Engaging the Forms of Unity

What is your only comfort in life and in death?
Engaging the Forms of Unity

Calvin Theological Seminary is identified as being part of a confessional church. What does that mean? Is this still valuable for ministry—today?

The recent conversation in the Christian Reformed Church on the Belhar Confession led to vigorous discussion and debate as to the role, shape and nature of confessions. This issue is not about the Belhar Confession. This issue is not about other examples of expressions of faith such as the "Contemporary Testimony" in the Christian Reformed Church.

This issue does focus on the background and biblical themes of the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism. We also have articles that focus on how these "Forms of Unity" still serve the church.

Do the “Forms of Unity” express everything that the church should confess, or that Scripture teaches? No. The mission of the church in an increasingly pluralistic age means we will continue to seek ways of expressing what Scripture teaches in ways that connect to our current age. At the same time, we should be encouraged that the biblical foundation of faith that our confessions do articulate can serve us as we move forward in mission.

I would like to close this opening article by sharing insights taken from Diogenes Allen in his book, Spiritual Theology. Near the end of that book, Allen notes that “spirituality,” in spite of its initial appeal, fails us. Vagueness about what we believe is not an asset.

Christian doctrine is not a straight-jacket, nor are we to submit to it mindlessly. Christian doctrine guides us through the maze of life. In Christian spirituality, you are asked to learn what Christianity teaches, and its dogmas are those teachings which, after long and continuing examination and controversy, specify what is judged to be authentically Christian.

If we treat Christian teachings casually and only concern ourselves with spirituality, those things that Christian doctrines enable us to perceive about ourselves, our world, and God are likely to remain hidden . . . . To ask that Christian doctrine be taken seriously by those who are concerned with spirituality is not a baseless demand for conformity, but an invitation into contact with God, who will help us and lead us to greater knowledge.

May this encounter with the theology of yesterday be of help to the church—today!
Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?
A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Preaching Sound Doctrine in a Time of Itching Ears

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

—2 Tim. 4:3-4

That time has come. I know that from my own experience, from reports passed on by colleagues, from my reading, and from the uncanny resemblance between Paul’s prophecy of the last days in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and the prime-time programs on TV. We are in that time when people will not tolerate sound doctrine.

Why is that? Because they have itching ears. When you have an itch, you want to scratch it with anything at hand. People want to hear something that will make their ears stop itching, something that will make them feel better right away, something that will minister to their felt needs. So they look for teachers who will scratch where it itches, who will tell them something that works.

That is exactly what has happened. Like the marketplace of ancient Athens, the world is filled with competing myths. That may seem counterintuitive in a rational age dominated by science. But, of course, those are two of the major myths of our time: the myth of reason believes that human intellect can solve all the mysteries and miseries of life, especially as it employs the methods and technologies of science. Then there’s the myth of government which believes that the right organization of human effort will produce heaven on earth—the recent elections in the United States presented us with a fierce debate between competing versions of that myth (more government versus less government). There’s the myth of celebrity culture, the myth of education, the myth of consumerism. At the heart of them all is the myth of the divine self—the belief that each of us is a god in charge of our own life—which, of course, goes all the way back to the Garden and whispering, “You will be like God….”

It doesn’t matter if these competing myths agree with each other. It doesn’t even matter if they are internally coherent. Indeed, it doesn’t matter if they agree with reality. What is reality, after all? Reality is just a perception, your perception, your own personal construction of meaning. There’s no such thing as the truth, just your truth and my truth. So find a myth that works for you. People have turned aside to myths that scratch where it itches.

As a result, we preachers are tempted to give up on preaching sound doctrine. I don’t mean that we simply drop doctrine, as old-fashioned liberal Christianity did. (If some element of Christianity like the Virgin Birth seemed unscientific or simply embarrassing, liberal preachers simply denied it.) In our circles we wouldn’t drop sound doctrine entirely; instead we might de-emphasize it in favor of other things. We are tempted to blur the borders of doctrine in the interests of ecumenism and evangelism and effective preaching.

Now of course we should be committed to Christian unity, passionate about reaching the lost, and persistent in our efforts to become more effective at preaching the Word. But none of those concerns is contrary to sound doctrine. Indeed, in 2 Timothy 4 Paul insisted that we should preach the Word in a doctrinally sound way as we do the work of an evangelist.

What does that mean? The word “sound” in 2 Timothy 4:3 is the Greek ugiainouses, which means literally “healthy.” Preach healthy doctrine—doctrine that is healthy, that will make you healthy in every way. Given the strong distinction Paul makes between truth and myth, in
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this setting this word undoubtedly means “correct.” This is not just moral teaching about how to live; it is doctrinal teaching, teaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus and what those historical events mean for human life. This word occurs eight times in the Bible, all of them in the pastoral epistles. In nearly every use of the word, you find that combination of truth for life. Preaching sound doctrine means preaching the truths of the gospel in a doctrinally correct way, so that believers and seekers can live healthy lives in a sick and dying world.

What does such preaching actually look like? Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 is a masterpiece of doctrinally sound evangelistic preaching. Note that it begins with a direct response to the challenge of the culture: “These men [speaking in tongues are not drunk, as you suppose.” He begins exactly where his “congregation” is in its opinion of the Christian faith. Then he jumps immediately into Scripture, because these are Jews who knew that Scripture. After quoting from the prophet Joel, Peter turns immediately to the focus of all sound doctrinal preaching, Jesus. But notice that he again refers to their experience: “... as you yourselves know.” Then, in an incredibly bold move, he addresses their sin and God’s predestination. “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” This much they knew—the bad news of human depravity and a cruel cross, all somehow part of God’s plan.

