



Why We Have a Catechism

Answering the Ultimate Questions

As Presbyterian and Reformed churches, why do we have a Catechism? It is a question which shouldn't be so foreign to us. Anyone among us who has had any interaction with Christians of the more Anabaptist tradition, at some point or another, is invariably usually asked as to why we place so much importance on the Confessions; and in the case of the Reformed Churches the question is asked particularly about the Heidelberg Catechism.

Mind you, when they talk about this with us in this way, they are usually not that aware of their own church's history. For every believer who is part of a church – and every believer ought to be part of the local Body of Christ – believes in something, and it's that something which is reflected in the way that their church has drawn up its beliefs in a doctrinal statement or statements.

Even if they are part of a church of such a tradition as the Brethren, where there is no agreed confession as such, they would still have to believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord before they become members.

In fact, Scripture says that if they don't have such a basis of faith, they are going against the Lord of the Church! The apostle Paul, after having written quite extensively about our fallen nature and God's judgement, and then God's grace in Christ, to the church at Rome, states, *"...if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Rom. 10:9).

"Ah," but one could say, "these words, which are an early confession, are what's found in the Bible." But, then, isn't that what we have in the Catechism – those things which are found in the Bible? It is this Bible in Romans 10 which speaks of this simple confession of faith in Jesus as Lord. A simple confession which becomes expanded by that early hymn in Philippians 2, which tells of what Jesus did to bring us to faith.

Right through Scripture's historical development, and ever since, the Church has had a framework for its teaching. It has taken what is in the Bible and taught it to adults and children in a summarised form. And it has often done that through Questions and Answers; a method often called 'catechism'. So when the Reformational Catechisms begin with a question, they follow a pattern found throughout church history. Martin Luther himself wrote a short Catechism soon after the Reformation began, to teach particularly the children what the Bible states; also as a way of combating the errors of the Roman Catholic church. In doing this, Luther was only following what the church had done for centuries.

And ever since the Reformation, every kind of denomination has followed a Question & Answer approach in its teaching. There have been the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, the 1689 Baptism Catechism, the Methodist Catechisms, right through to the Pentecostal Catechisms of this century. This is nothing new, nothing different, but simply a part of what being a church is all about. This is our confession.

Questions will be asked

In Exodus 12, verse 26, Moses says, *"And **when** your children ask you..."* This is not a matter of *if* their children ask them; no, it is when their children ask them. It is understood that the children will ask.

There are a number of ways in which questions will be asked. For instance, the questions could be asked in the way we have just noted from Exodus. Thus, they are asked **explicitly**. That means there is an open verbal communication; you are asked out aloud. This is what is happening to the parents in Exodus 12.

This was also probably happening in 1 Peter chapter 3, verse 15. There the apostle says, *"Always be prepared to give – an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* The understanding is that, as a result of what Peter has written in chapter 1 about the living of such a good life among the pagans, they will see our good deeds, and will want to know about what we show. Therefore they ask in an open and honest way. They are impressed.

Then there are questions which are asked **implicitly**. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8 points to this. There Philip is moved by the Spirit to go to the Ethiopian official's chariot. Upon doing that, Philip heard the man reading Isaiah. Implicitly, Philip sees a searching soul. He understands that this man really wants to know what it means. But because he doesn't want to offend the Ethiopian, he asks an open question: *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* Or, as someone translated it, *"Do you after all know what you are reading?"* He taps into where that man is at.

Questions will be asked. That's a part of our human nature; the nature that is made in God's image, because we want to know; in fact, we **need** to know. Looking at the example of Jesus we see how He is also answering questions, but answering them even before they are asked! How often doesn't He actually read His disciples' minds, or the thoughts of the Pharisees, and then proceed to clearly address their issue.

Parents realise how much questioning is a part of basic human nature as soon as their children can speak. Who can forget the nagging voice of the two year old, "Why mummy? Why?"

The type of question can tell us what type of answer to give. This brings us to the next aspect in relation to the question being asked. For there are essentially two types of questions. Each of these two types will have a wide range within it; but we'll find questions relating to faith will be one or another sort.

