A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CATECHESIS: DEVELOPMENT, USE, AND DISUSE

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ABSTRACT
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In recent years American evangelicals have employed stopgap measures to stem the spiritual exodus of youth from the church. A deeper solution, that is truer to the historic faith, is a reframed version of catechesis injected into the church and family. Catechetical instruction is grounded in the teaching of Scripture. History reveals the early church fathers and the Reformers developed systematic ways of instructing those young in the Christian faith. The Reformers gave the Bible back to the masses by developing study tools, catechisms, to aid in their learning. Luther and Calvin each wrote multiple catechisms to be used for spiritual formation and discipleship. The Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms are robust witnesses of the Christian faith which were practically used by many, notably Richard Baxter. Baxter perceived his parishioners needed more than he could offer from his pulpit ministry. He determined to annually visit each of the 800 families under his care, teaching them by means of catechizing. Baxter’s example was followed by many, but it would not be long until the catechisms and confessions of the historic church would pass into disuse. Following the Great Awakening, American Revivalism advocated a spiritual formation founded on the mantra “no creed but the Bible,” prompting a disdain for the church’s confessions and catechisms. The historic tools of spiritual formation were replaced with theologically generic Sunday school curricula which failed to communicate a theology to the laity. Consequently, today’s evangelical churches struggle in effective spiritual
formation with young people as well as adults. A fresh case for catechesis is part of the way forward for the church and family. This thesis will review the biblical and historical record of catechesis in order to commend the value of this largely forgotten practice.
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INTRODUCTION  

For decades, statistics have circulated touting the large percentage of students who enter the university claiming Christianity and exit, only four years later, denying their personal faith. This reality has unfolded alongside mass efforts by evangelicals to engage young people with the gospel in relevant ways. Somewhere along the way, while children are still under the guard of the home, there has been a failure, a monumental spiritual disconnect. This reality is not new and has been a historical challenge. Yet, the consequences continue to mount creating an unstable and unpredictable future for the next generation. Tim Keller writes:

The more the culture around us becomes post- and anti-Christian the more we discover church members in our midst, sitting under sound preaching, yet nonetheless holding half-pagan views of God, truth, and human nature, and in their daily lives using sex, money, and power in very worldly ways.¹

As adults in the church set the example, and model for the next generation what it means to be a follower of Christ, it is imperative for parents and elders to give attention to the warning signs illuminated by the religious faith and practice of current youth. Over half a century ago, James D. Smart wrote:

Even among the most earnest Christian people, little is done beyond the years of early childhood to teach children in the home anything concerning the Christian faith. Family worship has, in general, vanished.²


Smart recognized the breakdown of spiritual formation of young people seventy years ago. It is sobering to admit the same scenario exists today, and arguably a more complicated one.

**Problem Identified**

After fifteen years of vocational ministry, I can agree with Gary Parrett when he laments, “There are very few spheres in which an approach to education is as random and haphazard as that practiced in many of our churches today.” Churches often treat our spiritual education unlike any other form of study or discipline. Never would a music student or prospective economist be given freedom to choose whatever courses he desired, or be allowed to take no classes at all. Solace is found in the fact that one’s primary care physician, who has received a diploma from a medical school, actually was taught, tested, and examined in the curriculum of medicine. Even in the example of a child seeking to pass the third grade of elementary school, he must meet a minimum standard of learning, comprehension and application. Garry Parrett and Steve Kang state, “How strange it is that, in this matter of Christian education and formation, we have come to adopt so very different a scheme.” It is as if a totally different thought process has been implemented when teaching the Scriptures in comparison to teaching, say, algebra or literature.

What are the long term consequences of a poor foundation of spiritual formation and education? In recent years, research has been conducted on the current state of affairs of young people in the evangelical church. In the book, *Soul Searching, The Religious and*

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, Christian Smith and his colleague, Melinda Lunquist Denton, show research that includes hundreds of personal interviews with youth across the country. Smith categorized youth into three groupings which expressed their posture toward religion and faith as spiritual seekers, the disengaged, and religiously devoted teens. Among these three categories of teenagers, a common thread of belief seemed to tie them together. Smith coins what he believes to be the de facto dominant religion of teens to be Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This belief system can be boiled down to the following creed:

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith explains the typical embrace and practice of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism “is de facto, functional, practical, and tacit, not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion.”

To the surprise of many, those who live out Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are well integrated into the life of the evangelical church, youth and adults alike. This religious perspective is parasitic in nature, attaching itself in varying degrees and parts to elements of more traditional religious belief and practice. One of the results of embracing this perspective is a deep dissatisfaction concerning the incongruence between religion and reality. People are left

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7 Ibid, 162-163.

8 Ibid, 166.

9 For a full perspective on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, see Christian Smith’s chapter “God, Religion, Whatever,” in Soul Searching.
wanting with a religiously shrouded shallow interpretation of humanity, its struggle with brokenness, and a self-centered motive.

Therefore, a spiritual exodus of youth, as well as middle aged people, from the orthodox church has taken place. Who needs the church and religion to nuance the practice of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Many have conceded life to be better lived independent of the church and its seeming hypocrisies. Others have re-created church to better match their interpretation of spirituality, hence the vibrancy of the prosperity movement. And still there are many who have remained, sitting quietly, disillusioned, misinformed, yet in the ledgers of evangelicalism. The church has a responsibility to continually reform its concept of spiritual formation and take seriously the maturity of the flock. As correctives are sought for the future, an examination of what lies behind is imperative, lest the perils of the past be repeated.

**Definition of Intent**

It is my intention to show how a thoughtful reintroduction of Christian catechesis into the family and church will act as a corrective to the historical disintegration of spiritual formation in the church in America. In the pursuit of a corrective in the area of spiritual formation, I will conduct a historical survey of the development, use, and disregard of Protestant catechisms. In the survey I will be unable to treat any one subject in great depth, but hope to provide a general context of the times. Looking backwards, the catechisms of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Heidelberg and Westminster will be compared and contrasted. Richard Baxter’s ministry in Kidderminster will be analyzed as a case study, and I will show the fruits and challenges of his practical catechetical work. I intend to shed light on the positive and negative effects of the Revivalism, Sunday school and Restoration movements.
as they relate to effective spiritual formation in the church and home. Finally, I would like to engage some recent examples of catechesis being implemented into family life and the church's educational structures. If catechesis is to be embraced once again as a means of spiritual nourishment, the method and practice will need to be reframed in order to capture the attention of the evangelical church.
CHAPTER 2
CATECHESIS

Confessions of faith have often been the basis of catechisms, which traditionally have been used to introduce new believers and children to the basic teachings of the church. Critics of confessions and catechisms claim that they are archaic and threaten the overarching unity of the body of Christ. Although there is some truth in the criticism, it misses the original heart behind the statements. What is a catechism? The Reformation understood them this way:

A catechism is a book or document giving a brief summary of the basic principles of Christianity in Q&A form. Catechisms represent the practical, “on-the-ground” application of the main teaching agreed upon at church councils and expressed through creeds and confessions.¹

Catechesis derives from the New Testament word κατηχέω, which simply means to teach or instruct by word of mouth. The New Testament uses this word and others referring to the act of instructing as well as learning. This will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter, but for now it’s important to note the primary goal of the catechisms was to teach and instruct those who lacked the knowledge or didn’t have access to it in any other form.

Vocabulary Review

In seeking to define the concept of catechesis, it is helpful to look at other derivations of the word and their meanings.