Now for the good news, boldly announced but not simply explained: “But God raised him from the dead….” And then, to counter the claim that the Scripture knew nothing about such a doctrine as a dying and rising Christ, Peter engages in some pretty fancy exegesis that led to some deep doctrine about Christ’s ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit. He concludes with the summary doctrinal claim of the Christian faith: “God had made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” The crowd responded to that culturally sensitive, Christ-centered, biblically rich, doctrinal preaching by crying, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And about three thousand of those formerly hostile listeners were added to the church that day.

Paul’s address to the philosophical dilettantes of Athens in Acts 17 is another masterpiece of doctrinally sound evangelistic preaching. Note that he too begins by connecting with the cultural milieu of the Athenians: “People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.” And though he was greatly distressed by the rampant idolatry on display on every corner, he doesn’t begin with outrage. Instead he uses their myths as a launching pad for the proclamation of the truth of the Christian faith: “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

He begins his proclamation with pure theology—the doctrine of God, of creation, of God’s relationship with all humanity, of providence—all done in a culturally sensitive way, even quoting one of their poets. But then he brings down the hammer of the truth on their false ideas about God, calling it ignorance and commanding them in God’s name to repent. He closes with the doctrines of the final judgment, the incarnation, and the resurrection of Jesus. Notice that Paul’s sermon, like Peter’s, was Christ-centered. Peter’s began with Christ; Paul’s ended with Christ. In both Christ was the point. That’s doctrinally sound preaching.

That combination of culturally alert but doctrinally sound preaching did not bore the Athenians. It did offend some of them, as such preaching always will, and they responded with the kind of ridicule we hear today. But others wanted to hear more “on this subject”; and a few believed and followed Christ, on the spot.

Timothy has a word of advice for those who want to resist the turn from truth to myth: “But you, keep your head in all situations” (2 Tim. 4:5). The word translated as “keep your head is naphe. It has to do with getting drunk. We must “stay sober” as we do the work of preaching and evangelism. Don’t get drunk, so to speak, and lose control, lose your balance, fall over. When the world is on fire and the church doesn’t have any fire, it is tempting to become unbalanced in our preaching, to stagger off in one direction or the other. What we need to do is to preach the Word in a doctrinally sound way—culturally sensitive, biblically based, theologically sound, Christ-centered, life-changing. Keep your head and preach sound doctrine in this time of itching ears.
The Pros and Cons of Confessions

The CRCNA remains an intentionally confessional church. Recent denominational discussions and synodical decisions about the Covenant of Officebearers and the Belhar Confession strongly reaffirmed our commitment to the Three Forms of Unity—the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort. Each has its own organization and language, and none captures everything that Scripture teaches. But all are gospel-centered summaries of the basic perspective and specific doctrines that are foundational for Christian faith and life. Together they present a robust overview of the Reformed faith. As doctrinal standards, they state what we should believe, not just what our spiritual ancestors professed. We still find that the Forms are faithful to Scripture and nurture our walk with the Lord. Many who join us from other backgrounds discover them to be rich treasures of biblical truth.

But recent discussions also raised concerns about confessions. Some wonder whether we emphasize doctrine so much that we confuse faith in Christ with mere head-knowledge, neglect Christian living, and fail to share the gospel with others. Others suspect that our strong commitment to centuries-old formulations stifles openness to Scripture, frustrates the Holy Spirit, impedes theological renewal, reflects Western intellectualism, isolates us from other Christians, and impairs our ability to contextualize the gospel in the current world. Good Reformed people raise these concerns. And together we must all wrestle with these questions.

Do Doctrinal Standards Undermine Our Faith and Life?

It is possible that too much emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy could become legalistic, divisive, and delude us into confusing faith in Christ with knowledge of theology. It would be spiritually deadening if we were more concerned with the Forms than with Scripture, prayer, obedient living, ecumenical fellowship, and sharing the gospel.

However, affirming the Forms does not necessarily lead to such distortions. Who in the CRCNA advocates for or lives that way? If doctrinalism ever was a problem, it was decades ago. Since the 1970s, Catechism preaching, doctrinal education, and members’ knowledge of the Reformed confessions have steadily declined. Is fear of heresy behind our lack of hospitality to visitors? Is the doctrine of reprobation what impedes evangelism? Whatever the reasons for our spiritual weaknesses, inordinate zeal for confessional orthodoxy is surely not to blame. In fact, I wonder whether loss of interest in doctrine is part of the problem.

But even if confessions don’t hurt us, why should we have them? Why not simply affirm Scripture and a basic faith-statement like the Apostles’ Creed, and leave other doctrines up to individuals, congregations, and scholars?

Sound Doctrine is Required by Scripture

Christian churches have adopted doctrinal statements because the Bible commands us to acknowledge, believe, and practice what it teaches. Dr. Mast’s article effectively develops that point. Doctrine is not merely human propositions about Christianity but careful identification of what God teaches in Scripture. It is not mere head-knowledge, but affirms God’s written revelation about himself, creation, our sin, God’s salvation through Christ, the work of the Spirit, the church, and how we should live for God’s kingdom and glory. We must hear and obey everything God teaches in Scripture. Lack of sound doctrine is a failure to obey God and undermines the faith, hope, love, worship, lives, and ministry of God’s people. Confessions do not capture everything in Scripture, but they frame the key teachings on which the others depend and are rightly understood.

