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Our speech increasingly reflects our identity in the truth

Preached by Rev. W. Bredenhof on Sunday, October 23, 2005 (Morning)

Reading: John 8:31–47; Colossians 3

Text: Heidelberg Catechism: Lord's Day 43

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Truth and politics go together like oil and water. Over and over again, we find instances of one politician claiming something while other politicians say that it is all a deliberate deception. Now I hardly need to tell you that these kinds of issues don't only come up in politics. We find the same in our own lives – no matter what age we're at. Somebody says that somebody else said something malicious. When confronted, the other person denies it. Are they doing it intentionally? Did they honestly forget what they said? Or is their recollection of the event skewed in some way, intentionally or unintentionally?

How do we deal with these issues? Like with all other issues in the Christian life, we begin by looking at ourselves very closely. We look at ourselves in the light of what God says about us in his Word. Who are we and how is that going to impact how we live? As you know, this year's theme in the home visits is our identity in Christ. So, who are we? We are redeemed believers who have union with Christ our Head – we are in him, we are his body. And we can see in our reading from John 8 that he is the Truth. In verse 32 he says that the truth will set his disciples free. And then in verse 36, he says the Son is the one who gives freedom. The conclusion is made more explicit in the famous passage of John 14:6 where the Lord Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus Christ is the truth. That means truth characterizes his mission – freeing people from slavery to lies and the father of lies. Truth characterizes his nature – he represents honesty in full bloom. And his speech embodies truth. So it is to be with those who are in him. Those who are in Christ more and more reflect their identity with the way they speak. This point is driven home in Lord's Day 43. This morning, we'll see that the ninth commandment, as part of our sanctification and thankfulness, requires that we more and more reflect who we are in Christ, especially as it pertains to our speech. So, we'll hear God's Word under this theme:



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Our speech increasingly reflects our identity in the Truth

This is shown in:

1. Putting to death old ways and attitudes
2. Bringing new ways and attitudes to life.

1. We show our identity in the truth by putting to death old ways and attitudes

Putting old ways to death and bringing new ways to life – this idea is a Biblical one. We can see it in Ephesians, for instance, and we can also see it in our reading from Colossians. Because it's Scriptural, the Catechism also works with this idea in Lord's Day 33 when true repentance or conversion is discussed. It's clear that a big part of our sanctification is played out in this process of putting old ways to death and bringing new ways to life. Sanctification, you may remember, is the process by which the Holy Spirit makes us more and more into who God wants us to be. Sanctification is something which is ongoing in every Christian's life. We're all works in progress.

This whole process is based upon our new identity in Christ. When the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts, we become united to Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. We are a new creation in him. And the Scriptures are clear that this union, this new identity, is going to have an impact on how we live our daily lives. We're going to be putting our old nature to death more and more.

Let's parse that with the ninth commandment in Colossians 3. Consider what God says in verse 9: "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices." Now right off the bat someone might say that this has nothing to do with the ninth commandment. After all, the ninth commandment does not say, "you shall not lie." True enough. It says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." However, the Christian church has always recognized that God uses this one concrete example of bearing false witness against a neighbour in a court setting to establish a general principle: believers are to love the truth and steer away from lying. "Bearing false witness" is just one concrete example of how people break the general principle. Colossians 3:9 works with another concrete example: lying to each other. God says that we ought to be honest and truthful with those around us. Why? Because we have taken off the old self. The old nature is being put to death. We are no longer controlled by those things. Verse 7 says, "You used to walk in these ways..." These kinds of things consistently characterize the lives of those who don't believe. But for us who are redeemed, our lives have to be consistently characterized by something different.

The lying to each other in verse 9 is one thing, we also have the malice and slander in verse 8. These things also fall under the ninth commandment. Malice is defined as the desire to harm or cause trouble for others. It's ill will. It's a matter of what lives in your heart – your attitude towards others. Slander is defined as making false and damaging statements about others. Slander reveals what lives in our hearts. In the same way as the third commandment forbids us from injuring God's name and honour with our



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speech, the ninth commandment forbids us from injuring our neighbour's name and honour with our speech.

