

# What is Catechism?

by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

Zacharias Ursinus was the primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism. This article is found at the beginning of his commentary on this Reformed catechism under the heading, "Special prolegomena with reference to the catechism" (English translation by G.W. Williard, Columbus OH, 1852; reprinted by P & R ). The electronic edition of this text was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for *Reformation Ink*. It is in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed.

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- I. What is catechizing, or the system of catechization?
- II. Has it always been practiced in the church, or what is its origin?
- III. What are its principal parts?
- IV. Why is it necessary?
- V. What is its design?

## I. WHAT IS CATECHIZATION?

The Greek word *katacaesis* is derived from *kataceoh*, as *kataecismos* is from *kataacidzoh*. Both words, according to their common signification, mean to sound, to resound, to instruct by word of mouth, and to repeat the sayings of another. *Kataceoh* more properly, however, means to teach the first principles and rudiments of some particular doctrine. As applied to the doctrine of the church and as understood when used in this way, it means to teach the first principles of the Christian religion. This is the sense in which it occurs in Luke 1.4, Acts 18.25, Gal. 6.6, etc. Hence, catechization in its most general and comprehensive sense, means the first brief and elementary instruction which is given by word of mouth in relation to the rudiments of any particular doctrine; but, as used by the church, it signifies a system of instruction relating to the first principles of the Christian religion, designed for the ignorant and unlearned.

The system of catechizing, therefore, includes a short, simple, and plain exposition and rehearsal of the Christian doctrine, deduced from the writings of the prophets and apostles, and arranged in the form of questions and answers, adapted to the capacity and comprehension of the ignorant and unlearned; or it is a brief summary of the doctrine of the prophets and apostles, communicated orally to those who are unlearned, which they again are required to repeat.

In the primitive church, those who learned the catechism were called Catechumens. This term meant that they were already in the church, and were instructed in the first principles of the Christian religion. There were two classes of these Catechumens. The first were those of adult age who were converts to Christianity from the Jews and Gentiles, but were not as yet baptized. Persons of this description were first instructed in the catechism, after which they were baptized and admitted to the Lord's Supper. Augustin was such a catechumen after his conversion to Christianity from Manicheism. He wrote many books while he was a Catechumen, and before he was baptized by Ambrose. Ambrose was also a Catechumen of this sort when he was chosen Bishop. The urgent necessity for catechizing and appointing him arose from the peculiar state

and condition of the church of Milan, which the Arians were making inroads upon.<sup>1</sup> Under other and ordinary circumstances the apostle Paul forbids a novice or Catechumen to be chosen to the office of a Bishop. (1 Tim. 3. 6.) The *neophutoi* spoken of by Paul, were those Catechumens who were not yet baptized, or had been baptized very recently. The Greek word, which in our translation is rendered a “novice”, according to its literal signification means a new plant; that is, a new hearer and disciple of the church. The other class of Catechumens included the small children of the church, or the children of Christian parents. These children were baptized very soon after their birth, being regarded as members of the church. After they had grown a little older, they were instructed in the catechism. Having learned it, they were *confirmed* by the laying on of hands and were dismissed from the class of Catechumens. They were then permitted to celebrate the Lord's Supper, along with those of riper years. Those who desire to see more in regard to these Catechumens, are referred to the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, the tenth book, and the latter part of the fourth chapter. Those who taught the catechism, or instructed these Catechumens, were called Catechists.

## II. WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF CATECHIZATION, AND HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN PRACTICED IN THE CHURCH ?

What may be said of the origin of catechization may also be said of the whole economy or service of the church. It was instituted by God himself, and has always been practiced in the church. For, since the very beginning of the world, God has been the God not only of those of adult age, but also of those of young and tender years. This is according to the covenant which he made with Abraham, saying, "I will be a God to you and your seed after you;" (Gen. 17.7.). He has also ordained that both classes should be instructed in the doctrine of salvation according to their capacity; the adults are instructed by the public voice of the ministry, and the children by being catechized in the family and in school. As it respects the institution designed for the instruction of adults, the case is clear, and it admits of no doubt.

