

The Vital Importance of Catechetical Teaching

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I am afraid that what I say this evening may sound a lot like talking about myself, but I really can't help but do it because I think my experience in the Christian faith is a microcosm of what has happened to a whole generation. J. Gresham Machen once said and he said this back in the 1930s, America is moving on the moral momentum of its ancestors. So as I speak to you about the vital importance of catechism instruction and the urgent need for it, I do so out of five or six important reasons, the first being my own life experience.

The word catechism means to speak down to and receive an answer, and whether we like it or not, everyone is catechized one way or another. When I was growing up in Des Moines, IA back in the 1920s and '30s, I was catechized by my surroundings. At that time, everybody seemed to believe that abortion was murder and that being queer, that was the word we used then, homosexual has replaced it today, was something to be ashamed of. My Presbyterian parents were very moral, upright people. They had a lot of that momentum that Machen talked about, and it made a very deep impression on me and my two brothers and my two sisters. We had a concept of right and wrong very much in line with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, but they did not teach us the catechism itself so that we could know not only what is right and what is wrong, but why it's right and why it's wrong. And to illustrate the problem, let me tell you a little personal story. In 1993 in the 41st year of my ministry, I was called to Austin, TX to conduct the funeral of my beloved father. It was an honor and I did it gladly, and after the funeral I went with my wife to visit my mother in her 95th year. We sat talking together about spiritual things and I cannot remember why but I suddenly said, "Well, mother, what is the chief end of man anyway?" And she said, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." I was stunned. I said, "What is God?" She said, "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." I couldn't believe it. I said, "How many persons are there in the Godhead, mother?" And she said, "There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are the same in substance equal in power and glory." That's the first time in my life that I ever knew my mother had memorized the Westminster Shorter Catechism. She didn't teach it to us. It was never even mentioned until I became a seminary student back in 1949.

And so you may wonder, "Well then, G. I., how's it come about that you've written books on the catechisms?" Well, I want to tell you about that. I was converted in 1946 because, thank God, through the influence of my father and mother and some very imperfect preaching, I knew that I was a sinner and needed a Savior, and I felt very strongly in my heart a call to the ministry. So I enrolled as a student of theology at Pittsburgh-xenia Theological Seminary in 1949 and I immediately encountered a veritable Babel of confusion in that seminary. One of the professors was an honorary president of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States. He was a thoroughgoing liberal. Another was a new orthodox devotee who considered himself to be an expert on marriage, and by the way, 30 years later he was divorced, so that didn't work out too well. There was also a great Calvinist there by the name of John Gerstner, some of you may have heard of him and read some of his writings. I learned a lot from John Gerstner. In other words, the kind of education I had received did not prepare me for that environment. It had failed to pass on the heritage of catechetical training, and I had no grounds upon which to filter what I was hearing and decide what was right and what was wrong. At one point I even remember that I was seriously considering giving up the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ because of the impact on my mind of bad theology taught in a winsome manner by a liberal professor. And would you believe it, at the time I was serving as a student pastor of a small rural United Presbyterian Church in western Pennsylvania. Should never have been allowed in the pulpit, but there I was.

I went to seminary on Monday morning, pardon me, Tuesday morning and was there four full days taking a full load in seminary, then came rushing home to prepare two sermons and then to have a youth club on Monday. Well, one Saturday, the lady who I think was the treasurer of the church came and said to me, "We were cleaning the church and we found a pile of old, dusty books. If there's any of them you would like to have, you're free to take whatever is there." Well, I thought might as well, look. So I did look and guess what I found? I found this. This is more than 100 years old. It is the Subordinate Standards of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, 1903 is the imprint date. What did it have in it? Well, it had the Westminster Confession of Faith with all the proof texts printed out in English. It had the Larger Catechism with all the proof texts. It had the Shorter Catechism with all the proof texts. And that's not all, it also had the 18 Articles of Testimony and they were designed to defend certain parts of our Reformed faith that were under attack in that period of history. Well, I couldn't put this down. I studied it avidly and in a very short time, I decided that the guys that wrote this book understood the Bible a whole lot better than my professors. And they did. By the way, somewhere along the line I also read something by J. Gresham Machen, and he said, "Tyranny itself is nothing new but the technique of tyranny has been enormously improved in our day. The tyranny of the scientific expert is the most crushing tyranny of all." I read that and I said, yeah, that's right. Soon as I submit my mind to any expert, I'm done thinking. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to think for myself under the authority of the word of God.