History Teaches the Importance of Confessions

Church history confirms the importance of confessions. The Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds were written mainly because of significant issues in the life and worship of the early church, not because intellectuals wanted to debate propositions. These creeds are ecumenical and still affirmed by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and confessional Protestant churches. Our Three Forms of Unity were written after the Reformation, when Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and some Anabaptist churches summarized the Christian faith in catechisms and confessions that reflected their perspectives.

During the centuries when Christianity was dominant in Western civilization, denominations stressed their
The Pros and Cons of Confessions

doctrinal differences—often to the point of exclusion, isolation, and hostility. Such regrettable attitudes still exist today. But denominational confessions differ little on the fundamental doctrines of the faith, such as Scripture, God's nature, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, supernatural miracles, atonement, resurrection, the Christian life, and life to come. For the last three hundred years, the Christian faith in Western society has been challenged by Deism, Enlightenment rationalism, romantic humanism, scientific naturalism, and postmodern pluralism. During this time, the main division among Christian churches has been between those that remain faithful to their historical confessions of biblical doctrine and those who have accommodated Christianity to modern and postmodern intellectual and ethical principles. The current importance of the confessions is maintaining continuity with biblical Christianity and vigilance against modernist and postmodern deviations and religious pluralism. Confessional Protestants are often closer to confessional Orthodox and Catholic Christians on the basic doctrines of the faith than to liberal and progressive members of their own denominations.

Are the Confessions Time-Bound?

Some feel that the confessions are time-bound and out of date. But it is more correct to say that they are time-specific than time-bound. They were written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so obviously they address those issues in the manner of that era. But the doctrines they assert are not limited to that period for two reasons: they are ecumenical; and the issues remain current.

First, the confessions reaffirm the doctrines of the ecumenical creeds, which have stood since the early church and still define biblical orthodoxy for most of the world’s Christians. Their formulations are not eternal, but they endure through time. They are not sixteenth-century museum pieces.

Second, the Reformed position on doctrines that Christians debate is not limited to the post-Reformation period. Most of these issues have been discussed from the time of the early church to the present. God’s sovereignty and the human will; election and judgment; the relation of grace, faith, and works; the nature of Scripture; revelation in Scripture and in nature; the nature and work of the church; the sacraments; Christians’ lifestyle and relation to the world—all these topics and more have been debated since the early church. Most issues have few options: either God is completely sovereign or not; either baptism is only for believers or not. There are just a few possible understandings of the sacraments and a few kinds of church government. The different positions and reasons for and against them have been discussed for centuries. Totally new positions and interpretations of Scripture are unlikely (unless post-Enlightenment perspectives are adopted). The Reformed confessions state the positions that Reformed churches believe are most biblical. One might think they are mistaken or too restrictive, but they are not time-bound.

How Should We Interpret the Confessions Today?

There are two opposite misinterpretations of the confessions. One treats them as historically relative and without direct application today. The other is fundamentalist, applying everything in the confessions exactly how it was understood centuries ago. In my view, the right approach is to use the same method of interpretation that we use for Scripture.

The Reformed approach to the Bible aims to understand what it meant when it was written so that we can apply it properly to our lives in the present. (See Weima’s article in Forum, October 2012.) Scripture teaches many truths about God, humans, salvation, and God’s will for our lives that endure for all times and places. It also teaches things intended for limited times and places—Old Testament sacrifices, kosher laws, and New Testament rules about hats in church and owning slaves. Likewise for humans—our basic nature remains the same, but our knowledge, culture, technology, and social patterns change. Scripture is clear on most issues, but sometimes the church must ponder and pray to gain clarity, as with women in office, creation and evolution, and the ethics of modern warfare.

Similarly, the confessions are clear on most issues they address. If they are shown from Scripture to be mistaken or too narrow, the church is committed to correcting them. But sometimes what they mean or imply for today is not obvious. So we must discern whether women in office is a confessional issue (no), whether children may come to the Supper (yes), or what the Belgic Confession’s statements about the book of Scripture and the book of the universe imply for the relation between Genesis and scientific accounts of human ancestry.

For centuries, Reform synods, educators, and cultural leaders have interpreted and applied the confessions to the issues of their day. So do we today. That is why confessional orthodoxy is a living, relevant tradition rather than a fading echo of the long-dead past.

Using the confessions is like the Supreme Court’s interpreting the Constitution after two hundred years of legislation and court decisions. Judges must apply the original principles to complex situations unimagined by the framers. Another analogy is surveying unmapped land. Surveyors take a fixed starting point, establish precisely located markers, and move into new territory. They remain on track as long as they follow the original trajectories. If Scripture is our starting point and the confessions our historic markers, then we should engage the future within those biblical-confessional trajectories. We will find lots of new ideas within the borders and lots outside.

Conclusion

Approaching the confessions this way, we may see that they are not antiquated straight- jackets that frustrate God’s Spirit by blocking novelty and reform. They remain living, reliable summaries of biblical truths for faith and life from which to express and contextualize the gospel wherever God gives us opportunity.
The Belgic Confession (1561)

Testimony of an Oppressed Church

What does a suffering, persecuted church say to the world? The answer may surprise some Reformed folk because it is right before us in one of our doctrinal standards, the Belgic Confession.