Touching the catechization of children in the Jewish church, the Old Testament abounds in many explicit commands. In the 12th and 13th chapters of Exodus, God commands the Jews to give particular instruction to their children and families in relation to the institution and benefits of the Passover. In the fourth chapter of the book of Deut., God enjoins parents to repeat to their children the entire history of the law which he had given them. In the sixth chapter of the same book, he requires that the doctrine of the unity of God, and of perfect love to him, should be inculcated and impressed upon the minds of their children. And in the eleventh chapter he commands them to explain the Decalogue to their children. Hence, under the Old Testament dispensation, the principal things contained in the prophets were taught to children in the family by their parents, and in the schools by the teachers of religion. These were things respecting God, the law, the promise of the gospel, the use of the sacraments, and sacrifices. These were types of the Messiah who was to come, and of the benefits which he was to purchase. For there can be no doubt but that the schools of the prophets Elijah, Elisha, etc., were established for this very

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<sup>1</sup> Arius, a priest in Alexandria, denied the true divinity of Jesus Christ. He taught that the Son was not eternal but was created by the Father, and therefore the Son was not God by nature; he had a changeable nature; his honor and dignity were earned from the Father by Jesus' righteous life on earth rather than being inherent in Jesus' identity as God; Jesus was not "consubstantial" with the Father (i.e. of the same substance); the Holy Spirit was begotten by the Logos (Christ), and therefore was less than either the Son or the Father – whg.

purpose. It was also with this design that God delivered his law in the short and condensed form in which we are told: "You shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, ...and your neighbor as yourself." As it respects the gospel, it was briefly comprehended in these promises: "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head." And in your seed will "all the nations be blessed." Likewise, they had sacrifices, prayers, and other things which God required Abraham and his posterity to teach their children and families. And so this doctrine is presented in a plain and simple form to meet the capacity of children and the unlearned.

In the New Testament, we are told that Christ laid his hands upon little children and blessed them, and commanded that they should be brought to him. Hence he says, in Mark 10.14, "Allow the little children to come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God." It is evident from the example of Timothy that the catechization of children was diligently attended to in the times of the apostles. It is said of him that he knew the holy Scriptures from infancy. And in the epistle to the Hebrews, mention is made of some of the principal topics included in the catechism of the apostles, such as repentance from dead works, faith towards God, the doctrine of baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment.<sup>2</sup> These are what the apostle terms "milk for babes". These and similar points of doctrine were required from the Catechumens who were adult age at the time of their baptism. And it was required of children at the time of their confirmation by the laying on of hands. Hence, the apostle calls them the doctrine of baptism and laying on of hands.

Likewise, the Church Fathers wrote short summaries of doctrine, some fragments of which may still be seen in the Papal church. Eusebius writes of Origen, that he restored the custom of catechizing in Alexandria, which had been allowed to grow out of use during the times of persecution. Socrates<sup>3</sup> writes of the system of catechizing in the primitive church: "Our form of catechizing," he says, "is in accordance with the mode which we have received from the Bishops who preceded us, and according to the way we were taught when we laid the foundation of faith and were baptized, and according to what we have learned from the Scriptures," etc. Pope Gregory had images and idols placed in the churches to serve as books for the laity and children.<sup>4</sup> After this period, through the negligence of the bishops and the subtlety of the Romish priests, the doctrine of the church became gradually more and more corrupt. And so the custom of catechizing grew more and more disused, until at length it was changed into the ridiculous ceremony which, to this day, they call confirmation. So much concerning the origin and practice of catechization in the church.

### III. WHAT ARE THE PARTS OR PRINCIPAL TOPICS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CATECHISM?

The chief and most important parts of the first principles of the doctrine of the church, as just quoted from the Epistle to the Hebrews, are repentance and faith in Christ, which we may regard as synonymous with the law and the gospel. Hence, the catechism in its primary and most general sense, as the doctrine of the church, may also be divided *into the law and gospel*. It does

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<sup>2</sup> Heb. 6:2

<sup>3</sup> Church historian in Constantinople b. 380 AD; his writing covered the period 306-439 AD. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Hendrickson, Peabody Mass, 2002), vol. III, p. 880.