And so I would say that my entire life was salvaged from the wreckage of a church that wasn't faithful by this book, and that was what led me, in time, to see what had happened. Do you see this? In 1925 it was replaced with this, a brief statement of the Christian faith

called "The Confessional Statement." It was not only gravely deficient but even heretical in some places. So after that happened, I decided to study the history of the United Presbyterian Church to see what had happened. After all, they had such wonderful standards to begin with. Every office-bearer of the old United Presbyterian Church had promised solemnly to maintain and adhere to the same, that means the teaching of this book, against all opposing errors. My own grandfather Williamson in Pawnee City, NE no doubt took that vow himself, and also said in his vow that he would submit to the admonitions of his brethren and many times up until about 1900 when my father was born, the citizens of the United Presbyterian Church resisted all attempts to abbreviate this teaching or water it down. In 1859 it said the interests of the United Presbyterian Church demand not the preparation of a new creed either in form or in fact, but the faithful application of the principles contained in her standards. And they even said the same thing 30 some years later in like language.

So as I studied that history, I became more and more amazed at the way in which agitation had risen after World War I especially, for change. They wanted change. I don't think they knew what they wanted, they just wanted change. Have you ever heard of that, you American people that are thinking about what's going on today? Yes, of course you have. Well, the result was that in 1925, it really shut this away and replaced it with this, and after making some rather amateurish efforts to do something about it, I ended up in the OPC in New England with a small group of people who left the United Presbyterian Church, and right there and then, I set my face like flint to teach them the catechism and confession that they had lost, and I began liking week by week the study lessons that finally made the book on the Westminster Confession of Faith. I never had any idea that it would be a book. Far less did I ever dream that it would still be in print 50 years later. I can hardly believe it, but the need was so great, you see. I'm not the only one that's caught in that terrible sea of neglect. I remember talking to John Murray once about this, the great professor at Westminster, and he said in his Scottish way, "I know of no instance of such a rapid abandonment of the faith as in the United Presbyterian Church of North America." And he was very supportive of all my efforts to begin to recover that lost heritage.

Well, folks, that's the first reason why I believe we need to return to intensive catechetical teaching and training. The second reason is because I've lived long enough now, almost 60 years, next year will be my 60th year in the ministry, I've lived long enough to see the failure of our Protestant celebrity culture, and here I can't help but remember the wise words of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book on preaching and preachers. He wrote, "One of the advantages of being old is that you have experience so when something new comes up and you see people getting very excited about it, you happen to be in a position of being able to remember a similar excitement perhaps 40 years ago. And so one has seen fashions and vogues coming one after another in the church, each one creates great excitement and enthusiasm and everybody rushes after it, but soon it wanes and disappears and something else takes its place." That's the story of American Protestantism for the last 100 years. "This," he said, "is surely a very sad and regrettable state for the Christian Church to be in, that like the world, she should exhibit these constant changes

of fashion. In that state, she lacks the stability and solidity and the continuing message that has ever been the glory of the Christian churches."

In the first church I ever served, there was an elder who was all enthused about the Moral Re-Armament movement. Have you ever heard of that? Probably not. You see, I'm too old, and you folks are young. You didn't hear of that one. But he was sure that was going to change everything. It didn't. After that, we've had things like The Navigators ministry, the Promise Keepers, and now today we have what I would call the Celebrity Conference Addiction. Thousands of people from Presbyterian and Reformed churches go off everywhere you can think of and flock to these conferences, hoping that that will revive the church. I don't think it will. I don't believe in that. Professor Carl Truman at Westminster Seminary said, "American culture is obsessed with celebrity and we need to be aware that the American church is very susceptible to this. The American church reflects the culture, ministries built around individuals, around big shots, churches that focus on God-like guru figures, all of them pointing to one door." He writes, "I've lost count of the conversations I've had with church people anxious to tell of who they heard at this conference, and of which person they corresponded with, and of how this opinion or that opinion would not sit well with this demigod and is therefore of little value. And of course, of how anyone who disagrees with or criticizes this chosen hero must of necessity be morally depraved and wicked." You see what it leads to. Well, I don't think that that will ever revive the church. If there is to be a revival, a renewal of Presbyterian and Reformed churches across America, it must come from within the local churches themselves, and one of the forgotten instruments is intensive, faithful, relentlessly faithful catechetical instruction.