¹ Justin S. Holcomb, Know the Creeds and Councils (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 17.
Catechesis—a “catchall” word for this particular form of ministry; sometimes used to refer specifically to the process

Catechize—a verb referring to the process of teaching in this particular manner

Catechism—sometimes a designation for the actual content in which persons are catechized; often used today to refer to content in some particular printed format; sometimes, another “catchall” word for this form of ministry

Catechist—the teacher; the one who catechizes others

Catechumen—the learner; the one being catechized

Catechumenate—the sometimes formal, sometimes not-so-formal school of the faith that emerged in many churches to prepare new believers for their baptism and for full participation in the church’s life

Catechetical—an adjective with many possible applications; one use is in regard to the “catechetical schools” for Christian higher learning established in some cities, such as Alexandria in the second and third centuries

Catechetics—the study of the art and science of catechesis

Many have sought to define Christian catechesis over the years. This is a challenging task due to the breadth and complexity of the ministry task and opportunities afforded to it. It is helpful to survey multiple attempts at explaining this concept. Catechesis has been defined in the following different ways:

1. The brief and elementary instruction which is given by word of mouth in relation to the rudiments of any particular doctrine . . . as used by the church, it signifies a system of instruction relating to the first principles of the Christian religion, designed for the ignorant and unlearned.

2. The shaping of religious emotions and affections in the context of teaching doctrine.

3. The totality of the Church’s efforts to make disciples, to help men believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ.

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4. The church’s ministry of grounding and growing God’s people in the Gospel and its implication for doctrine, devotion, duty and delight.⁶

With these definitions in mind, I will go on to explore the biblical nature of catechesis and its development over the centuries.

**Biblical Basis**

As the idea of catechism is considered, one must ask the all-important question of beginnings. Where did this idea come from? And more pressingly, is it biblical? For some people the concept of catechesis sounds archaic and pre-modern and, therefore, is deemed not relevant. Compound this with the feeling that catechisms are a man-made add-on to the Holy Scripture, and the result is a recipe for rejection. If catechesis is indeed biblical, then relevance is not the shaping concern. Our attention would then turn to the proper application of catechesis in the life of the church today. Therefore, a discussion is warranted as to the biblical nature of catechesis and the mandate for godly instruction.

Throughout the Scriptures the subjects of teaching and learning are commonly addressed. One of the primary reasons God gave us the written Word was for our benefit to gain knowledge of himself. The Westminster Shorter Catechism instructs us on this matter as follows:

**Question 3:** What do the Scriptures principally teach?

**Answer 3:** The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

It has been said by A.W. Tozer, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁷ This is indeed true as our thoughts of God impact

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⁶ Packer and Parrett, 29.

all matters of life and death. It is imperative people come to know truth about God who is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. A primary way in which this knowledge is transmitted is through the acts of teaching and being taught. As he writes to the church in Rome, Paul makes clear the importance of the teaching and receiving of God’s Word as it relates to the central matters of faith. Romans 10:14-17 states:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.\(^8\)

Few would argue it is unhelpful to be taught the Word of God. The commonly recited first Psalm admonishes us to pursue God’s law, the torah, and in return receive blessing. Packer and Parrett explain, “Torah comes from the Hebrew root that signifies “shooting” (as in shooting an arrow) or “casting” (as in casting lots). The true connotation of torah is more “direction” or “guidance” or “instruction” than mere legislation.”\(^9\) With that in mind, review the first verses of Psalm 1.

Psalm 1:1-2:

אַשְׁרֵי הַמָּלַעְנֵי אֲשֶּׁר
לֹא מִלְּחָכָם בִּשְׁמֵשָׁם וּבְדֵאָם
לֹא שָׂפָה לְמַעְמָה לַא יָשְבוּ:
כִּי אָם בְּחָרְוָה יְחוֹדָה מַפְסִילָה:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,

\(^8\) Romans 10:14-17 (ESV).

\(^9\) Packer and Parrett, 35.
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.\textsuperscript{10}

The psalmist calls one to meditate (נַחֲגָה) on the law. This implies repetition, study, and intentionality on behalf of the one who desires to know God. Soaking in the Word day and night, as if part of a process of marination, allows the substance and goodness of the law to be drawn into the soul. The semantic range of נַחֲגָה includes the implication of speaking aloud either to oneself or in a verbal exchange with another.\textsuperscript{11} The person who submits to the torah, the direction and guidance of God, engages with it, discusses it with others, and will be blessed.

Blessing is first explicitly expressed in Genesis 1:22 when God blesses Adam and Eve. Later, in Numbers 6:22-27, the LORD gives instruction for Aaron to bless the people of Israel with His blessing. People long for the blessing of their God, creator, and king because they know innately they are needy. If one denies God as the source of blessing, he will seek power and hold tightly to privilege as a means of securing a sense of blessing. These efforts will culminate in futility as there is no substitute for the blessing of the Creator. So it is right to pursue the teaching of and the training in the torah of the LORD. When God is known and one’s duty toward him understood, true blessing is available.

Nevertheless, when the concept of catechesis is introduced to the practice of studying the things of God, the tone of the conversation quickly changes. My personal experience is no exception. For a broad swath of evangelical Protestants, the thought of catechesis is foreign and deemed primarily a Roman Catholic practice to be avoided. Outside of

\textsuperscript{10} Psalm 1:1-2 (ESV).

\textsuperscript{11} DBLH, s.v. 2047 נַחֲגָה (nakhāḡā).
mainstream American evangelicalism, catechesis is more commonly known among Lutherans and Episcopalians. Some conservative Presbyterians and other Reformed traditions have maintained familiarity with the practice of catechizing, primarily using the Heidelberg and Westminster Shorter Catechisms.

To the surprise of many evangelicals, myself included, catechesis is a biblical concept. From beginning to end, the Scriptures affirm a commitment to the “grounding and growing” of believers in Christ. Packer and Parrett declare, this:

Determined attention to faith formation is a biblical constant that was established early on in the Old Testament (Deut 6:7-9). The New Testament takes this idea further and centers it on the person and work of Jesus Christ. But the concept of diligent teaching about our beliefs, our obedience, and our relationship with God was already in place many centuries before the time of Christ.

A few key words from Scripture will help us better understand the concepts of teaching, hearing, and believing what is true about God, man, sin and salvation. A brief treatment of the words לָמַד (lā·mād) and κατηχέω (katēcheō) from the Old and New Testaments respectively will shed light on the biblical framework of teaching and learning.

Old Testament Use of לָמַד

The people of God were not unlike their historical neighbors in that they had little access to books. One must be continually reminded of the differences between their society and our own. Most all information, if it were to be transmitted among common people, was communicated verbally. This required both the speaker and listener to have skills that we, in modern times, have pawned off on note pads, digital reminders, computers and calendars.

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12 Grounding and growing is the language that Packer and Parrett use repeatedly in their book, *Grounded in the Gospel, Growing Believes the Old Fashioned Way*. This language does well to capture the two fold purpose of catechism. Providing first the theological foundation, hence the grounding. Then, capitalizing on the solid foundation in the years to come by engaging the ongoing growing process.

13 Packer and Parrett, 34.
Due to limited written resources and limited literacy, oral teaching was commonplace. The practice of listening and asking questions was the primary posture of the student.

This was true for all avenues of education, including passing on the faith to the next generation. Teaching young ones about what God has done in the past has always been vital and encouraged by God himself (Deut 6:1-2). Deuteronomy 6:20-21 assumes the younger generation will inquire as to the backstory of the faith that is modeled for them:

When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statues 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.’

God did not suggest Israel wait patiently for their children to ask these most important questions. On the contrary, providing them sound instruction concerning His redemptive deeds and holy commands, God commanded them to take the initiative and teach them. The Old Testament writers used multiple verbs to communicate the concepts of teaching and learning. One of these words, לָמָּד, is of particular interest. לָמָּד is used repeatedly in Deuteronomy chapters 4, 5, and 6. Reviewing a few examples will shed light on the nature and importance of this word.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2:

מצאת תכלת אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וַיֵּלֶדֶנָּה אֲשֶׁר יָכוֹנַן הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָכֶם:
לְבִשְׂאוֹת לְמָשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר יָכוֹנַן הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָכֶם:
וַיַּעַנְיָהוּ וַיִּשָּׂא וַיֵּלֶדֶנָּה אֲשֶׁר יָכוֹנַן הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָכֶם:

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the

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14 Deuteronomy 6:20-21 (ESV).
God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.\(^\text{15}\)

Deuteronomy 5:1:

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them.\(^\text{16}\)

One will notice that in Deuteronomy 4:1 and 5:1 the same verb לָמַד is used to communicate both teaching and learning. The semantic range of לָמַד is two-fold in nature. On the one hand, it can mean to learn, gain information, and respond properly with action. On the other hand, it is the action of teaching, instructing, and imparting information both formally and informally.\(^\text{17}\) Moses, inspired by the Holy Spirit, goes into detail of what this style of teaching and learning looks like. Directly after the Shema, Moses writes in regards to the commands of God:

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.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{15}\) Deuteronomy 4:1-2 (ESV).

