

COMMENTS ON CATECHETICAL PREACHING (3)

PETER Y. DE JONG

Catechetical preaching, so we were reminded in previous articles, has long been staple fare in Reformed churches throughout the world.

Like sermons of every kind these meet with mixed response. Some appreciate them highly; others urge that they have long outlived their day. Then we find those who remain indifferent.

For such reactions each hearer must bear his own responsibility. At the same time, however, preachers worthy of their office dare not take their task lightly. They are to speak no more and no less than the gospel of grace. Always the preparation and delivery of a sermon demands the best he has to offer. He speaks in the name and on the authority of the God of salvation to people, old and young, whose faith is often far from stable, in order to draw them into an ever more fruitful fellowship with the heavenly Father whose grace and glory know no limits. Never is this more urgent than when "the sum of Christian doctrine" set forth in the *Heidelberg Catechism* serves as the "text" or foundation for the message. With its word preacher and people have to a large degree grown familiar. Such familiarity easily breeds contempt.

To escape that snare preachers should take heed not only to *what* but also to *how* and *why* they preach such sermons as they do. Wise mothers soon learn the art of serving healthful food in ways which whet the appetite; preachers called to break the bread of life ought do no less. For such preparation Scripture is the instructor without peer.

For everyone commissioned to bring the gospel few writings are as pertinent as Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus.

These evangelists faced situations which largely parallel life as it is lived in our day. Ephesus was a thriving commercial center. Its theater catered to those who loved pleasure and sports. Its temples offered a strange mix of Asian fertility cults and somewhat more respectable Roman deities. Meanwhile Crete had lapsed into an imperial backwash with natives of ill repute for their untrustworthiness.

In both places churches had been established. Now their members needed further instruction in faith and godliness. Paul therefore summarized for both preachers their awesome responsibilities. Only so would the gospel bear fruit to the glory of the God and Savior whom these people had professed.

The heart of their messages was always to be the same: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (I Tim. 1:15). This for the apostle is "the mystery of godliness."

He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

(I Tim. 3:15)¹

Only by living according to this "rule" which is "the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 1:13) would the congregations be safeguarded in a wicked and wayward world. Always the gospel was intended to elicit a whole-souled response from those who listened, in order that they might be sustained and strengthened in their struggles:

If we died with him,
 we will also live with him;
if we endure,
 we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
 he will also disown us;
if we are faithless,
 he will remain faithful,
 for he cannot disown himself.

(II Tim. 2:11-13)

Always the appeal is to the sacred writings which alone make a man wise unto salvation. These the Lord Jesus has come to fulfil in his person and work. Specific patterns of conduct are laid down for all ages and classes and situations. Throughout sharp demarcation is drawn between believers and unbelievers and also between the past and present positions of those who have now become God's dear children. Grace received by faith becomes the motive for a life well-pleasing to the Lord, for,

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:3-7).

Repeatedly Paul urges that "these things" shall be taught by the two preachers. This leaves neither time nor interest for engaging in foolish speculations about myths and genealogies which by titillating the curiosity of some easily lead into false doctrine which imperils salvation. Not only is that blessed gospel firmly rooted in God's acts in Christ Jesus; it produces sound faith and conduct as it calls for a recognition of the sure hope of his appearing.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:11-14).

This charge is laid on every preacher who would be true to his calling, not the least when he engages in presenting the Word of life as systematically arranged and explained by the catechism. As in the inspired guide which Paul provided for the two young evangelists, so in every catechetical sermon people should be taught and exhorted, encouraged and rebuked and comforted according to each one's need. Always *kerugma* and *didache*² are woven into the seamless robe of God's will for those who belong to him. Much more is demanded than repeating a few simple Bible texts; here "the full counsel of God" is to be preached even to the same congregation and by the same minister repeatedly, lest anything essential to growth "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Pet. 3:18) be lacking.

Ours is an age not reputed for serious contemplation of things spiritual. For many the God of heaven and earth seems at a far remove from their lives. Large segments of the daily round such as education, politics, social relationships together with work and play have lost their rootage in the created order as well as all hope for their renewal by the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. Life for multitudes today, much as in Paul's time, has largely lost its meaning. To pressing questions few are able to supply satisfactory answers. Here are errors which need correction; wounds which require a healing touch; hearts hungering for some word which can bring peace and joy and strength.

This the church faithful to "the good deposit which was entrusted to it" does. It will not allow its preachers to dabble with the Word of grace. While reaching out to a sinful and often stubborn humanity, it confesses its need to be

diligently nurtured in the Christian faith and godliness. To satisfy its hunger the heavenly bread must be continually broken; to slake its thirst living water must be drawn for it out of the wells of salvation. And to guide its steps in paths of loving service to God and fellowman, it can never do without timely instruction and exhortation. All this it does first and foremost through preaching in proper order and form all that God has so graciously revealed in his Word.

In order that within the Reformed churches nothing of this may be lacking in a given year its ministers of the Word are pledged "ordinarily" to preach one sermon every Sunday "the sum of doctrine contained in the *Heidelberg Catechism*." Here is no option left to the discretion of pastor, consistory or congregation. And for more than four centuries this ecclesiastical regulation has yielded a rich and rewarding harvest.

Earlier, note was taken that such systematic instruction in the Christian faith is not something new or strange.³ Already the early church fathers engaged in a kind of catechetical preaching as creeds were developed and adopted. Later this practice was revived and strengthened by the Reformers as they called their followers back to the fullness of Holy Scripture. The history of the production as well as the homiletical use of that catechism was also traced. An article was devoted to reflecting on the objections raised against such preaching. Our concern, however, is not only with *what* is to be preached, but also with *how* this can be done as effectively as possible by those called by God to serve his purpose and his people.

Several questions immediately spring to mind.

When can such messages really be "sermons" and not addresses or lectures or devotional talks? How may they be constructed in such a way that the needs of the people are best met? Can this material, intended to serve as "text" year after year even to the same congregation and by the same pastor, be presented without becoming a dull and dreary repetition of what almost everyone has already heard?

For every catechetical sermon the *sine-qua-non* is that it shall be a "sermon."

Although this seems to be self-evident, few care to dispute that today many no longer know what a sermon really is. Even preachers do well to remind themselves of the place and power which an evangelical pulpit is intended to occupy in the life of a believing congregation. Here the minister of the Word is a teacher, but always far more than a teacher. To instruct he needs mastery of the message to be presented, yet far more urgent is that he himself shall be mastered by what he preaches. He is a spiritual guide in word and deed, but especially here he points away from himself to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom all the fulness of God dwells together with "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). He speaks with authority, indeed, but that authority is always God's. It flows not from some human person no matter how attractive, well-educated or competent, but solely from the divine Word which is brought. The pulpit, as someone has aptly said, is "the earthly throne from which the heavenly King rules the world."

Attempts have been made again and again to summarize the nature of preaching in a simple and straightforward definition. While these are indeed helpful, few seem capable of summarizing its many-sidedness as indicated in the New Testament. It is a human activity, but as Paul reminded the Thessalonian congregation, replete "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (I Thess. 1:5). At no point is man in control of its effects, even though the preacher bears responsibility for how he does his work and the people for how they hear and receive it. Nowhere is this "mystery" by which God is pleased to bring men to salvation (while at the same time penalizing all who reject the gospel) more succinctly stated than in his doxology incorporated in II Cor. 2:14-17:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To

the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

This is the tension which every faithful minister of the Word experiences, also when preparing and presenting catechetical sermons. He is to be deeply aware of being sent by and standing before the living God who weighs his every thought, word and deed. He is bound always to the message which God has commissioned him to bring. His concern is at the same time with those who hear, since they will be judged in time and eternity according to the responses which they give. Only "in Christ" can such a high calling be discharged with any degree of peace and confidence. Here he is to steep himself again and again in what God himself has declared about preachers and people and preaching itself.

