

On the Day of Worship

The reader will have noticed that in this series we are not going through the articles of the CanRC Church Order in a systematic way. Sometimes it just reflects what people are talking about in our churches, what's "in the air." That brings us in this and the next few columns to the topic of "worship." Worship, and especially corporate worship, is something every church member is involved in. And many conversations about worship reveal an increasing variety of views and opinions when it comes to different styles and possible changes in how we worship.

Does the Church Order have anything to do with this? Some would argue that it is precisely our Church Order that is the culprit when it comes to stifling every desire to make changes in how we worship. But is that correct? Worship is covered in a few articles in the fourth part of the Church Order, Articles 52–56, and when it comes to the actual set-up of the worship service, it's even less. Contrary to popular belief, our Church Order says very little about worship.

This time we'll have a closer look at Article 52. In this article the churches have agreed on two things the consistory is responsible for: (1) calling the congregation together for worship twice every Sunday, and (2) regular catechism preaching.

WHY TWICE?

"Why do we have to go twice?" If you have children, you will eventually hear that question some Sunday morning. Or you have visitors worshipping with you, perhaps with a different church background, who wonder out loud, "Why twice?" But the question can also come up: What gives the consistory the right to insist on

worshipping twice every Sunday, when God does not issue such a demand in Scripture?

The last observation is correct. Gathering for worship is a biblical command for God's people, but nowhere does it speak directly about two worship services. In fact, even as an explicit rule in the Church Order it is relatively new. It was not mentioned before the revision of 1983. Of course, our churches did not invent the idea of two services per Sunday in 1983. From the very beginning of the Reformation, Reformed church orders reflect the practice that having two services was the rule. Shortly after 1563, the year that the Heidelberg Catechism was published, it was agreed that catechism preaching should take place "ordinarily," or "as a rule" in the afternoon service. It shows that in the old church orders two services on a Sunday were simply implied.

The practice of worshipping twice has deep roots. Already in the Old Testament the LORD called his people to praise and prayer at the times of the morning and evening sacrifices. Still—despite the fact that the early Christian church continued this pattern on the Lord's Day—one can say: that was commanded at that time, but there is no biblical instruction to do so today.

WHY NOT TWICE?

To begin with, as mentioned in a previous column, there are many other things we have agreed on in the Church Order that God does not "demand." But not having an explicit divine command does not imply that there cannot be a biblical rationale for doing something as church(es). In this case, with two services the church maintains the unique character of the Sunday as a *day* of worship,

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which is in line with the intention of the fourth commandment. Especially in a time of increasing secularism, worshipping twice is also essential for giving explicit evidence of what a living, thriving, faithful, and missionally-minded church of Christ looks like. After all, worship is more about what we bring—praise and glory to our God—than about what we get or learn.

That's why the consistory does not just provide an *opportunity* for worship, but the consistory "shall *call* the congregation." That flows from the responsibility of the shepherds for the spiritual well-being of the flock. So yes, worshipping twice on a Sunday may not be a direct biblical command, but we have agreed to it for good reasons, and if someone wants to reduce it to once, he had better come with some very good arguments.

KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE

The second matter agreed upon in Article 52 is regular catechism preaching.¹ What to some seems to be a typically Dutch Reformed tradition, was actually a widespread custom from very early on in the time of the Reformation. It even has its roots long before that. Instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian religion is as old as Christianity, and in the thirteenth century priests were instructed to explain in the preaching the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Sacraments. Remarkably, those are still the four parts of the Heidelberg Catechism. At times this kind of preaching was neglected, which resulted in a lack of knowledge of what the Christian faith is all about.

The main objection against catechism preaching has always been that you can only preach from God's Word and not from a human document. As such that statement is correct. However, catechism preaching, when done properly, is proclaiming God's Word. The difference is that it does not focus on one separate text, but on a summary of what several passages in Scripture teach about the doctrine of salvation as revealed in the Bible.

More practical criticism of catechism preaching has been that it becomes too repetitive. We know it already because we've heard it before. To some extent preachers can try to avoid this. It is not required to deal with all the details of every Lord's Day in one sermon. Something can be saved for the next cycle. When that Lord's Day is approached in a subsequent round, focusing on a different question and answer, or presenting a different emphasis, are good ways to bring in more variety and even help go deeper into certain aspects. That being said, repetition also has an advantage. When you still remember the multiplication tables as an adult,

it is because they were drilled into you by rigorous repetition in school. In this case it's important to keep fresh the knowledge of what we believe about God and his great works.

It has also been said that catechism preaching may explain doctrine but does not have practical personal application in the life of believers. But that's a fallacy. Doctrine is what you believe, and what you believe determines how you live. Everyone who is familiar with the Heidelberg Catechism can know this. How often do we not read, beginning with the famous first question: "How does this comfort you?" or "How does this benefit you?" or "What good does this do for you?"

LIVE WHAT YOU BELIEVE

One of the benefits of regular catechism preaching is that it helps to expose the congregation to what the Bible calls "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), the wide range of things God has revealed to us, and not only the preferred passages or topics of ministers. We all have our one-sided interests and things we like to emphasize, at the cost of other truths. That's also true for ministers. Preaching that covers a healthy balance of themes and topics from God's revealed Word will help the believers develop a good understanding of God's truth.

The flipside is that losing regular catechism preaching will lead to a loss of spiritual sensitivity to be able to discern between what is true and what is false in the world of ideas. In light of the above it is good to stress that Article 52 talks about "proclaiming the doctrine of God's Word" as an act of worship. That's different from catechism classes or classroom lectures. Catechism preaching must avoid the pitfall of presenting abstract theology. This is about the faith we share. Note also that all of this is the responsibility of the consistory, not just of the minister. This is especially critical in churches that don't have their own minister but rely on guest preachers. If a consistory does not consciously take ownership of regular catechism preaching, it can easily lead to a haphazard and sloppy approach. 



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