

Issue

1

A MODERN APPROACH TO CATECHETICAL
INSTRUCTION

BUILDING UPON OUR COVENANTAL FOUNDATION
BY THOMAS R. BROWNING

Doing Biblical
Youth Ministry
in Modern Times

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A Modern Approach to Catechetical Instruction

C.S. Lewis called it “engaging in the great conversation”. Moses called it “teaching them diligently... when you walk by the way”.

I believe every Christian parent wants their child to know God. Part of that desire comes from the natural inclination in a parent’s heart to want their child to be happy and well adjusted; part of that desire comes from an appreciation of what a gracious God has already accomplished in their own salvation. Yet, the reality is that there is usually a great divide between what parents want for their children and how they set about to bring that desire to fruition. Often the division between what they want and what they actually receive is related to raising their children in an increasingly complex and busy society. Sometimes, however, it is more related to the failure of the evangelical church to provide adequate instruction for parents on just how to create an environment that lends itself to natural discourse concerning the things of God.

KEY IDEAS
☛ Focus on Parents
☛ Historical Legitimacy
☛ Provide Training
☛ Community Effort
☛ Make it Modern
☛ Analyze Results

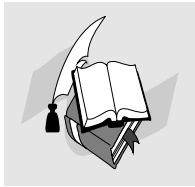
I believe this lack of instruction has caused some parents to relegate their responsibility to others. The church’s failure to adequately catechize parents has led to the parent’s failure to see either the value or necessity of catechizing their own children. Some parents have felt that their inadequate theological training means that Sunday school teachers, youth ministers or even teaching elders are better suited to accomplish the catechizing of their children. The difficulty with such a view is that while teachers and elders certainly share in the responsibility of bringing their children up in the fear and admonition of the Lord the ultimate responsibility for a child’s training still falls to the parents. This responsibility, which is so clearly taught in Scripture, can never be relinquished even if there are others in the church who are more doctrinally proficient.

I believe the best way to alleviate the reticence of parents is to involve them in any process of catechesis right from the start. I believe that the act of involving parents will require us to adjust our philosophy of Christian Education across the board. To introduce a modern spiritual mentoring program will forever change the way we approach Christian education. Obviously, there is a need to avoid the perception among parents that they are only spectators in the catechizing of their children. Yet, the concern is about much more than just parental perception. It is about the absolute

necessity of parents actually being involved from start to finish. The benefit of parental involvement extends to both parent and child. It has benefit for the child in that they incur grounding in biblical instruction; it has benefit for the parent in that they fulfill their Scriptural mandate as well as grow in their own sanctification. Failure to involve parents in the process of catechesis removes the primary means ordained by God to accomplish the task.

I believe there are several ways to encourage the involvement of parents. First, it would help parents to see that the theological education of Christian children is something with which the Reformed church has always been concerned. Secondly, it would help parents to receive biblical instruction on the importance of teaching their children doctrine. Thirdly, it would help parents to commit to the theological training of their children if other people in the church were willing to become involved in the process. Fourthly, it would help if some of the instruction in the great confessions and catechisms were made more culturally accessible. Fifthly, it would help if parents could see some objective evidence of the value of the process.

Making the Case from Church History



“Believe my Lord, that the Church of God shall never be conserved without catechism.” John Calvin to Lord Somerset

In light of this first goal, I believe it is important to demonstrate that church leaders were concerned about the theological education of children in the church from the earliest days of the Reformation. One only has to read the lists of books and catechetical manuals produced by Luther, Calvin, Knox and others to realize that they took the biblical education of children seriously. 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." (Quoted from Tom Nettles) Obviously, Calvin's opinion is important to us as Presbyterians, but there were others even before Calvin who understood the value of catechesis.

Martin Luther deserves special credit being one of the very first to see the merit of providing theological training for children. His masterful Shorter Catechism is a wonderful model of such efforts both because of its clarity and brevity. He included in his catechism questions concerning *The Lord's Prayer, The Apostle's Creed and the Ten Commandments*. Notice the way he handles the Ten Commandments. Notice also that even in the title he makes it clear that this is the simple way a father can instruct his whole family as to their meaning. Luther intended his catechism not only for children

but for all those desiring to grow in their faith. Lutherans have faithfully used it with success for over 400 years.

The Ten Commandments
The Simple Way a Father Should Present Them to His Household

The First Commandment: You must not have other gods.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear, love, and trust God more than anything else.

The Second Commandment: You must not misuse your God's name.

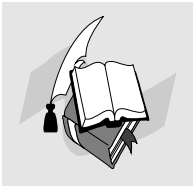
Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will not use His name to curse, swear, cast a spell, lie or deceive, but will use it to call upon Him, pray to Him, praise Him and thank Him in all times of trouble.

The Third Commandment: You must keep the Sabbath holy.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will not look down on preaching or God's Word, but consider it holy, listen to it willingly, and learn it.



The Fourth Commandment: You must honor your father and mother. [So that things will go well for you and you will live long on earth].

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will neither look down on our parents or superiors nor irritate them, but will honor them, serve them, obey them, love them and value them.

The Fifth Commandment: You must not kill.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will neither harm nor hurt our neighbor's body, but help him and care for him when he is ill.

The Sixth Commandment: You must not commit adultery.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that our words and actions will be clean and decent and so that everyone will love and honor their spouses.

The Seventh Commandment: You must not steal.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will neither take our neighbor's money or property, nor acquire it by fraud or by selling him poorly made products, but will help him improve and protect his property and career.

