



The character of the afternoon service

Reformed people usually go to church twice on a Sunday. This is a good custom, characteristic of the Reformed tradition, going back to the days of the Reformation.

The Bible does not prescribe that the congregation should be called together twice for worship. However, in the Reformed tradition we have always been convinced that it is edifying for the congregation to meet again in the afternoon for a so-called “teaching service” (in Dutch: *leerdienst*).

The character of the afternoon service is supposed to be distinct from the morning service. During the morning service the minister proclaims the gospel from a biblical passage. In the afternoon he has a more didactic sermon, proclaiming the doctrine of God’s Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. In other words, in the morning the emphasis is on *proclaiming* the gospel, while in the afternoon the emphasis is on *teaching* the gospel (of course, these are no more than emphases – any good sermon will have elements of proclamation and teaching).

Over the years, however, the distinction between the morning service and the afternoon service has faded out more and more. The character of the afternoon service has become almost identical with the morning service. The liturgy is ninety percent the same. And as far as the preaching is concerned, I’m not sure that our Catechism preaching is always distinct from the “regular” preaching (I will come back to this point later on).

This is not a good development. If the afternoon service loses its distinct character, it loses its *raison d’être*. If our defence of the afternoon is no more than “going twice is better than going once,” I’m afraid that sooner or later people are going to say: I don’t buy that argument anymore.

We have to give our people a better reason for attending the afternoon service, and we have a good reason: in the afternoon you get something different – the same gospel, but from a more didactic and confessional perspective.

Historical development

It will be helpful to start with a bit of history. In the early days after the Reformation the character of the afternoon service was clearly different from the morning service. In the very beginning, the afternoon service had the character of a public Catechism lesson. The minister asked questions and the children of the congregation had to give answers, as found in the Heidelberg Catechism. When the minister explained the teaching as summarized in the Catechism, he did not focus on just one Scripture passage, but he dealt with the various Scripture passages that are mentioned in every Lord’s Day.

As church life in the Reformed tradition developed, the character of the afternoon service changed.

- First, the custom of having the children answer the questions disappeared (they were taught in Catechism class during the week).
- Second, in an effort to convince the congregation that the afternoon service was not a second-rate service, the liturgy was beefed up to be more similar to the liturgy of the morning service.
- Third, the Catechism sermon of the minister developed from a public Catechism lesson into a fully-fledged sermon or (as our Church Order describes it): proclamation of the doctrine of God’s Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism.

The next step in the development was to be expected: sometimes, if the minister wanted to do an exchange with another minister, the congregation would get a Catechism sermon in the morning instead of the afternoon. More often, the congregation would not get a Catechism sermon at all, but two “free text sermons” instead.

The Canadian Reformed Churches have condoned this practice by changing the wording of the Church Order. Whereas the old version (the old Article 68) stipulated that Catechism preaching should take place “ordinarily in the afternoon service,” the current version (Article 52) says no more than that it should happen “as a rule, once every Sunday...” In my opinion, this change was not an improvement.

I have the impression that consistories do not mind whether there is Catechism preaching or not, as long as there is a minister on the pulpit. Being an occasional preacher myself, I get phone calls from brother pulpit suppliers. I have never had one who tried to put pressure on me to preach a Catechism sermon during the afternoon service. As one brother told me: “Preach whatever you have, as long as we get you on the pulpit. We are beggars, so we can’t be choosers!”

I do believe that consistories can be choosers! They have the right to request Catechism preaching once on a Sunday. And I would encourage consistories to make a conscious effort to have Catechism preaching “ordinarily in the afternoon,” even if that phrase has been dropped from the Church Order.

Catechism preaching

A related issue, and maybe a more difficult one, is the character of Catechism preaching as such. The single most important factor that determines the character of the afternoon service is the sermon. So the question is: what is a Catechism sermon and how does it differ from a regular sermon?

The difference is not that “the text” for the sermon is taken from the Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism does not have the same status as the Word of God, so in my opinion a minister should never say “our text is taken from Lord’s Day so and so.” If it is to be preaching at all, it has to be proclamation of the Word.

On the other hand, the text of the Catechism should not be ignored either. Sometimes you hear Catechism sermons where the minister is in fact preaching on some passage of the Scriptures. The text of the Catechism is hardly used, or not used at all. In my opinion this is not Catechism preaching, but regular preaching disguised as Catechism preaching. I do not deny that such preaching can be very good and uplifting. In fact, I have heard wonderful sermons that belong to this category. But it is not Catechism preaching.

So what is Catechism preaching really? If I may offer some suggestions, I believe that Catechism preaching should have the following characteristics.

- In the first place, Catechism preaching is preaching of the Word of God. Even if the preacher uses the text of Heidelberg Catechism as guideline, he is proclaiming the Word of God. He shows how the doctrine which is summarized in the respective Lord’s Day is based on the Scriptures. Therefore he should use various Scripture passages. Even if he deals with one or two passages in more detail, it would still be prudent to refer to a variety of Scripture passages.
- Second, the preacher uses the text of the Lord’s Day – not as if it is “the text” for the sermon but in such a way that the rich content of the Catechism is used. The authors of the Catechism have done a remarkable job in formulating aspects of the Christian faith. It is hard to improve on their terminology. Why not use those well-crafted phrases to edify the congregation?
- Third, Catechism preaching is pastoral in character. Once again, using the text of the Catechism will help the preacher to achieve this. The Catechism is very pastoral in character,

very direct and personal. This characteristic needs to be carried through into Catechism preaching.

- Fourth, the character of Catechism sermons should be a blend of historical-confessional and contemporary. Many of the doctrines which are summarized in the Catechism are as relevant today as they were during the time of the Reformation. But this relevance needs to be demonstrated. Therefore, the Catechism preacher needs to study the background of the struggles of the time of the Reformation. At the same time, he needs to know current theological trends and debates, as well as the general religious climate of our time. More than in a regular sermon, the preacher could spend time in working through some of these issues.
- Fifth, it would be beneficial to apply some flexibility in following the division into fifty-two Lord's Days. Although the Catechism is amazingly contemporary, it is clear that some issues have become less important, while others are not mentioned in the Catechism simply because they only emerged later during history. In some instances, then, it would be beneficial to *condense* a few Lord's Days into one sermon. For example, I don't think that it is necessary to have an annual sermon on the issue of swearing oaths (LD 37). I would suggest that Lord's Days 36 and 37 can be dealt with in one sermon. On the other hand, we could *expand* the discussion of a Lord's Day into two or three sermons if the issues are important today. It might be beneficial to spend more than one sermon on the work of the Holy Spirit (LD 20), views of eschatology, pre/post-millennialism (LD 22), marriage issues (LD 41), evangelism and mission (LD 48), to mention a few examples.
- Sixth, since Catechism preaching is supposed to have a stronger emphasis on teaching and instruction, I feel that this emphasis should also be reflected in the style of preaching. For example, the preacher could analyze the structure of a Catechism answer with the congregation, ask people to underline important words, etc. He could hand out an outline of his sermon which would allow people to make notes. On that same outline he could include a few important quotes from contemporary sources which he wants to discuss during his sermon. He could ask a probing question and ask the listeners to think about it for a minute. He could even use technologically advanced methods (overheads, power point, etc.), if that helps him to get his message across (just make sure that these tools do not distract more than they facilitate...)

In conclusion, it is great that our Reformed fathers instituted the afternoon service so that the congregation might be taught and instructed more thoroughly. Let us keep the original intention in mind and let our afternoon services have a distinct *teaching* quality.

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