

# **An Encouragement to Use Catechisms**

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Many contemporaries have a deep-seated suspicion of catechisms. In our own Baptist denomination, many would consider the words "Baptist catechism" as mutually exclusive. A popular misconception is that catechisms are used in times and places where inadequate views of conversion predominate or the fires of evangelism have long since turned to white ash. If the Bible is preached, they continue, no catechism is necessary; catechisms tend to produce mere intellectual assent where true heart religion is absent. This concern reflects a healthy interest for the experiential side of true Christianity. Concern for conversion and fervor, however, should never diminish one's commitment to the individual truths of Christianity nor the necessity of teaching them in a full and coherent manner.

In fact, some who profess the Christian faith are so experience-oriented that their view of spirituality makes them antagonistic to precise doctrine. Any attempt to inculcate systematic arrangement of truth is considered either divisive or carnal. Such convictions may be held in all sincerity and may gain apparent support from selected facts, but suspicion of catechisms as a legitimate tool for teaching God's Word cannot be justified historically, biblically, or practically.

## **History Commends the Usefulness of Catechisms**

The early church was painfully familiar with the apostasy of professing Christians. Persecution and the continued power of heathen worship practices caused many to lapse and prompted the early church to develop methods of instructing apparent converts before baptism. The period of instruction and catechizing served two purposes: it allowed the candidate (catechuminate) to decide if he still wanted to submit to Christian baptism and gave the church opportunity to discern (as far as human observation can do these kinds of things) the genuineness of his, or her, conversion. Then, after engaging in a period of fasting and prayer with the church, the candidates were baptized. This use of catechisms served as a safeguard for the purity of the church. Men such as Tertullian and Augustine served as catechists within the church. Julian the Apostate (ca. 360) so feared the effectiveness of this enterprise that he closed all Christian schools and places of public literature and forbade the instructing of youth.

With the union of church and state by the end of the fourth century and the gradual development of infant baptism the nature of catechetical instruction changed. The procedure of pre-baptismal catechetical instruction shifted more and more to after-the-fact instruction in preparation for confirmation. In many places it vanished entirely. Mass christianization of barbarian tribes in the middle ages revitalized the catechetical idea. Charlemagne insisted that each baptized person should know at least the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. This concern then extended to the children of such Christianized tribes. Though minimal, instruction was necessary, and the guarantee for it came from godparents who themselves were required to know the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. As confirmation developed in significance, examination upon the basic points of Christian doctrine became a normal procedure. This kind of practice has led to the impression that catechisms substitute for conversion in some traditions.

The golden Age of catechisms emerged in the Reformation. Both Luther and Calvin placed high priority on instruction by catechetical method and considered the success of the Reformation as virtually dependent on the faithfulness of Protestants to this process. In 1548, Calvin wrote Edward VI's protector Somerset: "Believe my Lord, that the Church of God shall never be conserved without catechism, for it is as the seed to be kept that the good grain perish not but that it may increase from age to age. Wherefore if you desire to build a work of continuance to endure long, and which should not shortly fall into decay, cause that the children in their young age be instructed in a good catechism."

*The Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Westminster Catechism* have had the most significant impact on Reformed Protestantism. The former, dating from 1562, begins with two questions which establish the format for the remainder of the document.

Q. 1. *What is thy only comfort in life and in death?*

A. That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

Q. 2. *How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou in this comfort mayest live and die happy?*

A. Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.

The three parts of the catechism which follow are entitled "Of Man's Misery," "Of Man's Redemption," and "Of Thankfulness." Within these sections full question and answer expositions are given of the Fall, the Apostles' Creed, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Perseverance, and Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer.

Hercules Collins, a leading English Baptist of the seventeenth century, adopted the *Heidelberg Catechism* as the basis for his 1680 publication *Orthodox Catechism*. Collins, a Baptist, felt that this virtual duplication of the Heidelberg Catechism should strengthen the usefulness of his work, "hoping an Athenian Spirit is in none of you, but do believe that an old Gospel (to you who have the sweetness of it) will be more acceptable than a new." Part of his purpose was to demonstrate basic unity with the larger Protestant community.

Although literally hundreds of catechisms were produced in English in the seventeenth century, the most influential catechisms were those that arose from the Westminster Assembly, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Shorter Catechism especially influenced Baptist life, as it formed the basis for Keach's (or *The Baptist*) Catechism and subsequently Spurgeon's Catechism. In America, the Philadelphia Association catechism and the Charleston Association catechism were duplicates of Keach's catechism. Richard Furman used it faithfully and effectively.

Several principles appeared to govern the theory of catechisms. One, many catechist believed that catechisms of different levels should be produced. Luther had published two as did the

Scottish divine Craig and the Puritan John Owen (*Two Short Catechisms*). Richard Baxter had three, suited for childhood, youth, and mature age. The Westminster Assembly's two catechisms are well known. Henry Jessey, another of the leading early Baptists, had three catechisms, all bound together, one of which contained only four questions: What man was, is, may be, and must be. John A. Broadus includes sections of "advanced questions" at the end of each respective section in the body of his catechism. This graduated difficulty in catechism rests on the theory that the earlier the stamping on the mind, the more indelible the result.

