

Profit and Peril in Preaching on the Catechism

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While the primary purpose of Luther in writing his Small Catechism was to enable the head of the family to teach his family the fundamental truths of God's Word and to provide the church with a means for preparing people to receive the Lord's Supper worthily, a further use even antedated the appearance of the Small Catechism. This was its use as a basis for sermons.

Koestlin reports that in 1522 during Lent weekday services were held in Wittenberg.¹ Luther did the preaching, at this time restricting himself to expounding the Ten Commandments. He further reports that from 1523 on weekday services were continued in Wittenberg, on the first days of the week in matins, on Saturday in vespers.² On Mondays and Tuesdays the catechism was treated, not only the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, but also Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As he headed toward the publication of his catechisms, Luther in 1528 preached three series of sermons on the material which was soon to appear in his catechisms. These sermons were preached on four weekdays in two successive weeks at 2:00 P.M.³ Roerer took down those sermons in shorthand. On the basis of this material Luther prepared model catechism sermons for pastors. In 1533 the revised church order for Wittenberg included the requirement that Sunday morning matins should be devoted to sermons on the catechism.⁴

According to Meusel this same order required that the entire catechism should be covered in eight weekday services in each quarter of the year.⁵ It seems that in cities this was also done on Sunday afternoons. The procedure was that the children first recited a portion of the catechism. Then followed a short sermon which explained what had been recited. Then the children were catechized. Adults were urged to attend these services, but were not catechized. In order that mature Christians might retain a comprehensive knowledge of doctrine and understanding for the interrelation of doctrines, the church regulations (*Kirchenordnung*) for the cities called for one or two weekday services devoted to preaching on the catechism.

There is a considerable bibliography of sermons on the catechism written during the 16th and 17th centuries.⁶ To mention only a few: Jakob Andreae published ten sermons covering the six chief parts of Christian doctrine in 1561. In 1620 Johann Arndt published "The Entire Catechism in 60 sermons." The influence of later Pietism led to a decline of interest in catechetical preaching. For it insisted that preaching on the catechism be replaced by the catechization not only of children but also of adults. Nor did it hesitate to use legalistic pressure to enforce this change. The reaction was that services devoted to preaching the catechism disappeared from the scene and only the catechization of children was left.

Gradually this trend was reversed and preaching on the catechism again appeared on the scene. This held true also in our country. Volumes of sermons on the catechism began to be published. Names of authors like Golladay and Dallmann may be familiar to our readers. In *The Preacher's Manual* Dean Fritz comments: "A series of doctrinal sermons on the Catechism (Six Chief Parts) will be appreciated by any congregation."⁷ The mimeographed notes used by the homiletics department of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary suggest that

¹ Julius Koestlin, *Martin Luther* (Berlin: Dunker, 1903), II, 512.

² Koestlin, *op. cit.*, II, 19.

³ Koestlin, *op. cit.*, II, 52.

⁴ Koestlin, *op. cit.*, II, 274.

⁵ Carl Meusel, Ph.D., *Kirchliches Handlexicon* (Leipzig: Justus Naumann, 1891), III, 723.

⁶ Meusel, *ibid.*, 723..

⁷ John H.C. Fritz, D.D., *The Preacher's Manual* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), 17.

during the Trinity season “the preacher may choose to treat the Means of Grace,...the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer...”

A few comments on the time and texts for sermons on the catechism might be in order before we consider the profit and peril in such preaching. The reference to the mimeographed notes used at the Seminary indicates that a series of catechism sermons might well be introduced in the Trinity season. Of the eight series of catechism sermons which I preached during my years in the parish ministry, seven were preached during the Trinity season. The exception was a series on the Second Article preached during the Epiphany season. It was an appropriate time. On the choice of texts Fritz has this to say: “The words of the Catechism may be used if they are Biblical quotations, as, for instance, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. For sermons on the Creed suitable Bible texts should be selected.” “The sermons on the last three parts should use the Scripture quoted as texts.”⁸

Is there any unique profit in preaching on the catechism? To give an unequivocal affirmative answer might be going too far. But there is profit. We may not be confronted with the same abyssmal ignorance of fundamental biblical truth which Luther and his contemporaries faced. After all, all of the communicant members of our congregations have gone through a period of instruction in doctrine either as children or as adults. Sad to say, we run into cases where people try to excuse their neglect of Bible classes and even of church services by saying that they learned everything in confirmation class. They fail to reckon not only with the fact that we easily forget what we have once learned but also with the fact that nowhere does the Lord encourage complacency, settling for any level of attainment. Rather, He encourages us to grow, to be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col 1:9). Sermons on the catechism can be an aid toward such growth.