Of all this and much more those committed to preaching catechetical sermons should be aware. Nothing dulls the Word which is the "the sword of the Spirit" more effectively than when the preacher who presents this material year after year thinks of himself as master of the material. Soon he neglects both prayer and study as well as the ever-changing needs of those who hear him. He speaks perhaps with great show of oratorical effectiveness, but all his words under God's judgment are "only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). Without love for God, for the Word and for the people who are addressed, his sermon--whatever he or anyone else may say about it--is no sermon at all.

Since such and similar corruptions of preaching can invade a pulpit quickly (no one is immune to them!), definitions can serve a salutary purpose.

C. H. Dodd said that preaching is the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world.⁴ But this is less than helpful, unless one knows what is "proclamation" and what is "Christianity."

Commenting on Dodd's explanations, R. H. Mounce feels compelled to add by way of warning that "the current

popular understanding of preaching as biblical exposition and exhortation has tended to obscure [the] basic meaning" of proclamation.

Preaching is not the relaxed recital of morally neutral truths: it is God himself breaking in and confronting man with a demand for decision.⁵

In his *Education unto Religion* (the scope of which includes, but is far broader than, sermons) A. Victor Murray takes several pages to delineate what he regards as essential to bringing the gospel.

In the full-orbed Christian faith there seem to me to be five elements. There is something to know, something to feel, something to choose, something to do, and something to belong to. . . .

(1) Christianity is a historical religion. Therefore we must have recourse to history. The Old and New Testaments are the basic documents of the faith and they are historical records without which there could be no Christian faith. . . .

(2) The root of all religion is feeling, by which I mean not an emotional excitement but rather a deep sense of concern with the unseen world. . . . Knowledge about God is a matter of study and instruction; knowledge of God comes by feeling and intuition, not opposed to the intellectual process (although often assumed to be) but completing it, and informing and disciplining it. . . .

(3) Christianity also involves moral choice. There is warfare in human life, and the fact of sin is inescapable. . . .

(4) Then action is needed. . . . The externalizing of an emotion helps to prevent it becoming morbid and also to recall it when it has gone. . . .

(5) Christianity has come down to us through the agency of the Christian community. . . . And the Christian community is an essential part of the Gospel, for it is through the life and witness of the community that Christ is made known to men.⁶

Having reminded his readers of this, he ends with the quip,

There is no expeditious road
To pack and label men for God
and move them by the barrel load.

How pertinent are the comments of H. H. Farmer when he reminds us that "Christianity is *sui generis*."⁷ Its proclamation and presentation therefore, if true to the gospel, will allow for no comparison with an address, a lecture, a drama, a spectacle, or for that matter, a sensitivity session. And while formally its dialogical character can be admitted, it is not dialogue or discussion in the commonly understood sense of those terms. It depends on and draws from the decisive work of God which he has accomplished and still accomplishes for us men and our salvation.

Fundamentally it is dogma declared on the basis of unimpeachable sources that God in Christ has reconciled the world to himself and charged his servants to deliver that message to all within hearing. Its address, though given within the context of the believing church, is always personal, direct and challenging.

. . . it is not merely *telling* me something. It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour, through the medium which the nature of His purpose permits Him to use, the medium of a personal relationship.⁸

All this is done, so Reformed churches are fully persuaded, by divine decision and arrangement. God has not sent his Word into this confused world of ours without plan or pattern or purpose. In Christ he has formed the church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to" him, who engage in declaring his praises (I Pet. 2:9). For that church he provides the official ministry of the Word, not leaving it to chance or human choice how and when and by whom that Word shall be brought. The more consistently faithful churches and pastors observe what Scripture says about their calling, the richer will be on them the outpourings of his favor. Here he is always at work to

the praise of the glory of his grace in Christ Jesus, not only to call men and women and children to salvation, but at the same time

to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ (Eph. 4:12-15).

Here *kerugma* and *didache* join hands in a successful unity which, despite whatever differences of emphasis may be legitimate, should never be dissolved. To that unity no other kind of sermonizing can serve so effectively as that of systematic, continual and persuasive catechetical preaching.

-2-

Such sermons, shall they be pleasing to God who hears with far keener ear than any man, and profitable for the people, deserve to be crafted with great care. Certain standards with respect to content and form are to be met to the best of the preacher's ability. All superficiality and slovenliness are contraband as incompatible with the sacred purpose for which he who sends his servants has commissioned them. Recognizing this and the ever-present danger of dealing too casually with familiar material, Reformed churches have repeatedly insisted that such sermons shall "especially" evidence on the part of the pastor "diligent study."

What is before all else demanded is that these shall be consistently *biblical*. Here the catechism is no substitute for Scripture; it draws from the record of God's mighty acts which find their fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence the texts which give shape to the catechetical questions and answers have been drawn not only from Paul's epistles but

from the whole round of Scripture itself. This already provides some clue to the possibility of varying approaches to the same subject, whether doctrinal or devotional or dealing more explicitly with ethical responses, to its several Lord's Days. Only because these churches are convinced that every phrase and statement is biblically defensible have they insisted on the regular homiletical use of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. No other creed, confession or catechism, in their official judgment, can serve as a guide to set forth the facts and mysteries of the gospel so clearly, succinctly and persuasively to those who need instruction in the Christian faith.

Always, therefore, when faithful to the Word from which this catechism derives, such sermons will be truly *evangelical*. With God's love in Christ Jesus it begins and ends. Throughout, also when dealing with the call to repentance, faith and daily obedience, it magnifies the person and work of Jesus Christ together with the Holy Spirit who regenerates, leads into all truth and strengthens for service those who receive the Word gladly. Even the "knowledge" of our sinfulness and our daily sins--a theme repeatedly introduced--springs only from the gospel as the Word of life and light and liberty. More, much more than some helpful counsel on how to meet a pressing problem is to be presented, if the message is to be truly a sermon. Always the controlling emphasis is that "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Cor. 4:6).

Therefore these sermons are *doctrinal*. In season and out of season they teach, despite any disinclination on the part of many to be instructed. In view of the palpable ignorance which characterizes many who claim to be Christian this facet of preaching can hardly be overstressed. Such teaching the catechism insists on giving without hesitation or apology. Because it aims to be truly evangelical and evangelistic, it dare not and cannot avoid being theological, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones so appropriately urges:

I would be prepared to argue that in many ways evangelistic preaching should be more, rather than less theological, and for this good reason. Why is it that you call people to repent? Why do you call them to believe the gospel? You cannot deal properly with repentance without dealing with the doctrine of man, the doctrine of the Fall, the doctrine of sin and the wrath of God upon sin. Then when you call men to come to Christ and to give themselves to Him, how can you do so without knowing who He is, and on what grounds you invite them to come to Him, and so on. In other words, it is all highly theological. Evangelism which is not theological is not evangelism at all in any true sense. It may be a calling for decision, it may be a calling of people to come to religion, or to live a better kind of life, or the offering of some psychological benefits; but it cannot by any definition be regarded as Christian evangelism, because there is no true reason for what you are doing apart from these great theological principles.⁹

At long last, so it would seem from reading much that has been written recently about preaching, many begin to realize that people need more of the "strong meat" of the Word. Too many sermons by their shallowness and sentimentality fail to provide people with what they need to stand and to withstand in the struggles of daily life. Nor can meaning and purpose and hope be recovered unless the fulness of God's Word and work is explained in the light of his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Here the mind must first of all be addressed clearly and carefully lest the faith to which men are called withers on the vine. How aptly John H. Leith comments on this when writing,

A commitment which does not serve God with the *mind* is always dangerous and irresponsible. Indeed, the articulation of faith in intelligible words not only clarifies faith but becomes itself the means of deeper commitment of heart and mind. Theology and the creeds are the service of God through the life of the mind and are indispensable to any other service which

may be rendered to God.¹⁰

To which Alan Richardson adds his warning,

The demand of a “non-theological” language may often harbor a dislike, not of words, but of the theological truths which lie behind them. . . . too often the attempt to avoid ‘theological’ language and to use only an ordinary work-a-day vocabulary has resulted in the substitution of a prudential ethical or topical address in place of real Christian preaching.¹¹

Those faithful to the catechism will never fall into this snare. It teaches, using all the cardinal biblical terms with a few beside, and by its explanations does its teaching well.

