

# Catechism: Learning to Hold Fast the Form of Sound Words

by Rev. Richard J. Smit

Every Protestant Reformed young person knows that when the calendar changes to September, there will have been, or this coming Lord's Day there will be, an announcement in the bulletin that new catechism books will be distributed and assignments handed out. For a period of 30 weeks Protestant Reformed young people will descend into their church basements, into specially designated catechism rooms, or enter school classrooms to submit to the preaching of their pastor and teacher in catechism.

Do you know why the Consistory demands you go to Heidelberg Catechism, Essentials, and pre/post confession class? Jesus gave the command for catechism to His Church when He said, "Feed my lambs!" (John 21:15). That text is the central reason, but it is not the only passage of Scripture in which Christ gives us the purpose and reasons for catechism. We also find another purpose for catechism in II Timothy 1:13, "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."

In light of that text we ask the question, "What Protestant Reformed congregation will prosper in the Reformed faith into the future?" It is that congregation, where by the grace of God alone, the future elders, deacons, ministers, teachers, fathers, mothers, and single adults learn in catechism the form of sound words in their youth and heed the command of Christ to hold fast to the form of sound words.

## **What does "the form of sound words" mean?**

The Apostle Paul speaks to Timothy when he was a young preacher in Ephesus. In II Timothy 1:13, the Apostle commands Timothy "to hold fast the form of sound words." Because the Apostle speaks an urgent admonition, the form of sound words surely must be something very important and vital to Timothy's work and to God's people. The urgency of the Apostle's admonition indicates that without the form of sound words, the Church will not prosper.

These indispensable forms are patterns and standards to guide our confession and walk of life. To illustrate the idea of the text, here are some examples. The young ladies who sew dresses or other clothes for themselves know what a "pattern" is. The young men who fix their own cars use a car manual as a "pattern" to get the right parts together without leftover screws and bolts, or to tighten the nuts to the right torque. Patterns are indispensable to the cement contractor who is building a foundation for a house. He uses a "pattern" (the blueprint) to plan the size and the exact position of his footings, and he uses "forms" to keep the cement in its proper place for the footings and walls.

The Reformed believer has been given by God a spiritual "form." According to the standard and infallible guide of this spiritual pattern or form, the Protestant Reformed young person may by faith grow properly and wisely in his confession and walk of life. That spiritual form is the *Three Forms of Unity* (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt). These for us today are "the form of sound words." Though there are "Three Forms," they are not three different ones, but three which set forth the same truth of Scripture. Principally, they are one form in their distinct unity. Together the Three Forms of Unity comprise for the Protestant Reformed young person "*the form of sound words*"

The Three Forms of Unity speak to us, literally, "words of health." They are words of spiritual health because they faithfully center in the Word of Life Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. Because the Truth set forth in the Reformed Confessions is centrally the glory of our God in Christ crucified and risen again, the confessions are words of spiritual life and health. To know the Reformed Confessions by faith is to know our Covenant God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Such knowledge is spiritual life and health.

Understand, further, that the Confessions are careful *formulations* of the Truth of Scripture. The writers of the Confessions did not dream up what they wrote and confessed. By faith they diligently and wisely searched the entire Scriptures from beginning to end to find what all of Scripture taught concerning the doctrines of the Trinity, the infallibility of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, and so on. The final result is that the Confessions set forth the standard of what Scripture teaches in its entirety on many, many points of doctrine.

That heritage we have been given today is the work of the Spirit of grace in His Church. That means when you learn the Reformed Confessions in Heidelberg Catechism and Essentials, you are not learning something man-made. Man of himself could never come up with the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, or the Canons of Dordt. That you have Catechism to teach you the Confessions ought to be an occasion to rejoice in the unfailing mercy of our God. That you have the Three Forms of Unity is the fulfillment of the promise that the Spirit of Truth would lead us into the truth. Therefore, the Three Forms of Unity are the result of the work of the Spirit of sovereign grace in His Church.

When you receive your Essentials book (which follows closely the order of the Belgic Confession), or the Heidelberg Catechism books, you will be learning the form of sound words given to us by the Spirit of Christ. You will be learning the truth of Scripture put together in a form which you can understand and in which you may grow spiritually by faith.

### **Do we need “the form of sound words” today?**

There are objections to the need for instruction in the “form of sound words” today. Some suggest that doctrine and especially Confessional Forms and Creeds are divisive. There are those in the church world who suggest that the Bible alone is sufficient as “the form of sound words.”

But think about that objection for a moment. It seems on the surface to be a very appealing objection. In fact, in a sense, the Scriptures are THE form of sound words. The Scriptures ought always to be the ultimate standard of our faith and practice. Those Scriptures we must search daily to see and to know the Truth taught therein.

However, that idea to have only the Scriptures as our Confession or Creed is not correct when it upholds Scripture over against the Confessions. The Three Forms of Unity are the truth of Scripture. They have that truth because the Spirit of Truth has led His Church into the truth. The Confessions set forth the truth of Scripture only because they are the product of the work of the Spirit in the Church. Because our Reformed Confessions are the truth, they also are the form of sound words and must be regarded as such.

It would be foolish for a Protestant Reformed young person to reject the Reformed Confessions as “the form of sound words.” Rather, Reformed young people must regard our Confessions as what the Church has learned in the past when facing the battles of Pelagianism, Arminianism, evolution, millennialism, and many more. The Confessions then are a precious heritage from our spiritual forefathers which is now handed down to us so that we might prosper in this age of increasing apostasy. Do you view our Reformed Confessions as an indispensable heritage?

