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E. J. Young

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**ORDAINED SERVANT**

**Statement Of Purpose**

Ordained Servant exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal Ordained Servant will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

**Editorial Policy**

1. Ordained Servant publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of Ordained Servant or of the Church.

2. Ordained Servant occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Ordained Servant does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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**EDITORIAL**

When I first became an Orthodox Presbyterian back in 1955 one thing immediately impressed me. It was the fact that no matter which OPC preacher I heard it was always the same message. There was, of course, a striking variety of abilities and styles, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that I always heard faithful preaching. To put it another way, I always heard Reformed doctrine,

the doctrine so beautifully and faithfully summarized in our Confession and Catechisms. And I believe this is still one of the outstanding things—a great blessing of God—that characterizes our denomination. But the Confession and Catechisms were not the only treasure bequeathed to us by the Westminster Assembly. Of great importance also are the Form

of Government and the Directory of Worship.

We are therefore thankful to be able to include in this issue a fine study of the latter by Drs. R. Dean Anderson, Jr. It serves as a striking reminder of the fact that our Reforming Fathers were not only concerned for the unity of the church in *doctrine*, but also in its *form of worship*. As we look at the church today—especially the American church—or even that part of the church that calls itself Reformed, one thing is quite apparent. In the *form* of worship—or *style* (as some prefer to call it)—there is utter chaos. It is, in fact, no exaggeration at all to say that there has been a veritable explosion of innovation.

Let me give you two examples, both of which took place in churches claiming to be Reformed. (1) The people arrive for morning worship to find a large pile of dirt in the ‘sanctuary.’ Planted in the middle is a home-made cross. There is no sermon. The people are invited to simply look at what is before them and meditate. And the report is that many felt inspired and uplifted. (2) The morning worship is given over, in large part, to a young Indian who chants to the sound of a drum. His own description of what he was chanting was this: “I sing from my heart and connect my mind to the Creator... I pray to the Creator, to the grandmothers and grandfathers, my ancestors, and Mother Earth.” And the result? Well, one said “It was a spiritual awakening of sorts—liberating too; I could see that there are an infinite number of ways to praise God.”

In contrast to this our Reforming Fathers held that there is only *one* way to worship God—the way that He has commanded. And if that be true then there ought to be a far greater uniformity than there is in our way of worship. It is our hope that this study will contribute to an increased awareness of what the problem really is in our present chaos, and what should be done about it. There is much to learn from the wonderful guide provided by the Westminster Assembly.

**QUESTION BOX**

I recently received the following question: “*Meetings of the presbytery and general assembly are ordinarily open to visitors. Should session meetings be open also?*” The writer goes on to ask if the Book of Discipline IV, A, 1, b—giving the

governing body power to close other meetings by simple majority—applies “*only to the trial of judicial cases?*” And, finally, “*Does discussion by the session about a church member, or visitor, or potential intern warrant closing the meeting to that person and others?*”

It is my opinion that the Book of Discipline IV, A, 1, b, is only concerned with judicial process. But even so it would seem to imply more. If a Session, Presbytery or General Assembly should not, ordinarily, go behind closed doors when acting in a judicial capacity, then may it not—under *ordinary* circumstances—also conduct its other business openly? Van Dellen and Monsma, in *The Church Order Commentary*,<sup>1</sup> insist that it “is to the best interest of the Churches that Consistory [Session] meetings are private.” And several reasons might be given. It would be very difficult to hold Session meetings in smaller rooms if many others were in attendance. There may be reports on family visitation which, in my opinion, ought to be heard by the elders only. It is also understood that authorities such as Van Dellen and Monsma agree that every member has the right to come to the Session to be heard, to ask questions, or even to lodge a formal complaint.

It is therefore my opinion that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has wisely refrained from legislation in this matter. A Session could decide to allow any members who wish to do so to sit in on Session meetings. This might be a very salutary thing, for example, for a young man who begins to desire the pastoral office. And the doors *must* remain open to all members of the church when a trial is in process. But, at the same time, a Session has every right—when it is not meeting in judicial capacity—to use its own collective and sanctified wisdom in determining whether or not to meet in private. And there will certainly be many times when the Session should *not* have visitors present.

On page 22 of Volume 3, Number 1 of *Ordained Servant*, under the heading of *Feedback*, the following material should have been within quotation marks: the part of paragraph 6 beginning with the words “~~The censures of the Church are spiritual in their nature...~~” and ending with the words “...in casting him out of the Church into the world, which is described in Scripture as Satan’s kingdom.”

**An Examination of the Liturgy  
of the  
Westminster Assembly:  
as formulated in  
The Directory for the Publick Worship of God.**

**by R. Dean Anderson, Jr.**

In our day of rather varied liturgical practice, it is well worth considering what our forefathers thought and decided on this question. Too often it is forgotten that they too had to grapple with the question of how to organise a worship service.

The Directory for Worship produced by the Westminster Assembly was one of the first products of that body to be officially approved and enacted.<sup>1</sup> It was early on decided to proceed with this document first, before coming to what was to be the most difficult and vexing matter of the Assembly, namely the issue of church government. At least on the question of a Directory of Worship, both Independents and Presbyterians rested on similar biblical principles. Thus it was thought a mutually acceptable document could be produced for uniformity of practice throughout the realms of England and Scotland in accord with the Solemn League and Covenant. The Directory of Worship was specifically produced to replace the Book of Discipline which was no longer in favour because of all its crypto-Romish ceremonies. A subcommittee of five men was set up to prepare a draft which was later discussed clause by clause in the Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

This essay, after extrapolating the liturgy from the Directory, shall first discuss several of its elements, before proceeding to several comments on the liturgy as a whole. In the initial discussion I shall endeavour to bring to light some of the debates and issues discussed by the Assembly and its committees.

The Directory for Worship actually presents two liturgies. The first is clearly for all regular public worship of God, and as such is the liturgy my comments shall focus upon. The second listed below for interest is that given for special days of thanksgiving. Nowhere in the document are these set out as such, but by careful reading they are easily extrapolated.<sup>3</sup>

**Regular Service**

Call to Worship  
Prayer

**Special Service of Thanksgiving**

Exhortation  
Short prayer for God's assistance and blessing

## An Examination of the Liturgy of the Westminster Assembly

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Reading	Singing of Psalm(s)
The Psalm	exhortation and prayer with special reference
Prayer before sermon	to the occasion
Preaching of the Word	Preaching on some relevant text
Prayer after Sermon	prayer after sermon (including special thanksgiving)
(Optional Psalm)	
(Sacraments)	Psalm
Solemn blessing	Blessing

### Prayer

The opening prayer is given in note form, as are all prayers and forms for exhortation. According to the preface of the Directory, it was:

*... our meaning therein being only, that the general heads, the sense and scope of the prayers, and other parts of publick worship, being known to all, there may be a consent of all the churches in those things that contain the substance of the service and worship of God; ....*

The essential themes in this prayer are given as:

*acknowledgement of the greatness of God,  
unworthiness of man,  
request for acceptance of worship and blessing upon it,  
blessing on Word to be read.*

### Reading

Only canonical books are to be read, and these only by a pastor or teacher (and occasionally one intending the ministry if approved by Presbytery).<sup>4</sup> There was quite some debate over the question of who should do the reading. Some (e.g. Palmer (P), Herle (P)) were insistent that only the pastor or teacher should read Scripture, but many others thought this too strict.<sup>5</sup> Palmer reasoned that the reading of Scripture is the mouth of God, and therefore only the minister (the mouthpiece of God) should do the reading. Whilst this reasoning seems valid, certainly against the pragmatic argument to the contrary that this would prove too heavy for the ministers, yet Lightfoot (E) quite rightly argued that even in the NT and known synagogue practice we see that readers differed from preachers (citing Luke 4, and Acts 13).<sup>6</sup> Some thought such reading a good opportunity to test the talents of those training for the ministry. (Note that such reading could also involve some explanation of the text - see below). In the end the desire of the Assembly to take account of continental Reformed practice won the day. Uniformity even internationally was something highly desirable among the churches of Christ. Thus the argument that candidates in all other Reformed churches were allowed to read Scripture held sway, and a careful formulation was passed on the third day of debate.