Of course, more needs to be added about such sermons. But here our comments can be brief since much of this should be obvious to every preacher. Catechetical sermons, like all good sermons, must be *challenging*. They are to speak to the needs of the people where they are and in the light of what they experience in today’s world. None of them may ever be crude re-presentations of those delivered fifty or two hundred years ago. Here the preacher is to serve as a pastor with the pastoral responsibilities of leading and feeding, correcting and healing those in his care.

The minister of the Word aims at awakening, stimulating and strengthening the response of faith which is far more than intellectual acquiescence to the truth. Always the appeal, while first addressed to the mind by means of intelligible words, is to the total person. New and God-approved emotions are to be kindled. The will is to yield obedience to the demands of the Word. The lips are to speak and sing the praises of the Lord. Always the call is for a conscious return to God and the ways which he prescribes for his people. True religion according to the New Testament is *eusebeia*, perhaps best translated as piety or godliness which learns to respond on the deepest levels of selfhood to the will of God. It is a heart-response involving an involvement quite other than the undisciplined thrill of the moment. Always the Word of life when received rightly produces awe, humility, gratitude which delights in obedience. Here we may read

with much profit that too much neglected work of Phillip Doddridge entitled *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Divine truth also when mediated by the preacher's message is more than a set of carefully formulated propositions. These are foundational, indeed, but on them the believer is to build a life of faithfulness, of loyalty to the God who graciously calls all who hear to a life of covenant fellowship with him. James states the matter so crisply!

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. . . . [But] the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22,25).

Such *confessional* preaching will by the promised blessing of God produce a confessing people, one which seeks to serve him and fellowman in both word and deed.

But catechetical sermons, no matter what the subject to be explained and applied, can and should always be *doxological*.¹² Does much at times seem dull and drab even to the point of lifelessness? Likely one of the chief causes for this lies in the failure of the preacher to begin and end with God who is the overflowing fountain of all good, whose judgments are true and righteous altogether, who never fails to supply the needs of those who diligently seek his face and whose mercies shine so brightly that the way into the future is never dim. All true doctrine rightly calls for songs of praise.

While all these aspects of "a good sermon" are involved, they should derive both from the central "theme" of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the teaching of each of its fifty-two Lord's Days. The aim is to proclaim the *comfort* known and experienced only in a living faith-relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This prevents any message from becoming a sterile intellectual and impersonal address. But for the sake of sound and clear understanding the authors (and therefore the church by its official adoption of this confession also for homiletical ends) insist that it

consists in the triple "knowledge" of our misery on account of our sinfulness and sins, our salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ and our obligation to live by that grace a life of service in loving obedience and prayer.

Nothing is more destructive of such preaching than to isolate these three from each other. This danger perhaps threatens most when treating Lord's Days II - IV without clear reference to Lord's Day I as the living confession which the church lays upon the lips of its members. The temptation to proclaim for some weeks only a "fire and brimstone theology" may have its appeal in days of spiritual and moral declension, but should be resisted at all costs. Any diagnosis of the ills which afflict people without pointing unmistakably to the remedy provided by our gracious God soon proves fruitless to awaken the sinner to that godly repentance which leads to life. Whatever one may think of Heinrich Ott's understanding of the Word, he is on target when affirming that

an autonomous doctrine of pervasive universal justice and of retribution and recompense, a preaching of future punishment in hell would be of no use. For in a time of nihilism and the dissolution of values it simply would not be believed. And this is perhaps just as well. Only when they proclaim the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. . . can the message of the law, of sin, and of judgment be convincing.¹³

Always the God made known in Scripture summons us "to flee from the wrath to come" and in the same breath to seek salvation only in the One on whom he has laid our iniquities and through whose stripes we are healed.

Such looking to the Lord Jesus does not desensitize men to the fearful reality and consequences of sin. Rather, in and through him we see by faith the costliness of divine grace. Here, of course, the preacher does not elaborate on those rich provisions; that is to be done painstakingly and persuasively in the second section and to a large degree, though from a somewhat different perspective, in the third section of this little guide into the truth. But all catechetical

proclamation with its instruction and call for decision is a summons to "know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified" as the only ground and foundation of salvation.

Nor need this become tedious.

Each Lord's Day has its own message. But the thread woven throughout the seamless fabric of the Word and obediently patterned in the catechism is "the [great] mystery of godliness" summarized by Paul in his letter to the evangelist (I Tim. 3:15).

While undeniably Christocentric, such sermons will also be profoundly God-centered and trinitarian. Never does the Savior's work end in and with himself; in redeeming his own from sin he reconciles them to the everlasting Father who as Spirit renews and refreshes the lives of everyone who draws near in Christ's name and pleads his person and work. This the beloved disciple has affirmed in language which expresses the heart of all sound preaching:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make [y]our joy complete (I John 1:3-4).

This delineates that new spiritual life which is God's gift. It is a fellowship (*koinonia*) in which the vertical and horizontal are happily wedded. Never does the gospel hold out the promise of fruitful life with others apart from its rootage in saving communion with the triune God.

Today it seems that the term "God" speaks with little clarity or relevance to many. Countless folk live in ignorance of him, of his being and works and ways. At best they retain a vague awareness of some supernatural being or power. At worst his is a name which slips carelessly and profanely from the tongue when things go wrong. More than ever it is incumbent on the church and its ministers to make him known. This is the "dogma" which people need more than bread and water. It needs explanation which is saturated with Scripture throughout. It alone meets the true needs of

those who listen with a sensitive and believing heart. Only so will the preacher be able in his messages to avoid the moralizing clichés which often pass for sermons on the third part of this catechism. There is diversity throughout a wholesome series of such catechetical sermons, but only when their unity as God's message of grace in Jesus Christ is made unambiguously clear. Without this a preacher serves stones for bread or a serpent whose bite is as deadly as it is painful.

Such instruction is at the same time exhortation and admonition. It comes in the form, indeed, of affirmations, of definitions and propositions and explanations which are the fruit of the church's wrestling for centuries with the heights and depths of God's truth. But imperatives are included at many a turn in a wholesome sermon. Someone has commented that Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are not so much a theological summary as "a treatise in Christian piety." To that aim the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism* strove to be faithful and have admirably succeeded. This, then, should be the avowed purpose of every catechetical sermon irrespective of what doctrine is set forth. Here the sheep of the great and good Shepherd are to hear his voice and follow in faith which is productive of good works.

-3-

Always it is dangerous, even more than a little presumptuous at times, to write on *how* any sermon, including those which are catechetical, should be structured. Both the gifts of the preacher and the needs as well as the capacities of the people are so varied that any straight-jacketing may appear to be an exercise in futility. How different in style and therefore in structure were most of the sermons delivered by the early fathers from those preached by the Reformers. Yet both served their times well under the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

This, however, does not imply that every message delivered from a pulpit is a sermon. Some are little more than pious exhortations; others a form of rambling without coherence to confuse the people even when they attempt to

listen intently. Never should it be said of an evangelical minister what was remarked about one pastor's sermon by an elderly lady, "Today he said nothing, but he said it so well!"

With this in mind we excuse ourselves for making some comments on structure which should control especially catechetical sermons intended to be based on the same Lord's Days year after year.

Some five or six qualities should characterize such sermons, shall they serve their purpose well.

