

### ***A Strategy for Catechesis***

How should the *Children's Catechism* and *Shorter Catechism* be utilized in our Sunday School classes? Here is a suggested strategy that aims to be practical, realistic, effective, and above all, dependent on God's mercy and blessing.

#### **1. Parents and teachers working together<sup>1</sup>**

Parental involvement is crucial and foundational for catechesis. The Bible teaches that the primary responsibility for training covenant children belongs to parents (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Ephesians 6:4). The church's role is to come alongside of parents in the training of children in order to assist them in this work. The Christian home is foundational to the discipleship of covenant children. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 provides a family portrait of what catechesis in the home looks like:

*And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

In other words, God is commanding parents to faithfully instruct their children in as many contexts as possible. The picture is of a parent binding himself to his children and functioning as a walking biblical commentary in all of life. The parent heeding the call of Deuteronomy 6 teaches his or her children to see the world through the spectacles of Scripture.

This all comes under the umbrella of catechesis, which simply means "instruction." We even observe the customary format of catechesis in questions and answers in God's direction to believing parents:

*When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.'* (Deuteronomy 6:20-25)

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<sup>1</sup> This outline follows the programme for catechesis outlined in Terry Johnson, *Catechizing Our Children: The Whys and Hows of Teaching the Shorter Catechism Today*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2013.

We see it again in Exodus 12:26-27:

*And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.' And the people bowed their heads and worshiped.*

The picture could be summed up this way: parents instruct, children ask questions, parents provide biblical answers. This is God's desire for our homes. Therefore, parental instruction has a primary and vital role to play in the training of covenant children.

Building on the foundation of faithful parental instruction, the church has the privilege of reinforcing what is being taught in the home. Therefore a program of catechesis should involve communication and cooperation between parents and Sunday School instructors. This may involve something as simple as making sure parents know which questions and answers of the catechism need to be reviewed during the week. Such cooperation also provides encouragement to both parents and teachers as they work together to teach children the gospel.

We don't want to ignore the challenges involved in this process. Catechesis is a slow, patient process. Catechesis is not easy. There will be challenges. But the challenges will pale in comparison to the joy of seeing our children, over the years, by God's grace, internalizing and embracing the truths they are taught. Catechesis is not a quick program. It's an investment program that takes years, but it's a worthy investment. With God's blessing, catechesis is worth the hard work it requires from parents, teachers, and students. Parents and teachers should work together to teach our covenant children how to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

## **2. Catechize regularly**

The practice of catechesis is a family and church responsibility. Regular training in the catechisms will help parents fulfill this God-given task. Therefore we encourage the use of the *Children's Catechism* for kindergarten/elementary students and the *Shorter Catechism* for junior high students. By the time students reach high school, they will have memorized answers from the catechism touching on all the crucial teachings of the Christian faith. High school classes reinforce catechetical instruction by encouraging students to think through the implications of these truths for their own lives. Regular catechesis in the early years prepares our youth to think biblically about God, themselves, and the world.

## **3. Repetition**

God's Word is to be taught, meditated on, and memorized. A common misconception of catechisms needs to be confronted here. Some object to the practice of catechesis saying it's a boring exercise that is purely intellectual and outdated. "Our children need Jesus, not catechesis," someone might object. True enough, our children do need Jesus to be their Savior and Lord! But the biblical model given to us for leading our children to Jesus is faithfully immersing them in the truths of Scripture again and again (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). The truths of

God's Word are never outdated and they are meant to be memorized and meditated upon (Deuteronomy 6:6; 11:18; Psalm 1:2; 37:31; 119:9, 11, 15, 97; Proverbs 4:20-21; Matthew 4:4; Philippians 4:8; Colossians 3:16)

A teaching ministry that emphasizes memorization is always going to be confronted by challenges in our distracted, fast-paced, sound-bite culture. But Scripture makes it clear that God's truth isn't just to remain on a written page; it's to be stored up in our hearts (Deuteronomy 11:18). Bible memorization is vital and should not be neglected. Catechisms provide additional help because they take biblical truth and summarize it in a clear, concise way for easy memorization. Put another way, catechisms bring together the truth of God's Word in succinct statements so that we are better equipped to understand the meaning and message of Scripture.