\(^{16}\) Deuteronomy 5:1 (ESV).

\(^{17}\) DBLH, s.v. 4340 לָמַד (lā·māḏ).

\(^{18}\) Deuteronomy 6:7–9 (ESV).
This model of teaching includes repetition, speaking and writing as a way of instructing the next generation. It reveals a comprehensive effort to effectively pass on the truths of God and his mighty works. A failure to pass on knowledge of God and his mighty works can lead to spiritual and moral disaster, as mentioned of the generation that followed Joshua, in Judges 2:

And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. 19

The accusation against this wayward generation was two-fold. The people failed to know the Lord as well as failed to know the work he had done for Israel. This harkens back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:20-21 as discussed earlier. Moses warned the next generation would be susceptible to ignorance of God himself, and all that he had done for his people. The psalmist repeats the significance of this warning in Psalm 78. He exhorts his people to:

Faithfully pass on to future generations the record of God’s mighty deeds and holy commands (Ps. 78:4-5). He is persuaded that diligent attention to impressing this twofold message upon children and grandchildren would help those future generations to ‘set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments’ (Ps 78:7). Thus they would not become ‘like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God’ (Ps. 78:8). 20

The theme of properly instructing the next generation is peppered throughout the Old Testament, and this theme becomes even sharper in the New Testament.

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19 Judges 2:10-12 (ESV).

20 Packer and Parrett, 36.
New Testament Use of κατηχέω

One of the main purposes of the Jewish synagogue was for teaching and study of the Scriptures. The temple was a place of worship, but the synagogue a place for instruction and dialogue. Children would attend schools located at the synagogue where the Scriptures were the only text. In Luke 2:41-52 Jesus is found, lingering as a child at the synagogue, sitting amidst the teaching. Luke 2:46 states, Jesus was “listening to them and asking them questions.” The fact that he was asking questions was not what was out of the norm for this youth. It was how he was answering that had everyone’s attention. “And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” Jesus’ example of listening and asking questions hints at the notion of catechesis. This would have been a common form of instruction in the synagogues.

There are many words used in the New Testament to describe teaching or giving instruction. Of unique importance is the Greek verb κατηχέω. Κατηχέω is a combination of two words. Kata, meaning “down toward,” and “echo,” meaning “to sound.” To κατηχέω, is “to sound down, to speak with the objective of getting something back as an echo.” From κατηχέω the English language developed the word catechize, which is often structured in the form of question and answer. Packer and Parrett note, “In some of the New Testament instances of the term, we may already have evidence of an emerging use of κατηχέω as a standard term for imparting basic Christian knowledge.”

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24 Packer and Parrett, 38.
The verb κατηχέω is found eight times in the New Testament. Luke uses it four times and Paul four times. Κατηχέω is most often translated “teach” or “instruct,” though it is twice used in the sense of “inform,” “tell,” or “report” (Acts 21:21, 24). In other texts, this verb is used with regard to oral instructions like those given by a physician to a patient. This understanding of κατηχέω is also supported by its passive use, which carries the idea of hearing.

In this way κατηχέω is similar to יָפַל in that it can be used to communicate both teaching as well as learning. Luke and Paul use it both ways. In Luke 1:4, Acts 18:25, and Romans 2:18 it means to be informed verbally. Yet in 1 Corinthians 14:19 and Gal 6:6 it is used from the perspective of the one who is teaching verbally. While none of these references build a definitive argument for catechesis in the New Testament, they point to what would soon be labeled as catechesis in the years to follow. Let’s consider a few examples of Paul and Luke’s use of κατηχέω in order to better interpret its meaning in context.

Luke 1:3-4:

ἔδοξε κάμοι παρηκολουθηκότι ἀνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἁσφάλειαν.

it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Here in Luke’s introduction of his gospel, he declares that he intends to write an orderly account of past events for the purpose of increasing the certainty of things that have already been taught. There are two options to consider regarding Theophilus, assuming he

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was indeed an actual individual. If Theophilus is presumed to be a non-believer who has had some prior teaching, then this orderly account that Luke provides in his gospel would be additional catechetical material. “If, on the other hand, Theophilus was a believer already, then katecho here might refer to a past experience of some sort of catechesis, to which Luke now adds his confirming testimony.”

There is no luxury of clarity here; commentators do not agree. What is clear is that Theophilus had been instructed and he was now receiving more instruction in the Christian faith.

In the book of Acts, Luke once again uses κατηχέω in reference to one who had been instructed. Acts 18:25 states of Apollos, “He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

This could, of course, simply mean Apollos had been instructed in the faith generally. “But given the fact that ‘the way of the Lord’ is itself a technical term for full-scale Christianity both in Scripture and in the language of the ancient church, it seems to us to be a strong possibility that katecho here carries a more technical sense.”

It is known that Apollos had received some instruction, though it was not complete. Catechesis is a lifelong process as disciples grow in maturity and faith.

Galatians 6:6:

Κοινωνείτω δὲ ὁ κατηχούμενος τὸν λόγον τῷ κατηχοῦντι ἐν πᾶσιν ἄγαθοῖς.

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

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27 Packer and Parrett, 39.


29 Packer and Parrett, 39.

30 Galatians 6:6 (ESV).
Here Paul inserts a puzzling, stand-alone statement, that does not seem to fit with what has been said prior or what follows. Commentators have different theories as to why this command is placed here as an independent thought. Painting a picture of the relationship between the “teacher” and the “one who is being taught,” Paul uses κατηχῶ in both forms. If one were to import the direct English verbiage, the verse would read, “Let the catechumen share all good things with the catechist.” Paul’s choice to include this word of advice highlights once again the commonplace of semi-formal instruction in the life of the Christian. Early church history documents a well-developed system of catechetical schools during the second and third centuries. During this time formal teachers were integral in disseminating Christian doctrine. It is known that Origin had a career as a teacher in the catechetical school at Alexandria, and extra-biblical sources point to early implementation of systems of instruction. The spirit of catechism is captured in the second epistle of St. Clement.

II Clement 17:1-2:

Let us therefore repent with our whole heart, lest any of us perish by the way. For if we have received commands, that we should make this also our business, to tear men away from idols and to instruct them, how much more is it wrong that a soul which knoweth God already should perish! Therefore let us assist one another, that we may also lead the weak upward as touching that which is good, to the end that we all may be saved: and let us convert and admonish one another.\(^{31}\)

Early church history is not necessarily indicative of the practices of the apostolic church. “While we should not read these later structures back into apostolic times, it probably is correct to say with C. K. Barrett that Gal 6:6 ‘may be the earliest reference to any kind of paid Christian ministry.’”\(^{32}\) Paid or not, the call to instruct the next generation in the way of

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the Lord is found throughout the pages of Scripture. There are multiple other word studies that could be shown here in biblical defense of catechesis. A closer look at the New Testament’s use of διδαχή, διδασκαλία, παράδοσις, and παραδίδωμι would further support the tradition of intentional instruction of believers in the faith. These words help broaden the arguments showing catechesis to be “the intentional passing on of the Faith, not merely for cognitive apprehension, but for holistic transformation of individual believers and for the maturing of those believers together as the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{33} The concept and practice of catechesis undoubtedly has biblical roots, and therefore is worthy of our consideration.

