



Why catechism?

That is a good question. Why have Reformed churches always had a high view of catechism? Why are parents spending so much time making sure their children know their catechism, in order that sometime during the week their pastor or possibly an elder can ask them to recite the questions? Or, more basically, why do covenant parents send their children to catechism?

One evening, while washing dishes after a hard day and looking up against a hectic evening, Mom had an idea. Drying her hands, she went to the dining room desk, opened the drawer, and pulled out *New Testament History for Juniors* catechism book. This would be the way, she hoped, Every evening would have a short period of time when they could go over the lesson for next week's catechism class - while washing and wiping the dishes.

Why does an idea like this come to the mind of a covenant mother? Why do we send our children to catechism? Thankful that we have this (very proper) tradition, we ought to review why our consistories call parents to send their children to catechism classes every week for a good part of the year, for 12, 13, and sometimes even 14 years.

Consider that most of our children already receive training in the Christian day schools, a good deal of them with thoroughly Reformed teachers who train them in the Scripture. Consider, too, that many of our children weekly receive instruction from Sunday School teachers. More yet, concerned as well about their children's inner growth as their outer, godly parents spend time at home telling Bible stories, and spend time around the table with family devotions, drawing out Biblical truths that apply to their children's lives.

God forbid that anyone think this to be an excuse for not putting much work into, or not sending their children to, catechism. Nevertheless, the question is, "Why catechism if we have all this already?"

That we have a good reason is critical in this age when almost all Reformed practices are rejected wholesale. When many churches are either eliminating catechism or giving it less time and attention, you and I need to equip ourselves for the defense of our practice of sending out six (5?) to eighteen (21?)-year-olds an hour a week to be taught by their pastor. Why catechism?

From the viewpoint of duty

Why do you send your children to catechism? That the Scripture teaches the parent's responsibility to teach their children is well known in most Reformed circles. Because we know that well, we have (if possible) our own Christian day schools which are parental instead of parochial (church run). But why, then, do Reformed believers maintain the church's duty to teach Bible truths to the children of believers rather than, or in addition to, the parents and their parental schools?

The background for catechism training by the church is the truth of the covenant. Take away this great Bible truth, or distort the covenant into an agreement between God and man, and catechism becomes a work of the mission or evangelism committee rather than the consistory. But understand this truth well, and catechism becomes not only a necessary, but a wonderfully blessed necessity for the church along with covenant parents.

We need not show extensive Scriptural proof for the parental duty with children's education. None would deny this. To quote only two:

"For I (Jehovah) know him (Abraham), that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment . . ."
(Genesis 18:17-19)

"And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house . . ." (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) - not to mention all the others, especially in Proverbs.

The reason the Lord wills that parents teach their children is not first of all that the children might become saved in the narrow sense of the word (although this instruction is part of the process of their salvation). Rather, God wills parents to teach their children because these are children of the covenant. Our babies are not baptized in order to bring them into the covenant of God. But because they are members of the covenant, God calls us to baptize them as a sign of that covenant. Now, since they are members of God's covenant, God wills that parents teach them the truths and obligations of the covenant of grace.

So far the parents' duty.

But this duty also falls on the church. When you and I bring our children for the sacrament of baptism, we believe that God has given those children not only to parents, but to the church. The duty to teach is also the church's. That is plain from especially two things.

- **First**, in Matthew 28, the Lord gives the apostles, as representatives of the church, the mandate to go into all nations *"baptizing . . . and teaching them. . ."* (Matthew 28:19, 20). Surely, because of the truth of the covenant, the calling of the church is to teach the children as well as the adults.
- **Second**, Deuteronomy 6:6-9, quoted above, which says, *"Thou shalt teach them diligently . . ."* is addressed to the nation of Israel as the church. The singular is used in that passage. The passage is not speaking first of all to parents, but to the nation as a whole (to *"Israel," "thou"*). The calling of the church is to teach its children the wonderful works of the Lord. This Reformed churches do in catechism.

This does not mean that parents do not have the duty to teach the catechism to their children. No more does catechism at church relieve parents of their duty to teach them Bible truths at home, than Christian schooling relieves parents of their duty to teach their children obedience at home. The Synod of Dordt was so impressed with this duty that it advised consistories to supervise the catechetical instruction that parents gave to their children at home. The church instructed the parents what they ought to teach their children and supervised this instruction with periodic visits.

Parental instruction in Bible (catechism) lessons is not only necessary, but is a great blessing to the church. The preacher or elder who sees nothing but blank stares when he asks about the present lesson becomes both discouraged and does not get very far in applying the truth to their lives and driving home the great themes of the Bible during the short time he has. But what a blessing for the pastor who can teach the truth to children who have already heard the basics at home from their father or mother. Rather than be disappointed because he feels the parents stole his thunder, the teacher is thrilled to hear little Billy say, "Yes, daddy told us about that already . . ." or, "Mom explained that to us before!"

When both the church and the parents carry their load, children greatly profit. The duty is the parents' as well as the church's.

From the viewpoint of the goal

Why do we have the practice of sending children to catechism? Because the parents as well as the church have the duty to nurture them spiritually. But there is another way to ask the question: "Why catechism?" That is, "For what purpose are parents and the church called to teach the children?" Or, "What is the goal in catechism?"

One danger that parents and consistories face in catechism is having a wrong goal - the mere intellectual superiority of their children over children in other churches, the mental ability to split theological hairs from one end to the other. This is a cold, mechanical approach to God's calling for us and our children.

Our goal for covenant children is their spiritual maturity. This demands increase in mental capacity of Biblical truths, surely. This calls for knowledge of theological terms and controversies. But the goal not to be lost sight of is the spiritual maturity of the child, so that he can take his (her) place in the office of believer in the church, so that he truly knows God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3). This we long for, pray for, lead our children toward, and rejoice over when it comes. The attainment of spiritual manhood and womanhood of our children is the greatest thrill for covenant parents. No greater joy has any man than this that his children walk in the truth!

Perhaps we as parents can examine our own lives here. We honestly desire that our children experience the blessings of salvation and truly have catechism mean something in their own lives. But do we personally know what that means? Does our spiritual maturity bubble over to our children, so that they desire to have the same spiritual joy and maturity that they see we possess? Is it maybe the case that we satisfy ourselves with learning for learning's sake, worshiping for intellectual stimulation, studying for argument's sake? Perhaps parents need to pray that their lives be changed and their maturity be increased so that their children might learn from and desire what they have.

An outstanding landmark on this (never ending!) road to spiritual maturity is the public confession of faith. Basic in all goals for catechism is this goal. With their hearts young men or women believe unto righteousness and with their mouth confession is made to salvation (Romans 10:10). Pray to God that our young people would be impressed with the importance of this great text from Romans. My heart's desire and prayer for the young people of our church is that they might confess their faith to salvation. Here is the first goal of catechism training: confession of the faith God gave them through the means of faith. At this happy landmark the "*man of God*" (1 Timothy 6:11) testifies that the truths he has spent years learning are his truths to be bought and defended at all costs, that the way of godliness presented in the Scriptures is his resolve, that the daily conversion for which his parents have prayed and longed is his prayer.

Always catechism sets its sights on this goal, the spiritual growth and maturity of the children which climaxes (though does not stop) in their public confession. Much is involved in this spiritual maturity: the ability to understand and defend truths of the Bible, the desire to assume the duties and privileges of confessing members, and a godly resolve daily to be turned to the life of the new man in Christ. God grant that our catechism might be blessed with this fruit, to His glory and the strength of His Church.

B Gritters

© 2011

www.christianstudylibrary.org