

Teaching Truth, Training Hearts

The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life

Revised Edition

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By
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with
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Dedication

to the 1998 Edition

To Margaret,

without whose prayers and example
catechising would be like
clouds without water.

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Preface

Tom Nettles

I confess that I love catechisms. I have enjoyed memorizing large portions of some of those in this volume. It is spiritually refreshing to meditate on the phrases of the responses and investigate the Scriptures used to develop those responses. That exercise has been as helpful in my personal theological education as any other single practice. I relished the time on Sunday afternoons and sometimes on week nights working with my children on ways to memorize the beautiful cadences of *The Baptist Catechism* after they had learned every response in the *Catechism for Girls and Boys*. They would come up with rhythms. I will never forget the swelling, booming response that always came after mastering the rhythm in “whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness,” or acrostics (APJIP, “assurance..., peace..., joy..., increase..., and perseverance...”), and challenges to each other for methods of remembering. They were quicker and smarter than I and I probably relied on my position as the book-holding inquisitor sometimes to escape embarrassment at the obvious reality that they knew the answer verbatim while I still struggled to get all the phrases.

Though it sometimes creates tedium, mostly what I remember about those sessions was the fun and the clear conviction that we were working together on something that was right, that honored God and his truth, and that held promise for the development of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional maturity. I pray that those truths will yet be effectual in them and that they will want to pass along the adventure in truth to their children. I thank them for the fun and for being my laboratory.

These catechisms could be used in five helpful ways. (1) I hope parents will be able to use it as part of a family worship time; (2) Church classes for both children and adults would find it helpful in guiding or supplement-

ing a doctrine study; (3) Pastors could read through one and then another catechism regularly to discipline their exegesis and provide a guideline for achieving a balance in their teaching and preaching ministries; (4) Christian schools may find it beneficial as part of the doctrinal curriculum at several grade levels; (5) Seminary classes on denominational history and theology would be hard pressed to find a more succinct and clear witness to the doctrinal balance and persevering testimony of Baptists through the centuries.

Even though I have sought to describe several other catechisms in introductory material, I regret having to leave out their texts. It seemed practical to limit the selection to these with the intent that they provide a window to both historical information and practical usefulness. A special thanks to Steve Weaver for his contribution of the material on *An Orthodox Catechism* and Hercules Collins. *An Orthodox Catechism* is similar to *The Baptist Catechism*. It shows the solidarity with orthodox evangelicals in their desire to propagate the faith once delivered to the saints. *The Baptist Catechism* employs the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and the *Orthodox Catechism* employs the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Teachers will find creative ways to mix and mingle responses and biblical proofs on common subjects from different catechisms to provide a fuller display of the doctrines involved.

I want to thank some conscientious and tenacious secretaries who have combined their efforts over the years to make this volume possible. Jackie Madon at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Camille Couch at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Matilda Hunsicker and Stacy Guzzardo (Moo) at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School all provided faithfulness and competence in critical steps along the way. Also I deeply appreciate Founders Press for a willingness to make this book and consequently these texts available.

Finally, because of the wonder, mystery, beauty and infinite grace to which the truths contained in this small volume bear witness, I say sincerely SOLI DEO GLORIA.

Steve Weaver

I would first like to express my appreciation to Tom Nettles for including me with him in the second edition of this important volume. I must confess that I share Tom's love for catechisms, largely due to his influence on my life. In fact, like for so many others, it was when I read the first edition of this volume that I became convinced of the importance of catechisms in Baptist life. Therefore, it is a distinct honor to have had the

opportunity to pursue doctoral studies under the primary author of this volume and now to contribute in a small way to this second edition. My prayer is that this new edition will lead to the continued recovery of the use of catechisms in Baptist life today.

My contribution to this volume was to provide the text of and introductory essay for the *Orthodox Catechism*. First published in 1680, the *Orthodox Catechism* is a revision of the beloved *Heidelberg Catechism*, a Protestant catechism originally published in 1563. For over four-hundred and fifty years this catechism has provided comfort to God's people. What has been largely unknown, however, was the revision published by London Baptist pastor Hercules Collins in the latter half of the seventeenth century. It is hoped that the inclusion of the *Orthodox Catechism* in this volume will result in an increased knowledge and use among Baptists of this encouraging expression of Reformed piety.

