



CATECHETICAL PREACHING: A REFORM TOO FAR¹

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Should we preach on catechisms or confessions as such? Only in the most exceptional circumstances. Our mandate is to preach the Word. To resort instead to expounding a human document is to confuse our people by blurring the distinction between what is normative revelation and what is to be judged by that revelation. Even when creeds are inerrant . . . their proportion, balance, and selection of topics will not be that of Scripture. 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.

Donald Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*.

Preaching, rightly understood and practiced, is an essential aspect of Reformed worship and community. It bespeaks the proclamation of the living Word through the ministration of the written Word of God. While our theological forebears derived this high view of preaching from the inscripturated Word itself

¹ This article first appeared in a more modest form in the March 2012 edition of *The Voice*, the church magazine of Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

(consider, for example, Mark 1:38; Acts 20:27; Rom. 10:17; 2 Tim. 3:16), the importance of it was underpinned by their experience of the Church of Rome. Emerging at a time when the attributes of the church—her apostolicity, unity, catholicity, and holiness—had become proud badges of self-congratulation, the Reformers perceived that other criteria were needed to distinguish true congregations from false ones within the professing church of Christ. Of the resultant *notae* or marks of the true church preaching was given primary billing. In the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) for instance, the “pure doctrine of the gospel . . . preached” was stated to be the first mark of the true church (Art. 29), while in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) particular churches are described as “more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced” (25:4).² Thus, the primacy of preaching became a salient feature of Protestant and specifically Reformed worship. The Scottish Congregationalist theologian P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921) gave expression to this in the commencement of his first book, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind* (1907): “It is perhaps an overbold beginning, but I venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls.”³

Today, the primacy of preaching is as necessary as ever. Few in Protestantism would disagree. Yet, when consideration is given to

² I am indebted to Rev. Tom VandenHeuvel for alerting me to the variation in wording between the BCF (“true church”) and the WCF (“more or less pure”). The latter is advisable for it reflects the reality of congregational life and practice.

³ P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind*. The Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching, Yale University, 1907 (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 3.



the way preaching is defined or undertaken today, it becomes clear that its primacy is not so secure as may at first be thought. In many places preaching remains central in worship as an act, but its content is other than the Word of God proclaimed. Along the way we have been forgetting that preaching only denotes a true or more pure church if the preaching itself is true to the Word or more pure, and that an avowal of the *primacy* of preaching must also affirm the primacy of *preaching*.

Consider by way of introduction today's anecdotal and catechetical methods of preaching.

ANECDOTAL PREACHING

Those utilizing the former base their approach on the descriptive rather than the didactic portions of Scripture. Especially influential is Jesus' outdoor preaching with its use of storytelling and analogy from everyday life. Anecdotal sermons, writes Scott Roberts in his on-line article "Preaching Methods," "chiefly rely on entertaining stories, or anecdotes, to illustrate a moral lesson. The preacher may draw from personal experience, books, news items, TV shows, movies or any other source for the anecdotes. The sermon may or may not include biblical references."⁴ Unquestionably, the anecdotal method is popular today. It caters to the biblical illiteracy of the present climate, and, comports with the pursuit of relevance amid the secularization of the age, can serve well as a first connection to the unchurched. The problems arise when the anecdotal approach becomes the regular

⁴ http://www.ehow.com/list_6860507_preaching-methods.html, accessed June 19, 2014.

diet of the church member. Over time it does more to undermine the biblical literacy of the church than it does to cure the biblical illiteracy of the unchurched, as is amply demonstrated today by the church's weakness in knowing and handling Scripture. Most if not all the Reformed would agree.

CATECHETICAL PREACHING

More contentious among us, but less analyzed, is the appropriateness of catechetical preaching. The catechetical method developed in Lord's Day afternoon services in the Netherlands in the 1560s following the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and became fully institutionalized in the Reformed Churches of the Low Countries following the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619. Containing three parts titled guilt, grace, and gratitude (or sin, salvation, and service) and fifty-two Lord's Days, the catechetical method was deemed a suitable reform of worship for structuring the diet and content of preaching in at least one service of the Lord's Day. In part we may sympathize with this thinking. Clearly, it developed out of the need to embed the freshly rediscovered truths of the New Testament in the minds of those siding with the Protestant Reformation. In the heady days of the 1560s it would have been very easy for Protestants in the pews to have lost sight of the advances of the Reformation and to have reverted to the teachings and practices of Rome. Moreover, by limiting the use of the method to but one service of the Lord's Day, the continental Reformed kept free other services of the Lord's Day for biblical exposition.

While seemingly a harmless development in itself, the principles of Reformation, the passage of time, and the developments of the present, raise the question as to whether the introduction of



catechetical preaching was a reform of worship which went too far.

This question I seek to answer as an advocate of classic Reformed theology and as an exponent of expository preaching.⁵ The former I understand to be admirably codified in the Three Forms of Unity and Westminster Standards, and the latter to be the true heir of Reformation (specifically Reformed) preaching. The matter before us is not, then, one of theology or of the comparative superiority of the Three Forms of Unity or Westminster Standards, but of the homiletic method which best expresses a Reformed view of Scripture. Nor is the question simply theoretical. It arose in the course of ministering for a decade as a Presbyterian in a church of continental Reformed heritage, and explains why I have chosen to address here the catechetical rather than the anecdotal method.