So, we're to be taking off lying to one another, as well as malice and slander. This taking off and putting on is another image that Paul uses here in Colossians. The image is one of a person taking off certain clothes and then putting on others. Taking on a new appearance – an appearance which is not just about appearance, but an appearance that reflects the reality of being in Christ – having the beginnings of a sanctified, transformed life. It's pointing to the same thing as the putting to death and bringing to life.

The Catechism has the same basic idea in Lord's Day 43. Notice that it begins with a "must not" – there's a negative part. And then there's a positive part, "I must." This structure reflects this Biblical concept of putting off and putting on or putting to death and bringing to life. You can see it in the other Lord's Days on the Ten Commandments too, it's not just here in Lord's Day 43.

Now when the Catechism works with the idea of putting off the old nature in connection with the ninth commandment, we do get a more comprehensive picture than in Colossians 3. We would expect that: after all, the Catechism is summarizing all the Scriptural teaching on this point, not just Colossians 3. So, we find first of all the concrete example of the ninth commandment itself: no false testimony in a court of law. But then it goes further: we are not to twist the words of another person. That includes exaggerating what others have said to make it sound worse than it was. Then the catechism mentions gossip and slander. We've already touched on slander. What about gossip? Gossip is usually understood as talking about other people behind their backs, almost always in a negative way. Note that this says nothing about whether or not what you are saying is true. The truth of what you're gossiping about is irrelevant. When we gossip, we probably say a lot of things that are true – but this does not make it less sinful.

We have to think about what lives in our hearts when we do these things. What is motivating us when we gossip? Perhaps we're just bored and we get together with our friends and family and we can't talk about anything meaningful so we start talking about other people. Maybe it's that innocent, but more often there's more happening. In fact, with all these different ways of breaking the ninth commandment, there's a whole complex of things going on in our hearts. We have to look closely at what motivates us. Why do we slander? Why do we exaggerate? Why do we gossip? Is it because we are filled with love for the Lord and love for our neighbours who were created in God's image? Is it because of our pride? When we think about this aspect of putting these sinful things in our lives to death, it's helpful to keep asking ourselves the question: why? What's driving me to do this?



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And then take the next step: look to Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, look at who he is and what he has done for you. By God's grace, we have union with him. Romans 6 tells us that we share in his death on the cross. More particularly, our old nature was crucified with him. So, when God looks at us now, he doesn't see our old nature – he sees us as we are in Christ. This is good news and this good news is going to affect how we live today. Our old nature is crucified with Christ – this is true in principle, as far as God is concerned. But in the here and now, in the practice of our lives, the old nature is still there, still needs to be continually put to death. This is the tension of the Christian life. The already but not yet. As believers, we still have an old nature with which we're called to struggle. That means putting to death false testimony, twisting words, exaggerating, gossiping, slandering and malice. It also includes jumping to rash and uncharitable judgments – something we seem to often specialize in. But on the other hand, there's also the positive side of living out of our new nature. Let's look at what that entails in our second point.

2. We show our identity in the Truth by bringing new ways and attitudes to life

So, there's the putting off, the putting to death. But it's not like that's all there's to it – as if we would be left naked or dead. There's the negative side of things, but Scripture and our confession also speak of a positive side. Our union with Christ, our identity in him results in a putting on of new ways and attitudes, bringing new ways and attitudes to life. And, as we'll see in a second, this includes our speech.

Lord's Day 43 speaks of these new ways and attitudes in the second half. We're called to love the truth. As those who are in the truth, in Jesus Christ, this should be a no-brainer. We're also called to speak the truth honestly – when we talk, the words that come out have to reflect our identity in our Lord. The Catechism also speaks about confessing the truth honestly. If you think about it, that's a kind of peculiar expression. What does it mean to confess the truth honestly? This also has to do with our speech. In particular, think about the promises we make when we do public profession of our faith. We are asked whether we believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught in this Christian church. When we say "yes" to this and really mean it, we are confessing the truth honestly. The truth is all that is promised us in the Gospel, the truth is Jesus Christ to whom all those promises and teachings point. And we're not only called to confess that truth when we make public profession of our faith – it's supposed to be a life-long thing. Every time God gives us an open door (and we should be praying for those open doors) we go through it – that means we speak about the Truth of God's Word, we speak about Christ, we speak about the glorious depths of God's grace in Christ, and we speak about how the Reformed confession captures the truth of God's Word in a way not found anywhere else.

