The Heidelberg Catechism has been subscribed to and preached by Reformed churches the world around ever since its first publication in 1563. Sermons on the Catechism have been a regular part of the spiritual diet of Reformed Christians for years in Germany, The Netherlands, America, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and more recently, Singapore. Generations of Reformed men and women have lived out their 70 or 80 years listening to 40 or more Catechism sermons every year. Nearly half of all the preaching done by Reformed preachers — preachers still faithful to their bounden duty — is Catechism preaching.

For church and preacher alike, therefore, the importance of Heidelberg Catechism preaching can hardly be exaggerated.

However, Catechism preaching must be more than merely a “tradition” among us, if this practice is going to survive into the future. It must be a tradition that has a solid basis, a basis that is understood by pulpit and pew alike. There must continue to be appreciation — yea, love — for the exposition of the Catechism and regard for the outstanding benefits of this method of preaching.

From many quarters there are assaults directed against the Reformed practice of Heidelberg Catechism preaching. This is not altogether surprising, since from the very beginning there have been those who voiced objections to Catechism preaching. What is surprising, however, is that these objections are being heard with increasing frequency within the Reformed churches themselves, where the blessings of Catechism preaching have so long been enjoyed. Even among our own people, the importance and place of Catechism preaching is not always appreciated. And even from time to time dissatisfaction with the practice is heard and a call is issued for putting an end to it.

The main purpose of this paper is not so much to defend Heidelberg Catechism preaching per se, as to deal with the practice itself. My main concern is with how the Catechism should be preached and with discussing suggestions for the enrichment of Catechism sermons.

Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism

We need not go into detail regarding the history of the Heidelberg Catechism. Yet a brief sketch will set the background for our discussion and
serve to illustrate the suitability of the *Catechism* for sermon-making.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* is named after the city of its nativity, Heidelberg, which in the 16th century was the capital of the German-speaking Palatinate. Its ruler was an "Elector," one of seven German princes who were responsible for the election of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Early on Heidelberg had come under reformatory influences. In 1406 Jerome of Prague, countryman, sympathizer, and eventually fellow-martyr with the Bohemian pre-Reformer, John Huss, spent several months preaching in Heidelberg. Several of the Brethren of the Common Life found refuge in the city and even taught at the university. Martin Luther himself made several visits to the city. While still an Augustinian monk, he attended a theological conference in Heidelberg in 1516. In 1518 Luther publicly defended his teachings on the bondage of the will, free grace, faith, good works, and the authority of Holy Scripture in Heidelberg. On his way to the Diet of Worms, 1521, Luther spent a night in Heidelberg, taking the opportunity to preach in the Church of the Holy Ghost.

It was especially under the reign of Otto Henry (1556-1559) that the Reformation was planted in the Palatinate. Although Otto Henry was personally sympathetic to Lutheranism, he was also congenial to the Reformed. During his rule many persecuted Reformed Christians found a place of refuge in the Palatinate, and even in the city of Heidelberg itself. This was the beginning of tensions between these two branches of Protestantism that figured so much in the composition of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

In 1559, however, Otto Henry died unexpectedly. Because he left no male heir, his nephew, Frederick III (later surnamed "The Pious") became the new Elector of the Palatinate.

By the time Frederick assumed his rule, division between Lutherans and Reformed was deepening. There was even the threat of civil war. In Heidelberg there had been several public clashes between Tilemann Hesshius, the leader of the Lutheran faction, and Wilhelm Klebitz, leader of the Reformed. At the heart of the controversy, of course, was the whole issue of the presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper. Matters became so bad that one Sunday Hesshius and Klebitz struggled at the communion table.

Frederick was concerned to bring peace to his realm, and, if at all possible, conciliate the Lutheran and the Reformed. He made several attempts at this. The first was the formulation of a liturgy, to which all could agree, that might be used at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In 1561 Frederick convened a conference of the leading theologians in his realm. But the conference served only to indicate that fundamental differences still existed. Finally, in 1562, he ordered the preparation of a new catechism that
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would be subscribed to throughout the Palatinate. In the meantime, Frederick himself had become thoroughly convinced of the Reformed (Calvinistic) view of the Lord’s Supper.

The task of writing the new catechism was entrusted primarily to two men, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus. Olevianus was at this time the Elector’s court-preacher. Ursinus was theological professor in the University of Heidelberg. Even though these two are indisputably the primary authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, they were assisted by Frederick himself, as well as by certain members of the University faculty and consistory, such as Pierre Boquin, Emmanuel Tremellius, Michael Diller, and Thomas Erastus.