It was more than 50 years ago that I first set foot in a Christian Reformed church out in rural Iowa. There was no celebrity there but there was something awesome, the pews were all filled with people, families. The eyes and ears were fixed on the man who stood in the pulpit; sometimes I stood in the pulpit because I know. But when I first went there, I can't remember who he was and, in truth, that was not important, what was important was what he said. It was a catechism sermon and I could see right away the awesome fruit of long term intensive catechetical instruction.

In the USA, we've had a string of big-name people. Ever hear of Billy Sunday? Dwight L. Moody? Billy Graham? And now the landscape is dominated by big wheel conferences and so on. But I ask you this question: has it brought a new Reformation? Has it strengthened the church? Or has it unintentionally weakened our local congregations? I remember one time in New Zealand, a lady came to me, she wasn't from our church, she said, "I just don't know what's wrong with me spiritually. I go to a conference, I feel like I'm almost in heaven. Then I go back home and pretty soon I'm all gloomy and down in the dumps." I said, "No wonder, you're looking in the wrong place. You need to be in a faithful church that is alive where the word of God is faithfully preached and the people are catechized in instruction."

So that's the second reason. The third reason is even the modernists are beginning to see it and you know when you see people from both extremes agreeing about something,

some of the most liberal people in the world agree with me that Genesis 1 and 2 is meant to teach six-day creation, you say, "Whoever thought it said anything else?" Well, Richard Osmer is a professor of Christian education at Princeton Theological Seminary, and he wrote the words I'm about to quote. You might be surprised that I would bring into this a professor of a seminary of a church that I regard as apostate, but let's listen to him. What does he have to say? He puts it this way, "Paula is 19, a sophomore in a well-respected private university. She lives in an apartment several miles from the main campus. On this particular day, she splashes on a bit of French perfume after putting on her grunge clothes, jumps in her Toyota and turns on a tape of reggae music as she drives to school. After attending classes in Eastern religion and the 19th century English novel, she walks down Main Street of this small university town with her new friend, Helen Kim, to one of their favorite eating spots, Hoagie Haven, which is owned by Greek immigrants and run by Guatemalans. While Paula was raised in her Presbyterian Church back home and confirmed just four years ago, she no longer believes that Christianity is the only way to God. She's not even sure that it is the best way to God. She puts it this way, 'What you believe is a matter of what part of the world you happen to be born in and where your life journey takes you. You have to be open to what life teaches you. I don't believe the same things I did when I was still living at home. I don't imagine I'll believe the things I do now in 10 years.' Well," Professor Osmer says, "the church failed these people. It failed to provide them with the intellectual and spiritual resources needed in a postmodern world, of particular importance was its failure to teach the Paula's in the midst the most elementary beliefs and practices of the faith." It's interesting to note that Professor Osmer wrote that when he was on a committee set up by the Presbyterians to try to produce a new catechism. I never heard that they were able to do that. How could a liberal produce a catechism? It's not possible to have anything worthwhile if that liberalism is in control. But it does illustrate where we are in America today.

So that's my third reason. The fourth reason, of course, is the all-important one: is catechetical teaching really biblical? I believe it's taught in the Old Testament. Genesis 18:17 to 19, "The LORD said [to Abraham], 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.'" All the way through the Old Testament you find this theme, "Hear, O Israel," Deuteronomy 6, "The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, 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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." And you heard the reading of the scripture tonight, the psalmist says, "We will not hide them from our children but tell them to the coming generation that the next generation might know, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children." Why, of course. And of course, when you come to the New Testament, it's even more clear. Luke writes a letter to Theophilus and what does he say? "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a

narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things in which you have been catechized." That's what it is in the Greek, katecheo. You've been catechized. In order for Theophilus to profit by the study of the book of Luke, he had to be prior to that catechized.

As I wrote in my study manual on the Heidelberg Catechism, catechism is something like a map. Why bother to study a map? Any of you people been over to Cyprus or Zambia in Africa? Do you can go there first or do you get a map first? You get a map, of course. You might say, why not just go out and study the surface of the earth instead? Well, the answer, of course, is that one is wise to begin with the study of maps. After all, life is short and the world is very big; one person working by himself could only map a very small portion of the earth's surface. That's why maps are so valuable. They exist because many people over many years have made a study of the earth, and while these maps are not perfect they are quite accurate. Thus, the best way to begin an understanding of the geography of the world is not to start with the world itself. No, the best ways to start with a good atlas, and it is much the same with the Bible. It contains a great wealth of information. It's not easy to master at all. In fact, no one ever has mastered it completely. It would therefore be foolish for us to try to do it on our own, starting from scratch. We would be ignoring all the study of the word of God that other people have done down through the centuries. That's why we have creeds and catechisms. There is a sense, in other words, in which you need to know the whole Bible, in a way, before you can understand any part of the Bible. Now that's a fact. If you open the Bible and blindly put your finger down and read a text, it may give you the weirdest possible idea. You've got to know the context, the overall context, and the catechism gives you that.

