



A Lost Art

A tried and true way of teaching is needed again

Historically, the church's ministry of grounding new believers in the rudiments of Christianity has been known as *catechesis* — the growing of God's people in the gospel and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty, and delight. It is a ministry that has waxed and waned through the centuries. It flourished between the second and fifth centuries in the ancient church. Those who became Christians often moved into the faith from radically different worldviews. The churches rightly sought to ensure that these life-revolutions were processed carefully, prayerfully, and intentionally, with thorough understanding at each stage.

With the tightening of the alignment between church and state in the West, combined with the impact of the Dark Ages, the ministry of catechesis floundered. The Reformers, led by heavyweights Luther and Calvin, sought with great resolve to reverse matters. Luther restored the office of catechist to the churches.

And seizing upon the providential invention of the printing press, Luther, Calvin, and others made every effort to print and distribute catechisms small handbooks to instruct children and "the simple" in the essentials of Christian belief, prayer, worship, and behavior (like the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*).

Catechisms of greater depth were produced for Christian adults and leaders (like Luther's *Larger Catechism*). Furthermore, entire congregations were instructed through unapologetically catechetical preaching and the regular catechising of children in Sunday worship.

The conviction of the Reformers that such catechetical work must be primary is unmistakable. Calvin, writing in 1548 to the Lord Protector of England, declared, "*Believe me, Monseigneur, the church of God will never be preserved without catechesis.*" The Church of Rome, responding to the growing influence of the Protestant catechisms, soon began to produce its own. The rigorous work of nurturing believers and converts in the faith once for all delivered to the saints, a didactic discipline largely lost for most of the previous millennium, had become normative again for both Catholics and Protestants.

The critical role of catechesis in sustaining the church continued to be apparent to subsequent evangelical trailblazers of the English-speaking world. Richard Baxter, John Owen, Charles Spurgeon, and countless other pastors and leaders saw catechesis as one of their most obvious and basic pastoral duties. If they could not wholeheartedly embrace and utilize an existing catechism for such instruction, they would adapt or edit one or would simply write their own. A pastor's chief task, it was widely understood, was to be the teacher of the flock.

Today, however, things are quite different, and that for a host of reasons. The church in the West has largely abandoned serious catechesis as a normative practice. Among the more surprising of the factors that have contributed to this decline are the unintended consequences of the great Sunday school movement.

This lay-driven phenomenon swept across North America in the 1800s and came to dominate educational efforts in most evangelical churches through the 20th century. It effectively replaced pastor-catechists with relatively untrained lay workers, and substituted an instilling of familiarity (or shall we say, perhaps, *over-familiarity*) with Bible stories for any form of grounding in the basic beliefs, practices, and ethics of the faith.

Thus, for most contemporary evangelicals the entire idea of catechesis is largely an alien concept. The very word itself — *catechesis*, or any of its associated terms, including *catechism* is greeted with suspicion by most evangelicals today. ("Wait, isn't that a Roman Catholic thing?")

We are persuaded that Calvin had it right and that we are already seeing the sad, even tragic, consequences of allowing the church to continue uncatechised in any significant sense. We are persuaded, further, that something can and must be done to help the Protestant churches steer a wiser course. What we are after, to put it otherwise, is to encourage our fellow evangelicals to seriously consider the wisdom of building believers the old-fashioned way.

J L Packer and Gary A Parrett

©2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org