In the *Orthodox Catechism*, the question numbers were not in the original. Those have been added for convenience of the reader. We have updated the language, punctuation, and spelling, but have kept the changes to a minimum. We have also corrected any scripture references that were believed to be typos in the original.

Special thanks to Richard Barcellos of Reformed Baptist Academic Press for permission to use the text of the catechism which was originally edited for publication in Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and G. Stephen Weaver, Jr. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2014). Two significant additions to the catechism in this volume is the inclusion of the section on the laying on of hands and the appendix on hymn-singing, which were both omitted from the RBAP edition. A special word of appreciation is also due to Enrique Durán, Jr., who did the initial transcription of the catechism and assisted in proof-reading the catechism.

Finally, I would like to thank Founders Press for their ongoing commitment to publish material that edifies the church, including the present volume. I am thankful for the vision of Executive Director Tom Ascol, for the work of Ken Puls in shepherding this work in its early stages, and for the important role of Jared Longshore in bringing this book finally to its completed form.

Introduction

An Encouragement to Use Catechisms

Life at the beginning of the third millenium A. D. pulsates with witticisms, opinions, and even reasons that would assign a book on catechisms to the dust bin of antiquarian irrelevancies. In the same odd combination of agreement that saw pietists and rationalists gradually overthrow confessional Christianity in 17th-18th century Europe, some within historically evangelical denominations join with twentieth-century post-moderns to cast an eschewing eye on these quaint systematic arrangements of biblical doctrine. To be sure, they think they share a common antipathy from different perspectives; in reality, like pietism and rationalism, foundational commitments are frighteningly similar. Whereas rationalists, such as Descartes, made human consciousness in the form of pure rationalism the final criterion for truth, pietists made human consciousness in the form of religious experience the criterion of truth. The pietists accepted the Bible and enjoined its study; they believed in conversion and preached so as to engender it; they believed in right and wrong and sought holiness both in personal life and in social and cultural institutions. All of these practices are right and the churches would do well in every generation to emulate them. Nevertheless, in spite of these good things, their weariness of theological vigilance led to an eventual theological slumber. This slumber induced a nightmare of horrors. To this day, the evangelical church has not been able to exorcise these dream-wrought demons in order to live in the full glow of the light of Christ (Ephesians 5: 8–14).

Now in these last days of modernism, dubbed post-modernism in much contemporary literature, human consciousness still serves as the criterion of truth. A significant difference exists, however; the confidence that rationalism could unlock the secrets of the world and the meaning of life and present humanity with an exhaustive display of truth forever to un-

shackle the mind of man has evaporated. Rationalism has led to irrationalism; now, therefore, human consciousness in the form of individual desire reigns supreme. Neither truth nor a uniform set of standards governs the post-modern milieu. One life style, chosen in accordance with one's own desires, is as good as another. "Do not absolutize" is the only rule.

Again, evangelicals somehow find this mentality useful in seeking to do what evangelicals do. An appeal to the absoluteness of *Me* has an inordinate influence on worship, practice, and faith in evangelical churches and organizations. The structure of buildings, the preaching of sermons, the development of church programs, the formation of focus groups, the provision of recreation, and even the engagement in missions tend to focus on personal fulfillment, positive self-image, individual desires, and a non-threatening atmosphere.

The powerful attraction, and even governing capacity, of these (non) values, while showing up in such areas as the physical arrangement of the building and the content of corporate worship, has its most devastating effect on preaching and religious education. Both of these stewardships of the "deposit of truth" are in severe distress. The post-modern ideology has become an infatuation of the church. Its guardians have allowed, and at times encouraged and even taught, a fondling and caressing of the *Me* goddess to the dangerous point of spiritual adultery. Governing life and church by Truth rather than personal opinion, personal pleasure, and personal experience may prove distasteful to many, but to those who have tasted that the Lord is good, it will open a door to a banquet of spiritual blessings and heavenly delights.

