

The Need for Catechesis—H. C. Newton

One of the most overwhelming aspects of being a parent is the sheer volume of things that a child must be taught—to know, to do, and to not do. It starts of with the basics—eating, being obedient, saying “Mommy”; then comes the big stuff—tying a shoe, riding a bike, the infield fly rule. Next comes school of some sort (and no matter what venue you choose, there’s a lot for the parents to teach), responsibility, driving a car, and so much more. For the Christian parent, there is something fundamentally more important—the covenant nurture of children.

In the patriarchal period, prior to the division of the prophet/priest/king roles in Israel as a nation, the father served in overlapping roles. A duty that is placed on the father may apply to his role as ruler of his home, and it may also apply to his role as priest in his home. For instance, in Genesis 18:19, the LORD says that Abraham was chosen “that he may command his children . . . to keep the way of the LORD.” What an amazing thought—Abraham, the father of the faithful, was chosen by God for the purpose of instructing his children in the covenant—the same could be said for us. On first read this verse looks like a statement about paternal responsibility alone, but, unlike us, Abraham also served as priest for his family. As Abraham was not merely the head of his nuclear family, he was also the head of the Church; we see in God’s purposes for Abraham that the responsibility for education of covenant children lies with both the family and the Church.

There have been times throughout history that the Church has tragically overstepped its bounds and exercised almost total control over this nurture. But the Bible will not allow for that—in addition to Genesis 18:19, Ephesians 6:4 clearly tells the father, as head of household, to “bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Any family that relegates a child’s religious training to Sunday School is clearly in rebellion to this command—as is the Church when it usurps the family’s responsibility.

In many ways, however, it seems today that the pendulum is swinging to the opposite error to where it parents (especially fathers) want to take it all unto themselves. Against this stand texts like Matthew 18:18-20 and Nehemiah 8:1-8. In these we see a command for the Church to disciple and teach and an example of the Church doing so. This teaching is not relegated to fathers, or adults, but seemingly to all that fall under the hearing of the Church. The Church is the pillar and buttress of truth, and as such holds up the light of the Lord for all to see—both within and without. It is only in this light, the Psalmist observes, that we see light (Ps. 36:9)—which should serve as a reminder that methodology, catechisms, and other means are but that—means. Without the Lord’s enlightening of the soul, and when the means depart from the Scripture—they’re nothing but exercises for the child. But as they reflect the teaching of Scripture, by His grace, the child can see God in all His glory.

Above these passages, Deuteronomy 6 is *the* classic text for covenant education, but it's unclear whose children are in view of Moses' charge to teach. Is it "Parents teach your children," or "People of Israel, teach the children of Israel"? Ultimately, whether we see these texts as promoting the role of the church or the role of the family, the end is the same. Both texts show that from the beginnings of redemptive history, the "instruction and discipline" of children in the Lord has been a goal. This is a joint effort—it takes a covenant community *and* strong parents, to raise a child. (See also Ex. 12:25-27; Josh. 4:21-24, Ps. 78:4-7, 71:17-18, 145:4)

This joint responsibility is seen in our *Book of Church Order*. In Chapter Two of the *Form of Government* we read, "The universal church visible consists of all those persons, in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and promise submission to his commandments." And the officers of the Church are to discipline *all* who belong to the Church, and as the Body is one body with many parts, all parts of the body are to help the other parts. One way that parents "promise submission" is our second baptismal vow—"instruct your child in the principles of our holy religion."

What should we expect from this education? A. H. Degraaf's conclusion cannot be stressed enough: "The church has been charged to instruct its catechumens in the knowledge of faith. But considering the nature of faith-knowledge, we may well ask how this is possible. Certainly we cannot *teach* someone to *believe*. At the most we can teach a person *what* he *ought* to believe and what this would mean for his daily life."¹

The way we go about teaching a person what he ought to believe is catechesis. Paul and Luke use the word *katēcheo* to express oral instruction, any passing on the Christian faith to another fits the bill. Clement used the word describing the official teaching given to new believers before baptism—eventually it was used for the instruction before confirmation. Initially this instruction was in some sort of lecture form, but from the time of Augustine on the oral instruction took the form of questions and answers to be memorized and then used for instruction.² During the "Middle Ages," catechetical instruction almost disappeared from the Church. However, "where this kind of instructions was adhered to most closely, Christian life remained purest. We have only to think of the Waldenses, the Albigenses, the Hussites and the Lollards to prove this."³

Although most Evangelicals associate catechisms with the Romish Church today, it was Martin Luther, John Calvin and their Protestant descendants that revived the practice of catechesis and also focused this catechesis on children. Hundreds of catechisms were written—and used—in England in the early 1600's, even following the publication of the Westminster Shorter Catechism many pastors (including those who contributed to the Shorter) continued to write their own catechisms for use in their own churches. Isaac Watts and John Wesley knew the value of catechisms and promoted their use extensively. "Yet in the second

half of the nineteenth century the effects of the new antipathy to dogmas, creeds and catechisms virtually put catechizing out of the Church. Today we are reaping the results of that false approach to the Christian life. Ignorance and unbelief are rampant in our land, the Church is without an authoritative message, and often even evangelical Christians are weak and unstable. Is there not cause to ask whether the time has not come to revive the art and practice of catechizing?"⁴

Now that we've discussed the theory, let's move on to the practice. Catechetical instruction is "a systematic presentation of Bible truth in a form that can be memorized, understood and embraced, so that the covenant member knows what he believes and why, and acts on it."⁵ When the words are memorized, and when the memorization is drilled, the words—the doctrines—become lodged in a child's mind and thoughts in ways that will serve them throughout their life.⁶ But memorization alone is not enough. Isaac Watts railed against the against mere memorization, "The young creature will neither be the wiser nor the better for being able to repeat accurate definitions and theorems in divinity without knowing what they mean." Instead, he insisted that "parents and teachers should use their utmost skill in leading the child into the meaning of every questions, when they ask it, and of every answer when the child repeats it, that the child may not hear and learn mere words and syllables instead of the great things of God and religion."⁷

The greatest strength of catechizing is in its nature. All Christian parents are called to teach their children about God and the contents of the Bible. But how many of them are trained well enough to do so on their own? What happens all too often is that the children are taught simple morality, the most common "Bible Stories" from the Old Testament, the events of Jesus' life (emphasis on the birth and death narratives), and a few of dad's favorite Proverbs—maybe augmented by a daily devotional reading—*My Utmost for His Highest* or *Morning and Evening*.