The Eighth Commandment: You must not tell lies about your neighbor.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will not deceive by lying, betraying, slandering or ruining our neighbor's reputation, but will defend him, say good things about him, and see the best side of everything he does.

The Ninth Commandment: You must not desire your neighbor's house.

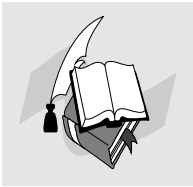
Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will not attempt to trick our neighbor out of his inheritance or house, take it by pretending to have a right to it, etc. but help him to keep and improve it.

The Tenth Commandment: You must not desire your neighbor's wife, servant, maid, animals or anything that belongs to him.

Q. What does this mean?

A. We must fear and love God, so that we will not release his cattle, take his employees from him or seduce his wife, but urge them to stay and do what they ought to do.



Calvin also took such instruction seriously. Early on in his tenure at Geneva, Calvin created a catechism for children. It is interesting to note the difference between his approach and Luther's. Calvin tended to a much higher level of detail. Years later, he revised his catechism amidst complaints that it was too difficult. Some scholars have speculated that the reason his catechism was so difficult was because he had no children. Others think it was so difficult because it was rushed. One example taken from the fifth commandment will suffice:

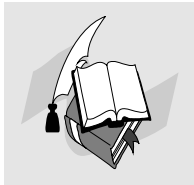
Honor father and mother, etc.

By this commandment there is enjoined upon us piety toward parents and toward those who by the Lord's ordaining are in authority over us in the place of parents, such as magistrates. That is why we are to render to them the highest reverence, obedience, gratefulness, and whatever duties we are capable of. For it is the Lord's will that we accord mutual service to those who have brought us into this life. It makes no difference whether those to whom this honor is paid are worthy or unworthy. For of whatever sort they may be, they have been set over us as parents by the Lord. Who has willed us to honor them. And this indeed is the first commandment with promise, as Paul says, by which the Lord promises the blessing of the present life to his children who reverence with fitting observance their parents. At the same time, he hints that the most certain curse hangs over all disobedient and unyielding children. However, it

should be noted in passing that we are bidden to obey our parents only in the Lord. Accordingly, we are not to break the law of the Lord to please them. For in that case we are not to count as parents but rather as strangers those who try to steal us away from obedience to our true Father. (*Calvin's Shorter Catechism of 1538*)

Whether Calvin's catechism was too difficult or not, it is clear that he thought children ought to be trained in doctrine. Most of the theological content of his catechism was adopted and shortened by the Reformed pastors who followed him. He is often credited with being the author of the great first answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." The English Puritans, who followed Calvin, were equally committed to training their children in doctrine. The great Puritan theologian and pastor John Owen wrote:

You know, brethren, how I have been amongst you, and in what manner, for these few years past, and how I have kept back nothing (to the utmost of the dispensation to me committed) that was profitable unto you; but have showed you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to all repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, with what sincerity this has been by me performed, with what issue and success by you received, God the righteous Judge will one day declare; for before him must both you and I appear, to give an account of the dispensation of the glorious Gospel amongst us; - in the meanwhile, the desire of my heart is, to be servant to the least of you in the work of the Lord; and that in any way which I can concede profitable unto you, - either in your persons or your families.



Now, amongst my endeavors in this kind, after the ordinance of public preaching the Word, there is not, I conceive, any more needful (as all will grant that know the estate of this place, how taught of late days, how full of grossly ignorant persons) than catechizing; which has caused me to set aside some hours for the compiling of these following, which also I have procured to be printed, merely because the least part of the parish are able to read it in writing; - my intention in them being, principally, to hold out those necessary truths wherein you have been in my preaching more fully instructed. As they are, the use of them I shall briefly present unto you: -

1. The Lesser Catechism may be so learned of the younger sort that they may be ready to answer to every question thereof.
2. The Greater will call to mind much of what has been taught you in public, especially concerning the Person and Offices of Jesus Christ.
3. Out of that you may have help to instruct your families in the Lesser, being so framed, for the most part, that a chapter of the one is spent in unfolding a question of the other.

4. The texts of Scripture quoted are diligently to be sought out and pondered, that you may know indeed whether these things are so.
5. In reading the Word, you may have light into the meaning of many places, by considering what they are produced to confirm.
6. I have been sparing in the doctrine of the Sacraments, because I have already been so frequent in examinations about them.
7. The handling of moral duties I have wholly omitted, because, by God's assistance, I intend for you a brief explication of the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, with some articles of the Creed, not unfolded in these, by themselves, by the way of question and answer.

Now, in all this, as the pains has been mine, so I pray that the benefit may be yours, and the praise His, to whom alone any good that is in this or any thing else is to be ascribed. Now, the God of heaven continue that peace, love, and amity, amongst ourselves, which hitherto has been unshaken, in these divided times, and grant that the scepter and kingdom of his Son may be gloriously advanced in your hearts, that the things which concern your peace may not be hidden from your eyes in this your day; Which is the daily prayer of your servant in the work of the Lord,



J.O.

The later Puritans also spent time catechizing their children. Perhaps the man to most aggressively catechize his congregation was Richard Baxter. Though he was not a Calvinist in the strictest sense, he was an ardent believer in the practice of instructing not only children but adults as well. He spent seven hours two days a week meeting with the various families under his charge. He spent an hour with each family covering some point of the catechism. He determined that by spending that amount of time he could make it through the entire eight hundred families in his parish annually. Observe how he admonished other ministers to take pains with these private sessions.

