

Rediscovering Catechism

THE ART OF EQUIPPING
COVENANT CHILDREN

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN TO AID IN THE renaissance of catechism, particularly to revive the catechetical method of training children. The art or perhaps we may say the grace of catechizing has been a potent force in the history of the church.

This book is addressed to readers whose churches teach catechism but perhaps are unaware of its principles and history, to those whose churches have dropped catechism teaching, and to those who are unfamiliar with

the concept. This book addresses all who hold their children dear, love the church of Jesus Christ, and greatly long to see the extension and expansion of Christ's kingdom.

The book covers two general areas. Chapters 1 through 7 investigate the meaning and history of catechizing; chapters 8 through 17 outline practical considerations and steps for productive catechizing. Since each section is largely self-contained, you may turn to either section first. It is my prayer that the Lord, through this work, will excite in his churches that indomitable spirit of conquest that characterized the "saints who nobly fought of old."

For whatever is unworthy in this work I take full responsibility. For whatever is true and worthy I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to all the little and big children it has been my joy and privilege to catechize these past twenty years; to my late and beloved father, the Reverend Harry Van Dyken, a man of the covenant and of great compassion, and a catechist nonpareil; and above all to my faithful God and Father, who through Jesus Christ has always cradled this poor sinner in his covenant love with such incredible long-suffering and faithfulness.

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” So Charles Dickens opens his *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel of London and Paris in the days of the French Revolution. His words also describe our times.

Although our times are bad enough, it will not do for Christians to moan and wring their hands. History is full of bad times when God called up men and women of strong faith and glorious deeds, and we must prepare our children for that call. The best means to fulfill that

duty, as this book will try to convince you, is by returning to catechism teaching, a method of instruction in biblical truth that the church has used for centuries.

In the first two chapters we will do some groundwork. First, we must be sure that our confidence is in Christ. Second, we will see that Christ is leading churches today back to the biblical model of teaching the Word through careful questions and answers. Third, we'll note that families are reclaiming their children from the world. Fourth, we'll see that we can firm up and safeguard these gains if the church and the family will join hands. Fifth, we'll note that if we return to the Christian heritage of catechizing children in the truth, the church may well look ahead to a faithful and victorious future.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS ARE NOW

Only in such an atmosphere of sober biblical optimism does a return to catechism fit so well. However, since you are swimming against the rising tide of moral degeneracy and anti-Christian activism, you will probably need convincing proof.

In the first body of evidence we'll consider, God testifies about his Son in relation to our

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ANCHORING IN THE PAST

Two developments in the church and one in the home present great potential for the future if Christians will but grasp the opportunity at hand. That opportunity is to reconnect the church to its past and forge links into the future.

BACK TO THE BASICS

We should all be greatly encouraged that many churches have been formed by believers who have left drifting churches. They have separated

themselves from those whose theology and life have played tagalong with the world. They have sensed that the church has cut itself adrift from the historic faith. Therefore as churches have labored to realign themselves with the Scripture, to get back on track as it were, they have returned to the Reformation and the early church. Another pilgrimage has begun of late. Tiring of feel-good, man-centered worship and sensing that feelings do not generate truth but that only the truth can generate reliable feelings, many people seek to return to ordered worship and ordered living, hallmarks of a doctrinally stable church. Many Christians are weary of antinomianism and understand that God did not move from a law-orderly Old Testament to reveal a disorderly Christ.

By reclaiming Luther's grand discovery of justification by faith, Christians again embrace the law with David, Paul, and James. The law leads to Christ, plainly outlines the extent of Christ's payment, defines his righteousness, protects believers from sinning against God's love, and enables them to give concrete expression to their love for God by deeds of obedience. This again is a return to historic Christianity, to the historic church.

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THE MEANING OF CATECHIZING

Catechizing is a particular method of instruction historically used by the Christian church. To germinate the idea we can imagine ourselves on a ship looking for a submarine. The submarine hides deep below the surface of the ocean. Our ship is equipped with sonar, and our operator sends out sharp sounds into the dark waters. Those sound waves travel down through the water until they hit something. Sometimes they strike a school of fish, or the bottom, or the sub

we are searching for. When those sound waves bounce off the hull of that sub, the sonar device picks up the echo. From that echo the operator can get a fix on the submarine's position.

That illustration introduces us to the teaching concept known as catechizing—sending out questions and listening for the echo, the answer that fixes the depth of knowledge and understanding. When you question people, you find out “where they're at.” The word “catechism” derives from the Greek word *katecheo*, which is found in several places in Scripture. The most familiar is Luke 1:4, where Luke explains why he wrote his Gospel: “that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed [catechized].” Like many Greek words *katecheo* is put together from two words, in this case *kata*, meaning “down toward,” and *echeo*, meaning “to sound.” *Katecheo* is “to sound down.”