<sup>4</sup> Most could not read, and so pictures were painted, stained glass was constructed, and statues were carved, to teach the stories and doctrines of Scripture in representative form. A story was then memorized about the image, with the image serving as a visible memory aid to recall all the parts of the story – whg.

not differ from the doctrine of the church in respect to the subject matter, but only in the form and manner in which these things are presented. The doctrine of the church may be compared to strong meat designed for adults, which does not differ in essence from the milk and meat prepared for children. This is how the catechism is compared by Paul in the passage already referred to. These two parts are termed by most, the Decalogue and the Apostles' creed. This is because the Decalogue comprehends the substance of the law, and the Apostles' creed that of the gospel. Another distinction made is that of the doctrine of faith and works, or the doctrine of those things which are to be believed, and those things which are to be done.

There are others who divide the catechism into these three parts: in the first place, the doctrine respecting God, then respecting his will, and lastly respecting his works. These they distinguish as the works of creation, preservation, and redemption. But all these different parts are covered in the law or the gospel, so their divisions may easily be reduced to those two.

There are others, again, who make the catechism consist of five different parts; the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Prayer. Of these, the Decalogue was delivered immediately by God himself, while the other parts were delivered mediately, either through the manifestation of the Son of God in the flesh (as is true of the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Eucharist), or through the ministry of the apostles (as is true of the Apostles' Creed). But all these different parts may also be reduced to the two general topics of the law and the gospel. The Decalogue contains the substance of the law, the Apostles' Creed, that of the gospel. The sacraments are parts of the gospel and may, therefore, be embraced in it as far as they are seals of the grace which it promises. But as far as they are testimonies of our obedience to God, they have the nature of sacrifices, and so they pertain to the law. Prayer, in like manner, may be referred to the law, because it is part of the worship of God.

The catechism of which we speak in these lectures consists of three parts. The first concerns the misery of man, the second his deliverance from this misery, and the third part is gratitude. This division does not, in reality, differ from the above, because all the parts specified are embraced in these three general heads. The Decalogue belongs to the first part because it is the mirror through which we are brought to see ourselves, and through which we are led to a knowledge of our sins and misery; it belongs to the third part because it is the rule of true thankfulness, and of a Christian life. The Apostles' Creed is embraced in the second part because it unfolds the way of deliverance from sins. The sacraments belong to the doctrine of faith; they are the seals that are attached to it. And in the same way, they belong to this second part of the catechism, which concerns deliverance from the misery of man. Prayer, being the chief part of spiritual worship and thankfulness, may very properly be included in the third general part.

#### IV. WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO INTRODUCE AND TEACH THE CATECHISM IN THE CHURCH ?

This necessity may be urged,

1. *Because it is the command of God:* "You shall teach them to your children" (Deut. 11.19.)
2. *Because the divine glory demands that* God be rightly known and worshipped by those of adult age, and also by children; as it is said, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have ordained strength." (Ps. 8. 2.)
3. *On account of our comfort and salvation;* for without a true knowledge of God and his Son Jesus Christ, no one who has reached the years of discretion and understanding can be saved, or have any sure comfort that he is accepted in the sight of God. Hence it is said, "This is life eternal that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," And again, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (John 17.3, Heb. 11.6.) And not only this, but no one can believe on someone he knows nothing about, or has not heard; for, "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom. 10.14,17.) It is necessary, therefore, for all those who will be saved, to lay hold of and embrace the doctrine of Christ, which is the chief and fundamental doctrine of the gospel. But, in order to do this, there must be instructions imparted to this effect. And of necessity, there must be some brief and simple form of doctrine, suited and adapted to the young, and those who are unlearned.
4. *For the preservation of society and the church.* All past history proves that religion and the worship of God, the exercise and practice of piety, honesty, justice, and truth, are of the greatest importance to the well-being and perpetuation of the church, and of the commonwealth. It is in vain that we look for these things among barbarous nations, since they have never been known to produce the fruits of Piety and virtue. Hence, it is necessary that we be trained in the practice of these things from our earliest years; because the heart of man is depraved and evil from his youth. Indeed, such is the corruption of our nature, that unless we commence the work of reformation and moral training early, we will apply a remedy too late, when, through long delay, the evil principles and inclinations of the heart have become so strengthened and confirmed, as to defy the restraints we may then wish to impose on them. We must be correctly instructed in our childhood out of the sacred Scriptures concerning God and his will, and commence the practice of piety. Otherwise, it is with great difficulty, if ever, that we will be drawn away from these errors which are, as it were, born in us, or which we have imbibed from our youth. It is with great difficult that we are led to abandon the vices in which we have been brought up, and to which we have been accustomed. If, therefore, the church and state are to be preserved from degeneracy and final destruction, it is of the utmost importance that this depravity of our nature should, in due time, be met with proper restraints, and be subdued.
5. *That we may not be led into error.* All persons should be acquainted with the rule and standard according to which we are to judge and decide about the various opinions and dogmas of men, so that we may not be led into error, and be seduced by them. This accords with the commandment to, "Beware of false prophets." "Prove all things." "Try the spirits whether they are of God." (Matt. 7. 15, 1 Thess. 5. 21, 1 John 4. 1.) The law and the Apostle's creed, which are the chief