This confession of faith is called the Belgic Confession (full French title: La Confession de foi des Églises Réformées Wallonnes et Flamandes) because it was written on behalf of persecuted Reformed Christians around the town of Doornik (Tournai) in the southwestern part of the united Netherlands, now Belgium. When these Reformed Christians gathered peaceably in the streets of Doornik in September 1561 to testify publicly to their faith by singing psalms, the civil authorities, encouraged by the Roman Catholic Inquisition, quickly suppressed the demonstration. In response, the Reformed threw “a closed and sealed package” into the outside enclosure of the Doornik castle. It was addressed to King Philip II and included a copy of the Confession with an open letter to the authorities that God’s work would not be stopped: “If you try [stopping us] by killing, for everyone who dies, a hundred will rise in his place. If you will not forsake your hardness and your murder, then we appeal to God to give us grace patiently to endure for the glory of his name … and heaven and earth will bear us witness that you have put us unjustly to death.” Commissioners sent to investigate matters reported finding similar letters of protest (with the Confession) in the homes of Doornik’s citizens. From the outset, the Belgic Confession was a political testimony. And, lest we forget, its author, Guido de Brès, became a martyr for his faith.

Knowing this, today’s reader of the Belgic Confession might find its content surprising, perhaps even disappointing. At first reading, its appears quite apolitical, removed from the concrete and bloody struggles for religious freedom. For, above everything else, the Belgic Confession is an effort to summarize the purity of the gospel and defend the orthodox Christian faith. Its opening article confesses God as “a single and simple divine essence, spiritual,” a statement no inquisitor could fault. Similarly, articles 8 and 9 on the Trinity use the classic language of the Ancient Church Councils—“one in essence and substance, but three in persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” This does not sound like a call to arms or a public rebuke of one’s oppressors.

Yet de Brès knew well what he was up against, facing the double-barreled onslaught of the Roman Inquisition and the civil power of Imperial Spain. In an earlier work (1555), Baston de la foi chrestienne (late 16th century English translation: “The staffe of Christian faith, profitable to all Christians, for to arme themselves agaiynst the enimies of the Gospell; and also for to know the antiquitie of our holy faith, and of the true church”), de Brès marshaled quotations from the church fathers to show that the Reformed were not heretics. He wrote:

… that if I intend to present this book (in which there is nothing of mine, but all things are from the ancients) as a confession of my faith to these enemies of the fathers, I do not doubt that at the same time I am not like an evil heretic, condemned to be burned alive to ashes.

In this work, as in the later Confession, de Brès’ first concern was to prove that the Reformed church stood in continuity with the church of all ages. If one can speak of a strategy here, it is to disarm the foe of his most potent weapon, the accusation of heresy.

This is not to suggest that the Belgic Confession contains no polemic, but rather that the disagreements with Rome are framed by the longer narrative of Christian orthodoxy going back to antiquity. The large majority of the articles in the first half of the Confession—God (1), general and special revelation (2 & 3), the Trinity (8 & 9), the deity of Christ (10) and of the Holy Spirit (11), creation (12) and providence (13), human creation and providence (14), original sin (15), election (16) and God’s plan to save (17), the Incarnation (18), two natures of Christ (19), atonement (20 & 21)—are affirmations of the universal, apostolic Christian faith held in common with Roman Catholics.

We may also find it easy to forget the controversy that surrounded the writing of the Belgic Confession because when the confession does introduce its differences with Rome, it does so rather gently. The list of Holy Scripture’s canonical books (art. 4) does not include the Apocryphal Books. However, when article 6 notes the difference between the canonical and apocryphal books, even listing them by name, it also notes that “the church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books.”

The significant point of dispute about
The Belgic Confession

Scripture has to do with its authority (art. 5) and sufficiency (art. 7). Reformed people “believe without a doubt all things contained in [Holy Scripture] not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God” (art. 5). Furthermore, Rome’s reliance on church tradition is clearly in focus in article 7 (key terms emphasized):

Therefore we must not consider human writings—

no matter how holy their authors may have been—

equal to the divine writings;
nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age,
nor the passage of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.

Many articles later, the Confession distances itself from Roman Catholic doctrines of salvation and the church. Articles 22, 23, and 24 repudiate all notions of merit and works with respect to our justification, and declare that “to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most enormous blasphemy against God … . “We are justified ‘by faith alone’ or by faith ‘apart from works.’” This is underscored by the intercessory work of “Jesus Christ the Righteous” who is “the one and only Mediator and Intercessor.” Prayer to saints, by contrast, is the fruit of “sheer unbelief” and “dishonors saints instead of honoring them” (art. 26).

The Reformed understanding of the church distances itself not only from Rome, but also from the Anabaptist tradition, which was yet another controversy in the church at that time. The true church is marked by sound preaching of the Word, proper administration of sacraments, and practice of church discipline to correct faults (art. 29). It accepts only two sacraments and not Rome’s seven, but it also “detests the error of the Anabaptists who are not content with a single baptism once received and also condemn the baptism of the children of believers” (art. 33 & 34).

The historical context of de Brès’ writing of the Belgic Confession as a time of suffering and persecution for the evangelical churches of the Low Countries is especially important for understanding the last two articles, including controversial article 36 on Civil Government, and especially those parts that the Christian Reformed synods of 1910, 1938, 1958, and 1985 either revised or relegated to a footnote. The important point: civil government is legitimate as God’s servant to govern the world, permit and enhance freedom for the church to preach the gospel and worship, “while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them.” Our views about whether the civil authorities should “remove and destroy all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist” have clearly changed since the sixteenth century, but the principle of rejecting civil authority and subverting social and moral order (as the radical Anabaptists of the sixteenth century did) still deserves the repudiation it did then. In protesting the abuse of civil power by the Inquisition and Imperial Spain, de Brès wanted it to be clear that he was not promoting civil and social anarchy.