In making public this reasoning I wish neither to attack the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism nor to introduce division among the continental Reformed. Rather, the article provides a practical outworking of the belief that the time has come within today's global context for a more proactive and self-conscious pursuit of a Bible-based conflation of the continental (Reformed) and English-speaking (Presbyterian) strands of the Reformed tradition. While the full-scale assimilation of these communities within the tradition of theology would encompass discussions of theology, subordinate standards, and *praxis*, and entail

⁵ Further explanation of the value of the method may be found in *Preaching and Politics: Engagement without Compromise* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009) and in *Consecutive Exposition: A Weighing of Iain H. Murray's "Time for Caution"* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: From His Fullness Ministries, 2014).

concessions from both communities, our present consideration of the continental Reformed practice of catechetical preaching addresses an obvious difference between the public worship of the two Reformed communities. For good reason, I side with the Presbyterian abstention from catechetical preaching, but it does not follow that in the conflation of the two sides of the Reformed tradition that Scripture would lead me always to do so.⁶

Preliminary comments.

Since there is, on the one hand, a reductionist approach to Reformed thinking in our day and, on the other, the possibilities of emotional reaction to, and misunderstanding of, the discussion of the catechetical method, it is important to state unequivocally what is not intended by this call to end the practice of catechetical preaching.

Firstly, the discussion is not intended to undermine the value of the Three Forms of Unity: The Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618/19).

I am not arguing that the Three Forms of Unity and the Heidelberg Catechism in particular have no more use in the life of the church. I affirm that ministers and officebearers in continental Reformed churches ought to subscribe sincerely to the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity. I believe the children and youth ought to be taught the main heads of doctrine of our historic Reformed faith in

⁶ Other sample questions worth consideration include the following: Should we begin in theology with God's glory or the believer's comfort (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 1 and Westminster Shorter Catechism 1)? Should union with Christ receive distinct consideration (not the omission of a chapter on the theme in the WCF)? Is gratitude or duty primary in the believer's obedience? Should Elders operate with term limits? Are church courts higher or wider?



Catechism class. Furthermore, those seeking membership of the church should either be introduced to the Three Forms of Unity in an inquirers' class (for those coming from unchurched or non-Reformed backgrounds) or reminded of their teaching in a new members' class (for those coming from other reformed churches). Additionally, nothing would preclude the offering of classes of theological instruction on the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards in the life of the church, nor would it be problematic to teach the Heidelberg Catechism from the pulpit in a context other than that of public worship.

Truthfully, it is not difficult to remain committed to the confessional and catechetical summarization of the truths of Scripture for the maintenance of orthodoxy, the unity of a congregation's direction, and the cohesive teaching of sound doctrine, while simultaneously jettisoning the practice of catechetical preaching. All that changes with the ending of the practice is the affording of the Heidelberg Catechism a profile *in public worship* as elevated as that of Holy Scripture. Recall in this regard that conservative brethren in Presbyterianism live habitually with the disjuncture between the use of the subordinate standards in the educational programs of the church and their preclusion from dictating the schedule and content of preaching in public worship.

Accordingly, the continental Reformed could help reduce the *angst* induced by the thought of the termination of catechetical preaching by making a study of homiletic and educational practices in conservative Presbyterianism. For there is no reason to think that the jettisoning of catechetical preaching means the rejection of the Heidelberg Catechism, any more than the want of

the use of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in the structuring and content of Presbyterian preaching means the rejection of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in conservative Presbyterianism.

This is worth emphasizing, for in the heavily catechized and denominationally focused life of Grand Rapids and of Western Michigan, the termination of the practice of catechetical preaching has been said to constitute a "giving up of the Catechism." But this is not so. As unconvincing is the claim that the jettisoning of the catechetical method is the slippery slope to heterodoxy. In reality, the jettisoning of catechetical preaching does no more to hasten departure from the Reformed faith than the insistence on the practice ensured a buttress against heterodoxy and liberalism. We affirm the importance of a confessional and catechetical Christianity for the reasons mentioned above, but the sad fact is that continental Reformed and Presbyterian churches are both capable of going awry, with or without the use of the catechetical preaching. If fear becomes the main reason for retaining the catechetical method then we have to ask at some point whether the reliance on the method, given the drawbacks mentioned below, has become a capitulation to a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7).

Second, the discussion is not intended to reflect negatively on the excellence of the ministry of those who have utilized the method throughout their ministries.

Undeniably, blessing has come through catechetical preaching to previous generations of the continental Reformed community. The Lord has doubtless spoken through those expositions of the Catechism which have pointed the Lord's people to Scripture and to the Christ. Many faithful and godly men have found satisfaction in using the Heidelberg Catechism for the sake of the gospel and the upbuilding of the church. My concern, then, is not to disparage



the labors of others, any more than it is to question the theology of the Three Forms of Unity. In fact, the desire to avoid offending colleagues in ministry tempts me to leave the catechetical method be. However, several reasons lead me to seek a way of holding a reasoned discussion of the method.

First, there is the matter of the sovereignty of God. The fact that God has blessed the catechetical method does not make it the right or the best one for public worship. God's sovereignty and compassion toward his church is such that he is well able to bless his servants in their endeavors notwithstanding the use of a method which is in tension with his Word. What matters most to God, I freely admit, is not methodological perfection but right motivations of heart. The idea that the catechetical method must be legitimate simply because God has blessed it is doubtful. To argue in effect that "if it works it must be right," introduces a pragmatism into Reformed thinking which many continental Reformed would not like to see applied to beliefs and teachings with which they do not agree.

Second, there is the matter of the doctrine of Scripture. Since many utilizers of the catechetical method have undoubtedly sought to be faithful to the gospel and to maintain the Reformed faith as the best expression of biblical Christianity, there should be room for a discussion of the catechetical method based on a shared conservative understanding and appreciation of the supremacy of Scripture. On this basis we each seek to safeguard the supremacy of our Scripture as the standard or court of appeal of our faith and conduct.

