

Catechism Preaching

Part 1

Catechism preaching is not a general practice within the churches that together form the International Conference of Reformed Churches. In general, it can be said that the catechism is preached in churches with a Reformed, Dutch background, and that churches with a Presbyterian, English/Scottish background do not have this custom. When churches who have catechism preaching and churches who do not have it meet in an organization like the ICRC, it can be helpful to discuss such a difference. For a good discussion, however, they first of all need a common understanding of it.

What is catechism preaching, and why did it come up? Let us take our starting point in what Ph. Schaff wrote about it in his *The Creeds of Christendom*. What he said may even for today express the general understanding of catechism preaching. Schaff was an admirer of the Heidelberg Catechism. In his book on the history of the creeds, he devoted one of the largest paragraphs to this catechism. About catechism preaching he said the following:

Whole libraries of paraphrases, commentaries, sermons, attacks, and defenses were written about it. In many Reformed churches, especially in Holland (and also in the United States), it was and is to some extent even now obligatory or customary to explain the catechism from the pulpit every Sunday afternoon. Hence the division of the questions into fifty-two Sundays, in imitation of the example set by Calvin's catechism.¹

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¹ Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom. With a History and Critical Notes* (rev.

In a footnote, he added about the division into fifty-two Sundays: “This division was first introduced in the Latin edition of 1566, perhaps earlier.”²

What Schaff said about catechism preaching can be summarized in three statements:

1. Schaff is unclear whether preaching was one of the original purposes of the Heidelberg Catechism. If it was not original, it was at least early. This catechism was first published in 1563, the division into 52 Sundays in the 1566 edition shows that from that time onward the catechism had to be preached.

2. The division into 52 Sundays goes back to Calvin. From this it can be concluded that the custom of catechism preaching goes back to Calvin.

3. Catechism preaching was and is especially a custom in the Dutch churches and the churches from Dutch descent.

In the view of Schaff, and probably also in the view of most Reformed people in the world, catechism preaching has a double limitation: it belongs to the Calvinist tradition, and within the Calvinist tradition, to The Netherlands.

In the following we will investigate the three statements of Schaff. This will provide us with the background necessary to adequately discuss the value of catechism preaching.

Heidelberg Catechism and Preaching

The Heidelberg Catechism was officially adopted in January 1563. This catechism went through some changes before it was included in the Church Order of the Palatinate, which the Elector of the Palatinate issued on November 15, 1563. The division into 52 Lord’s Days occurs for the first time in this edition.³ Schaff, then, was right when he advocated an early date for the division into Lord’s Days. But this division is even earlier than Schaff knew. It dates from the year during which the catechism was first published.

It is interesting to read in the Church Order how home, school, and church had to cooperate in catechism instruction. The students had to

David S. Schaff; 3 vols.; 6th ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 1.536–537.

² Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1.536–537. Schaff makes this remark against scholars as Van Alphen and Niemeyer who said that the division was even later than 1566.

³ J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 30.

learn the questions and answers of the catechism at school and at home. In the afternoon service, they had to say the questions and answers the minister had preached on the previous Sunday, and the questions and answers for this service. For that purpose the catechism had been divided into Lord's Days. The minister had to preach through the catechism at least once a year.⁴ The Church Order shows that the division into Lord's Days is connected with preaching.

Yet, the impression could still linger that the preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism was an afterthought. For the catechism was published in January of 1563, and the Church order which prescribes preaching on the catechism was not published until November of that year. History teaches differently, however. There are several indications that catechism preaching was intended right from the beginning when the Heidelberg Catechism was made.

An indication can be found in a letter Ursinus, the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism, wrote in 1563. He complains in this letter that he had too much to do. The authorities have added to his workload that he has to preach the catechism in the Sunday three o'clock catechism service. This sermon was previously preached by Olevianus.⁵ This shows that catechism preaching, at least in Heidelberg, the capital of the Palatinate, antedates the publication of the Church Order.

We can probably trace catechism preaching back right to the beginning of the catechism. In the preface to the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism, dated January 19, 1563, the elector urged and directed the

⁴ See the text in W. Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (3rd ed.; Zurich: Zollikon, n.d.) 149. The rule itself is formulated rather complicatedly. I will attempt an English translation: "Furthermore, catechism preaching, too, shall be observed every Sunday afternoon at the hour that is convenient for each place.... After this [the minister] has some among the young people say a certain number of questions of the Catechism explained in the preceding and especially in the following sermon (as we have let it be divided into Lord's Days for this reason) and which they previously have learned in school or at home. And when these have been said in the presence of all the people, the minister shall explain the next few questions, so that he will yearly preach through the catechism at least once a year." There are even more regulations concerning the catechism in the Church Order. Every Sunday in the afternoon, a three-page summary of the catechism should be read (184ff.). In cities and villages, the catechism service should be observed on every Sunday and Feastday. The church order also contains a special prayer to be said after the catechism sermon (200).

⁵ See for the quotation W. Hollweg, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961) 137.

preachers and teachers of his principedom to inculcate it into the young people in schools and churches, and into the common man from the pulpit.⁶ The Heidelberg Catechism was made to be taught in class as well as to be preached in church.

Catechism Preaching before the Heidelberg Catechism

Schaff said that the division of the Heidelberg Catechism into 52 Lord's Days goes back to Calvin. This implies—even though Schaff does not say so explicitly—that it was also customary in Calvin's Geneva to preach the catechism every Sunday. The last statement is correct; the first is not completely correct.

Calvin wrote two catechisms, one before he was expelled from Geneva, and one after his return. The second of these has the same form as the Heidelberg Catechism in questions and answers. This catechism was published in two languages: in French in 1542 and in Latin in 1545. The French edition has by way of footnotes a division into Lord's Days.⁷ This lack of division in the Latin version is remarkable. This version was meant for the ecclesiastical world in general, to show how the Reformed doctrine was taught in Geneva. It was therefore not necessary to make a division into Lord's Days. But the French version was made for Geneva, for the church members. They needed the division into Lord's Days since this catechism was preached on the Lord's Day. It is, however, not a division into 52 Lord's Days, as the Heidelberg Catechism, but a division into 55 Lord's Days. Does that mean that Geneva did not have the same rule as Heidelberg to preach yearly through the whole catechism? How was catechism preaching organized in Geneva?

Calvin had made the catechism to comply with the rules of the church order of Geneva of 1541 concerning the preaching. This church order prescribed that three services should be held on each Sunday; of these, the middle one, which begins at noon, is the catechism service: "At midday there is to be catechism, that is instruction of little children in all three

⁶ See Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 151.