\textsuperscript{33} Packer and Parrett, 42.
CHAPTER 3  
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The practice of catechizing was developed early in the life of the church and flowed from the New Testament tradition. More formal catechisms were later developed primarily to help shape and form the foundational beliefs of new converts. In this time period, “catechetical” referred specifically to the oral explanation of Christian doctrine. Cyril of Jerusalem described the process of catechizing in 386 A.D. by saying:

Let me compare the catechizing to a building. Unless we methodically bind and joint the whole structure together, we shall have leaks and dry rot, and all our previous exertions will be wasted.¹

A long lasting building was thought through, planned, from start to finish. Care was given to the selection of materials and craftsmen who would work them together. The early church fathers understood spiritual formation to be a similar pursuit.

Early catechetical practices can be examined from a variety of sources, some as early as the late first or early second centuries. The Didache of the Apostles and Irenaeus’s Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching are early records that point to some of the traditions and practices of this time. From the third and fourth century come Hippolytus’ The Apostolic Tradition as well as many lectures and sermons from Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hippo. The practice of catechesis flourished in the second

¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Prochatechesis, 11, quoted by Justin S. Holcomb, Know the Creeds and Councils (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 17.
through fifth centuries. During this time the church took very seriously the task of teaching and training converts who came from radically different worldviews and backgrounds.

Because of the diverse spiritual backgrounds of the converts, and the fact that many came to faith with little knowledge of God or the Hebrew Scriptures, the concept of the catechumenate was developed. The catechumenate was a school of sorts, or a process that one entered into upon conversion as one proceeded toward baptism. This concept seems out of place with the norms found in Scripture, particularly in Acts 2 and 10. In each case there was close chronological connection between faith placed in the gospel and the sacrament of baptism. Unique to Acts 16, the Philippian jailer and his family came to faith and baptism without prior experience or background in the faith of the Jews. It raises the question, why did the early church fathers believe a catechumenate process was a necessary requirement, sometimes lasting as long as one to three years?

The basic idea of the catechumenate was in place as early as the second century, but it was the rise of Constantine in the fourth century that prepared the way for a large wave of converts to pursue the church. His rule completely changed the landscape for Christians and those interested in the faith. Christians ceased to be the minority on which persecution and oppression were commonplace. This newfound tolerance of the Christian faith allowed for previously illegal evangelistic campaigns to be launched without much resistance from the government. Constantine’s own conversion gave much publicity to the faith and made belief in Christ socially acceptable. Instead of starving the churches of their rights, Constantine lavished them with resources enabling them to become public centers to be used for common government purposes. They became locations where lawsuits would be settled and food was distributed to the poor. Even the pagan cults of the day saw their own privileges and
resources depleted, making Christianity all the more attractive for those considering their spiritual journey.²

These events made the church and the gospel more attractive to a broken, needy, poor and uneducated community. The church at the time believed it necessary to carefully address these pagan and gentile converts in an intentional way. The catechumenate was developed to provide biblical instruction to large numbers prior to the administration of baptism to the new believers. In this way spiritual instruction became more systematic, and less personal. Discipleship that would have taken place in the home moved to the church and classroom.

The Catechumenate and Augustine

Augustine (354-430) formalized the catechumenate process, and provides us with written account of the calendar of instruction for new believers as they anticipated baptism. His process, being the predecessor to more formal catechisms of later days, was quite simple. It lasted for a very long time with distinct junctures that followed the church calendar. In the introductory phases:

Formal catechesis was modest: a single, though often lengthy, address. And this catechesis was, in essence, a prelude and an overview.³

This prelude was more of an evangelistic speech, a kind of apologetic. Augustine shares about his method in his work On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed. In the document, he explains the importance of communicating the breadth of the Scriptures to someone considering Christianity. Augustine states, “The narration is full when each person is catechised in the first instance from what is written in the text, ‘In the beginning God created

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² William Harmless, Augustine and the Catechumenate (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 52.
³ Ibid., 155.
the heaven and the earth,’ on to the present times of the Church.”⁴ *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* is like a user’s manual on how to filter those who would enter the catechumenate.

Once inducted into the process the convert would receive the title *catechumen*. During this extended time period catechumens simply blended in with the rest of the congregation; they attended services and listened to sermons. They had a very similar experience to most others in the congregation, leading some modern commentators—Dujarier and Jungmann, for instance—to presume this style of catechumenate to be no catechumenate at all.⁵ Jungmann asserts the church spent too much effort pushing spiritless candidates toward baptism while neglecting the instruction they really needed. But this critique fails to properly assess Augustine’s primary mode of catechizing, which was his preaching.

The catechumens regularly sat under Augustine’s preaching of the word, alongside the full congregation. But one must remain aware that Augustine often prepared his sermons with the catechumenate specifically in mind. Of the recorded sermons from Augustine, twenty-four include the direct address of the catechumens sitting in the audience. These twenty-four record Augustine turning toward them and directing his words to their situation. This is not to say his many other sermons failed to instruct the catechumen, as large portions of Augustine’s content were directed to the new or young believer. Captivating his audience with his exquisite vocabulary and ability to string words together beautifully, Augustine was an unforgettable orator. He readily used formal Latin, but did so in a way that remained


⁵ Harmless, 157.
accessible and attractive to the average, uneducated, common person. It was a regular occurrence for the congregation to become lively and interact with Augustine while he preached. Often, they would respond with shouts, groans and even finish Augustine’s sentences when they anticipated him speaking a common theme.⁶ Sitting under Augustine’s preaching as a catechumen would have been quite a formative experience.

As the season of Lent arrived, the instruction of the catechumenate shifted. Lent is the period of reflection and repentance that many believers practiced as preparation for Holy Week and Easter. This was an opportunity for catechumens to commit to following through and submit their names for baptism. Those who chose to continue in the process were now called “petitioners” or competentes. The competentes would gather daily to pray and be prayed for. The daily prayers would include prayers of exorcism—petitioning God’s deliverance of souls from every evil influence. They would engage in certain ascetic exercises, including fasting each day until 3pm. And now they would be catechized, more formally.⁷ This next phase of catechesis took on the form of helping the competentes memorize The Creed and The Lord’s Prayer. These were handed over by means of oral presentation. The competentes would memorize each line until they were able to recite it back. They were not to write it down nor pass it on to other catechumens. This practice of keeping the Creed and Lord’s Prayer a secret was an application of the disciplina aarcani (discipline of secrecy) which is based on Matthew 7:6, so as not to cast pearls before swine.⁸

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⁶ Harmless, 168.
⁷ Packer and Parrett, 55.
⁸ Ibid.
Finally, the competentes entered the last season before the actual experience of baptism. This included more biblical instruction as well as information about the meaning of the baptism they would receive. Augustine believed:

Candidates would be better served by being catechized about the mystery of baptism prior to the experience. Cyril of Jerusalem, on the other hand, represented the other option of postbaptismal catechesis referred to as mystagogy. Those holding to this viewpoint were convinced that the experience of baptism itself was the best teacher. After the competentes were baptized, which under Augustine would have included disrobing, facing the east and west, renouncing the devil, being immersed in water three times, and then being prayed over with the laying on of hands, they were called neophytes. The neophytes could now join the congregation in the Lord’s Supper and continue their catechesis, for days or even weeks. Under Augustine’s leadership the neophytes were a celebrated group, who were encouraged and challenged to pursue Christ in all things. Augustine was a forerunner, and his methods and theology would be leaned on for many centuries to come.