The concluding article is moving in its understated submission to let God’s just and mighty hand exact vengeance against enemies and oppressors. Our Lord Jesus Christ “will come from heaven … with great glory and majesty to declare himself the judge of the living and the dead.” While the wicked “with good reason” tremble at the prospect, “it is very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished. They will receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world” (art. 37).

As a theologian, I am instructed and guided by the thoroughness and clarity of this centuries-old confession. It is theologically the most rich and rewarding of our standards. More importantly, the conviction of its adherents that they would “yield our backs to the stripes, our tongues to the knives, our mouths to gags, and our bodies to the flames” before forsaking their testimony in Christ, awes me, moves me to tears, and challenges me as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Note: The historical details in this article were gleaned primarily from Nicolaas H. Gootjes, The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources (Baker Academic Books, 2007).
Engaging the Heidelberg Catechism

On January 19, 2013, the Heidelberg Catechism celebrated a milestone birthday—its 450th! This was the day in 1563 that a synod in Heidelberg adopted the catechism for use in the German state of the Palatinate. Shortly after it appeared, Heinrich Bullinger, a leading Protestant reformer, called it “the best catechism ever published,” and within sixty years, it had been translated from its original German and Latin into Dutch, English, Hungarian, French, Greek, Romansch, Czech, and Spanish. Today it can be found in many African and Asian languages as well, and it is still one of the most widely used and deeply loved statements of the Christian faith in global Reformed Protestantism. Especially admired are its famous opening lines: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

Why has the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) had such staying power? After all, its main author, Zacharias Ursinus, was only twenty-eight years old and in his first year of teaching theology at the university. Furthermore, he composed the catechism not for the worldwide church but for the congregations and schools of one small territory in Germany. And the HC was just one of hundreds of catechisms produced during the Protestant Reformation. What was it about this one that made it stand out and survive for so long? There are many answers to that question, but we will concentrate here on two: the biblical grounding and the practical focus of the HC.

Biblical Grounding

The HC is a document steeped in Scripture. Frederick III, the ruler who commissioned it, refers to it in the preface as “a catechism of our Christian religion out of the Word of God,” and later he would claim that “my own catechism is drawn word for word from divine, not human, sources.” These deep roots in Scripture can be seen in at least three ways. First, one of the things that strikes the reader immediately is the many biblical text references that support each question and answer. We sometimes refer to these as “proof texts,” but I would prefer to call them “source texts” or “text links.” They were not so much intended to “prove” a particular point in the catechism as to indicate some of the biblical sources on which the authors had reflected in their formulation of a particular doctrine. In addition, the references were intended to point to the places in biblical commentaries where a reader could find fuller discussions of these doctrines. In today’s terms, they were like links in an online text that would take you to another page with more information.

Second, the famous threefold structure of the HC follows a biblical pattern. To live and die in the joy of the comfort that Q&A 1 talks about, I must know three things: how great my sin and misery are, how I am set free from such sin and misery, and how I can live in gratitude to God for such deliverance (Q&A 2). Misery—Deliverance—Gratitude. Sin—Salvation—Service. These three subthemes form the major divisions of the catechism, and it has long been thought that this pattern was based on the structure of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Romans 1:1-3:20 establishes the universality of human sin; 3:21-11:36 treats salvation by grace through faith in Christ; and chapters 12-16 focus on the offering of ourselves as living sacrifices to God. The entire book is neatly summarized in Romans 7:24-25, which, slightly paraphrased, anticipates the language of the threefold division of the HC: “What a miserable man I am! Who will deliver me from the body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The HC tracks very closely with the apostle Paul himself!

Third, the main contents of the HC are right off the pages of Scripture. Like all catechisms for a thousand years before the Reformation, the HC is essentially an explanation of the basic elements of Christianity: the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments. The commandments, Lord’s Prayer, and institutions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are, of course, parts of Scripture itself, and even the lines of the Apostles’ Creed are based directly on the biblical text. Since ancient times, the Christian community had considered it important to teach these key portions of the Bible.
to children, new Christians, and laypeople as a way of instilling in them the fundamentals of the Christian faith. And that is precisely what the HC does also, as it weaves these basic elements of Scripture into the threefold structure: we come to know our misery through the (summary of the) commandments (Q&A 3-11); we come to know our deliverance through the gospel as summarized in the creed and the sacraments (Q&A 12-85); and we learn ways to show our gratitude through the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer (Q&A 86-129). What we have in the HC, therefore, is biblical content within a biblical structure, resting on a biblical foundation.

Practical Focus

The HC is not only a profoundly biblical document but also a very practical one—in two senses in particular. First, it does not treat biblical doctrine abstractly but always relates it to the individual Christian or the Christian community. This is clear already in the opening question and answer, where Christ is presented not as an abstract theological concept but as a person to whom I belong, someone who is “my faithful Savior,” someone who “has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.” All of this is part of the comfort of the gospel, addressed to people in great spiritual “dis-comfort” and in need of that good news.

