

EDITORIAL: PACKING IT ALL IN

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It is the practice of Reformed churches, by which I mean those denominations mainly emanating from Holland and present in North America and elsewhere which hold the *Three Forms of Unity* (*Belgic Confession*, *Heidelberg Catechism* and *Canons of Dordrecht*) as their doctrinal basis, regularly to catechise their young people. This along with their Christian schools not only produce instructed Christians, but more importantly those who tend to stay with their churches in later life.

Anglicans have a catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer*, but in more than forty years I hardly recollect it being used. A revision appeared in 1962. Positively what they have, or did have, are set services including the reading of Scripture both from the Old Testament and New, the singing of the Psalms, the recitation of creeds (*Apostles'*, *Nicene* and *Athanasian*), the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. In effect, the Word was proclaimed in every service so that they are at least reasonably informed and have a framework available for later life.

Presbyterians have the excellent *Westminster Standards*, including the *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*. The latter, even in recent memory, was taught in their schools, though the swing from Christian to secular has meant its effectual abandonment. One encounters every variation from those who have a good grasp of doctrine to those who do not even know of the existence of creeds!

Free churches, i.e., baptist, brethren, congregational, evangelical, independent, methodist, etc., seem largely content to exist in a state of profound theological ignorance! The preaching may vary from excellent to abysmal and there may be some teaching on the denominational peculiarities and positively a good grasp of the gospel and the practice of loving one's neighbour, but no real comprehension of, say, the Trinity, the Person of Christ or the resurrection of the dead!

Well, there is nothing new in all this! That excellent detective writer, Dorothy Sayers, was complaining about it in the 1940s—and if you can come across an old copy of her *Creed or Chaos?* published sixty years ago, get it as a salutary read!

I do not want to be hard on the clerical brethren. Surely, it must be one of the most difficult jobs in the world! But I doubt if more than twenty percent of them

hold to their official confessions, so what help is there for us poor laity?

Well, there is good news! During last year, I worked through Jim Packer's *Concise Theology* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1993), and it is a brilliant book. It is a series of brief studies of two to four pages under the four headings:

God Revealed as Creator

God Revealed as Redeemer

God Revealed as Lord of Grace

God Revealed as Lord of Destiny

Starting with "Revelation: Scripture is the Word of God," and working through such headings as "Authority," "Creation," "Predestination," "Angels," "Satan," "Covenant," "Law," "Incarnation," "Virgin Birth," "Justification," "Church," "Baptism," "The Lord's Supper," "The Family," "The State," and much more, and concluding with "Mortality," "Hell" and "Heaven: God Will Welcome His People into Everlasting Joy," almost every aspect of theology is briefly covered. Each section is full of Scripture, and Packer brings out the practical implications: "As I often tell my students, theology is for doxology and devotion—that is, the praise of God and the practice of godliness."

Discussion: As Christians we are blessed with numerous systematic theologies, such as Calvin's *Institutes*, written so Christians can understand their Bibles better. Presbyterians have Hodge's classic, nineteenth-century, three-volume *Systematic Theology*, and his son Alexander's *Outlines of Theology*, and the latest arrival is Reymond's *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. Anglicans have Litton's *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* and Griffith Thomas's *The Principles of Theology*, an exposition of the *Thirty-nine Articles*. The Church Society has issued a magnificent reprint of James Ussher's *A Body of Divinity* by our good friends at Tentmaker. The Reformed have Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* and Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics*. Space would fail to even mention the worthies in the Reformed camp from Bavinck, Bannerman, Cunningham, Dabney, Kuyper, Murray, down to Warfield, who can be profitably consulted on specific issues. But of the making of many books there is no end, and Moses would remind us "to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Packer's *Concise Theology* is a splendid, largely uncontroversial exposition of the Christian faith. After the Bible, it would be a good first book for the new convert and a useful summary of the essentials for the old saint reaching the end of his voyage in this life. Packer by name and packer by nature: he has packed it all in!