**Medieval Monasticism**

From the early church through the Middle Ages, informal and formal catechesis remained a regular part of church life. Yet these practices shifted substantially due to the rise of monasticism. The concept of withdrawal from society was the early trademark of monasticism. The word monastic is derived from the Greek word μοναχός (monachos), which means a solitary person. This social withdrawal was something foreign to previous

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9 Packer and Parrett, 56.

models of education and piety. Jean Sorabella explains, “In regions around the eastern Mediterranean in the late third and early fourth centuries, men and women like Anthony—whose biography provided a model for future monks—withdraw into the Egyptian desert, depriving themselves of food and water as part of their effort to withstand the devil’s temptations.”\textsuperscript{11} A few years later some men and women living along the Nile River pioneered an alternative practice called cenobitic monasticism. It stressed “retreat into a community of like-minded ascetics committed to daily regimens of work and prayer.”\textsuperscript{12} This alternative birthed the concept of urban monasteries and convents. Sorbella acknowledges, “In western Europe, some monks and nuns settled far from cities and towns, seeking lives of devotion and self-denial in inhospitable locations, but other communities flourished in populous places, where they might withdraw from the world in spirit and yet remain nearby to offer instruction and guidance.”\textsuperscript{13} This became a better illustration of being in the world, yet not of the world, even though history shows that the movement was still missing something.

For the next several hundreds of years, the shaping of culture was almost entirely under the influence of the monasteries. The clergy were the primary ones with education and therefore became the principal educators. This was a shift that removed lay people almost entirely from the process of spiritual formation. Monks were not only church leaders but also philosophers, architects, builders and farmers. The influence of the monks was positive in many respects and should not be underestimated. On the other hand, monasticism blurred the

\textsuperscript{11} Sorabella.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
role of a Christian minister with that of culture-developer. This led to confusion between biblical piety and passion for social concerns. Philip Schaff laments the effects of monasticism stating it:

Darkened the all-sufficient merits of Christ by the glitter of the over-meritorious works of man. It measured virtue by the quantity of outward exercises instead of the quality of the inward disposition, and disseminated self-righteousness and an anxious, legal, and mechanical religion. ¹⁴

The side-effects of monasticism lingered during the next centuries in the southern countries of Europe and in America. In these locations a dichotomy existed between extreme ascetic sanctity of the clergy and the profane lifestyle of the laity. This fared poorly for the health of the family, the church, and the overall climate of spiritual formation.

These events and many others were pieces of the puzzle that influenced the rising need for revolution and reformation. Justo Gonzalez declares, “The last years of the Middle Ages were a time of unrest in which social causes joined with religious dissatisfaction and expectation. Ecclesiastical authorities benefited from the existing order, and usually gave their support to the powerful as they suppressed every movement of protest.”¹⁵ Many monks were bitter enemies of those that came forward with protests and propositions of reform. On the eve of the Reformation, the people were eager for a return to justice and orthodoxy.


Reformation Era

Luther, Calvin and Catholics

The conditions of the sixteenth century were ripe for the composition of confessions and catechisms. Many of the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were bringing controversial theological questions into the light for a broad population to scrutinize:

Virtually every support for traditional Roman Catholicism was coming under fire. If Luther and Calvin called upon Rome to rethink its interpretation of Scripture, so too did leaders of the Renaissance challenge other intellectual traditions in art, political theory, literature, and history. If Protestants raised troubling questions in theology, so too had several generation of academicians raised troubling issues in philosophy. 16

The sixteenth century was in great need of fresh written statements that would clarify and reposition Christianity amongst competing powers in Europe. These written statements of creed, confession, and catechism would serve multiple purposes. They were of great importance to theologians and provided clear, authoritative doctrinal statements. They were also in forms that could be used for instruction and ongoing education. Parrett and Kang explain:

It was the Protestants—Luther, Calvin and others—who championed the recovery of a rigorous catechesis, something that had been largely lost in the Western church since around the time of Augustine. How ironic that in the eyes of many contemporary evangelicals, catechesis is seen as a thoroughly Roman Catholic idea and practice. 17

Looking specifically at the catechisms of this period, which has been called “the Golden Age of catechisms,” 18 will allow for a brief survey and comparison.

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18 Holcomb, 18.
Luther’s Small Catechism

One of the most famous catechisms of the Reformation came from the pen of Luther in the early sixteenth century. Luther found himself busy with ministry activity when he received a request from his prince to inspect the churches of his region. He had already intended to participate in the writing of a catechism but was going to oversee the project, not write it himself. That all changed after his travels revealed profound ignorance among both the clergy and laity. Luther used words such as “deplorable” and “miserable” to describe the spiritual condition of the people. Luther describes his observations by saying, “Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching.” Returning from this experience, Luther committed himself to the task and wrote the catechism himself. What was produced was called The Small Catechism and is sometimes referred to as Luther’s Little Instruction Book.

The Small Catechism was published in 1529 as a guide for fathers who would in turn shepherd the hearts of their households. Luther had a long term goal in mind when he wrote. He knew the extensive lack of spiritual formation that existed and desired to make a change that would last for generations. Helping point them to the saving truths of Scripture, the catechism was intended for youth, as well as for the generations to come. In training up young people in a systematic way, Luther understood he had the potential equip them to pass on the faith to their children later on. Noll reports, “To meet the need for popular instruction Luther immediately drew up wall charts containing simple explanations of the Ten

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Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostle’s Creed.” This became the foundation for the Small Catechism which was published soon after.

The catechism was primarily meant to be useful in the home. Luther begins Section One, on the Ten Commandments, with the statement, “As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.” Spiritual formation starts in the home. Luther intended to create a tool to aid in this process. Yet, it was not solely for children. Luther believed that all people could benefit from catechism, including himself. In the preface to his Large Catechism Luther states:

But for myself I say this: I am also a doctor and preacher, yea, as learned and experienced as all those may be who have such presumption and security; yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism, and every morning, and whenever I have time, I read and say, word for word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, etc. And I must still read and study daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and am glad so to remain.

Luther’s catechism would be complemented by other works, written by his contemporaries, yet his remained the norm and influenced Lutheranism around the globe even to this day.

Calvin’s Geneva Catechism

Calvin, like Luther, did not consider it beneath him to utilize his education and gifts for the benefit of the uneducated and children. On the contrary, Calvin made general education and catechetical instruction a norm throughout Geneva. In 1541, Calvin published his famous Geneva Catechism. Achtemeier describe Calvin’s work by saying it:

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20 Noll, 59.

21 Martin Luther, The Small Catechism, (St Louis, MO: Concordia Pub., 1943), 5.

Represented a thorough reworking of the 1537 Instruction in Faith, completely reorganized and newly cast into a question and answer format. It is a lengthy document, consisting of 373 questions which Calvin divided into a series of 55 weekly lessons. In this new edition, Calvin intended the conversation between teacher and pupil to be one where the pupil experienced the posture of instructing the teacher. Substantially longer than the Instruction in Faith, the Catechism covered in detail a broad swath of theology. Calvin arranged the catechism in five main sections: Of faith—an exposition of the Creed; Of the Law, or the Ten Commandments; Of Prayer; Of the Word of God; Of the Sacraments. Later on, the large catechism was shortened to twenty-one questions and referenced as the Genevan Shorter Catechism. The Shorter Catechism was used with young people as they prepared to be received at the Lord’s Table.

Calvin followed Luther’s lead in enlisting the active support of the parents in the spiritual formation of children. A group of lay elders were given the task to help ensure parents were fulfilling their duties properly. Those who slacked off were to be admonished and in some cases even reported as failing to the local magistrates. Discipleship at home was taken very seriously.

One of Calvin’s major contributions in Geneva was education. His vision for education was more extensive than the catechizing of children in the home. He started with the spiritual education of the young and naïve and proceeded to develop formal schools that served the entire community. He was known as one who labored intensely for the good of his people. Calvin’s work “prepared the way and furnished material for a number of similar works, which have gradually superseded it, especially the Anglican, the Heidelberg, and the

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Westminster Catechisms. Later on the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms will be addressed, and it will be clear to see how they leaned on the work of Calvin.

**Roman Catholic Catechisms**

The Reformers were not the only ones to recognize the need for and value of catechisms. In the Roman Catholic “counter-Reformation,” Pope Pius V order the publishing of a Roman Catechism. This work was completed in its final version in 1566 and was soon translated into all the languages of Europe. The Roman Catechism was different from Luther and Calvin’s work in that it was intended for teachers, not for pupils. It was a full and comprehensive manual containing doctrine and theology. Later on, shorter, more accessible catechisms were developed to be used with students and children. All Catholic catechisms of the day were based upon the decrees that came out of the Council of Trent.