Two, exact memory is generally considered important. The power of words to substantiate reality enforces the necessity of some precision at this point. "I serve a precise God," said Richard Rogers. Luther instructed those teaching the Small Catechism "to avoid changes or variation in the text and wording." We should teach these things, he continued, "in such a way that we do not alter a single syllable or recite the catechism differently from year to year." Exact head knowledge, however, is obviously not the end of catechetical instruction. Rather, catechizing aims ultimately at the eyes of understanding, heart knowledge. Even in the Westminster Assembly some were concerned that "people will come to learn things by rote, and answer it as a parrot but not understand the thing." The design of the catechism is, under God, to chase the darkness from a sinner's understanding, so that he may be enlightened in the knowledge of Christ and freely embrace him in forgiveness of sin. John Bunyan specifically wrote his catechism, "Instruction for the Ignorant," that God might bless it to the awakening of many sinners, and the salvation of their souls by faith in Jesus Christ. The major purpose of Henry Jessey's "Catechism for Babes" was to give instruction concerning how God could forgive those who "deserve death, and God's curse," and could still "be honoured in thus forgiving, naughty ones as we are."

Henry Fish, an American Baptist, screwed in tightly the application of each section of his catechism by a poignant rhetorical question sealing discussion of each doctrine. For example, "Are **you** a believer, or does the wrath of God abide on you for unbelief?"

A catechism written by the English Baptist John Sutcliffe pinpoints this same concern as the goal of catechetical instruction.

*Q. To conclude: what do you learn from the catechism you have now been repeating?*

A. I learn that the affairs of my soul are of the greatest importance, and ought to employ my chief concern.

That this has indeed been the result of catechetical instruction quite often is a happy fact. Luther Rice, that great early promoter of missions in America, said this in reflecting on his conversion:

After finding myself thus happy in the Lord, I began to reflect in a day or two, whether touching this reconciliation with God, there was anything of Christ in it or not! It then opened very dearly and sweetly to my view that all this blessed effect and experience arose distinctly out of the efficiency of the statement made by Christ. That I was indebted wholly to him for it all, and indeed the whole of that luminous system of divinity drawn out in the Westminster Catechism, opened on my view with light, and beauty, and power. This I had been taught to repeat, when a child. I then felt and still feel glad that I had been so taught.

A charming reminiscence of one of the children Furman catechized gives a clear picture of the importance he attached to this process and these doctrines. A 1926 edition of *In Royal Service* quotes the remembrance a grandchild had of her grandmother's experience under Furman.

We had no Sabbath school then, but we had the Baptist Catechism, with which we were as familiar as with the Lord's Prayer. At our quarterly seasons, we children of the congregation repeated the Baptist Catechism standing, in a circle round the font. We numbered from sixty to a hundred. The girls standing at the south of the pulpit, the boys meeting them in the center from the north, Dr. Furman would, in his majestic, winning manner, walk down the pulpit steps and with book in hand, commence asking questions, beginning with the little ones (very small indeed some were, but well taught and drilled at home). We had to memorize the whole book, for none knew which question would fall to them. I think I hear at this very moment the dear voice of our pastor saying, "A little louder, my child," and then the trembling, sweet voice would be raised a little too loud. It was a marvel to visitors on these occasions, the wonderful self-possession and accuracy manifested by the whole class. This practice was of incalculable benefit, for when it pleased God to change our hearts, and when offering ourselves to the church for membership, we knew what the church doctrines meant and were quite familiar with answering questions before the whole congregation, and did not quake when pastor or deacon or anyone else asked what we understood by Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification. Oh, no; we had been well taught...What a pity that such a course of instruction has been abandoned.

Another kind of understanding was necessary also. Couching profound truth of the Great "I Am" in language digestible and understandable for children takes great discipline and concentration. Henry Jessey recognized a deficiency at this point in some of the earlier catechisms for children in that some of the answers contained Latin and Greek phrases. Jessey "desired to see one so plain and easie in the expressions, as they the very Babes, that can speak but stammeringly, and are of very weak capacities, might understand what they say."

John A. Broadus felt the same tension when writing his "Catechism of Bible Teaching." Reflecting on finishing Lesson 1 entitled "God," Broadus said, "It is, of course, an extremely difficult task to make questions and answers about the existence and attributes of the Divine Being, that shall be intelligible to children, adequate as the foundation for future thinking, and correct as far as they go." Those three guidelines should serve well to judge any catechism. Baptist catechisms have existed virtually since the appearance of modern-day Baptists in the seventeenth century. Typical of early Baptist commitment to catechizing is an admonition that appears in the circular letter of 1777 from the Baptist ministers and messengers assembled at Oakham in Rutlandshire, England.

