

CHAPTER NINE

“CATECHISM PREACHING” - UNDER ATTACK?

IMPORTANCE

Although as Reformed Christians we take Catechism preaching for granted, it is worth our while to write about this important part of preaching.

No less than 50% of the sermons we hear are “about the Catechism” (whether this is a correct expression will be discussed later). A minister who has completed forty years of ministry, has delivered at least 2,000 sermons “on the Catechism” (another expression that will have to be considered closer).

We are bound by our mutual agreement in the Church Order, Article 68, to prepare such sermons, and to listen to them, half of the time. Thus it is as important for preachers as for the congregation, for the pulpit and for the pew, to take a closer look at this one-half of all preaching.

Why did we bind ourselves to that obligation? Was and is it a biblical binding? Is it not true, “in the Church nothing but God’s Word”?

NO LONGER TAKEN FOR GRANTED

We started with stating that Catechism preaching is taken for granted, but is that indeed still the case today? The answer must be that this type of preaching is being questioned, also among Reformed believers. We have even, in recent years, met with some aversion to it, even rejection of it. This seems to be the mood of the times in which we live: all “established” patterns are being questioned today. Some of the reasons for this are:

A misunderstanding of this kind of preaching, as though it is, indeed, a “*preaching about or on the Catechism.*” But can a “minister of the Word” bind himself, then, to such an obligation? Did not his letter of call demand from him to preach the Word and “nothing but” the Word? The Word is divinely inspired; the Catechism, however beautiful and faithful, is the work of men, of fallible men; therefore should never be put on a level with the Word of God.

The cause may lie with ministers who treat the Catechism as though it is inspired, and in their sermons “explain and apply” the text of the Catechism in exactly the same way as they explain and apply a text chosen from Holy Scripture. Is this not against Article 7 of our Confession: “Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures”? The Catechism is not inspired! Therefore it can never be “the text for the sermon” in the same way as a passage of Scripture is “text for the sermon”!

A different kind of reason why Catechism preaching is no longer taken for granted by everyone is, I fear, what Paul mentions in his letter to Timothy, II Timothy 4:3, 4: "For the time is coming that people will not endure *sound teaching* but, having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths."

Closely related to this is the fact that some reject Catechism preaching, even Catechism teaching in the classes, because they have fallen victim to another, *unwritten*, Catechism. They have fallen victim to some sect or other, in whose midst, often with dictatorial force of the "leader," the Holy Scriptures are "robbed" of certain sayings which then are put together in a sectarian doctrine, as is the case among Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, Baptists, "The Brethren," "The People of God," and so on. . . . Their minds have been poisoned by such sectarian indoctrination and brain-washing and for that reason, as Paul said, "will no longer endure sound teaching. . . but wander into myths."

Finally, a reason for not taking Catechism preaching for granted anymore, is the accusation that Reformed people usually know their Catechism better (even by heart) than they know their Bible. They hardly know their way in the Bible and are unable to meet, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses, on the level on which these people come to your door: "The Bible says. . . ." Then a reference to the Catechism does not help. Sure, "infants should be baptized." The Catechism says it clearly in Lord's Day 27, Question 74, but a phone call to the minister is needed: "Reverend, I'm talking with a Baptist: where does the Bible say that infants must be baptized? I can't find it in the New Testament!" (This is just one of many experiences.)

This deplorable situation, some say, is the result of all that stress on the Catechism, in teaching as well as preaching. Let the ministers teach Bible in the Catechism class, instead of Catechism! And call it then a *Bible* class!

The conclusion of all this is that "maintaining Article 68 of the Church Order" (more details later) is, first, a human invention. Then, it is an unbearable yoke. Finally it tends to replace the Bible by the Catechism.

It is no luxury therefore, the reader will agree, to study this phenomenon of "Catechism preaching" together. Let's try to find out *what* "Catechism preaching" is – at least what it should be. Then also *why* it should be maintained because it is so important. And finally, maybe, also a few remarks on *how* it should be done.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE HISTORY

Notwithstanding the mood of our time that history is of no importance and consequence, we believe that it is always wise and helpful, for any topic, to have a look at the past.