⁷ See for the French text, Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 3ff.; the division in Lord's Days is not indicated. The Latin text was published in *Calvini Opera Selecta* (5 vols.; ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel; Munich: Kaiser, 1970) 2.72ff.; the division in Lord's Days is here indicated as chapters. An English translation was published in *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (vol. XXII of the Library of Christian Classics; ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) 88ff.

churches.”⁸ When this instruction is repeated later in the church order, something is added: “A definite formulary is to be composed by which they will be instructed, and on this, with the teaching given them, they are to be interrogated about what has been said, to see if they have listened and remembered well.”⁹

These regulations give us some insight into the customs of that time. The catechetical instruction of the church did not take place during the week, but on the Sunday.¹⁰ The service itself was used as a catechism class. Therefore the students had to say the catechism during the service, and they had to answer questions to show that they had understood the sermon. Who attended these catechism services? The ordinances do not make that completely clear, but certainly not just the children. The schoolmasters and the fathers were to accompany the children, the domestics should be sent, too, and the foreigners who lived in Geneva.¹¹

Nowhere in the church order of Geneva, however, do we find a rule that the catechism should be preached through within a year. Here is a difference between Geneva and Heidelberg. But in general there is a striking similarity concerning catechetical preaching. Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism was derived from Calvin. In fact, it was the general custom of the churches of the Reformation.

Catechism Preaching in the Churches of the Reformation

Catechism preaching can already be found with Luther. In 1527, ten years after Luther had published his ninety-five theses, church visitation was organized in the churches that had followed Luther on the path of reformation. One of the first church visitors was Luther himself. He now had the opportunity to see for himself how the reformation he had begun was progressing at the local level. He was appalled. He found that the common church people knew next to nothing, particularly in the rural areas. One of the main reasons was that the ministers had not been trained to be ministers of the Word. They were often former priests who were not

⁸ See the translation in Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 62.

⁹ Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 69.

¹⁰ Catechetical instruction was not limited to the church, however. The parents and the schoolmasters, too, had to instruct the children; see M. B. Van 't Veer, *Catechese en catechetische stof bij Calvijn* (doctoral dissertation, Free University; Kampen: Kok, 1942) 61ff., 90.

¹¹ Van 't Veer, *Catechese en catechetische stof bij Calvijn*, 171.

taught how to preach.

Then Luther revised sermons he had preached on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments and published these under the title "Larger Catechism" (1529). They were intended to serve as preaching models for the ministers, so that they could preach about the main parts of the doctrine.¹² To this Larger Catechism Luther added the Smaller Catechism, a catechism to be read daily and to be used for the instruction of the children. Catechetical instruction was Luther's answer when the reformation movement faltered through a lack of knowledge.

This led to the instruction concerning catechism preaching in the church order for Wittenberg, 1533. Every Sunday, early in the morning, the priest or deacon had to preach from the catechism. When the whole catechism had been dealt with, he had to start all over again. Thus the preacher had opportunity enough to explain well and diligently the whole catechism, especially that which the common people needed.¹³ Preaching from the catechism means here preaching about the main parts in which children and church members had to be instructed: the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, to which a part on the sacraments was added. There were differences between the Lutheran and the Calvinist practice of catechism preaching. The Larger Catechism of Luther gave examples of catechetical sermons. The Catechism of Geneva, on the other hand, did not consist of sermons, but was to be used as the starting point for preaching. Another difference is that in Lutheranism catechism preaching was from the beginning distinguished from catechetical instruction of the young members of the church. Separate catechetical instruction had started as early as 1521. The Reformed churches came late to the realization that the catechetical instruction which leads to admission to the Lord's Supper can best be conducted separately from the catechism preaching. This was the beginning of more than two centuries of catechism preaching

¹² A Latin and German version of the Larger Catechism can be found in J. T. Müller, *Die symbolische Bücher der evangelisch-lutherische Kirche* (new ed.; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1900) 375ff. An English translation is given in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (ed. and trans. Th. G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 358ff. The sermons on which the Larger Catechism was based are published in *Luther's Works* (vol. 51: *Sermons*, ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 137ff.

¹³ See for the text Th. L. Haitjema, "De prediking als catechismus-prediking" in *Handboek voor de prediking* (ed. S. F. H. J. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel; Amsterdam: P. J. Roscam Abbing, 1948) 2.287–288.

in the Lutheran churches.¹⁴

The need for catechism preaching was felt not only within Lutheranism, but also within the Zwinglian reformation. In 1532, Bullinger and Leo Judae made a Regulation for ministers for the city of Zurich. One of the rules was that the ministers should preach on an article of the Christian faith in the afternoon service. When in the next year the catechism of Leo Judae was published, this was used as the basis for catechism preaching.¹⁵

We may conclude that catechism preaching was instituted in the three main streams of the Reformation on the continent: within Lutheranism, Zwinglianism, and Calvinism. England and Scotland seem to have been the exceptions. I have not been able to find traces of catechism preaching there. The exception is the congregation of refugees which met in London. According to their church order, the catechism had to be preached.¹⁶

Schaff, therefore, was too limited when he saw behind the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism only the reformation of Calvin in Geneva. Catechism preaching was a common institution in the churches of the reformation on the European continent.

Catechism Preaching before the Reformation

Is catechism preaching, taken in the sense of preaching on the summaries of the Christian faith (the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the meaning of the Sacraments), an invention of the Reformation? Luther said, "We have the catechism on the pulpit, something which did not happen for a thousand years."¹⁷ This is correct in the sense that,

¹⁴ T. Hoekstra says that during the sixteenth century excellent rules were given for catechetical instruction in the Lutheran churches, but that in reality not much came of it; see his article "Catechese" in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie* (6 vols.; Kampen: Kok, 1925–1931) 1.428. W. Jetter, however, has shown with many examples that catechism preaching was fully developed in the Lutheran churches; see his "Katechismuspredigt" in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (36 vols.; ed. G. Krause and G. Müller; Berlin; De Gruyter, 1977–2004) 17.753–769. Catechism preaching was, according to Jetter, responsible for the establishing of a new kind of evangelical Christianity (756). He blames the Enlightenment as the cause for its disappearance (774ff.)

¹⁵ See K. Dijk, *De dienst der prediking* (Kampen: Kok, 1950) 406.

¹⁶ M. Micron, *De Christlike Ordinancien der Nederlantscher Gbemeinten te Londen* (ed. W. F. Dankbaar; 's Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956) 68. Noteworthy are the rules that the older children have to say by heart a part of the catechism, and that the whole congregation should be present in these services.

¹⁷ In his *Table Talk*, no. 4692; see Van 't Veer, *Catechese*, 153, footnote 16.

generally speaking, the preachers did not preach about the catechism. Yet, it can be shown that the necessity of catechism preaching was recognized during the Middle Ages.

