

Discipleship...



TRAINING FAITHFUL
MEN & WOMEN
TO DO MINISTRY

The Rare & Missing Jewel of Catechesis: Part Two

Now last time I tried to define for you what **“catechesis”** is and how frequently the idea is addressed in the Bible. What I said was this, **“Catechesis is the art and science of teaching someone else by means of using a catechism.”** Now that art may involve the use of a question and answer format (that certainly is the most pervasive use today) or it may simply involve a specified body of material and that body of material doesn’t even have to be written down. For example, when my mother tried to teach my sister to cook there was no written material; there was no question and answer format. My mother would simply say, **“Well you put in a little of this and a little of that until you get it where it tastes like this or looks like that? Do you see what I mean?”**

Her method was more in keeping with what I call **“oral tradition”** but it was catechesis just the same. It was **“catechesis”** because it involved a certain body of material (How to make blackberry cobbler or butter rolls) and because there was a formalized method of teaching involved. In my mother’s case the formalized method was **“the way my mother and sister taught me to cook.”**

Now for the Christian the body of material we use in catechesis is formalized as well. It always involves two things and you will find these two things in every catechism throughout church history. Those two things involve **“who God is”** and **“what God requires”**. Now those two categories may be subdivided even further. For example, **“who God is”** may be subdivided into **“the person of God”** and **“the acts of God.”** And, of course, those things can be subdivided again and again.

Anyway, that is what catechesis is. It is **“the art or science of teaching someone concerning a set body of material.”**

Now the second thing we examined last time was how frequently the command to catechize or teach our children or communal newcomers was found in the Bible. And what we saw was that the command to teach, to instruct, to build up was pervasive. In fact, it is the great charge of every parent and grandparent, every man and women to teach those over whom they have authority. But it is not limited to that. They are commanded to teach even those outside their authority as best they can. We saw that both in Israel's charge to teach their children and in their charge to teach the nations around them.

That teaching was not bound to one hour a week or even one day a week. Nor was it bound to one testament alone. No, the charge was to teach **"endlessly"** and **"repetitively"** in every conceivable location and every conceivable context of life so that every facet of life would be filled with the awareness of God's presence and attentiveness to God's expectation. We saw that in the words of Moses that sounded like this...

^{NIV} **Deuteronomy 6:6...** These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

And we saw it expressed in a slightly different way in Paul...

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 4:15...** Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

^{NIV} **2 Timothy 2:2...** And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

Now what I want to talk about this morning is how that command to catechize has worked out in history. I want to spend a few minutes talking about catechesis in the early church and how it was lost and recovered in the Reformation. Then I want to talk about how catechesis came to America with the Puritans and how that too was eventually lost. Then finally, I want to talk about

how we are trying to recover it here and what the obstacles are to making that happen and how you might help us overcome those obstacles.

There are several allusions to the act of catechesis in some of the earliest literature of the church. You can find such allusions in the *Didache*, *The Epistle to Diognetus* and even the *Shepherd of Hermas*.¹ But the first explicit reference to the practice that I can find occurs in Justin Martyr (110-165 AD). He writes:

I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ...As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past...Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water...Since at our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice, by our parents coming together, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked training; in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed...he who is illuminated is washed.²

Now that tells us two things: first, it tells us they believed in baptismal regeneration. That is they believed the water itself washed away sins. Secondly, it tells us that by the beginning of the second century the act of catechesis had been redirected. It was no longer directed toward believers but toward those who were as yet unconverted. That is, catechesis was directed away from the building up of the saints toward identifying who the saints were.³

Now, I have to tell you I think that is an important change and as you read the Apostolic Fathers you can garner lots of possible reasons for why that happened. One possible reason is that in the second century most new converts were Gentiles not Jews. And that offered a whole new set of problems. Gentiles had little or no understanding of the faith or of biblical revelation.

Secondly, the presence of theological heresy or dispute demanded that converts be instructed and be found faithful before being committed to the community of

faith where they could do a lot of damage. In that regard, catechesis was preemptive.⁴

Thirdly, and this is the most practical reason of all, the early church lived in an age of persecution and perhaps wanted to screen out spies who might be trying to ferret out the identity of all the Christians in any one place and mark them for imprisonment or torture.⁵

I think you can see a concern regarding both if these issues in Tertullian's *Prescription Against the Heretics*.

