

Why Catechism

Text

Psalm 78:1-10

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Introduction:

The mention of catechism among evangelicals usually evokes the response: “Isn’t that something Catholics do?” The answer to the questions is “yes”, but a qualified “yes”. Catholics do catechize, not only children, but also adult converts, but they are not the only Christians who catechize. The word comes from a Greek verb which means to inform, teach, or instruct. It was used in the early church for the first instruction given to new converts before they were baptized. It has been a part of Christian practice from the earliest times of church history. It has flourished in certain periods and waned in others. In the first four centuries of Christianity, when the vast majority of Christian converts were converts from paganism. It played a major role in making Christians out of pagans. At the time of the Reformation in Europe, when most people were outwardly Christians, but inwardly still pagans, the reformers revived the practice of catechism as a means of teaching people the true faith of the Gospel. In our own times some churches have maintained its practice especially as a means of teaching the faith to children and adolescents.

The focus of catechesis is the communication of the essential truths of the Christian faith. The pattern established early on and revived by the reformation and maintained to this time by many is to organize the content of the catechism around:

- Essential beliefs – based on the Apostles Creed

- Essential behavior – based on the ten commandments
- Essential spirituality – based on the Lord’s prayer

This is usually completed by a fourth section dealing with the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and introducing the catechumen to life in the church.

In the spirit of the text we have read, which speaks of communicating the faith to the generations to come, I want to remind you why some way of systematically teaching the Christian Faith to our children is essential. To do this I want to remind you of the three following basic truths:

- Faith requires understanding
- Learning follows patterns
- The truth is not unopposed

I. Faith Requires Understanding

Verse seven of our text speaking even of the generations not yet born says: “so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments”. God’s desire is always that his people should communicate the truth that he has communicated to them to their children in a way that the children come to have a living relationship with God, and in turn pass the faith on to their children. In order that this might happen the preceding verses say: “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children.”

Faith is based on truth, the truth that God has revealed. It is impossible to have a living working faith without knowledge of the truth. That knowledge must be acquired. Each person must learn it, and it is our responsibility to teach them.

An easy way to remember the most basic elements of the faith that must be taught and that correspond to the major sections of the catechism is by remembering what Jesus said to his disciples in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me.” Taking those three things we can think of the truth that is essential to a living faith as follows:

- The Truth – What we must believe. This speaks of what we call doctrinal truth, the truth about, God, his creation including humans, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, and salvation. This corresponds to the first part of the catechism.
- The Way—how we are to behave and conduct ourselves. This speaks of the ethical instruction of the Scriptures. We begin this instruction with an understanding of the Ten Commandments. It corresponds to the second part of the catechism.
- The Life—The Christian life is a new life; a life lived in relationship with God, a life of prayer. The foundational instruction of this new life is the Lord’s Prayer. It corresponds to third part of the catechism.

In the end Jesus is the sum total of all of these things and to know the way the truth and the life is to know Christ, but knowing Christ in all of the ways and the dimensions that we must requires effort, time, and instruction.

II. Learning Follows Patterns

What I have to say here falls roughly under the title of human development. In more recent times thorough studies have been made of how we learn, and how we learn differently at different stage of our lives. It is not my purpose to go into details about these things, but simply to establish a rationale for doing catechism at the age that we do. Young adolescents have a great capacity for assimilating facts and information. They memorize easily and tend to retain what they memorize at this age throughout life. They also are curious and enjoy learning new things. And more importantly yet, it is the time of life when we begin to distinguish ourselves from our parents, and to form our own beliefs and values.

Someone might object at this point and say: “But it does no good to learn a lot of facts, if we don’t know how to usefully employ them.” My reply to that objection is threefold. First, I would simply turn the objection around and say: “we will never usefully employ them, if we don’t learn them.” Hoping that our children will become effective Christians without learning the basic facts of the Christian Faith is like hoping they will become engineers without learning the multiplication tables. Secondly, I would say that while knowledge is not faith, and that it is true that we can have knowledge without faith, the opposite is not true; we cannot have faith without knowledge. Finally, I would say that knowledge must be acquired in a systematic fashion. To move beyond first principles, we must know first principles. One of the problems with church is that it is ongoing, and at any given time we have people at all stages of development. It’s not like school where we begin at the beginning and progress in graded stages. This being the case, we must always make provision in our teaching of the faith for all

stages of development. Catechism is one of the ways we do this. When children reach an appropriate age, we communicate to them the essential elements of the Faith in a way that they can understand. Will they fully understand all that they have learned at this stage? Of course not, but they will have acquired the tools with which they can continue to build their relationships with God, the Church, other believers, and the world all throughout their lives. On the other hand, if they have not been given these essential tools, they will have been deprived of one of the essential elements of life, similar, for example, to a child who was not taught to read.

III. The Truth is not Unopposed

In their excellent book on catechesis, *Grounded in the Gospel*, J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett use Jesus' statements in Matthew 5, where he repeats six times the formula: "You have heard, but I say unto you", to make a fundamental point about catechesis. The point is that our children have already been catechized by the world. By the time they reach the age that we begin catechism, they have already been taught a set of values by the world in which they live. Many of the "truths" and "values" that they have absorbed through school, media, and interaction with friends are in opposition to the truth that is in Christ.

In this particular chapter of their book they make the excellent point that catechism always has a context. We are not just teaching people to be Christians, but we are teaching them to be Christians as opposed to being something else. We can go all the way back to the Apostle Paul and his work among the pagans of the first century Roman Empire. His Epistles are replete with examples of putting off the old and putting on the new. The converts of his time to become true Christians had to put on Christ, but before they could put on Christ they had to put off the false reasoning, and ungodly behavior of pagan Rome.

At the time of the reformation the context in which the reformers worked was that of a Christianity that had been thoroughly infected with superstition and error. In their teaching of the Faith, they had to draw clear and distinct lines between what people had heard and what Christ and the Scriptures said. So in our times we must help those who are learning the faith to distinguish between God's truth and the lies of a culture infected with numerous spiritual diseases. To fail in this would be to leave them at the mercy of those infections in the same way we leave them at the mercy of childhood diseases when we fail to inoculate them.

The task is not particularly easy and we are not always successful, but we must redouble our efforts. Having received the Faith, we have been entrusted with the responsibility of

transmitting it to the next generation and to generations yet unborn “so that so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments”.