Baptists have shared in this dalliance with post-modernism and have waded in both the religious and secular streams of it. To those, an approach to religious commitment that includes teaching by catechism would seem strange at best and even highly offensive for many. Others, however, maintain a continuity with pietism and still treasure the Baptist emphasis on conversion and the principle of biblical authority so central in Baptist history. They would consider the words "Baptist catechism" as mutually exclusive. They may labor under the misconception 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. For good reasons, therefore, some harbor deep-seated suspicion of catechisms.

This concern reflects a healthy interest for the experiential side of true Christianity. Of this number, some have come from main-line Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. In these contexts they learned a confession, went to catechism class, and were confirmed and then later heard the gos-

pel and embraced Christ in saving faith. They have subsequently left their former denomination and have joined a more Bible-centered and conversion-centered congregation. In doing this, they have interpreted their experience with catechisms largely in negative terms. In reality, the impressions of those experiences probably served as preparation for understanding and receiving the gospel. Concern for conversion and fervor, therefore, 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 the actual appropriateness of such fears cannot be sustained historically, biblically, or practically. It is the purpose of this book to remove those misconceptions and provide for Baptists of both the post-modern and pietist type a view of Christian instruction which can both inform the mind and arrest the heart.

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 (catechumenate) 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 this) 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. Virtually all pastors (bishops) had large classes of catechumens. Some of the clearest and most vital statements of theological commitment come from the writings designed for *catechesis*. 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 eventually gave new direction to 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 concerning the means by which thorough reformation could be accomplished.

In the first place, there ought to be an explicit summary of the doctrine which all ought to preach, which all prelates and curates swear to follow, and no one should be received to any ecclesiastical charge who does not promise to preserve such agreement. Next, that they have a common formula of instruction for little children and for ignorant persons, serving to make them familiar with sound doctrine, so that they may be able to discern the difference between it and the falsehood and corruptions which may be brought forward in opposition to it. Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and using it to multiply from age to age. And therefore, if you desire to build an edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good Catechism, which may shew them briefly, and in language level to their tender age, wherein true Christianity consists. This catechism will serve two purposes, to wit, as an introduction to the whole people, so that every one may profit from what shall be preached, and also to enable them to discern when any presumptuous person puts forward strange doctrine. ... thirdly, to take away all ground of pretence for bringing in any eccentricity or new-fangled doctrine on the part of those who only seek to indulge an idle fancy; as I have already said, the Catechism ought to serve as a check upon such people.¹

¹ John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 7 vols., ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 5:191.

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.

1: What is thy only comfort in life and in death?

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.

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

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, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer.

Hercules Collins, a leading English Baptist of the seventeenth century and successor as pastor to John Spilsbury in the first Particular Baptist church, adopted the *Heidelberg Catechism* as the basis for his 1680 publication of *An Orthodox Catechism*. Collins felt that this virtual duplication of the *Heidelberg Catechism* should strengthen the usefulness of the 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.”²

² Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism: Being the Sum of Christian Religion, contained in the Law and Gospel. Published for Preventing the Canker and Poison of Heresy and Error* (London, 1680), “Preface” [unnumbered]. Collins also proposed the use of the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Apostles Creed.

Part of his purpose was to demonstrate basic unity with the larger Protestant community. In the funeral oration for Collins, John Piggott, reminded the congregation that “his doctrine ... was agreeable to the sentiments of the reformed churches in all fundamental articles of faith.”³ Collins believed that the catechism was a “sound piece of divinity,” and expressed his hope that readers would know, “I concenter with the most Orthodox Divines in the *Fundamental Principles and Articles of the Christian Faith*, and also have industriously expressed them in the same words.” While he was a zealous Baptist working for the restoration of a pure church and a pure observance of the ordinances, he earnestly contended that “whatever is good in any, owned by any, whatever Error or Vice [in church constitution] it may be mixed withal, the Good must not be rejected for the Error or Vice sake, but owned, commended, and accepted.”⁴

Although scores 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, long time pastor of First Baptist Church, Charleston, SC, used it faithfully and effectively.

Several principles appeared to govern the theory of catechisms:

One, many catechists 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 these, *A Catechism for Babes or Little Ones*, 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

³ Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols. (London, 1811–1830), 2:435.