Third, there is the matter of the study of theology. Many catechetical preachers exercised their ministries prior to the advance of what

has become known as Reformed biblical theology. This we may date back, significantly, to the work of three continental (or continentally-influenced) theologians: John Calvin (1509–1564), Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), and Herman Ridderbos (1909–2007). Each of them understood the fundamental (but not absolute) redemptive-historical structure of Scripture, and the primacy of such motifs as kingdom and covenant, contributing in their own ways to the present popularity of Reformed biblical theology.

While the details of the development of Reformed biblical theology are beyond the scope of this essay, we note that its emergence can be dated back to 1893, to the inauguration of the Chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary—Vos being its first holder. His emphasis on redemptive history was given significant momentum by the renaissance in Calvin studies which took off in the mid-twentieth century and continues to the present. One advance of this renaissance is the realization that Calvin was in effect Vos before Vos. Clearly his theology is founded on biblical-theological (specifically redemptive-historical) considerations, which impacts the shape and feel of its dogmatic finish. Meanwhile, in Herman Ridderbos we have further confirmation of the way in which biblical theology can inform and help shape systematic theology. If the influence of Calvin and Vos helped John Murray (1898–1975) set in motion in conservative Reformed circles a fresh way of undertaking the task of systematizing the truth of Scripture, it is clear that the influence of Calvin, Vos, and Ridderbos is serving to further and to mature that trajectory today.⁷

⁷ For this history in greater detail, see Tim J. R. Trumper, "John Frame's Methodology: A Case Study in Constructive Calvinism," in *Speaking the Truth*



This is all to say, that whereas prior generations of ministers thought nothing of utilizing the catechetical method, the impact of the emergence of Reformed biblical theology on systematic theology is raising the valid question as to whether the catechetical method was one reform which went too far. While confessions of faith and catechisms are not systematic theology, they are more akin to the classic approach to it than to other theological disciplines. Our questioning of the method is not, then, so much a reflection of the endeavors of previous generations of catechetical preachers, as it is a questioning of the method of systematic theology which prevailed prior to the emergence of Reformed biblical theology. At the heart of this questioning is the belief that it is expository preaching, as exemplified by Calvin and encouraged by the current injection of biblical-theological considerations into the systematization of biblical truth, which is the true heir of Reformational homiletics.

Third, the discussion is not intended to ignore the variations within the utilization of the catechetical method.

Over the centuries, variations have inevitably entered into the practice of “preaching the Catechism.” We need to be sensitive to these, for it would not be fair to tar all catechetical preaching with the same brush. Wayne Brouwer notes that the method has come to mean three things:

- (i) Catechism as homiletical text: the structuring of sermons according to the individual answers of the Catechism.

- (ii) Scriptural exposition: the choosing of a Scripture passage relating to many if not most, of the theological propositions contained in a single Lord’s Day of the Catechism.

- (iii) Doctrinal-topical: the extraction of a single topic from the collection of key ideas contained in a Lord’s Day from the Catechism, for the purpose of designing a sermon which unfolds the topic in a way consistent with the theological heritage of the congregation in a way relevant to the congregant. The primary emphasis is placed on sound homiletic development of the topic rather than on the exposition of either the Catechism text or the biblical text.⁸

In the first meaning there is an implicit contradiction of the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (whether in theory, practice, or both), and is therefore, in my view, the most egregious homiletic use of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Less egregious, but still problematic, is the third meaning (doctrinal-topical). This manner of catechetical preaching produces a rather defensive perpetuation of the tradition of theology through the medium of a systemic Calvinism rather than a Bible Calvinism.⁹ The perpetuation is, it seems to me, based on the confusion of doctrinal and doctrinaire preaching. In the former doctrine arises from biblical exposition, in the latter it is read into the exposition in order to shape it. It is based on an “orthodox

⁸ Wayne Brouwer, “Preaching the Heidelberg: A New Look at the Tradition of Catechetical Preaching,” published on-line at *Reformed Worship: Resources for Planning and Leading Worship* (<http://www.reformedworship.org/article/december-1992/preaching-heidelberg-new-look-tradition-catechetical-preaching>, accessed June 19, 2014).

⁹ I first heard the distinction between system and Bible Calvinism attributed to J. I. Packer but am unable to recall the source.



Calvinism” which repeats rather than renews the Reformed tradition of theology.¹⁰

Least troubling is the second meaning (scriptural exposition), for it indicates the endeavor to accent exposition within denominational contexts in which the utilization of the catechetical method is expected. In this formal or informal compromise between the minister of the Word and his denomination (or *vice versa*), the minister allows the agenda of his pulpit ministry to be governed by the Heidelberg Catechism, but seeks primarily to expound the Scriptures. While the subject matter and scope of the preaching is set by the Catechism, the minister does at least seek to read the Catechism through Scripture and not the other way around. The denominational constraints, however, preclude him from going the next step, which would involve replacing the Catechism with Scripture as the determinative factor in the scheduling and scope of the preaching ministry of the church.

¹⁰ The nomenclature “orthodox Calvinism” is derived from my understanding of the socio-theological dynamics of the Reformed tradition today. For more on it in the context of its antithesis “revisionist Calvinism” and the mediating center-right “constructive-Calvinism” for which I argue, go to <https://fromhisfullness.com/constructive-calvinism>. In short:

Orthodox Calvinists seek continuity in the method and content of Reformed orthodoxy. They are therefore uncritical of Reformed orthodoxy.

