

## COMMENTS ON CATECHETICAL PREACHING

PETER Y. DE JONG

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 favor. 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 honor 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 . . . .<sup>2</sup>

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 the 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 kerygmatic 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 articles 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.

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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 1930s and the indescribable horrors of the 1940s. 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 favorable 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.<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> Both belonged equally and quite inseparably to "the full counsel 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."

Indications 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 had already done for them and now required that they confess Jesus of Nazareth as Savior 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.<sup>7</sup>

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*, than ten thousand words in tongues. I 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" . . .<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere, then, does the New any more 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>10</sup> 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* . . . .<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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,<sup>13</sup> 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 services of instruction may have been designed to provide catechetical instruction . . . .<sup>14</sup>

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 labored 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 for 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).<sup>15</sup> 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 a 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.

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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 . . .<sup>16</sup>

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 Savior 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 honor 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*.<sup>17</sup> 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 Lubeck (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."<sup>18</sup> 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 sermonic 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 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 a 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 a 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.<sup>19</sup>

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 sermon 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.

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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 Gransfoort, 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 labored in neighboring 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 Melancthon 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.<sup>21</sup> 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 honor 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.<sup>22</sup>

About this time one of Klebitz' children died. Difficulties arose in connection with the burial. Now two ministers, Velsius and Nesper, 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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

distinguishes 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<sup>1</sup> 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 Tremellius, one of the most competent Hebraists of that day and 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 Savior.

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,<sup>25</sup> 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.

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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 straightjacketed. 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.<sup>26</sup>

No less favorable 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

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 honoring 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.<sup>29</sup>

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 und Schulen  
der Churfurstlichen Pfalz ge-  
trieben 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.<sup>30</sup>

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 singleminded preoccupation with Jesus and his life on earth. Too clearly had its writers listened to the words of the Savior, "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 Savior 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 hungry and thirsty soul.

Now we come face to face with that initial word which seems to be a stumblingblock 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 center 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 Savior-King who claims all of life for his service.

Here we find no Polyanna 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 has 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 in-

grafted 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 Savior. 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 it 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? To those issues the next article intends to address itself in some detail.

## NOTES

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

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

<sup>3</sup>Glen, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Glen, 61.

<sup>5</sup>Isaiah 8:21,22

<sup>6</sup>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), 60 f.; also "Summary," 150.

<sup>7</sup>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. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 439 f.

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

<sup>9</sup>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 verbalizes the divine revelation, articulates the congregation-held truth, displays its liturgy, and focusses 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.

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

<sup>11</sup>Kleist, 5; also 11-12.

<sup>12</sup>Kleist on "Epistle to Diognetus," 135-147.

<sup>13</sup>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 in "The Ten Dogmas," 98-120.

<sup>14</sup>Origen, by Joseph William Trigg (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 10.

<sup>15</sup>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.

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

<sup>17</sup>*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," 109-112, is published from *Book of Concord*, tr. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert. All quotations in this article are taken from the above.

<sup>18</sup>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, und yn allen anderen prediken nycht anders vor syck nehme wen den Catechismus, so dede he sere wel."

<sup>19</sup>Heyns quoting from Ypey and Dermout, I, 499.

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

<sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>Good, 139.

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

<sup>24</sup>Good, 168.

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

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

<sup>27</sup>Schaff, 351.

<sup>28</sup>Schaff, 352.

<sup>29</sup>Schaff, 341.

<sup>30</sup>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.

<sup>31</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. V, 799 (emphasis mine).