

CHAPTER TEN

“CATECHISM PREACHING” — ACCORDING TO CHURCH ORDER

ASPECTS OF ARTICLE 68, CHURCH ORDER

Here is Article 68 again, now with some stress here and there, important expressions which deserve closer scrutiny.

“The ministers, everywhere, shall on Sundays, *ordinarily* in the afternoon service, *briefly explain* the *sum of Christian doctrine, comprehended* in the Catechism, so that, *as much as possible*, the *explanation* shall be annually completed *according to the division* of the Catechism itself.”

Now some remarks on the italicized terms.

“ORDINARILY IN THE AFTERNOON”

During the struggle around the Liberation 1944 quite some discussion went on about the meaning of the word “ordinarily.” It also occurs in the Article about General Synods: “The National (General) Synod shall *ordinarily* be held once every three years (unless there is an urgent reason to convene one *sooner*),” Article 50, Church Order. “Synodicals” said that “ordinarily” means, *as a rule*. . . but it need not always be so. That was during the years that the Synod Sneek-Utrecht prolonged its life beyond the three years, when they should have gone home in order to make room for the next synod! An urgent reason may force us to have a General Synod *sooner*, but certainly not later! Therefore the liberated people said, “ordinarily” means *according to the rule*. This is the rule that we have agreed upon; we’ll have to stick to it.

This is mentioned in order to warn against the ease with which churches take “ordinarily” in Article 68 in a way different from that in Article 50. Catechism preaching shall be held in the afternoon *according to the rule*, not *as a rule*, from which rule anyone who wants may deviate according to his own pleasure. . . .

Quite some time ago the present writer published an article about the special character of the P.M. service, precisely because of the rule of Article 68. I do not have to repeat that but still maintain: in the afternoon the preaching is somewhat different in character from that in the morning service. The preaching in the P.M. is a “two-way” business. The Word of God is preached, but also we as congregation confess it (in the words of the Catechism). As *Rev. M.J.C. Blok* called his book with Catechism sermons: “*Beleden Beloften*” (Confessed Promises). The promises of the LORD are proclaimed; and we confess them.

The conclusion is that the Churches should stick to the rule: Catechism preaching in the afternoon. We know the practical reasons for which Churches have changed the rule: Catechism alternately in A.M. and P.M. But this is not according to the accepted rule.

CATECHISM CLASS A LATE-COMER

In this context something should first be said about the fact that the Catechism Class as-we-know-it, appeared on the scene at a very late date. The reader may be somewhat surprised to hear that it was not about the middle of the 19th century that the specific ecclesiastical catechism class became a reality.

John Calvin's set-up, which was closely followed by Dort 1618-1619, was that Home, School, Church (in that order!) worked together in the teaching of the Catechism.

The *parents* were supposed to teach their children at home. (For that purpose it was decided to prepare a "shorter catechism." Some summaries were published between 1570 and 1585 in Heidelberg but we have not been able to lay our hands on any. In 1610 Rev. Faukelius of Middelburg composed the well-known Compendium [Kort Begrip] but that one has never been officially adopted.)

The *School* was to add to this primary teaching of the Home. "The Consistories everywhere shall see to it that there are good teachers who shall teach the children. . . in godliness *and the Catechism*" (Article 21, Church Order). In those days the schools were under the supervision of the consistories. Usually the teachers taught the Catechism on Saturday afternoon, the same Lord's Day that the minister would preach on the next day in the P.M. service.

Thus the *Church* took over, not in a special Catechism class as we have now, but on Sunday afternoon, teaching young and old the sum of Christian doctrine from the Catechism.

Now this has changed. After the Secession 1834 the need for Catechism instruction by the minister was felt (although that should *not* mean that the Schools have no task here anymore!). Yet, with the arrival of the Catechism class in the Church building, the preaching on the Catechism in Church was *not* abolished. The need for this kind of preaching has not disappeared; it has grown, I would say.

This brings us back to Article 68 itself again.

"BRIEFLY EXPLAIN" –

"THE SUM OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE" -

"COMPREHENDED IN THE CATECHISM"

We take these three important expressions together because they describe in a lucid way what "Catechism Preaching" really should be.

There is the word, "*briefly*." Aha! someone says, the Catechism sermon should be short, Reverend; shorter than your morning sermon! That would, however, be a completely mistaken conclusion.

Why? Because "*the sum of Christian doctrine*" has to be preached in the P.M. service. "*Sum*" means here, sum-total; fullness, completeness. An example may clarify this. If the minister preaches on Matthew 28:19, his theme will be something like, "Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel to the whole world." In his sermon he will also preach about "baptizing them. . .," and consequently say something about God being Triune, thus emphasizing the difference between "the baptism of John" and "Christian baptism." But the main message is "the great commission."

