

Pastoral Letter on the Use of Catechisms in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church

A crisis in belief.

Every Christian parent wants his or her children to understand, believe and live the foundational truths of the Christian faith. However, numerous voices warn us that many of our children are being shaped more by the pervasive media voices of our culture than by their own Christian tradition. The net effect is that many of our own young people do not have a biblical worldview and show signs of biblical illiteracy. Moreover, an uneducated Christian is vulnerable to other gospels and creeds, as well as to distortions of our own creeds. However, we have at our disposal an ancient resource of spiritual formation that can help us reverse this trend. That resource is our catechisms.

The goal of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind.

The goal of this pastoral letter is to draw on some of the rich resources of our Reformed heritage and enlist them in the battle to shape hearts and minds. We think that rediscovering and using our catechisms can help us towards fulfilling the great commandment to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22.37). We believe that the catechism is an effective tool in transforming and renewing minds (Romans 12.1,2). In a generation where many Christians are “losing their minds,” the catechism can help us build Christian minds. While this is especially important in a relativistic age, we are not so naïve as to think that cognition is the only problem. But we know that the mind is the vital pathway to shaping the heart and affections.

An ancient tool of spiritual formation.

Catechism is an ancient teaching tool of the church set forth in question and answer format to make truth easier to grasp. Traditional catechisms were organized around the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer.

The catechetical method has been used from ancient Hebrew times through the last century to impress God’s truth upon children, and involves not simply repetition and memorization, but also understanding.

This ancient method of instruction was used by Plato and Socrates, as well as Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and our Presbyterian fathers and mothers of an earlier generation. During the Reformation, the practice of explicitly “catechizing” the laity aimed at raising up a new generation of Word-shaped people. Among the Reformation catechisms, some became official standards (Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms).

Common objections to teaching the catechisms.

Why is it that so many have abandoned catechizing? Here are some of the most common objections:

Isn’t this teaching tool too heavy on cognition?

The first question of our Shorter Catechism reminds us that the goal of humankind is to glorify and enjoy God forever. This means that the goal of learning the catechism must be to do the same. Godliness can’t be reduced to cognition, but neither can it bypass the understanding. A biblical understanding of the heart includes the intellect, the emotions and the will. While we acknowledge that in the past catechetical instruction has sometimes mistakenly ignored the heart, we believe that when guided by the first question throughout, it can deepen our love for Christ and the gospel and help us grow in grace and knowledge.

Some object to pouring information into our children that they may not remember or understand.

Children have a unique ability to mimic and memorize that should be tapped into for the sake of Bible memory and catechizing. They are often able to learn and remember a lot more than we give them credit for. If we agree that all children will be absorbing the ideas of their environment, what can be more important than presenting them the basic truths of the Christian faith?

Others worry about “indoctrinating” our kids into the distinctives of reformation theology.

We believe that the Shorter Catechism is one of the best summaries of the major teachings of the Bible, organized around the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer.

Still others worry that catechizing and memorization are out of touch with modern educational theory.

Modern educational methods utilize memorization and recitation to teach basic truths of many different subject fields.

But catechizing is too Roman Catholic.

The Protestant Reformers did not think so. The early church did not think so. Catechizing was an effective method of teaching basic Christian truths for centuries throughout the universal church.

Since we already have Sunday school programs, is catechizing really necessary?

Catechizing gives our children a doctrinal and biblical framework in which to place and apply Sunday school teaching. We believe it is an excellent foundation for a children’s Sunday school program.

Aren’t children too busy with homework and sports to memorize more information?

That is part of the problem. Many families are overloaded and too busy. Since we are so immersed in the “here and now,” we desperately need truths that will ground our children in eternal things.

Isn’t the Bible enough? Do we elevate catechism above the Bible?

Of course the Bible is sufficient. The catechism is subordinate to Scripture; nevertheless it effectively helps us to learn the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures.

How shall we use the catechisms?

For all these reasons, we commend a greater use of our catechisms (the Children’s Catechism, the Shorter and the Larger Catechisms) in the churches of the EPC. Here are some practical suggestions on how to do that:

1. Begin with the church Session.

Catechizing our children is a responsibility we undertake as ordained officers of the church: “The home and the church should also make special provision for instructing the children in the Bible and in the Church Catechisms. To this end Sessions should establish and conduct under their authority Sunday schools and Bible classes.” (*Book of Government*, 4-5).

2. Encourage parents to take an active role in catechizing.

Parents are the primary teachers of our youth. They have a covenant responsibility to teach their children those truths that will “make them wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3.15). The parents’ love for the Lord, and for their children, will help carry these truths to their children’s hearts and heads.

3. Put together a plan that includes both Bible memory and catechism.

We teach the Bible first and then the catechism. If a church is currently not teaching the catechism, the Children’s Catechism is a good place to start. Also, modern language versions of all the catechisms are now available.

(A partial resource list is appended to this paper).

4. Put a special emphasis on the younger children.

The early years are the years when we must make special effort to “impress” biblical truth on our children (Deuteronomy 6.7-9). This is especially true of children aged three through twelve.

5. Make the memory program a component of the children’s Sunday School and/or midweek children’s ministry.

Establish memory goals for each age group. Take some time at each meeting to review memory verses and catechism questions. Churches might even supplement this with a full year focusing on teaching through the entire Children’s Catechism before they move to Middle School. Also, ensure that teachers know how to teach the catechism.

6. Include students and adults.

While memory work may be easier for younger children than for those who are older, encourage continued memory work. In teaching older students, work for understanding of what’s being memorized. If necessary, use the Larger Catechism and Confession for amplification.

7. Use the catechism in pastoral training and responsibility.

We recommend that those pursuing ordination in the EPC memorize parts of the Shorter Catechism as part of their ordination training or internships in our churches.

Pastors have a special responsibility to lead in catechizing. A pastor can both teach the catechism and use the catechism to teach and preach. Catechism questions can be incorporated into other lessons, classes, sermons and even worship services.

Conclusion.

We know that there are many ways to teach God’s Word and the great truths of our faith.

In Deuteronomy 6.4-9, the people of Israel were to teach God’s commands to their children in formal settings (“when you sit down”) and informal settings (“when you lie down...when you walk along the road”). They were to teach by impressing these commandments on their children and by modeling them (“tie them on your hands”). Much of this pastoral letter deals with a more formal instruction that must take place. But we commend these other methods as well.

It is possible to educate a generation of people who can grow in moral and spiritual sanity in corrupt times. This was God’s assignment to Abraham in Genesis 18.17-19. Even though he lived not far from Sodom, God’s promise of blessing remained. He said of Abraham “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised.

May God use us in a similar way in our generation, to avert a crisis of belief, as we pass on the deposit of faith to those who follow.

Resources:

Hustedt, Dennis. Firm in the Faith: A Training Manual for Christian Growth. Webster, New York: Evangelical Press, 2000.

Meade, Starr. Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions Based on the Shorter Catechism. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000.

The Children's Catechism. Summertown Texts, 1988.

Van Dyken, Donald. Rediscovering Catechism: The Art of Equipping Covenant Children. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000.

Vincent, Thomas. The Shorter Catechism: A Study Guide. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, n.d.

Williamson, G.I. The Westminster Shorter Catechism: For Study Classes. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003.

The NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.

The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in Modern English. Livonia, Michigan: Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 2004.

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