⁴ Collins, “Preface” to *An Orthodox Catechism*.

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.” Instruction to Dutch Reformed ministers insisted that the text of the five chapters should be memorized by students “fully and unadulterated, not substituting strange words which sometimes falsify the meaning and give the text an opposite meaning.”

Three, heart knowledge, more than exact head knowledge, was the main purpose of catechetical instruction. 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 can 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, *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, wrote a catechism entitled *The Baptist Scriptural Catechism*, published in 1850 by Edward H. Fletcher. Fish, a great observer and promoter of revival and an advocate of pulpit eloquence, screwed in tightly the application of each section of his catechism by a poignant rhetorical question sealing discussion of each doctrine. For example, his section on faith closes, “Are *you* a believer, or does the wrath of God abide on you for unbelief?” His section on regeneration and the Holy Spirit asks, “Are *you* giving evidence of having been renewed by the Holy Spirit?” The discussion of election poses the question, “Judging by this standard [that is, repentance, faith and the maintenance of good works as evidences of election], have *you* any reason to hope you are an object of his electing love. If not, have you not reason for deep concern?” After a strong section of responses to the subject of the omnipotence and independence of God, Fish closes with the question, “Since you are wholly in the power of this Almighty being, have you reason to fear or rejoice judging from your present character and condition?”

A catechism written by 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.⁵

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,

⁵ J. B. Taylor, *Memoir of Rev. Luther Rice* (Baltimore, MD: Armstrong and Berry, 1840), 25, 26.

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.

Four, cognitive 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 that the very Babes, that can speak but stammeringly, and are of very weak capacities, might understand what they say."⁶

John A. Broadus felt the same tension when writing his "Catechism of Bible Teaching," included in this volume. 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. Both Particular Baptists and General Baptists in England used catechisms to instruct children and adults. Typical of the Particular 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 apostacy 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 intreat you to furnish yourselves with this excellent com-

⁶ Henry Jessey, *A Catechisme for Babes or Little Ones* (London: Henry Hills, 1652), preface. This catechism was reprinted in the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. 30, no. 1 (January 1982), 42–53.

pendium 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.

Among the General Baptists, Thomas Grantham in the 17th and Dan Taylor in the 18th centuries saw the value of a catechetical approach to indoctrination. Grantham's *St. Paul's Catechism* (1687) inculcated Arminian theology and used the six principles of Hebrews 6 as its guide. It has an unusual format in that the son asks questions and the father answers them. Both the questions and answers are too long and unwieldy to be easily memorized.

Dan Taylor's catechism, *A Catechism of Instruction for Children and Youth*, went through eight editions by 1810. He made no bold attempt to inculcate the distinctive marks of Arminianism, but instead spent a great amount of space on the doctrine of sin, its heinousness, its debilitating effects, its consequences, and the resultant necessity of regeneration. In light of the Christological controversies among the General Baptists in which Taylor was a major player, the omission of a separate chapter on the person of Christ is an unusual fact.

In the early nineteenth century, Baptists in Virginia often considered the question as to how the religious education of children should be conducted. Both in the general meeting and in separate associations the answer was given, "By the use of catechisms."⁷

Semple described a debate in the Dover Association concerning the use of catechisms in which virtually every objection to their use was forwarded and answered. Catechisms were unnecessary since the Bible was sufficient and catechisms tended to lessen the dignity of the Bible in people's estimation. Catechisms, in addition, had been used to inculcate the most "corrupt and absurd sentiments."⁸

Semple summarized the reply of the advocates of the catechism:

that corrupt men could communicate corrupt sentiments through the most sacred channels; that the pulpit and the press, conversation, and even public prayer had been occasionally the vehicles of unsound doctrines; that it could be no indignity to the Scriptures to inculcate in the minds of children principles and duties completely sanctioned by the Scriptures; that such forms of instruction greatly assisted parents in

⁷ Robert Baylor Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, VI: Pitt & Dickinson, 1894), 117, 127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

the discharge of their duty, seeing there could be few parents capable of explaining the Bible suitably for the instruction of children; that the manners and morals of the children of Baptists lately grown up plainly evinced that religious education had been too much neglected.⁹

The Sunday School and Publication Board of the State Convention of North Carolina produced a catechism designed to teach specific knowledge of scriptural facts.¹⁰ In 1864, the Baptist Banner Office in Augusta, Georgia, published *A Catechism for the Little Children* by Uncle Dayton (A. C. Dayton) again focusing chiefly on scriptural knowledge.