Our confession of faith and our catechism for the instruction of our young people, are published to the world; and from these glorious principles we hope you will never depart...At present, blessed be God, we believe there is no apparent apostasy in our ministers and people from the glorious principles we profess; but, at the same time, we must in great plainness and faithfulness tell you, that catechizing of children is most sadly neglected, both in private families and in public congregations...

Our honoured brethren, the ministers at Bristol, have lately encouraged the publication of two editions of our catechism,...and we do most earnestly entreat you to furnish

yourselves with this excellent compendium of true divinity, and that you would teach it diligently to your children in private, and desire your pastors to instruct them, at least for the summer season, in public.

Cathcart's *The Baptist Encyclopedia* encourages "parents to employ the Catechism in their own homes" because "this neglected custom of the past should be revived in every Baptist family in the world."

Southern Baptists developed catechisms as valuable tools for the religious education and evangelization of slaves. In 1848, Robert Ryland published "A Scripture Catechism for the Instruction of Children and Servants" and, in 1857, E.T. Winkler published *Notes and Questions for the Oral Instruction of Colored People*. Each of these catechisms contains fifty-two lessons, one for each Lord's Day of the year.

In 1863, when the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention was founded, one of its first publications was *A Catechism of Bible Doctrine*, by J.P. Boyce. Within a four-month period in 1864, then thousand of these were printed and distributed. In 1879, Southern Baptists requested J.L. Dagg to write "a catechism...containing the substance of the Christian religion, for the instruction of children and servants..." Evidently this catechism was never completed. When the Southern Baptist Convention was considering the reestablishment of the Sunday School Board in 1891, the first new project it proposed was the publication of a catechism by John A. Broadus. This was printed and used widely and advantageously.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Catechisms have served in several capacities historically. During the early centuries of Christian history they were used for prebaptismal instruction. Later, after infant baptism began to become prominent, they were used to educate the masses baptized in infancy. Charlemagne in particular arranged that catechetical instruction should be given in his era of embarrassing ignorance. During the Reformation, catechisms met several important and pressing needs. As a type of personalized confession, they helped establish clearly the distinguishing doctrines considered paramount by the reformers. Also, their polemical power assisted in the task of bringing a corrective cordial to the deceptive spiritual sickness propagated by Roman Catholicism. Additionally, they were effective in teaching biblical truth as an ongoing enterprise in cities and countries that adopted the Reformation. Puritans and their heirs utilized catechisms as an evangelistic tool. Baptists, including Southern Baptists, produced scores of catechisms for use in this variety of ways.

We see, then, that like all good ideas, catechisms are subject to abuse, and their evil lives after them. We should not, however, let the good be interred with their bones, but resurrect it as an effective instrument for a new day of Reformation.

## **An Encouragement to Use Catechisms (Part 2)**

### **The Bible Encourages Their Use**

In addition to the lessons of history, Scripture itself encourages the use of catechisms in our efforts to be transformed by the biblical message. The divine out-breathings which produced Scripture create both an assumption and a purpose which are consistent with this approach to instruction. The assumption is the authority, sufficiency, and consistency of Scripture; the purpose is the increase of spiritual maturity in the children of God.

Examples or models of instruction used by the first-century church abound in Scripture, both in method and content. These make it clear that the use of summaries, readily digestible portions of revelatory truth, make for effective instruction in the church. In addition, implicit admonitions for this form of education are scattered throughout the pages of the Bible and mixed with the models mentioned above.

The catechetical approach should not be used to serve any fascination with systems and abstractions or to puff one's self up with speculative knowledge instead of increased love for God (1 Cor. 8:1). Instead, it is one way that Christians may enhance their ability to use Scripture in accordance with its purpose. Instruction with this kind of precision constitutes an obedient response to the Bible itself and fulfills biblical principles undergirding the process of disciple making.

### **Fulfillment of Scripture's Purpose**

Preaching, teaching, and meditation (biblical means of spiritual growth) require slightly different emphases in the use of Scripture and accomplish slightly different tasks in conforming us to Christ. Preaching comes in the form of a proclamation, challenging and correcting our thoughts and actions, teaching us of the grace of God in the gospel, and calling us to deeper repentance and obedience. Teaching, no more content-oriented nor less confrontive than preaching, employs a format less monologic and more oriented toward questioning and discussion. Meditation involves extended personal appraisal of one's own thoughts and actions in comparison to the beauty and holy character of God as revealed in Scripture and impressed on the heart by the Holy Spirit.

In each of these, not only does the person who is well catechized have a distinct advantage, the use of a catechetical approach is a basic element of the procedure itself. Those who have good scripture knowledge gain more from good preaching. If, in addition, they have been trained to see the coherent structure of biblical truth and can define its leading principles, their knowledge of Scripture is more precise and thorough. The consequent benefit from preaching in-creases. More will be said about this in the discussion of practical advantages.