Constructive Calvinists seek the overwhelming continuity of content amid the biblical renewal of Reformed theological method. They are therefore sympathetic-critical of Reformed orthodoxy.

Revisionist Calvinists are not necessarily wedded to either the content or methodology of Reformed orthodoxy. They are critical-sympathetic of Reformed orthodoxy, if sympathetic at all.

Sensitive to these variations in the exercise of the catechetical method, we focus chiefly in what follows on the first and third (that is to say, the most egregious) practices of catechetical preaching.

Fourth, the discussion is not intended to imply that those ministering the Word without public reliance on the Three Forms of Unity are no longer obliged to consider them faithful summaries of Scripture.

Besides summarizing faithfully the content of what the Reformed believe, Donald Macleod notes—notwithstanding his rejection of catechetical preaching—how confessions and catechisms serve in the background of expository preaching to:

- Support biblical exegesis by providing excellent definitions.
- Help structure expository series *of a thematic nature* by delineating the various elements in need of coverage.
- Represent the wisdom of the centuries.
- Offer a reminder that what we preach is not private opinion.
- Help us know what are the majors of the Christian faith.¹¹
- Subject the subordinate standard to the correction of Scripture where necessary. (Macleod is not advocating substantial differentiation in pulpit ministry, for this would

¹¹ Donald Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Samuel T. Logan Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1986), 266–70.



require either action by the Elders [in the first instance] or formulation of an amendment to the relevant subordinate standard on the other).

In other words, biblical fidelity and confessional orthodoxy are required no less in a Reformed church where expository preaching is typical than in one accustomed to the catechetical method. The minister can avoid any perception that the authority of the Heidelberg Catechism is *en par* with Scripture, while yet presupposing its theology in all that is preached. Indeed, mention of the Catechism may be brought in for the purposes of illustration when the content of the sermon text and the Catechism coincide, and when reference to it can be woven into the sermon appropriately and seamlessly. But to quote the Heidelberg Catechism merely to check it off as part of sermon preparation—“Have I included my Introduction, main headings, applications, illustrations, and quotation(s) from the Catechism, and Conclusion—panders to the traditionalism of those for whom the Catechism is the *sine qua non* of preaching. We quote the Catechism not just to quote it, but when it makes sense to do so. That is to say, when or to the degree that the Catechism says *exactly* what the text is saying at the point in the sermon in relation to which it is being used; when the quotation can be woven into the sermon without despite to its texture or aesthetics. A catechetical quotation may confirm exactly the sentiment of the text, but unless it fits just right in the sermon the quotation will introduce into its delivery an awkward jarring that will do nothing for the sermon. The analogy which comes to mind is of a car getting up to speed, jumping from first to third gear, before

returning to first gear. It is possible to make a car do that and to show it can be done, but does it make for a pleasant ride?

Particular reasons.

Bearing in mind what is not being intended by our discussion of catechetical preaching, we come now to five particular reasons for jettisoning the catechetical method.

1. The Bible is inspired, catechisms are not.

Critical to the Protestant Reformation was the supremacy of God's Word. Scripture is supreme because it alone conveys sufficiently all matters necessary for our salvation. Scripture's authority trumps, thereby, its typical rivals: traditionalism, emotionalism, and rationalism. So important did the Reformers deem this principle of *sola Scriptura* that they were prepared to fight for it in the church, and to give their lives for it. Part of that fight included translating the Scriptures into the vulgar tongue. Yet, they understood that it is the ministry of the Spirit in the church which brings God's people to agreement on the essentials of the gospel. These essentials were gradually encoded in confessions and catechisms of one type and another, during what became amid the Reformation and post-Reformation eras a creed-making age.

We remain indebted to this day to the theological products the Reformers produced,¹² and can sympathize in part with the endeavor to embed the fresh rediscoveries of biblical teaching in the minds and hearts of the Protestant and distinctively Reformed believers of the period. Yet, it seems to me the institutionalization

¹² Writes Brian A. Gerrish: “Both directly and indirectly, the Reformation swelled the treasury of the creeds of Christendom” (*Saving and Secular Faith: An Invitation to Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 49.



of catechetical preaching in the early seventeenth-century—established in the midst of the surrounding controversies of the Synod of Dordt—was a reform too far and admitted a methodological tension into Reformation thought. The effects of the admission were unwitting no doubt, focusing on but the one service of the Lord’s Day. All the same, the decision created over subsequent centuries a rivalry between the supreme authority of the Scripture and the derived authority of the Heidelberg Catechism.

While advocates of the catechetical method are quick to deny this, the very fact that the jettisoning of the method is at all controversial speaks to the degree of confusion between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Heidelberg Catechism, at least in the minds of many long accustomed to hearing preaching that makes its way through the Catechism. The evident impression given that the catechetical method is the *sine qua non* of Lord’s Day ministry begs the question as to what we are to make of the prophetic messages of the old covenant or the apostolic preaching of the new covenant era, not to mention all the great preachers of church history up to the present who never made use of the Heidelberg Catechism. The prophets, apostles, and all those who followed them up to 1563, never heard of the Heidelberg Catechism, let alone of the obligation to announce their text by referring to “Lord’s Day such and such.”