At least two catechisms were produced by American Baptists in 1866. One, published by the American Baptist Publication Society, came from a contest held by the society. A committee edited the winning contribution and issued "The Prize Catechism" as *The Baptist Catechism*. It follows the order, and sometimes the wording of Keach's catechism. Its theology is a clear, forceful, and evangelistic Calvinism. The following exchanges illustrate the clarity and openness with which the doctrines of grace were embraced.

30. If men were left to themselves, would any embrace the offer of salvation?

Men are so sinful, that not one would embrace the offer of salvation, but for the gracious working of the Holy Spirit.

32. What is regeneration?

Regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit, by which the heart is renewed so that it turns from the love of sin to the love of holiness, and from enmity and disobedience to the love and service of God.

33. Will any who are truly regenerated be lost?

None who are truly regenerated will be lost, for they are kept by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The copy owned by the author is photocopied from microfilm in the library of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Inadvertently, pages 2, 3 were omitted in the copying. These pages probably contain the date of publication. I would guess that the publication is in the early 1860's.

38. Do all men receive these benefits of the atonement?

All men do not receive these benefits of the atonement, but those only who have been elected in Christ Jesus.

39. What is election:

Election is the purpose of God, by which those who are saved were before the foundation of the world, chosen to be conformed to the image of his Son, to whom they were given as his people.

The second catechism by American Baptists in 1866, written by W. W. Everts, was entitled *Compend of Christian Doctrines Held by Baptists*. Originally published in Chicago by Church & Goodman publishers, it was reissued in 1887 by the American Baptist Publication Society in the *Baptist Layman's Book*. This later edition employed the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* as the ordering principle and shares the same clear Calvinism as before. In fact, in the 1887 edition, Everts indicates no embarrassment about the term "Calvinist" in his answer to a question on perseverance: "The chief assailants of the doctrine admit that there is a stage of experience from which none can fall. Calvinists made that experience coincide with the new birth." This catechism contains an exposition of the Beatitudes. For example, in answer to how the blessing of comfort is bestowed on those that mourn, Everts writes, "By alleviating, terminating and sanctifying sorrow, and crowning it with heavenly hope."

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. Ryland's catechism is described more fully later in this volume. Examples from Winkler's *Notes and Questions* are included.

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, ten 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.

Today's Baptist community would benefit from a resuscitation of the advice given in Cathcart's *The Baptist Encyclopedia* which 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."

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.

The Bible Encourages The Use of Catechisms

Precedence of history alone, however, does not provide sufficient justification for the use of a method in teaching Christian truth. For those committed to the regulative principle of Scripture, biblical warrant, either directly commanded or legitimately inferred from a robust grasp of revealed rationale, cannot be sidestepped. It is necessary to establish, therefore, that in addition to these lessons of history, Scripture itself encourages the use of catechisms. The means by which God brings about justification and subsequent transformation embody the biblical message in a way remarkably consistent with the purpose, content, and arrangement of catechisms in the reformation tradition. 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, suf-

iciency, and consistency of Scripture; the purpose is preparation of the mind and conscience for the Spirit's work of regeneration and 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 Corinthians 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 fulfils biblical principles undergirding the process of disciple-making.

Fulfilment of Scripture's Purpose

Preaching, teaching, and meditation (all 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-catechised 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 increases. More will be said about this in the discussion of practical advantages.

A well-catechised 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 bibli-

cal scholar and pastor, 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 (Deuteronomy 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 by the prophet” (Acts 2:16) and the explanation was sufficient. His appeal to the attestation of Jesus’ ministry by miracles, wonders, and signs (Acts 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 (Ephesians 1:19; Colossians 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 catechised them. Many misunderstandings and erroneous applications, however, dominated the Athenians religious scheme as they tortured the message of creation and conscience into superstitious paganism. In addi-

tion to some elemental truths to which Paul could refer, he had the more monumental task of deconstruction in his preaching to these proud pagans, as he confronted their woefully diminutive theology and moral ignorance. The unregenerate condition is deadly whether one is in pagan ignorance or lives in a flourishing Christian context. Given this element of equality, the one who is well-catechised has his natural capacity more greatly enlarged to comprehend the preaching of the Christian gospel.