A well-catechized hearer doesn't view the words and ideas of the preacher as isolated fragments of truth; he understands them as constituent elements of the "one faith" which must govern our efforts to achieve "unity in the faith." Matthew Henry, a seventeenth-century Puritan biblical scholar, states, "Catechizing does to the preaching of the word the same good office that John the

Baptist did to our Saviour; it prepares the way, and makes its paths straight, and yet like him does but say the same things."

This relationship between preparatory instruction and purity of worship was woven into the very fabric of the history of Israel. The people were commanded to instruct their children in the ways of God. When an Israelite child asked his father, "What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God hath commanded you?" the parent was to answer with a summary of the mighty works of God for the redemption of the people (Deut. 6:20-25). These acts of God might be more fully expounded in other contexts, but the summary served as a basis of all conduct and worship.

One could conclude that the entire history of Israel was catechetical preparation for Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Of course, it was much more than that. Peter explained what the people observed with the words, "This is what was spoken..." (Acts 2:16) and the explanation was sufficient. His appeal to the attestation of Jesus' ministry by miracles, wonders, and signs (2:22) was consistent with their understanding of God's activity in pivotal redemptive eras of their history (Moses and Elijah). His recitation of the Messianic prophecies through David made immediate appeal to the orientation of his audience. Also, his references to the pouring out of the Spirit did not refer simply to Jesus' promises during his earthly ministry about the coming of the comforter. This would have meant little to Peter's audience. More likely he referred to the coming of the Spirit as the sign of ultimate redemption and the new covenant (Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31; 36:27; 39:29; Jeremiah 31:31-34). Peter's announcement of Jesus as both "Lord" and "Christ" met with immediate understanding and conviction. Both words were filled with meaning for the hearers and the string of evidence he presented pointed to the conclusion they drew.

I am not contending that a strong background of knowledge when combined with a compelling argument always makes a convert. No conviction or conversion will come without the effectual working of the Spirit of God (Eph. 1:19; Col. 2:11, 12). A connection, however, between prior knowledge and proclamation is a part of God's ordained means of salvation.

The same is seen in Paul's sermon at Athens. He appealed to what he knew they had discerned from general revelation and had put within their system of worship (Acts 17:22-29). In a sense, nature and conscience had catechized them.

Also, more quickly than those not so trained, those catechized become capable of preaching and teaching. The appeal of preaching he in proclaiming the new (whether it be insight into content or application) based on known truth. Jesus said, "Every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (Mt. 13:52). The scribes were the most thoroughly educated people of Israel during the time of our Lord. They were professional students of the law and gathered around themselves pupils to whom they taught the law and the oral tradition which accompanied it, much of which they themselves produced. They taught their students to pass on this content without alteration. Jesus indicates that the person with scribal training, when converted and freed of the idol of human tradition, is capable of teaching others the truths of the kingdom of God. He can understand and communicate how Christian revelation relates to the new challenges the world

constantly presents. He gives insight in how one can make fresh applications of the unchangeable truths divine revelation.

Apollos, before he met Aquila and Priscilla, was literally "catechized" in the way of the Lord and was teaching with accuracy the things concerning Jesus (Acts 18:25). Upon receiving more accurate instruction concerning some details, he continued his teaching being of great help to believers and an irrefutable apologist for the faith in public debate with the Jews (Acts 18:27, 28). It was no small contribution to his eventual effectiveness that he was so thoroughly "catechized."

The biblical evidence for the value of catechisms is not derived solely from inference. The specific admonitions of Scripture support the use of this method. "Teach them diligently to thy children" and "talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" were the instructions accompanying the second giving of the commandments (Deut. 6). This sort of instruction included memorization of fundamental precepts. The psalmist assumes the existence of this knowledge in his numerous exhortations to meditate in the law of the Lord. No meditation can occur where no content is present; and the more accurate and precise the content, the more edifying and uplifting the meditation.

David says, "The unfolding of thy words gives light" (Ps. 119:130 NASB). The word for "unfolding" may mean "entrance" or "opening." Its root often is used metaphorically for "understanding" or, in a phrase, "grasping the true meaning." The illumination of the Holy Spirit alone accomplishes this, particularly as it relates to one's transformation by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2). From a human standpoint, however, the purpose of a catechism is to present true contextual understanding of the biblical revelation. It can give significant and enlightening help in the Christian privilege of meditation on the truths of divine revelation, a practice which gives understanding to the simple.

### **Admonitions and Examples**

Much of the educational task of the church today is parallel with that of the Levites in Nehemiah's day. When the Israelites were at the threshold of recovering their significance as the people of God, central to this reorientation was the learning of the word of God. Ezra led the scribes and the Levites in intensive sessions with the people: "They read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understanding the reading" (Ezra 8:1-8).