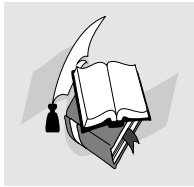
Let them that have taken most pains in public, examine their people, and try whether many of them are not nearly as ignorant and careless as if they had never heard the gospel. For my part, I study to speak as plainly and movingly as I can...and yet I frequently meet with those that have been my hearers eight or ten years, who know not whether Christ be God or man, and wonder when I tell them the history of his birth and life and death as if they had never heard it before...But most of them have an ungrounded trust in Christ, hoping that he will pardon, justify and save them, while the world hath their hearts, and they live in the flesh. And this trust they take for a justifying faith, I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have gotten more knowledge and remorse in half an hour's discourse, than they did from ten year's preaching. I know that preaching the gospel publicly is the most excellent means, because we speak to so many at once. But

it is usually far more effectual to preach it privately to a particular sinner... *(Quoted in Packer's A Quest for Godliness pg. 307)*

We must labor to be acquainted with the state of all our people as fully as we can; both to know the persons, and their inclinations and conversations; to know what are the sins that they are most in danger of, and what duties they neglect for the matter or the manner, and what temptations they are most liable to. For if we know not the temperament or disease, we are likely to prove but unsuccessful physicians.

We must use all the means we can to instruct the ignorant in the matters of their salvation; by our own most plain, familiar words; by giving or lending, or otherwise helping them to books that are fit for them; or by persuading them to learn catechisms; and those that cannot read, to get help of their neighbors; and persuade their neighbors to afford them help, who have best opportunities thereto. *(The Reformed Pastor, pg. 83)*

The historian, Leland Ryken, argues in his book, *Worldly Saints: the Puritans as They Really Were*, that the technique that the Puritans found most effective in the theological education of their children was catechizing. He also argues that the goal of catechizing was not rote memorization but understanding. It should be pointed out that such a view is not held by all those that advocate catechetical instruction. Some modern scholars, like Douglas Kelly, are proponents of strict memorization because of the manner in which memorization helps children compartmentalize thought. He believes that rote memorization not only accomplishes the goal of helping children gain facts but also that it helps them in the very process of logical thought. However, the enforcement of strict rote memorization seems to have been questioned back as early as the time of Cotton Mather. He was fairly generous in what he accepted as an appropriate catechetical reply. He cautioned parents not to let “children patter out rote the words of the catechism, like parrots; but be inquisitive how far their understandings do take in the things of God.” It seems he was more interested in the process of theological conversation than he was strict memorization. In this sentiment, he approaches something of C.S. Lewis’ desire to stay engaged in the great conversation.



Archbishop Usher (*circa 1600 AD*) whose writing influenced the writing of the Westminster Confession was also intensely interested in the use of the catechism. When he gave his view as to why catechetical instruction was so important, he did so using a catechetical format.

What is Catechizing?

A teaching by voice and repetition of the grounds of Christian Religion, Gal.6.6; Acts 18.23; 1 Cor.14.19.

Where should it be done and by whom?

Both at home by the Master of the House, and in the Church likewise by the Minister.

Why at home?

Because houses are the nurseries of the Church.

But is it not some disgrace and baseness that men of years and place should be catechized?

If men will be Christians, which is their greatest honor, they must hold it no disgrace to learn Christ: Noble Theophilus held it none, who was thus catechized as Luke showeth, Chap. 1.4, likewise Apollos, Acts 18.28.

The use of catechetical instruction in America was a normal practice in Puritan church life. Most often children and new converts were catechized on Sunday afternoons by church elders. The involvement of church elders was not intended to supplant the duty of parents. It may have even been viewed as a safety check to make sure parents were meeting their familial obligations. The process became such an important of Puritan life that elements of it were even incorporated into the public education system. Notice the way the memorization of the alphabet in the New England Primer included sound Christian theology.



A

In Adam's fall
We sinned all.

B

Heaven to find
The Bible mind

C

Christ crucified
For sinners died.

D

The Deluge drown'd
The Earth around.

E

ELIJAH hid
By Ravens fed.

F

The judgment made
FELIX afraid.

It seems fairly obvious from these few observations, that catechetical instruction has always been important in Reformation churches. But as important as that is, it is even more important to examine the Scriptural commands concerning the instruction of our Covenantal children.

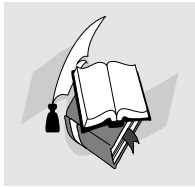
The Biblical Basis for Catechesis

“And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.” Deuteronomy 6:7

The Old Testament is replete with commands concerning the instruction of children. There are narrative accounts like the story of Eli and his two sons where the failure of the parent can be deduced from the story itself. Then, of course, there are actual commands to teach children concerning God and His great acts of salvation.

Exodus 12:24 ff. provides a good starting place for the concerns God had about the instruction of children. There Moses forewarns the children of Israel to be faithful to instruct their children concerning God’s great deliverance of His people. After giving them the details of preparation for the Passover he turns toward the future and his concern that the events of that night not be lost to future generations.

"And you shall observe this event (*speaking of the Passover*) as an ordinance for you and your children forever. [25] "And it will come about when you enter the land which the LORD will give you, as He has promised, that you shall observe this rite. [26] "And it will come about when your children will say to you, **‘What does this rite mean to you?’** [27] that you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes."