Other catechisms were consulted and borrowed from in the work of Ursinus and Olevianus. Ursinus himself had previously prepared a catechism known as Summa Theologiae. Use was made of catechisms produced by Bucer, Jud, Bullinger, Calvin, and a’Lasco, as well as some early Dutch catechisms in circulation.

The work of Ursinus and Olevianus was subjected to the scrutiny of a special commission appointed by Frederick. After revision by the commission, a general synod of all the ministers of the Palatinate was convened. It met from January 11-18, 1563. The result was the unanimous approval of the new catechism and the mandating of its immediate publication. The first edition appeared that same month bearing the title, “Catechismus Oder Christlicher Unterricht Wie Der In Kirchen Und Schulen Der Churfurstlichen Pfalz Getrieben Wirdt.” (“Catechism, Or Christian Instruction, According To the Usages of the Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate.”)

Instantly the Heidelberg Catechism, as it was now called, won the acceptance of Reformed believers in the Palatinate. Before long, its influence began to be felt in Reformed circles throughout Europe. This is not hard to understand, writes Philip Schaff, since:

The Catechism is a work of religious enthusiasm, based on solid theological learning, and directed by excellent judgment. It is baptized with the pentecostal fire of the great Reformation.... It is the product of the heart as well as the head, full of faith and unction from above. It is fresh, lively, glowing, yet clear, sober, self-sustained. The ideas are biblical and orthodox, and well fortified by apt Scripture proofs. The language is eloquent. It is the language of devotion as well as instruction. Altogether the Heidelberg Catechism is more than a book, it is an institution, and will live as long as the Reformed Church.1

Besides the initial edition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* which appeared in January of 1563, two other printings were required before the year's end.

The only major revision concerned the 80th question and answer, which denounces the Roman Catholic celebration of the mass as "a denial of the one sacrifice and sufferings of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry." This question and answer was absent from the first printing of the *Catechism*, partially inserted in the second edition, and present in the third edition as we have it today. This question was added at the express command of the Elector Frederick, who may himself have written it. The notice was appended at the end of the second and third editions: "What has been overlooked in the first print, as especially on folio 55 [which contains the 80th question and answer], has now been added by command of his electoral grace. 1563."

Very early the *Catechism* was accepted among the Dutch Reformed. Already in 1566, Peter Dathenus translated the *Catechism* into Dutch and included it as an appendix to his Dutch rendering of the Genevan Psalter.

**History of the Homiletical Use (Preaching) of the *Catechism***

Nearly from the first, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was preached. Besides serving as a confession, as an instructional tool for the youth — one of its main purposes as stated by Frederick in his introduction to the *Catechism* — it also very soon became the text of sermons.

The first documented use of the *Catechism* for preaching is by Peter Gabriel, minister in Amsterdam, in 1566 (only three years after the publication of the first edition). It is apparent that he was not alone in this practice, but one of several Dutch Reformed ministers preaching to their congregations from the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

It was also in 1566 that the *Catechism* was published for the first time with the questions and answers numbered (120 questions and answers) and divided into fifty-two "Lord's Days," evidently to facilitate use in preaching.

The practice of preaching from a catechism did not originate with the preaching on the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Already before the publication of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, other existing catechisms were used in preaching. Among Lutheran ministers sermons were often made on the basis of Luther's *Catechism*. And after the *Heidelberg Catechism* made its appear-

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ance, some ministers still preferred to make use of other catechisms in their preaching, as, for example, the *Catechism of Geneva*. Gradually, however, the *Heidelberg Catechism* won out over these other catechisms, largely because of its superior suitability for preaching. Several synods of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands encouraged its use in preaching before the Synod of ’s Gravenhage, in 1586, made preaching on the *Heidelberg Catechism* mandatory.

Already a question was put to the Synod of Dordt, 1574, regarding the advisability of *Catechism* preaching. The Synod decided:

The answer to the question of Walcheren whether it would be good that good homilies based on the *Catechism* be made is as follows: This shall be left as it is [optional, that is, R.C.], but it would be good if the ministers in an orderly manner take turns in the classical meeting to explain in summary form a question or two from the *Catechism* and in this way teach and sensitize each other and also learn to explain the *Catechism* thoroughly to the congregation in an orderly and edifying manner. ³

The Synod of Dordt, 1578, encouraged the preaching of a sermon based on the *Heidelberg Catechism* in the afternoon service after the administration of the Lord’s Supper.

The Synod of Middelburg, 1581, was asked to produce an exposition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that might aid the ministers in producing *Catechism* sermons.