We mention *unity* as a first requisite. In conformity with the catechetical material one "theme" is to be drawn here in subordination to Scripture and stressed throughout. Although many Lord's Days mention several topics, one always stands out as that which is to be emphasized. Several answers, for example, speak about the Holy Spirit or the blood of Jesus Christ. Yet in every instance this is done in relationship to that which is the concern of the specific question and answer. When such related but subordinate matters are treated at great length, the point which that Lord's Day makes is soon lost to the minds and hearts of the hearers. Such a sermon actually sails under a false flag and carries illegal cargo.

Also essential to a sermon is *progress* as development of the basic thought. Nothing confuses listeners more quickly or produces ennui with its accompanying indifference to God's truth than belaboring a minor point. Some measure of repetition, indeed, is necessary for sound instruction and exhortation, as Gregory pointed out in *The Seven Laws of Learning*. But to be effective this needs to be done with caution and care. Illustrations and examples serve well in illuminating the truth, but even these should be employed with restraint. One or two usually are more than ample. When indulged in frequently and at great length the "story" is soon remembered at the expense of the truth it was intended to explicate and confirm.

Closely related to the above is *coherence*, lest the connection of one part of the message to the others mystifies those who listen. Without logic (not to be identified exclusively

with argumentation) the sermon soon becomes confused. Nor will it engage in addressing itself clearly to the total person, mind as well as will and emotions. Sermons are to be like tapestries woven from the "text" selected, here the questions and answers which the given Lord's Day supplies.

Which brings us to what for want of a better term may be called *elegance*. Nothing but the best in the way of style and structure which the preacher has to offer is acceptable. With every skill at his disposal he strives to bring God's message to bear upon the full life of everyone who has come to worship.

This is a far cry from that strained artificiality and ostentatious display of learning against which early Reformed synods warned the preachers of that age. Simplicity of speech, even when treating the loftiest themes, is the norm which Scripture itself both commends and illustrates. Neither is there room for banality or vulgarity. Did not Paul remind the cultured Corinthians that he "did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom," but that his "message and . . . preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (I Cor. 2:1,4,5)? And were not many messages of our Lord, himself the highest wisdom, often couched in parables drawn from everyday life to astound and entrance those who gladly heard his words to accord them an authority far exceeding that of the learned scribes and Pharisees? But lest the point be misconstrued, we add the warning of Raymond Abba:

Here colloquialisms and provincialisms are as out of place as a secular vocabulary is quite inadequate for the adoration of the Creator who is also the Redeemer of mankind and for the expression of man's deepest needs.¹⁴

This holds as true for sermons as it does for the prayers which are offered and the hymns which the congregation sings. As preachers we should fix in our minds the words of R. H. Mounce,

Preaching is not the relaxed recital of morally neutral truth; it is God himself breaking in and confronting man with a demand for decision.¹⁵

This makes the message truly authoritative and the ring of *authority*, not from man, should resound. Not everything, to be sure, deserves equal emphasis. But without this a sermon will not only be dull; it will surely be self-defeating.

Only so will the messages, also here, be truly *person-directed* as well. Preaching is far different from beating the air vainly with a spate of words no matter how orthodox they happen to sound. Here God calls, pleads, commands everyone within range of the preacher's voice to seek his face and walk in his ways. Always he speaks with unmistakable urgency. His Word (*Wort*) elicits, whether those who listen are conscious of this or not, an answer (*Antwort*). In accordance with it they will be judged.

These responsibilities are integral to the sacred calling of preparing and delivering an effective sermon. Of this Paul reminded his co-worker,

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. . .and they destroy the faith of some (II Tim. 2:15-16,18).

At its most obvious level "preaching is the *oral* communication of divine truth." Words are and must always be spoken. Yet much more than words flowing from a minister's mouth are involved. Pictures and pantomime, even when associated with dance, are no substitute for words. But like the prophet of old, every gospel minister is summoned while "eating the scroll" to sit down where the people themselves sit. Here he identifies himself with them as completely as possible, knowing that in preaching he is always preaching to himself first of all. H. H. Farmer has summarized this well:

Preaching is that divine, saving activity in history, which began two thousand years ago with the advent of Christ in His personal relationship with men and women, and has continued throughout the ages in the sphere of redeemed personal relationships (which is the true Church), now focusing on me, confronting me, as a person indissolubly bound up with other persons at this present time.¹⁶

To underline its unique, its "distinctive nature. . . derived from the distinctive nature of the Christian faith," he adds that "it is God's activity, that it is God encountering human souls in what may at any moment prove to be the supreme crisis of their life." This, then, calls for that careful exposition and application of the gospel which demonstrates that he who brings the message is first receiving it into the deepest levels of his own life. Catechetical preaching will then show itself to be

God's great activity of redemption in history, in the world of persons, focusing itself in challenge and succor on "these persons here present," who listen to your words and look into your eyes; nay it is that activity focusing on you, the preacher, also, for no man has truly preached who has not tremblingly felt the sermon penetrating his own soul also. Comments and impressions of life, theology, challenges, and rebukes on social questions, moral instruction, anything in fact of *truth* that might conceivably be given to the best and humblest reflexion of a serious Christian mind, these all become specifically *preaching* precisely as they are informed by this sense that here and now God's saving activity in the world in Christ once again encounters the souls of men.¹⁷

This is an "administration" of "the keys of the kingdom." It is God's Word. It is that; it does not merely become such when appropriated by faith. Never, of course, does it work mechanically or magically. Full responsibility for how we handle and receive it rests with us, to remind especially the preacher that consideration of structure and style also has its appropriate place. These are not dispensable addenda to be

lightly dismissed.

-4-

Sermon-making, more than congregations realize, is arduous labor. It calls for the development of a high degree of skill. It demands a structure and a style appropriate to the high purpose for which God has ordained it. Without proper preparation no man, however gifted he may happen to be, will serve his heavenly Sender well. And again, because of great familiarity gained over several years with catechetical material, this should be underscored lest we engage in the work carelessly.

Here craftsmanship is to be developed by continual and consistent practice. There is "theory" about sermon-making which can serve a pastor well. It does not consist, except in a general way, of inviolable rules and regulations. Rather, remembering the basic guidelines helps to shed light on snares into which some fall unawares. They help to shape the message so that it may be more easily assimilated when proclaimed.

The "text," which is a specific Lord's day, deserves to be read carefully again and again, even when preparing to preach the material for the eighth or ninth time. Always there are nuances springing before the mind's eye which were never seen so clearly before.

This should be done in the light of those biblical passages from which the catechetical formulation derives. Here we need not argue with ourselves whether the statements are true to the sacred writings; of that a Reformed minister has been convinced before he begins his sermon preparation. What he seeks is some new perspective for himself from which to address his hearers so that he may bring out of his treasure together with the old that which is new. This enriches the understanding; this strengthens the faith-life of himself and those who heed what he will say.

What ought not be ignored is the setting of each Lord's Day. What has gone before laid a foundation; what will

follow often provides further elucidation and application of the riches of salvation. Occasionally this can be profitably included somewhere at the beginning of the sermon to stress anew the unity, coherence and fulness of God's work of grace.

Upon such careful and prayerful reflection--recognizing that he deals with sacred truths--he sets himself to formulate his "theme." This is possibly the most difficult as it surely is the most essential. It is to derive strictly from the question(s) and answer(s) of the Lord's Day. It is to be a statement, not merely a topic. It should as much as possible be brief, crystal-clear and attention-getting. This he will seek to bind upon minds and hearts throughout the course of the sermon. Here he aims at encouraging a "confessional" congregation to engage in *confessing* in word and deed the gospel wherein they can find rest in Christ for time and eternity.

But this theme needs elaboration. It must be explained adequately and applied personally as well as practically. This calls for a carefully crafted series of *divisions*. Each of these is to be properly related to the theme, flowing directly from it as explications of the central and all-controlling thought and yet exclusive of each other lest the preacher fall into idle repetition.