The reading was to be “ordinarily one chapter of each Testament,” that is a *lectio continua* from week to week through the whole Bible, though certain passages could be read more frequently as well. If warranted, an explanation was to be given after the reading. Thus this reading was completely separate from the text and theme of the sermon. Here we ought to recall the situation of general illiteracy. It is

also stated that “every person that can read, is to be exhorted to read the scriptures privately, and to have a Bible.” Reading the Bible in church was an important way of communicating basic Bible knowledge to the people. Our own situation today no longer requires this practice.

### **The Psalm**

In the section on singing of Psalms it is stated that everyone able to read is to have a psalm book, and those not able, are to be exhorted to learn to read. The Directory continues:

*But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.*

This practice (still continued among the Free Presbyterian Churches of Scotland) is clearly no longer necessary.

### **Prayer before sermon**

The object of this prayer is for the minister “to get his own and his hearers hearts to be rightly affected with their sins” so that they thirst after the grace of God in Jesus Christ. An example in note form follows. Here the main points are confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness, followed by needs of Christendom, peace, rulers, etc., prayer for ministry of word and reception of hearers. The Directory continues that: “We judge this to be a convenient order, in the ordinary public prayer.” If desired, however, some of these petitions could be placed in the prayer after the sermon, and some of those from that prayer be placed in the prayer before the sermon. Going by its stated object, this prayer would seem to replace the explicit corporate confession of sin, and consequent statement of absolution so common in 16th century European liturgies. One wonders then if the title “prayer before the sermon” is really so appropriate. If the sermon is a pure gospel message, the idea seems to be to inculcate conviction of sin as a necessary prerequisite to fleeing to Christ.

### **Preaching of the Word**

The whole question of whether the Directory for Worship should take up the matter of sermons was brought to the floor when certain propositions relevant to it were tabled by Herbert Palmer (P) on June 4, 1644. Jeremiah Whitaker (P) argued that such a topic was “needless and not expected” in a Directory. After long debate it was however decided to proceed. We may well concur with Whitaker that the structure of a sermon does not seem to be the sort of thing needing ratified uniformity in all churches. But as it turned out the Directory gave only a recommendation on this matter. This was due to Thomas Gataker’s (P) objection on June 5th that the overall pattern of doctrine, reason, use, so common in Puritan preaching of the 17th century, was “too strait for the variety of gifts, and occasion doth claim liberty.”<sup>7</sup> He was supported in this by William Gouge (P). As a result the Assembly added the clause explaining that this method should only be seen as recommended, and not prescribed. An important rider in my opinion.

According to the Directory the sermon is ordinarily to be textual, either free text, or an explication of some chapter, Psalm, or book in sequence. The permission for either a free text, or expository series was decided early with little debate (June 4, 1644). On the same day however *lengthy* debate was held on a proposition touching the *length* of sermons. The proposition read: “The preacher shall handle so

much for each time, as may be kept in memory by the hearers.” The nub of the debate centered on the question whether “the people’s memory must be the stint of sermons.” The proposition was voted down. It is interesting to note however that concerning the division of a sermon, the Directory states that the minister is not “to burden the memory of the hearers in the beginning with too many members of division.”

Preaching on a catechism seems to be excluded, although it must be admitted that the Westminster catechisms had not yet been drawn up. The recommended sermon outline runs as follows:

*brief introduction,*  
*summary of text if long (e.g. historical passage),*  
*Division of text, Raising of doctrines:*  
*- plain explication*  
*- a few choice parallels,*  
*- arguments or reasons (with illustrations),*  
*- dispelling of doubts in text, or prejudices [only those obviously leading to doubt from the text, or in the prejudice of the hearers],*  
*application (instruction or information in the knowledge of some truth, confutation of false doctrines if applicable to congregation),*  
*exhorting to duties,*  
*admonition,*  
*comfort,*  
*trials (to help hearers examine themselves - be careful here).*

It is interesting to note that the use of Latin, Greek, or Hebrew in sermons cost quite some debate. Some (e.g. Palmer (P) who cited an article banning this in the French Reformed Churches) were vehemently opposed to this, whilst others (Lightfoot (E), Nye (I)) saw that occasionally it could be useful in explaining a particular passage. The Assembly discussed this on June 6 and 7 before referring the matter back to the committee. A compromise was finally reached after a full day of debate on June 17th, “against the unnecessary and unprofitable use of it” Lightfoot, *Journal*, 285.

There was also some debate about whether a blessing could follow the sermon as well as at the end of the sacrament. This idea does not seem to have been taken up.<sup>8</sup>

### **Prayer after Sermon:**

The Directory once again gives a sample prayer in note form, of which the main points are: thanks for salvation in Christ, etc., prayer for continuance of gospel, petitions based on sermon, prayer for preparation for death and judgement (watching for coming of Lord), acceptance of worship. In addition it is recommended that the Lord’s Prayer be used as well. This recommendation was brought to the Assembly early on, and “ordered with little debate.”<sup>9</sup>

### **(Psalm)**

The concluding Psalm was optional but apparently occasioned no debate as it was commonly sung.<sup>10</sup>

### **(Sacraments)**

Baptism: The liturgy (in note form) is as follows:

*Words of instruction, admonishment to all to look back on their baptism, exhortation to parent, prayer, baptism in trinity, prayer of thanksgiving.*

Of note here is that the common English practice of private baptism naturally came up for debate.<sup>11</sup> Lightfoot laconically notes: “Here began we to enter into the ocean of many vast disputes.” Various arguments were used to justify this practice,<sup>12</sup> though the arguments of the Scots against it won the day. Naturally all the relevant texts for baptism in the NT came up, as also the relation between baptism and circumcision.<sup>13</sup>

It was also debated whether or not to fix the number of sprinklings. This was however not done. Notable here is of course the allusion to the practice of the early church with three distinct sprinklings, one for each person of the Trinity.

The question as to whether parents should be asked to give a profession of their faith at their child’s baptism was also discussed more than once, and a set of questions was drawn up and passed. They did not however find their way into the Directory itself.<sup>14</sup>

Lord’s Supper: This is “frequently to be celebrated” but exactly how often is left to each congregation.<sup>15</sup> A preparation service the week before is to be held only if frequent observance is inconvenient. As with the prayers, no exact form is given; however a synopsis of the exhortation to take place at the observance is given in note form. Its parts are as follows:

*exhortation,  
warning,  
invitation,  
sanctification and blessing of the elements,  
Words of Institution (I Cor. 11:23-27 with optional explanation and application),  
prayer,  
distribution with appropriate words,  
concluding words,  
collection for the poor.*

From June 20 until July 10, and again on Nov.12, great debates raged in the Assembly over the manner of coming to, seating, and distribution at the Lord’s Supper table. Issues such as sitting versus kneeling, successive tables versus one large table, whether the minister should break all the bread or each man for himself (and then whether the man who broke it should pass the other half on to the person beside him or put it back on the plate!), whether the minister’s admonition after the distribution of the elements should be held in the pulpit or not. On certain points the Scottish commissioners were very particular and thus aroused heated opposition from the Independents who wanted these matters left to the freedom of the churches (for fear of instituting ceremonies not required by Scripture). The result of the long debates was a very careful formulation of the liturgy, which while suggesting certain practices, ultimately left the exact manner of celebration to the local churches.<sup>16</sup> The Scottish churches thus found it necessary when ratifying the document at the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, Feb. 3, 1645 to explicitly stipulate that the manner of celebration was *not* an indifferent matter. On this whole



question however, I rather agree with the Independents, that these matters whilst they may contain certain valid concerns, do not seem to require rigid uniformity. Scripture is not so specific.