Like memorizing anything else, learning a catechism will require regular repetition if it's going to stick. Parents committed to this work will go over the questions being memorized during the week; teachers will reinforce that effort by going over the questions several times each class. It doesn't have to be done all at once, of course. It may be good to break up this repetition. Go over the questions at the beginning and discuss them. Repeat them during the lesson and go over them at the end. Each teacher can figure out what will work best for them and their students. There are plenty of ways to make this fun and engaging. You might divide the students into teams and have teams answer. You might use a chalkboard and write out the answer and slowly erase words as students recite it. These are just suggestions, but have fun with it! Repetition does not have to be torture!

#### **4. Teach and apply**

The practice of catechesis is not simply rote memorization. Catechisms were written to aid *instruction*. In a bygone era many pastors would write their own catechisms for the children of their church and it would be utilized to discuss the truths of the Bible with the children. Think of a catechism as a teaching aid or a comprehensive gospel tract. Catechisms in the question and answer format are teaching tools. The *Shorter Catechism* is designed to take our children to Christ and to teach them how to live life in Christ. Use the catechism to your advantage. Take students to Scripture to show them where the doctrines being memorized are found in the Bible. Make applications based on the truth being memorized. "What is the chief end of man?" should be followed by "What does this mean for us? How can you glorify God?"

#### **5. Review**

Memorization requires repetition and review. Therefore at the beginning of each class, it's a good practice to take a few moments and review what has already been memorized. Review should be accumulative, so as students progress in a section of the catechism, review will necessarily take longer each week until that section of the catechism is completed.

#### **6. Interact**

Another misconception of catechesis looks something like this: The catechist (instructor) drills the catechumen (student) with questions. The student responds with the appropriate answer, but doesn't understand the words being recited.

Away with such notions of catechesis! In the hands of a good instructor, the catechism is a tool for teaching our children the truths of the Bible. Memorization must be coupled with understanding. Interact with students. Discuss the meaning of the answers. Make sure they understand the words. Teach them the meaning of new terms. Catechisms do not use big words unless they are biblical words worth knowing! Go on to draw out the applications of the truths being memorized. Ask follow up questions. Catechisms are not only a tool for memorization; they are a catalyst for conversation.

### **7. Recite**

After completing a section of the catechism in class, students will meet with one of the elders to recite the answers of that section. This practice provides opportunities for our children to meet one-on-one and talk about the Christian faith with an elder. Furthermore, reciting the questions and answers in this "official" way encourages memorization. People who play music still understand the value of recitals. The value of a recital is that it requires retention at a deep level. We want our children to internalize the truths they memorize (Psalm 119:11).

### **8. Reward**

Learning a catechism is hard work. We don't want to provide rewards as the end goal for students to learn a catechism. Knowing and glorifying God is the goal of learning a catechism. But there's no reason we cannot provide incentive and encouragement to our children as they work hard to learn the catechism. After the completion of a section, students will be rewarded with some kind of small gift suitable to their age. One word of caution needs to be mentioned here. We'd love to see every child with their parents committed to learning a catechism. However, more than likely not everyone will make this commitment. Therefore, teachers and the elders who will give the rewards need to toe a fine line in recognizing students without embarrassing parents and students who are not memorizing the catechism.

### **9. Pray**

Memorizing a catechism is not our primary goal here. Our desire is to see our covenant children know the true God, give their lives to Jesus, and commit themselves to serving his church. This is a spiritual work. Therefore, prayer is indispensable in this effort of catechesis because what we're aiming for can only be accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our children.

So we want to be faithful in working with parents. We want to be faithful with regular, repetitious, didactic, interactive catechesis. Let's commit to this hard, slow, invaluable labor. And let's give ourselves to prayer as we commit our children to the grace of our great and faithful God.

*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. - Genesis 17:7*

*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. - Acts 2:39*