To begin with The Netherlands, by the end of the thirteenth century the local priests were instructed to expound the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed every Sunday, and the Ten Commandments and the seven Sacraments of the church once a month or at least three or four times a year. From the additional remark that this exposition should be given in an easily understandable way and in the mother tongue, it appears that the intention was that the common church members should understand these articles of faith.¹⁸ The explanation will not have amounted to much, if it had to take place every Sunday in addition to the sermons on gospel or epistle. Yet a flood of explanations about the catechetical summaries show that the instruction of 1294 had its effect.¹⁹

A few years earlier a similar decision was made in England. Synod Lambeth 1281 complained about the lack of knowledge among the clergy. All local pastors were ordered to teach the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the two main commandments, the seven works of mercy, the seven main sins, the seven virtues, and the seven sacraments.²⁰

In Germany, Johannes Gerson preached catechetical material; he discussed the Ten Commandments and the Creed. Many other popular preachers preached on themes from the catechism.²¹ This must have led to a custom of catechetical preaching. A book about the ministry praises this kind of preaching. It is called a good custom when priests explain in the morning or afternoon service the Articles of Faith and the Ten Commandments for young and old, and ask them how much they have understood. This book was published in 1498, less than twenty-five years before the beginning of the Reformation movement.²²

Catechism preaching existed before the Lutheran reformation. We can even use Luther himself as a proof for this. Luther himself preached cate-

¹⁸ The text of this instruction is published and explained in A. Troelstra, *De toestand der catechese in Nederland gedurende de voor-reformatische eeuw* (doctoral dissertation; Utrecht; Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1901) 105ff.

¹⁹ See Troelstra, *Toestand der catechese*, 112ff.

²⁰ Troelstra, *Toestand der catechese*, 108. W. Jetter mentions that catechism preaching became an organised custom in the church; Synod Lambeth required it from the clergy four times a year; see his article "Katechismuspredigt," 747.

²¹ See Jetter, "Katechismuspredigt," 747.

²² The quotation is given in Troelstra, *Toestand der catechese*, 126.

chism before 1517.²³ And in his preface to the Larger Catechism, Luther mentioned the names of several manuals from the Middle Ages which contained everything the pastors should teach.²⁴ Luther, in instituting catechism preaching, only enforced a rule of the Middle Ages which was never really implemented in the churches.²⁵ Luther's insistence that his reformation first brought the catechism on the pulpit is only correct in the sense that then the rule was made and maintained.

How far back does this custom reach into the Middle Ages? At least as far as around A.D. 800, catechism preaching was emphasized in the restoration of the church under the influence of emperor Charlemagne of France. A rule dating from 789 orders the bishops to see to it that the priests maintain the true faith, understand the Lord's Prayer themselves, and preach it in a way that is understandable to all. An instruction from 852 says that each priest should study the explanation of the Creed and of the Lord's Prayer according to the tradition of the orthodox fathers extensively, and then by preaching this instruct the people entrusted to them.²⁶ These rules show that catechism preaching was neglected, but at the same time that its importance was recognized.

Catechetical preaching goes back even to the time before the Middle Ages. We can find sermons for catechetical instruction already during the patristic period. Well known are the sermons Augustine (354–430) preached on the Creed. He also preached a series of sermons on the Decalogue. Other examples of catechetical preaching can be found in Cyril of Jerusalem given around A.D. 350. He explained the Creed, the sacraments, and the worship service in these sermons.²⁷

²³ Van 't Veer, *Catechese*, 169. See also Luther's introduction for his catechism preaching in 1528: "It has hitherto been our custom to teach the elements and fundamentals of Christian knowledge and life four times each year and we have therefore arranged to preach on these things for two weeks in each quarter, four days a week at two o'clock in the afternoon," *Luther's Works* (vol. 51 of *Sermons I*; ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 135.

²⁴ Müller, *Die symbolische Bücher*, 375; translation in *Book of Concord*, 358.

²⁵ See Troelstra, *Toestand der catechese*, 127ff.; Van 't Veer, *Catechese*, 153ff.

²⁶ See the quotations in J. C. L. Gieseler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (3rd ed.; Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1831) II/1.71; see also Jetter, "Katechismuspredigt," 747.

²⁷ Sermons on the creed were at the time usually not preached in public since the creed was seen as something only for the initiated. Therefore sermons about the creed could only be preached on special occasions for special persons; see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed.; New York: Longman, 1983) 32, 62.

Catechism, as the instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian religion, is as old as Christianity. Already at the time of the Church Fathers one of the means of catechetical instruction was catechism preaching.

Catechism Preaching in The Netherlands

The third remark Schaff made was that catechism preaching was maintained especially in The Netherlands and in churches descended from The Netherlands. That is correct, but observations need to be made. This preaching did not take root without opposition and was not maintained without the support of churches in other countries. First, we will see how catechism preaching became established in The Netherlands.

As early as 1566, three years after its adoption in Heidelberg, this catechism was preached on a regular basis in Amsterdam.²⁸ That means that catechism preaching had been established locally even before a church order for the Reformed churches had been adopted.

The first attempt to organize the life of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands was made at a meeting held in Wezel, in 1568. In the regulations that were made there, catechism preaching was dealt with. Three forms of catechetical instruction are distinguished; next to the church, the parents and the schoolmasters had to teach the catechism. Concerning the duty of the church, the general rule was given that every effort should be made that the children not just learn to recite the catechism to the letter, but also understand what it means. Therefore the children were to be interrogated (publicly, during the worship service!) to see whether they knew the words, but also whether they understood the content. The brothers who met at Wezel realized that therefore simple language was required for the catechism preaching. To say it in the words of the articles of Wezel, "In explaining the catechism more than anything else a language is needed which, as much as possible, is very plain and accomodated to the understanding of children."²⁹ Catechism preaching, as a means of primary instruction, requires plain language.

By the time the provincial synod of Dordrecht met in 1574, catechism preaching seems to have become established in the churches. This Synod made the regulation that even in the afternoon service in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated "the preaching of the catechism will be maintained as

²⁸ T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde homiletiek* (Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning, 1937) 369.