It is also interesting to note that the original draft had a provision for certain Psalms to be sung during the succession of tables. This was eventually deleted, and seems to imply that silence was preferred.<sup>17</sup>

Another interesting point of contention was whether those not communing should be allowed to view the proceedings. This reminds one of their exclusion in the liturgies of the 4th century. A whole day's debate did not settle the question.<sup>18</sup>

### General Comments:

Reviewing the liturgy as a whole we are struck with the apparent omission of both the creed and the decalogue. With respect to the latter, there does appear to have been some debate on this matter on June 18, 1644. Lightfoot cryptically records however that “*in fine* (i.e., Latin “in the end”), they were waved and laid by.”<sup>19</sup> A note in the minutes of Dec. 16 records that the Assembly notified parliament:

*...that the reason why the Assembly have sent up nothing in the Directory concerning the Creed and the Ten Comm[andmen]ts, is because they reserve it for the Directory for catechizing where they conceive it will be most proper.*<sup>20</sup>

This seems to indicate that they did not wish to exclude either from the liturgy. However to the best of my knowledge such a Directory for catechizing never appeared.<sup>21</sup>

Although Lightfoot gives no record of a discussion of the order of the liturgy, it is clear from Baillie that such matters were discussed by the subcommittee.<sup>22</sup> It is however difficult to give any meaningful evaluation of the order without knowing where the creed or ten commandments would have been positioned. That the sacraments should follow the preaching of the Word is basic.<sup>23</sup>

In summary we may say that apart from the omission of the section on catechizing, the liturgy of the Directory of Publick Worship is carefully put together. One can appreciate the avoidance of set forms, and also at the same time the desire to regulate fairly carefully what ought to be said. As mentioned above, certain parts of the Directory seem to enter into areas unnecessary to its purpose and this seems to reflect one of the major problems in putting it together. That is, the amount of time wasted by debating unnecessary details, or points that we would (today at least) see as merely relating to circumstance (cf. Confession of Faith, I:vi). This time factor cost the Assembly a great deal, for as history was to show, the uniformity of religion came too late to make any real difference in English ecclesiastical practice.

Two points from the historical overview have struck me as very relevant for our churches today. First, the desire for a general uniformity of practice among the churches with respect to liturgy. This does not have to be a straight jacket, regulating every little detail, but general uniformity was greatly desired by our fathers, and does indeed reflect the unity of the worship of the church given to her Lord. Second, the care taken by the assembly to investigate and take into consideration the practice of Reformed churches on the continent. The Presbyterians were not so haughty that they thought that they could not learn from the experience of their continental brethren. This desire is something that has also been part

of the OPC from its beginning. In this respect the OPC follows in the footsteps of its forefathers at Westminster.

<sup>1</sup> It was made law for England and Wales in a parliamentary ordinance of Jan. 3rd, 1645, passed by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland on Feb. 3rd, and by an Act of parliament of the Kingdom of Scotland Feb. 6th.

<sup>2</sup> The committee consisted of chairman Stephen Marshall (P) [responsible for draft on preaching], Herle (P) [resp. for fasting and thanksgiving], Palmer (P) [resp. for catechizing - never included], Young (P) [resp. for reading of Scriptures & singing of Psalms], Goodwin (I) [also resp. for fasting and thanksgiving], Scots commissioners [resp. for sacraments]. See R. Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie, A.M. Principal of the University of Glasgow MDCXXXVII - MDCLXII* (David Laing, ed.; Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, 1841-2) 2.117-118, 140. For convenience, throughout this essay I have indicated the “party” standing of members by a system of letters:

P = English Presbyterian  
S = Scots Presbyterian  
I = Independent  
E = Erastian

It may be of interest with respect to the sources used to note that Baillie was a Scots commissioner, whilst John Lightfoot an Erastian delegate.

It is interesting to note that an Independent was included on the subcommittee. The Directory was of course prepared before the great debates that finally led to the exclusion of the Independents from the Assembly. Nevertheless Goodwin did cause problems. He arrived late for the first meeting of the subcommittee, and Baillie (*Letters* 2.123) records: “While we are sweetlie debaiting on these things, in came Mr. Goodwin, who incontinent assayed to turn all upside downe, to reason against all directories, and our verie first grounds, also that all pfaceing was unlawfull...He troubled us so, that after long debates we could conclude nothing.” It should be borne in mind that Baillie wrote these comments in a public letter. His most cutting comments were always left for his private communications! (cf. 2.156) The Independents throughout the debates opposed all unnecessary regulations, and all notion of fixed forms. The resultant Directory therefore does exhibit a number of concessions made to them as a result, e.g., the use of notes to indicate matter for prayers and exhortations instead of fixed forms.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the omission of the creed and ten commandments see below.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect one can appreciate the development in the reformation from the time of the Belgic Confession which did not deny the use of the apocrypha in the public reading of the worship services, art.6. See A. D. R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis: Verklaard uit het Verleden Geconfronteerd met het Heden* (Franeker: T. Wever, n.d.) 1.244-5.

<sup>5</sup> The matter was discussed on June 11-13. See J. Lightfoot, “The Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines: From January 1, 1643, to December 31, 1644,” in J. R. Pitman (Ed.), *The Whole Words of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.* vol.13 (London: J. F. Dove, 1824) 282ff for other arguments used.

<sup>6</sup> This is confirmed in the Mishnah; cf. *Meg.* 4.5-6 where it seems any capable male could read the Law or prophets.

<sup>7</sup> Lightfoot, *Journal*, 278.

<sup>8</sup> June 18, and again November 11; Lightfoot, *Journal*, 285, 325.

<sup>9</sup> Lightfoot, *Journal* 277. June 4, 1644, Mr Palmer (P) reporting for the committee.

<sup>10</sup> See Baillie’s letter to W. Spang, April 25th, 1645.

## An Examination of the Liturgy of the Westminster Assembly

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<sup>11</sup> Baillie remarked in a letter to W. Spang, July 12th, 1644 (*Letters*, 2.204) that “The abuse was great over all this land. In the greatest parosch in London, scarce one child in a-year was brought to the church for baptisme. “ He means of course that they were baptised at home.

<sup>12</sup> Including that *admitted* by the Synod of Dort 1619, viz: of children close to death.

<sup>13</sup> Reviewing the arguments, I personally wonder whether it is not too strict to say that private baptisms (administered by the minister) may *never* take place.

<sup>14</sup> The questions proposed on Oct.9 were as follows:

1. Do you believe all the articles of faith contained in Scripture?
2. That all men and this child are born in sin?
3. That the blood and Spirit washeth away sin?
4. Will you have, therefore, this child baptized?

The final passing of the set of questions occurred on Oct.11 and again (!) on Nov.12, but there is no indication given by Lightfoot whether they were the same as those proposed, or modified in some way. It is nevertheless clear that there was plenty of debate. See Lightfoot, *Journal*, 314-316.

<sup>15</sup> This wording left the Independents free to continue their practice of weekly celebration, and the Scots theirs of periodic celebration. See Baillie, *Letters*, 2.148-9.

<sup>16</sup> For example on the question of coming to the table the Directory states: “the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it.” This was intended to allow for either, 1) that all communicants sit at the table, or 2) that only some sit at the table, and others receive the sacrament in the pews. To the latter practice the Scots vehemently objected. See Lightfoot, *Journal*, 291. Baillie noted in a letter of July 12th to W. Spang (*Letters*, 2.204), “After we were overtoyled with debate, we were forced to leave all these things, and take us to generall expressions, which by a benigne exposition, would infer our church-practices, which the most promised to follow, so much the more as we did not necessitate them by the Assemblie’s express determinations.”

