




Why Bother Catechizing Our Children?

In every issue of "EQUIP" or "NEW HORIZONS" (two reformed denominational magazines) we see a list of children who have successfully recited the Shorter or Children Catechisms. We might smile and think, "that's nice and quaint, but our children really don't have time for such an anachronistic method of learning about Christianity, after all, as long as believe Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, this should be all the doctrine that our children need." Maybe that's why for a denomination the size of the PCA with as many churches as it has, we see such a short list of covenant children who have demonstrated this knowledge. If we added up the children in each "EQUIP" issue (usually only a few from the same churches) at the end of the year we would have less than 1/5% of our covenant children recognized---pretty weak!?! 

Why is it that when some of us hear about catechizing our children we recoil? Well, for many of us who never grew up learning the Children's or Shorter Catechism the whole idea seems archaic and distinctly Roman (Catholic). For others it brings up a nightmare of stumbling over recently crammed questions and answers dryly being recited to a stern faced elder. Or maybe it's the work involved, all of those questions---when would anyone have the time? Sadly, perhaps we have forgotten why such a method of learning is so practical and needed today.

Let me tell you a true story about a Presbyterian pastor who was asking a Catholic priest about why so many Catholics, when they are older and have been away from church so long, seem to want to come back. The Catholic priest's answer was immediate. "We catechize our little children and it is part of them, therefore, when they are seeking again the answers to life, their memorized catechism questions come back to them and they return again to the source of that learning." (Please note, we use a different catechism than the Catholics based on the Westminster Standards). I, personally, like to use a metaphor that we are wiring the

house of the child's mind and are waiting for the Holy Spirit to flick the switch translating the head knowledge to heart knowledge.

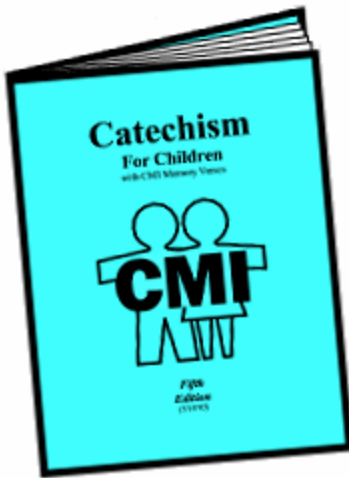
For those in the reformed community who have heard of the classical approach to education the idea of beginning with the basics as a foundation is not novel. This is the "grammar" of the faith. Catechism is the foundation upon our understanding of Christianity. In George Barna's recent book "TRANSFORMING CHILDREN INTO SPIRITUAL CHAMPIONS", he mentions four cornerstones on which our children's Christian belief system must be anchored:

1. Cornerstone #1 - The child's view of the Bible as a credible source of information and wisdom on how to think and live.
2. Cornerstone #2 - The child's actual knowledge of the Bible. Most people say that the Bible is inspired by God, but know little of its contents.
3. Cornerstone #3 - A framework that is logical and comprehensive, that makes sense to the child, and that provides practical counsel.
4. Cornerstone #4 - A burning desire to obey God. Our children should demonstrate a commitment to godly principles and standards.

Its the third cornerstone that we as reformed Presbyterians have a tool that others do not---the Children's (or Shorter) Catechism! We can be thankful as biblical Presbyterians that such a systematic way to learn the basics of the Christian faith exists and has been used for generation after generation. Starting at with the Westminster divines (theologians) drawing up the Shorter Catechism of our Confession in the 1640's to Joseph Engels (a Presbyterian Sunday School teacher in the middle of the 1800's) simplifying the Shorter Catechism for children. But many of us still ask, "Why bother? There's lots of good stuff out there for our children to learn."

Let's look at the word "catechism". It comes from two Greek prefixes: "cat" or down (catacombs comes from this group of letters) and "echeo" to sound from (echo comes from this prefix). So catechism is to "sound down" expecting an echo. The teacher asks a question and the student answers it. Some would say, "Why this is just the Socratic method of asking questions in learning". Yes, but a whole lot more, because the answers have to do with eternal life or destruction. Throughout Scripture we see warnings that "when our children ask us what do these things mean" we must be ready to answer (Exodus 12:26, Deut 6:20, Joshua 4:21, Proverbs 1-4, Psalm 78:3-4).