I must not omit an account of the conduct also of the heretics — how frivolous it is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed. To begin with, it is impossible to tell who is a catechumen, and who a believer; they have all access alike, they hear alike, they pray alike — even heathens, if any such happen to come among them. **“That which is holy they will cast to the dogs, and their pearls,”** although (to be sure) they are not real ones, **“they will fling to the swine.”**

Do you see his point? There was no clear identification of the believers in contrast to the catechumens among the heretics. They all had equal access and they all had an equal say. But such was not the case in the **“faithful church”**. In fact, in many congregations catechumens were allowed to participate only in limited parts of worship until they had completed their training and were baptized.⁶

Now what is interesting is that the process of being a catechumen could last a long time. It could last for forty days up to and even beyond three years.⁷ During that time, the catechumen was required to learn a certain body of material and to be able to verbally profess that material and his life and deeds were examined closely. It was possible for a catechumen to know what they needed to know and still not be approved based upon moral inconsistencies. Ford quotes Hippolytus who writes, “It is not the time but the character that is decisive.”⁸

By the time of Augustine, that had changed again. After the conversion of the Emperor Constantine the church grew so rapidly that the stringent catechetical instruction of the earlier church gave way to something much less demanding. This scaled down version of catechesis may have occurred because there were too many catechumens to keep up with over a three-year cycle or it may have

occurred because the church also faced the daunting task of training of believer's children who had been baptized as infants.

Now for whatever reason, catechesis fell out of use after the breakup of the Roman Empire. During the long dark night of the Middle Ages catechesis virtually stopped and Christendom became entangled in superstition and tradition to the degree that the doctrine of justification, indeed the doctrine of salvation wound up almost wholly lost.

All that changed in 1529, when Martin Luther produced both a Short Catechism and a Large Catechism. They were produced after Luther had made a two-year traveling survey of the nation and its spiritual condition. The Short Catechism was made for unlearned families and laymen and the Large Catechism was specifically designed for clergy. They were both based upon the Ten Commandments, the Lord Prayer and the Apostle's Creed.

Grace, mercy, and peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord, from Martin Luther to all faithful, godly pastors and preachers.

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.

How will you bishops answer for it before Christ that you have so shamefully neglected the people and paid no attention at all to the duties of your office? May you escape punishment for this! You withhold the cup in the Lord's Supper and insist on the observance of human laws, yet you do not take the slightest interest in teaching the people the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or a single part of the Word of God. Woe to you forever!

I therefore beg of you for God's sake, my beloved brethren who are pastors and preachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young. Let those who lack the qualifications to do better at least take this booklet and these forms and read them to the people word for word in this manner:

In the first place, the preacher should take the utmost care to avoid changes or variations in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, etc. On the contrary, he should adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year. Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form — perhaps with the intention of making improvements — later on. In this way all the time and labor will be lost.

This was well understood by our good fathers, who were accustomed to use the same form in teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. We, too, should teach these things to the young and unlearned in such a way that we do not alter a single syllable or recite the catechism differently from year to year. Choose the form that pleases you, therefore, and adhere to it henceforth. When you preach to intelligent and educated people, you are at liberty to exhibit your learning and to discuss these topics from different angles and in such a variety of ways as you may be capable of. But when you are teaching the young, adhere to a fixed and unchanging form and method.¹⁰ Begin by teaching them the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc., following the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory.

Although we cannot and should not compel anyone to believe, we should nevertheless insist that the people learn to know how to distinguish between right and wrong according to the standards of those among whom they live and make their living. For anyone who desires to reside in a city is bound to know and observe the laws under whose protection he lives, no matter whether he is a believer or, at heart, a scoundrel or knave.⁹

Luther Shorter Catechism

The Ten Commandments

The Simple Way a Father Should Present Them to His Household

1. 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.

2. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

PART II

The Creed

The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. The First Article: On Creation

I believe in God the Almighty Father, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Q. What does this mean?

A. I believe that God created me, along with all creatures. He gave to me: body and soul, eyes, ears and all the other parts of my body, my mind and all my senses and preserves them as well. He gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and land, wife and children, fields, animals and all I own. Every day He abundantly provides everything I need to nourish this body and life. He protects me against all danger, shields and defends me from all evil. He does all this because of His pure, fatherly and divine goodness and His mercy, not because I've earned it or deserved it. For all of this, I must thank Him, praise Him, serve Him and obey Him. Yes, this is true!

II. The Second Article: On Redemption

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, descended to Hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended to Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Almighty Father. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

Q. What does this mean?

A. I believe that Jesus Christ is truly God, born of the Father in eternity and also truly man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is my Lord! He redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, bought and won me from all sins, death and the authority of the Devil. It did not cost Him gold or silver, but His holy, precious blood, His innocent body — His death! Because of this, I am His very own, will live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him righteously, innocently and blessedly forever, just as He is risen from death, lives and reigns forever. Yes, this is true.

PART III

The Lord's Prayer

The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. Introduction

Our Father, Who is in Heaven.

Q. What does this mean?

A. In this introduction, God invites us to believe that He is our real Father and we are His real children, so that we will pray with trust and complete confidence, in the same way beloved children approach their beloved Father with their requests.

II. The First Request

May Your name be holy.

Q. What does this mean?

A. Of course, God's name is holy in and of itself, but by this request, we pray that He will make it holy among us, too.

Q. How does this take place?

A. When God's Word is taught clearly and purely, and when we live holy lives as God's children based upon it. Help us, Heavenly Father, to do this! But anyone who teaches and lives by something other than God's Word defiles God's name among us. Protect us from this, Heavenly Father!

