.

Catechetical preaching is also comprehensive. What do I mean? Well, the comfort referred to in 2 Cor. 1 is different from the comfort of LD 1. In what way? Look closely and you will see that the subject of 2

Cor. 1 is God the Father and not so much God the Son. Also, while Father and Son receive attention, no mention is made directly of the Holy Spirit. As well, the comfort of 2 Cor. 1 is clearly directed at the believers in Corinth and their situation; whereas, the comfort of LD 1 is meant for all and every believer everywhere. It transcends time and place.

Yes, and this comprehensive character of the Catechism comes back repeatedly. Indeed, there is no way that one Bible text can cover as much ground as the Catechism text. Because it deals with subjects, it can range far and wide, and so can the preacher.

One can say that a text specific approach to the Catechism usually results in a somewhat truncated, limited and curtailed sermon. It cannot possibly cover the same ground as the Catechism does in a Lord's Day.

This in turn brings out another aspect of catechism preaching in that it is close to being *inexhaustible*. A text by its very nature is specific. A catechism subject can draw from Genesis to Revelation for its content and support. You have the whole Bible in front of you.

In my forty plus years in preaching catechetically I have often been asked whether or not this type of preaching is not monotonous and boring. After all, how many times can a preacher cover the same ground? If the source material for the subject all comes from the Bible, then the answer is that this type of preaching is never boring. The preacher may get bored or lazy, but if he is committed to working hard and digging deep, he will find no shortage of treasures.

This brings me to one more aspect that I see as an advantage. It is related to the fact that catechetical preaching is directional. What do I mean by that? Again, contrast it with the morning service. When it comes to such a service the preacher can pick and choose as he likes. The result is that sometimes he picks according to his own tastes, likes, dislikes, abilities or what have you. Over time the congregation may even grow tired of his approach and accuse him of being one sided or hung up on a certain topic.

Now, that cannot be the case with catechetical preaching. When it comes to this type of preaching, we do not choose the text but the text or subject is chosen for us. If last week it was LD 20 then we know that next week it will be LD 21. On occasion you may even be able to dodge a particular LD but not for long. Sooner or later you will have to face it. Meanwhile, the congregation will hopefully find itself on the receiving end of a spiritual diet that is full, varied and nutritious.

In closing, then, I would say that all of my colleagues who take a text approach to the catechism are short-changing it, themselves and their congregations. For me it has always been a joy to face Sunday afternoons knowing that I have a pertinent biblical subject to deal with and that the whole Bible is my text.

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