Catechism preaching has a history!

The beginnings of this kind of preaching (and teaching) are much older than the Age of the Reformation, although this Age undoubtedly became the Golden Age of Catechisms.

Already after the return from exile a system of Catechesis, preaching as well as teaching, developed around the synagogues. And since then there is a remarkable *continuity* of Catechism-contents in the history of the Church.

In that early period, just mentioned, religious instruction was centred around what I call "*the four fundamentals.*" Jewish young people were taught in the same four main subjects that still form the main contents of our Catechism. Of course, at that date in the history of revelation and redemption these "four" were partly different. The synagogue taught:

1. the Creed (a combination of biblical statements under the heading, "Hear Israel, the LORD our God is one Lord"); 2. the law (same as we have in Catechism, Lord's Days 34-44); 3. Prayer (called "eighteen Prayer" because it had 18 lines or petitions); 4. the Sacraments (but then, Old Testamentic of course: Passover and the other festivals; also about sacrifices and liturgy in the temple).

These same "four fundamentals," but now in New Testamentic attire, are found in the Early Church as contents and summary of Christian preaching and teaching. Now they became The Apostles' Creed, The New Testament Sacraments, The Ten Commandments and The Lord's Prayer. They were preserved all through the Middle Ages, notwithstanding the apostacy in the Church. And then, lo and behold!, the Reformation did not start something completely new. Indeed, countless Catechisms were written in the 16th century. Only a few survived as permanent. But, in one way or another, Lutheran as well as Reformed and/or Presbyterian, they were all built, in different order, around these "four fundamentals." In the Heidelberg Catechism in this order: 1. Apostles' Creed (Lord's Days 7-22); 2. Sacraments (Lord's Days 25-31); 3. Ten Words (Lord's Days 34-44); 4. The Lord's Prayer (Lord's Days 45-52); with an introduction, Lord's Day 1, plus some connecting Lord's Days.

But now the reason why all this was mentioned in a booklet on Catechism *Preaching: The Heidelberg Catechism* (to confine ourselves to this one) was written for *two, even three distinct purposes!*

The first, as teaching guide for the young generation. Therefore it is put in the form of questions and answers.

The second, as a program for preaching in the afternoon services.

Therefore the division into fifty-two "chapters."

The third, to accomplish a reconciliation (in Heidelberg) between "Calvinists," "Zwinglians," and "Philippist Lutherans" (those Lutherans who kept more to Philip Melancthon than to Luther in the doctrine of the Sacraments, etc.). For that reason so much attention to certain doctrines like

Ascension, Lord's Supper, justification, etc.

We are now especially interested in the second purpose.

CATECHISM PREACHING STARTS

Already at a very early date the Catechism became the guide for *preaching*. Martin Luther, building upon the "rest" of the truth that had been maintained during the Middle Ages in the "four fundamentals," started preaching his Catechism in Wittenberg in 1533. Bullinger, a fellow worker with Calvin, had already started it in 1532. In London, England, where a congregation of Dutch refugees was instituted, A. Lasco started preaching on the Catechism of Geneva in 1550, and replaced it by the Heidelberg Catechism the same year the latter was published: 1563.

In The Netherlands itself Rev. Peter Gabriel, Amsterdam, was the first one to take the Heidelberg Catechism as theme for his afternoon preaching in 1566, soon followed by many other ministers.

When the Synod of Dort, 1571, convened, the second(!) item on the Agenda was Catechism preaching. All Synods that led up to the great Synod of Dort 1618-1619 which completed Article 68, Church Order, in its present form, made regulations for this kind of preaching. At certain times, they had to deal with requests to provide books with Catechism sermons for the benefit of preachers who were not able yet to do it without help.

Thus Article 52, the rule that every Sunday the Catechism be preached, grew until it became complete. (Since 1618 the only change was made in 1905, when the words were added, "as much as possible," see below.)

It is about time to have a look at that Article. Here it is in the draft-translation of 1968, the only one we have as Churches today.*

Article 68, Church Order

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.

Several aspects have to be elaborated in the next chapter.

* A Committee is working on a revision. However, nothing of that revision has become official yet. Therefore we stick to the old version.