III. The Second Request

Your Kingdom come.

Q. What does this mean?

A. Truly God's Kingdom comes by itself, without our prayer. But we pray in this request that it come to us as well.

Besides, a shameful and insidious plague of security and boredom has overtaken us. Many regard the Catechism as a simple, silly teaching which they can absorb and master at one reading. After reading it once they toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again. Indeed, even among the nobility there are some louts and skinflints who declare that we can do without pastors and preachers from now on because they have everything in books and can learn it all by ourselves. So they blithely let parishes fall into decay, and brazenly allow both pastors and preachers to suffer distress and hunger. This is what one can expect of crazy Germans. We Germans have such disgraceful people among us and must put up with them.

As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher — yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly. These dainty, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to become doctors above all doctors, to know all there is to be known. Well, this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. They need not fear a fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need is to become children and begin learning their ABC's, which they think they have outgrown long ago.¹⁰

In 1538, nine years after the Catechisms of Luther, John Calvin produced a Catechism at Geneva but it was never very popular. It was too long and much too complex to have ever been received or adopted. I thought I might contrast it with Luther's on one point to show you what I mean.

(Luther's Shorter Catechism 1529)

2. 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.

(Calvin's Catechism 1538) *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*

Here he is forbidding us to misuse his holy name in oaths, to confirm either vain things or lies. For oaths ought not to serve either our lust or our desire, but right necessity; when either God's glory is to be vindicated or something is to be declared with intent to edify. He utterly forbids us to pollute his holy name in any respect, but rather would have us use it with reverence and the greatest dignity as befits his holiness, whether we may be taking an oath or may be saying something about him, but since the chief use for taking this name lies in calling upon him, let us understand this is here commanded of us. Finally, he decrees a punishment in order that those who have profaned the holiness of his name with perjuries and other blasphemies may not trust they can escape his vengeance.¹¹

The Heidelberg Catechism was composed by in 1563 and was based primarily on Calvin's Catechism and Institutes although it was dramatically shortened and simplified. It too was based upon the Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. It quickly became the reformed catechism. It is also unique in that it is divided up into three parts following the Book of Romans: guilt, grace and gratitude or sin, salvation and sanctification. It too is written in the first person. It is short and wonderfully clear though not as short or simple as Luther's.

60. Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

61. Q. Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, hut because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.¹²

The following is taken from an article by B.B. Warfield.

In 1647 and 1648, the Westminster Assembly at the urging of Parliament created the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. It is different in that it is not based upon the Apostle's Creed. It is rather based upon the Scripture, upon the Lord's Prayer and upon the Ten Commandments. In a very real sense it is based upon Calvin's Catechism at Geneva, though better than Calvin's in every way. It is divided into two parts: who God is and what God requires. It is not as warm as the Heidelberg Catechism but is wonderfully short and memorable. The Larger Catechism was especially designed for pastors and teachers. It is an English/Scottish work rather than German or European. It has always been the basis of English speaking Presbyterians.

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

It is worthwhile to be a Shorter Catechism boy. They grow to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God. So apt, that we cannot afford to have them miss the chance of it. **"Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it."**¹³

¹ Phyllis Zagano, "Communicating Belief: A Historical Look at Christian Catechesis—And Catechisms" in *Christian Education Journal* 12.2 (Winter 92), 48.

² Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Ch. 61.

³ John H. Westerhoff, "Evangelism, Evangelization and Catechesis: Defining Terms and Making A Case For Evangelization" in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (April 94), 157.

⁴ Tom J. Nettles, "An Encouragement to Use Catechisms" taken from an article at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ10/article3.html>.

⁵ Alan Kreider, "Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity" from the Tyndale Bulletin 47.2 (November 96), 318.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *Second Period: Ante-Nicene Christianity or the Age of Persecution and Martyrdom From the Death of John to Constantine the Great Chapter 5: Christian Worship: The Eucharist* ¶ 69. "The service began, after the dismissal of the catechumens, with the kiss of peace, given by the men to men, and by the women to women, in token of mutual recognition as members of one redeemed family in the midst of a heartless and loveless world. It was based upon apostolic precedent, and is characteristic of the childlike simplicity, and love and joy of the early Christians."

⁷ Peter Toon, "Catechumen" from *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 182.

⁸ Steven R. Ford, "The Place of Catechesis in the Early Church; Its Implications for Christian Initiation Today" from the *St. Luke Journal of Theology* 24.3 (June 1981), 182.

⁹ T. G. Tappert, (2000, c1959). *The book of Concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹⁰ T. G. Tappert (2000, c1959). *Ibid.*

¹¹ I. John Hessleink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* based upon the trans. of Calvin's Catechism by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12.

¹² G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1993), 106.

¹³ B.B. Warfield, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?" from *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield Vol. 1* ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 383-4.