

THE REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

ANITHETICAL CATECHISM
INSTRUCTION FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY (2)

BY REV. NATHAN J. LANGERAK, PASTOR OF SOUTH HOLLAND
PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH

The Reformed Practice

Antithetical instruction in the catechism room is the Reformed method. This is clear from the Creeds themselves.

The Heidelberg Catechism is polemical. It is called an irenic creed. It is praised to the skies for being irenic. It is polemical and sharply polemical, and was intended to be so, if its precise language is done justice. This is not only the case with Q&A 80, but also with other significant Lord's Days. LD 11 Q&A 30: *"Do such then believe in Jesus the only Savior, who seek their salvation and welfare of saints, of themselves, or anywhere else? They do not; for though they boast of him in words, yet in deeds they deny Jesus the only deliverer and Savior."* The whole of LD 18 is a polemic against the Lutheran error of the ubiquity of Christ's human nature. There is the alarmed objection of the Roman Catholic—now the Federal Vision—man against the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works in LD 24: *"What! Do not our good works merit, which yet God will reward in this and a future life."* There is the thorough treatment of the sacraments which are persistently antithetical throughout, most conspicuously, but not exclusively in Q&A 80.

The Belgic Confession does not fall one whit behind the Heidelberg Catechism in this antithetical approach to setting forth the truth. At the end of many of its articles in which the truth is positively set forth the Belgic Confession says something like this: *therefore we reject the errors, therefore we detest the Anabaptists, therefore we detest the errors of such and such a sect.* The outstanding example of this approach is Article 14 in which the last half of the article is taken up with an extended rejection of the error of free will.

In classic fashion the Canons, much to the chagrin of many a broadminded

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*Instruction for the
21st Century (2)*

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

*In the previous issue
the author dealt with
the necessity and
demand of catechism
instruction. In this
issue, the author
continues his
treatment of the
demand of catechism
training.*

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Reformed theologian, set forth the truth of the doctrines of grace with astounding clarity and then proceed to demolish, reject, and damn as originating out of hell the errors of the Arminians.

Indeed, antithetical is the Reformed methodology.

Demanding an Antithetical Prophet

Such antithetical catechism instruction demands an antithetical prophet. It belongs to the definition of his office as prophet that he is antithetical in his teaching. This is not merely a practical demand, that is, unless he is antithetical like a writing teacher is antithetical he will not be a successful teacher, but a demand touching one’s faithfulness to his office and obedience to Jesus Christ who sent him. Herman Bavinck in his *Reformed Dogmatics* comments perceptively on this idea: “[A prophet is one] who opposes the thoughts of God to the thoughts of human beings, his truth to their lies, his wisdom to their folly.”¹³ A prophet who does not oppose the thoughts and truth of God to the thoughts and lies of human beings, a prophet that is only positive, is no prophet at all. If he is not antithetical he is unfaithful in his office.

Can you imagine a Joel, an Isaiah, an Amos, or a Jeremiah who was not antithetical? O, the pain they would have spared themselves if they were otherwise; if they had only judiciously and faithlessly refused to be antithetical, lest they step on the toes of some powerful or influential family in the nation. If only they had relentlessly proclaimed only the positive! If only they had talked about the many things that everyone had in common!

A prophet, a faithful prophet, is an antithetical prophet. He is one who not only proclaims God’s Word, but also proclaims that Word over against the lie. All the prophets in this respect were antithetical: they always proclaimed the truth over against the lie. In this they were faithful servants of the chief prophet Jesus Christ. He was polemical against the scribes and Pharisees and against the Liar, Satan himself. He called his own people and his sheep heard his voice and followed him, and he pronounced his own dreadful “woe!” against the Pharisees.