Breaking through the tradition of the catechetical method is not easy to do. Yet, it is Reformed history, theology, and *praxis* which lend the reform of (continental) Reformed homiletics some weight. We recall the validity of the Reformation protest against a Roman traditionalism deemed as authoritative as Scripture and

ponder how the Reformed have not corrected previously a catechetical method which has created *de facto* a rival to Scripture. Interestingly, R. B. Kuiper, an advocate of the catechetical method, acknowledges this implicit contradiction of Protestant and Reformed thought. Catechetical preaching, “however excellently intended, is in at least some danger of running afoul of the *Scriptura sola* principle.” Kuiper continues:

. . . doctrinal preaching, like all preaching, must be based upon the Word of God, and that is a way of saying that it may not be based upon the creeds . . . the church’s interpretation of Scripture is fallible, and so its confessions of faith and catechisms can do no more than service as helpful guides in preaching. Never may they be regarded as the source of doctrine or the touchstone of truth. Those distinctions belong to the Bible alone. And he who makes use of the creeds in preaching is in sacred duty bound to keep that fact unmistakably clear.¹³

A preacher of any amount of experience understands, however, that what is clear for him is not necessarily as clear for his hearers. The introduction of the catechetical method—undoubtedly considered by advocates as the zenith of the history of preaching, not least because of its aim to engrain Reformed theology in the minds and hearts of the faithful—has led, experience suggests, to a practical confusion over a fundamental question of authority. That is what we are dealing with when the catechetical method is said

¹³ Cited by G. I. Williamson, “Some Thoughts on Preaching,” *Ordained Servant*, 3:2 (April, 1994) and available on-line at <http://opc.org/OS/html/V3/2c.html>, accessed May 26, 2014. Williamson’s quotation of R. B. Kuiper is taken from *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 227–229.



or implied to be essential to preaching. When, in my experience, the only part of a sermon congregants comments on is the point at which the Catechism is quoted, or when a subject is brought up and the quotation of the Catechism comes to mind easier than the quotation of Scripture, that is the problem with which we are dealing.

The call for a movement away from catechetical preaching is not, then, a diminution of the Heidelberg Catechism *in se*, but of the reassertion and consistent application of the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Stated alternatively, the call to take back a reform which went too far is simultaneously an endeavor to realign the use of the Heidelberg Catechism with a vintage Protestant and Reformed understanding of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in Worship. After all, the Heidelberg Catechism, it should be superfluous to repeat, is not *en par* with Scripture. To imply that it is, transforms the expression of the Reformed faith into a quasi-Catholicism, at least in regard to the question of authority.¹⁴ To steer clear of such a distortion, we should, as Kuiper advises, do what we can to undo (where applicable) and to avoid (where not) this “unProtestant” perception.

The theory here is straightforward enough. The challenge arises in practice. For in the current climate of the Reformed tradition, there is, in some quarters at least, a seeming bent on replicating the Reformed faith—or, at least, our impressions of it—as if we still live in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe.

¹⁴ See, for example, the article “Catechetical Preaching” by R. E. Knodel, Jr., first published in the *Ordained Servant*, 7:1 (Jan. 1998), 16–19. This is now accessible at <http://opc.org/OS/html/V7/1e.html>, accessed June 19, 2014.

Accordingly, to tread the old paths of the Reformed faith one must wear old shoes: old Bible versions, old hats, old language, old musical instrumentation and so forth. Admittedly, we all depart from the Reformers at some point or another, not forgetting that they differed among themselves. But let us differ with them as pertains to cultural expressions of the Reformed faith, on the basis of Scripture and in order to be effective in the present, rather than because we are bound to practices simply because they are historical or traditional.

In a context more akin to the godlessness of the first and second centuries than to the Christendom of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, our expression of the Reformed faith needs an unequivocating emphasis on, and practice of, *sola Scriptura*. We refer to Scripture as our *supreme* rule of faith and conduct, as an accommodation to the aggrandized importance placed on our subordinate standards, but we forget that so far as our subordinate standards teach, Scripture is not our supreme standard for faith and conduct, it is our only standard! Strictly speaking, our confessions and catechisms cannot be subordinate to Scripture which exclusively functions as our rule of faith and conduct. They can only serve to summarize what the Scriptures teach. This leads us to a second reason for jettisoning the catechetical method.

2. The Bible is God’s fully revealed counsel, catechisms are man-made summaries.

One of the arguments heard in favor of the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism is that it covers the whole of Scripture. As a summary of biblical teaching it certainly attempts to, but the Catechism is in reality much more truncated. Even by creedal,



catechetical or confessional standards the Heidelberg Catechism covers less theological territory than may be thought.

Let us start with the positive. The Heidelberg Catechism covers the big gospel themes: guilt, grace and gratitude, or sin, salvation, and service. Within these areas of thought, the Catechism touches most pastorally on the corruption of man's human nature, and our inability to keep God's law; justification by God's grace in the person and work of Christ, and the nature of true faith. The Catechism expounds the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the nature of conversion, the Ten Commandments and prayer. The Catechism is, therefore, stacked with universally held Christian teaching, and is suffused with a warm-hearted trinitarianism.

Yet, the claim that "to preach the Catechism is to preach Scripture," as some are taught today, falls short on two accounts.

First, the Catechism reflects the predominance of the two great areas of debate at the time of the Reformation; namely, justification and the Lord's Supper. While this weighting of doctrinal consideration reflects the moment in time in which the Catechism was written, its location in history does not and cannot guarantee that the Catechism teaches Christian doctrine in biblical proportion. This does not mean to say that justification and the Lord's Supper should receive less attention, but it does mean to say that if the preaching of the Catechism was tantamount to preaching Scripture other doctrinal matters would either be included or have a higher profile than they do. In this regard, a push for preaching through the Belgic Confession (although also uninspired) makes more sense, for the Confession offers a more

comprehensive overview of biblical teaching and is, therefore, more well-rounded.