²⁹ The text in F. L. Rutgers, *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der zestiende eeuw* (2nd ed.; Dordrecht: Van den Tol, 1980) 21.

usual.”³⁰

This is not the only reason why preaching the catechism was discussed at this synod. The question was raised as to whether it would not be good to have good homilies on the Heidelberg Catechism. Presumably the ministers did not find it easy to preach on material such as the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. At this point we remember Luther, who intended his Larger Catechism as a collection of model sermons on catechetical material. Synod, however, came up with a different solution. At meetings of classis, the ministers were to take turns in giving brief expositions about some questions and answers from the catechism. In this way, they could help one another and learn to explain the catechism “thoroughly and edifyingly.”³¹ But this seems not to have been sufficient. The national Synod of 1581 had to deal with a request to have the homilies of Dr. Bastingius or some other explanations on the catechism printed after they had been looked over by persons appointed by synod. It was decided that Bastingius and the classis his church belonged to would make explanations of the catechism.³²

Synod 1586 again made a regulation concerning catechism preaching. The ministers everywhere should keep the rule to preach the catechism in the afternoon service. In this way, they would preach through the catechism

³⁰ Rutgers, *Acta*, 148. The rule was repeated at the national Synod of Dordrecht, 1578 (*Acta*, 251) and weakened by Synod of Middelburg, 1581 (*Acta*, 409).

³¹ Rutgers, *Acta*, 160; see for the question, 212.

³² Rutgers, *Acta*, 418, 438; see also 371. Two words are used in the request: *homilia* and *exegetata*. The Synod decided that not *homilia* but *exegetata* should be made. S. C. Grobler says that *homilia* are popular sermons directed toward the application on the lives of the people, and the *exegetata* are sermons that are exegetically founded. According to Grobler this means that Synod Middelburg 1581 decided that not popular explanations of the catechism should be made, but exegetical explanations of Scripture [passages] connected with the content of the Catechism; see his article “Katechismusprediking en gemeente-opbou” in C. J. H. Venter, ed. *God bou op deur sy woord* (Potchefstroom: Departement Sentrale Publikasies, 1988) 128. I think that Grobler is correct in deriving from the decision that Synod thought that simple sermons (*homilia*) were not enough. There is no ground, however, for the supposition that *exegetata* are exegetical explanations of Scripture. Synod wanted Bastingius to write exegetical expositions of the catechism. This explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism was published in 1588, and republished as: Hieremias Bastingius, *Verclaringe op den Catechisme der Christelicker Religie* (ed. F. L. Rutgers; Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1893).

in a year, according to the division of the catechism into Lord's Days.³³

These decisions could give rise to the impression that catechism preaching was established in The Netherlands without much difficulty. It is true that in the end the catechism was preached in all the churches, but that custom was not firmly established until one hundred years after these decisions. Before that time, catechism preaching had to overcome two challenges. The first objection was of a practical nature, the second was an attack against catechism preaching as such.

Several practical problems arose. Catechism preaching was not always easy to organize, especially in the small villages in the countryside. Some ministers served several rural congregations and preached in three or four places in turn. In that situation it was difficult to have regular catechism preaching. But more importantly, the catechism service was not a popular service. One ecclesiastical meeting decided that the ministers in the country who have only one congregation, should preach the catechism in the afternoon, even when only a few people attended. They gave as reason: to prevent profanation of the sabbath.³⁴ The attendance at the catechism service was low. In one classis, the attendance in the different churches was polled. Church A had announced the catechism service three times, but no one had turned up. In church B, no more than two people had been in church for three catechism services in a row. Church C had tried many times to hold a catechism service, but there were no attendants. In church D, the caretaker had been the only listener.³⁵ This should not be seen as a rejection of catechism preaching as such. The people had been accustomed to having the Sunday afternoon off for their own enjoyment. It took about a century to firmly establish catechism preaching. Once established, however, catechism preaching resulted, to use the words of Schotel, who traced its history, in "mature congregations which were not tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine."³⁶

The second objection against this form of preaching was weightier. The minister of the church of Gouda broke the rule of Synod 1586 and refused to preach the catechism. Ostensibly the reason was that a human

³³ Rutgers, *Acta*, 501.

³⁴ See the decision of the provincial Synod of Brielle, in A. N. Hendriks "De Catechismusprediking," *De Reformatie* 54 (1978–1979) 757ff.

³⁵ From an article of S. Tuininga in *De Reformatie*, 62 (1986–1987) 683.

³⁶ See for the development, G. D. J. Schotel, *Geschiedenis van den oorsprong, de invoering en de lotgevallen van den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* (Amsterdam: W. H. Kirberger, 1863).

text should not be read and preached in the churches. The major assemblies did not let this pass. A provincial Synod admitted that a catechism in the form of questions and answers is not prescribed in Scripture. However, having and teaching a summary of the fundamental articles of the Christian religion is an apostolic custom (Heb. 6:1). It has always been maintained in the church and has great usefulness.³⁷

The real reason behind the refusal to preach the catechism was the fact that several ministers, especially of Arminian conviction, had objections against the doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism. That came to light in a particular incident a few years before the Synod of Dort. Remonstrant ministers were asked to state their agreement with a number of propositions taken from the Heidelberg Catechism. These ministers, however, could not declare that they agreed with the doctrine of the catechism.³⁸

As a result of these objections, the preaching of the catechism was discussed at the Synod of Dort, 1618.³⁹

³⁷ See Hendriks, “De catechismusprediking,” 774; and Grobler, “Kategismus-prediking en gemeente-opbou,” 123–124.

³⁸ This happened at the Conference of Delft, 1613, see the theses in J. D. De Lind Van Wijngaarden, *De Dordtsche Leerregels of de Vijf Artikelen tegen de Remonstranten* (2nd ed.; Utrecht: Ruys, 1905) 52ff. The church order of Utrecht, 1612, published under Remonstrant influence, is interesting in this connection. It contains an article on catechism preaching. This preaching should be maintained in those places where it has been established (this is contrary to the rule in the nationally adopted church order that the catechism should be preached in all the churches). This church order also says that the rule about catechism preaching is temporary (*by provisie*); see *Christelijke kercken-ordeninge der stadt, steden, ende landen van Utrecht* (Utrecht: Samuel de Roy, 1612) 10.

³⁹ H. Kaajan summarizes the difficulties around catechism preaching as follows:

- the negligence of the ministers themselves who either did not preach or did not urge the people to come to the service
- the ministers had the care of two or more churches and could not sufficiently supervise both
- the difficulty to refrain the people on Sundays from games or work
- the unwillingness of the Remonstrants to preach the Heidelberg Catechism
- the fact that the government allowed the people to work on the field on Sundays.

See his *De groote Synode van Dordrecht in 1618–1619* (Amsterdam: De Standaard, n.d.) 94.