Then, in the afternoon he preaches on Catechism Lord's Day 8: "that these three distinct Persons are the one true God." Now he must preach the "sum," the completeness of this main Christian doctrine: God is Triune. He will take his congregation for a walk through the Scriptures, mention several "texts" and thus make clear that God "has so revealed Himself in His Word" (Catechism Lord's Day 8).

Again, it must be clear to us that this "sum" (i.e., fullness, completeness) *is not found in the Catechism!!* That would be impossible. The Catechism would become as big as the Bible itself. Therefore, Article 68, Church Order, says, this sum "*is comprehended in the Catechism.*" In other words, the Catechism gives only a "skeleton" of the fullness of that specific Christian doctrine. For that fullness the pastor has to lead his flock into the green pastures of Scripture itself. But he does this by using the Catechism as a "guide." Again: Why? Simply because we as Churches have agreed in our Confession that this is the way the Bible should be understood. Not as the Jehovah's Witnesses or Liberals do it, but as Reformed people, in agreement with the Ecumenical Symbols of the Early Church.

But – and here we return to the word "briefly" – if the minister would try to repeat everything in his sermon that the Bible reveals about the Triune God, or about justification, etc., it would take him hours and hours. It would become a day-long session. Therefore: "briefly." But in that "briefly" he has to do justice to the "sum" or completeness and fullness of that doctrine. It has to be a well-balanced (not one-sided) presentation of a complete doctrine, with all its nuances and effects for us.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

From what has been said some conclusions may now be drawn as to the special character of a "Catechism sermon."

1. It is clear by now that the P.M. sermon is *not* "about" or "on" the Catechism as though the Catechism is the text for the sermon the same way as the inspired Word of God is the text for the "first sermon." It would be against our Confession to do it that way. The text for the P.M.

sermon is the “Christian doctrine” as found in the Bible, and comprehended in the Catechism as a “skeleton.”

2. The preacher, however, is bound not only to read the Catechism in the light of the Bible (that goes without saying), but also to read the Bible in the light of the Catechism. And that may not go without saying. . . . Does that mean that the Catechism has more authority than the Bible? Certainly not, but the minister is bound to read (and preach) the Bible, not as a Romanist does it, or a Jehovah’s Witness, or a Liberal or a Pentecostal, and so on. . . ., but as the Church of the Reformation has always understood and preached the Word of God. Call that prejudice, but everyone is prejudiced, a Liberal or Jehovah’s Witness as much, even much more, than a Reformed believer.

3. The Bible belongs to the Church, not to the preacher. It is not enough that he preaches from here and there, on texts chosen by himself (in which choice he may be one-sided in whatever sense), but he has to preach the fullness of the Word of God. Article 68 “forces” him to preach on many parts of the Bible which, maybe, he would never choose himself. For 50% he may choose his “own text,” but for the other 50% he is bound – and every minister ought to be happy with this binding.

4. Once again: “the sum” has to be preached. In the morning the minister should stick to his text, understand it in its context, and not wander away from it, going afield in an erratic walk through the whole Bible (as one can often hear in radio-broadcasted sermons). Stick to your text!

But in the afternoon he may, he must “run through the whole Bible” in order to find the “sum”: what the whole Bible has to say on election, providence, justification, regeneration, marriage, daily bread, etc., etc., etc. It is tempting to give more examples, like on the keys of the kingdom, the threefold office of the believer, the Church, and so on, but we hope that the reader gets the message alright.

5. Some more things should be stated, however briefly. The word “doctrine” is used by Article 68. That means a positive, well-balanced exposition of the revealed truth of God’s Word as confessed by the Church, but also – by the same token – a rejection of all that is not in agreement with this doctrine. The Catechism is strong in “controversies,” those of the 16th century. Essentially not much has changed, though these same errors may now come in a different attire. The congregation must be protected against them and be trained in rejecting them, wherever they meet them. But the word “doctrine” in our church-language should not be understood intellectualistically! Doctrine is life. Therefore Catechism preaching can and must be very practical. The Catechism itself gives the lead. “What is *your* only comfort. . . ?” Look at the third part, the Ten Words and the Lord’s Prayer: how immensely practical is that whole third part. Lord’s Days 45–52 are no less than a training course in prayer, and ministers should keep it that way, instead of giving a series of lectures on

“the Name,” “The Will of God,” “The Kingdom,” “Daily Bread,” “Temptations.” Sure, he must teach the sum of Christian doctrine on all these themes, but in such a way that the prayers of the membership become enriched by it, and more pleasing in God’s sight, so that He may hear us, and give abundantly what we ask of Him.