

WHY CATECHISM PREACHING IN A SECOND WORSHIP SERVICE?

Recently Rev. G. H. Visscher participated in a forum in a local Christian Reformed Church where the second worship service was being discussed. He was asked to present the case for the historic practice of having a second service wherein the Catechism would be the guide for preaching. Here follows an adapted version of his address.

Why a second worship service? Why catechism preaching in this second worship service? Those are the two questions that need to be answered in all kinds of Reformed churches. From the outset it is good to realize that struggles in this regard are not just a specialty of some Christian Reformed Churches. While I have the pleasure of serving a congregation which almost attends as faithfully in the afternoon as in the morning, the problem exists in some of our congregations as well – especially, it seems, in the more urban areas. But what I mean is that when you study the history, you find that the phenomenon is not new. Even in the Reformation period it was a challenge. I read about one church which announced the catechism service three times only to find that no one showed up, and another church in which the only listener to the catechism sermon was the caretaker.¹ But nevertheless, it has consistently been maintained by Reformed ecclesiastical assemblies that it is a good thing when alongside of services wherein a particular text of Scripture is proclaimed, there are also services wherein the catechism is used as a guide for the preaching.

Why? A number of principles can be highlighted here.

A Longstanding Christian practice

The first is that Catechism preaching *is a longstanding Christian practice*. Due to a need to educate members of the Reformed churches in Reformed doctrine, the second service has always had somewhat more of an educational character and purpose. This is seen in the fact that in the early Reformation period, time was taken out for direct catechetical instruction of the youth with the recitation of answers and the like. Yet, it needs to be realized: preaching of the Word with the Catechism as a guide was not an afterthought. Catechism preaching was practiced from the beginning, and intended right from the time the Catechism was written.² And rather than being merely a specialty of the Dutch Reformed churches, it was the practice of the Lutherans, Zwinglians, and the Calvinists.³ The British churches even received the advice that ministers negligent in catechism preaching should be punished and members absent from the catechism preaching should be fined.⁴ (How's that for a sure fundraiser!) Some have defended the idea that actually the practice predates the Reformation since preaching on the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments (three sizable parts of the catechism today!) was already known in the Middle Ages and the early Church. Cyril of Jerusalem is known to have preached on the Apostle's Creed back in 350 AD; in principle, that is of course the same as catechism preaching.

Systematic Presentation of Christian doctrine

The second principle is that this longstanding Christian practice of Catechism preaching is beneficial because, when it is done well, *it is a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine*. This was obviously its first purpose. Members of the Reformed churches generally knew what they were against and reforming from; but they needed positive and systematic instruction in the full truth of the Scriptures and received this when the Catechism was used as a guide for the preaching. When Martin Luther was appalled at the lack of knowledge among the common people, he found the right answer in catechism preaching.⁵ If we want to have mature congregations that are not tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine, this kind of systematic preaching is ever so essential. The fact that very often in history it has been the Arminians who opposed Catechism preaching, should tell us something, shouldn't it? In an age when we are being bombarded with all kinds of erroneous ideas, there is something very wholesome about receiving regular instruction in the Christian truth. Can we really say that we know these doctrines so well that we do not need this instruction anymore? To be sure, it takes some creativity and hard work for ministers to come up with different approaches to the Lord's Days and keep it interesting time and again, but it's well worth the effort! For this purpose, in my judgement, one does not need to stick just to the Heidelberg Catechism. While the other confessions are not designed for this purpose, they certainly can be beneficially used in this manner as well. Consider, for instance, the rampant prevalence of Arminianism in so much of Christianity today. Would it not be beneficial then to use the Canons of Dort for the same purpose of systematically teaching Biblical truth? And what about the whole matter of ethics? Are we and our youth so aware of the Biblical positions regarding a whole

host of moral and ethical issues which arise today? Is there not a lot of value then in regular preaching on the Ten Words of the Covenant? Furthermore, is catechism preaching not a way to ensure that, as Paul put it, the “whole counsel of God” is proclaimed (Acts 20:27 RSV)? When a minister always gets to choose a text, it is easy to ride hobby horses and ignore less favorite subjects. But this one-sidedness is prevented when there is a system such as in the catechism.

And on this point, it is good to note as well, how wonderfully personal the catechism is. The words “doctrine” and “system” often suggest today that the material is cold and impersonal. But preaching does not need to be impersonal or apersonal when the catechism is our guide. Think of the way the words “I”, “me”, “my” are used here and you know, this material – these doctrinal truths – are meant to be brought home to the hearer and impressed upon their very hearts.