This emphasis on the practical application of doctrine is found throughout the rest of the catechism as well: How does this teaching “help” us (Q&A 28)? How does it “comfort” us (Q&A 52, 57, 58)? What “good is it” to us (Q&A 59)? How does it “remind and assure” us (Q&A 69, 75)? This is not academic theology, but pastoral and relational theology, doctrine that is connected to people.

The HC is practical, secondly, in that it also highlights Christian practice—that is, how we as Christians can, may, or should respond to the biblical truths that are presented. This is most clearly seen, of course, in the third section of the catechism on gratitude, which teaches us how “in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us” (Q&A 86). But this emphasis is also found earlier in the second section on deliverance. In Q&A 31, for example, the catechism explains that Jesus is also called Christ, or the anointed one, because he was ordained by the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet, only high priest, and eternal king. Then the catechism goes on in the very next question to talk about our response to the threefold office of Christ. If Jesus is called Christ, “why are you called a Christian,” that is, a follower of Christ?

Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name [prophet], to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks [priest], to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life [king], and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for all eternity [king]. (Q&A 32)

Christ is anointed as prophet, priest, and king; we belong to Christ; therefore, we too are anointed to be prophets, priests, and kings. Here is Christian doctrine at its best—not just a summary of divine revelation but also a call to respond to that revelation in Christian living.

The HC is not, of course, without its limitations and flaws. It does not have a well-developed doctrine of the new creation, for example, or of the church as mission. And it contains a sharply polemical question and answer on the Roman Catholic mass (Q&A 80) that the Christian Reformed Church has judged to be an inaccurate representation of official Catholic teaching. But the HC’s remarkable shelf life is a testament to its resonance with the grand themes of Scripture and to its exquisite blend of doctrine and piety. Little wonder that the CRC has always recognized the HC as one of its confessions and has covenanted in its Church Order (Articles 54.b, 63.b) to employ the HC as a key tool in the preaching and teaching ministries of the church. We join Reformed and Presbyterian churches across the globe in wishing the HC a happy 450th!
The Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort were produced in 1618-19 by the careful and concerted effort of delegations of clergy and theologians sent from nearly all parts of Reformed Europe for the sake of settling the controversy over the teachings of Jacob Arminius (1559-1609). Arminius’ formal statement of his theology and his differences with the generally received teachings of Reformed church (in which he was an ordained minister and a professor) were presented to the States of Holland in 1608 in his Declaration of Sentiments. He argued that grace ought to be understood as resistible; that human beings, once saved, might be able to resist God’s grace to the point of rendering it ineffectual; that God’s election resides in human beings alone—but, as the Apostle Paul teaches, salvation is the free gift of God (Eph. 1:4-5; 2:8, 10; Phil. 1:29).

Common Misunderstandings of the Canons

Of the three Forms of Unity, the Canons of Dort have been the least understood and least appreciated. Much of the reason for this lies in a reductionist reading of the Canons through the lens of the rather unfortunate phrase, “five points of Calvinism” and the even more problematic attempt to explain the canons with the acronym TULIP. There are five doctrinal topics addressed by the Canons not, however, because “Calvinism” can be collapsed into “five points” but because the articles of doctrine put forth by the Remonstrants contained five main sections. The broader teachings of the “Calvinist” or, as more accurately named, “Reformed” churches remain in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The Canons of Dort serve as an interpretive codicil or appendix to the two main confessional documents, set against the Remonstrant articles for the purpose of preventing a mistaken reading of Reformed doctrine. The acronym TULIP is a modern attempt, originating probably in the early twentieth century and certainly not in use before the late nineteenth century. Not only is it reductionistic, it has often led to a very mistaken and narrow reading of the Canons. The best use that one can make of it is to indicate how the Canons cannot be easily wedged into its terms.

The Teaching of the Canons

There are five “heads” or basic theological topics in the Canons, divided into four sections. They deal respectively with (1) “Divine Election and Reprobation”; (2) “The Death of Christ and Human Redemption”; (3-4) “Human Corruption” and “Conversion to God”; and (5) “Perseverance of the Saints.” It should be immediately obvious that the actual order of the Canons does not correspond with Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Examination of the teachings of the Canons, moreover, demonstrates that even a re-ordering of the acronym into something like ULTIP is problematic. The only one of these terms actually present in the Canons is “perseverance of the saints.” And whereas unconditional election can be elicited from the actual words of the Canons, the remaining terms can only be applied to the Canons with difficulty and much explanation.

The first topic is not simply about unconditional election. At issue here is the universal sinfulness of the human race; the wages of sin, namely, eternal death; and the loving intention of God to save all those who believe in Christ through the preaching of the gospel. All who believe in Christ will receive the gift of life eternal, whereas those who do not believe remain under the anger of God against sin. The Canons specifically state that the cause of all sin, including unbelief, resides in human beings alone—but, as the Apostle Paul teaches, salvation is the free gift of God (Eph. 1:4-5; 2:8, 10; Phil. 1:29).

The Canons continue, in their second topic, to underline the solely gracious nature of salvation by identifying Christ’s sacrifice as full and perfect satisfaction for sin, “sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” This sufficiency provides the basis for the Canons’ declaration that the gospel should be preached to all people. In addition, the Canons insist that “all who genuinely believe” in Christ are saved by him...
Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

The Canons of Dort

from sin and death. How such a doctrine could be characterized as “limited atonement” is difficult to comprehend. Of course, the Canons also acknowledge that not all human beings will be saved. On the one hand, attributing all salvation to the utter graciousness of God, the Canons declare that all those whom God has chosen will by grace be given faith and led to salvation. On the other hand they also declare that the fault of unbelief lies in human beings themselves.