Question: Whether it would be good to make some explanations of the *Catechism* in the form of homilies or something similar for beginners?

Answer: Jeremias Bastingius and the Classis of Walloon are considering this and, working on the *Catechism* of our churches, shall bring together and shall produce not homilies but exegesis which, having been examined by the Classis of Brabant and Walloon, shall be distributed. ⁴

It was the Synod of ’s Gravenhage, 1586, that was the first Dutch Reformed synod to make *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching mandatory.

Ministers shall on each Lord’s Day, generally, in the afternoon sermons, briefly explain the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the *Catechism*, which at present is accepted in the Netherlands churches, in such a way that

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⁴ DeRidder, p. 130.
it may be finished annually, following the division of the *Catechism* itself, made for that purpose.\(^5\)

The Synod of Dordt, 1618-'19, after carefully examining the *Heidelberg Catechism*, opposed any changes in the *Catechism* — changes for which the Remonstrants had been agitating — and in its 148th Session, May 1, 1619, passed a resolution affirming that the *Heidelberg Catechism*

...formed altogether a most accurate compend of the orthodox Christian faith; being, with singular skill, not only adapted to the understanding of the young, but suited also for the advantageous instruction of older persons; so that it could continue to be taught with great edification in the Belgic churches, and ought by all means to be retained.\(^6\)

Out of this conviction, the Synod of Dordt affirmed the decision of the Synod of 's Gravenhage requiring weekly *Heidelberg Catechism* sermons.

This requirement exists still today in Reformed churches throughout the world. The Protestant Reformed Churches are one example of this.

The ministers shall on Sunday explain briefly the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the *Heidelberg Catechism* so that as much as possible the explanation shall be annually completed, according to the division of the *Catechism* itself, for that purpose. *Church Order*, Article 68.

These churches are serious about the carrying out of this requirement. For this reason, at every annual church visitation the question is put to the consistory: "Is the *Heidelberg Catechism* regularly explained in the services for Divine Worship, so that no doctrine is left untreated?"

**Heidelberg Catechism Preaching as Preaching of the Word of God**

Over the years numerous objections have been raised against *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching. We are not going to take notice of all these objections or spend any time refuting them. Suffice it to say that no objection of real substance has yet been brought forward. The majority of the objections, when analyzed, concern the WAY in which the *Catechism* is preached, not *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching *per se*.

There is one accusation that we do wish to say a few things about, that is the accusation that *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching is NOT preaching of the Word of God. This is the most serious of the objections lodged against

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5 DeRidder, p. 151.
6 Schaff, p. 549.
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this practice, and the most often heard. At the same time from the very beginning the Reformed churches gave an answer to this charge.

The accusation is serious because, if it is true, the Reformed churches are guilty of the most serious thing a church can be guilty of — not preaching the Word of God. Still more, the Reformed churches have been guilty of this for over 400 years, mind you!

One of those who faults *Catechism* preaching on this ground is D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his well-known *Preaching and Preachers*. He writes:

...on the whole I do not believe in preaching through a catechism. There are those for whom I have great respect who do this regularly; but I suggest that this is not a wise procedure, chiefly for the reason that it tends to produce a theoretical attitude to the Truth, an over-intellectual attitude to the Truth. It is not that I do not believe in teaching people the *Catechism*. I do. But my view is that this should be done at another time and in a different way. I would place this under the heading of instruction and deal with it in a series of lectures. But, still better, it seems to me, is to tell the people to read and study the *Catechism* for themselves and then consider it together in discussion groups.

I say all this because I believe, as I have been indicating, that in preaching the message should always arise out of the Scriptures directly and not out of the formulations of men, even the best men. After all, these catechisms were produced by men and men who were concerned to emphasize certain things in their peculiar historical situation, over against certain things in their peculiar historical situation, over against certain other teachings and attitudes. At their best, therefore, they tend to be incomplete, they tend to have a particular emphasis; and therefore they tend to leave out certain things. But my final argument against preaching through the *Catechism* is that the same object can be achieved by preaching from the Scriptures in the way I have indicated; for after all, the catechisms derive from the Scriptures. The function of a catechism, I would have thought, ultimately, is not to provide material for preaching; it is to safeguard the correctness of the preaching, and to safeguard the interpretations of the people as they read their Bibles. As that is the main function of creeds and catechisms, it is surely wrong therefore to just preach constantly year after year on the *Catechism*, instead of preaching the Word directly from the Scriptures itself, with the Scriptures always open before you, and the minds of the people directed to that rather than to men's understanding of it. Though what you are preaching is your understanding of the meaning and the teaching of the Scriptures this method preserves, and emphasizes in a clearer manner, the idea that you are giving the message of the Bible rather than the dogma of a particular church.⁷

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The charge that *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching is not the preaching of the Word of God is fallacious. Because its contents stand in full agreement with the Word of God — as every Reformed minister avows who signs the “Formula of Subscription” — and are an explanation of the Word of God, it can unhesitatingly be asserted that *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching is preaching of the Word of God.