The Discussion at the Synod of Dort

It is noteworthy that catechism preaching was discussed at the Synod of Dort when not only the national representatives were present, but also the representatives of the foreign churches. Catechism preaching was not seen as merely a Dutch affair. Remarkable is that in the *Acts of Synod* only the advice of the foreign delegates has been preserved. Since these pieces of advice form a direct source for the history of catechism preaching in the Reformed churches of that time, we will here give some extracts.⁴⁰

The *theologians of Great Britain* began with the general rule that the practice of the Apostles, reason, and experience teach us that catechising is necessary. There are two opportunities to explain the sacred doctrines of the faith: the usual one takes place every Sunday, and the special one belongs to the preparation for attending the Lord's Supper. At the first one, the catechism service, people of all ages should be present, but only the young will have to submit themselves to the interrogation. This shows that the English representatives see the catechism service as a public catechism lesson. The public recitation of the questions and answers is seen as important not just for the younger, but also for the older people. It helps them, too, to memorize the catechism.

The British also had some advice for the minister. He should explain every answer as clearly as possible. And he should ask his students about his explanation, to see whether they have understood it. If it appeared from the answers that the explanation was understood, he could be satisfied, but if not, he should give (if possible) a clearer explanation and repetition. Another interesting remark was that the government should uphold catechism preaching. If the minister was negligent, he should be punished, and if the older people were not present at the catechism sermon, they should be fined.

The *theologians of the Palatinate* stated that they did not doubt that the main reason why so many heresies could be found everywhere was the neglect of catechising. They described the situation in their state. On Sundays in the afternoon a brief catechism sermon was preached. After that, the minister would come down from the pulpit, read some parts of the doctrine, and explain some selected questions and answers of the catechism to the adults who had never gone to school. The afternoon service there had

⁴⁰ See *Acta ofte Handelingen des Nationalen Synodi* (Dordrecht: Canin, 1621) 1.30–41. The advice usually deals with catechism teaching as well as catechism preaching. In our summary, we will limit ourselves to the remarks about the preaching.

a double function: it was for catechism preaching as well as for catechism teaching of those who did not learn the catechism at the schools.

The *theologians of Hussia*, another German state, declared that first of all there should be a catechism which not only conformed to Scripture, but was also suited for the understanding of the students. The Dutch churches had this in the Heidelberg Catechism. These theologians, then, wanted to go on record that they did not agree with the opposition of the Remonstrants against the Heidelberg Catechism.

The ministers had the duty to teach the catechism at the regular hours and to preach the catechism. Those who were negligent were to be punished. The parents were to be present at the public catechetical interrogations, so that they could repeat the instruction to their children. In the villages, it would be enough if catechism was taught after the catechism preaching; in the cities, there would be in addition two catechism classes during the week.

The *theologians from Switzerland* explained that there were differences in practice between their republics, but that instruction in the catechism was maintained everywhere. On Sundays many sermons were delivered in cities and villages, one of these being the catechism sermon. The catechism would be preached through every year in order that by repetition it be retained in the memory.

The catechism service on Sundays was to be attended by those who no longer went to school and by those who could not attend school. On a work day during the week, the catechism was preached for the students. That meant that every member of the church weekly heard the catechism sermon.

The practice of *Geneva* was not included in the report of the theologians from Switzerland, but explained separately. The representatives of Geneva said that a form was needed in which the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the doctrine of the sacraments was clearly and briefly explained. Two or three sections of this form, together with a few pertinent Scripture passages, were to be explained in the afternoon service on Sundays.

Here, too, the problem seemed to be well known that the ministers could hardly get the people to attend the catechism service. The ministers should then insist that at least the young children and the older children be present. A special warning was added against long and oratorical explanations of the catechism. The explanation should discuss the matter in questions to evoke the agreement of the listeners.

Then followed the advice of the theologians from cities in Germany. Those of *Bremen* began with a strong statement: catechetical instruction is

the foundation for the upbuilding of the church. Three ways to learn the catechism were mentioned and discussed: in the school, in the homes, and in the church. About the catechism in the church it is stated that it would be held either instead of the second sermon, or after that. This would then be a rather informal part of the service, for here, too, we find a public interrogation. At the end of their advice, these theologians again made a strong statement: If the young people are well instructed in the catechism, then afterwards one need not worry overmuch about the adults.

The explanation of catechetical instruction in *Emden* began with a historical remark: Since nothing is more necessary for obtaining a firm knowledge of the saving doctrine than catechizing, and this is as the foundation of the spiritual house, therefore our forebears at the beginning of the Reformation of 1520 have done their utmost that the children and the young people too would be taught the first principles of the Christian doctrine. This remark shows that the Reformed knew that they were in line with the Lutheran reformation on the point of catechetical instruction.

The report from Emden is also interesting because it shows how a catechism service was organized. The schoolmasters would bring their pupils to the church every Sunday afternoon. The ministers in this service first prayed, then mentioned the main parts of the Christian religion: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the institution of Baptism and of the Lord's Supper, church discipline, and the Lord's Prayer. Next they required the children to recite the questions and answers which would be explained during that service. (The children were supposed to know the whole catechism of Emden by heart by the time they were ten years old.) Next the ministers would explain the recited questions and answers briefly and apply them to the lives of the people, just like a sermon on a passage from Scripture. Within three months, they would have repeated the whole catechism.

This northern part of Germany experienced the same problem with establishing catechism preaching that was felt everywhere. But the ministers should not give up. The ministers in the villages, also in those places where only a few people attended the service, gave brief catechetical sermons during the Spring, the Fall, and the Winter. For experience teaches that the hearers get an aversion against preaching from long sermons.

Such was the advice from the foreign delegates. All were in favour of the established practice of catechism preaching. Small wonder that the Synod of Dort maintained catechism preaching next to the teaching of the catechism by parents and schoolmasters. The Synod decided that it was the duty of the ministers to hold catechism sermons that were properly short and, as much as possible, suitable for the understanding, not only of the adult, but also of

the youth.⁴¹ In the Church Order (Article 68), the rule that the catechism should be preached in the afternoon service was maintained.

To return once more to Schaff, he said correctly that catechism preaching has been established particularly in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. But it is also noteworthy that at the time of the Synod of Dort the whole Reformed world agreed with catechism preaching and practised it.

Part 2

In the first part, I have attempted to give some historical background for the custom of catechism preaching. The goal of this historical section was to show that catechism preaching is not an isolated custom. Too often it is seen as limited to a small section of the churches of the Reformation during a very limited period of time. History teaches us, however, that this particular type of preaching is much older than the Reformation, and that it was quite widespread in the churches of the Reformation. Catechism preaching is not an eccentricity.

We have to say more than that, however. History can by itself never justify a practice. We have to discuss next the more important question of whether catechism preaching can justify its existence before the forum of Scripture. Several objections have been brought in against it. In this part, I would like to deal with three important objections and end with a more general observation.