So, the Catechism mentions confessing the truth honestly. It also speaks about avoiding all lying and deceit as the devil's own works. Proverbs 12:22 tells us, "The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful." And Revelation 21:8 tells us that the fiery lake of burning sulphur, the second death, waits for those who can be characterized as "liars." The church father Augustine captured the danger in lying and deceit when he said, "The one who lies dies in his soul." You see, lying and death



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belong together like a husband and wife. They are one rotten gangrenous flesh. So, as believers united to Christ, we live out of our new nature by avoiding that unholy union.

Colossians 3 speaks the same language as the Catechism. When the Spirit begins speaking about putting on certain virtues, he speaks about things that are required by the ninth commandment as well. For instance, in verse 12, he speaks about clothing ourselves with compassion and kindness. In verse 14, he sums it all up by saying "put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." If we have love for each other, we'll be doing whatever we can to defend and promote the reputation and honour of our neighbours. You see, the ninth commandment commands the Christian virtue of charitability. Our human nature is to think the worst of one another. Even in the church where the Holy Spirit is working to sanctify us. Sometimes it seems like we actually want to think that each person is as evil as they possibly could be. But the Bible tells us to take a different approach. Sure, we have to be realistic about the effects of sin. There is the doctrine of total depravity. But, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, that applies to me too! But that's not all there is to be said. Especially in the church, the Holy Spirit is there, he is living in me and living in others. He is working in them to make them into who they are in Christ. So, should I automatically be thinking the worst of other people? Doesn't the ninth commandment mean that I should do my best to be honest and realistic about the work of the Spirit in their lives? Doesn't the ninth commandment mean that I should assume that other people have good motives too? Being charitable to one another is another way in which we put on the new nature. Thinking the best of one another is another way that we reflect who we are now in Christ.

Christ is the truth embodied. He is love embodied. If we are truly in him, if we have union with him by true faith, then we should pray for his Spirit to work in us. We should pray for the Spirit to so work that Christ would more and more be seen in us. That more and more, Christ is heard in the way we speak. We should pray that Christ would more and more be portrayed in the attitudes we harbour towards one another.

You see, if Christ is truth, our union with him means that we should also be truth. That means that our entire being, our whole nature would be characterized by truth. And that's not truth in the abstract. For instance, that doesn't mean that you always have to speak what is true. There can be instances where silence is called for. If you are an ugly, rude person (and I'm not saying that you are), I do not have to tell you that you are an ugly, rude person. You see, our union with the Truth means more. Jesus Christ is the Truth, but he is more. Love also characterizes him. That means that as we put on truthfulness, we also put on love. In the fall, we bring out heavier coats and jackets. Maybe some of those jackets have liners in them for winter. Well, we're called to put on the jacket of truth, but we also have to put on the liner of love. Ephesians 4:15-16 speaks this way, connecting the speaking of truth in love with our identity in Christ. Listen to what it says there, "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."



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The world tells us that truth is a personal thing. The world says that truth is subjective. There is no real truth, there are only perceptions. But believers know different. We know different, because we know Jesus Christ – the truth of God in the flesh. And we not only know him, we are in him. That reality is going to impact our way of looking at the world and our way of looking at the people around us. It will affect our ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Because we are in Christ, we will strip off pretension and deceit, gossip, slander and falsehood. Because we are in Christ, we will put on truth and honesty, doing whatever we can to advance the name of our neighbours. Because we are in Christ, by the power of his Spirit, we're going to be more and more looking like him. And that will result in more praise for him! AMEN.