Here's a brief summary of what the children's (or Shorter) catechism teaches: Questions about creation (Who made you? Why did God make you and all things?), about the attributes of God (His knowledge, power and transcendence), about the Bible, about eternal life, about covenants and promises of Scripture, about evil and the devil, about justification, adoption and sanctification, about Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, about the moral law--the Ten Commandments, about the Lord's Prayer, about the Lord's Supper and Baptism and about the second coming of Jesus Christ (this is a brief outline of the 145 questions of the Children's Catechism. The Shorter Catechism summarizes the questions and answers by saying, "What man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man" (question #4 of the Shorter Catechism).



The children's catechism does this systematically, building on one theme after another. It stays with the basics. It is God-centered. And it does it all in a question and answer format. It's like a road map. If I wanted to travel between Atlanta and Knoxville by car I could take a roundabout, journey visiting an expanding square of towns until I eventually reached Knoxville several weeks later or I could drive with a good map for four hours, directly and expeditiously. So it is with the catechism. We could read from Genesis to Revelation to find out about God and we would

eventually obtain a long list of who He is, it would take several weeks or even months. Or we could get the succinct, biblical answer in the Shorter Catechism, question #4, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth".

Maybe a more important question is, "Why should we catechize our children?" I think Deuteronomy 6 has the answers. In Deut 6:6-10, after God has told how important His commandments are, He states that we are to have them upon our hearts and to "press" them on our children, to talk about them when we sit at home, and we we walk along the road, when we lie down and get up, tying them as symbols on our hands and foreheads and writing them on our doorframes of our homes. The catechism gives us the structure to do this. Yet we still might say: "Why?"

In the next few verses of Deuteronomy 6 God tells us that we are a forgetful people that we need to fear the Lord and not to follow after other Gods. Its interesting that if we don't know the true God (and His

attributes and commands) our nature is to build gods of our own. And then we see the questioning nature of children, again in verse 20, "and in the future when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?'. Our children are always asking yet too often we don't have the answers.

Maybe by this point you agree that the Children's or Shorter Catechism is important, but really how can we eat this elephant. The answer is always the same---one bite (question) at a time. There are lots of helps. Children's Ministry International (CMI), of which I am the director, will take you even deeper into each question if you desire, visually through reusable flannelboard visual depictions of each question with accompanying Bible verse, Bible lesson, songs and crafts. Or if you want to go the Shorter Catechism route, CMI has just written a "DAILY FAMILY DEVOTIONS GUIDE" in three easy-to-fit-in-your-Bible booklets (Charles please ask Tim to show them to you and review them in EQUIP) which is a comprehensive guide with hymns, prayers, Bible stories allowing you to go through the Shorter Catechism at your own pace with your family. CMI also has a nine booklet Shorter Catechism instruction for "Tens through Teens" for the classroom. What I've mentioned above can be found in the PCA bookstore and much of it has been used in PCA churches for years.



Well, what other excuses do you have on not catechizing your children? We have our covenant children for such a short time. Why not lay a permanent foundation of truth that will never leave them. Recently, a lady from a PCA church on the Georgia coast was very interested in starting a catechism program for their church. We set up a seminar in the next few weeks and during the seminar I found out first-hand why she thought it was so vital. I'll close with her testimony of God's grace in her life using the means of the catechism.

"When I was a young girl we went to a Presbyterian Church where there was an active catechism program. I managed to memorize the shorter catechism by age eight through the hard work of many teachers there. When I was eight, my mother and father divorced and I lived with my mother. We began attending one type of church after another as my mother took a journey searching an elusive truth of who God was. We went through a smorgasbord of beliefs from Mormonism to Jehovah Witnesses, to liberal churches to Pentecostal denominations. What I saw sustaining me time and again were the answers that I had learned as a child in the catechism taught to me. I knew there was a God that did not have a body but was a spirit, who existed in three persons same in

substance equal in power and glory, that God had spoken the complete truth in His word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and on and on, soundly refuting the error that was trying to be placed upon her at each turn. When I was a teenager, my mother relented and allowed me to go back into a Bible believing Presbyterian Church where I took up where I left off."

What a great testimony, let's do a similar work with our covenant children.

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