

# **“Fathers—Instruct Your Children”**

## **The importance and practice of Catechism**

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### **The Importance of Catechism**

Growing up in American fundamentalism, as I did, the very word “catechism” brought to my mind images of the liberalism of mainline Protestant denominations, or some mysterious Roman Catholic ritual that could have no biblical support whatsoever. As a Bible church person, I was taught from my earliest youth that catechism was at best a worthless practice, if not downright dangerous to the soul. But if you were to have asked me just what exactly catechism was, I'm not sure that I could have given you an answer. Growing up with such misconceptions, I often viewed my friends who attended catechism classes as people who could not possibly be born again and therefore, in desperate need of evangelization. Unlike their misguided and dead church, our church had no creed but Christ, and we needed no such man-made guides to faith since we depended upon the Bible alone. Whatever catechism was, I wanted no part of it!

The burgeoning evangelical men's movement, demonstrated by the huge amount of interest garnered by such groups as *Promise Keepers*, raised a whole host of legitimate questions about the role of Christian men in society, the work-place and the home. This is certainly an important and indeed, a healthy trend. But I wonder if the answers to such questions are perhaps best found in the wisdom of earlier generations, rather than from among our own contemporaries. Many of these same questions have been asked before and the answers given to them by our predecessors and fathers in the faith were not only based upon a thorough knowledge of Scripture (which George Barna reminds us is sadly lacking in our own age), but additionally, were forged through a kind of wisdom and life experience gained during an era in which Christians were less apt to simply react to the secular agenda and uncritically imitate its glitz, glamour and noise. Evangelical Protestants of previous generations, it seems, were often more careful about confusing the sacred and the secular than our own leaders, and they often dealt with such weighty issues theologically and historically. Inevitably, when we look to the theological wisdom of the previous generations regarding the role of men in society, the work-place and the home, we come back to the importance of the practice of catechism.

Catechism (from the Greek word *catechesis*) is simply instruction in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Instead of replacing or supplanting the role of the Bible in Christian education, catechism ideally serves as the basis for it. For the practice of catechism, as properly understood, is the Christian equivalent of looking at the box top of a jig-saw puzzle before one starts to put all of those hundreds of little pieces together. It is very important to look at the big picture and have it clearly in mind, so that we do not bog down in details, or get endlessly sidetracked by some unimportant or irrelevant issue. The theological categories given to us through catechism, help us to make sense out of the myriad of details

found in the Scriptures themselves. Catechism serves as a guide to better understanding Scripture. That being noted however, we need to remind ourselves that Protestants have always argued that creeds, confessions and catechisms are authoritative only in so far as they faithfully reflect the teaching of Holy Scripture. This means that the use of catechisms, which correctly summarize biblical teaching, does not negate or remove the role of Holy Scripture. Instead, these same creeds, confessions and catechisms, as summary statements of what the Holy Scriptures themselves teach about a particular doctrine, should serve as a kind of spring-board to more effective Bible study. When this is the case, these confessions, creeds and catechisms are invaluable tools to help us learn about the important themes and doctrines that are in Scripture.

The practice of catechism also serves as an important safeguard against heresy and helps to mitigate some of the problems associated with the private interpretation of Scripture. How many times have you been forced to sit through a Bible study in which the goal was not to discover what the text actually says, but instead to discover what a particular verse means to each of the studies' participants? When we remember that virtually every cult in America began with an open Bible and a charismatic leader who could ensure his or her followers that they alone have discovered what everyone else, especially the creeds, confessions and catechisms, have missed, we see perhaps the greatest value of catechism. These guides protect us from such errors and self-deluded teachers. As American evangelicals have moved away from the practice of catechism for subjective and experiential modes of meaning, it is no accident that biblical illiteracy has risen to embarrassing levels and that false doctrines have rushed in like a flood. These important safeguards of basic doctrine have been removed, and since Satan is, of course, the father of all lies, we are most helpless against him when the truth is not known.