<sup>17</sup> This could have been in accommodation to the Independents who preferred silence in this respect (as Zwingli had). Baillie (*Letters*, 2.149) described their typical communion as follows: “They have, after the blessing, a short discourse, and two short graces over the elements, which are distribute and participate in silence, without exhortation, reading, or singing, and all is ended with a psalme, without prayer.”

<sup>18</sup> The examination for profession of faith was also discussed and on Nov.12 the following agreed upon: “None to be admitted but those, that, upon examination by the minister before the church-officers, shall be found to have a competent measure of knowledge.” This practice would then mirror exactly that of the contemporary Netherlands (A form for profession of faith in the Netherlands was never discussed until the General Synod of Utrecht 1923, and even then one was only recommended, not prescribed). Before then each local church had used its own form - the only general requirement being that the faith as summarised in the Heidelberg catechism was professed. In practice such profession was more uniform than might be expected.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, *Journal* 285.

<sup>20</sup> Session 342, pp.20-21.

**It is a Dean Anderson, a native of New Zealand. He graduated with honours from Victoria University in Wellington, and then attended the Seminary of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario. He is presently completing his doctoral work in the Netherlands.**  
Eg: Whether the Scottish custom of two prayers before the sermon be used, or the English practice of one.  
See Baillie, *Letters*, 2.123.

<sup>23</sup> Just as the Peace offering was to follow upon the Burnt offering, cf. Lev 3:5.

# TAKING HEED TO THE FLOCK

by

Dr. P. Y. de Jong

## THE PROPER PRACTICE OF FAMILY VISITATION

*“I have now, brethren, done with my advice, and leave you to the practice. Though the proud receive it with scorn, and the selfish and slothful with distaste, or even with indignation, I doubt not but God will use it, in despite of the opposition of sin and Satan, to the awakening of many of his servants to their duty, and to the promotion of a work of right reformation; and that his blessing will accompany the present undertaking for the saving of many souls the peace of you that understand and perform it, the exciting of his servants throughout the nation to second you, and the increase of the purity and unity of his churches. Amen.”*

RICHARD BAXTER: THE REFORMED PASTOR.

We have considered at great length some of the basic principles of family visitation. This, however, will not be sufficient to carry the work out successfully. It is necessary to give some time and consideration to the question of its proper exercise also. Unless we are able to give a good account of the work itself, understanding what is required of both elders and members of the congregation, our efforts will be fruitless.

### *Preparing for the Work*

To conduct family visitation successfully the elders ought to prepare themselves carefully for this important task.

It goes without saying, of course, that we who are Reformed are very averse to anything which would smack of legalism in our family visitation. The work is spiritual; therefore so difficult of accomplishment. For that reason we have never countenanced the Roman Catholic practice of supplying prepared manuals, the use of which would be obligatory. For spiritual life we can only lay down general principles. There cannot be specific applications binding

equally under any and all circumstances.

God has also been pleased to glorify Himself in the variety of spiritual life found among His people. No two of His children have identical problems and experiences. Therefore the specific approach also at family visitation will have to be left always to the discretion of those elders who engage in the work.

In consequence, preparation for this work will necessarily be of a rather general nature. The elders will not be able to decide beforehand just what they shall say and do. A detailed plan of procedure would be of value only if we could predict with reasonable accuracy how the members of the congregation react under certain circumstances. Since the depths of the heart are known to God alone and only some small part is revealed at any time, we will have to rely upon the Holy Spirit for wisdom and guidance in approaching the needs of the people.

To be conscious of this situation challenges the elders to prepare their own hearts first.

Richard Baxter in his valuable, if somewhat antiquated, work on *The Reformed Pastor* beautifully delineates the spiritual oversight which the pastors (also elders) should have of

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themselves. According to this worthy divine it consists of five chief parts:

- I. See that the work of grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls.
- II. See that you be not only in a state of grace but that your graces are in vigorous and lively exercise.
- III. See that your example contradict not your doctrine.
- IV. See that you live not in those sins against which you preach in others.
- V. See that you (lack) not the qualifications necessary for the work.<sup>1</sup>

Only those who are conscious of their own spiritual state of grace can perform this arduous work. They should engage in prayer for guidance before they begin, earnestly beseeching God that the words to be spoken may meet with divine approval and prove to be a blessing to those toward whom they are directed. Any unkind word or gesture may easily prove to be a serious obstacle to the successful conducting of the work.

Let not one of the elders fail to give himself a good account of his personal attitude towards the brethren and sisters. Any censoriousness is out of place. Likewise will those fail who exercise the oversight in the spirit of superiority and tyranny.

But that the chief blessings may be insured, the elders ought not to fail to study the Word of God in which are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Only in its light will we be able to understand the spiritual problems which our people face daily. There will also be abundant occasion for defending the true faith against the false doctrines which are so popular today. In order to teach wisely and well, the elders must be grounded in the faith and have the ability to defend the truth as it is in Christ Jesus with tact and conviction.

Too often family visitation tends to degenerate into a social call. Then it is time and effort wasted to call upon all the members each year. But if we remember the spiritual duty of exercising oversight in the name of Christ, we will not be remiss in preparing ourselves for this work, knowing that no one is sufficient to

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<sup>1</sup> Baxter: *The Reformed Pastor*

these things of himself.

### ***Choosing the Best Method***

But how must the work be conducted, when the elders arrive at the homes of the members?

This involves the problem of the most advantageous method.

Should the elders ask questions and then expect direct answers, in order to become better acquainted with the spiritual level of the members? Or should they allow the discussion to follow the course decided by those whom they visit?

That there are arguments which can be adduced in favor of the latter practice is self-evident. Particularly when Christians are somewhat advanced in the way of sanctification, it is gratifying to allow them to direct the discussion. They will naturally bring up those matters which they feel to be of greatest concern to themselves and their families. Especially when they are fully conscious of the proper spiritual relationship which should obtain between the members and the officers of the church at the time of family visitation, this method can be successfully pursued. Thus we escape the difficulty of having the work assume the form of inquisition to any degree.

But we should not forget that most people are not able to direct a spiritual discussion profitably. Many times they do not see and understand their own needs as well as the elders do, whose calling it is to watch for their souls. Never may we lose sight of the distinction between official family visitation and free spiritual discussion between the brethren of the church for mutual edification. The former seeks not only the profit of the individual but above all the growth of the whole body of Christ in truth and love.

Bearing these things in mind, we will understand the necessity of carefully considering the questions which should be asked and answered.

### ***Suggestions by Certain Reformed Fathers***

Biesterveld in his work on family visitation mentions what some Reformed writers considered to be proper and necessary questions at the

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time of these visits.

Zepperus, for example, thought that the minister ought to ask about the knowledge which each member had of the Reformed faith, also whether family worship and catechism teaching in the home were maintained, and further whether the members diligently attended the preaching of the Word and partook when the Lord's Supper was administered.

Helmichius strongly stressed the personal character of the work and considered it essential that family visitation be used to bring the wandering sheep back to the fold. He regards the pastor as the physician of souls who must prescribe the spiritual medicines and as jurist who can help the believers in their difficulties.

William Teelinck, Reformed pastor at Middelburg during the first quarter of the seventeenth century, speaks of the profitableness of carrying on family visitation at the time of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Already in his days some were beginning to depart from this practice, which he considered a grievous loss for the spiritual welfare of the congregation.