Scripture itself gives clear warrant to the use of external aids in order to enhance and accelerate biblical understanding. The Levites "gave the sense." Preeminently, the preacher serves in that capacity; but providing the same kind of touchstone given by the "rule of faith" in the early Christian centuries, a catechism helps perform the same function. When it has a comprehensive scriptural orientation and is organized logically, a catechism can enhance understanding and give immense help in grasping the sense of Scripture.

Summaries of faith, either in confessional or catechetical form, appear in the New Testament. These are used in situations where strong clear reminders of the distinctiveness of the Christian faith are needed. They serve to exhort, encourage, warn and edify. Bits and pieces of

confessions, or perhaps catechetical responses, are very likely present in such passages as Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Timothy 1:15-17; 3:12-16; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; 2:11-13; and Titus 1:11-14. The faith Paul mentions in Eph 4:5, 13 could be the experience of grace of faith. Another and more likely, possibility is that it denote an objective faith, that is a body of teaching. The context seems to favor that understanding. Paul emphasizes the gift of pastor-teacher in verse 11 and, in verse 13, has in mind a doctrinal core around which believers should be united. This is contrasted to the instability of the doctrine characteristic of deceitful teachers in verse 14. At any rate, the words in verses 5 and 6 have an easily memorable form which expressed a foundational and minimal confessional standard for some first-century Christian churches. The simple but clear and exclusive confession could serve as an effective shield of faith against many fiery first-century darts of false teaching.

The phrase "a faithful saying" (literally *Faithful the word*), in Timothy 1:15 and 3:1 and 4:9, introduces a confessional, or perhaps catechetical formula. The sentences which follow could possibly stand alone as pithy and pregnant epigrams, "one-liner" confessions such as "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." More likely they are part of larger statements as in 1 Timothy 3:16. That particular confession called by Paul "The Mystery of Godliness" begins with a phrase which contains an adverbial form of the word "confess" and literally translates "confessedly great." Idiomatically it means "undeniably." That which is "confessed" with such certainty is a six-article Christological confession.

Apparently, Paul considered this confession a helpful safeguard against the encroachment of heresy, for immediately in 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul warns Timothy about the errors of ascetic dualism. That heresy by implication denies the goodness of creation as well as the reality of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and bodily ascension of Christ into heaven. Paul points to the "words of faith" and the inherently good, noble and praiseworthy doctrine he has been following. He uses the same word to describe the "teaching" (v.6) as he does to describe the inherent goodness of the creation (v.4).

The phrase "words of faith" in verse 6 has a strong verbal relationship to the "faithful sayings" in 1:15, 3:1,4:9, and 2 Tim. 2:11. The first uses the noun form of "faith" and the second uses the adjective form. Conceptually, Paul is making the same affirmation. A "faithful saying" incorporates words which summarize certain truths of the faith; thus, "words of faith" becomes "faithful words", or "faithful sayings." These are in turn identified with "the sound doctrine" (NASB) Timothy has been following.

Paul is reminding Timothy that spiritual and doctrinal nourishment he received in his early instruction is a strong, and even essential, foundation for an effective ministry with the people of God. Verse 9 then repeats the formula "It is a faithful saying and worthy of full acceptance" that exercising oneself to godliness (v.7) striving and laboring for life now and to come (vv.8, 10) are all part of putting one's hope in the living God "who is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe."

These faithful sayings consisted of the teaching of the apostles and N. T. prophets (the foundational gifts to the church) and served as the Christ-centered guide to the interpretation of the O. T. Scriptures and as paths to life in the presence of the Living God.

In 2 Timothy 1:8, Paul encourages Timothy not to be ashamed of the "testimony of our Lord." The word "testimony" which serves to translate two Greek words contains a rich fabric of meaning. Among the several things that both unite are the following: an event, word, or thing that serves as proof or evidence (John 8:17); a personal conviction about the truth which can not be compromised no matter what the consequences (2 Cor. 1:12); the spoken message about Christ's person and work (1 Cor. 1:16); and, in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it refers specifically to the martyr's death. In 1 Tim. 2:6 the "testimony" is used as an appositive to "ransom." The death of Christ was thus Christ's personal witness to and irrefutable evidence of the truth that there is one God and that reconciliation is possible only through a mediator who provides an effectual ransom (*antilutron*). The death of Christ speaks volumes, infinite volumes, about the unique efficacy of the gospel; it is the testimony in God's ordained time. And to that specific testimony that Christ made in his death Paul was appointed a preacher, and apostle, and a teacher. When he speaks of the "testimony of our Lord," therefore, in 2 Tim. 1:8 he has in mind that historical witness of Christ in his passion which is communicated to all generations in the words called the Gospel ("be a fellow-sufferer in the gospel").

John's Angel in Revelation 19:10 speaks of those messengers who "hold the testimony of Jesus." Indeed, the angel continues, the "testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy." Isaiah, when hounded by the false religionists of his day to consult mediums, replied, "To the law and to the *testimony!* If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa. 8:20 NASB).

