

Lost – A Thinking-Cap

If you ask me what, in our time, our people need above all in the first place, my answer is: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the second place, I say: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the third place, I say: Doctrine!

You say, that's a bold statement. You tell me that I won't find a ready ear for such a statement in our age which is intensely practical. And I am fully aware of it. Doctrine is not popular. Principles, fundamental truths are contraband. Most people say: we have had too much doctrine. We need practical stuff. Service is the watchword. Others say, more reservedly: we need truth, all right, but a re-statement of the truth. The tendency and the result of the latter is the same as that of the former. Doctrine is not popular.

Naturally, one asks himself the question: How must this doctrinal indigestion, this apathy, this positive aversion to fundamental principles, be explained? There are various causes. One tremendous cause is the spirit of the age. That powerful, undefinable but very real influence that imbues the general populace, invades literature and pulpits and finds a very ready response at a certain period, which we designate as the spirit of the times for want of a better expression. The spirit of the time is against doctrine. The leaders of the people are against doctrine. The air we inhale is against doctrine. We cannot help but be under the influence of the spirit of the age before we are fully aware of it. And so, we gradually wean away from doctrine and begin to speak as the spirit of the age speaks: No more doctrine, let us be up and doing!

But I want to be more concrete and stay nearer at home. It is not this difficult-to-describe spirit of the age which I want to blame today. There is another reason. Surely, there are many causes that combine to account for this miserable apathy to doctrine. But one of the causes is the loss of the thinking-cap. To this cause I want to call your attention a few moments:

- I. The Reality of this Loss
- II. The Deplorable Nature of this Loss
- III. What to do to Regain it

I. You may be surprised to hear that the cap, such an insignificant thing as a cap, has always had great symbolical significance in popular language. Yet, this is a fact. To wear one's cap on one ear, for instance, has always been symbolic of extreme nonchalance and indifference. To come with cap in hand expressed an attitude of respect and politeness over against superiors. The expression: "to set one's cap"

meant the same as to make a fool of somebody. And thus examples might be multiplied to show that in the language of the people the cap always had great symbolical meaning.

And so the language of the people coined the term: thinking-cap. The exact origin of the term we failed to find. But the meaning of the expression is quite generally known. And though I have no authorities to show for it, I venture to guess that the expression finds its origin in the custom to put on a certain peculiarly shaped, plain, round black cap, when one would sit down to do some serious thinking.

If this guess is at all right, you will find no difficulty in understanding the meaning of the expression. It does not symbolize the brains, it does not point to thinking capacity as such, for to put off the thinking-cap did not mean to lose one's mind. If this were the case, the loss of the thinking-cap would signify something irretrievable. It would mean that our people, that especially our young people, that still more particularly our young men, had lost their ability to think. That, of course, would be deplorable in the extreme. One might, then, probably deliver a funeral oration on the thinking-cap. But it would be a loss that was decisive as death. It could never be restored. And I did not exactly mean to be so pessimistic today. I did not come to deliver funeral orations. No, I do not believe that our young men, and that more or less in general, our people are inferior to a former age in thinking capacity. If anything the contrary is true. There are bright and quick minds among our young people. Many indications there are of this fact. If there is only something that interests them, they are sufficiently bright-minded and quick-witted to grasp a thing. But the thinking-cap symbolizes rather the exercise of our thinking capacity than the capacity itself. If one wears his thinking-cap it signifies that he sets himself to do some serious, quiet, sound, deep, continuous thinking, to solve some problem, or to listen to the exposition of that solution by some one else. If one is without his thinking-cap, it signifies that he has no desire to exercise his brains, that he is mentally lazy, that the exponent of some difficult problem finds nobody home. And the loss of the thinking-cap stands for a general mental laziness. Now, I maintain that I have reason to think that the thinking-cap is lost especially among our young people. They are averse to do some straight and sound, some real and continuous thinking. They dislike to exercise their thinking capacity, especially in regard to subjects the acquiring of which does not yield immediate practical results in dollars and cents. Our young people are loath to think!

You want evidence? I think I can produce it. Let me point you to some undeniable facts.

In the first place, there is the subject of reading. You pass thru our homes with the inquiry: what do our young people read? You will obtain various answers. Very few will answer you that they actually are interested in reading books that require some

study. Religious books, doctrinal works, are hardly read at all. A good many will tell you that they read novels. Stories, preferably some very snappy detective story, they will read. And they read these without any critical judgment, merely for the sake of the temporary enjoyment they get out of it. And then, there is a large group that do not read at all. They have no time, they find no interest whatever in reading. And if you turn from the homes to our church and Sunday school libraries, you will obtain the same result. The vast majority of the books that are drawn are novels and romances. Books of a more substantial nature enjoy the solemn peace of oblivion. I find in this evidence that our young people have lost the thinking-cap.