Second, the Catechism omits plenty that is found in Scripture. For example, there is nothing substantive about the nature of Scripture, the development of God's covenantal dealings with his people, the doctrine of adoption, or of the Last Things. What it contains in terms of pastoral warmth and sensitivity to the feel of Scripture it lacks in both depth and comprehensiveness. It emits heartening evangelistic overtones, but these explain its somewhat surface and passing approach to doctrine—at least, compared to the detail of the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession. Not until the Irish Articles of 1615 was covenant theology, for example, introduced into the confessions of the church, and not until the publication of the Westminster Confession of Faith did the first substantive confessional statement on the subject appear (WCF ch. 7). That confession also contained the first distinct chapter on adoption. Since the Heidelberg Catechism by contrast, was intended to bring Lutheran and Reformed together, it was inevitable that the Catechism came to focus on a more reductionist list of doctrines uniting two magisterial Protestant traditions.

As a summary of biblical teaching the Heidelberg Catechism simply cannot compare with either the breadth or depth of Scripture. No matter how faithful the Catechism is to Scripture, it is not and can never be the fullness of God's revealed counsel (Acts 20:27). A preacher using the catechetical method may jump off into the broader realms of Scripture, but that begs the question as to why he does not go directly to the Scriptures. If we wish to describe a friend, why look at a photograph of the person when the person is present before us?



Once more, we are faced with the possibility of the staunchest of the Reformed adopting a quasi-Catholic approach. If quasi-Catholicism is seen in the apparent equal ultimacy of Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism, it is also seen in the practical reality of the Heidelberg Catechism mediating the interpretation of the Scriptures. Whereas this interpretative role was undertaken in pre-Reformation times by the priest for the laity, now it appears the Catechism possesses the role. Naturally, the Reformed would prefer a sound catechism to do the mediation than an unsound priest holding an office which, in a sane world, would be defunct, but it is the deemed necessity of an interpretative intermediary in preaching which raises the question of quasi-Catholicism.

True, the Holy Spirit, who interprets his word, may and does make use of ministers of the Word and catechisms, but if we are saying that the minister (whom the Holy Spirit has called to expound the Word) must make use of the Catechism (which the Holy Spirit has not decreed should be used), then we are crossing out of the Reformed world back into a world more Catholic in principle. Could it be, then, that the introduction of the catechetical method, designed ostensibly to embed Reformed thinking in the minds and hearts of Reformed believers, indicated in fact that the necessity of a mediator between the reader and the pages of Scripture had not quite been expunged from Reformed thinking?

Many reared on catechetical preaching will leave it to the scholars to ponder the question. Their loyalty to the method has been won by a more practical consideration, namely the speed with which the catechetical preacher, using the summary of Scripture rather than the full revealed counsel, moves from one subject to another, Lord's Day by Lord's Day. Although he does not cover all of those

passages God has inspired nor the themes God has revealed in Scripture, he does hit on the central ones. But what has been gained in speed of coverage of the faith—a plus it is assumed amid the widespread attention deficit disorder of the present—is lost as regards the scope of the exposure to Scripture.

Initially, this may seem of marginal significance, but over a period of years the use of the catechetical method limits the hearer's exposure to the breadth of Scripture. Moreover, proceeding through themes at a quicker rate of knots than does the Bible expositor, the catechetical preacher runs the risk of sacrificing depth of treatment for the breath of treatment of the issues historically codified in the Heidelberg Catechism. Catechetical preaching, with its repetitive cycles, results over time in the "plateauing" of the understanding of the congregant, and the consequent shrinkage of the appetite to go further.

Some colleagues in ministry may challenge this dim view of the results of the method, but I have found from my years as a pastor in the continental Reformed tradition that when the Catechism is taken out of the pulpit and brought into discussion groups, the proficiency of those catechized from the pulpit in answering questions about the faith quickly declines once supplementary questions are raised. The former receive the answer, "Because the Bible says so" (which is better than "Because the Catechism says so"), but the latter, such as "Why should we trust the Bible?" can receive but blank stares. In fairness to exponents of the catechetical method, this is not a problem found in continental Reformed churches alone. However, this experience, if representative, challenges the claim that doctrinal instruction is more effective by means of catechetical preaching than by small group teaching and discussion.



So much for the effect of the catechetical method on the hearer. I also wonder whether its cyclical use explains in part the shorter tenures of continental-Reformed pastors.¹⁵ For the preaching of the Catechism one end of the Lord's Day year after year likely becomes dry after a while. In Scripture, by contrast, the preacher has a library of sixty-six divinely inspired books from which to draw his expositions. In it, the minister of the Word has a lifetime of resources to unearth. Accompanying his calling must be the passion and commitment to bring to light their rich and varied lessons.

3. The Bible is a multi-genre book, catechism are uni-genre documents.

As an excellent but uninspired document, the Heidelberg Catechism contains but one overall genre of literature: proposition. The catechetical preacher may make use of the different genres of Scripture by referencing the Catechism's textual apparatus, but he nevertheless bases his thoughts, to one degree or another, on a single genre. If a congregant likes proposition, that is fine. If not, then one service on the Lord's Day is much the same each week. The Bible expositor by contrast, majors directly on the forty-five authors contributing to Scripture, who wrote in multiple genres over a period of 1,600 years. In the sixty-six books of Scripture they penned, there is history (plenty of it!), poetry (the Psalms especially), prophesy, wisdom literature,

letters, and apocalyptic literature. These are the genres which make Scripture so richly diverse. Over the course of any length of ministry, an expositor of God's Word will interact with all them. Some are easier to preach than others, but to preach them is to reflect in pulpit ministry the literary make-up and feel of Scripture more than is guaranteed by means of the catechetical method.