Preaching from a Human Text

The most important objection follows from the fact that catechisms are human documents. Does that not mean that preaching on the catechism is preaching from a human text? Is preaching on a section from the catechism not a contradiction in terms? For all of us will agree that good preaching is, by definition, administration of the Word of God.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has formulated this objection in a straightforward and inoffensive manner:

The function of a catechism, I would have thought, ultimately, is not to provide material for preaching; it is to safeguard the correctness of the preaching, and to safeguard the interpretations of the people as they read their Bibles. As that is the main function of creeds and catechisms, it is

⁴¹ *Acta ofte Handelinghen des Nationalen Synodi*, 1.51.

surely wrong therefore to just preach constantly year after year on the catechism, instead of preaching the Word directly from Scripture itself, with the Scriptures always open before you, and the minds of the people directed to that rather than to men's understanding of it.⁴²

This criticism is based on the conviction that preaching is preaching the Word of God. This leads Lloyd-Jones to reject catechism preaching. This kind of preaching would be preaching on human understanding of that Word, instead of preaching on a text from that Word.

The interesting thing is that defenders of catechism preaching have exactly the same starting point and yet do not come to the conclusion that catechism preaching is impossible. Dr. T. Hoekstra, who wrote a standard Dutch text on homiletics, defines preaching as the explication and application of the Word of God revealed in Holy Scripture.⁴³ Yet Hoekstra does not think that catechism preaching is inappropriate. His book on preaching has a section on catechism preaching, where he says:

In catechism preaching the Lord comes to his people and discloses the mysteries of his covenant of grace for his congregation. Therefore catechism preaching is administration of the Word. Strictly speaking it is not preaching from the catechism but from the Word.⁴⁴

Defenders of catechism preaching maintain that in these sermons, too, the Word of God is preached.

Using basically the same definition of preaching, these theologians come to a different conclusion concerning the scriptural justification of catechism preaching. We can, therefore, not easily decide the whole matter on the basis of a definition. We will have to dig deeper and ask the question: what is the character of a creed or confession? What is its relation to Scripture?

Let us begin to answer this question by looking at one of the creeds: the Apostles' Creed. This creed was not bodily taken out of Scripture. There is no passage in either the Old or the New Testament where this creed is given in extenso. That does not make this creed unscriptural, however. Its content is taken out of Scripture. Revelations given in different

⁴² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 187–188.

⁴³ Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde homiletiek*, 157; see also on 160: The administration of the Word in the congregation of the believers is the explanation and the application of the Word of God.

⁴⁴ Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde homiletiek*, 371; see C. Trimp, *De preek: Een praktisch verhaal over het maken en houden van preken* (3rd ed.; Kampen: Van den Berg, 1986) 9.

places of Scripture have been collected and brought together in an organized way. The structure of the Apostles' Creed is trinitarian, based on the baptismal command of Matthew 28:19. And the content of God's revelation is summarized as the trinitarian God and his work. The Apostles' Creed presents the doctrine of Scripture, a systematical summary of the biblical truth.

The same can be said for the later, more extensive confessions of the Reformation period. They, too, give a summary of scriptural content. To give an example, it became important in the struggle of the sixteenth century to define the basis for our belief in God. Many Reformed confessions organized and summarized the scriptural revelation about itself. The summary form as such cannot be found in Scripture, yet these confessions insert lines from Scripture in their formulations and prove their doctrine with texts appended to the articles.

The question which we have to answer in connection with catechism preaching is: what is the character of this doctrine, this summary given in the catechism? There is no doubt that the formulation of the doctrine is made by man. But what about the doctrine itself? Is the doctrine present in Scripture, or is the doctrine man-made?

A Reformed theologian like Charles Hodge sees the doctrines as human products. Scripture contains isolated facts. Those facts cannot be pieced together at random; the relations between them are in the facts. Still, we have to make the connections. This does not mean, however, that the doctrine is of lesser value, according to Hodge. Actually, the doctrine is on a higher level than Scripture:

A much higher kind of knowledge is thus obtained, than by the mere accumulation of isolated facts.... We cannot know what God has revealed in his Word unless we understand, at least in some good measure, the relation in which the separate truths therein contained stand to each other. It cost the Church centuries of study and controversy to solve the problem concerning the person of Christ; that is, to adjust and bring into harmonious arrangement all the facts which the Bible teaches on that subject.⁴⁵

A similar opinion can be found in A. Kuyper when he describes theology as "that science which has the revealed knowledge of God as the object of

⁴⁵ Ch. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London and Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1883) 1.1–17; the quotation is on p. 2. Hodge speaks here about the task of (systematic) theology, but from his reference to Christology it appears that he sees the creeds as standing on the same (high) level.

its investigation and raises it to understanding.”⁴⁶ Kuyper, who could always find interesting parallels, compares the revealed knowledge of God with ore, which has to be melted to become shining gold, or with grain that has to be turned into bread before it can be eaten.⁴⁷

Both Hodge and Kuyper speak about theology rather than about the creeds. Their view, however, has implications for the creeds. If this is true, then the catechism, summarizing the doctrine of Scripture, may be “a higher kind of knowledge,” but this knowledge goes beyond the revelation in Scripture, for Scripture gives only bare facts.

It is at this point that we have to disagree with these theologians.⁴⁸ The Bible does not reveal merely bare facts. It does not give grain that has yet to be worked into edible bread. The Bible itself provides insight into the meaning of the facts. The relations between the truths of Scripture are indicated in that same Scripture. To borrow Hodge’s expression, the “higher knowledge” is present in God’s Word; or, God’s word in Scripture is the bread of life.

To give a few examples in connection with the Apostles’ Creed:

- Matthew 28:19–20 connects the Trinity with baptism and the obligation to keep Christ’s commands.
- Ephesians 1:3–14 speaks about the many ways in which the Trinity is involved in our salvation.
- Genesis 17:1 shows that God’s omnipotence is not a mere fact but is of tremendous importance in the life of Abraham (and of every believer). All that Abraham has to do is walk in uprightness before God, for God is able to take care of Abraham’s life.
- Genesis 1 tells us about God’s creation work and how God determined man’s place in creation (v. 26).

Or, to give examples concerning the doctrine of Scripture:

- 2 Timothy 3:16–17 connects the inspiration of Scripture with the

⁴⁶ A. Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (trans. J. H. De Vries; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 299.

⁴⁷ Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 296, 597–598; see also 567, 570.

⁴⁸ See for criticism on Hodge, J. M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 77ff. I agree particularly with Frame’s criticism that the facts in Scripture are not brute facts without interpretation. Rather, the Bible describes and interprets its own facts. See for criticism on A. Kuyper, J. Douma, “Encyclopedie,” in *Oriëntatie in de theologie* (ed. J. Douma; 2nd ed.; Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 1987) 19.

importance of the Old Testament for teaching, rebuking, etc. The goal is also indicated: “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

- 2 Peter 1:20–21 shows that the divine origin of Scripture is important for the interpretation of it.
- Psalm 19:7 does not just mention the fact that the law of the Lord is perfect, but also says what this perfect law is for: it revives the soul.