Much of the *Catechism* is taken directly from the Scriptures: the articles of the “Apostles’ Creed,” the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer are examples. There are over 650 Scripture references throughout the 120 questions and answers of the *Catechism*. Copious Scripture references line the outside column of every page. The whole purpose of the *Heidelberg Catechism* was that it should systematically set forth the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. All of Scripture has been consulted and its teaching on every fundamental truth has been considered. VanDellen and Monsma remark:

Sometimes it has been objected that *Catechism* preaching is the setting aside of the Word of God. It is claimed to be preaching of man’s Word. This presentation is utterly false for every Lord’s Day division of the *Catechism* is the summary of several Bible passages. Virtually, therefore, the Minister who preaches on a certain Lord’s Day division of the *Catechism* is preaching on several passages of God’s Word.... When we preach a *Catechism* sermon, we are preaching the Word of God just as well as if we preach on a certain text or passage taken directly from the Bible. Only, in case of catechism preaching, one expounds and applies the Word of God according to a summary of that Word adopted by all the Churches and agreed to by all the members of our Churches. 8

Defending *Catechism* preaching as the preaching of the Word, Dr. P.Y. DeJong writes:

No sermon — and on this all will have to agree — is simply a verbatim recitation of a large number of biblical texts. If this is what our Lord had wished, he would never have ordered his apostles to “preach” and to “teach.” Nor would he have said to them after speaking his parables, “Therefore 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.” In a similar vein Paul urged Timothy, “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,” supplementing this with the

command, "Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage — with great patience and careful instructions." These and many other passages demonstrate that the gospel is to be explained and applied to those who hear.9

There can really be no doubt about it that faithful Heidelberg Catechism preaching IS preaching of the Word of God.

How the Catechism is to be Preached

An important question is HOW the Catechism should be preached, the method of Catechism preaching.

The Church Order answers this question: "The ministers shall on Sunday explain briefly ... the Heidelberg Catechism...." The Catechism is to be preached. The Catechism is to be explained. The language of the Catechism is to be exegeted, if you will. Very really, the particular Lord's Day or part of a Lord's Day is the "text" of the sermon. In his sermon the minister must deal with the words, phrases, sentences, and thoughts expressed in the Catechism.

The method that is to be rejected here is that of preaching on a text of Scripture and only referring to the Catechism. Or what is worse, using the Catechism as a jumping-off point for the sermon, to which point the preacher never returns in the course of his sermon. This is mere lip-service to the requirement of Article 68 of the Church Order, no actual carrying out of its demand.

VanOosterzee writes:

By this we do not of course mean to say that every kind of preaching on the Catechism is desirable or useful. Everything here depends on the character of a preaching which has added to the history of Homiletics many a fair page, but also many a blurred and blotted one. One may preach on the Catechism merely for the pleasure of being able to contradict it; the moral dishonesty of this line of practice, however, where it extends to the essence of the Church's Confession, hardly needs pointing out. One may read out a section of the Catechism, and then proceed to preach wholly at large upon the subject embraced in this section, with the employment now and then of a word from the textbook; a compliance with the form, to the total perversion of the meaning of the requirement. One may also converse upon the Catechism, paraphrase it, dilute the precious wine of its teaching with copious draughts of water; a most effective way of sending the hearers to sleep, and attenuating still more the congregation usually present. One may, in the last place, fulfill in all conscientiousness the twofold requirement of delivering a discourse

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9 DeJong, MJT, Vol. 2, Number 2, Fall, 1986, p. 159.
less oratorical, more didactic in its style, aiming most of all at the clearer presentation and confirmation of Christian knowledge; the contents, extent, and course of which are, so far as may be, determined by the nature of the subject and the peculiarity of the section now in its turn under review. Here what is called for is above all clearness and accuracy of dogmatic presentation, not at the cost, but in the interest, of the practical side of the subject, as will be the case where the work is entered upon with zest. 