One of the most complete discussions of this official work is to be found in the works of Voetius. He speaks of two types of visitation; the regular visitation by the ministers and elders before each celebration of the Lord's Supper, and the occasional visitation (*visitatio occasionata*) which ought to take place at least once each year. Upon the first occasion three matters were to be considered: first, whether the believers understood and practiced the proper preparation for and use of the Holy Supper; then, whether the religious services in the church were attended and godliness was practiced in the home; and finally, whether the believers lived in harmony with their neighbors. If the results were unfavorable, the consistory was obliged to continue its labors regularly with such a family until a change for the better took place. At the time of the occasional visitation the pastor was to ask more confidentially about the spiritual condition of each member of the family. Thus the sorrowing were comforted, the weak in faith encouraged, and the wayward warned.

This list could be considerably lengthened, but surely the above is sufficient to suggest the direction taken by leaders in the Reformed churches in the period of their greatest influence and prosperity.

In times past some have drawn up series of questions which could serve as guides to the elders. Never were these meant to be followed rigidly and in routine fashion. Yet in so far as they were used as guides, they served an admirable purpose. Two of these we would include here, in order that their value may not be lost. It should be remembered that they reflect the social and spiritual conditions of the times in which they were written and therefore can hardly be considered satisfactory in that form for us today. New problems have arisen, and these too should be faced. However, because of their value we would include the two given by Biesterveld.

In the year 1708 the Synod of Glasgow in Scotland passed an act respecting "Ministerial Visitation." By it the visitation of all the families in every parish was regulated for the Scotch churches. The following manner of procedure was prescribed:

1. After the minister has received a list of all the persons in the family, he is to speak to all in a general way about the necessity of regeneration and the examples of sincere, religious and pious living; also about piety towards God and righteousness and mercy towards men.
2. Then more specifically to the servants; about their duty to serve God and to be conscientious, faithful and obedient servants, and about the reward which is given to all such; commending to them the reading of the Scriptures and prayer, and exhorting them to love and unity, and above all to give diligence to hallowing the day of the Lord.
3. The minister is also to address the children according to their ability to understand, speaking to them of the profit of knowing and loving and serving the Lord in the days of their youth and of honoring their parents, reminding them how they were presented to the Lord in baptism; when they are older and have been in-

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structed in the nature of the Covenant of Grace and its seals, to admonish them personally to devote their lives to God, to desire and prepare for their first celebration of the Lord's Supper, likewise to read the Scriptures daily, to engage in personal prayers and to hallow the day of the Lord.

4. After the minister has spoken to the servants and children, he must address himself especially to the master and mistress of the family about their personal obligations to God and their care for the salvation of their souls; their duty to promote the true religion and worship of God in their home, opposing and punishing sin, promoting true godliness, and honoring the day of the Lord. Here it is also proper to admonish the fathers to see to it that in the daily family worship the Lord is served in prayer, thanksgiving and Scripture reading. Furthermore the minister must ask about the conduct of the servants and the fulfillment of their duties towards God and man, likewise how faithfully they attend family worship and public worship on the Lord's Day, and whether some are godly and sincere. Then, too, whether the ignorant and weak are instructed, and whether proper care is exercised for the training of the children; especially whether they are sent to school, what profit they derive therefrom and how they spend the day of the Lord in the home and in private after the sermon. Together with all this the minister must add appropriate encouragements, directions and admonitions, as he sees fit.
5. The minister is also to inquire about the supply of Bibles.
6. He must admonish the communicants to remember and to pay their vows.
7. And because all this requires much care and zeal towards God and love for the souls of men, it must be done in dependence upon God and with fervent prayer to Him, both before the minister goes out to do this work, and when he is with those whom he visits.<sup>1</sup>

The same author has also provided us with a copy of the resolution adopted by the

consistory of the Reformed church of Utrecht about fifty years ago. This action was taken to facilitate the work of family visitation by the elders and the ministers by following a rather well-defined pattern. If we bear in mind the size of such a congregation, we will understand why such a decision was necessary to give more unity to the work.

Questions which the Elders of the church at Utrecht are to ask the members of the congregation at the time of family visitation:

1. How many constitute the particular family and who these individuals are (father, mother, children, servants, others);
2. Whether all the members of the family have received Holy Baptism;
3. Whether all the members of the family have placed themselves under the supervision of the consistory;
4. Which members of the family have been permitted to partake of the Holy Supper;
5. Whether all the members of the family faithfully attend public worship, especially on the Lord's Day, and as far as this is possible also during the week; whether there is growth in the knowledge of the truth; and whether the head of the family investigates this, particularly on the Lord's Day;
6. Whether all children of school age attend the Christian School, and if not, what reasons are given for this;
7. Whether the members of the family who do not yet attend the Lord's Supper faithfully attend catechetical classes; whether the head of the family supervises their preparation for this; and whether he is acquainted with the fruits of that work;
8. Whether those who have been permitted to come to the Lord's Supper also faithfully make use of this means of grace; and whether the father and mother of the family set a good example in this respect;
9. How those who are under church discipline are conducting themselves (this to be done in private, especially in the case of those who are under silent censure);
10. Whether the head of the family faithfully leads the family in prayer and in teaching them the Word;

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<sup>1</sup> Biesterveld: *Het Huisbezoek*, p. 251-253

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11. Whether the children and servants manifest obedience to the fifth commandment;
12. Whether there are any children away from home, and if so, in what circumstances they find themselves; whether these have already made profession of their faith; whether they faithfully attend the services where they are;
13. How the head of the family watches for the spiritual welfare of the servants which may be in the home;
14. Whether there is any difficulty or trouble in the home, and whether the members live in peace and unity with their neighbors and the members of the church;
15. How the family conducts itself on the Lord's Day;
16. Whether the family according to its ability supports the poor and the church;
17. Whether the family in any way needs the advice or help of the consistory.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Following a Definite Plan***

Although the Reformed churches have been opposed to the routine use of prepared manuals for the conducting of family visitation, they as a general rule insisted that some definite plan be followed. Time and again the synods took up the matter and issued certain directives for the proper execution of this work. It is therefore not amiss that we also give some consideration to the definite plan which may be followed with profit.

First of all there are certain preliminary considerations. Those who engage in the work must know how many members constitute the family and approximately how old each one is. This knowledge should properly be gleaned from the church records before the visit. So, too, it is of great help to know something of the spiritual background of the particular family. Have they been members of the church for years, or are they recently converted to the Lord? There is a danger that the visits become mere repetitions of previous calls, especially in the larger congregations where it is practically impossible for every elder to become

acquainted with the whole church. This obstacle may be overcome to a degree, if the elders are assigned to certain districts each year and if the consistory insists on reports when family visitation is completed. If these facts are borne in mind, the elders will be better prepared to meet the needs of the family.

But how shall they begin? This is perhaps the most difficult part of the whole work. It is so easy to make a few remarks about work or weather, with the result that most of the time is consumed with matters that only very indirectly concern family visitation.

Some have profitably made use of prayer at the very beginning. This is appropriate indeed, especially since it reminds both elders and members that the work will not attain its goal unless the Lord gives His blessing. Others have suggested beginning with the reading of an appropriate passage of Scripture, which then serves as the point of departure for the whole discussion. There are, however, certain difficulties which this practice presents. If the reading is to serve its purpose, the passage ought to be particularly appropriate for that family—not some general passage which might be discussed by anyone. Family visitation is to be distinguished from the preaching of the Word precisely in its more personal and direct application of the gospel to our lives. But also, there is the danger that the one who reads begins to comment on the passage, with the result that most of the time is consumed by the exhortation and the elders do not get to know the spiritual condition of the family at all.

If the congregation understands the nature and purpose of these calls, it is not awkward to begin with a direct question to one of the members of the family. And in order that the discussion may be guided properly, some of the following questions ought to be asked.