The Council of Trent had been called for two main purposes: reform abuses in the church and answer the Protestants. After eighteen years of convening and recesses the council members crafted, “an official statement of Catholic teaching that gave the church a more detailed definition of its own beliefs than it had ever had.” Although Trent did accomplish some needed reform, it failed to purge the Catholic church of many false teachings. The divide between the Catholics and Protestants was solidifying as each group was producing clear doctrinal statements. From the mid-1500s to Vatican II in the 1960s, little fruitful doctrinal discussion took place between the Catholics and Protestants.

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25 Ibid., 100-102.

26 Noll, 166.
Heidelberg Catechism

Almost simultaneously another catechism was being developed in Heidelberg, Germany. It also had a purpose that was at least two-fold. It sought to act as a guide for the religious instruction for youth as well as provide a unified confession of faith for the newly formed Protestant church. Holcomb keenly observes:

As a document intended to squelch conflict rather than draw lines in the sand, the Heidelberg Catechism is the most inclusive of all the Reformed confessions. It was meant to bring together the various strands of the Reformation that disagreed sharply at significant points of doctrine.\(^{27}\)

This specific purpose greatly affected the content and tone of the catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism is unique in this regard, which sets it apart from Luther’s, Calvin’s and the later Westminster Catechisms. Unlike almost all other confessions or catechisms of the sixteenth century, it is nearly devoid of polemics, which contributed to its quick acceptance as a broadly useful exposition of Christian faith.

There are two men to whom authorship is generally attributed, although there is some dispute on the matter. Casper Olevianus (1536-1587), a French Reformed Protestant who studied with Calvin and Beza was the pastor of Heidelberg’s main church. He was only twenty-six years old at the time of writing. Olevianus’ participation in the writing process seems essentially to have consisted of linguistic revision and formulation. The second author, and arguably main contributor, was Zacharius Ursinus (1534-1583). He was a native of Breslau in what is now Poland and had begun his theological education with Melanchthon in Wittenberg but had also studied personally with Calvin.\(^{28}\) Ursinus was twenty-eight years old at the time of writing, which puts him in line with the other brilliant youthful Reformers.

\(^{27}\) Holcomb, 115.

\(^{28}\) Noll, 134.
Together these two men crafted a beautiful statement of faith that has its own personality. As Mark Noll writes:

The Heidelberg Catechism does not represent a different theological orientation. It, too, is a “Calvinistic” document. But it is a statement of Christian truth from a different perspective. Here the Reformed Church confesses the good news of Jesus Christ in a joyful, thankful, free, personal way—with the “existential involvement” as well as the concern for theological correctness of the Reformation period itself.29

The personal nature and accessibility of the catechism appealed to a large audience. Published first in Heidelberg in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism grew in popularity. It was quickly translated into Latin, Dutch, French and English. Kevin DeYoung points out, “Besides the Bible, John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, and Thomas a Kempis’ Imitation of Christ, the Heidelberg Catechism is the most widely circulated book in the world.”30 Its beauty and usefulness must be attributed to God’s grace on the authors. Schaff observes, “The peculiar gifts of both, the didactic clearness and precision of the one (Ursinus), and the pathetic warmth and unction of the other (Olevianus), were blended in beautiful harmony, and produced a joint work which is far superior to all the separate productions of either.”31 But not all were so fond of their work.

In 1576, Frederik III’s son, Louis, a committed Lutheran, became prince. Immediately upon his receiving of power, he removed Olevianus and Ursinus from their positions and ended the use of the Heidelberg Catechism in Heidelberg.32 At this point in history, it was too late to slow down the wave of use and appeal of this catechism. In just a


30 Kevin DeYoung, The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2010), 17.

31 Schaff, Creeds, 535.

32 Noll, 135.
short time, the Heidelberg Catechism topped the bestseller lists of the day, even gaining greater popularity than Calvin’s Genevan Catechism. Noll states, “It was for centuries, and to some extent still remains, the manual and textbook of German, Dutch, Hungarian, and Swiss Reformed Christians.”

The Heidelberg Catechism is divided into 129 questions, which were themselves divided into fifty-two “Lord’s Days” to aid in the teaching process. The catechism discusses the major tenants of the faith, including a detailed discussion of the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. The authors, borrowing from Calvin, further developed the question and answer system, as well as the numbering system that has been used by all major subsequent catechisms. Ursinus described the major divisions as The Law (Ten Commandments) and The Gospel (the Apostles’ Creed). Within the two major divisions there are three primary focuses: the misery of man, the deliverance of man, and the thankfulness of man. The Law exposes and demonstrates the misery of man. The Gospel (the Apostle’s Creed) unpacks the deliverance of man and portrays the goodness of the gospel to which the redeemed are thankful.

The Catechism from Olevianus and Ursinus has a different progressive order than other documents including Luther’s Small Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism launches with an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed and then moves on to the Ten Commandments; Luther’s work is in reverse order. Noll explains, “With this arrangement, the Reformed were stressing the Law as part of a Christian’s joyful service to Christ, where Lutherans characteristically described it as the force that drives the sinner to Christ.”

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34 Noll, 135.
interesting feature of the Heidelberg Catechism is its lack of specific Reformed doctrines.

One of the purposes of this catechism was to build bridges between various Reformed branches. In meeting this goal the catechism is left wanting in some areas. Karl Barth noticed that:

Peculiarly Reformed doctrines play only a small part in this catechism. They are essentially limited to questions 47-48 (the way in which Christ is omnipresent), question 72 on baptism (the way in which water is related to the washing away of sins), and questions 75-79 on the Lord’s Supper (the way in which the body and blood of Christ are really present in the elements).  

The Calvinistic doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement are not to be found.

This is not to say the authors were not predestinarians, but reflective of their goal to unite the various Reformed strands. Schaff purports:

The Calvinistic system is herein set forth with wise moderation, and without its sharp, angular points. This may be a defect in logic, but it is an advantage in religion, which is broader and deeper than logic.

As the authors made content decisions, they kept in mind their audience. Children and the masses of uneducated people tend to struggle to understand and appreciate the metaphysical distinctions and the transcendent mysteries of eternal decrees. And so Olevianus and Ursinus used careful judgement as they compiled what questions would be included or excluded. The Heidelberg Catechism opens with the heart penetrating question:

**Question 1:** *What is your only comfort in life and death?*

**Answer 1:** That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work

35 Barth, 24.


37 Ibid.
together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of
eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him

This first question reflects the spirit and tone of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is common for
multiple points of doctrine to be touched upon in a single question. In question one, the
concept of comfort is made known to be more complex that it first appears. Barth explains:

It is more than a little numbing, or petty reassurance. Comfort comes with a level of
exhortation and challenge for the one who seeks it. One must seek it from the source
that can provide it, God alone. This concept encapsulates a large swath of Christian
What is truth? The comfort given man from God. Every other question is thereby
answered.\(^\text{38}\)

For good reason the Heidelberg Catechism has been loved and frequently sought out, not
only as a tool for catechizing, but also as a devotional help.

**Westminster Catechism**

The Westminster Catechisms were composed about eighty years after the Heidelberg
in the context of civil war between the English Long Parliament and the King. Many lives
were lost in the war as they fought for something reflective of religious freedom. It is amidst
this landscape that Parliament, under control of Presbyterian Puritans, issued an ordinance,
June 12, 1643, declaring that an assembly of divines be convened at Westminster in London,
“to effect a more perfect reformation of the Church of England and it liturgy, discipline, and
government on the basis of the Word of God, and thus to bring it into nearer agreement with
the Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches on the Continent.”\(^\text{39}\) And so, the
Assembly was created by State authority and with the state in mind.

\(^{38}\) Barth, 123.