This obligation to be antithetical—also in catechism instruction—is binding upon every ordained Protestant Reformed prophet as part of his ordination vow and his signing the *Formula of Subscription*. He promised to be polemical so that he actively refutes the lies that militate against the Reformed Creeds and especially the lie of Arminian freewillism that militates against the Canons of Dort:

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned Synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the Church free from such errors.¹⁴

That promise before God covers all his catechism instruction from the Beginners’ Bible Stories to the Essentials and Post-high classes in weighty doctrine. At the very least he must be antithetical in this respect that he himself rejects those errors and actively refutes and contradicts those errors in the catechism room.

A Pedagogical Necessity

Any teacher of any value whatsoever must be antithetical in the strictest sense of the term. A man is simply a failure as a teacher if he is unwilling or unable to be antithetical. Antithesis is a practice of good pedagogy. If he is explaining mathematics he not only explains what some equation means but equally emphatically he explains what it does not mean. If he is explaining physics he demonstrates the theory and in order to make the proper explanation stand out clearly he shows what it does not mean. If he is explaining good writing he also shows what bad writing is.

So much more is this antithesis important in instruction in the doctrine of eternal life. The setting forth of the truth of doctrine and life over against the error makes the truth stand out clearer and sharper. It crystallizes the truth in their mind. The truth is set forth over against the dark background of the lie and the truth stands out sharply and clearly and distinctly.

Do we not have an interest that our children know the truth? Antithesis is crucial for them to know it.

But most importantly every Protestant Reformed young person must affirm at their confession of faith before the church of Jesus Christ, before God, Jesus Christ, and his holy angels that he rejects all heresies repugnant to the

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truth of the aforesaid doctrine. This is the second question of the three that is asked of every member making confession of faith, “have you resolved by the grace of God to adhere to this doctrine; to reject all heresies repugnant thereto and to lead a new, godly life.”¹⁵

They must be able to answer that question honestly and faithfully, and to carry that out in their life in the church.

And God will require it of the unfaithful ministers and consistories who do not equip their catechumens to be able to answer that vow and fulfill it so that as a result of their failures the churches are full of members who are like the children of Israel in the days of Saul when in the day of battle there was found neither sword nor spear among the children of Israel (1 Samuel 13:22). We must rather be like David who had this commendable act at the very beginning of his reign, “he bade Israel to be taught the use of the bow” (2 Samuel 1:18).

The Practice

How Shall We Practice It?

Implied in the practice of antithetical instruction is that the minister teaches the truth. This is the truth of Scripture and especially as that truth is summarized in the Reformed Creeds and maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches. There can be no proper antithesis where the truth is not taught.

It implies, too, that in setting forth the truth the truth is allowed to dominate and shine gloriously in the instruction. Antithetical instruction is not merely setting forth and refuting the errors. We do not only curse the darkness. There may be no morbid interest in warfare for warfare’s sake. It is the method of setting forth the truth. In the course of setting forth the truth the errors that oppose that truth are refuted.

That truth must be taught sharply and clearly to the youngest of children. Antithesis does not wait until the children are in Heidelberg Catechism class. There is a solid starting place in the biblical history. That biblical history is antithetical. For example, the history of Abraham as he walked with God as God’s friend in obedience to God stands out over against the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. God says about his friend and that over against and in light of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen. 18:19). The history of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the reason for that destruction was to be part of the basic catechism instruction of every Israelite child as he was being taught justice and judgment.

Teach Their Hands to War

This work of antithetical instruction involves the training of the children themselves in the practice of antithetical thinking and practice.

This is not advocating the Socratic Method of instruction in which in the course of the hour of catechism the instruction takes the form of almost continual questions and answers between the minister and the children. If the minister takes seriously that catechism instruction is instruction and essentially the preaching of the gospel fitted to the age and mental capacity of the children, then the teaching in the room will also take the form in which Scripture mandates the preacher preach: “instruct, exhort, rebuke, admonish, with all longsuffering” (Titus 2:15). The minister will instruct in the catechism room, and the elders will see to it that instruction dominates the hour.

Nevertheless the practice of antithetical instruction involves training the children themselves in the tactics of battle.

One of the ways that a man does this is by himself doing it. In this way he teaches by example.