That it is the Catechism itself that must be preached is also the position taken by the late Prof. H.C. Hoeksema. In a classroom syllabus entitled Homiletics, prepared for use in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, he writes:

In view of the fact that increasingly this practice [of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, RC] is neglected in many churches, and in view of the fact that many ministers try in various ways to evade this duty, it is not amiss that we stress that the minister must preach on the Heidelberg Catechism itself, and must in his preaching expound the Catechism. He must not preach on a text from Scripture and merely refer to the Catechism in the course of his sermon. He must not merely preach on the truth on which the Catechism touches in a particular Lord’s Day. But he must preach on the Catechism itself. He must read the Lord’s Day as he reads his text before the sermon, and then he must proceed to preach a sermon on that Lord’s Day. Anything less than this cannot properly be called Catechism preaching.

In a pamphlet entitled Heidelberg Catechism Preaching: Our Reformed Heritage, the Rev. Marvin Kamps vigorously defends this method of Catechism preaching.

As to the method of preaching the Catechism, therefore, there can be no doubt but that our fathers wanted the Catechism itself to be explained and applied in the Light of Scripture.

Kamps goes on to fault those “...Reformed preachers (who) do not want to have the Lord’s Day itself as their text.” And he rejects the “...erroneous

11 Homer C. Hoeksema, Homiletics (Grand Rapids: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1975), p. 42.
13 Kamps, p. 10.

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idea that we must not preach the *Heidelberg Catechism* itself."\(^{14}\) It is true, as he alleges, that historically the refusal to preach on the *Catechism* itself was the first indication of dissatisfaction with and departure from the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This is precisely what happened with the Remonstrants in the 16th and 17th centuries in The Netherlands.

Although the *Catechism* itself must be preached, this does not prohibit the judicious use of a text or passage of Scripture in connection with the exposition of the *Catechism*. This certainly may and ought to be done. Concerning this Hoeksema writes:

> The minister must not forget to leave the impression with the congregation that even in *Catechism* preaching he administers the Word of God... we make the point that this ought to be explicit in the preaching. It is a good custom, therefore, that at the beginning of the sermon the minister quotes a few pertinent texts and points the congregation to them as the basis of the instruction contained in the particular Lord's Day on which he is preaching. And while it is not always equally possible to be explicit on this in (the) course of one's sermon, the minister should certainly let his sermon as much as possible be controlled by the Scriptures. We may remark, too, that frequently it is appropriate as well as enriching to make room in the sermon for a brief explanation of this or that related passage of Scripture.\(^{15}\)

VanDellen and Monsma state:

> It may be said in this connection that *Catechism* sermons should be so constructed that the congregation sees very clearly that the truths embodied in the *Catechism* are indeed but reproductions of God's own Word.\(^{16}\)

> Always the *Catechism* must be preached in the light of Scripture. Since the contents of the *Catechism* are based upon and derived from Holy Scripture, this must be demonstrated. Ultimately the faith of God's people must be made to rest in Jesus Christ *as He is revealed in Scripture*.

> Especially for the sake of the young, as well as for recent converts to the Reformed faith, it must be demonstrated that the various teachings of the *Heidelberg Catechism* are the teachings of God's Word. They must be brought to see and be convinced of that.

> This may be done, as has been suggested, by reference at the beginning

\(^{14}\) Kamps, p. 11.

\(^{15}\) Hoeksema, p. 43.

\(^{16}\) VanDellen and Monsma, p. 277.
of the sermon to various Scripture passages on which the teaching of a particular Lord’s Day rests. Often ministers have concluded the reading of these references with the formula: “On these and similar passages of Holy Writ is based the teaching of Lord’s Day....”

For myself, I have preferred not to follow this approach. Rather, I make use of the passage or a part of the passage used in the Scripture reading in the course of the sermon. The passage underlies the main truth set forth in the Lord’s Day or an important aspect of that truth. Some freedom must be granted here, each man doing what he is most comfortable with and what, in his judgment, is most edifying for the congregation.

That it is the *Catechism* itself that must be preached does not either preclude, in my judgment, a fuller treatment of certain truths skipped over or only slightly treated in the *Catechism*. There are various doctrines given scant treatment in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, as, for example, the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the doctrine of predestination, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the second coming of Christ, and the doctrine of the covenant. Fuller treatment of these doctrines is possible.