Encapsulating each genre in ministry is also important for the hearer, for in every congregation there is a diversity of learning abilities. God in his wisdom has given us a Scripture through which we can reach the broad cross-section of our hearers. As we trace in pulpit exposition the contours of Scripture, so we tap into the different learning abilities represented before us. Some minds learn best from history, some from poetry, some from wisdom literature, some from the logic of didactic letters, and so forth. In principle, then, the Bible expositor should have a broad appeal, for his ministry includes all the genres capable of appealing to all his hearers. God in his wisdom has given us the variety of genres in his Word; the preacher in his wisdom includes them in his diet of sermons.

While the theory works well, there is, admittedly, a challenge in practice; namely, that congregants don't appreciate each genre alike. They warm to the choice of genre found in Scripture, but not necessarily the progression through a series from a genre other than their preferred. To overcome this, the preacher has to monitor the length of series. He may stretch his congregants (and likely ought to), yet without taxing them. The congregant, for his or her part, must embrace the principle that "all Scripture is profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). In practical terms, this means engaging in series actively, believably, and enthusiastically, regardless of whether the genre is preferred or not. Such engagement takes a

¹⁵ Seventh Reformed Church, for instance, has had, excepting the present minister, eighteen ministers since 1890, most of whom served the congregation between two and five years. I completed my work there in 2017 after ten years as the joint second-longest serving minister in the history of the church.



state of “convertedness” and an openness to other biblical genres. This openness typically arises from growing spiritual maturity and a selfless concern for others in the congregation besides oneself. Over time congregants with “stickability” will learn to benefit from all God’s Word and will be the better students of Scripture for it.

4. The Bible is chiefly a biblical theology, catechisms a sort of systematic theology.

Let me come right out and say what I have hinted at to date. Namely, that the Bible is more of a biblical theology than it is a systematic theology. Biblical theology is what the Bible is; systematic theology is what we do with it. This does not mean to say that it is wrong to systematize the content of Scripture along doctrinal lines, but it is to say that our systematization of biblical content must be sensitive to Scripture. A failing of Reformed theology has been the fundamental treating of the Bible as a systematic theology rather than as a biblical theology.

Biblical theology can mean many things. It can simply refer to the use of the Bible as the source from which we derive our theology, or it can refer to one of a number of specific methods of conveying its message. Chiefly, in our circles today, biblical theology has reference to the study of the historical arrangement of Scripture and the understanding of its big picture—what we call the history of redemption. While this metanarrative focuses on the person and work of Christ, biblical theology also recognizes other parts of Scripture such as the wisdom literature. This literature was written within redemptive history but was not intended to contribute to its trajectory, namely from the first things (eternity past, creation, and fall) to the last things (the return of the Lord

Jesus). Accordingly, the true expositor takes account of the biblical theology of Scripture in its wider sense—the metanarrative or big picture of God’s dealings with his people (inclusive of the multiple themes running throughout it), plus its non-historical portions—and has, thereby, a broader scope in his preaching than the practitioner of the redemptive-historical method who tends to focus exclusively or lopsidedly on the historical.

Systematic theology, by contrast, undertakes a logical ordering of the themes of Scripture. A seminarian, studying systematic theology, for example, will take courses in the doctrines of Revelation, God, Man, Christ, Salvation, the Church and Ethics (although sometimes Ethics is taught by the practical theology department). This is fine in principle, but the manner in which systematians have logically ordered the teaching of Scripture has not always done full justice to the nature of Scripture.

Too often the discipline has ignored or underplayed the organic development of revelation with its unfolding of the history of redemption. For the sake of the neatness of the system of theology, systematians also tend to overlook the distinctiveness of the contributions of the individual authors of the New Testament (especially). It follows that the rich images and figures of speech in Scripture have not always been treated aright. Sometimes they are reduced to bare concepts, which reduction better enables the mixing of them for the sake of the pristine logic of the system of theology. However, those interested in the humanness of Scripture and the authenticity of the language actually used, will not fail to spot the misuse of the biblical language. This does not mean to say that systematic theologians have taught doctrines erroneously, but it does mean to say that the use of individual texts can, and often are, less exact than it ought to be, and that biblical metaphors or



models are frequently admixed and muddled without biblical warrant.

In short, a high view of Scripture does not, by itself, guarantee a high use of it. The true expositor seeks both, and endeavors to do justice, consistent with an orthodox doctrine of Scripture, to both its divineness and humanness. By contrast, the practitioner of the catechetical method focuses exclusively or lopsidedly on the propositions or system of theology. Catechetical preaching thus tends to the confusion of the doctrinal and the doctrinaire.

Moves are currently afoot to recognize the shortcomings of the inherited method of systematizing biblical teaching. It is likely they have, as much as anything else, brought into question the historic practice of preaching from the Catechism. For to use a document shaped by the comparatively recent discipline of systematic theology to explain a scriptural text belonging to the realm of biblical theology is awkward and aesthetically displeasing at best. The preacher admixing the Heidelberg Catechism and Scripture in preaching must either basically ignore the Catechism to do justice to the text of Scripture, or round off the biblical passage in view to ensure he says all that the systematic locus in the Catechism expects him to say.

Obviously, much more could be said on this point. I just note in summary that it is no coincidence that Mark Dever in his book *The Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* connects expositional preaching and biblical theology as the first two marks of a healthy church.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, first published, 2000; third edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 39–84.

The two emphases go hand in hand. Catechetical preaching, by contrast, is more akin to systematic theology, hence its doctrinaire feel.