Let me call your attention in the second place, to the character of the various programs that will "draw the crowd." It has happened, that in the heat of the school fight last year, a well known speaker had prepared an address on the detestable school amendment, and had to return home without having delivered the lecture because there was no audience. You say that I am pointing to extreme cases? I beg to differ. The lecture course that is annually prepared by the Young Men's League of Grand Rapids has degenerated into a course of entertainment. Short, snappy, twenty-minute speeches could be tolerated. But the main part of the program was of an entertaining rather than of an educational nature. And why was this course changed? Because the lectures drew no crowd! And why did they draw no crowd? Because the thinking-cap is lost!

Let me call your attention to the condition of our Young Men's Societies. It is a general complaint that they do not flourish. Surely, for a social evening you can generally draw a full attendance and more. But for the regular meetings there is little or no interest. You can prepare programs, you may assign to each member his work weeks in advance. But generally, you find that the society decreases in membership in proportion as it lays more stress on the necessity of study and preparation. Why? Because the thinking-cap cannot be found!

I could continue for a while. I could call your attention to the things that do interest many of our young people. And it would be easy to show that they are generally things that require no wearing of the thinking-cap. But I will take for granted that I will meet with little serious opposition when I say that our time is characterized by a deplorable absence of the thinking-cap. Happily, there are others. There are happy exceptions. But I am speaking none too strongly when I say that the absence of the thinking-cap among the coming generations is rather general.

II. Now, I said, that this loss of the thinking-cap is a deplorable loss. It is not a good riddance. It is not a loss that we can afford to forget. It is a deplorable loss. And I am going to tell you some of the reasons why particularly the loss of this cap is to be deplored.

The first reason I want to mention in this connection is that the thinking-cap and sound doctrine are most intimately connected. Doctrinal knowledge cannot be expected to flourish where the thinking-cap is wanting. I know that not all would agree with me today, when I emphasize that the loss of doctrinal knowledge is most deplorable. The cry that we must become less doctrinal and more practical is very loud in our time. And besides, there are a goodly number who identify in their minds doctrine and narrow-mindedness and who take pride in preaching the gospel of broad-mindedness. But in the first place, I would call your attention to the fact that to despise doctrine is to despise the work of God himself. Our God did not deem it sufficient to reveal to us a little gospel you might write on your thumb-nail, but gave us the entire Word, full of wisdom and knowledge, in order that we might know the whole counsel of God. And that Word emphasizes again and again that the church of Christ in the world must be founded in doctrine. In the second place, I deny the antithesis sometimes, in our day so often, postulated between doctrine and practical life. Surely, I admit that the church can and often did divorce its doctrine from life, so that it fell into the error of dead orthodoxy and cold intellectualism. But this is not to be blamed to doctrine as such, but rather to a wrong conception and defective application of it. Sound doctrine lies at the basis of life. It is indispensable to sound practice. Practical life soon runs wild if it is weaned from doctrine. And therefore, it is a mistake to cry: Less doctrine, more life. I would rather maintain that we must have both: more doctrine and more life, or that we will lose both life and doctrine. And as far as this so-called broad-mindedness is concerned, I have little respect for it. It generally signifies but little more than an obliteration of all lines of distinction, an aversion to positive and definite truth. And many of these broad-mindedness advocates are so narrow-minded that you could not crowd the narrow Reformed doctrine into their minds if they would want to receive it. And, therefore, I maintain that our need is not less, but more doctrine. But it is more than an accident that doctrinal knowledge and the thinking-cap go together. If the coming generation refuses to read, to study, to think, they will soon be strangers to the main principles of our Reformed faith. Our hour in catechetical instruction, a little instruction in the Sunday school, and the instruction in the sermon is not sufficient, will prove altogether inefficient if our young men do not set themselves to study and investigate. And, therefore, the loss of the thinking-cap is deplorable because it involves a loss of doctrinal knowledge.

But there is more. This becoming estranged from sound Reformed doctrine among our young people will ultimately have to reflect upon the church as such. It will lower its doctrinal standard. It will cause a condition in which doctrinal instruction and doctrinal preaching will become gradually more difficult, ultimately impossible. For with the loss of the thinking-cap the element will be growing in the church that have lost their hold upon doctrine. It is not only that they dislike doctrine but they actually

understand no more. When the preaching is doctrinal they fail to grasp it. They have no hold upon a doctrinal sermon. They leave the church without having been edified, for the simple reason that they have not understood the preaching of the Word. Their cry is for a different type of preaching. They like, they gradually demand topical rather than doctrinal and exegetical sermons. When the minister preaches on a live topic they can grasp it. When he expounds the Word to them they neither understand nor enjoy it. They begin to characterize the preaching as dry, intellectual, dead, impractical. And the minister will ultimately have to fall for this demand, for the simple reason that he must come down to the level of his audience. You may see the beginning of this tendency today, even in our own church. And, therefore, not only will doctrinal knowledge be lost among an ever-growing element in the church, but the preaching itself, the doctrinal standard of the church will have to be lowered to meet the wants of the people. The loss of the thinking-cap is, indeed, a deplorable loss.