There are first of all questions of a general nature which should be asked of all. (1) Are all the members faithful in attending divine worship and using the means of grace? That this comes first occasions no surprise. From the lips of the members themselves the officers should know whether they are interested in the service of the Lord. (2) Is there a measure of spiritual growth with each according to age

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<sup>1</sup> Biesterveld: *Het Huisbezoek*, p. 254-255



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and circumstances? To be able to ask this question properly the elder himself should understand the nature of spiritual life in its several manifestations. We may not expect, as a general rule, the same clear testimony from the young Christians as from those of a more mature age. Although Christ should be personally known and loved and served by all, Christian knowledge and experience deepens as the years go by. (3) Is there peace and unity in the home? Do the several members manifest love and helpfulness in their relations to each other? Often disharmony in the home will do great damage to the tender plant of faith. How careful particularly the father and mother should be in setting an example of love and godliness in the home! (4) Are spiritual matters discussed in the home, especially on the Lord's day? Where secularism so strongly prevails today and threatens the church with undoing, it is necessary to insist on the cultivation of this Christian virtue. Also in connection with this, is provision made for good reading material for old and young alike! We are living in an age when the printed page is very influential. Books and magazines of all sorts find their way into our homes. Does the father supervise the reading of his children, especially of the young people? Nor is it inappropriate to ask whether what is heard over the radio, particularly on the Lord's day, contributes to the spiritual edification of the family. (5) Is family worship faithfully and profitably conducted? This of course requires ideally that the father leads in audible prayer, reads the Scriptures reverently and if possible comments on the significance of the passage for the family. Likewise, the elders should know whether every member of the family, even the younger children who have learned to read, are in possession of a Bible and make diligent use of it for themselves. (6) Do the children and young people who have not yet professed Christ in the church faithfully attend the catechetical classes? Is their study properly supervised by one or both of the parents? Does the father speak especially to the young people of his family about the necessity and privilege of confessing Christ before men, also warning his children of the sin of breaking the covenant of the Lord? (7) Does the proper

spiritual relation exist between the members and the church, particularly the officers? Do the parents by their words and works set an example of honoring the minister, the elders and the deacons for the sake of the holy offices to which these men have been called? (8) Do the members of the family make use of the societies? Also this opportunity for spiritual development should receive greater appreciation by our people. The elders ought to stress the value of such Bible study as well as of the Christian fellowship which is enjoyed at such meetings. (9) What is the relation of the family to the neighbors? This includes not only those who are members of Christ's church, but also unbelievers. Do the members of the family witness for Christ whenever and wherever possible? (10) How do the several members of the family conduct themselves in their daily life? Are they aware that they are "living epistles, read of all men?" The elders can do much to instill in the minds and hearts of the believers the consciousness that all of life must be controlled by the Word, and that one's daily work is a vocation of the Lord. (11) Does the family faithfully and according to its ability support the causes of the kingdom of God? These gifts should be preceded and accompanied by personal prayers. Likewise, the parents should be asked whether they teach their children Christian stewardship, so that when these grow up and make their own living, they realize their obligations to God in financial matters too. (12) Does the head of the family try to promote the sense of true Christian distinctiveness among the various members, especially the young people?

There will of course be other questions which should be asked. First of all, the elders should direct their attention to the father and satisfy themselves that he is faithfully seeking to do his duty. (1) Is he mindful of his position as the head of the family, and does he daily strive to do justice to the obligations involved? (2) Is his authority in the home properly respected by all? (3) Does he execute his priestly duties in the home, praying for himself and his family and the church both privately and publicly? (4) Does he concern himself with the spiritual development of his wife and children,

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also seeing to it that the children faithfully attend church and catechetical classes and providing them with good Christian literature in the home? (5) Does he see to it that the Christian school is attended? If not, why not? (6) Does he set a good example in his personal life and in his relations to his family and his neighbors?

For the mother there are also certain questions. (1) Is she as a Christian mother aware of her position and influence in the family, especially in regard to the training of the children? (2) Does she seek to assist her husband in every way possible in his important work as head of the home? (3) Does she give all her time to her calling as wife and mother? If not, are there legitimate reasons for her to seek employment outside the home? Is she aware of the peculiar difficulties involved in trying to be gainfully employed and still keep up her home? Does her home, particularly the children, suffer in any way, if this is the case?

Also the children are to be addressed. Some of the questions which may be asked of them include the following. (1) Are they obedient to their parents and superiors, for the Lord's sake? (2) Are they conscious of their peculiar covenant relationship to God? Here the parents have a great obligation, since they have promised to train their children in the ways of the Lord and to explain to them the way of salvation. (3) Are they faithful in attending the catechetical classes, and do they benefit from these as well as from the preaching of the Word in accordance with their age and training? (4) Are the young people preparing for profession of faith? (5) Do they understand the church's position on the Christian's relation to the world in general and to the use of amusements in particular? (6) For what calling in life are they preparing themselves? (7) Have they given any

consideration to the possibility of entering full-time Kingdom service in one form or another?

It must be recognized that this list is merely suggestive. Simply to follow a set of questions, no matter how excellent and exhaustive, would breed formalism and legalism of the worst sort. But even though the above list is rather incomplete, it will not be possible to ask and answer the questions above within the space of an hour, if each question receives a fair share of attention. For that reason the elders should know what has been considered previously, if this is at all possible.

Once again, those who conduct the visitation must be filled with deep love for the whole flock of Christ over which they have been placed. As the Great Shepherd knows His own and calls them by name, so should the undershepherds be acquainted with all and thus be able to guide

and comfort them according to need.

No man is sufficient to these things of himself. Here a thorough understanding of the Scriptures must be combined with practical wisdom which knows the wrestlings of spiritual life, patience which is able to lead the erring sinner back to the fold, firmness necessary to oppose all sin and keep the church pure, love for the brethren and sisters in spite of all the weaknesses and failings which they may display, and boundless zeal for the glory of God. Yet no elder need perform this work in his own strength. If we lack wisdom, let us with confidence ask God who giveth liberally and upbraideth not. He will supply all our needs, even to putting the words into our mouths. But this demands diligent study of the Word of God and fervent prayer when we engage in His work. Those who do these things will be able to say with the apostle, "But our sufficiency is from God."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:5

**"No man is sufficient to these things of himself. Here a thorough understanding of the Scriptures must be combined with practical wisdom which knows the wrestlings of spiritual life..."**

# SOME THOUGHTS ON PREACHING

by

**G. I. Williamson**

In the editorial in Vol. 1, No. 2, I argued strongly for the *primacy* of expository preaching. (If you did not read it, let me urge you to read it first, before reading this article). Here I want to raise a question that you may already have asked: ‘but what about catechetical preaching?’ The reference here, of course, is to the well known and time-honored practice in some Reformed denominations whereby the minister is required to preach one of his two sermons each Lord’s Day according to the sequence of the 52 divisions of the Heidelberg Catechism. My answer to this question is as follows.

If expository preaching remains the predominate emphasis then I see a valued place for catechetical preaching. And I do so for several reasons.

For one thing, there is great need today for the people of God to understand the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. And it is our Catechisms and Confessions that give us a wonderful summary of that system. Many of our people have come to the Reformed faith out of the raw paganism of modern American culture. They were not catechized in their youth. And every day we are confronted with more that calls for discernment—a discernment that is all but impossible without a good grasp of the system of truth that we have in our confessional heritage. What our people need to see clearly is the fact that our Confession and Catechisms really are scriptural. Systematic preaching that follows the sequence of our doctrinal standards will help them to see this. I would liken the preachers task, in this, to that of a guide in a great museum of art. It is his task to point things out in such a way that the visitor can see for himself what really is ‘there’ in the work of art (a

thing which is quite impossible in much modern art, by the way). The preacher is to expound the word of God in such a way that even the humblest among God’s people can see for themselves that the doctrine is unmistakably there.