5. Expository preaching reflects our cosmopolitan world better than does catechetical preaching.

The New Testament reveals how cosmopolitan has been the appeal of the gospel. Under the old covenant Israel was called to be a light to the nations (Is. 49:6), but once the ascended Christ sent the Spirit, God's ancient people were to take the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). The remainder of the Acts of the Apostles traces this "contents page," disclosing how the gospel crossed over into Europe (Acts 16:6f.) and came eventually to Rome, the capitol of the known world (Acts 28:11–31). It is no wonder that much of the attention in the Acts of the Apostles has to do with the melding of believing Jews and Gentiles into one new Israel. Paul addresses this explicitly in Ephesians 2:11–22 and in other places too.

The Protestant Reformation, however, took place in sixteenth-century Europe. While Europe became the springboard of the modern missionary movement, its global thrust went unmatched by a globalization of the confessional and catechetical materials the Reformers and Puritans bequeathed to the church. Subsequent history has experienced the decline of Christian witness in Europe, its rise in North America, and now the advance of the church in Asia and Latin America. Yet, our most well-known and utilized subordinate standards remain European, even though the church is no longer dominated numerically by Europeans. Western theologians are still to the fore, but that too is changing.



We must continue to value the heritage we have received, but need to be aware that many of the people we read and esteem are, as it is sometimes put, “dead white guys.” We praise God for them but recognize that in the current age we need to reflect the more cosmopolitan interests of Scripture and of the current scene. I am not advocating that we discard subordinate standards, and especially not the excellent ones we have, but I do believe that using the Heidelberg Catechism to structure the diet and content of preaching hinders the reflection of the cosmopolitan nature of the church. Biblical exposition is a better way to go, precisely because it brings us back to the cosmopolitan context out of which the church spread globally. The catechetical method by contrast either affirms context which have little interest in reaching out cross-culturally, or appears to those introduced to the message of the New Testament as somewhat dated and ethnically narrow. It is worth recalling, for instance, that it was not the church in Europe which took the gospel to Africa, but the church in the Middle East and Africa which brought the gospel to Europe and through Europe to the Americas.

If, then, we are serious about opening our arms to the increasingly cosmopolitan communities in which God has placed us, we need to be conscious about how we are perceived by those who visit our worship services and community life. Yes, God has blessed us with good news in Jesus to share, and it has been superbly articulated in Reformed subordinate standards of European origin. We want to share this heritage, but it is counter-productive to imply that it rivals the cosmopolitan heritage of Scripture. Catechetical preaching can become, if we are not careful, a form of cultural Christianity. I am not suggesting we jettison the Bible-based

theology of some very fine “dead white guys” from sixteenth-century Europe, but we likely need to do better in integrating the biblical thought of Africans like Tertullian, Augustine, and so forth. Recall that while we stand on the should of the Reformers, they stood on the shoulders of ethnically diverse church fathers. In turn, the church fathers stood on the shoulders of the ethnically diverse authors of Scripture (e.g., Luke a Gentile, and Paul a Hebrew of the Hebrews). Naturally, then, in this transient age, many newcomers to the faith will be more comfortable with a racial admix of biblical exposition than with a non-racial concentration on Eurocentric history. We thank God for the Reformation, but it is not the sum and substance of church history.

IN SUMMARY

Much more could be said, but to sum up this is what I have argued:

- The proposed move away from the use of the Heidelberg Catechism pertains to preaching in public worship alone. It does not pertain to the use of the Catechism as a source of instruction in congregational life outside of public worship. Indeed, in an age wherein Lord’s Day evening worship has been largely abandoned, it would be better to hold a class of edifying catechetical instruction than for the Lord’s people to diminishing the worship of the day by other activities. If worship is constituted, it should be Scripture and Scripture alone which is the unrivalled source of our authority.
- There are good reasons for the move away from catechetical preaching, some of which have developed since the initial advent of catechetical preaching. I think especially of the emergence of conservative and Reformed



biblical theology, the father of which is Dutch theologian Geerhardus Vos (see, especially, his book *Biblical Theology*, published by Banner of Truth Trust).

- The move to expository preaching, morning and evening, does not mean that pulpit ministry must always revolve around consecutive exposition (series). There is nothing wrong with series being broken up by occasional expository sermons, or even the odd topical sermon (treated expositionally). This can be a refreshing change.

I understand that catechetical preaching belongs to an era when the continental Reformed churches were numerically stronger and more conservative, and that the challenging of the method may come across as part of the loss of more halcyon days. Yet, as appetites for the exposition of the Word grow, so we will begin to see emerge rich possibilities for the deepening and broadening of our understanding of it; the better balancing of doctrine and piety (the head as well as the heart); the outworking of what it means to be Reformed (through the acceptance of ongoing reform according to God's Word); and the encouragement of a worldview which fosters not only global mission but local outreach.

Of course, the change of homiletic method is not everything in church life. We need to engage more urgently the lost, overcoming resistance to joint prayer, and working through with a better distinction of abiding principles of worship and flexible preferences how to integrate the lost. In it all, God works to his glory, using the close attention to the text of his inspired Word in the production of these changes.

Biblical exposition is an important means by which we may help our people transition through biblical reform, for the Scripture is our sole authority for our faith and the conduct of our personal and corporate lives. In the process, our people will grow through the embracing of both the encouragements and challenges of the consecutive exposition. We expositors also have room to grow, especially in connecting the exposition of Scripture to the needs of the congregants at each stage of their development. When, however, the preacher and people commit to pray together for the ministry of the Word and to listen to it, there is no limit to the distance they can travel together. Let, then, the journey begin!

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