The time was when one of the best accolades which could be given to a congregation was to say that it was well indoctrinated. One may wonder at times whether the emphasis has shifted in the direction of activism. If activism were to be the main thrust in the individual and corporate life of Christians, there would be little need for indoctrination. Then efficient organization and functioning ought to be our main concern. But if activity is to be a fruit and not the essence, then the tree on which the fruit grows needs to be nurtured and pruned. For this, indoctrination is needed. Furthermore, while Christians are to be led, they are not blindly to follow leaders. They need to be able to test the orthodoxy of their leaders, following the good example of the Bereans, of whom we are told: “They received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Ac 17:11). Indoctrination produces such Christians. Finally, indoctrination which relates all doctrines to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Savior, will increase the joy and peace and power and hope which a knowledge of the truth brings. This does not mean to say that indoctrination can be furthered only by preaching on the catechism. “All scripture...is profitable for doctrine” (2 Tm 3:16) and all scriptural preaching will therefore promote indoctrination. But preaching on the catechism is one means by which it can be fostered.

If a pastor restricts his pulpit program to preaching on the various pericopes, an observation made by Fritz may be valid: “certain doctrines are seldom or never treated in some pulpits, yet instruction in all doctrines should be given to Christian congregations.”⁹ While Luther’s Small Catechism was intended to teach only the basic truths of Scripture, when a pastor preaches on the catechism he will be able to find places where a discussion of the millennium or of adiaphora or of the other areas which Fritz lists can be fitted into the context. Thus the indoctrination of his people will be advanced.

Many of us, no doubt, have had the experience that long-time members who attended an adult class with someone from outside our circles have reacted favorably, informing us that there was much that they were able to understand better now than when the first learned it as children. It is for this reason that some congregations try to encourage their members to attend an adult class at no more than ten year intervals. Be that as it may, our point is that our people will appreciate preaching on the catechism.

⁸ Fritz, *op. cit.*, 90, 17.

⁹ Fritz, *op. cit.*, 90.

For the pastor, preaching on the catechism will have the appeal of introducing variety into his pulpit program. Preparing and preaching sermons ought never to become boring even though because of our physical and mental limitations it can become burdensome during those periods when our pulpit schedule is crowded. Every encounter with a text opens new vistas and that is always exhilarating. To be permitted to preach Christ crucified as often as we get into the pulpit is a privilege without parallel. We may well borrow Paul's words: "To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe" (Php 3:1). Still, it has well been said: "Variety is the spice of life." While the underlying purpose of all preaching remains "to declare...all the counsel of God" (Ac 20:27), with preaching on the catechism the starting-point is not so much exegetical study as trying to organize the doctrines under a given head in the catechism in such a way that the presentation will be both comprehensive and interesting. When a pastor seeks to attain this goal, the skills with which his Lord has endowed him will be put to use somewhat differently than when he expounds and applies a text in the usual manner.

During this year of the observance of the 450th anniversary of the publication of Luther's catechisms much will be written and said in praise of his Small Catechism, the "gem of the Reformation." This is quite proper. But what about the years between anniversary observances? Our children in their confirmation classes will learn something about the history and value of the catechism. But what about the adults? Luther's comment that he wished to remain a pupil of the catechism throughout his life is well known. Preaching on the catechism at intervals will help to keep our people close to the catechism and help them to continue to appreciate how well it summarizes the basic truths of God's Word.

The title of this article suggests that there might be peril as well as profit in preaching on the catechism. If a pastor is as thorough as he ought to be when he teaches his confirmation class and then in preaching on the catechism follows the same line of thought which he employs in his confirmation classes, the danger is real that the segment of his congregation which is represented by the members of his confirmation class could become bored and complain, "we hear it during the week in confirmation class and then again on Sunday when we go to church." Other members might also be tempted to complain of boredom if the same sections of the catechism are treated too often.

This suggests two cautions. When we encourage preaching on the catechism we are not suggesting that the entire catechism be covered in one year. Rather, our comments earlier in this article had in mind preaching on one section one year, on another in some subsequent year, and so on until the entire book has been covered. We would suggest that no section ought to be treated more than once every ten years unless there is an unusual situation. In general the emphases of the festival half of the church year ought to be retained.