Hardly does it seem necessary to add that throughout the sermon his hearers need application of truth to their lives. Here the danger is that the preacher contents himself with broad, general remarks which fail to demonstrate that he is pastor and guide as well as teacher. Only when addressing himself to specific life situations--of the young as well as the old--will he be able to involve his hearers more effectively with the gospel. Without falling into the extremes which characterized some pietistic and Puritan preachers in the past, we can learn much from them as "physicians" skilled in applying God's remedies to those who suffered from spiritual diseases of many kinds. One of the weaknesses of much preaching today is its failure to recognize that people, buffeted by life's distressing circumstances, come for help and healing. Some of the finest "pastoral counseling" is done week after week from the pulpit. Here, when done well, an

ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. This is a far cry from simple moralizing; it is rather leading the listeners to the Lord Jesus Christ whose sympathetic touch through the gospel, also when brought in catechetical fashion, transforms life. Him who fills all faithful preaching with his presence and power Isaiah already introduced as saying,

The Spirit of the sovereign LORD
is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's
favor
and the day of vengeance of our
God,
to comfort all who mourn
and provide for those who grieve
in Zion--
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.

(Isa. 61:1-3b)

Unless catechetical sermons do this, they fall short of the mark; they afford no remedy or relief, because they fail to lift up as every sermon should the crucified, resurrected and glorified Lord. Such sermons have cut the heart out of the good news of our God.

Often people come to church with little appetite for listening. Here the minister is to exert himself as a fisher of men in obedience to the Savior's summons. This calls for baiting the hook well. It is an art learned best through long practice of close associations with a congregation. He who

would serve them with "pure spiritual milk" as well as with "strong meat" must be eager to walk and talk with people in their daily round. He is man among fellowmen, sharing their joys and sorrows. To nothing human should he feel himself estranged, not even to the temptations and trials which test the faith of God's children. Nor may he forget, when entering the pulpit, that often it is as strenuous a discipline to listen as it is to speak. To make this as easy as possible when dealing with divine truth is an aspect of his calling which may not be forgotten.

Much can be done to achieve this without compromising the glory of the gospel. Here we learn much from the prophets and apostles and especially from our Lord himself. Repeatedly he adorned his messages with figures of speech and illustrations which spoke directly to everyday experiences. Nor did he hesitate to vary the length of his sentences or to change from the indicative to the imperative or interrogatory mood when addressing either individuals or multitudes.

The beginning of the sermon always deserves attention. This calls for preparing the *introduction* with unusual care.

What congregation cares to listen to sermons which begin every time with such stereotypes as: "Last week we learned from the catechism that. . . , now we will consider the next question and answer," or "Today the subject for our sermon is. . . "?

Let us take to heart, especially when preaching catechetical sermons, what several competent preachers have penned for our profit. H. H. Farmer does not hesitate to insist that

our gospel is an unchanging gospel, obviously; but the way in which we present it, and the things in it which need to be proclaimed, or re-proclaimed, with special emphasis and clarity, are determined (largely) by the situation, the mental and spiritual particularly, of those to whom we speak. The spirit of the times is a very real, if intangible, thing, and it has always something of the pressure and challenge of God in it. Eternal as the gospel is, there must be some translation of it

into the present tense, some welding, to change the metaphor, of a hard, sharp point of thrusting relevancy on to the shaft of it, or to use a somewhat worn but useful simile, we must get on to the right wavelength, if we are to be heard.¹⁸

To which John R. W. Stott in his *Between Two Worlds* adds:

Coming away from the "tube" and into the pew, it is little wonder that many people are unable to listen to a sermon which is not produced from a variety of camera angles, replete with make-up, and divided by commercial breaks.¹⁹

While fully cognizant of the dangers of introductions which are not brief, not interesting, not arresting. W. E. Sangster pleads for their propriety and profitableness.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the beginning of the sermon. Most of the hearers give us their attention at the start. However convinced they may be that preaching is boring, hope springs eternal and the thought lingers in the mind of the most blasé that perhaps on *this* occasion something of the awful majesty and arresting power they would associate with a message from God may be evident in what the preacher has to say. If he does not take a firm grip of their attention in the first few minutes, how can he hope to hold it to the end?²⁰

And since the themes of the Lord's Days are so well-known and possibly even well-worn to large numbers in Reformed congregations, the demand for beginning well ought never be ignored.

Which brings us to the *conclusion*. Here all that has long since been learned in a good course on Homiletics will serve the concerned preacher well. Fully as well as the first impressions do the last which a preacher seeks to leave deserve careful thought. Here, too, a single kind of conclusion, used with every Lord's Day, is as inexcusable as it is inappropriate.

Nor may the *delivery* of such a sermon be minimized. Especially messages which aim especially at instructing people in the Christian faith can, when the basics of effective address are ignored, send many a hearer into sound sleep. Here peppermints and chewing gum will be of little avail. Never should the style of the pulpit be equated with that of the classroom. Rather, the lively preaching of the gospel seeks direct, personal contact on the deepest levels of life with old and young, the businessman, the housewife and teenager. Delivery, contrary to what some seem to suppose, does not take care of itself. Nor is it an art beyond the reach of anyone willing to train himself; think of Demosthenes who, according to the story often told, learned to become a gifted speaker by putting pebbles in his mouth as he tried to make himself heard and understood within sound of the Greek sea. To be sure, the dignity of God's message of life and grace and hope ill comports with incessant Bible-thumping or wild and meaningless gesticulations. But neither is there room on the pulpit for the droning voice, the stern-set visage or hands feverishly clutching the pulpit for support. The message takes shape visibly when its words impinge upon the mind and heart. Instinctively the alert congregation senses whether or not the truth has mastered the man who is bringing it. And if not, how dare we expect that it will grip the souls of those who hear?

Here a clear and resonant voice is a great asset, quite indispensable for effective communication. But it is to be modulated according to the truths which are explained or reinforced or applied. And this, too, can be cultivated as the preacher reviews what he has prepared before the season of worship. By no means does every sentence require equal emphasis. Here we learn from everyday conversation whose charm lies in its direct and personal appeal. Always the eye is to be engaged as mind and heart open themselves to those whom we are addressing. Here, and of this we need not feel ashamed, we seek "to win friends and influence people" for our Lord Jesus Christ who as the friend of sinners calls them to discipleship.

Catechetical sermons, then, because so often they are taken for granted and even lightly esteemed, are among the most difficult to preach appropriately.

They deal with the most essential and profound truths of the Christian religion; at the same time they are intended to be the most practical and personal. And this is done in a congregation rather than on a one-to-one basis. They treat the same fundamentals again and again, yet always with the challenge to shed new and richer light on God's plan of salvation. They are to teach, to plead, to warn, to rebuke and to comfort; all within the space of some thirty to forty minutes. And this should be done in such orderly (yet vibrant) fashion that those who hear with even modest concentration will leave with something to ponder and practice in the days ahead.

Important as the manuscript may be as foundation for the actual hour of preaching in order that precision, clarity and beauty of diction may be preserved, it is best left behind somewhere in the pastor's study. Only those who have trained themselves thoroughly in the art of reading can engage the attention of some several hundred successfully when bound to a manuscript. Far better for the pulpit is a brief but lucid outline with a quotation or two to cover up a possible lapse of memory.

Most of all, what every minister needs is that quiet hour before he goes to the pulpit. This he spends alone with the Lord who alone can see him through with confidence that the Word will not return fruitless. Then even moods whether high or low which may afflict him for a moment will not turn him from the task to which he has set himself. He knows that faithful labor in the Lord is never put to shame.

-5-

Possibly much of what has been written to this point may seem too theoretical, general or even repetitious of what is already well-known. Yet without principles to guide, our practice may soon lead us astray. Now an attempt will be made to demonstrate the propriety and usefulness of what

has been stated to this point. Here we draw far more from the experience of others than from our own.

