

Preaching and our Confessions at Adoration

This article provides a brief explanation for our practice of referencing our historic Reformed confessions in the preaching of the Word of God.

The worship service in a Reformed church is focussed on the reception and response to the Word of God. We gather to *hear* the Word and we *respond* to what we hear in our songs of praise, prayers, and collections for the poor and the church. This is rooted in the apostolic practice of the early Church (see Acts 2 for a description of the worship of the early church) and we seek to continue in that tradition. We believe that the Second Commandment obliges us to worship the Lord in the way that He has described and prescribed in the Word and we strive to do in worship what He has commanded us to. Since His ways are greater than our ways (Isaiah 55:8) we must not forsake the means He has committed himself to. At the time of the Reformation, the major emphasis of the Reformers was on the restoration of biblical worship in the churches because many distortions had been introduced in the Roman medieval church. The movement of reformation in the churches was inspired by a revitalization of preaching. The faithful would gather to hear preaching in barns, hedges, public squares, and wherever else they could gather to hear the Word proclaimed faithfully.

As a result, in Reformed churches there is a great deal of energy and time devoted to the preaching of the Word in the worship service. As Romans 10:17 makes clear, we understand that the Lord using the *preached* word as the regular way of working faith. The sermon occupies a central position in the worship service but it is not to be seen as a solitary event. There is significance and importance in everything that takes place in the service, from the opening call to worship to the closing benediction. Nonetheless, at a time when preaching is being eclipsed by other types of instruction, Reformed churches continue to insist that it is the preaching of the Word of God that a means of grace appointed by God for the building up of His people.

You'll notice this when you worship with us - the preacher leads the whole service and makes use of songs that fit with the sermon theme as a whole. As well, the pastor will work through entire books of the Bible in a series of sermons in order to showcase the splendour of the Scriptures and to instruct the congregation in the riches contained in any particular book.

For some who visit our church, it may be new for you to hear references to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, or the Canons of Dort in the sermon. These are our confessional statements which summarize the teachings of Scripture on particular subjects of doctrine. These statements have been adopted and used in Reformed Churches for over 400 years. They offer a clear and concise explanation of what the scriptures teach. We do not view them as substitutes for the Bible but we regard them as faithful summaries of the Word of God. We are keen to see growth in our knowledge of the doctrine of the Old and New Testament and so we make use of these time-tested confessions for our mutual edification.

In our afternoon service, following the reading of Scripture, the usual practice is to recite together the answers to one or more questions from the Heidelberg Catechism that are connected to the sermon. We do this together as an expression of our unity in the faith and doctrine of the church.

Later in the service, we also recite together the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, or Athanasius Creed for the same reason that it is good to publicly affirm what we believe.

In the history of the Reformed churches, there has been three main approaches to the relationship between the confessions and the preaching of God's Word. Each of these approaches has a rich pedigree of practice and it is common to respect the other approaches even if one prefers another approach.

In the first approach (most commonly practiced in Presbyterian churches that subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith), only the Bible is used in the public preaching of the Word. The Confessions are to be studied and taught in a variety of settings but they are not employed in public worship settings. This approach was most clearly articulated in the Puritan writings in England and Scotland as they restored the primacy of the Word of God to the preaching and resisted the formalism creeping back into the Elizabethan Church.

In the second approach (practiced among Reformed churches that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity), the confessions are referenced in the public preaching of the Word in connection with the exposition of a particular text of Scripture. The outline of the confessions will often form the outline of the preaching series (ex. preaching through successive Lord's Days in the Heidelberg Catechism using a succession of suitable Bible texts).

In the third approach (also practiced among Reformed churches that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity), the confessions are preached as the text for the sermon and Scripture is referenced. Since we believe the confessions are a faithful summary of the Word of God, this approach to preaching makes use of the structure of each confessional article in order to draw out the teachings of the Confessions on a particular subject.

Over the course of the year at Adoration, you will hear different guest preachers who follow any one of the three approaches. In most instances, the morning sermon will be an exposition of Scripture as part of a series through a particular book of the Bible while the afternoon sermon will typically involve a reference to the Confessions.

We pray that you are edified through the Word of God and encouraged by the Spirit's application of the Word in your heart and life!