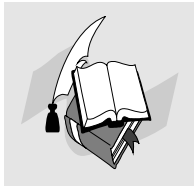


Whether Moses intentionally placed the form of instruction in a question and answer format, it is clear that parents were to be faithful to recount the faithfulness of God for the children and for that matter all future generations. It is the same kind of idea recorded in Deuteronomy 6, which is considered to be the classic text supporting the idea of continual catechesis. It is a text held precious by both Jews and Christians.

DT 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! [5] "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. [6] "And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; [7] and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. [8] "And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. [9] "And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

There is no end to the instruction that can be gained from the study of this crucial passage. But rather than do an exposition of the text, it might be more appropriate just to list a few of Moses’ more important points, especially with regard to the issue of catechesis.

- (1) The words of instruction are not to just be committed to memory. They are to be taken to heart (vs. 6) which means, at very least, that they are to impact ethical behavior.
- (2) The words of instruction are not just to be taught; they are to be taught diligently (vs.7). That means that not only the content of the instruction but the very means of instruction is to be constantly scrutinized and improved.
- (3) The words of instruction are to permeate all of life's activities. They are to be a part of home-life, travel, and even work. They are to so saturate the life of believers that they are the last thing on a person's mind when they go to bed and the first thing on a person's mind when they rise up in the morning (vs. 7).
- (4) Moses associates the words of instruction with both the hands and the head which can be taken metaphorically to speak of their place both in the actions and thoughts of believers (vs. 8).
- (5) In the same way the words of instruction are to be written on the doorposts of the house and the front gates of fences. Metaphorically, Moses' command implies that such instruction should be a constant testimony to those both inside and outside of the believing household (vs. 9).



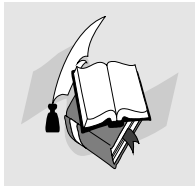
While the question and answer format is not alluded to in Deuteronomy 6:4 ff., it is clearly alluded to starting in verse 20. Even if one objects that the passage does not explicitly command the use of the traditional catechetical format, it is undeniable that theological instruction and even theological discussion is viewed as a normal part of the discourse of believing families.

DT 6:20 "When your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?' [21] then you shall say to your son, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. [22] 'Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; [23] and He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.' [24] "So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today. [25] "And it will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.

The Psalms are filled with thoughts concerning the value of instruction. Psalm 119 explicitly urges young men to purify their way with the word of God. The underlying implication is that such love for the Word of God is communicated through the careful, faithful instruction of the Word of God.

[1] How blessed are those whose way is blameless,

Who walk in the law of the LORD.
 [2] How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
 Who seek Him with all their heart.
 [3] They also do no unrighteousness;
 They walk in His ways.
 [4] Thou hast ordained Thy precepts,
 That we should keep them diligently.
 [5] Oh that my ways may be established
 To keep Thy statutes!
 [6] Then I shall not be ashamed
 When I look upon all Thy commandments.
 [7] I shall give thanks to Thee with uprightness of heart,
 When I learn Thy righteous judgments.
 [8] I shall keep Thy statutes;
 Do not forsake me utterly!
 [9] How can a young man keep his way pure?
 By keeping it according to Thy word.
 [10] With all my heart I have sought Thee;
 Do not let me wander from Thy commandments.
 [11] Thy word I have treasured in my heart,
 That I may not sin against Thee.
 [12] Blessed art Thou, O LORD; Teach me Thy statutes.
 [13] With my lips I have told of
 All the ordinances of Thy mouth.
 [14] I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies,
 As much as in all riches.
 [15] I will meditate on Thy precepts,
 And regard Thy ways.
 [16] I shall delight in Thy statutes;
 I shall not forget Thy word.



The Proverbs also proclaim the importance of gaining wisdom concerning the things of God. The issue of gaining wisdom is the primary theme of the first major section of Proverbs. In Proverbs 1:20, even the metaphorical figure “Wisdom” pleads with the ignorant to be heard.

[20] Wisdom shouts in the street, She lifts her voice in the square; [21] At the head of the noisy streets she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings: [22] "How long, O naive ones, will you love simplicity? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, And fools hate knowledge? [23] "Turn to my reproof, Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.

Even one of the most famous of all Proverbs seems to be directed at the importance of training children theologically. Some modern exegetes have argued that the passage is better understood as a plea to parents to find the natural inclination or bent of a

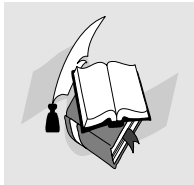
child and lead them in that path. The principle is a good one but it seems to neglect the overall thrust of the book's argument, which is that the wise man seeks and lives by the wisdom of God which includes, at the very least, the knowledge of God and His commandments.

[Proverbs 22:6] Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Obviously, the Old Testament views such instruction as very important. Though the emphasis is not as pervasive in the New Testament, it is still present. The epistle to the Ephesians seems to be picking up on the idea set forth in Deuteronomy when it states:

[Eph. 6:4] And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The very notion of instruction implies that there is a content to be learned. Also the idea of "bring them up in it" seems to pick up on the same motif as set forth by Moses. The instruction is to be theological and it is to be consistent just as it was in Deuteronomy. The same idea is set forth in Paul's letter to Timothy.