SOUNDING HEARTS

To catechize is to sound down, to speak to someone with the objective of getting something back as an echo. Catechism sends a sound to probe a student's understanding. We use the catechetical method of questioning to send out the Word in order to hear responses,

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THE MEANING AND PLACE OF CATECHISMS

Throughout the centuries the church has employed good scriptural and doctrinal catechism books to ensure thorough biblical knowledge, doctrinal stability, and an effective walk before the Lord. Godly use of catechism material generates greater devotion to the Word. We have said earlier that catechisms are books written to help in the practice of catechizing, but they are more than that. Almost all catechisms spring from creeds and confessions, so we'll

look at the concept of creeds and confessions to capture the principles involved.

The validity of confessions is an issue for all Christians who long to return to historic Christianity, for as they journey into the past they inevitably encounter confessions. Whether they visit the church in Hippo, North Africa, where Augustine preached, or slip into the back pew of St. Andrews, Scotland, to listen to John Knox, they will find churches that faithfully held to the Bible and as tenaciously held to creeds and confessions.

WHY NOT USE ONLY THE BIBLE?

At the outset we are confronted with an obvious question: Isn't it a mistake to add man-written books to what God has written? This question deserves serious thought, for it usually comes from people who have seen the word of men, and particularly of theologically well-educated men, imposed upon God's Word.

By considering a few instances, we can see the issue clearly. For example, when your pastor stands behind the pulpit with nothing but a Bible in his hand, what does he do? When you as a Sunday school teacher sit in your class with your Bible on your lap, what do you do? Both

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CATECHISM

An obedience born out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ is the primary reason for engaging in any activity, and catechizing is no exception. The Scriptures tell us that children are a heritage of the Lord (Ps. 127). Our covenant God gives children to families, to Israel, and to the church of Jesus Christ. They are the heirs of the promise; “for of such,” said Jesus, “is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). Christ warned, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say

to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). A neglect of the command to teach these little ones is a grave offense.

The Scriptures also teach that knowledge is basic to faith and godliness. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Eternal life, said Christ, is to know the Father and to know Jesus Christ his Son (John 17:3). John J. Murray said,

Scripture attaches great importance to knowledge and gives a foremost place to the mind and understanding. Ignorance and error are the effects of the Fall and it is upon them that Satan’s kingdom is built. Knowledge and truth are the grand weapons by which it is overthrown and Christ’s kingdom established in the individual and the world.¹

Satan’s kingdom seems to erupt and spread everywhere. A few examples are the disarray in marriages and families and the worldly living and the ungodly pleasures that characterize not only the world but so often the church. The contemporary situation mirrors what the

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THE HISTORY OF CATECHIZING: MOSES TO PAUL

In the physical world of toasters and computers, we lay out spreadsheets and fix breakfasts today because of what others discovered and built yesterday. We are all connected to the past, to history, even though it may fail to interest us. In the spiritual realm of words and learning, however, a disinterest in history and a refusal to learn from the past may put us in the spiritual poorhouse and our children begging

on the streets. We turn then to the past to learn what God has done in and through his people.

ISRAEL

Beginning at the time of Moses, Israel, in common with the civilizations of that time, had few books. Teaching then relied heavily on two factors that history tells us were strongly developed among peoples of limited literacy. The first factor was an accurate memory for the spoken word. Without notes, reminders, books, computers, calendars, or other aids to memory, early peoples had an amazing ability to retain information.

A second factor, closely related to the first, was oral teaching. If one cannot teach from a book in one's hand or with sophisticated teaching aids, one has to rely on hearing and telling, on asking and answering questions.

As Moses gave his parting instruction to Israel, he said, "These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:6-7).

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THE HISTORY OF CATECHIZING: ALEXANDRIA TO MASSACHUSETTS

THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The early church stressed the importance of teaching and soon established the office of teacher or catechist. The church at Alexandria, Egypt, founded a school, perhaps the greatest of all institutions of learning in the early

church, which was specifically known as a catechetical school.¹

Augustine (354-430), known then as a great preacher, today as the great theologian of the doctrine of grace, has also been called “one of the doctors of the universal church.”² Building on our understanding that a doctor is a teacher, we are not surprised to hear that he prepared a book entitled *Catechizing the Uninstructed*, in which he detailed the steps in the process of wise catechizing.

In history most of us leap from 500 to 1500, from Augustine to the Reformation, thinking of the thousand years from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance as a non-descript fog called the Dark Ages. Few lies have been more successfully perpetrated by Renaissance humanists than this one. We must note, however, that the churches of Jesus Christ did not cease to teach during this great period of expansion and building. Nor must we lose sight of many vigorous teaching programs established throughout Europe.

A canon attributed to the Sixth General Council of Constantinople (680) promoted setting up charity schools in all country churches, since they were already found in all city