Without apology it has been affirmed that every catechetical sermon, while refreshing the lives of the hearers with truths already known, must do so in as "attractive" a way as comports with the material itself. This can be done without any sacrifice of the integrity of content.

In the English-speaking world, where we find many Reformed congregations, little has been published to assist pastors in this work, in sharp contrast to the flood of such literature in the German and especially Dutch languages. To fill this gap in a small and introductory way these articles have been written.

Not only individual sermons but also series of such messages should meet the requirement of unity within a large measure of variety. How wearying for a congregation to know before the sermon begins not only what but also how the minister will say what he has to say.

Now the *Heidelberg Catechism* (more than any isolated Scripture text) allows for wide variety in its treatment. As a summary of several biblical passages its Lord's Days cannot be exhausted in a single sermon on each. This allows, upon careful reflection, for presenting the message from more than one perspective.

Again it must be underscored that "concrete" rather than abstract terminology, especially in selecting the theme, should be chosen to attract the attention of the hearers. Words have an "emotive" quality whether favorable or unfavorable. Little interest will usually be aroused, even when faithful to the subject material, by such impersonal topics as:

- "The Holy Trinity,"
- "The Atonement of Christ," or
- "Some Basic Rules for Prayer."

Far more appealing when we are informed that the message will address itself to:

“The Incomparable Glory of Our God,”
“By His Sufferings Our Lord Brings Us Life,” or
“Lord, Teach Us How to Pray.”

Here we have not “topics” but “themes.” Each makes a statement intended to stir the heart as well as the mind. Each draws the hearers closer to the gospel. At the same time it can be easily remembered. Yet the statement, because of its relative brevity, calls immediately for elucidation. This, of course, does not ignore the warning sounded by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that

. . . in presenting the Christian gospel we must never make a *direct* approach to the emotions or to the will. The emotions and the will should always be influenced through the mind. Truth is intended to come to the *mind*. The normal course is for the emotions and the will to be affected by the truth after it has entered and gripped the mind. It seems to me that this is a principle of Holy Scripture.²¹

But because it aims at flooding the soul with life and peace as well as light, the message always deserves to be summarized in an arresting way. “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 23:11).

Even when working on a first series of such sermons this deserves careful thought. Here the central affirmations of the Christian faith can be expounded and applied well when taking our cue from the Scripture passage read before the catechism is quoted as the specific “text.” Perhaps some of the following suggestions for the early Lord’s Days may illustrate how variety in approach need not impair faithfulness to content as well as coherence and challenge in its development.

Lord’s Day I: “Your Only Comfort in Life and Death”
(Isa. 40:1-11)

Lord’s Day II: “Our Comfort in Knowing Our
Misery” (Rom. 7:7-13)

Lord's Day III: "Do You Know the Source of Your Misery?" (Gen. 3:1-7)

Lord's Day IV: "Look into the Depth of Your Misery" (Rom. 3:1-20)

Lord's Day V: "Salvation Does Not Come Cheaply!" (Isa. 52:14-53:6)

Lord's Day VI: "What a Wonderful Savior is Jesus My Lord"! (I Cor. 1:19-31)

Lord's Day VII: "Salvation is For All Who Truly Believe" or
"See the Many-sidedness of Faith!" (John 3:1-18)

Such and similar themes lend themselves readily to three or even four principal divisions; not more, lest few will be able to remember them! These when properly formulated will under the Spirit's blessing make that impact which produces faith, hope and loving obedience.

Much the same should be attempted when preaching on the Ten Commandments. These are not only integral to the structure of the catechism as they were to the catechetical lectures of many of the early Christian fathers; their validity and value for spiritual growth is consistently affirmed throughout the Bible. Here is always more than "Do this!" and "Don't do that!" Here is no room for a meticulous casuistry even though the various forms in which we sin against God's law are to be exposed. What is essential is grounding the God-pleasing life in the work of redemption and renewal by divine grace. None of our works can please the Lord or be expressive of wholesome gratitude, unless they proceed from true faith, are done in conformity to his will and aim at his praise. Remembering this, we will hardly dare plague our people with such banalities as "Today, my friends, we will reflect on the first . . . or the eighth . . . or the tenth commandment." Such cheap and casual formulations may serve as "topics" for the lazy preacher; they are not "themes" appropriate to expounding God's will which ought to be esteemed by his children as more precious than silver and gold.

Also the treatment of the Lord's Prayer deserves more than some commonplace affirmations. To be sure, it rests on substantial doctrinal and theological formulations. Only those who come to the heavenly Father in Christ's name may assure themselves that they will surely be heard and answered. Nor may the believer ask for anything that happens to cross his mind at some given moment. But here the catechism speaks devotionally, personally, with a tenderness to be emulated in explaining each part.

For those well versed in Scripture it should not be too difficult to express this in each instance and from several wide-ranging perspectives. Here we enter a holy place, far richer indeed and yet clearly symbolized in the pattern of that earthly tabernacle which the Lord commanded Moses to construct for Israel's approach to Him. Already Lord's Day I can appropriately refer, even in theme and structure, to that tabernacle in the wilderness which foreshadowed its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ who is our access to the throne of God. Through the shedding of his blood we may cry "Abba, Father!" Our entrance is rendered sure and stable. As a "kingdom of priests" we seek no other priest than the One who has entered heaven as our intercessor and through whom even our feeblest petitions find acceptability in the Father's heart.

But note further the parallel which may be carried out when expounding the several petitions. We come, as did the priests of old, to render our praises to God by hallowing his name. We approach his throne as we ask for grace to do his will. We confess him as our King even as once he was enthroned in symbolical fashion above the golden mercy-seat surrounded by cherubim. Upon that throne in glory, as once within the ark, rests the law for our lives. Our needs are all supplied, even as were those of the children of Israel in the desert by daily manna. Here is all we need. And confessing this, God's people adore him with that doxology which echoes the benediction which long ago the priests laid upon the people.

Other approaches are equally deserving of attention. From the many prayers recorded in Holy Writ, both Old and

New Testament, all can learn much both with respect to content and form. Nor would we forget the close relationship between the Ten Commandments and the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. In all things we are to glorify the God of salvation by our thoughts, words and deeds. Knowing that even the holiest believer cannot attain this perfectly we are to pray daily for grace to grow in that godliness which by drawing near to God receives strength for every turning along life's way.

Such unity and coherence in a series of catechetical sermons is profitable for both preacher and people.

This has been attempted by Dutch ministers from time to time. Occasionally strong stress was placed by a few on *comfort*, undeniably the approach to divine truth which the authors of the catechism deliberately chose for their day. Another has urged throughout that the church's confession is to be *confessed* always and everywhere. Still another--and his sermons appear on the printed page--dealt in each Lord's Day with *love*, the love of God in Christ for an unlovely and loveless people who are not only summoned but also by grace enabled to love in response. But unless done with great insight and finesse, such treatments soon dull the spiritual appetites of the hearers. Nor does the material of the catechism require this.

Some *Church Orders* still prescribe that the series "shall be completed as much as possible within a year." This should be taken with the seriousness which the church intends. A pastor who preaches such sermons only once every month or two deserves to be reminded of his responsibility to the congregation by the elders. Yet this rule need not be interpreted as a "law of the Medes and the Persians." What is intended by it is that the central truths by which believers are called to live every day shall always stand out clearly in their minds and hearts. Hence repetition of the material has been made mandatory in those Reformed churches which take their confessions seriously.