It is also important, however, to make several qualifications. And the first one that I would make is that, in doing this, it is important to avoid the dulling effect of constant repetition. This, in my opinion, has been a difficulty not always overcome in the churches that have required their ministers to constantly preach according to the divisions of the Heidelberg Catechism. Great as this Catechism is, it is a fact that it is difficult to preach over the same ground—year after year—without a dulling effect. It is no doubt for this reason that—despite the stipulation of the church order—in many Reformed churches you will hear a series now and then on the Belgic Confession or the Canons of Dordt. (It is good to note that some Reformed denominations—such as the Reformed Churches of New Zealand—have amended the Church Order to allow the pastors to use all of the Confessional Standards as guides for doctrinal preaching).

More important than this, however, is a right concept of Catechetical preaching. And on this point no one has said it better than the late Professor R. B. Kuiper of Westminster.

“Now this type of preaching, however excellently intended, is in at least some danger of running afoul of the *Scriptura sola* principle.

Not that catechismal preaching is to be condemned. On the contrary, if it be performed properly, it

## Some Thoughts on Preaching

deserves the warmest approbation. Doctrinal preaching of the right kind is one of the most crying needs of our day...It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Protestant ministry is today working as hard at keeping the laity in doctrinal darkness as was the Roman Catholic clergy before the dawn of the Reformation. The Christian church has no greater present need than that of systematic doctrinal preaching.

But doctrinal preaching, like all preaching, must be based upon the Word of God, and that is a way of saying that it may not be based upon the creeds ...The greatest creeds of Christendom are but fallible interpretations of Holy Writ. It does not follow that they cannot perform valuable service for preaching. They can indeed do that, for, although fallible, they are precious products of the illumination of the historic church by the Holy Spirit Christ's promise to the apostles that the Spirit of truth would 'guide them into all the truth' was intended for the church of all ages, and Scripture describes the generic church as "the pillar and ground of the truth." Therefore, for the minister of the gospel to stress his right of private interpretation to the practical exclusion of the illumination of the historic church deserves to be described as boundless conceit. Nevertheless, the church's interpretation of Scripture is fallible, and so its confessions of faith and catechisms can do no more than service as helpful guides in preaching. Never may they be regarded as the source of doctrine or the touchstone of truth. Those distinctions belong to the Bible alone. And he who makes use of the creeds in preaching is in sacred duty bound to keep that fact unmistakably clear."<sup>1</sup>

1 - *The Infallible Word*, A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 227-229.

Professor Kuiper is right! During the early years of my ministry, as an Orthodox Presbyterian pastor in New England, I sometimes preached in Iowa in the Summer in Christian Reformed Churches. I met some wonderful people. But I also noticed an element that troubled me in the thinking of some I met—and they were invariably among the most conservative in many ways. I remember one middle-

aged couple, in particular, who said the Heidelberg Catechism was inspired by God. I could hardly believe my ears, and questioned them closely. But that is what they said, meant, and believed. And I think it was because they so often heard it treated as if it was. My point is that we need to be alert to the danger of preaching from the Catechism as though it were a text of the Bible.

When we do this we inadvertently lead people back into the Roman Catholic error of placing church creeds and decisions beside (and, in effect, over) the Bible. This may help to explain the present anti-traditional reaction which is now so rapidly undermining the Christian Reformed Church. A major error—however harmless it may seem at first—usually has the effect of provoking an opposite aberration.

So, in answer to the question: What about catechetical preaching? our answer is: Yes! But only if this catechetical preaching is done in such a way that the text expounded in the sermon is the text of inspired and inerrant Word of God and not the uninspired words of man—however excellent they may be—about the Word of God.

There is a profound difference. And it is our conviction that it is no small part of our task as pastors and teachers to constantly make this important distinction abundantly clear in both our message *and* method.

**“...the church’s interpretation of Scripture is fallible, and so its confessions of faith and catechisms can do no more than service as helpful guides in preaching. Never may they be regarded as the source of doctrine or the touchstone of truth. Those distinctions belong to the Bible alone. And he who makes use of the creeds in preaching is in sacred duty bound to keep that fact unmistakably clear.”**

## A Plan for Catechetical Preaching

### SYNOPSIS OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS DIVIDED INTO 52 LORD'S DAYS

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Lord's Day	Larger Catechism	Shorter Catechism	Confession of Faith	Topic(s)
1	1	1	XVI.2	Glory of God/ Man's Chief End
2	2-5	2-3	I	Revelation
3	6-7	4	II.1-2	Attributes of God
4	8-11	5-6	II.3	Trinity
5	12-14	7-8	III	God's Sovereignty/Decree
6	15-17	9-10	IV	Creation/Angels
7	18	11	V	Providence
8	19-24	12-16	VI.1-3	The Fall
9	25-29	17-19	VI.4-6	Estate of Sin & Misery
10	30-32	20	VII.1-4	Covenant of Grace
11	33-35	20	VII.5-6	OT/NT Administration of Covenant
12	36-40	21-22	VIII.2-3,7	Mediator God/Man
13	41-45	23-26	VIII.1	Jesus Christ: Prophet, Priest, King
14	46-50	27	VIII.4a	Humiliation
15	51-56	28	VIII.4b	Exaltation
16	57-60	29	VIII.5-6,8	Benefits Applied to Elect
17	61-65	29	XXV-XXVI	Visible/Invisible Church
18	66-69	30-31	IX-X	Effectual Call to Union with Christ
19	70-73	33	XI	Justification
20	74	34	XII	Adoption
21	75-78	35	XIII,XVI	Sanctification
22	79-81	36	XVII-XVIII	Perseverance/Assurance
23	82-90	36-38	XXXII-XXXIII	Benefits in Life, Death, Ress. Judg.
24	91-97	39-40	XX.1, XIX	The Moral Law & Its Use
25	98-99	41-42	XX.2-3	Rules to Understand the Commandments
26	100-101	43-44	XIX	Preface to the 10 Commandments
27	102-106	45-48	XXI.1-2	The 1st Commandment
28	107-110	49-52	XXI.3-6	The 2nd Commandment
29	111-114	53-56	XXII	The 3rd Commandment
30	115-121	57-62	XXI.7-8	The 4th Commandment

**A PLAN FOR CATECHETICAL PREACHING**

31	122-133	63-66	XX.4, XXIII, XXX-XXXI	The 5th Commandment
32	134-136	67-69	XXIII, XXVI	The 6th Commandment
33	137-139	70-72	XXIV	The 7th Commandment
34	140-142	73-75	XXVI	The 8th Commandment
35	143-145	70-78	XXII	The 9th Commandment
36	146-148	79-81	XXVI	The 10th Commandment
37	149-152	82-84	VI	The Gravity of Sin
38	153-154	85-88	XIV-XV	Repentance & Faith   Means of Grace
39	155-160	89-90	XXI.5	The Word
40	161-164, 176-177	91-93	XXVII	The Sacraments
41	165-167	94-95	XXVIII	Baptism
42	168-170	96	XXIX.1-7	The Lord's Supper
43	171-175	97	XXIX.8	How to Examine/Enjoy/Evaluate the L.S.
44	178-185	98	XXI.3-4	Prayer
45	186-189	99-100		The Lord's Prayer
46	190	101		The 1st Petition
47	191	102		The 2nd Petition
48	192	103		The 3rd Petition
49	193	104		The 4th Petition
50	194	105		The 5th Petition
51	195	106		The 6th Petition
52	196	107		Conclusion

“In this confused and divided state of Christendom, I judge it useful that there should be public testimonies, whereby churches which, though widely separated by space, agree in the doctrine of Christ, may mutually recognise each other. For beside that this tends not a little to mutual confirmation, what is more to be desired than that mutual congratulations should pass between them, and that they should devoutly commend each other to the Lord? With this view, bishops were wont in old time, when as yet consent in faith existed and flourished among all, to send Synodal Epistles beyond the sea, by which, as a kind of badges, they might maintain sacred communion among the churches. How much more necessary it is now, in this fearful devastation of the Christian world, that the few churches which duly worship God, and they too scattered and hedged round on all sides by the profane synagogues of Antichrist, should mutually give and receive this token of holy union, that they may thereby be incited to that fraternal embrace of which I have spoken?”