Protestant catechisms most often take the form of a series of questions and answers developed as summaries of biblical teaching. The first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), for example, focuses upon the theme of the believer's comfort by asking "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The *Heidelberg Catechism* is arranged around the three-fold distinction of guilt, grace and gratitude. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1648), on the other hand, seeks to get right to the "big" question concerning the ultimate meaning of life, when it asks in question one, "What is the chief end of man?" *Luther's Larger Catechism* (1529) begins by setting forth the meaning of the Ten Commandments, and Luther attempts to set clearly in the catechumen's mind the proper relationship between Law and Gospel from the outset. Indeed, the primary purpose of all three of these catechisms is to instruct new Christians and our covenant children in the basics of the Christian faith. For in all of these great catechisms we are to learn about the content of the law and its relationship to the gospel, the Lord's Prayer as a pattern for our fellowship with God, the *Apostle's Creed* as a summation of Christian doctrine, and the sacraments as our means of spiritual nourishment. Thus these catechisms are all formulated to introduce catechumens to the basics of the Christian faith-things that all of us should know and believe.

### **The Practice of Catechism**

The practice of catechism should ideally have a two-fold emphasis. The first of these emphases centers around the home. If Christian men are wondering about what their primary role should be as a father, in terms of their obligation to be priests of their own homes, I suggest that the practice of catechism occupy a major role. The Scriptures make it very clear that parents, especially fathers, are assigned the role of

recounting to their children the mighty acts of God in redeeming his people (Exodus 13:8 ff). God commands us to teach his commandments "to your children and to their children after them" (Deuteronomy 4:9; cf. also Deuteronomy 6:6-9). In Joshua 8, we read that . . .

Joshua read all the words of the law-the blessings and the curses-just as it was written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including women and children, and the aliens who lived among them (vv. 34-35).

The prophet Isaiah tells us that parents are to tell their children about God's faithfulness (Isaiah 38:19). In the New Testament, we discover that the young pastor Timothy, had known the Holy Scriptures from infancy (2 Timothy 3:16). Paul recounted how important his own religious instruction had been to him, even before he became a believer (Acts 22:3). It is Paul who instructs fathers not to exasperate their children, but to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Certainly it is important that every dad teach his children about the meaning of life. Yes, it is important to know who Larry, Moe and Curly are and every properly mannered child should know how to make various Stooze sounds and gestures despite their mother's objections. It is also important for dads to teach their sons why an F-15 is superior to a Mig-25, and to even build a model of it together if possible. It is a must to know what a "draw play" is, and why if your child does not learn from your mistakes and grows up support a team like the Los Angeles Rams, they too must learn to live with the heartbreak of having your local team leaves the area, a very difficult but valuable lesson. It is important to learn how to tie a ball into a mitt to make a good pocket, to run a lawn mower properly so as to not leave streaks in the grass and to position the firewood precisely so that you get a good hot and clean fire.

But while all of this is important, it certainly pales in the light of eternity, when we realize that our children must also come to know the unspeakable love of Jesus Christ, who declared over the objections of his disciples, "let the children come unto me." There is no doubt that the Scriptures themselves assign specifically to fathers the vital role of instructing their children in the Holy Scriptures and the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Let us never forget that our children come to Christ, many times, directly through instruction received in the home. But how can mom or dad best instruct their children in the faith? This can be done very effectively through regular Bible reading and catechism-practices that at one time were the distinguishing mark of a Christian home.

The second emphasis of catechism centers on the role of the local church. Here the role of the pastor and elders, as well as the goal of the Sunday school program, should be to further and support those efforts at catechism ideally begun in the home. Parents should not assume that the church's role is to supply the catechetical instruction that they as parents make little or no effort to provide at home. Too many times Christians labor under the false assumption that the church and its various youth programs, will make up for a lack of instruction in the home. Just as you cannot expect your children to do well in school without the active involvement of the parents at home after school, so too, parents cannot expect their children to grow in faith as they should apart from concerted effort to provide regular catechism in the home.

Sunday schools and youth programs are wonderful reinforcements to what the parents undertake in the home. But these can never replace the value of instructing one's children in the basics of Christian faith. Certainly we are all too busy, and this seems so difficult to do. But even a little time spent in catechism pays great dividends, and a discerning parent can find plenty of object lessons with which to illustrate the truths of the catechism from virtually every family discussion, newscast, situation comedy, or feature

film. One of the best by-products of parents taking an active role in catechizing their kids, is that they also catechize themselves in the process! In order to teach your kids and to be able to answer their questions, which are often more direct and difficult than those asked by many adults, you must learn the material for yourself. In order to teach, you have to learn!