But by using the catechism, the tools are all there for full-orbed instruction—the concepts, the explanations, the proof texts. The training is pretty much self-contained (although study guides like those by Williamson and Vincent can help). These are discussed in a tried and true, systematic manner, covering all the major items that a child needs to learn, and an adult needs to master. The other standards of the church will cover the same things, in different levels of depth, so that as the parents prepare to instruct the child, they will grow in their understanding. There is a freedom to be found in catechizing as well—there is no schedule, you are not bound by seasons, and the method by which a parent leads in understanding or memorization can be shaped to fit the parent and the children involved. The catechism doesn't govern covenant nurture, it is a tool to facilitate it.

This is not to suggest that children and parents (and new believers) cannot profit from the former method, but it is potentially aimless. But especially those of us

in confessional churches should desire that our children are taught confessional material, in the language of our "Presbyterian-American" sub-culture. C. H. Spurgeon said that he compiled his catechism because he was "persuaded that the use of a good Catechism in all our families will be a great safeguard against the increasing errors of the times."⁸ He was right then, he'd be more so today.

Joel Beeke advises parents, in general terms, "in all your teaching, be reverent and serious, yet natural. Let your children feel that what you speak is real. Look them straight in the eye as you speak. Show your love for their souls. Don't be afraid to weep as you speak of the loveliness of Christ or warn them to flee from the wrath to come."⁹ And then specifically, "assign your children questions to memorize, then pack your teaching with questions that flow out of the questions memorized. Draft five to ten questions off of the questions that your catechists are to memorize. Remember, catechizing is not lecturing. Dialogue with your children. Question, re-question, correct, explain, guide, and review with your catechists."¹⁰

This sounds like a great deal of effort—and it is. But it is effort to which God calls *all parents* of covenant children. Deuteronomy 6 tells us that this instruction is something we need to do "diligently," it required painstaking work in Moses' day, and it still does in ours. But there is great incentive to this work, and greater encouragement to be found in it. One mother recently related the following:

"I essentially went straight from this email of yours into the living room, where the first child (David, who recently turned six) was in the middle of his answers to his father. As I walked in, my husband was asking, 'Why do you need Christ as a prophet?' David replied, 'Because I am ignorant.' 'Why do you need Christ as a priest?' 'Because I am guilty.' 'Why do you need Christ as a King?' 'Because I am weak and helpless.'

". . . I had goosebumps.

"I know that at this point in his life, given how stubborn and selfish this particular child is, it was rote. He was repeating what he was taught. I don't think he truly agreed with what he was saying, down deep. But he was hearing it, with his own voice. He hears it daily, in his own catechism, and hearing his brothers say theirs. He sees it in the lives of his confessing brothers and his parents and grandparents. He hears it in our prayers and thanksgiving for God's provision in everything. Our family has had frequent cause for both thanking God and for pleading with Him. He has seen this. He knows the only thing being a covenant child really means for him is exposure and teaching about who God is, and why he owes him his life, love, and allegiance. He knows that simply being our son and a member of our church won't save him. He is reminded of this often."¹¹

Beeke's treasure of a book includes this additional bit of advice which is a fitting close: "Persevere in love. Even when you don't see fruits, press on in prayer,

preparation, and teaching. Teach winsomely, with passion and love. Children are rarely fooled; we need to show love for the Word and the doctrines we teach. Keep reaching for greater depth. The gospel's simplicity is precious but that simplicity never robs it of profundity. Aim to raise stalwart, doctrinally knowledgeable sons and daughters who will, by grace, hold fast the Reformed faith with conviction. In dependency on the Spirit, aim to bring your children, who are the heritage of the Lord, to the Lord who is the heritage of covenant children. Pray that your children, by grace will love instruction and the God of the truths taught.

"May God help us today to view the evangelizing of our covenant children as a task that involves both bringing the gospel to them and so presenting Christ and the doctrines of grace that believing children may grow in Him. We need to recover the vision of our forebears in our catechizing, such that we view evangelism as entailing both how to come to Christ and how to live out of Christ."¹²

¹A. H. De Graaf, *The Educational Ministry of the Church*

²There is an advantage that catechesis has over a lecture or a sermon, one wag noted, "At sermons and prayers men may sleep or wander, but when one is asked a question, he must disclose what he knows."

³John J. Murray, "Catechizing—A Forgotten Practice," from *The Banner of Truth*

⁴ibid.

⁵*Catechetical Instruction: The Why and How* by Thomas E. Tyson, available from the OPC's Committee on Christian Education. SRPC members may speak to the author to borrow the video as well.

⁶See the Warfield article in this issue.

⁷As quoted in Murray, op. cit.

⁸As quoted in Murray, op. cit.

⁹*Bringing the Gospel to Covenant Children*

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹email from Laura Hollister to the Reformed Theology Discussion email list

¹²op. cit.