parts of the catechism, constitute the rule and standard according to which we are to judge the opinions of men, and thus we see the great importance of a familiar acquaintance with them.

6. *To better understand and appreciate sermons.* Those who have properly studied and learned the Catechism, are generally better prepared to understand and appreciate the sermons which they hear from time to time. They can easily categorize the things they hear out of the word of God, according to the various topics of the catechism. On the other hand, those who have not enjoyed this preparatory training, tend to hear sermons with little personal profit.

7. *It is adapted to those needing simpler instruction.* The importance of catechization may be urged in view of its peculiar adaptedness to those learners who are of weak and uncultivated minds, who require instruction in a short, plain, and clear manner, as we have it in the catechism. They would not, because of their youth and weak capacity, be able to understand it if presented in a lengthy and more difficult form.

8. *To separate new believers from non-believers.* It is also necessary to distinguish and separate the youths and the unlearned from schismatics and profane heathen. This can most effectually be done by a judicious course of catechetical instruction.

*Lastly, to develop teachers.* A knowledge of the catechism is especially important for those who are to act as teachers, because they ought to have a more intimate acquaintance with the doctrine of the church than others. Because of their calling, they may one day be able to instruct others. Because of their ability to obtain knowledge of this doctrine, it becomes them to diligently improve it so that they may, like Timothy, become well acquainted with the Holy Scriptures. Then they may "be good ministers of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and the good doctrine which they have followed." (1Tim. 4.6)

To these considerations, which clearly show the importance of catechization, we may add many others of great weight; especially with the great mass of mankind, such as the arguments which may be drawn from the purpose of our creation, and from the prolongation and preservation of our lives from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood, etc. We might also speak of the excellent object of the doctrine of the catechism, which is the highest good of God himself. We might show the effect of such a course of instruction, which is a knowledge of this highest good, and a participation in it, which is something vastly more important and desirable than all the treasures of this world.

This is that pearl of great price hidden in the field of the church, concerning which Christ speaks in Matt. 13:44, and on account of which Christians in former times suffered martyrdom with their little children. We may here refer to the example of Origen, of whom we have an account in the sixth book and third chapter of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius. So too the fourth book and sixteenth chapter of the history of Theodoret may be read for the same purpose. But if we are ignorant of the doctrine and glory of Christ, who among us would be willing to suffer on their account? And how can we not be ignorant of these things, unless we are taught and instructed in them from our childhood? A neglect of the catechism is, therefore, one of the chief causes why there are so many today tossed about by every wind of doctrine, and why so many fall from Christ to Anti-Christ.

## V. WHAT IS THE DESIGN OF THE CATECHISM, AND OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH?

The design of the doctrine of the catechism is our comfort and salvation. Our salvation consists in the enjoyment of the highest good. Our comfort comprises the assurance and confident expectation of the full and perfect enjoyment of this highest good in the life to come, with a beginning and foretaste of it already in this life. This highest good is what makes all those truly blessed who enjoy it, while those who do not have it are miserable and wretched. What this only comfort is, and to which the catechism is designed to lead us, will be explained in the first question. We now proceed to it without making any further introductory remarks.