[1 Timothy 3:14] You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them; [15] and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Apparently, Timothy was instructed very early on concerning spiritual matters. Since he was of a Jewish heritage, it seems likely that he was instructed in much the same manner as any other young Jewish boy. Paul found no reason to criticize or argue against the kind of instruction Timothy had received. Of course, the exact nature of the training Timothy received is difficult to know but it is obvious that he had some kind of consistent training and it had value. Even someone as sophisticated as Apollos gained benefit from personal catechetical instruction. The book of Acts relates how Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos speak and then felt compelled to take him aside explain the way of God more clearly, which means at very least that they catechized him.

One of the most interesting New Testament passages concerning theological instruction occurs at the beginning of Luke's gospel. There Luke tells Theophilus:

LK 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, [3] it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you

in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; [4] so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

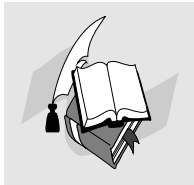
G.I. Williamson points out in his excellent commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism that this is one of the few places where it is clear that catechetical instruction preceded the instruction of Scripture. The very reason Luke sets out to write his gospel is to confirm for Theophilus the accuracy of the catechetical instruction he had already received. Williamson goes on to point out that a catechism is like a map; it provides the gridwork for understanding the actual instruction of the Bible. It does so in the same way that an atlas helps a student understand what the geography of a particular land might be like. It doesn't have authority over the actual geography but it does provide a grid whereby understanding can start.

Perhaps the New Testament books that most clearly reflect the need for a training-inclined ministry are 1 and 2 Timothy. Paul writes there:

[2 Tim. 1:13] Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. [14] Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.

[2 Tim. 2:2] And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

[1 Tim. 3:16] And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness:



He who was revealed in the flesh,

Was vindicated in the Spirit,

Beheld by angels,

Proclaimed among the nations,

Believed on in the world,

Taken up in glory.

This last passage is laid out in a confessional form by the translators of the NASB. It is not difficult to see how in the earliest days of the New Testament church such a structure might have been used as memory work in the theological education of new Christians. Of course, it is Scripture and that makes it different from any modern man-made catechism but it doesn't change the fact that the content of Scripture had to be explained, interpreted and defended against error. It seems that the New Testament church was committed to theological training in the same way that the people of God were in the Old Testament.

Involving the Covenant Community

“Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting the parents in the Christian nurture of this child?” BCO 56-5

WHY IT'S HARD

- Influence of Other Denominations

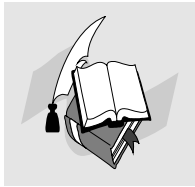
- Inability to Find a Proper Venue

- Increased Reliance on Others

The question is asked whenever there is an infant baptism in a PCA church. It is always answered to the affirmative and then almost no one gives it much thought. In practice, there is an unwritten code that prevents the church at large from interfering in the theological education of the church's children.

There is something about having someone else involved in the theological education of one's child that produces anxiety and guilt. Naturally, allowances are made for ministers and elders but even then many parents wonder why it is that their charge should be taken on by someone else, anyone else.

There are perhaps two or three reasons why this concern exists in the modern Presbyterian Church. First, it is possible that other denominations have influenced the practice of modern Covenantal congregations. Most youth education programs are not based upon theological considerations. They tend rather to be cultural, moral, or relational in orientation. Other denominations in America, and this is not meant to be a slur in any sense, tend toward the autonomy of the individual. A streak of American independence permeates much of the religion in America today. This fact is true in spite of the fact that many churches operate under a form of church government that can best be described as a monarchical bishopric. Some pastors rule their congregations as an benevolent dictatorship, but generally even those pastors know better than to pry into the private domain of the family.



Secondly, it is even more likely that church members do not see any convenient venue in which they can fulfill their oath to render assistance in the nurturing of someone else's child. Usually they expect, and understandably so, that Sunday school teachers and vacation Bible school workers somehow vicariously fulfill their pledges for them. Many people would be willing to assist if they thought their help was either needed or desired. But generally Christian adults are more concerned about being intrusive than anything else. The practical result of this kind of gentility is that many Christian children pass their lives in their home church without ever having enjoyed either the fellowship or wisdom of some pretty wonderful saints.

Finally, it is possible that some parents may have reservations about allowing their child to spend time alone with other church adults. Their hesitation is not primarily because of fear that their child will somehow be absconded or assaulted, though with the rampant nature of perversion in our society this too may become an increasing concern. Usually, parents have reservations because they do not want others leading their children where they cannot protect them. By that, I mean they do not want others

KEY QUESTIONS

- Place Parameters on Dialogue
 - Provide Safe Environment
 - Promote Adult Participation
-

starting theological debates and raising questions that they themselves are not prepared to settle. This concern is, to my mind, the most valid objection any parent can have.

So, how do we address the issues that prevent members of the church from fulfilling their pledge to assist in the spiritual nurturing of our Covenantal children? How do we place parameters on the dialogue between our children and participating adults that will provide a level of reassurance for the parents and yet allow the children to gain from the experience and wisdom of other Christian adults? How do we provide an environment that promotes spiritual vitality and dialogue without putting our children at an unnecessary risk? Finally, how do we encourage good men and women in our church to participate in a modern spiritual, mentoring program with someone else's child that buttresses what their parents desire for them?

One important element that needs to be considered from the beginning is that the topics of discussion need to be well defined. For example, it would be one thing for some Christian brother to discuss with my child what the Shorter Catechism says about the nature of the Trinity; it would be something else for the same brother to discuss the nature of the adolescent struggle with masturbation. I would be comfortable with the first subject though absent. I might not be comfortable with the second even if I were present.