The other caution is that the treatment of parts of the catechism in preaching dare not become stereotyped, almost a duplicate of what is presented in confirmation classes. Nor need it be. While basic truth does not change, the application may. When he is teaching a confirmation class the pastor gears his style and his application to the level of those who are just entering the teens. In applying the negative in the seventh commandment, for example, he might warn against purloining something from another pupil's desk or locker. In the sermon preached to a congregation he may apply the same negative to cheating on income tax forms. Thus he will avoid becoming monotonous. But this requires that he must carefully review what his pastoral contacts have revealed about the problems which his people face and plan to address himself to those which fit into the context of the catechism portion on which he is preaching.

That leads us to discuss another peril connected with preaching on the catechism. After several years of teaching the catechism a pastor is not going to make many startling discoveries of new ideas. So when he sets out to preach on the catechism, he may be tempted to think that sermons of that nature can be shaken out of his sleeve and will not require a lot of preparation. Such an approach, however, can lead to a dull and slipshod sermon. Preaching on the catechism is different from teaching the catechism. Just as regular sermons on pericopes are easier to prepare than most sermons for festivals and special occasions, so they are also easier to prepare than sermons on the catechism. Sermonizing calls for a type of outlining which is different from that which is used in teaching. There needs to be a basic outline in which the parts are parallel in formulation and actually divide and cover the theme. There needs to be a smooth transition from one paragraph to the next. The

entire sermon ought to move toward a climax. Applications need to aim at nurturing the faith of the hearers and reaching the concerns which confront them as they on their level live their lives as Christians. In teaching the catechism questions are asked and as the catechumens seek to answer them their interest and attention are held. Since the answers are not always identical, an element of variety is bound to appear. The preacher, however, needs to project himself into the situation of his hearers and anticipate the questions which they might be raising in their minds and seek to answer them. All of this calls for the sanctified use of the imagination and careful planning. If the preacher thus rises to the challenge of presenting familiar truths in a different way, he will not be casual or slipshod in meeting the challenge.

A further peril which is connected with preaching on the catechism is that the sermons could become doctrinaire and abstract and lack the life of conversational delivery. The warning that sermons are not essays is particularly in place. The preacher will have to strive to let the hearer feel that he has something important to share with him and that he is not just trying to show how precise he can be in presenting definitions. Systematic theology operates with large numbers of proof passages on occasion, and rightly so. But in preaching on the catechism the number of proof passages used will have to be limited while the effort is made to make the meaning of those which are used clear and to show how they do indeed support the thoughts which are being presented. When the preacher's tone and attitude show that he is grateful that the Lord has not left us in the dark about some important truth, he will be well on the way toward avoiding becoming abstract.

A final peril in preaching on the catechism is that there is danger, especially when preaching on the Ten Commandments, that there will be no preaching of Christ crucified. A number of years ago I visited a Lutheran church in which the pastor during the Trinity season was preaching on the Ten Commandments. On this particular Sunday it was the Seventh Commandment. What he said was correct. But the closest he came to mentioning the Savior was to say when speaking about a certain sin, "A Christian wouldn't do that." I felt deprived of reassurance for my faith. But what was far more serious is that if someone who had never heard about his Savior had attended that service, he would have left, perhaps convicted of sin, but without having heard of the One who died to save Him from his sin. Or, what is equally serious, he might have drawn the conclusion that the essence of religion is to be good and to do good and thus to be right with God.

Now it is true that the text taken from Exodus 20 has nothing to say about the Messiah. But then if we are dedicated to preaching Christ crucified whenever we preach, we shall remember that no text stands in isolation but always in the wider context of Scripture. Reference to this context will provide the basis for bringing the gospel when preaching on the Ten Commandments. Special care is necessary here so that the introduction of the gospel does not become stereotyped: "We sinned against this commandment, but Jesus died to save us from these sins." The truth will always be the same, but the words in which it is told can and needs to be different. Nor is the passive obedience of our Lord the only content of gospel preaching. It is just in connection with a discussion of the commandments that there is a golden opportunity to become specific about His active obedience. Examples like His diligence in prayer, His regular attendance at synagogue services, or His respect for His parents and the government come to mind. It is more than a device, it is an irresistible constraint for the Christian preacher to preach Christ in every sermon, also when preaching on the Ten Commandments.

While candor compels us to admit that there can be perils connected with preaching on the catechism, we are confident that they can be avoided. On the other hand, there can be profit in such preaching and this is reason enough for us not to allow preaching on the catechism to fall into disuse. If we have been letting that happen, may this year of the catechism lead us to consider whether somewhere along the line in our pulpit programs we ought not from time to time make room for preaching on the catechism.