The other is to teach it explicitly to the children. Luther has something colorful to say about this in his commentary on Genesis 18.

For when you teach your own people, you are not beginning a war there but are providing training for war. You see, however, that in training it is not proper for us to use spears made of iron and swords that are sharp. Now, then we use wooden sticks and swords fashioned from wood. In battle,

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however, iron is needed, and it must be firm and well sharpened for striking. Thus when we argue against the enemies of the church, sound strong arguments must be advanced; for if this is not done, the enemies not only laugh at us but are more strengthened in their error. Thus we have proved the Anabaptists and the Sacramentarians wrong, not only by proving our points with many sound reasons but also by taking note of the mistakes they make as the result of improper conclusions and quotations. Therefore it is one thing to teach and another thing to exhort. Rhetoric, which is useful for exhorting, often plays games and often hands you a piece of wood which you suppose is a sword. But dialectic carries on war and busies itself with matters that are serious. Therefore it does not show the opponent pieces of wood; it shows iron. The fathers did not do this everywhere....Therefore Augustine (*De Doctrina Christiana Book III, chap. 5ff*) is right when he says that a figure proves nothing and should have no place in a disputation; for a disputation must lay sound foundations. When these foundations have been laid, there is nothing to prevent clarifying and adorning the matter by means of an allegory or a figure.¹⁶

Luther here is talking about instruction that provides training for war. That is what the minister is after in his antithetical catechism instruction. The fact that we reject Schaff's assessment of Q&A 80 as unsuitable for children does not mean that we do not take into account the age of the catechumens and their mental capacity in this antithetical instruction. Sometimes we give them wooden swords. We do not enter into every possible argument, but show them the basics. We let them practice the art of defending the truth. We tolerate their questions and probing. We show them that the truth must be defended, can be defended, and how to defend it. We show them that the lie can be defeated, must be defeated, and how to defeat it. We train them.

A Regional Emphasis

We acknowledge that in the catechism room there is limited time. The preacher in catechism can often feel like Augustine who complained about his own lack of antithesis in his instruction in his *Enchiridion*,

To state what are the true objects of faith, hope, and love is easy. But to defend this true doctrine against the assaults of the those who hold an opposite opinion, requires much fuller and more elaborate instruction.¹⁷

It seems as though we do not even have enough time to set forth the true doctrine, yet alone adequately to explain and to defend against those who hold the opposite opinion. This is especially true as the heresies multiply. Eventually it will all be covered in the preaching of the gospel on the Lord's Day. In the catechism room there is limited time. What is the preacher to do?

Focus on the issues that the lambs will face in that particular area. For example, in the Chicago area there is the labor union issue that is a perennial concern. It is something that the working man faces especially in the construction and trucking industries. There are pressures from others to join and by joining to validate their own disobedience and rebellion. There are temptations that the men face, too, in which well paying, benefit rich jobs are available to those that join the union. If a minister in Chicago never teaches in catechism about the error of union membership and condemns it from the Word of God, then he is to blame for their faltering. He was culpably negligent of his own sheep and lambs that are pressured by the issue and need the Word of God to address it in order to confirm them in their faith, warn them of the judgment of God on that rebellion, and comfort them in their suffering. The threats that face the church are always in a certain sense similar, but they are also peculiar to different churches in Doon, Iowa, Lansing, IL, Grand Rapids, MI, and Edmonton, Alberta.

Doctrinal Antithesis

Right antithetical instruction must reckon with the errors that the church faced doctrinally. The writers of the *Catechism* rejected in their book for the instruction of children the ubiquity of Christ's human nature, the popish

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mass, works righteousness, and many others. The Belgic Confession mentions the errors of the Manichees, the Epicureans, Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arius, the Pelagians, and more than once the error of the Anabaptists. The Canons reject Arminianism. The minister treats the errors that have affected the church in the past. We must treat the errors of the past if for no other reason than to know that the church has fought for the truth in the past.