There are surprising practical ramifications that result from the practice of catechism as well. Many people who hear the *White Horse Inn* or visit *Christ Reformed Church* or are suddenly intrigued by Reformation theology frequently inquire about the best way to learn Reformation theology for themselves. There is no doubt that getting one of the Reformation catechisms, and working your way through it, is a great place to start. Too often people assume that the place to start learning theology is through tackling technical theological writing, when in fact the creeds and catechisms of the Reformation were designed to instruct novices in the faith. Starting with the catechism and confessions is really a better way to go.

There are other practical results as well. When I first entered the ministry, I was quite surprised at how many times I heard from people how the catechism questions and answers they memorized in childhood kept coming to mind when temptation or doubt would assail them later in life. Many were able to recount how catechism in their youth kept them from joining cults, because they knew enough doctrine to know that you must believe in the Trinity to be a Christian, or how catechism kept them from marrying people from non-Christian religions, since they knew enough biblical teaching to tell the difference. Indeed, several who were on the verge of leaving the faith altogether simply could not escape what had become such an important part of their subconscious. The catechism questions and answers they had memorized many years before simply would not leave them when the going became difficult. It was a part of their life history that they could not escape no matter how hard they tried.

In conclusion, there is one story that wonderfully captures the importance of catechism, perhaps more than all others. The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield, in an article defending the worth of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, recounts a wonderful story that demonstrates what he describes as the “indelible mark of the Shorter Catechism.”

We have the following bit of experience from a general officer of the United States Army. He was in a great western city at a time of intense excitement and violent rioting. The streets were over-run daily by a dangerous crowd. One day he observed approaching him a man of singularly combined calmness and firmness of mien [bearing], whose very demeanor inspired confidence. So impressed was he with his bearing amid the surrounding uproar that when he had passed he turned to look back at him, only to find that the stranger had done the same. On observing his turning the stranger at once came back to him, and touching his chest with his forefinger, demanded without preface: "What is the chief end of man?" On receiving the countersign, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever"-"Ah!" said he, "I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy by your looks!" "Why that is just what I was thinking of you," was the rejoinder.<sup>1</sup>

Concludes Warfield, “It is worthwhile to be a Shorter Catechism boy. They grow up to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God.”<sup>2</sup> If we want our children to grow up to be men and women of God, one of the best possible ways for this to happen is to recover the practice of catechism!

## Practical Matters

If you are convinced of the value of catechism and want to get started, there are a number of things to keep in mind:

*First, be consistent.* The best way to learn a catechism is simply to keep at it! Take “the tortoise” and not “the hare” approach. You cannot teach your child a lengthy catechism in a couple of weeks. But over time—if you keep at it—you’ll be amazed at how much children will remember and comprehend.

*Second, be creative.* One of the greatest obstacles to catechism is boredom. Simply reading the question and then expecting your children to recite the memorized answer is no fun for them, and they’ll come to hate the whole idea. Go ahead and stress memorization, but whenever you can, relate the catechism to the Scriptures. Most catechisms give Scripture proofs. And if you discuss the question and answer with your kids, and then relate the catechism to real life situations, current events or to movies and TV, your kids will get the sense that theology is of great value in navigating their way through life. Some catechize in the morning, some at the dinner table, some at night before bedtime. Do what is best for your situation, and do your best to keep the catechism time enjoyable. But do it!

*Third, don’t panic.* Many people tell me that they are new to this and there is always the pressure to make up for lost time. Go slow. Quality time is always better than rushed and tense sessions where the kids are tired and the parents are frustrated. Do what you can when you can and have realistic expectations. Even a small amount of catechesis is better than no catechesis.

*Last, the more that you know about the catechism the easier the whole process will become.* You may have to get a commentary on the particular catechism that you use, and you may have to spend some time preparing to catechize. Being an effective teacher means being a faithful student. You cannot teach what you do not know. Christ Reformed Church, for example, offers a number of theology/bible and catechism classes, which can help you out. The time you spend learning the catechism and preparing to teach it to your kids will pay great dividends later.

### Notes

1 B. B. Warfield, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?" in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. 1, ed., John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 383-84.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 384.

**Recommended Catechisms:** *The Heidelberg Catechism*; *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*