And so we can go on, but it will be clear by now that Scripture is not a collection of loose thoughts which we somehow have to piece together. The connections between the doctrines are given in Scripture. The church did only two things in making the creeds. First, it brought together revelations that were spread out over Scripture. Second, it often expressed these truths in its own words. But it did not construct the doctrine; rather, it read the doctrine as it is present in Scripture. The creeds and confessions bring together and formulate the doctrines that are present in Scripture itself. The doctrine is not the higher understanding of revelation (Hodge) or the finished product of what is given in a raw form in Scripture (Kuyper) but the underlying structure in revelation.

At this point, the decision has to be made as to whether catechism preaching is possible in principle. If a catechism is a human system of amorphous elements in Scripture, then preaching the catechism is impossible. But if the catechism formulates a doctrine that is present in Scripture, preaching the catechism is possible. The wording of the catechism is not infallible, to be sure. But the truths expressed are still those of Scripture, not of theology. Catechism preaching is preaching the Word of God.

Actually, catechism preaching is a good way to do justice to what the apostle Paul calls “the whole counsel of God.” When he said farewell to the elders of Ephesus, he said that he did not hesitate “to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 RSV). This counsel, or plan,⁴⁹ can be identified with what Paul in the same speech calls “the gospel of God’s grace” (v. 24) and “preaching the kingdom” (v. 25). When this is called “counsel” or “plan” it proves that God’s work for salvation is not an improvisation but according to his plan and his divine will. Paul in this con-

⁴⁹ The word is *boule*, used in Acts for a human decision or plan in Acts 5:38, 27:12, 42, and for God’s plan concerning David in 13:36. The word is used three times for God’s plan concerning Jesus Christ, in Acts 2:23, 4:28, and 20:28. The first two of these texts are more limited in scope; they emphasize that Christ’s death is according to God’s plan. The third speaks of the comprehensive plan of God.

text emphasizes in particular the word “whole.” He has preached the whole counsel of God. No part of God’s work of salvation has been neglected by him in his preaching. Therefore Paul cannot be blamed when a hearer is condemned and punished by God. For Paul did not give a reduced version of the gospel.

This expression of Paul has been used, correctly in my view, as a rule for preaching. No part of the whole plan of God’s salvation for sinners should be neglected in the preaching. It is very easy, however, to neglect some part of the full plan of God. When a minister chooses a text he can handle or he has an idea about, he can easily be one-sided in his choice of a text. When a minister has the need of the congregation foremost in his mind, he can choose texts he thinks the congregation needs and again be one-sided. The catechism, concentrating on the doctrinal structure of God’s revelation, contains a survey of the content of Scripture. As such, the catechism is helpful for the congregation to grasp the central content of God’s revelation. It is helpful for the minister, too, since it can prevent one-sidedness in his preaching. Just as continued text preaching is beneficial to keep catechism preaching fresh, so continued catechism preaching is beneficial to keep text preaching well rounded.

Two Practical Objections

The main question has now been answered. Catechism preaching cannot be rejected for the reason that only Scripture should be preached. More objections, however, have been brought in against catechism preaching. In this section, I would like to discuss two objections stating that catechism preaching is not feasible for practical reasons.

It is sometimes thought that catechism preaching is by definition impractical. The doctrines are preached, but they are separated from real life. Catechism preaching has no application to the life of the hearers.⁵⁰

It is always one of the greatest challenges for the preacher to preach in such a way that the hearers understand the implications of God’s word for their lives. Preaching should be directed to people in their circumstances. It should touch the hearts of the listeners so that they realize the importance of the message for themselves and know what they should do with it. This

⁵⁰ “Furthermore, confessions and catechisms present doctrine abstracted from its existential context—the life-situation of Scripture—and thus obscure its practical relevance or tempt us not to apply it at all.” D. Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* (ed. S. T. Logan, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986) 269.

is, however, a general aspect of preaching. The requirement that the sermon should apply to the listeners is not limited to catechism preaching; it is a requirement for all preaching. When a minister preaches a specific text, he faces the same requirement. Preachers will, from time to time, fail to show the relevance of the sermon for the listeners. That does not mean, however, that it is in general impossible to apply the text to the lives of the people.

Is it then by definition impossible to preach the catechism in such a way that the importance of the doctrine for daily life is highlighted? Everyone who knows the Heidelberg Catechism will say no. That has to do with the way the doctrine is explained here. In the Heidelberg Catechism, the application is given in the explanation of the doctrine.

The Heidelberg Catechism sets the tone in its famous first question and answer:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ....

This is very personal and very applicable. It tells me that I am not left on my own. I need not face life and death all alone. Jesus Christ has bought me with his blood. He takes care of me.

When the catechism next discusses what I need to know, we do not receive a dry table of contents. I have to know, first, how great *my* sin and misery are; second how *I* am delivered from all *my* sins and misery; third, how *I* am to be thankful to God for such deliverance. This determines the manner in which the doctrine is explained. In all subsequent answers, the catechism discusses how I am personally involved.

To give one more example, take the doctrine of the Trinity. That our God is three persons is a reality, a fact. But does it have significance for our lives? The catechism speaks about the Trinity in connection with the Apostles' Creed. It confesses the fact of the Trinity on the basis of revelation: "Since there is only one God, why do you speak of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Because God has so revealed himself in his Word that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God" (Q&A 25). But already before that, the catechism has shown the importance of the three persons for us: God the Father and our creation; God the Son and our redemption; God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification (Lord's Day 8). God is as triune God involved in our lives.

Because of the practical character of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is easy to preach the doctrine in a way that is directly relevant for the hearers. Beginning ministers often have experienced that the application is easier in the catechism sermon than in the text sermon.

It must be admitted that the tone of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is different. This may well be the reason for the objection related above that preaching the doctrine would be irrelevant. The Shorter Catechism does not bring the doctrine close by speaking about you and me. Its goal is to give a crystal clear explanation of the doctrine. Man is usually referred to in the third person. Consider, for example, the rightly famous first question and answer.⁵¹ “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Here, however, the application is not far away. If it is man’s chief end to glorify and to enjoy God, then I have to aim at glorifying God and living close to him. We are also helped here because the second question and answer, by exception, addresses us: “What rule has God given to direct *us* how *we* may glorify and enjoy him? The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct *us* how *we* may glorify and enjoy him.” Taking this into account, a sermon that addresses the hearers can easily be made on this doctrine.