Preaching of the Gospel

A third principle is that this longstanding Christian practice of Catechism preaching is beneficial because *it is* after all *preaching of the Gospel*. It is not really just preaching on a human document; when it is done properly, the catechism is used as a window into the Scriptures and as a means to expound the various themes of the Scriptures. Then it too is *preaching of the Gospel*. And – need I remind you? -- there is nothing today more powerful than true and faithful proclamation of the Word. Think of Lord’s Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “...*where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel...*” Here too the catechism reflects the truth of Scripture. Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 1 that he is eager to preach the gospel precisely because he is convinced that “*it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...*” (Rom.1:15,16; cf Rom. 10:17). Paul does not say here that this gospel *can* be the power of God. He does not say that this gospel *has the potential* to become the power of God. He says: *it is* the power of God. The gospel, you see, is not advice to people, suggesting to them how they can lift themselves up. *It is* power. And it is not too hard to imagine that it is **power** when we remember that it is the Word of God that is being proclaimed. The Word that came forth from the mouth of God was the power that created the world in the first place, was it not? God *spoke* and light appeared out of darkness! God *said* let the dry land produce, and it brought forth trees. The whole universe derives its existence and reality from the speech of God. “*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth*”(Ps.33). And the Word that comes from the mouth of God will not return to Him empty (Is. 55:10-11). The Lord Jesus too is the divine Word become flesh.. When he *says* “Rise!”, paralytics rise, take up their pallets and go home (Mt.9:6). When He *says* “Peace! Be still!”, even the wind and the sea obey him and become calm (Mt.8:26). When He *cries out* with a loud voice to a dead man who cannot hear, then there comes Lazarus...out of the tomb (Jn 11:43)!

And the true preaching of the Word of God is in one line with that; it is not the proclamation of a pipedream after the style of the politicians who come with their endless speeches about promises they seemingly have no way of keeping. Nor is it the proclamation of a doubt after the style of so many. The word of God can call things into existence, change the old, undo what was, bring forth the new. It can bring light out of darkness and joy out of tears. It is this Word of God - evocative, dynamic, creative, saving, sin-annulling, death-defeating, healing, life-giving - which the Church proclaims. Today too the Spirit of God uses this means to change hard-hearted stubborn sinners and make them soft and pliable beings that can be moulded in the hands of God? How does it come about? Only when those in the pulpit and those in the pew realize that the holy place in the Church of Christ is the pulpit; it is from there that God speaks and it is from there especially that He works in the midst of the congregation. And I would stress: the pulpit and the pew must realize this. Those in the pulpit must feed the flock a wholesome measure of God’s Word, confident in its value, and those in the pew must hunger for that very Word; where one of these two are missing, there are serious problems in the church.

To be sure, *if the pulpit is just another platform or lectern, if the pulpit is just another man’s private stage*, then we might just as well remove it and find something better. But church’s are called to do things God’s way, are they not? And preaching is the God-appointed way for our age!

A Worship Service

Fourthly, *also the second service with its catechism preaching is a worship service. And the Lord is worthy of all worship*, is he not? If we are enthralled with the Lord God, will we not *want* to do more than just the bare minimum in terms of worshipping Him? When we make allowances for average sleeping times, we are left with about 119 hours in a week. Where do we ever get the notion that we can spend no more than *one* of those 119 hours in

corporate worship? Every week begins with a Lord's Day, does it not, and not just a Lord's hour? If anything more than an hour a week is too much, it begs the question about the degree to which we desire to spend eternity in a place of worship such as the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 4:10; 7:11; 11:1; 15:4; 21). The truth is: a genuine thanksgiving to God for His work of grace in our lives never leads us to worship him *less* but *always more*. What does it say about us then when we are seeking to get away with the bare minimum? What does it say about this generation when a football or a hockey game is never too long, but a worship service almost invariably is? Besides, we should not isolate the sermon from the act of worship⁶; the people of God do not come together just to consume another sermon. They come to worship the Lord! Thus when the people of God are too complacent to do that for more than one hour a Lord's Day, some serious questions need to be asked and, probably, some serious admonitions administered. Those are the kind of arguments one would bring in here.

Nowadays it seems popular to bring in all kinds of other means in which growth in Biblical knowledge and Christian fellowship can be attained. It does not make sense of course to argue against these when they have such laudable goals. But the overriding question has to be then: *why do these things so often have to take the place of a second service in which the proclamation of the Word takes place?* If they are desirable, in accordance with God's Word, and bring honour to Him, can they not be added to that service or to some other occasion?

Reformed churches have always given the proclamation of the Word primacy of place. Worship must have priority. Churches that let go of this longstanding Christian tradition will discover in the long run that it has not been in the best interests of their dedication to the Lord our God.

¹ See N.H. Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching (Part 1)" *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches 1993*, 147; cf D. Sinnema, "The Second Sunday Service in the Early Dutch Reformed Tradition, *Calvin Theological Journal* 1997 321.

² This is evident from the preface to the first edition of the Catechism (January 19, 1563), and from a letter of Zacharias Ursinus (Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching I," 138; Sinnema, "The Second Sunday", 303).

³ Gootjes, 140-143.

⁴ Gootjes, 149.

⁵ Gootjes, 140-1.

⁶ See C. Trimp, "Preaching as the Public Means of Divine Redemption," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* Volume 10 1999 52-3.