This salvation is not something earned by human beings either on the basis of their works or because of a human choice to be faithful and election is not based on foreknowledge. Rather, salvation is entirely gracious and, given the eternity of God, it is an eternally willed graciousness, an eternal election to salvation in Christ. Election is, therefore, unconditional and unchangeable while condemnation or damnation arises solely on account of sin. Just as election is manifest in time through the work of Christ in the preaching of the gospel, so too is assurance of election an aspect of Christian life in the world. Assurance arises not from inquiry into God’s plan but the experience of faith in Christ, sorrow over sin, and thirst for righteousness. Reprobation is touched on briefly as the divine will to pass by some, leaving them to their sinful ways, and finally judging them on the basis of their sin to final condemnation. Reprobation is not presented as God rejecting innocent people from all eternity.

The problem of the human condition that was introduced at the beginning of the first topic of the Canons together with the topic of conversion to God appears again in the third section of the Canons (topics 3-4) and provides a more complete explanation of the underlying issues addressed in the first topic. The unconditionality of God’s grace stands in direct relation to human inability in sin, specifically to the human inability to fulfill the divine requirement of righteousness. This is not a doctrine of “total depravity.” The Canons indicate that all human beings have a sense of moral good and even a will to accomplish it. Rather this is a doctrine of the utter inability of human beings to save themselves from their own sinfulness, whether by means of the light of natural reason or by means of observance of the law. All fall short of true righteousness. Salvation is available only through the utterly serious call of the gospel to turn to God and believe in Christ as savior. Our acceptance of the gospel is itself founded on God’s grace.

The Canons also insist that the gospel does not address human beings as if they were puppets, does not abolish human freedom, and does not coerce into salvation. Rather the gospel is the principal means by which God revives and heals human beings corrupted by sin. The other means appointed by God are the sacraments and church discipline, namely, the three marks of the church in Reformed thought. The sacraments and church discipline are witnesses to the gospel.

This language of the marks is important and also often misunderstood. The issue is not to restrict the life or activities of the church but rather to identify the specific identifying characteristics that reveal the presence of the true church as the place where the work of salvation as rightly presented and administered in Word and sacrament.

The ongoing preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments noted in the last article of the third and fourth topics leads directly toward the issue taken up in the fifth topic, the perseverance of the saints. Here too the Canons can be mistaken or caricatured. They in no way indicate an easy victory over sin and path to salvation or an assumption that once a person is saved by grace through faith alone that a person’s life need not reflect the work of the Holy Spirit. The Canons are quick to indicate that regeneration does not entirely free Christians from sin. Christian life contains many failings and the need for ongoing repentance. What the Canons also teach, however, is that perseverance in salvation is not a human work that can fail but an unfailing work of divine grace. The means of grace are also, therefore, means of perseverance.

Conclusion

As indicated by the consistent citation of Scripture throughout the Canons, their teachings are not scholastic, speculative, or philosophical. Their arguments may be a bit more complex than what we find in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism—but that is because the Canons are not the basic confession or the catechetical instruction of the church. They are a response to a theological problem. Debate over Arminian teachings continues and the Reformed churches continue to affirm the biblical truth presented by the Canons of Dort.
The Confessions in the Church

We asked a cross-section of pastors if they could provide input and illustrations as to how their preaching and their church has engaged the Confessions. Below are some of their responses.

How have you used the Confessions in your congregational worship?

Kevin Adams: We have used the Confessions liturgically during the “call to confession” and “assurance of pardon” segments, as prayers—especially the sections on the Lord’s Prayer, in the segment on “God’s will” (e.g., the Ten Commandments), etc. We have also used the Confessions as preaching guides, with series on the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed.

Kris Vos: I occasionally consult the Confessions in sermon prep if I know they address a particular topic. I spoke recently on the sovereignty of God, so I did some research through the Confessions. Though I did not quote them, they were certainly foundational for what I taught. Like Kevin, we have done series on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer where the Catechism is a key resource.

Brian Ochsner: Personally, in my preaching I like to quote the Catechism with some of its great one-liners to convey a particular truth. Preaching in our evening services still uses the Confessions. Also, while leaning heavily on the Apostles’ Creed, we like to incorporate the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and various parts of the Contemporary Testimony into our time of response following the sermon, giving the people a voice that echoes down through the generations . . . . The point is big for me as I lead into the use of the Confessions. They teach the church to believe Jesus led the church yesterday, to know they are part of a story bigger than just today, and that they serve a God who is greater than tomorrow.

In what other ways have you made the people in your congregations aware of the rich heritage of the Confessions?

Kevin Adams: We put part of Q&A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism into our church vision statement: “We aim to be a biblical community that experiences the wonder of grace in a way that frees us to wholeheartedly serve God.” We have also used the Confessions in small groups and adult education classes—especially the Heidelberg Catechism.

Kris Vos: I do a little expounding on essentials for each class of new members that comes through. Q&A 1 is a constant at Crossroads’ funerals.

Brian Ochsner: We are still strongly committed to teaching our young people the Heidelberg Catechism in 9th and 10th grade. And then we focus on the Belgic Confession in 12th grade.