The testimony of our Lord, or the testimony of Jesus, is the fulfillment of all the prophets. This testimony (*marturion*) is given a form so that witnesses (*martus*) may testify (*martureo*) verbally. An elevated prose portion of that testimony is presented in the words of verses 9 and 10 of 2 Tim. 1: "Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but has now been manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who destroyed death on the one hand, and, on the other, brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Timothy also is admonished to "guard the deposit" and follow the pattern or standard of "sound words" given him. This deposit and these sound words he was to entrust to faithful men who would be able to teach others. Paul had already written against those who live in a moral squalor opposed to the "sound teaching which is according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1:10-11). In 1 Tim. 6:3, Paul warns Timothy against those who want to teach other things and will not receive "sound words." Nor will they receive "the teaching" that according to godliness. Instead, they are men who understand nothing and, among other things, are deprived of the truth. He gives similar instruction to Titus that he would select overseers who hold firmly to the sure word which is in accord with "the teaching." This is so they may exhort others in "the teaching, the sound teaching" and may reprove those who oppose them.

2 Tim. 3:14, 15 pictures Timothy as having learned from his grandmother, mother, and Paul's sets of truths stated not exactly in Scripture language but founded upon Scripture truth. In the same vein the writer of Hebrews speaks of the need of some to be instructed in the "elementary principles of the Oracles of God" (5:12).

Paul's emphasis on "the teaching," the "deposit," the "sound teaching," the "sound words," and his instruction that it serve as corrective guideline to false teachings, false teachers, and nonessential subtleties creates a form with clearly recognizable features. Thomas Watson and Matthew Henry are convinced that the "form, pattern, standard of sound words" is a type of catechism: "the first principles of the oracles of God."

The apostles and other teachers in the New Testament worked with several clear, concise, verbally friendly confessional and catechetical devices to establish a foundation for the entire teaching ministry. The practice of learning by exact verbal patterns was well established, by divine mandate, in Jewish culture. A continuance that would not only be natural but an expected response to the divine disclosure of the words of the gospel. Nothing should hinder the conclusion that memorization of the deposit of truth is biblical. The catechism appears to meet this need most acceptably (See Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and manuscript: Oral Tradition and Writt, Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*).

### **Sola Scriptura**

Some object to catechisms because they fear a tendency to replace Scripture. If viewed in terms of the medieval practice, such a fear might have legitimacy. In addition the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy: produced an implicit creedalism that was opposed by the founder of the pietist movement. While Pietism developed its own set of problems, its renewed emphasis on Bible study was a needed practical application of the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*. The most consistent practice in Protestantism, however, gives positive relief to this important concern. Spurgeon noted the tendency of this fear and addressed it forcefully:

If there were any fear that Scripture would be displaced by handbooks of theology, we should be the first to denounce them; but there is not the shadow of a reason for such a dream, since the most Bible-reading of all the nations is that in which the Assembly's Catechism is learned by almost every mother's son [cited in Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, s.v. Creeds, advantageous).

Matthew Henry, in his "Sermon Concerning the Catechizing of Youth," expressed, a century before Spurgeon, the same confidence:

Bear us witness, we set up no other rule and practice, no other oracle, no other touchstone or test of orthodoxy, but the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament: these are the only fountains whence we fetch our knowledge;...and far be it from us that we should set up any form of words in competition with it, much less in contradiction to it; or admit any rival with it in the conduct and guardianship of our souls, as some do the traditions of the church, and others I know not what light within. Every other help we have for our souls we make use of as *regula regulata* - "a rule controlled"; in subordination and subserviency to the Scripture; and among the rest our catechisms and confessions of faith [*The Complete Works of Matthew Henry* 2 vols. (Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1979) 2:159, 160].

Allow a contemporary to testify to the eminently safe and edifying character of a scriptural catechism. In his introduction to his own revised version of Keach's Catechism, Paul King Jewett anticipates this objection with a strong answer:

It would be anomalous indeed to say that in teaching that the Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice, the catechism is setting itself in the place of Scripture. All that the

authors of our catechism have sought to do is to state in a plain, orderly and concise manner what the Scripture teaches. And do we any less in the sermon, which is the very central act of evangelical worship? What is a sermon, or at least what ought it to be, but a clear and forceful statement in the preacher's own words of what the Scripture means?

And if this may be done in a sermon, why may it not be done in a catechism?

## **An Encouragement to Use Catechisms (Part 3)**

### **Catechizing is Practical**

The practicality of such an exercise can be demonstrated at several points.

First, catechizing forces one to redeem the time. There are many good and helpful ways for parents and children to spend time together. Many parents struggle, however, with finding a means of creating spiritual and biblical discussions with their children. The discipline of catechizing draws parent and child, student and teacher, together in the most helpful and edifying of all activities--the submission of heart and mind to the teachings of the Bible. Other activities may draw the parties together, but time could not be so well spent in any other endeavor. As Matthew Henry affirms, "Your being catechized obliges you to spend at least some part of your time well, and so as you may afterwards reflect upon it with comfort and satisfaction above many other, perhaps above any other, of your precious moments."