Therefore, my first proposal is that the first year's mentoring/catechism discussions focus on the following twelve topics, which are actually twelve questions taken from the Shorter Catechism.

- (1) What is God? *Q4*
- (2) What is sin? *Q14*
- (3) Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression? *Q16*
- (4) What is the sum of the ten commandments? *Q42*
- (5) Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? *Q20*
- (6) Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? *Q21*
- (7) How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man? *Q22*
- (8) How doth Christ execute the office of a priest? *Q24*
- (9) What is justification? *Q33*
- (10) What is baptism? *Q94*
- (11) What is the Lord's Supper? *Q96*

 KEY CONCEPTS

- Guilt: Making the Idea of Sin clear

- Grace: Making the Gospel Clear

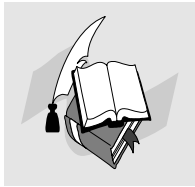
- Gratitude: Making the Sanctified Life Clear

(12) What is prayer? *Q98*

It is fairly obvious that there are many other questions that are just as important as the twelve which I have listed above. But the point is that these twelve are merely a start. Each of the questions address important issues but I have selected the twelve for specific reasons. Essentially, I have picked the twelve questions along three lines of thought: guilt, grace, and gratitude. This particular line of reasoning follows the reformed tradition as set forth in other catechisms and confessions. In particular, it follows the development of the Heidelberg Catechism. The first four questions are focused on the issue of guilt. My logic is that guilt is natural result of knowing what God is like, how Adam fell, the content of God's moral law, and the results of Adam's fall. The next five questions address, in particular, the outworking of God's grace toward sinners. The last three questions reflect, in part, some of the means by which sinners can demonstrate their gratitude toward God. In addition, two of the last three question address areas that constantly raise questions not only among our youth but also among our adults.

I would want to have the time to prepare a small booklet for both parents and mentors that would provide a layman's explanation of each of the questions and their answers. My best guess is that such preparation would take about three months. My plan is that the booklet would provide the points of discussion, explain how the discussion is connected to the Shorter Catechism and even provide some illustrations and conversation starters to keep the dialogue moving. My goal is to provide not only the general answers to the questions but also to try to communicate whatever I know with regard to how to keep such conversations on track. My motivation is two-fold: (1) such conversations would begin to familiarize our children with the great heritage Presbyterians have in the Shorter Catechism, and (2) they would help our adults to begin to think in the theological categories set forth in the Catechism.

It would also be helpful for the children to prepare a similar study guide for their own use. I think that it is important that they have at their command adequate resources to be able to engage in such conversations without being intimidated by the material. Obviously, their study guide would be need to be targeted more toward their level and interest. I am willing and able to prepare an interactive CD-ROM to help the kids work through their questions in advance. This would allow the kids to go through the material in a modern format. Though it would be a far cry from a video game it would definitely allow kids with reading deficiencies the opportunity to not only read the catechetical question but also to hear it being read and discussed via computer technology. In a word, I think it will help to alleviate any sense of dread the kids might have about engaging the catechism. I have included a disk with a brief sample of the kind of presentation I have in mind. Also, in fairness to the kids, the scope of the conversation would need to be limited to the context of the discussion outlined in the booklet. Parents would have an entire month between the child's mentoring sessions to discuss the scheduled question with their child and prepare them to engage their mentor with a measure of confidence.

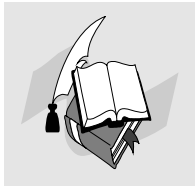


 G R O U N D W O R K

- Class on Ephesians
Emphasizing Community
 - Class on Covenant
Theology
 - Class on Covenantal
Obligations and
Opportunities
-

Now with regard to involving adult members of our church in a modern catechetical program, or spiritual mentoring program, I think there are a couple of issues that I would like to address. First, it is imperative that our Christian adults begun to more fully understand the nature of the Covenantal community to which they belong. I have sought, with the counsel of other pastors to begin to address the issue in a two-fold manner. The first aspect of addressing the importance of the nature of our church community is currently being approached through an exposition of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In it, I am trying to demonstrate that there was in Paul's mind a fundamental interest in demonstrating to the Ephesian church the nature of their inclusion into the people of God. I am trying to demonstrate that they have been incorporated not into the nation of Israel but into God's own possession the church and by doing so have assumed both the blessings and responsibilities of that incorporation.

Secondly, my intention is to turn in the first quarter of the new year to a study which focuses on the nature of Covenant theology. My purpose will be to try to explain the nature of the framework of Covenant theology along with all of its attendant signs, seals and responsibilities. This, to be sure, is a task well beyond my present understanding or ability but it is essential that it be attempted because unless there is an acceptance of the framework of Covenant theology there will be little more than lip service paid to the responsibilities associated with being a member of the Covenantal community.



Having accomplished that study, I would want to turn a brief study of how Covenantal members can be participants in fulfilling their pledge to help in the nurture of our Covenantal children. Essentially, this would be a class for selected adults and the parents of the children who fall into the right age grouping. I would then submit the booklets that will have been prepared in advance and try to give some insight into how they might be used. It would also be important, at that point, to discuss with some candor the kinds of topics and situations that must be avoided in order to protect our precious children. I expect that this particular study would go no longer than two or three weeks. With regard to the issue of timing, I already covet the wisdom and advice of the session. The primary issue would concern whether or not it would be wise to start such a massive program prior to the Fall term of 1999.