Also, more quickly than those not so trained, those catechised become capable of preaching and teaching. The appeal of preaching lies 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" (Matthew 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 into how one can make fresh applications of the unchangeable truths of divine revelation.

The Apostle Paul prototypically exemplifies one whose zeal for knowledge prior to conversion affected proportionately his impact as an evangelist and teacher of the church. Prior to his experience of transforming grace, Paul "advanced in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries" (Galatians 1:14). He was zealous for the ancestral traditions, that is, in his knowledge of the Law [Scripture] and his commitment to its centrality for the healthy state of God's people, he was a Pharisee (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:5). This knowledge created a zeal hostile to the church. When, however, God revealed His Son in Paul, his capacity for the reception of the new revelations connected with Christ's fulfilment of the Old Covenant was immense. Though he was set aside to "go to the Gentiles," (Galatians 2:9), he often reasoned from the Scriptures in the synagogues seeking to convince the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. His defense of justification by faith alone by grace alone through Christ alone was done on the basis of careful exposition of the Old Testament. His commitment to Scripture as that which is able to make one wise to salvation and thoroughly furnish the Christian with all that he needs for spiritual maturity was only intensified by the gracious opening of his eyes to see the glory of God in the

face of Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ himself as the incarnation of the “scribe” who takes out of the law things new and old, Paul fits the pattern most neatly. His thorough catechising in Scripture and theological literature prepared him for his trying and arduous work as an apostle.

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.”

Admonitions and Examples

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 (Deuteronomy 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” (Psalm 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 (Romans 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.

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 (Ezra 8:1–8). Scripture says, “They read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

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; 6:12–16; 2 Timothy 1:8–10; 2:11–13; and Titus 2:11–14.

The faith Paul mentions in Ephesians 4:5, 13 (“one faith . . . unity of the faith”) could be the experience of grace of faith. Another, and more likely, possibility is that it denotes 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 (v. 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. This 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 1 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 Timothy 1:15, 3:1, 4:9, and 2 Timothy 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 saviour of all men, especially those who believe.”

These faithful sayings consisted of the teachings of the apostles and New Testament prophets (the foundational gifts to the church). In addition, they served as the Christ-centered guide to the interpretation of the Old Testament 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 Corinthians 1:12); the spoken message about Christ’s person and work (1 Corinthians 1:16); and, in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it refers specifically to the martyr’s death. In 1 Timothy 2:6 the word “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 Timothy 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” (Isaiah 8:20 NASB).

The testimony of our Lord, or the testimony of Jesus, is the fulfilment 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 2 Timothy 1:9–10:

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 warned against those who lived in a moral squalor opposed to the “sound teaching which is according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1:10). In 1 Timothy 6:3, Paul warns Timothy against those who want to teach other things and will not receive “sound words,” that is, those about our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor will they receive “the teaching” that is 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.

Second Timothy 3:14, 15 pictures Timothy as having learned from his grandmother, mother, and Paul sets of truths stated not exactly in Scripture language but foundationed upon Scripture truth. In conformity with this same idea the writer of Hebrews speaks of the need of some to be instructed in the “elementary principles of the Oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:12).

Paul's emphasis on "the teaching," the "deposit," the "sound teaching," the "sound words," and his instruction that it serve as a corrective guideline to false teachings, false teachers, and non-essential subtleties creates a form with clearly recognizable features. The Puritans 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 of 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.¹¹

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 nations is that in which the Assembly's Catechism is learned by almost every mother's son.¹²

¹¹ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*.

¹² Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, s.v. Creeds, advantageous.

Matthew Henry, in his “Sermon Concerning the Catechizing of Youth,” expressed, over a century earlier than 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.¹³

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?¹⁴

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 catechising 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

¹³ *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 2:159, 160.