For the first series, not only at the beginning of his ministry but also when assuming a new charge, a pastor does well

to follow the regulation as faithfully as possible. He thus lays solid foundations for any further treatment of this "sum of Christian doctrine" in the years allotted to him. Soon, however, he discovers that certain Lord's Days are so laden with material that they deserve occasionally two, three, or even four sermons. Lord's Day VI, for example, not only proclaims Jesus Christ as the only Savior who meets all the requirements; it also explains how the entire Old Testament foreshadowed and prepared for his coming into the world to fulfil all righteousness. Or again, Lord's Day VII deals with faith from its several aspects, none of which ought ever be overlooked. And how, if the details are to be somewhat carefully explained and applied, can Lord's Day XII receive its just due in one sermon? Should the treatment of Lord's Days XV and XVI be scheduled in a given year during the Lenten weeks, the questions and answers lend themselves well to a series of sermons on our Lord's sufferings, condemnation, crucifixion, death, burial and descent into hell.

Returning more directly to the matter of "variety within unity," we call attention to three Dutch ministers who have dealt with it in their publications. Of their work they provide us with copious examples, some in the form of detailed sketches while others in barest outline. For none of these would they claim even a modest amount of "homiletical perfection." Nor should they be followed slavishly. Few men can wear the suit of another with dignity and decorum, not to speak of the "sin" of stealing another man's wares. Also catechetical sermons, in the nature of the case, are always suited to the occasion, to the here-and-now of a pastor speaking according to divine truth to his own people. But what those men have written does merit our appreciation and reflection.

The venerable Jan Kok began his two volume work with reminiscences on his experiences with catechetical preaching.

In my youth I had little taste for catechism preaching. Much rather would I listen to messages on historical materials. When I entered the ministry, it was no pleasant prospect for me to think of beginning every

year again with catechism sermons. To deal with this once, so I thought, might go well, but how would this work out ten or even twenty times, if I were to live that long? And then to remain fresh?

But I did not know the good old Heidelberger, even though I had recited it many times. Not too long afterward that concern of mine was taken away. I found abundant material. Indeed, the longer I preached in accordance with it, the better I found I could do it. . .
22

Thereupon, so he informs us, "I attempted to make catechism preaching more attractive by changes in form without shortchanging the content." Appealing to the adage that "a change of diet makes for eating," he likened this to rice which is consumed at almost every meal in Indonesia but prepared in no less than thirty-five or forty different ways.

This he illustrates by providing for each Lord's Day eight to fifteen different "sketches" or outlines of varying length. Some are strongly doctrinal in their development, others more devotional or geared to challenge the hearers to obedience. At times the apologetic concern of a faithful pastor expresses itself by way of sharp contrast between sound and false teaching. Each is introduced by a selection from Scripture (to be read) which "colors" the approach taken. Again, these range widely throughout the Old as well as the New Testament, indicating that no minister need feel bound to appeal week after week to some Pauline epistle. At times his terminology will strike us as somewhat old fashioned, even abstract and topical rather than thematic. But the development of thought, in so far as it is supplied, demonstrates deep pastoral concern. Anyone in a position to obtain these volumes does well to do so without hesitation.

About that same time Pieter Biesterveld, serving as professor of preaching after many years in the pastorate, provided his students with practical directives on how monotony could be avoided when following the catechism faithfully as homiletical guide. Some of these are the following:

1. sermons which explain the Lord's Day phrase-by-phrase, much after the fashion of a homily;
2. sermons which develop systematically the specific doctrine in the given Lord's Day;
3. sermons which illumine the doctrine in the light of salvation-history, enabling the minister to engage in telling the "story" of when and how and why that doctrine was set forth at a specific time;
4. sermons which in the light of Scripture show the correlation between the catechism and the two other *Forms of Unity*;
5. sermons which defend the sound doctrine against errors of various kinds;
6. sermons which emphasize especially the personal and practical application of God's truth to everyday living.²³

Fifty years later Klaas Dijk, not without much hesitation but at the urging of his publisher, prepared a volume similar to the work of Kok.²⁴ Reflecting perhaps the temper of the Dutch church-goer in the troubled post-war years, his "sketches" are far shorter and simpler. But again the insistence throughout is on providing a stimulus to variety without sacrificing content.

All three for their generations did their work well. Even at this late date they are worthy of being consulted. But something similar, geared to the need and mood of our time, is urgently needed in the English medium, even though most publishers would shy away from publishing such materials for fear of lack of interest and financial loss.

-6-

With all this we--at long last--present some gleanings from the ripened sheaves of several experienced preachers. From whom these derive matters far less than what they have supplied to stir us who are called to make catechetical material vital and vibrant. Usually an appropriate Scripture passage will be included. In every case only the "bare bones"--theme with divisions--are mentioned, even though this fails to do justice to the sermons for which these supplied only the framework. But anyone at all conversant with

the *Heidelberg Catechism* soon will sense the direction in which the sermons moved.

Illustrations will be provided only for some of the Lord's Days, chosen quite at random. Nor will the "suggestions" follow the order of the catechism itself. No more is intended than, hopefully, to stir those who review these pages to stimulate their own capacities and energies to prepare both thought-provoking and soul-stirring sermons on this material.

Let us begin with Lord's Day I of which that famous German preacher Kohlbrugge affirmed, "All our life we should study the first question and answer of our Catechism." Here are a few suggestions supplied by Dijk:

Our Only Comfort in Life and Death

which according to Isaiah 40 speaks of

1. the Comforter; and
2. the Comforted.

We are the Lord's! (Rom. 14:1)

1. Wherein this "right-to-possession" consists; and
2. How this "right-to-possession" is received.

All tears wiped away (Rev. 21:4)

1. What are these tears?
2. How are they wiped away?

The path to the only Comfort (Ps. 130)

1. Wherein it consists; and
2. How it is to be walked.

From the volume of Kok:

Our Only Comfort (John 17:8)

1. is revealed in Scripture;
2. is prepared by Christ;
3. is applied by the Spirit;
4. is enjoyed in life and death; and
5. is received by faith.

Confessing our Only Comfort (Isa. 66:10-13)

1. to be necessary;
2. to be sufficient; and
3. to be glorious.

For a message based only on the second question and answer, he has among other suggestions this one:

Christ, the Fountain of Our Comfort (Matt. 11:28)

as he

1. in the first part directs us to this fountain;
2. in the second part opens this fountain; and
3. in the third part enables us to drink from this fountain.

Many perspectives can also be opened when dealing with the material of Lord's Day XVII.

The Profit of Christ's Resurrection (Col. 3:1a)

1. for our faith;
2. for our love; and
3. for our hope.

The Resurrection of Our Lord (I Cor. 15:55-58)

1. as the victory over death;
2. as the seal of justification;
3. as the source of new life; and
4. as the guarantee of complete salvation.

Christ, the First-fruits of the Resurrection (I Cor. 15:29)
proclaims to us that our resurrection

1. begins with him;
2. proceeds from him; and
3. is assured by him.

The Power of the Savior's Resurrection (Phil. 3:9-11)

1. unto righteousness to appear before God;
2. unto new life to serve him; and
3. unto glory in perfect fellowship with him.

The Resurrected Lord Reveals Himself (Rev. 1:17-18)

1. as the Savior who died;
2. as the Deliverer who lives; and
3. as the Royal Guard who holds the keys.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

as announced in Matt. 28:6

1. in its majesty;
2. in its significance; and
3. in its fruition.

Are you at times disturbed and distressed when you have to preach sermons on the two sacraments? Often these are taken for granted by the congregation, especially Holy Baptism. To it the Bible refers frequently and that in many different ways to indicate its great significance for our lives as believers. Because some of the questions and answers seem rather long, complicated and even abstract, we tend to treat the material too casually or else shy away from some of its implications. Here pointed suggestions are provided.

We are Baptized into Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:1-11)

1. at his command;
2. into his fellowship; and
3. to his praise.

Baptism as the first seal of God's grace

1. How it seals; and
2. What it seals.

Baptism as the Seal of God's Covenant,
in the light of Gen. 17 and Rom. 4, viewed

1. from the side of God; and
2. from the side of the believers.

In a land where many attack the baptism of children of believing parents, the appropriate Question and Answer deserves a special sermon from time to time. Again the approach can be varied.