Second, catechizing gives the building blocks from which all Scripture can be comprehended. I considered this idea briefly when considering how a catechism is in conformity with the purpose of Scripture. One of the church's most influential and, from a teaching standpoint, successful theologians, John Calvin, saw the truth of this principle and employed it brilliantly. He wrote a catechism to be used in all the homes in Geneva and explains his commitment to this ideas in the preface to his 1545 French edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He spoke of the benefits to the church of having in writing a treatment "in succession of the principal matters" which comprise Christian truth. Those who took advantage of this benefit will "be prepared to make more progress in the school of God in one day than any other person in three months" since he knows "to what he should refer each sentence and has a rule by which to test whatever is presented to him."

Marion Snapper calls this the Lodestar hypothesis. In the absence of sophisticated electronic equipment, a maritime navigator must focus on several brilliant and pivotal stars out of the vast and dazzling array of heavenly splendors. The catechism provides these guiding lights. An artist begins learning his gift by observing the forms of circles, triangles, ellipses, squares, and adds understanding of shading, symmetry, and depth. He then combines these into beautiful creations by the skillful addition of detail. A theologian begins with the first basic principles of faith, which if learned well provide the immovable stones which support massive and comprehensive treatments of all the revealed counsels of God.

Though a catechism cannot contain all the beauty of the Scriptures, it may contain "the essentials of religion, the foundations and main pillars" upon which the rest stands. Matthew Henry compares a catechism to a "map of the land of promise, by the help of which we may travel it over with our eye in a little time." A catechism can no more replace the Bible than a map can replace travel. Though a map does not render the smell of flowers, the heat of the sun, the refreshment of a breeze, or the height of a mountain, the serious traveler would never want to be without one. Traveling from Cuckfield to Canterbury or from Gary, Indiana, to Soddy Daisy, Tennessee, a trip can turn into quite a disaster without a good map for guidance. The terrain is not altered to fit the map; rather, the map is carefully designed to show what the terrain is like.

Nor does one sit at home admiring the wonderful map, thinking that he has seen the world because he has studied the map. No, the map aids in my travel and even encourages one to it. One gets an overall view of where one is going from the map, and, conversely, the journey even helps one understand the map better. Even so is a catechism to Scripture.

Third, a catechized congregation makes better sermons and better preachers. Thomas Watson says, "To preach and not to catechize is to build without foundation." The writer of Hebrews labored under some debilitating difficulties because his readers were inadequately grounded in foundational theological principles (Heb. 5:11-14). What might the writer have told us about the priesthood of Christ had his addressees been mature doctrinally and well catechized? Even so, if a significant portion of one's regular congregation sees clearly the lodestars of the Faith, more detailed textual exposition becomes possible, if not necessary. Thus, the people are in a position to feed on the sincere milk of the word and the pastoral dimension of feeding the flock of God takes on new and highly challenging dimensions.

Two dangers in this advantage are to be avoided. One, maturity of understanding in a portion of the congregation must not force one into a weekly display of esoteric interests. While every message must have something to stretch and challenge the mature, it must also speak plainly to the children and the uncatechized. Two, one must avoid the spirit of novelty. A strong foundation must not be interpreted to grant one license to produce cute little doctrinal embellishments of one's own whims derived from hermeneutical oddities and hidden meanings. Such enterprises, in reality, produce only disproportionate, grotesque monstrosities composed of wood, hay, and stubble to be consumed, for they have no coherence or harmony with the foundation, which is Christ. In fact the tendency of the preacher involved in catechetical training with his congregation would be to emphasize the great central truths of the gospel: sin, the cross, atonement, regeneration, repentance unto life, saving faith, justification, the person and work of Christ, the covenantal working of the Triune God in the salvation of sinners.

The fourth practical use of a catechism is its witness to our belief that Scripture is consistent, clear, and can be taught systematically. Popular scepticism towards the possibility of revealed truth produces raised eyebrows and dropped jaws at the mention of "systematic" theology or catechisms of Bible doctrine. Such materials presuppose that the Bible's teachings on any number of subjects can be arranged in such a manner as to present a consistent, non-contradictory picture of that subject. Catechisms may present real problems to those who feel uncomfortable affirming full biblical truthfulness and consistency; but, for those who accept that position as necessary for the Christian faith, catechisms should be not only welcomed but aggressively sought.

Fifth, arising from the Christian's commitment to truthfulness, which includes coherence and non-contradiction, the catechism aids in producing minds which are congenial to logic and analysis. A well-constructed catechism weaves itself into a tapestry of truth. All parts depend upon and are informed by all others. The learner does not see items of information as meaningless and disconnected from reality as a whole. Instead, without eliminating the sense of mystery and intruding on things hidden from our view by God himself, a confidence in the coherence of truth is paramount. Everything begins with God as creator, subsists and maintains

its being through divine providence, and ultimately is consumed in the divine purpose to God's glory.