\(^{39}\) Schaff, *Creeds*, 730.
The composition of the Assembly was to include representatives of all the major parties of the English Church. Men of various background and high education were chosen, which formed a strong representation of the church although some of the most able of the Puritan divines, Richard Baxter and John Owen, were omitted. Even though Baxter was not included, he knew the Assembly well and had high regards for the men. Of them he said:

The divines there congregated were men of eminent learning, godliness, ministerial abilities, and fidelity; and being not worthy to be one of them myself, I may the more freely speak the truth, even in the face of malice and envy, that, as far as I am able to judge by the information of all history of that kind, and by any other evidence left us, the Christian world, since the day of the apostles, had never a synod of more excellent divines than this and the Synod of Dort.

This group of 151 members set out together on task. In the end they produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Catechisms were published in 1647 as a valuable commentary to the Confession.

The Assembly accomplished their goal of creating statements that would be received as standards for the region. The Confession and Catechisms are brilliantly clear, logical, and carefully worded. This style and tone appealed to many, yet others have remained critical that the Westminster standards lack warmth and freshness. Phillip Schaff critiques the Shorter Catechism saying:

It deals in dogma rather than facts. It addresses the disciple as an interested outsider rather than as a church-member growing up in the nurture of the Lord. Its mathematical precision in definitions, some of which are almost perfect, though above the capacity of the child, is a good preparation for the study of theology.

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40 Ibid., 732.
41 Ibid., 729.
42 Ibid., 787.
Others have agreed with Schaff, that the Westminster Shorter Catechism remains above the developmental capacity of most children. In response, the *First Catechism* was written. The preface of the First Catechism says:

> In this adaptation, we have incorporated changes in vocabulary, grammar and the sequence of questions to make the catechism clearer and more accessible to young children. Where possible, the more personal first—or second—person pronouns are used.\(^{43}\)

One could argue this adaptation seeks to make the Westminster Shorter Catechism “sound” and “feel” more like the Heidelberg. In the face of those criticisms, Richard Baxter called the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “the best Catechism he ever saw, a most excellent sum of the Christian faith and doctrine, and a fit test to try the orthodoxy of teachers.”\(^{44}\)

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is divided into four main thematic sections. Each section is arranged in a question and answer format with a total of 107 questions addressed. Unique to the Westminster Catechisms, the questions are restated in the answers and allow the answer to be coherent if it were to stand alone. This strength of the Westminster Catechisms sets it apart when memorization is desired. If a pupil forgets the question, he is not at a loss, for the answer tells him the question and contains a complete thought. The four overarching sections of the Westminster Shorter Catechism are Theological Foundations, Ten Commandments, Sacraments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Often the Apostles Creed is listed as an appendix. This is quite different from other catechisms that have utilized the Apostles Creed as the main structure for the body of the catechism. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the most systematic and comprehensive statements of doctrine that were

\(^{43}\) *First Catechism* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 2003), 3.

\(^{44}\) Schaff, *Creeds*, 787.
produced during the Reformation. Being so, they remain in use as theological standards as well as tools for teaching and training.

Conclusion

One result of the Reformation effort was the new found need for clarifying statements of faith. Many of the major Reformers made personal contributions, including Luther and Calvin. Other confessions and catechisms were the product of assemblies, or groups of men. The Heidelberg Catechism and later the Westminster Confession and Catechisms were the fruit of many saints laboring together. The catechisms of this era share much in common, yet maintain their unique distinctives. The chart below helps illustrate the variations of content and flow in each of the catechisms discussed earlier.

Table 1. Comparison of Catechism Content and Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Luter’s catechism</th>
<th>Decalogue</th>
<th>Creed</th>
<th>Lord’s Prayer</th>
<th>Sacraments</th>
<th>Additional Teachings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geneva Catechism</td>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>Decalogue</td>
<td>Lord’s Prayer</td>
<td>“Of the Word”</td>
<td>Sacraments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidelberg Catechism</td>
<td>Summary of the Law</td>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>Sacraments</td>
<td>Decalogue</td>
<td>Lord’s Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster Catechism</td>
<td>Theological foundations</td>
<td>Decalogue</td>
<td>Sacraments</td>
<td>Lord’s Prayer</td>
<td>Creed often appended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these catechisms has left its mark on history, and most continue to be used today by churches and in Christian homes.

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45 Adapted from table in Packer and Parrett, 86.
CHAPTER 4  
CASE STUDY: RICHARD BAXTER

If one is to productively consider the catechisms of the Reformation period, he must also look at the lives of those who implemented them. One man in particular made a profound impact on his community through the practice of catechizing. Many of his contemporaries used catechisms regularly for the training up of children. But this man saw fit to use this tool to instruct and encourage the entire family. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) has been known as “the most influential pastor of the sixteenth and seventeenth century England.”¹ Baxter was very influential but far from perfect and made his fair share of errors. Even amidst his failings his overall mark on history was positive. He influenced many due to his written works, yet his influence predominantly arose out of his commitment to catechize the families under his care in Kidderminster, England. J.I. Packer writes of Baxter the following:

To upgrade the practice of personal catechizing from a preliminary discipline for children to a permanent ingredient in pastoral care for all ages was Baxter’s main contribution to the development of Puritan ideals for the ministry; and it was his concern for catechizing that brought The Reformed Pastor to birth.²

Baxter’s book, The Reformed Pastor, was published in 1656. This volume, which remains widely circulated today, was not a typical book on pastoral ministry. Baxter’s book is “part


scathing indictment of pastoral failures and confession of pastoral sins, part exhortation to pastoral duty and explication of pastoral strategy, part sermon, part treatise, and part breathless face-to-face imploration.”

Many pastors were blessed by Baxter’s book, which shared his heart, convictions and ministry philosophy. Baxter’s efforts to catechize families in Kidderminster will be examined as a case study with hopes of gleaning insights for future implementation.

**Ministry in Kidderminster**

After a five year forced absence, Baxter returned to Kidderminster in 1647 with a priority of bringing spiritual reformation. He surveyed the needs of his people and realized a comprehensive approach to reform was needed. The people of Kidderminster suffered in many ways. They were poor, uneducated, and desperately needed personal attention. J. William Black notes:

> While the Long Parliament’s efforts to reform the English Church attempted traditional top-down means to enact and enforce a uniform religious settlement, Baxter seems to have recognized early on the implications of their failure to produce a workable plan. His response was to focus on parish reformation rather than on a monolithic national reformation.

Parish-wide reformation would require him to reach out in multiple ways. Baxter knew that many of the current ministers were lacking in training, zeal, and some were not even believers themselves. He desired to shepherd them just as much as he wanted to reach his own parishioners. The writing of *The Reformed Pastor* was one of many efforts to equip his fellow laborers.

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3 Black, 81.

4 Ibid., 81-82.
Baxter and his contemporaries faced a changing religious and political landscape which had its effects on his practical ministry. Black helps us understand, “The pulpit-centered strategy had always assumed the stability of the parish system . . . and with attendance at sermons legally enforced; ministers could at least guarantee that most parishioners were within earshot.”

The English civil war changed this norm, and ministers faced fresh challenges. Preaching, church discipline, and education were to be implemented at a more local level. As Baxter reflected on his teaching and preaching ministry, he wrote, “We find by sad experience, that the people understand not our public teaching, though we study to speak as plain as we can, and that after many years preaching, even of these same fundamentals, too many can scarce tell anything we said.”

This is not to say Baxter devalued the preaching of the word. He just had the boldness to state what many had already observed. The common people struggled to capture content delivered in a formal lecture setting. Baxter confided:

I am daily forced to admire, how lamentably ignorant many of our people are, that have seemed diligent hearers of me this ten or twelve years, while I spoke as plainly as I was able to speak! Some know not that each person in the Trinity is God; nor that Christ is God and man.

This was no small problem for Baxter, and sadly, the same ignorance plagues churches today.