It may be profitable for the minister, in connection with the statement of Lord’s Day 7 that faith “...hold(s) for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word...,” after a treatment of the contents of the Lord’s Day proper, to preach a brief series of sermons on the doctrine of Holy Scripture. In connection with Lord’s Day 9, especially in light of the present day threat of theistic evolution, it may be good judgment on the minister’s part to preach several sermons dealing with the truth of creation. Or, in connection with Lord’s Day 20, which deals with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the minister may spend some time developing various aspects of this doctrine not explicitly referred to in the Lord’s Day, in addition to what is said concerning the Spirit’s person and work. Lord’s Day 21, the 54th answer, speaks of the church as “chosen to everlasting life.” Here the minister may appropriately pause and preach a couple of sermons on election, with direct reference to the language of the 54th question and answer. The 52nd answer, dealing with Christ’s return in judgment, makes reference to “everlasting condemnation” and “heavenly joys and glory.” It might be worthwhile for the minister to preach a sermon, in connection with this Lord’s Day, on hell and on heaven. The 124th answer speaks of our doing the will of God “...as willingly and faithfully as the angels do in heaven,” and the 127th answer refers to our mortal enemy, the Devil, who “cease(s) not to assault us.” At this point the minister may find it profitable to preach on the subject of the angels and devils, about which there is great ignorance and misconception. This would properly be done after a consideration of the general contents of these Lord’s Days. This certainly is not a violation of the requirement of *Catechism* preaching, and I have found that congregations appreciate this.
Preaching Through the *Catechism* Within One Year

Article 68 of the *Church Order* stipulates that the preaching of the *Catechism* shall "...as much as possible... be annually completed, according to the division of the *Catechism* itself, for that purpose."

In light of this stipulation, some have argued for a treatment of the *Catechism* that takes approximately one year, and have been opposed to spending two or three years in preaching through the *Catechism*.

VanDellen and Monsma state:

Again, sermons that go into great detail, so that two, three, or more sermons are required for one Lord's Day division should be avoided. Let the rule of Article 68 be observed. If our fathers, having more time and moving much slower than we, found it best to cover the *Catechism* in one year's time, then in all likelihood it is best for us also.¹⁷

Prof. Hoeksema writes:

The minister should try as much as possible to go through the *Catechism* once a year.¹⁸

The fact of the matter is, however, that it is impossible for the minister to complete the *Catechism* in one year's time.

One reason for this is that there are often "special" services at which the *Catechism* is not preached: baptism services, Lord's Supper, and various Christian holidays (like Easter and Pentecost). Besides, often the minister is forced to be absent from the pulpit in his own congregation due to classical appointments, vacation, attendance at Synod, and so forth.

Besides, it simply is not often possible to cover all of the material in a given Lord's Day in one sermon. A hasty treatment of the *Catechism* does not do justice to the *Catechism*. Many of the Lord's Days contain an abundance of material, and although the minister need not attempt to exhaust each Lord's Day each time through the *Catechism*, often more than one sermon is necessary before he is ready to move on to the next Lord's Day. Lord's Day 6, for example, not only proclaims Jesus as the only possible Mediator, but also explains how the whole Old Testament foreshadowed His coming, and teaches the proper relationship between the testaments. Lord's Day 7 deals with the several aspects of saving faith. Lord's Day 12 treats of the threefold office of Christ AND what it means to be a Christian. How could all of this material be "crammed" into one sermon? Lord's Days 15

¹⁷ VanDellen and Monsma, p. 279.
¹⁸ Hoeksema, p. 42.
and 16 treat the steps in Christ's humiliation. Several sermons can be preached on this material, treating the steps individually. Recently I listened to a tape of a sermon by a Reformed minister on Lord's Days 14-16, covering everything from the virgin birth to the descension into hell. All in one sermon, and a half-hour sermon at that! What an affront to the Catechism.

On this question of preaching through the Catechism in a year, Dr. P.Y. DeJong gives the following advice:

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 ever four sermons.¹⁹

We ought to understand the rationale behind the insertion into Article 68 of the Church Order the requirement that as much as possible the preaching through the Catechism be completed annually. The intent was not so much to assure that within one year all the fifty-two Lord's Days of the Catechism would be preached upon, as to insure that there would be regular, uninterrupted preaching on the Catechism. If the ministers were required to preach through the Catechism in a year's time, they would be forced to "stick with it" and not preach on the Catechism only sporadically.

Recent revisions of the Church Order by the Christian Reformed Church and the Canadian Reformed Churches have dropped this requirement.

At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, following its sequence. (Christian Reformed Church, Church Order, Article 54b.)

The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day. The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed. (Canadian Reformed Churches, Church Order, Article 52.)

It is good, therefore, that there is a certain amount of flexibility in Church Order, Article 68: "...as much as possible...." The minister ought to take proper advantage of that flexibility.