I know that there will be both children and mentors who will inevitably drop out of this program. I will make every effort to keep both on track through the use of cards, phone calls, discussions, and lunches. I will keep myself available to fill in if an adult should drop out of the project. I will also participate with some unfortunate child personally and I will make an attempt to meet with every child in the church "face to face" over the next year. I think one important method to get each month kick started is simply to read the point of catechism under discussion that month from the pulpit. It would be appropriate, I think, to include participating mentors and parents in such readings; I would be hesitant to involve children in this public process although the benefits gained in the eyes of both children and parents might be considerable. It

 USEFUL TOOLS

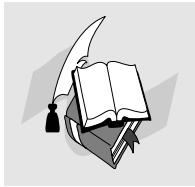
- Study Booklets in Modern English
 - CD-ROM's with Interactive Lessons
 - Must be Available At Start of the Program
-

might be effective to read the catechetical point for a week or two and then follow it up for two weeks with the expanded point from the Westminster Confession. Pastor Tom's wisdom with regard to whether either would be a viable option should be sought by the session.

Putting the Westminster Confession in Sneakers

"The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and lightning bug." Mark Twain

Because of the nature of what I am proposing I think I should give one or two of my thoughts regarding the manner in which such material should be presented. I do not for a moment believe that the material should be "dumbed down" or gutted of its distinctively Presbyterian flavor but I do believe that *every effort should* be made to accommodate the material to the modern culture in which we live. In order to do that, I think we should make use of media materials such as the booklets I have already discussed. I think we might also want to consider other media like interactive CD-ROM's or even cassette tapes to provide helps for both the kids and the participating mentors and parents. I have the software, hardware and desire to prepare such material. There is no reason why all materials should not be prepared prior to the implementation of such a program. I think it would be a mistake to parcel out such materials on the fly.



Along those lines, I recently received an e-mail from a pastor concerning a catechism that he constructed in order to aid our elementary-aged kids in their desire to become communing members. I have included it at this point because I think it is representative of the very kind of effort we must pursue in order to effectively communicate necessary theological content to a new generation. I do believe that any effort even one as good as this one can be improved on with time and reflection but it is so profoundly superior to most of the material that I have seen, both in content and intention, that it is worth the session's consideration.

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?

- What is sin?

Breaking God's Law by not doing what He commands or by doing the things He forbids.

- Where can we find God's Law expressed in the Bible?

In the Ten Commandments.

- Who sins?

All mankind sins, except one, the Lord Jesus Christ.

- What does it mean to acknowledge that you are a sinner?

It means that I know and admit that I break God's laws.

- What is another way to talk about God's displeasure?

We can call it His wrath or His anger.

- What does it mean to justly deserve God's displeasure?

It means that God is angry with us for a good reason. We have offended Him by our sin and lack of righteousness.

- What does the phrase "without hope" mean in the membership question?

It means that we have no good reason to expect to be saved.

- What is God's sovereign mercy?

It is His right not to exact justice or penalty from us for our sins, because he declares the penalty to be paid and justice to be satisfied by Christ Jesus.

- Who decides which people can receive God's sovereign mercy?

God alone decides who will receive His mercy.

- What happens to those people who remain under God's displeasure?

They are doomed to hell for eternity.

2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?

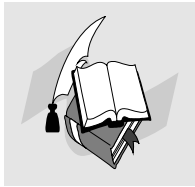
- Is there more than one God?

There is only one true living God.

- In how many persons does this one God make himself known?

Three.

- Who are the three persons?



The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- Did Jesus identify himself as God?

Yes, He is the Son of God, the second person of the trinity.

- What is the Gospel?

Jesus became the eternal savior of sinners by living a life of perfect obedience, offering a perfect sacrifice for sin in his death, and by being raised from the power of death in his resurrection.

- How can one be saved?

By receiving and resting upon the work of Jesus Christ alone.

- What is the work of Jesus?

He was our substitute, living perfectly, and dying in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. By doing this, he made it possible for us to have a restored relationship with God.

- What does it mean to receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation?

It means that we must believe that He died for us and trust that his death was an acceptable payment for our sins. It also means that we could never do enough good things to earn our salvation.

- From what are we being saved?

God's anger at us for sinning, and the penalty our sin deserves.

3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

- What do you mean when you resolve and promise something?

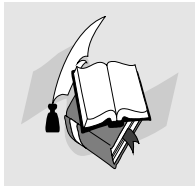
We mean that we firmly believe and give our word with every intention of keeping it.

- What is the grace of the Holy Spirit?

The spiritual power and forgiveness necessary to live a life of obedience to God delivered to us by the third person of God.

- What does it mean to humbly rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit?

It means to not depend on ourselves, but to depend on God's power working in us.



- What does it mean to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

To live like Christians, in obedience to God's Word.

- How do we endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

We trust the Holy Spirit to help us live in obedience to God's Word, to make us more like Christ each day, and to deliver forgiveness to us as we sin.

4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

- What is the Church?

It is the name given to God's people in the New Testament. It is sometimes called the visible or invisible church.

- Who makes up the Church?

Visible Church - Professing believers in Jesus and their children. Invisible Church - All God's elect of all the ages.



- What is the Worship of the Church?

The Lord's Day activities of the church where we gather in the congregation to pray, praise God, confess our common faith, hear the preaching and reading of God's Word, and participate in the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

- What is the work of the Church?

The ministry of the church throughout every day by which we make our faith and the truth about Jesus Christ plain to everyone around us.

5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

- What is the government of the church?