Knowledge of and training in the form of sound words is vitally necessary for the Protestant Reformed believer. To become indifferent towards, and then as an inevitable result to discard the Three Forms of Unity, to throw away our Essentials books or other Catechism books, would be the same as the young lady discarding the dress pattern and expecting to have something decent to wear, the mechanic discarding his manual and expecting his car actually to run, or the cement contractor discarding his forms and expecting a foundation upon which to build a house. For a Protestant Reformed young person to loathe and even to avoid catechism training in the form of sound words, would be like the young lady not even knowing how to thread a sewing machine and expecting employment as a seamstress, or a young man refusing to train in mechanics school and then expecting to be hired easily as an automotive mechanic. One cannot expect future spiritual prosperity and

blessedness without knowledge of the form of sound words. Catechism training in the Confessions is indispensable to a thorough, distinct, and prosperous confession of the Reformed faith.

Knowledge of Reformed Confessions, in the first place, is an essential tool by which we may understand Scripture. Because we may not have the depth of the understanding of a Guido de Bres, a Dr. Ursinus, or the delegates to the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), we may rely upon their God-given understanding of Scripture in order that we might grow in the knowledge of Scripture. By learning the Heidelberg Catechism, we grow in a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. That is the result because the Heidelberg Catechism properly guides us into many, many texts of Scripture some of which are listed as proof-texts.

In the second place, the catechism classes will guard you from learning and confessing false doctrine or even heresy. Because we are human and sinful, we can so quickly pick up catchy phrases or ideas which sound nice outwardly. However, before the scrutiny of the Confessions, many songs we think were good, or ideas which sounded so very nice, often prove to be contrary to the Reformed Faith and must be discarded. The Confessions are given by God to correct our thinking and to guide us carefully and distinctly in our knowledge of the truth.

In the third place, the catechism instruction of our Reformed Confessions will help you discover friends of like precious faith. Scripture commands young people, for example, to marry in the Lord. That command implies that immediately young people see whether their dates are of like precious faith. To determine whether you may marry them in obedience to God you must test their confession and walk of life according to the form of the Reformed faith. If in due time their confession and walk of life remains contrary to the form you are taught in Catechism, you, before the command of Christ do not have a candidate for dating or marriage.

In the fourth place, the Three Forms of Unity are also the necessary foundation of not only our unity denominationally, but also our unity as a federation of young people's societies. That principle is stated in Article II of the Constitution of our Federation. The form of sound words is the like precious faith which binds us together as societies and members in particular. Without the Reformed faith of our Lord Jesus Christ as our sure foundation, we would have no true fellowship in our society meetings and in our annual convention meetings and discussions in God's Word.

In the last place, you must view your Catechism instruction as a training ground where you acquire and obtain the Reformed Confessions as your sure defense. As young people living closer to the return of Christ, you live in an age when the attacks of Satan against the truth are more and more intense and severe. How will you defend yourselves from the onslaughts of the Lie and the Wicked One? You must view the knowledge of the Reformed Faith as your sure foundation and the sharp sword for defense in the battle of faith.

### **What is your calling, then?**

Christ commands even Reformed young people to "hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me." This is the word of Christ. When you are in Catechism you hear the form of sound words from Him! Christ speaks through your minister in the catechism room. Christ bestows by grace upon His Covenant children the gift of the truth of the Reformed faith. He does that through catechism instruction in a way and at a level that you can understand and begin to grasp. Therefore, what you have heard of Christ Himself in the preaching of the catechism room *hold fast!*

Holding fast means, in the first place, you must work faithfully. Faithfulness in memorizing, filling out your written work, answering the "extra work" questions, and making time to review your notes in order to give thorough answers on the quizzes. With God's blessing upon your faithful work, you will grow in knowledge and assurance in the Reformed faith.

Secondly, holding fast means that you use the confessions. They ought not gather cobwebs and dust in your head. Use the knowledge gained in Catechism to answer co-workers at the restaurant or students at high school or college.

Thirdly, holding fast means further that you must continue to study the Confessions. That means more than faithful submission to the Heidelberg Catechism preaching every Lord's Day. But in Bible Study and in personal study also take the time to read the other confessions. In fact, many find it profitable to take the quiet time before the worship service to read an article or two of the Canons of Dordt, or an article of the Belgic Confession that will apply to the Heidelberg Catechism preaching for that particular service. In these ways with God's blessing, the believer will more and more faithfully adhere to "the form of sound words."

But, in all these ways mentioned, how are we to hold fast to the form of sound words? The text says "in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." This means young people must not have as their goal merely to fill their minds full of the right answers to questions on the Reformed faith. Adherence to the Confessions must be living, heartfelt, and confident. The young person must know that the truth of the Reformed faith is not just abstract ideas, but reality for him before his God. Thus, the young person must seek that faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Without that, we cannot know the form of sound words, and then will not hold fast to them in our confession and walk of life. For that faith and love, we must humbly seek God in prayer.

In conclusion then, when you step into the catechism room, you must be conscious that you come to the place where Christ will speak to you through His servant. Christ comes with the command to you: "Hold fast what I teach you! Never let it go, because in holding fast to the truth by God-given faith you hold fast to Me, the Truth, the Way, and the Life!" Christ, Who calls you and feeds you, is Faithful also by His Word and Spirit of Truth to perform in you, His lambs, what He commands. He Who calls us to hold fast is Faithful to hold us fast unto Him forever. In that hope and assurance, faithfully and attentively enjoy another year of instruction in thanksgiving to God for all which He has given to you. ❖

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*Rev. Smit is pastor of Doon Protestant Reformed Church in Doon, Iowa.*

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