The treatment of the errors must be done in the 21st century. This does not mean that now that we are in the 21st century we do not condemn the errors as sharply and emphatically as do the creeds, that is, we pull back from the creeds’ condemnation of these errors and the errorists. The Arminian error is still Pelagianism brought up out of hell (Canons II.b.3). We still detest the errors of the Anabaptists (Belgic Confession, Art. 34, 36).

That the treatment must be done in the 21st century refers to how the preacher handles the various errors treated in his instruction. Since there is no new thing under the sun also with regard to false doctrine the minister will treat the old errors as they threaten the church today.

Take for example the Belgic Confession’s rejection of the error of the Manichees in Article 12. The minister might be tempted to say that we have no Manichees today. Thankfully that heretical sect has died out. So with a sigh of relief the minister briefly says a few words about those miserable Manichees that threatened the church long ago. With this he contents himself that he has been antithetical.

He would be wrong. He must explain that strange term to the children, and then treat that error especially as it affects the churches today and is a threat to the children whom he is teaching. Manichee was a heretic who taught a good god with good angels and an evil god with evil angels. These are in conflict throughout history as the good god tries to overcome the evil god. He taught dualism essentially. The Belgic Confession, and thus the Reformed faith, opposes that notion. We must not think of the devils as eternal beings alongside God, or of the evils in the world as workings of the devil outside of God’s sovereign governance of the world. The devils are creatures dependent upon God. God is sovereign over them. The warfare is not between equals, but God governs the devils even in their warfare against him, as He does all creatures, with his sovereign power.

This very error of the Manichees with its blatant denial of the sovereignty of God is found in evangelical and Reformed churches today. It is found wherever theologians or preachers teach a god that is in control of the good things, but is not in control of evil things. He is in control of the blessings, but when evil strikes, many deny that in that evil event God sovereignly determined and controlled the carrying out of that event by his eternal decree so that the evil did happen and happened exactly as God determined it and governed its carrying out. When that is taught and God’s sovereignty denied, as it is today, you have the reappearance of Manicheism. Thus the minister in catechism explains Manicheism and its present day reincarnation and warns the children diligently against this prevalent heresy of our day.

He also must refute the current threats to the church’s orthodoxy. He will not merely explain Rome’s false view of justification by faith and works, but also that false view as it is promoted by the men of the Federal Vision. The minister would warn against the present day attacks of theistic and atheistic evolution against the biblical truth of creation in six days. He would expose the rampant unbelief with regard to Scripture that pervades the most conservative Reformed and Presbyterian Seminaries so that theologians write books purporting to teach the truth that have as the underlying premise that Scripture is unreliable and false in important respects. He would carefully explain and refute the denial of the truth of the doctrine of covenant by almost the entirety of the Reformed Church world that teaches in one form or another a conditional covenant cut free from election. He would teach the truth of the kingdom of God over against the false kingdom ideas of both Common Grace and the Federal Vision with its Federal (covenant) Vision that is not driven by a view of the tabernacle of God with men in the new heavens and new earth, but by a postmillennial ideal of the kingdom on earth. Dispensationalism is a huge error the children will encounter. The popular face of Christian eschatology is Tim LeHaye, Jerry Jenkins and *Left Behind*. The criticism of the Emergent Church Movement and the host of undenominational community churches growing like hydra’s heads from the stumps of former Reformed churches, and whose pews are full of former Reformed church members is worthy of some time devoted to it in the catechism room. There are always issues with the sacraments. That was not merely a Reformation issue. That is a 21st century issue encountered in Baptist theology, a push for the practice of child’s communion, and the Federal Vision’s own corruption of the sacraments by universal, ineffectual sacramental grace. . . (to be continued)

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13. Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 330.
14. Formula of Subscription in *The Psalter*, 140.
15. Form of Public Confession of Faith in *The Psalter*, 90.
16. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20*, vol. 3, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961) Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., 191.
17. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson,

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By Rev. Nathan Langerak

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