Its officers, elders and deacons, govern the church. We are also connected to Presbyteries and the General Assembly of the whole church which are made up of elders from each church.

- What is the discipline of the church?

The discipline of the church is its instruction, preaching, holding weekly worship, use of the sacraments, and its attempt to oversee the members in a pastoral way.

- What does it mean to submit to the church's government and discipline?

It means that I will obey the leaders, and try to do what they ask of me as their requests are according to God's Word.

- What is the purity of the church?

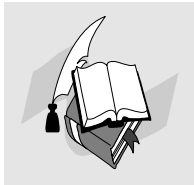
The purity of the church is the keeping of the correct doctrine (beliefs) and maintaining the required practice (what acts we do) by its members.

- What is the peace of the church?

The peace of the church has two parts. When men are saved they are no longer enemies of God. And those who are in the church are not enemies of each other. They should give thanks for their salvation. They should live as much as possible in harmony with others, not fighting, bickering, or being mean to one another, but showing each other kindness.

- What do we mean when we promise to study the purity and peace of the church?

We mean that we are giving our word to find out what the correct doctrines and practices of Scripture are and then to keep them or do them. We are also giving our word that we will make every effort to keep the peace with other members in the church.

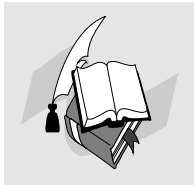


The point I am trying to make here is that it is important to try to communicate the truths of the Shorter Catechism, and ultimately the Scripture itself, in words and ways that are comprehensible to modern kids. That means that we communicate the thought of the catechism, the intention of the catechism, even the words of the catechism in the form of a dialogue or discussion that is contextualized for our kids. What I am advocating is a narrative exposition of the various points under discussion. It is one thing to know what the catechism says; it is something else altogether to know what it means. That is why catechesis must take place in a dialogue. To do that requires more than just familiarizing our kids with the material. It means that there must be a beginning of mastery on the part of our adults. It means that parents must begin to understand something of the nature of Socratic (*question and answer*) dialogue. I recognize this is an ambitious design.

Perhaps a practical illustration of how such a contextualization might work is to demonstrate how the twelve catechetical lessons might be framed in the study booklet. Instead of using just the twelve questions taken from the catechism that I mentioned earlier they might be framed in the context of more general questions. I have placed both side by side to show both the similarity and the contrast.

- (1) What is God? *Q4 Who is God and what is He like?*

- (2) What is sin? Q14 ***What stands between me and God?***
- (3) Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression? Q16 ***But I didn't eat the fruit did I?***
- (4) What is the sum of the ten commandments? Q42 ***1+1 equals 2: The Two Tablets of the Law***
- (1) Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? Q20 ***Why Didn't God Leave Us Lost?***
- (2) Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? Q21 ***Who Paid the Price?***
- (3) How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man? Q22 ***Why the God-Man?***
- (4) How doth Christ execute the office of a priest? Q24 ***The Priest Who Was the Sacrifice.***
- (5) What is justification? Q33 ***The Hinge on Which Every Thing Turns.***
- (6) What is baptism? Q94 ***Initiated into the Church Family.***
- (7) What is the Lord's Supper? Q96 ***Becoming A Communing Member.***
- (8) What is prayer? Q98 ***How and Why We Talk to God***



Certainly, some of the preceding ideas might have to be modified. I would not want to be perceived as making light of any of the important points of the catechism or the biblical theology that underlies it. My point is simply that the questions from the catechism need to be framed within a discussion that will help our kids and new Christian adults understand the issues involved. Contextualizing the catechism brings it into the modern world. It makes the discussion of “spiritual things” a part of everyday life and in that sense comes very close to the Lord’s command given through Moses in Deuteronomy. I suspect that there will be those who will criticize such an undertaking from the perspective that it involves tinkering with the Catechism. I think that is a valid concern. I have no pretensions about being able to improve upon the content of the Catechism or Confession. But I do believe that it is our responsibility to find new ways to increase our families’ appreciation of the vast theological treasures that are stored there. The simplest way to do that is to provide them with an opportunity to discover all that is there.

Analyzing What Works and What Doesn't

“Except for the explosion, I thought that went really well.”

An Unnamed Russian Space Scientist

Once the program is under way, it would be appropriate to constantly analyze whether or not it is working as it ought. That does not mean that we ought to suffer “paralysis by analysis” or even encumber the project by unnecessary record-keeping. But I think it would be fair to provide the parents and mentors with postcard-sized evaluation cards that would be turned in monthly. In a few sentences, they could help us evaluate whether the study helps were adequate. They could tell us whether the kids participated. They could tell us whether or not they received any benefit from participating in such a process, give us prayer requests, etc. In addition, we could also have cards for the kids but I think a quarterly evaluation on their part would more than suffice. I do not want them to dread their participation.

I would also want to challenge the kid to develop the habit of writing thank you notes to their mentors for their time and effort in the process. In making these suggestions, I am not proposing that we start such a program, decide it doesn't work, and then move on to something else. I believe we have a clear-cut biblical mandate to train our kids theologically. I believe our own BCO emphasizes the duty of all of our church family to participate in process. If we decide that parts of the program are deficient, we may have to make adjustments but I do not see how we can ever start and not go on to completion.

Soli Deo Gloria

EVALUATIONS	
→	Done Monthly by Parents and Mentors
→	Done Quarterly by Kids
→	Done Using Postcards
→	Based On Individual Interviews



Notes