Scott Vander Ploeg: Our church has been shaped by the Confessions in ways too many to count. As an example, our tagline, “A Place to Belong,” comes through direct influence of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1. We also use the Confessions in new members’ classes. Also, I have personally become a huge advocate of one-to-one discipleship in line with 2 Timothy 2:2. I begin with teaching people how to preach and articulate the basic gospel message according to an outline that I have developed in accordance with Q&A 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism (Sin, Salvation, Service). Much of the language that I use in this outline is taken directly from the Catechism. After people get this outline down, I move them through the basics of Christian teachings. In doing so, I teach people about the Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.

Any final thoughts about the usefulness of the Confessions for people today?

Peter Choi: I’m convinced the Creeds and Confessions continue to be a source of wisdom and guidance for the church today. Especially the Heidelberg Catechism, which seems to me to tap into a heart cry that has been expressed by every human generation, arising from questions like: Where do I belong? Or better, to whom do I belong? If we can identify the need of our generation (and every generation) as a deep sense of alienation and homelessness, the Heidelberg Catechism provides wise and winsome counsel by pointing the way home. In Ann Arbor, I found the HC to offer compelling answers in a campus ministry context, where so many college students in search of identity and meaning stood to benefit from the wisdom of others who have gone before. Young people valued hearing that prior generations had questions and struggles strikingly similar to their own; it provided a point of connection and a sense of belonging—not only to Christ but also to the community of God’s people throughout history.
Mentored Ministries: Joining the Church in Forming Students

By Rev. Al Gelder, Director of Mentored Ministries
and Chris Wright, Mentored Ministries Office Administrative Coordinator

In an age of constant change, in a seminary of constant change, some things don’t change. Back in the day of typewriters and mimeograph machines and rotary dial telephones, the “Field Education” office was located in the same place as it is today, possibly the only CTS office that can say this. Back then students visited this office to see about preaching opportunities and to learn about summer field assignments (as internships were called back then).

While preaching opportunities and internships are still part of student life, the work of this office certainly has changed. For one thing, the name has changed a few times—from “Field Education” to “Formation for Ministry” to the current name: “Mentored Ministries.” At the heart of Mentored Ministries is the integration of head, heart, and hand. Yes, students still have the opportunity to apply their learning in a cross-cultural setting and a pastoral ministry setting (internships). We continue to need (and appreciate) churches that offer students these ministry opportunities. But there’s so much more, and relationships (mentoring) are at the core.

Every M.Div. and M.A. student (M.T.S. as well) is in a mentoring group. Each group has a wise leader (professor or pastor) who builds a relationship with a group of students during the two or three years of the students’ program here. Equally important is the development of a peer group where “iron sharpens iron.” No one can go through seminary or through a ministry career as a “lone ranger.” It never works well, and churches end up paying the price if a pastor thinks he or she doesn’t need others.

Mentored Ministries also provides a place for theological reflection. Scripture, class learning, internship experiences, and peer interactions all come together in writing and discussing theological reflection papers in mentoring groups. CTS is not just a place to pack the brain full of theological facts. It really is a place where students are formed for ministry. And it does take a “village”—professors, vocational mentors, internship supervisors, a local church, fellow students—to do the vital work of preparing a person for ministry.

There are a lot of pieces in the ever-changing world of “field education/mentored ministries.” Some are new, many have a long history. None are just “hoops” to jump through. As CTS has more students working at a distance, there will be more changes in the ways that integration and reflection happen. But the results will be the same: CTS students who are whole persons, prepared to serve our Lord and his body, the church.

If you or your congregation want to know more or wish to investigate inviting a student to preach or serve as an intern, please contact us at mentoredministries@calvinseminary.edu or 616-957-6064.

New Staff Update

Jinny Bult De Jong is not a new face at CTS but is now sitting in a different chair. She has given up her seat on the Board of Trustees in order to serve the Seminary as chief financial and operating officer. And she sees this as a capstone opportunity that allows her to return to her first love—higher education.

Echoing the Psalm 16, Jinny recounts with joy how the boundary lines for her have fallen in pleasant places. “God has given me wonderful opportunities to serve and grow in his world-wide Kingdom work. After two wonderful assignments at Calvin College, first as Dean of Women and then 10 years later as Vice President for Student Life, I was able to learn and lead in organizations like International Aid, Kids Hope USA, Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies, and most recently, Stephen’s Children. “

Over her years of service, she has seen Christ’s church in action—from Honduras to Kosovo to Korea to Cairo; from Dallas to Chicago to Grand Haven, MI. But perhaps her best preparation for serving at the Seminary is her partnership with husband Rev. Andy De Jong, whose career included both campus ministry and church planting.

“The most formative experience for us as a ministry couple were the years Andy served Intervarsity campus ministry at CU in Boulder, CO, called and supported by Home Missions of the CRC. We learned how to disciple students and lead small groups for faith formation. But the Colorado team learned from us too—especially the cohesive and comprehensive view of God and his world that Reformed theology showcases.”

Jinny is thrilled to be called to serve with the community of Calvin Theological Seminary under the leadership of President Jul Medenblik. And as she looks ahead, her prayer for all those who love and support CTS, including herself, is that we dream big for this seminary in its life-giving engagement with God’s Word and world, always remembering that nothing is impossible with God.

Jinny and Andy still love Colorado where their adult children have settled in Fort Collins: Joel and married daughter Joy with her husband Tim Lago.
“By the grace of God, I look forward to building on the foundation others have laid in strengthening Calvin Theological Seminary’s ability to produce great preachers and great leaders who serve the Church which serves God’s mission in this world.”

Jul Medenblik
Calvin Theological Seminary President

I would like more information about membership in the Presidents’ Legacy Society.

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