When I was a pastor in New Zealand, the Mormons were really busy in New Zealand. New Zealand Mormons seemed to be attracted for some reason to that religion. But anyway, I heard that it was rumored that the Mormons found out it was a waste of time to go and try to talk to Reformed people, especially the Dutch immigrants. Why? Because they were catechized. They had a framework. They had a knowledge, an overall knowledge through the catechism. I remember some of the Dutch immigrants saying they envied some of the Kiwis who had a lot of verses memorized. "Well," I said, "yeah, learn a lot of verses but don't despise the fact that you have a context, and then when a Mormon comes and throws a text at you, you won't be put into orbit by that because you've had a grasp of the whole and you can tell right away when something fishy is thrown in your direction."

The apostles themselves gave summaries of redemptive history. They had a kind of catechism in that respect. Acts 7, Stephen's great address. Paul's in chapter 13 of the book of Acts. We also see that doctrines are sometimes summarized in a catechetical way. Hebrews 6:1-2, "let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and

eternal judgment." You see, they were catechized in the doctrines of the faith and I believe we also see that in 1 Timothy: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up in glory.

The fifth reason why we need this, in my opinion, is simply the lessons of church history. The two great Reformation eras in history were the New Testament era and the Reformation period begun by Luther, and we know that in both of these the catechism played a distinctly influential part. Church historians tell us that in the early church as late as the 4th century, they taught the 10 Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's prayer. The Apostolic constitutions in early church history documents says that the years for catechetical training were to be three at least, and we know that catechism was restored strongly at the Reformation. Martin Luther, one of the first things he did was to write a catechism. In fact, he wrote two, a long and a short one. The short one seems to have been much more popular than the long one. That's also true of the Westminster Catechism. And for centuries after the Reformation, there was an echo of this. I wonder how many of you know that the Methodist church at one time said it is the duty of preachers to see that the catechism is used in Sunday schools and families to preach to the children and to publicly catechize them in the Sunday schools and at public meetings appointed for that purpose. You people from the Dutch heritage know that early in the history of the Dutch Reformation, each pastor was required to expound the Heidelberg Catechism and also to faithfully catechize the children and youth through that catechism. Church of Scotland the same. It was required in the first Book of Discipline, 1560, that there be a Sabbath afternoon examination of the young children in the catechism in the presence of the rest of the church, with the minister elucidating the doctrine. And the afternoon service for the training of children had its precedent in Strasbourg and in Geneva. It was adopted by the English refugees in Geneva and passed on to Scotland by refugees like John Knox himself.

When I grew up, the only time I ever heard the word catechism was in a few of my Roman Catholic young friends. They were still catechized. I was not. I believed then that we have a lot of reasons, and my sixth reason is the actual results that I've seen from intensive catechetical teaching. One of the great blessings in my ministry was being called, as several OPC ministers were back in the '60s, to New Zealand and to be right away immersed in the life of a congregation, most of whom the members were well catechized. I can tell you that it makes a great difference in what you feel that people get when you preach the word of God to them. They have the overall understanding and the particulars, therefore, hit the target with greater impact, as I have experienced.

Well, one of my catechism boys, his name was Frank van Dalen, started catechism under my teaching in 1963 at the age of 8. Today he is the General Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, one of the NAPARC churches here in America. He got over here, of course, by marrying an American wife, but he's highly respected. And he sent me these words about his own experience in intensive catechetical teaching. "I remember Pastor Williamson drilling the Westminster Shorter Catechism into us once a week for three years. Every Wednesday after school we