But this flexibility must never become an excuse for a minister to become irregular and negligent in preparing and preaching Catechism

¹⁹ DeJong, MJT, Vol. 3, Number 1, Spring. 1987, p. 121.
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sermons. The minister may not weary of Catechism preaching and so begin to ignore his duty. Usually this begins gradually. The minister does not preach a Catechism sermon every Sunday he could or should. This laxity has crept into several denominations today where once Catechism preaching was a recognized institution. Already in 1902 the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church was cognizant of this laxity and issued the following exhortation to the churches:

With a view to dangers from without that threaten sound doctrine, and in consideration of the great need of, and the very meager interest in the regular development of dogmatical truths, Synod emphasizes the time-honored custom of Catechism preaching, and the Classes are urged to give proper attention to this matter, that the regular consideration of the Catechism may be observed.20

Here elders and church visitors have a responsibility. Elders must see to it that their minister is faithful in carrying out the duty of Catechism preaching. They must see to it that he preaches the Catechism and that he preaches the Catechism regularly. Church visitors must not fail to inquire into this at the annual church visitation, admonish those who might be negligent, and report such negligence to the classis.

Maintaining the Vitality of Catechism Preaching

Often Catechism preaching is criticized as being dull and repetitive, theological lectures that contain little by way of practical admonition and application to God’s people. Sad to say, often this complaint is justified. Prof. Hoeksema writes:

Perhaps the most common complaint against Catechism preaching is that it becomes stale and uninteresting. If this complaint is ever justifiable — and it may very well be in some instances — then the blame for this is largely to be laid at the door of the minister. There is no need whatsoever that Catechism preaching should become stale and uninteresting. But it can become uninteresting if the minister allows it to become monotonously repetitious. And the antidote for such repetitiousness is study and development on the part of the minister. He certainly must not be satisfied to prepare a series of fifty-two Catechism sermons, and then to “turn the pile over” after he has preached on Lord's Day 52 and begin again with sermon number one with little or no change. In fact, he must never be satisfied merely to revise and to rephrase an old sermon, but he should prepare a new sermon each time he preaches on a given Lord's Day.... Let the minister, therefore, study diligently. Let him

20 Quoted from VanDellen and Monsma, p. 280.
prepare new sermons. Let him treat the Catechism each time from a new point of view. The results of this method will be surprising. The minister himself will grow and develop in the understanding of the truth; his preaching on the Catechism will be enriched; the interest of the congregation will be maintained at a high level; and the congregation will grow in the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ, and become well-founded in the faith.21

Allow us to be so bold as to make a few suggestions that may be helpful in maintaining freshness in Catechism preaching. (Feel free to offer your own suggestions in the discussion period to follow.)

The first suggestion is: Read! Read widely. Read voraciously. Read the Scriptures, examining anew all (or as many as possible) passages bearing on a given Lord’s Day. Read theology. Consult the systematics on the various doctrinal subjects treated in the Catechism — Hoeksema, Berkhof, Hodge, Dabney, Calvin, to mention just a few.

Read works that have been produced on various doctrinal points covered in the Catechism. Read books on the providence of God, the Trinity, the virgin birth, the atonement, the church, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, justification, sanctification, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer.

Read the other Reformed confessions, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Westminster Confession, in particular. Compare the explanations of various truths in these creeds with that of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Read the various expositions of the Heidelberg Catechism that are available, both in Dutch and English. Two new works in English that have recently been published are worth mentioning. The first is Comfort and Joy, by Andrew Kuyvenhoven, former editor of the Banner. Mid-America Reformed Seminary has released the first of two volumes of sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism entitled That Christ May Dwell In Your Hearts, sermons on Lord’s Days 1-20. The second volume was expected to be printed in the Fall of 1990.

Good use can also be made of the many Dutch commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism that are available, either new or used. This is also a good way for the minister to brush up on his Dutch, which has probably become quite moldy since Seminary days. Two works that are worth translating, or at least consulting, are Kuyper’s E Voto and Veldkamp’s Zondagskinderen.

A second suggestion for maintaining the vitality of Catechism sermons: Apply the truths of the Catechism to the needs of the congregation.

21 Hoeksema, p. 43.

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In the good sense of the word, be practical! Take present attacks upon the faith into consideration in the polemics in which you engage — theistic evolution, Pentecostalism, paedo-communion, abortion, birth control, women’s rights movement, drugs and alcohol, teen suicide, materialism, hedonism, pleasure-madness, Sabbath desecration, ecumenism, Self-Esteem movement, New Age movement, etc. Be up-to-date, addressing the Word of God in the *Catechism* to current issues confronting God’s people. This ought to be an important part of the making of every *Catechism* sermon. The minister must work at it to apply the preaching, often the most difficult part of the task.