The first type are those from Christians. Exodus 12 illustrates this, as it's about questions from within the covenant community. The Catechism is also largely involved in answering believers' questions. That's why it has generally been used in the instruction of our young people. (The Westminster Shorter Catechism was written especially for them.)

But a Catechism also becomes useful for those showing interest in the faith. Its three parts concerning our sin, our salvation, and our service, are a helpful introduction to the Christian faith.

Nowadays we are more used to using shorter courses, though they, too, are often based on questions. But if we ourselves are familiar with the Catechism, it helps us to be ready to answer those who ask us about the hope we have.

This is what the apostle Peter addresses in his first letter. This should be no rote memorisation, but the way to express what we live out every day. After all, that's how come the unbeliever is asking us!

Is that an appropriate question for us to think about now – have we been asked lately why we believe? Have we ever been asked at all? What would you say to someone who cried out the same question as the crowd at Pentecost did to the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Questions need to be answered

Isn't it true that we sit uneasily if questions aren't answered? Don't we begin to become suspicious when we suspect someone isn't quite being truthful with us? Aren't we dissatisfied if we have a question that can't be answered?

I remember one teacher saying to me that I asked too many difficult questions – but I needed to know! We do need to know; and if we can't know we soon make something up which we think can explain it – like the Athenians in Acts 17 who even had an altar with the inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. It was that unknowingness which Paul declared to them. It was the Answer to their deepest need that he spoke of that day – the answer of a God who was altogether God, everywhere present, ruling over all, including being the cause for their very existence!

Those pagans couldn't really be satisfied until they had met Jesus Christ through faith. Their questions would haunt their inner selves until they came to savingly know the One whose Spirit alone can rule in the right way in our hearts.

But now, as Christians, having come into the Truth, how much we need to hold it dear! As Jesus said in Luke 21: *"By standing firm you will save yourselves."* It is in difficult situations of persecution and suffering that we realise questions do need to be answered.

Our Lord spoke of the time when the disciples would be delivered to synagogues and prisons, and when they would be brought before kings and governors, on account of His Name. Then they would certainly be called to account! And how would they answer?

Here comes an interesting thing. For the plain meaning of this text is that the Lord will put the words they need in their mouths exactly when they need it. And in that intense difficulty the Spirit does speak. But what does He speak?

Some say that here we have proof against a Catechism; that here the Bible tells us we should simply be led by the Spirit. However, let's notice a few things. Luke 2 1:14 does speak of a type of preparation. It says that they ought not to be worried beforehand how they will defend themselves. And they do know that such a time will come because Jesus has told them so.

The more we consider what Jesus says here, the more we realise how much of an exception this situation is – the exception to prove the rule; to show us that what we should be doing everyday is preparing us for whatever might happen. That includes learning how to answer. Then the Spirit will lead us, in the way of the Word. There's no excuse for a minister who alleges that he just lets the Spirit lead him when the time comes to speak!

Paul wrote to Timothy, *"What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us"* (v13f). Why else would we have teachers in the Christian church if there wasn't that pattern, a framework, a structure, for the way they taught?

The imagery about The Armour of God' is very clear about this in Ephesians 6. The apostle writes there: *"Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."*

This doesn't suggest throwing all caution to the winds. Quite the opposite! To use the words of Peter, it means that because we set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts we are always prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks us for the hope we have. He's the only hope! Without Him we will surely die! And so will everyone else!

But if we grow in the grace and **knowledge** of our Lord Jesus Christ, what a world opens before us! Then we are the richest people indeed. That way, we are certainly learning how to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven; treasures that cannot be taken away; treasures coming from God's Word.

The Catechism shows us who God is and what He has done for us – especially in the person and work of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Don't neglect it! Don't say the Bible is all we need, for if we can't use a simplified framework to the Bible, such as the Catechism, don't go thinking that you'll be able to put all of Scripture into a more understandable form! The Scripture and Catechism are meant to go together!

Let's be encouraged by these words of the faithful American Presbyterian theologian, B.B. Warfield, of last century: *"Two things keep the relatively small Christian Reformed Church straight in an ecclesiastically crooked world: the systematic instruction of its youth, and the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism."*

Let's use it to keep us straight too young and old!

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