¹⁴ Paul King Jewett, *The Baptist Catechism: Commonly called Keach’s Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), vii, viii.

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 idea 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. He who takes 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 splendours. 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 skilful 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.

The first level of scholastic education, the trivium, involved the study of three disciplines: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar supplied the basic laws of language—vocabulary, precise diction, declensions, conjugations, and syntax. Logic involved the arrangement of these well constructed sentences composed of clearly defined terms into arguments which were free of fallacies in reason. Rhetoric consisted of the art of presenting this well reasoned position in an attractive compelling style. The “grammar” of Christian witness and world-view is Scripture memory and catechism. The “logic” is more catechism and systematic theology. The “rhetoric” is preaching (Acts 18:5), persuasion (Acts 18:4), public debate (Acts 18:28), purposive extended argumentation (Acts 19:8), tactical apologetics, and world-view confrontation (Acts 17:22, 23). Paul had so mastered the fun-

damental points, the “grammar,” that he could use them in a dazzling variety of complex situations. One could add to this category all aspects of the apostolic letters of the New Testament such as practical instruction, ethical admonition, and theological application. The catechism, however, helps provide the “grammar” for all of this development.

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 travel and gives a person courage to try it. The map gives an overall view of the journey, and, conversely, the journey even helps the traveler better understand the map. 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 catechise is to build without foundation.” The writer of Hebrews felt that the inadequate theological foundation of his readers restricted his scope in instructing them further. They desperately needed a more mature grasp of elementary theological principles (Hebrews 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 lurk surreptitiously within this strength and must be avoided. An elevated quality 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 licence 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 skepticism 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 the logical procession and analytical integrity of the following series of exchanges:

Q. 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. 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. Wherein 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. 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 bolsters the faith of those in 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 wildernesses, 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 are 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. And

now that modernity has been stretched into post-modernity, toleration of all viewpoints has theoretically increased, but confidence in the existence of real truths has correspondingly diminished. In reality, everything is tolerated but Christian certainty.

What Christian young person hasn't found herself in the wilderness of a university classroom, or high school class room for that matter, wishing she knew concretely the argument for a belief that her parents and 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.

J. B. Gambrell, the great Baptist commoner, advocated the teaching of strong doctrine to maintain Baptist distinctives. When he was editor of *The Baptist Standard*, he challenged the readers to consider the benefits of a creed for vital Christian witness. A digest of his arguments applies just as forcefully to the use of catechisms.

In this discussion a good start is to say that no one can be a Christian without a creed. ... In Christianity the holy Scriptures are the measure and criterion of creeds. To say it is right to believe a doctrine, but wrong to write what you believe, is not even respectable baby talk. ... In times of looseness, vague expression, cunning craftiness in dealing with religious things a creedal statement, drawn on scriptural lines, perspicuous and forceful, has cleared the thinking of the people, separated between truth

and all the outlying territory of error like a staked and ridged fence. ... A creedal statement is a challenge to seekers for truth to see whether the things stated are so, taking each separate statement and comparing it with the Scriptures. It gives definiteness to inquiry and greatly helps in the study of the Bible by drawing attention to one great cardinal doctrine at a time. ... A worthy creedal statement has a fine unifying effect. It clarifies the minds of many who are right in their trend and feeling, but have not condensed their feeling and thoughts into words. ... A clear statement of any case will unify those whose minds are impregnated with the truth, but in whose minds the truth has not crystallized into form. ... A worthy creedal statement is helpful in dissipating misunderstandings. Only the devious, the sophist, the deceitful workers, the man with unworthy purposes opposes clear statement in dealing with religious matters. ... The cry against creeds is lacking in sound judgment. It comes mostly from those who wish to evaporate religious thought into theological mist that it may be crystallized into other forms. ... The practical value of clear, creedal statements in propagating the truth is and always has been immense. ... It is almost impossible to say too much for clear, crystallized creedal statements in which little words are used edgewise to carve the outlines of truth deep in the minds of men.¹⁵

If so much can be said for writing a creed, how much more helpful is memorizing a catechism built on the creed.

¹⁵ J. B. Gambrell, *The Baptist Standard*, vol 26, no. 4, January 22, 1914.