A third suggestion: Pay attention to the original German of the *Catechism*. This will afford fresh insights into the *Catechism* and provide some nice points that can be used in sermons. The German may be significantly different from the English, add something left out in the English, or simply provide a different nuance of meaning. Let me give some examples.

Second question is not, “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, *enjoying* this comfort mayest live and die happily?”, but, “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, *in* this comfort mayest live and die happily?”

Tenth question, “Will God suffer such disobedience and *rebellion* to go unpunished?” is really, “Will God suffer such disobedience and *apostasy* to go unpunished?”

Twelfth answer is not, “*God will* have His justice satisfied,” but “*God wills* that His justice be satisfied.”

Sixty-seventh answer speaks literally and much more graphically of our salvation “standing” in the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, rather than just “depending upon.”

Seventy-fourth answer regarding infant baptism does not say that salvation is promised to “adults” no less than to infants, but to “their parents.”

Eighty-first answer speaks literally not just of being displeased with our sins, but with “ourselves” — take that, you Self-Esteemers.

Eighty-second and eighty-third questions and answers do not merely speak of the keys of the kingdom, but the “office” of the keys.

Eighty-fifth answer speaks not just of excommunication’s exclusion from the Christian “church,” but from the Christian “communion.”

Eighty-sixth answer mentions as a motivation for performing good works not simply that “others” may be gained to Christ, but “our neighbors.”

Eighty-eighth question speaks not merely of conversion, but “repentance” and conversion. Repentance is an important part, the beginning of conversion. It is also the evidence of conversion.

Ninety-eighth question deals with the Second Commandment. The
question in the English is, "But may not images be tolerated in the churches as books to the laity?" Literally the German is, "But may not pictures be tolerated in the churches as books to the laity?" A different word is used here than the word for "image" in question and answers 96 and 97.

One hundred third answer speaks of part of our obedience to the Fourth Commandment as our diligently frequenting the church of God, not simply to "hear" the Word of God, but to "learn" the Word of God. Also, the calling implied in the Fourth Commandment is not that we "cease" from our evil works and yield ourselves to the Lord, but "rest" from our evil works, a significant statement in connection with the Fourth Commandment.

One hundred sixth answer speaks of the causes of murder as "secret" murder. And whereas the English speaks of God "accounting" all these as [secret] murder, the German says that all these things are murder "in His sight." The idea is that God beholds, sees, and knows the thoughts of the heart.

One hundred sixteenth answer, speaking of the necessity of prayer, mentions that God gives His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires "ask" them of Him. The German has "beg."

One hundred twenty-second answer does not simply make reference to God’s power, but to His "Almighty" power.

One hundred twenty-sixth answer speaks not simply of our transgressions, but our "manifold" transgressions.

One hundred twenty-seventh answer is much more expressive in the German. "Moment" is "eye-blink"; "resist" is "stand against"; and "be overcome" is "sink."

A final suggestion: Use various themes and treat the Catechism from different viewpoints.

There are several main themes from which all the Lord’s Days can be treated. Some possibilities are:

1) Comfort, or The Teaching of Comfort.
2) The Covenant.
3) The Kingdom of God.
4) The Doctrine of the Church.

Or, since the Catechism follows the broad outline of the Book of Romans, extensive use might be made of the Epistle to the Romans. Or, the Lord’s Days could be preached in the light of the Old Testament. Or, the Book of Psalms, which like the Catechism is experiential, could be used.

The various parts of the Catechism could be treated from the perspective of varying themes.

1) The Apostles’ Creed.
   a) I Believe....
   b) The Church’s Confession.
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c) With Heart and Mouth.
d) The Catholic Faith.

2) The Sacraments.
a) Means of Grace.
b) Means of Faith.
c) Means of Salvation.
d) Means of Assurance.
e) Signs and Seals of the Covenant.

3) The Ten Commandments.
a) The Rule of Gratitude.
b) The Standard For Christian Living.
c) The Law of Liberty.
d) The Law of the Covenant.
e) The Law of Love.
f) Obedience and Blessedness.

4) The Lord’s Prayer.
a) The Chief Part of Thankfulness.
b) In the School of Prayer.
c) Prayer and Praise.
d) The Prayer That Teaches to Pray.

These are just a few suggestions for maintaining the vitality of Heidelberg Catechism preaching.

Our prayer is that this institution does not die out among us, but continues to flourish. God give us preachers the ability to make good Catechism sermons. And may He use us and our preaching diligently on the Catechism for the instruction, growth, and comfort of His people, young and old alike. Thus will the church be saved — preaching’s great goal. And thus will God’s Name be glorified — preaching’s still greater goal.

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