It will be more difficult, to be honest, in other instances. Take for example the Trinity, Q&A 6: “How many persons are there in the Godhead? There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” The catechism does not give any indication as to why this doctrine is important. Yet the presupposition, also of the Westminster Catechisms, is that these confessed truths are important in the lives of believers. There is all the more reason to remind the congregation not only of the fact but also of the importance of these doctrines. Already the older explanations on the Westminster Shorter Catechism show the practical relevance of the confessed truths.⁵² It cannot be maintained that catechism preaching is by definition preaching without application.

The second practical objection brought in against catechism preaching is that it is repetitive. The Heidelberg Catechism was, after it had been completed, divided into 52 Lord’s Days, with the expressed purpose to be preached through on the 52 Lord’s Days of a year. Calvin’s catechism was divided into 55 Lord’s Days. Unless they had a longer year in Geneva, that

⁵¹ See the article of B. B. Warfield, “The First Question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 379ff.

⁵² See e.g. the monumental explanation in two volumes of Th. Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993). See for the Trinity, 1:142ff., with brief indications for the application at the end.

means that preaching the catechism would stretch out over thirteen months. Today, the churches that maintain catechism preaching are somewhat more free,⁵³ but I think that in most congregations the catechism preaching will have come full circle in a year and a half. Is this repetition not deadening? Most listeners have already heard it over and over again.

The first answer to this objection is that those who made the regulation of catechism preaching thought the repetition an advantage instead of a disadvantage. They saw a need for repeating the doctrine over and over again, so that the church members would know it thoroughly. And when we think about it, we have to agree. The catechism deals with the summary of the doctrine of God and his great works in history: creation, promise of redemption, Christ's work, salvation, sanctification, and the renewal of all things. These should be repeated since they are the central tenets of the Christian faith.⁵⁴

It is common experience that a firm grasp on things tends to disappear without constant repetition. You may have learned at school all fifty states of the United States, but unless this knowledge is refreshed, it will become very hazy over time. Imagine—and this is not an imagined example; things like this have happened—that someone who has a friend in L.A. asks someone going to New York to deliver a parcel to his friend. Or, even worse, someone going to India is asked to deliver something in Indonesia. Unless the knowledge acquired in geography class is refreshed, things become blurred.

This should not happen to the knowledge of God. When we pray to him, we should know who he is. When we praise him, we should know what he did for us. When we ask things from him, we should know what he prom-

⁵³ The Church Order of the Synod of Dort 1618–1619 took over the earlier regulation that the ministers everywhere, according to the rule, must explain briefly the summary of the Christian doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism in the afternoon service “so that it can be concluded yearly.” See the text in Haitjema, “De prediking als catechismus-prediking,” 291. Synod Utrecht 1905 allowed more freedom by adding “as much as possible” (can be concluded yearly); see Joh. Jansen, *Korte verklaring van de kerkenordening* (Kampen: Kok, 1923) 296. See also W. W. J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent: A Practical Guide to the Use of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1990) 247–248. Catechism preaching was assigned to the afternoon service because traditionally the teaching element was more prominent in this service.

⁵⁴ See also E. G. van Teylingen, “Der Katechismus in der Predigt” in *Handbuch zum Heidelberger Katechismus* (L. Coenen ed.; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1963) 192–194.

ises us. Daily we live before him and have to know his will in order to do it. To live with God we need constantly to be reminded of God's revelation.

The things of the faith bear repeating. Paul says it in Philippians 3:1: "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you." Paul had taught these things before. But he knows how easily they are forgotten, snowed under by the many things that happen daily. He therefore puts them in writing so that the congregation can go back to these truths (see also Phil. 3:18).

In much the same way, the basic content of Scripture should be repeated so that we do not lose sight of it. Catechism preaching is an important means to keep fresh the basic knowledge of the mighty works of God. We have to live in Christ, "rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as [we] were taught" (Col. 2:7).

Preaching on a Topic

As a final remark I would like to point to the fact that ministers often feel the need to preach on a topic. I would not be surprised if not a few ministers preach a kind of private catechetical sermon from time to time. I have heard that kind of sermon, but let me give an example that I did not hear. A minister realizes at a certain moment that his congregation needs more instruction on baptism. So he decides to take as his text Matthew 28:19. In his sermon, he discusses all the places of the New Testament where the word "baptism" occurs. He deals successively with the baptism of John the Baptist, the baptism instituted by Jesus Christ, and the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

This is, obviously, not an example of a textual sermon. Matthew 28:19 may officially be the text, but it only serves as occasion for the sermon. This can easily be seen. In this text, the relation between the Trinity and baptism is central, but this connection does not function in the sermon. The sermon only uses the word "baptism" from the text. Actually, the sermon looks like a sermon on the section on baptism from the catechism. Yet, it is not a catechism sermon, either.

Two differences can be noticed. In the first place, this approach confuses words with concepts. The impression is given that the biblical teaching concerning the sacrament of baptism can be received by collecting all the texts that use the word "baptism." It can easily be shown, however, that this is not correct. To understand the biblical teaching on the sacrament of baptism, the precursor of baptism, circumcision, also has to be considered. Since the material was collected around the *word* "baptism," these texts cannot play a role. The word-method leaves out many texts that should be taken into con-

sideration. On the other hand, too many texts are included. The two texts mentioning baptism with the Spirit contain the word “baptism” but do not speak about the sacrament of baptism. A sermon on baptism based on the word is, on the one hand, too inclusive, and on the other, too limited.

The second problem with this type of preaching is that it neglects what the church has learned about the doctrines during many centuries. The church has been preaching and teaching baptism for centuries, and in the course of this has learned to avoid pitfalls and misleading expressions. The church has been exposed to heretical teaching and has consciously rejected that on the basis of Scripture. All this is neglected. The minister starts all over again on his own, as if we were still living at the end of the first century. When a topic is preached, it is better to use the wisdom the church has garnered through centuries of teaching. In other words, when a topic is preached, it is better to do so according to the catechism.

Actually, strict textual preaching and catechetical preaching form an ideal combination, in my opinion. Text preaching teaches the specific meaning of a specific text. It is as varied as Scripture is varied. It can highlight a detail from God’s work that took place thousands of years ago, or an aspect of the law of God. Preaching on texts gives a kaleidoscopic variety. It is always new and always surprising. In addition, specific needs can easily be addressed by choosing specific texts.

The congregation, however, should not lose sight of the great themes, the underlying structure of the Bible. This prevents unintentional one-sidedness, and gives resistance against false teachings and the vanities of our own time. The faith of the congregation needs a backbone. This is provided by the catechism.

Catechism preaching, then, is a good means for the congregation to remain obedient to “the form of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Rom. 6:17).