



Freedom and Definition

“Man’s chief concern should be to seek after the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” I said to myself dozens of times, dutifully preparing years ago to answer publicly the first question in the *Evangelical Catechism*: “What should be the chief concern of man?” I still remember that answer, of course, as I do the answer to the dreaded Question 72: “In which passage of Holy Scripture do we find the humiliation and exaltation of Christ briefly described?” The (brief?) answer required us to recite Paul’s hymn (Phil 2:5-11) in its entirety.

Some would undoubtedly be shocked at such crass indoctrination, dismayed that religious education should be so carefully programmed. Yet, what the catechism does is remind us that, though our call to faith is intensely personal, it is not private. Faith has content; truth is larger than I; I am entering something already established. And, of course, it is knowing the truth that will finally set me free.

It works, I think. My first sermon as a newly ordained pastor was based on Isaiah 6:1-12. I didn’t choose the text, the lectionary did (Trinity Sunday). On the other hand, I cheated; I added vv. 9-12 on my own. Committed to the lectionary *and* arrogantly free, I made the text my own, even as the text had its own way with me and with the congregation.

Catechism and lectionary—they define and they set free. To do that properly and well, of course, they must be continually reexamined and carefully employed, which is what the articles in this issue seek to promote. The church needs such exercises. More and more we seem to hear from folks on the one side who care about nothing but definition and who look longingly to a nostalgic past, and from those on the other side for whom freedom has lost its roots and who look desperately to a utopian future. The solution to this problem, as we know, is not a balance—a pinch of definition and a modicum of freedom. It is to swallow both whole—pure and unrefined.

In the Perspectives section, following *Claus Westermann*’s introductory essay, *Walter Sundberg* explores the limitations of the current three-year lectionary and makes a provocative alternative proposal. He does not advocate abandoning the lectionary—nor do we—but he urges pastors and others responsible for worship to be critically aware of the potential problems posed by regular lectionary preaching.

Continuing with the lectionary theme are articles by *Craig Koester* and *Hans Boehringer*. *Koester* carefully describes how the selected Johannine pericopes function within the three-year cycle and how the omission of pericopes (or parts thereof) affects our understanding of this gospel. His work challenges the preacher to a more creative look at the options for proclamation. *Boehringer*, a participant in the

present three-year system. His essay presents the necessity and the promise of such a task, but also the painful dilemmas and realities its designers must face.

Turning to the other focus of our issue, church historian *James Nestingen* asks us to hear the sermon within Luther's Catechism before trying to use it in our own preaching. He offers a homiletical commentary on the catechism and follows this with preaching suggestions.

Margaret Krych's introduction to the place of the catechism in Christian education uses Piaget's stages of learning to warn against the dangers of trying to force young children into abstract modes of thinking. Krych is right: medieval paintings to the contrary, children are not merely miniature adults; having learned this, we must develop our educational programs accordingly. At the same time, other educators will remind us that this does not exclude using creative techniques of repetition, recitation, and memorization to introduce the catechism to younger children as a liturgical text, as words of identity, as a way of knowing and saying the Christian story. Then, when abstract thinking becomes possible, the words will be available for the mind to play with.

From the parish, *Rolf* and *Nancy Olson* make practical suggestions, based on sound educational theory, for using student writing as a teaching method in confirmation instruction. Their detailed presentation will be helpful to working pastors.

Under Resources, two homileticians from Luther Northwestern Seminary, *Michael Rogness* and *Sheldon Tostengard*, tackle face to face the question of whether or not to do children's sermons; they give different advice, but both essays will sharpen our thinking on this matter. Next, *John E. Schwarz* reviews twenty popular adult Bible study programs. He provides a treasure house of data which will be of value to anyone considering adult educational ministries. *Karl P. Donfried* uses his review of *Implications of the Gospel* (Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue III) to raise serious hermeneutical questions about the use and authority of Scripture in contemporary ecclesiastical conversations. Can we find a new *sensus fidelium*? Donfried takes the matter seriously—in a way which will raise hackles, however, because of its implications for issues like the ordination of women. Finally, in Texts in Context, *Irving Arnquist* and *Louis Flessner* consider preaching on the Lord's Prayer—a fitting conclusion to a "Catechism and Lectionary" issue.

F.J.G.