Questions about Children's Baptism

with sustained stress on parental understanding and practice

1. concerning your children;
2. concerning your God; and
3. concerning your calling.

Baptism as a Sign calling for Children's Praise
with reference to Matt. 21:15-16, showing that

1. God paves the way for such praise; and
2. God seeks and delights in such praise.

Children of Believers should be Baptized

because Scripture plainly teaches that they too are

1. embraced in God's covenant;
2. included in Christ's church; and
3. recipients of the promises.

Another preacher dealt with the same material in greater depth and detail.

Being, Remaining and Becoming Clean

as called for by Ezek. 36:25-27.

1. The first by Christ's blood and Spirit (QA 69);
2. The second by the Spirit's renewal (QA 70); and
3. The third by faith in the triune God which lays a triple obligation on all who receive it.

The Washing away of our Sins

on the basis of II Kings 5 where Naaman's cleansing is seen as a "foreshadowing" of the washing of regeneration mentioned in Titus 3:5,

1. as signified and sealed in baptism;
2. as given by God's grace; and
3. as manifested in a new and godly life.

Grace signified and sealed in Baptism (Titus 2:11-14)

1. as a twofold cleansing;
2. with a twofold benefit; and
3. unto a twofold pledge.

The Lord's Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:4)

brought to its fulfillment in the new covenant to remind us of

1. the Giver and the receiver. . .
2. the content and the sign. . .
3. the extent and its permanence. . ., and
4. the comfort and demand of the covenant.

Holy Baptism according to the Word (Acts 2:37-39)

1. Not just water but also the blood;
2. Not just a sign but also a seal; and
3. Not just for adults but also for children.

Baptism and Christ's once-for-all Sacrifice

Baptism

1. Points to the need for this sacrifice;
2. Assures participation in this sacrifice; and
3. Proclaims the fruitfulness of this sacrifice.

These examples could be multiplied more than a thousandfold. Instead of continuing, we will show how one preacher, in the days of World War II, treated many catechetical materials from a strong redemptive-historical perspective.

Lord's Day XIV - Christ conceived by the Spirit and born of the Virgin

according to Luke 1 and 4, to reveal Him

1. as the son and Lord of Adam;
2. as the son and Lord of Abraham; and
3. as the son and Lord of David.

This treatment could surely make an appropriate message for a Christmas service.

Lord's Day XV - Christ's Sufferings and those of our present time

as his sufferings

1. offer comfort in our sufferings today;
2. provide explanation of our sufferings today; and
3. find fulfillment in our sufferings today.

Lord's Day XX - The Holy Spirit and our Sanctification

in the light of I John 5:1-13, so that we may learn to confess him in word and deed as

1. the Spirit of faith;
2. the Spirit of consolation; and
3. the Spirit of perseverance.

Lord's Day XXXI - *Christ delivering the Church by Key-power*

with explicit reference to Luke 12:35-48 to show how the power given to his church demonstrates

1. the competence of the church;
2. the seriousness of the church; and
3. the salvation of the church.

Lord's Day XXXVI - *Listening to the 3rd Commandment in New Testament Light*

on the basis of Hebrews 10:19-31, "The Blasphemy of the Spirit"

1. the character of this sin;
2. the judgment on this sin; and
3. the road to this sin.

Lord's Day XXXVIII - *Christ writes the Sabbath-law on our Hearts*

to remind us of and comfort us with

1. the Sabbath-offering which in gratitude we owe to God;
2. the Sabbath-peace by which we are assured of the sincerity of our faith; and
3. the Sabbath-light with which we may win our neighbors for Him.

Lord's Day XLVII - *Hallowing God's Name as the chief factor in World History*

(Ps. 8 and Heb. 3)

1. the manner of this hallowing;
2. the meaning of this hallowing; and
3. the results of this hallowing.

This approach, of course, need not and perhaps cannot be carried out as consistently as the series from which the examples above were drawn.

Lord's Day XXV - *The Spirit working in our hearts with the Means of Grace*

to instruct us in

1. the priority of the Word to the sacraments;
2. the confirmation of the Word by the sacraments; and
3. the unity of the Word with the sacraments.

Lord's Day LII - *Lord's Day 52*

reminding us of

1. the last petition. . .
2. the last foundation. . ., and
3. the last word of our prayers.

With this random sampling we conclude the examples.

Again, none of the above can be rightly judged apart from the sermons which developed the theme and divisions in each case. Of the more than sixteen-hundred published sermons which we have perused over a period of some forty years, from no less than thirty preachers, we found only a handful either superficial or stereotyped. Those works, dated as they are, can help many a pastor to see into the material of the catechism far more than is apparent at first review. More than that, they also indicate how much variety can be provided in any given series of catechetical messages without sacrificing the unity of God's one great and gracious plan of redemption.

Such preaching should regain the honored place which once it had in Reformed congregations throughout the world. This may well be one of the best services which a pastor in our day can render to his people.

To do this demands much, perhaps more than many of us are willing to give in these days when the media tempt both old and young to appreciate little more than froth and frill.

Here the pastor must wrestle in prayer each week anew with the Word as reflected and rehearsed in the catechism.

He will have to walk and talk with his people, sharing their lives on every level so that he can bring the gospel more pointedly and practically and yet with solid foundations in the truth.

Above all he will then recover a deep sense of his calling to "administer the Word" in its fulness, from the Old as well as New Testaments as the church has learned to confess it, so that sinners may be drawn to the wells of salvation, believers refreshed with truths both old and new, and the God of all grace glorified more consistently by those who know him as

their heavenly Father for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Engaging in such a labor of love he will experience at least two passages tugging repeatedly at his soul. These help him pour "new wine" into the "new wineskins" which will not break under the pressures of our times.

Our Lord minced no words when teaching his disciples, "Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matt. 13:52).

And long centuries before, the prophet, commanded to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem," responded to the voice which said,

You who bring good tidings to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good tidings to
Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
(Isa. 40:9)

Obedient to such directives a preacher soon learns to preach also catechetical sermons gladly.

NOTES

1. All quotations taken from NIV except where RSV or KJV seemed preferable.
2. For evaluation of some consequences of C. H. Dodd's distinction between *kerugma* and *didache* see R. H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of N.T. Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) and Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 20-30.
3. Two earlier articles on this subject appeared in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (1985) 2:155-189 and

Mid-America Journal of Theology (1986) 2:149-170.

4. R. H. Mounce, "Preaching" in *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 Vol. (Wheaton: InterVarsity Press, 1980) 3:1260c.
5. R. H. Mounce, "Preaching," 1261b.
6. A. Victor Murray, *Education into Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953) 14-26.
7. H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1942) 5.
8. H. H. Farmer, *Servant*, 15.
9. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 65.
10. John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963) 2.
11. Alan Richardson, *Preface to Bible Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) 84.
12. Without thanksgiving, praise and adoration a sermon can hardly be regarded as complete. Note what P. T. Forsyth said in *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 97: "The sermon is the Word of the Gospel returning confession to God who gave it. It is addressed to us, indeed, but in truth it is offered to God."
13. Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) 27.
14. Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 69.
15. R. H. Mounce, "Preaching," 1261b.
16. H. H. Farmer, *Servant*, 15.
17. H. H. Farmer, *Servant*, 16.
18. H. H. Farmer, *Servant*, 89.
19. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 89.

20. W. T. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction and Illustration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 119.
21. This statement is repeated in several ways in the writings of Lloyd-Jones and elaborated from a pastoral perspective in his *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 44-46 and 51-64.
22. J. Kok, *Schetsen over den Heidelbergischen Catechismus*, 2 Vol. (Kampen: J. H. Kok and Grand Rapids: B. Sevensma, 1903) 1:v.
23. Klaas Dijk, *De Dienst der Prediking* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1955) 415.
24. Klaas Dijk, *De Catechismus-preek in haar Verscheidenheid* (Franeker: T. Wever, n.d.).