took the 20-minute train ride from our home to the Reformed church in Mangari," that's the location, "had an hour of catechism and then returned home. Every Sunday, my brother and I took notes of his sermons under the watchful eye of my father. He would ask us about the sermon after church. It may seem like a dry formal regimen, but for me it was at the time when I came to understand the Christian faith and commit my life to Christ. I was only eight years old when I began catechism training in the Shorter Catechism." Yeah, I know, that's sort of a surprise, too, but the Dutch immigrants before they ever called an OP minister, they studied our standards. They thought they were pretty good. So when I came there, they said, "Sure, go ahead, use what you're writing." So I did. "But I believe he says that there was nothing better for my understanding of each Sunday's exegetical preaching from the pulpit for once I had the catechism as a part of my way of thinking, I had a structure, a skeleton, if you will, for me to flesh out with the teachings from the word of God. Too many people without catechetical training have an atomized view of the word of God, that is, they do not understand the relation of one part to another. There are different types of relation in the Bible. There is the history of redemption relationship of one event to another, but there is another equally important relation in the Bible, the relation of one doctrine to another. That's where the catechal training was so useful. How does the doctrine of God relate to the doctrine of man? In seminary, we studied them as separate topics in different semesters. I was amazed at how little people understood the larger picture of the connection and relation to one another mostly because these people had not benefited from catechetical training." Frank told me once that he was way ahead of most of the men in his class at Westminster Theological Seminary because he knew the Shorter Catechism.

Now to continue. "The final benefit of those early years of catechetical training is that they have helped me to keep balance in theology by focusing on the whole counsel of God rather than a single part of it. I have found with many of the Lord's people that their varying circumstances and stages of life have affected which part of theology appears to be most relevant to them at a particular time. That is, there are periods of our lives when we focus more on our adoption into the family of God, particularly those times when we reflect upon our childhood experiences and realize how far they diverge from our heavenly Father's love and care given to us in the Bible. There are other times when we focus on sanctification and our desire for holiness before the Lord. There are times when we focus on our roles and responsibilities in the church under the headship of Christ, and so on. It is very difficult for a person to keep all these doctrines in balance but with solid catechetical training we are given a better understanding of how each particular area of theology and its life application that relates to the other teachings of scripture that we may be perhaps neglecting."

Frank van Dalen found the Shorter Catechism memory, and by the way, I required them to memorize the first 39 questions ice cold, and Questions 82 to 87, and then the Lord's Prayer and the 10 Commandments, they had to memorize them too, and then discuss their meaning in terms of the catechism. Frank went on to be a very effective missionary in Pakistan and he found that the Westminster Shorter Catechism was a great help to him in dealing with a totally new situation as an American missionary in a volatile Islamic country. So it helped him to understand sermons when he was young, to keep his thinking

in balance when he was a student, to keep him safe from a one-sided emphasis that so often endangers God's people, and even helped him with the most difficult courses in theological training, and helped him to navigate as he labored in an Islamic nation. And I think you can see, then, what a great blessing it has been to me to hear from a former student that that much fruit came from those Wednesdays when we went over and over and over intensively driving into the memory of those children those questions of the Shorter Catechism.

You might think that I am partial to the Shorter Catechism, in a way I am because I know from experience it's much easier to memorize. How many of you people of Dutch heritage know where the Compendium came from? Did you ever hear of the Compendium? Sure, some of you have. The Compendium is a very old document having been used in the Reformed churches for over 400 years. It was first prepared by Hermanus Faulkelius who was a minister of the Reformed Church in Middelburg, Holland in 1599. Why? At the request of his elders, he prepared this document as an abbreviated form of the Heidelberg Catechism. The purpose was to have available a document which the youth of the church could more easily memorize than the rather lengthy questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism. That's why I have always preferred, when it came to memory, the Shorter Catechism over the Heidelberg. For preaching it's probably the other way around. And I love both of them very dearly and have written studies of both.

Well folks, you haven't been listening to a scholar, you've been listening to a pastor. That's all I claim to be. I'm not a famous man, but once I felt like I was. It was in the year 2000. I was at Westminster Seminary. It was at the International Conference of Christian Churches, Reformed churches rather, the National Conference of Reformed Churches, ICRC. When I came there, very few Americans knew me but all those Orientals, those Koreans and Japanese, and others, "G. I. Williamson! G. I. Williamson! Catechism! Catechism!" Well, that was a great blessing to my heart. I don't want to be famous, but, boy, I sure do want that work to go to the ends of the earth and as I speak to you tonight, one of our pastors, Larson is his name down there in Uruguay, is translating the 6th translation of the Westminster Shorter Catechism book into Spanish, so you might pray for the Lord's blessing on that final effort. Thank you very much.