Not only is the created order meaningful, but history is meaningful, *and* the words used to describe creation and history are meaningful. The God who *spoke* the world into existence and maintains it by the *word* of his power, has by those acts vested in written language the possibility, in fact the necessity, of accurate communication. Observe theological procession and analytical integrity of the following series of exchanges.

Q. (20) Into what estate did the fall bring mankind?

A. The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery (Rom. v. 1,2).

Q. (21) Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?

A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it (Rom. v.12, to the end; Eph. ii. 1,2,3; James i. 14,15; Matt. xv. 19).

Q. (22) Wherin consists the misery of that estate whereunto man fell?

A. All mankind by this fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

Q. (23) Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life (Eph. i. 4,5), did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer (Rom. iii. 20-22; Gal. iii., 21,22).

The fall leads to an estate of Sin and Misery. The two estates are defined and their several parts delineated, and deliverance from sin and misery is introduced. This, of course, leads to a section describing the person and work of the Redeemer. These responses are from the *Baptist Catechism* used by London Particular Baptists, the Philadelphia Association and the Charleston Association. It is based on *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a cut above most other catechisms, but the advantage under discussion still stands for any well-organized catechism.

Sixth, Godly catechizing may serve to bolster faith in man's conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil. In 1630, Hugh Peters encouraged parents to catechize their children by reminding them "if ever your poore Infants bee driven to wilderness, to hollow caves, to Fagot and Fire, or to sorrowes of any kinde, they will thank God and you, they were well catechized.' Marion Snapper characterizes this as the "Prison Camp hypothesis." His judgment is that this is about as realistic as "arguing for obesity in anticipation of landing in a Vietnamese prison camp; it is simply too far removed from the realities of life."

Though wildernesses, Fagot and Fire may not be a present threat, persecution and opposition of a different sort is just as real and perhaps more subtly destructive. Biblical views of both God and man undergo incessant bombardment in the educational structure of modern society. What Christian young person hasn't found himself in the wilderness of a university classroom, or high school room for that matter, wishing he knew concretely the argument for a belief that his parents and his pastor hold dearly. And how many who have only vague impressions of doctrine

but no lively and coherent apprehension of them find themselves overwhelmed by the apparent massive scholarship and acute philosophical insights of an unbelieving teacher?

Such an experience tends to isolate "religious" ideas to a corner of knowledge merely mystical and devotional, tangent to reality only at the point of personal value judgments but not considered worthy of the status of absolutes in any sense. Christianity becomes only a matter of private opinion, but certainly not a case to be argued. Catechizing from an early age sensitizes and conditions the person to consider God and his attributes as an essential part of knowledge, indeed foundational for all true learning. In addition, one learns to evaluate man properly both as to his dignity from creation and his intellectual/moral capabilities as modified by the fall. Seventh, catechisms provide the theological foundation to bring reformation, prepare for revival, and avoid fanatical enthusiasm. Reformation is the recovery and propagation of central gospel truth and the ordering of the church--worship, ordinances, officers, and preaching--in its light. Revival is the recovery of love for God and man and results in the establishing of priorities in life on the basis of that love. Enthusiasm, the teaching that special leading and the revelation of truth are given privately to individuals, has been the source of divisive and dangerous error. Catechizing provides a doctrinal and biblical foundation which disarms and disciplines the tendency toward privatization of religious truth.

Spurgeon sums up the matter as pungently as any advocate of catechisms.

In matters of doctrine you will find orthodox congregations frequently changed to heterodoxy in the course of thirty or forty years, and that is because, too often, there has been no catechizing of the children in the essential doctrines of the Gospel. For my part, I am more and more persuaded that the study of a good Scriptural catechism is of infinite value to our children. . . . Even if the youngsters do not understand all the questions and answers . . . yet, abiding in their memories, it will be infinite service when the time of understanding comes, to have known these very excellent, wise and judicious definitions of the things of God. . . . It will be a blessing to them--the greatest of all blessing . . . a blessing in life and death, in time and eternity, the best of blessings God Himself can give.

Those who concur and practice in accordance with such a judgment will find themselves standing in good company and involved in a holy enterprise.

## **One Essential Article**

"Do I address one here who imagines that an orthodox creed will save him? I suppose that no one is more orthodox than the devil, yet no one is more surely lost than he is. You may get a clear head, but if you have not a clean heart, it will not avail you at the last. You may know the Westminster Assembly's Catechism by heart, but unless you are born again, it will not benefit you. Did you say that you believe the thirty-nine articles? There is one article that is essential--'You must be born again' (John 3:7). And woe to that man who has not passed through that all-important change."

*Charles H. Spurgeon*