— John Calvin

# WHO'S DOING IT?

by

Thomas E. Tyson

I have a sneaking suspicion that a task prescribed by our Form of Government is not being done as well as it should. Horrors!

Yes, I know, there may be other jobs that are slipping through the cracks. But this one, I believe, needs immediate and particular attention. I'm referring to the prescription of XXI. 2.:

*The presbytery must show its continuing concern for the progress of all the candidates under its care, and shall continually guide, counsel, and help them as they further prepare themselves for the work of the ministry.*

Pursuing my job as Director of the Ministerial Intern Program of the OPC, I have discovered that there is room for improvement in our shepherding of ministerial candidates. My fellow elders, will you allow me to make a few suggestions?

By the way, I trust that the following comments do not have the ring of a speech from the throne! Jack Peterson never ceases to remind me that I am the lowest of the low. Actually, he doesn't usually employ those exact words—more often than not he calls me “servant of all.” I speak purely out of my experience as a pastor, and particularly that of an intern-mentor.

To set this question in context, maybe we ought to look at the whole picture of the care and feeding of the candidate for the gospel ministry:

## 1. Getting Started

Where does a man get the idea, in the first place, that perhaps he ought to prepare for the gospel ministry? When I was a lad, the answer to that question was, typically: “If you want to be a

minister when you grow up, you will need first to pursue a college and seminary degree.” The idea seemed to be that doctors go to medical school, lawyers go to law school, and ministers go to seminary.

Lately we have realized that such a model is considerably off target. A young man ought not to decide to become a minister of the gospel when he grows up. Rather, he needs to become convinced that God is calling him to this particular servanthood.

The question is: How will he know that? Through a variety of means, to be sure, but never without the following—he will have:

- made a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ
- become a member of a Church, maintaining good standing
- demonstrated already the attitude of a servant
- an inescapable compulsion to preach the gospel

But there is one other way by which God makes clear his call, namely, the united opinion of his undershepherds. The session ought to send a young man to seminary. Well, not actually send in the sense of requiring him to go. Rather, by the elders telling him that they judge him to possess the gifts and qualifications requisite in the minister of the gospel.

This sending means that the session would:

- communicate clearly to the man its judgment on this matter

- provide him with continued opportunities for serving ministry
- guide and assist him (including financially) in pursuing, and keep close contact with him during, his academic preparation

## 2. The Session's Recommendation

The Form of Government (XXI. 2.) states

*The presbytery shall receive a written recommendation from the session of the local congregation of which the candidate is a member, certifying that in its judgment his Christian faith and potential gifts qualify him to be taken under the care of the presbytery with a view to ordination to the gospel ministry.*

I've wondered, on occasion, whether a particular session has taken this recommendation as seriously as it should. I say this, of course, without engaging in improper judging. It's just that the question would not go away: has this session engaged in both the examination and observation necessary to be able to bring such a recommendation?

It is not an act of kindness to "pass him along" anyway, hoping that if he is not truly called of God, such will become evident later. Later may be too late. I believe that, when indicated, sessions ought not recommend a man to be a candidate for the gospel ministry.

## 3. The Presbytery's Examination

FOG (XXI. 2.) goes on to say: It is therefore the duty of a presbytery, in taking a candidate under its care, to examine him respecting his Christian faith, life, service, and the motives influencing him to desire the sacred office.

Something needs to be said regarding each element of this examination:

- "his Christian faith" — Sometimes examiners misformulate the question, as follows: "What has been your Christian experience?", or words to that effect. We are not concerned, at this point, with God's providential direction of the man's life, leading him to faith in Christ; we may well inquire of that later. Right now we are asking for a statement of his faith in

Christ. A better formulation of the question, therefore, would be: "Are you a Christian, and what do you mean us to understand by your answer?"

- "life" — Here we are concerned with his behavior, including evidence of fruits of repentance and the use of the means of grace. Not the way things ought to be, or how he wishes they were, but how they are.
- "service" — Once more, not what he wants to do, later, when he becomes a minister. But, in what deeds of service is he currently engaged?
- "the motives influencing him to desire the sacred office" — Here presbytery will be concerned that the man indicate reliance on something more than a mere "feeling." Yes, that "inescapable compulsion to preach the gospel" needs to be present, to be sure. But God's call will always be external as well as internal. In giving expression to his motivation, the candidate needs to point also to prima facie evidence of qualification and gifting.

## 4. Taking It from There

Now comes that all-important chapter of the whole story, with which we began this article, that presbytery must show its continuing concern for the progress of all the candidates under its care, and shall continually guide, counsel, and help them as they further prepare themselves for the work of the ministry

How will that be done? And, by whom? It seems to me that the task must be addressed by both the presbytery and the local church session, working together.

### For its part, presbytery will:

- encourage the candidate to attend presbytery meetings unless prohibited by distance (in which case alternative methods will need to be devised), and give him both opportunity to report and counsel as appropriate
- concern itself with, and seek to address, the candidate's spiritual and physical (including financial—remember, he's being sent to seminary!) needs



- help him to locate a summer- and/or year-long internship
- monitor his academic work, giving particular attention to the guideline provided by “The Recommended Curriculum for Ministerial Preparation in the OPC” (*The Book of Church Order*, pp. 295ff)

**For its part, the session of the candidate’s home church will**

- provide the encouragement, counsel and help, described above, on a local level
- consider offering him a summer- or year-long internship
- update its evaluation as to his suitability for the ministry (which may mean reaffirmation, alteration, or even negation)

Now, I am aware that what I have so far said presupposes a covenant upbringing on the part of the candidate. That is, I have had in mind a man who has had a life-long, or at least a significant, background in the Church. In past years, perhaps this scenario characterized the majority of men preparing for the gospel ministry. But it is probably not true now.

It seems that more often than not today it is the case that a man

- is saved during his Junior year in college
- attends Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship meetings, but does not join a church
- decides, upon graduation, to go to seminary because he is enthusiastic about his new-found faith, and doesn’t think that he would be “fulfilled” in any other occupation

- attends worship services of three or four different congregations
- becomes convinced of the Reformed faith during his second year
- becomes a member of the Church, but only after six more months of “searching for the right one”
- asks presbytery, in April of his last year, to take him under care, because he needs to “become licensed” in order to be “eligible to receive a call”

I’m sure that the above scenario is neither exaggerated nor atypical. We face situations like this regularly in our presbyteries. Consequently, just about all that I wrote above just doesn’t “fit.” What should we do in such cases? I believe that, although it will not be particularly attractive to the candidate, the answer must be: slow down! Somehow, lost time must be made up and more time must be given for growth.

The man is still a babe ecclesiastically. That’s not a criticism of him; it’s not that there’s something wrong with him. In God’s providence, this is how things have fallen out. But he does need time to develop spiritually. He needs to refine his motivation for seeking the ministry. He needs time to live and minister in a local congregation. People in general, and the elders in particular, need to observe and evaluate his qualifications and gifts. For his part, he wants to “get on with it.” After all, he wasted most of his life so far; now he can’t wait to begin “serving the Lord.” All that enthusiasm is commendable; but it cannot be allowed to short-circuit the maturation process.

Well, there it is. I trust that these suggestions, offered in all humility by this presbyter who must confess his own culpability in our past failures, will be of some value to you, my fellow elders. Is there anything more important for the life and vitality of our beloved OPC than the care and feeding of our future ministers?

**Rev. Thomas E. Tyson is the General Secretary of the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and has written this article for Ordained Servant at the request of the Committee.**