In the third place, this loss will lead us back into the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism, in which the clergy know it all, and rule with undisputed sway, and the laity are the accursed mass that know not the law. This may seem strange at first, for it is exactly what we do not want. We are rather democratic in spirit. But the hard fact is no different. If our people wean away, too, from even a general knowledge of church government, the only element in the church that can judge about things ecclesiastical and doctrinal is the educated clergy. Even now you may hear it every once in a while that the people cannot judge about a certain matter. They are told that they must be silent. And this condition will grow upon us according as it becomes actually more true that the common laity have no knowledge of doctrine. If, however, they would have knowledge, so that they can take an active part and not let others do all the thinking and judging for them, they will need the thinking-cap. The loss of the thinking-cap leads to ecclesiastical hierarchy. Even as education is deemed indispensable for the democratic form of government, so sound knowledge is an indispensable requisite for the maintenance of the presbyterian form of government in the church. The loss of the thinking-cap is indeed deplorable.

And, lastly, this loss of the thinking-cap will weaken us in our fight against downright unbelief in the world. And we may expect that this fight is coming upon us more and more in the future. There was a time that the battle was one between protagonists of different doctrines within the church itself. It was a battle between Arminianism and Calvinism, between supra and infra. But the more the lines are drawn distinctly and sharply, the more these little battles will give way to the great battle that is coming between the world and God's people, between faith and infidelity, between light and darkness. It will be a battle, not for this or that minor principle, but for the Word of God, for the very faith itself. But a mistake he makes who would now draw the

conclusion that for this very reason we must cease to emphasize distinctive and minor principles, and only keep the large principles of Christianity in the broad sense. On the contrary, it is more than ever necessary that we emphasize and keep the truth in all its specific nature. We must not become less Reformed and more Christian, but more Reformed and stronger Christians. Otherwise we will be but poorly prepared and armored to defend ourselves against the oncoming tide of unbelief, and before we know it we will be swept off our feet by it. The loss of the thinking-cap is deplorable, because it will weaken the church in its battle with the forces of darkness.

III. But the question that is of prime importance is still to be answered. It is: What can be done to restore that valuable thinking-cap?

In answer to this question, I would say in the first place: our young men must simply put that cap on again. In connection with this first point, the remark must be repeated which Prof. Kuiper made in *The Banner* years ago, when he discussed the necessity of Americanizing our churches: The only way to do it is to do it. And to urge you to do it, I have attempted to show you the importance of the thinking-cap and the deplorableness of its absence. You must fight the battle against the desire and tendency to spend all your spare time in seeking enjoyment rather than education. You must begin to read, to read more than novels, to study books of a more substantial nature. You must patronize with your presence programs of an intellectual and educational character rather than socials and banquets. They must become possible again. And they will become possible once more if you show your interest. This may, at first, be a difficult battle to fight. The lost interest will naturally only gradually return. But the longer you fight the battle, the more the old interest will be quickened. The more you study, the more intimately you will become acquainted with the doctrine of the church, the finer your hold will become upon that doctrine, the deeper and livelier your interest will be. And, therefore, if you must admit the importance of the thinking-cap, put it on again. The only way to do it is to do it!

In the second place, our leaders, ministers and otherwise, that would lead our young men in the right direction, must not too easily lend their ear to the cry for less doctrine. Rather must they emphasize the necessity of doctrine, and, therefore, the necessity of the thinking-cap. We must have doctrinal preaching. We must continue to emphasize the necessity of catechetical instruction. We must continue to emphasize the necessity of preparing for catechism. We must urge our young people to read, to investigate. In short, they that would lead our young men must not be carried away with the stream and follow the line of least resistance. But they must lead them in the direction of sound and full doctrinal knowledge.

In the third place, our societies and leagues must not be allured to follow the tendency of the time. Too often this is done. In order to increase or maintain the membership of

the society the programs are often spoiled. Members that are not prepared when they should be, and when they have no legal excuse to offer, are excused and tolerated nevertheless. The result is, that the programs are frequently not carried out or are carried out very defectively. This must not be done. It is for the interest of the very life of the society that every member takes an active interest. It is better to have a smaller and stronger society in which every member is prepared in time, than to have the entire society degenerate because of the negligence of some members. The same is true of the League. The course pursued last winter is detrimental. Because lectures and educational programs attracted no crowd, it was decided to change the programs and offer programs chiefly of an entertaining nature. This catering to a wrong tendency is fatal. For those that do like something more substantial receive nothing, and those that absolutely refuse to put on the thinking-cap were followed. If our young people are to regain the thinking-cap, if they are to set themselves to serious study and investigation once more, it is necessary that we offer them something that necessitates its use.

There are other things that might be mentioned in this connection. But my time is more than taken. I will close with returning to my first remark: the only way to do it is to do it. Ultimately, all will depend upon the attitude of our young men themselves. Read, study, investigate, get away from that craving for amusement and nothing but enjoyment. For, your position in the church, the position of the church itself in the world, the establishment of God's covenant, the glory of our covenant God are at stake! Let us wake up to the importance of sound doctrine, to the realization of putting on our thinking-caps again, and let us stand shoulder to shoulder in our battle for clear, definite, strong and full Reformed truth!