Many Protestants, like Baxter, responded to this challenge by implementing the regular practice of catechizing parishioners, even as an effective means to help them understand sermons more comprehensively. Black notes:

5 Black, 217.


7 Richard Baxter, The Reformed Pastor, preface, xiii, sig (a5), quoted in Black 175.
Thus when Baxter suggested that one of the principal reasons that ‘godly’ ministry languished and reformation tarried was the absence of diligent catechizing, he had not stumbled upon some lost secret of reformation truth, but was merely highlighting an oft-promoted pastoral mechanism and pointing out that it had too often not been practiced.  

In Kidderminster, Baxter committed himself to this neglected mechanism, yet believed it most effective to engage each parishioner directly and personally, with the gospel and its implications.

**Methods and Tools**

Unique to Baxter was his effort to reach out personally to each family in his parish. Doing so required commitment and planning, yet the cost of his concentrated endeavor was worth the investment. Black comments, “Baxter was fully persuaded that his pastoral program, with parish-wide catechizing at the head, constituted the necessary means to effect the long-sought reformation of the English Church.” The parish in Kidderminster contained over 800 homes and 2000 people. Ministering to each person was a monumental and overwhelming task. Baxter explains his organized plan:

We spend Monday and Tuesday, from morning almost to night, in the work, taking about fifteen or sixteen families in a week, that we may go through the parish in which there are upwards of eight hundred families, in a year; and I cannot say yet that one family hath refused to come to me, and but a few persons excused themselves, and shifted it off. And I find more outward signs of success with most that do come, than from all my public preaching to them. At the delivery of the Catechisms, I take a catalogue of all the persons of understanding in the parish, and the clerk goeth a week before, to every family, to tell them what day to come, and at what hour. And I am forced by the number to deal with a whole family at once; but ordinarily I admit not any of another family to be present.

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8 Black, 176.

9 Ibid., 94.

Baxter saw this as the only method to truly know the people under his care. If they were no longer legally bound to come to church on Sunday, he must go to them during the week. His time spent with families was viewed as the most significant part of his ministry. Spending an hour or so with a family in spiritual discussion, then moving on to the next, required much patience and skill. Yet doing so, month after month, year after year, allowed Baxter to genuinely know the hearts of those in his parish.

This was the pattern of ministry that he called other ministers to emulate if they desired true reformation. It is no surprise that Baxter saw success. Personal interaction builds trust, breaks down stereotypes, and allows for true compassion and care to be expressed. The intentional time Baxter spent with each family working through catechetical material by God’s grace increased godliness among the people of Kidderminster. Some have criticized Baxter “as unwisely arguing for a concentration of ministry in the hand of the pastor when it ought to be shared by the whole congregation.” Baxter did indeed challenge pastors to fully embrace their calling and to diligently do the work associated with that call. But he believed the pastor was not the single voice in the process of discipleship. The primary and most important teacher, in Baxter’s view, was the family:

We must have a special eye upon families, to see that they are well ordered, and the duties of each relation performed. The life of religion, and the welfare and glory of both the church and State, depend much on family government and duty. If we suffer the neglect of this, we shall undo all. What are we like to do ourselves to the reforming of a congregation, if all the work be cast on us alone; and masters of families neglect that necessary duty of their own, by which they are bound to help us? If any good be begun by the ministry in any soul, a careless, prayerless, worldly family is like to stifle it, or very much hinder it; whereas, if you could but get the rulers of families to do their duty, to take up the work where you left it, and help it on, what abundance of good might be done! I beseech you, therefore, if you desire the reformation and welfare of your people, do all you can to promote family religion.  

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11 Parrett and Kang, 160.

12 Baxter, 100.
Baxter was doing far more than challenging his fellow clergy to simply try harder. He was initiating a reconfiguration of their pastoral ministry and expectations. Reconfiguring takes energy and time, of which many ministers were unwilling to concede. Their congregations were in despair, yet Baxter’s proposed changes required too much of them. On the other hand, there were those who tried to emulate Baxter’s strategy with mixed success.

Another element of Baxter’s revamped ministry model was the content used with families. The Westminster Shorter Catechism was published the same year (1647) that Baxter returned to Kidderminster. The Catechism would have been available to him soon after, and there is evidence he initially used it in ministry. He also saw the need for material to be written in a more focused and accessible way and, therefore, penned *The Mother’s Catechism* and the *The Poor Man’s Family Book*. These were simple catechisms helping the most uneducated grasp basic theological concepts and understand them at a heart level. For the family who completed those catechisms, Baxter produced a larger volume in 1683 entitled *The Catechising of Families*. In the introduction to this 300 page work, Baxter notes the intended users to be masters of families and schoolmasters. To the masters of families he states, “For masters of families, who should endeavour to raise their children and servants to a good degree of knowledge: I have divided it into short chapters, that on the Lord’s days, or at nights, when they have leisure, the master may read to them one chapter at a time, that is, the exposition of one article of the creed, one petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and one commandment expounded.” Baxter remained committed to equipping both the family and

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13 Black, 81.

the minister to better communicate and teach foundational biblical truths in an effective manner.

**Conclusion**

Few would argue against the incredible impact Baxter had in Kidderminster as well as in parishes across England. He was an inspiration to many struggling pastors and provided them with practical ways to augment their ministries. Baxter believed more than a powerful pulpit ministry was required to effectively reach his people. Meeting with individual families would become his trademark in order to see effectual change. Not all that Baxter implemented was transferable, and his critics have made this clear. It is true that Baxter was unique in his gifting and his call to the people of Kidderminster. Black concludes that, “Baxter’s pastoral genius was that he devised or adapted a strategy that addressed the particular circumstances and needs that met him upon his return in 1647 and best utilized his own abilities.” In short, Baxter was willing to think outside the box, and take a risk in effort to best reach his people with the gospel.

He became an inspiration to many others who found themselves in similar circumstances. Baxter did well to connect with the hearts of follow ministers who loved their parishes and needed helpful resources. Black notes:

> Overwhelmed by preaching responsibilities, sacraments, catechizing, visiting the sick, burials, counseling the troubled, and with too little time to be much bothered by the pamphlet wars on ecclesiology and doctrine in London, these pastors were more concerned with an idea’s practicality than with its pedigree.  

15 Black, 212.

16 Ibid., 218.
Baxter’s efforts were cut short, eclipsing their natural course and making it difficult to evaluate the long-term outcome of his strategy. Baxter’s Kidderminster experiment was overtaken and dismantled by the Restoration before it had a chance to prove its viability over the long-term. Speaking of those who claim Baxter’s efforts failed, Black says:

The critics may want to infer that Baxter’s model was doomed to fail under its own weight. But the historical record shows that his model did not fail, but was in fact shut down by the reimposition of episcopacy.

Even though he was unable to carry his work to completion in Kidderminster, his ministry had lasting effects. The time spent with families grounded both parents and children in the gospel, so that the next generation stayed true to the faith. In 1743, almost one-hundred years after Baxter had to leave Kidderminster, George Whitfield visited the town and wrote, “I was greatly refreshed to see what a sweet savour of good Mr. Baxter’s doctrine, works and discipline remain to this day.” Baxter’s documented ministry proves to be an excellent case study for the pastor who desires to practically implement the catechizing of families into his ministry.

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17 Ibid., 219.

18 Ibid., 219-220.

CHAPTER 5
DECLINE OF CATECHESIS IN AMERICA

Shifting our attention from Europe to America will highlight some similar challenges in the area of Christian spiritual formation. While America was free from the power struggles between church and state, the church had internal struggles as it tried to reconcile hundreds of years of post-Reformation influence with a new wave of converts who desired a fresh take on faith. These conflicts had profound effects on the church’s views and use of confessions and catechisms. Many of these movements birthed new congregations and denominations in America. Three will be examined as they relate to the use and disuse of catechesis in America: Revivalism, the Sunday school movement, and the Restoration movement.

Revivalism

During the Great Awakening of the 1740’s, revival was taking place in many Presbyterian and Baptist churches across the colonies. At this point in history the concept of revival was associated with the true preaching of the Word of God accompanied by prayer. Through these means, God has, at times, seen fit to show a generous outpouring of the Spirit where many souls were converted. Iain Murray notes it was common to believe that:

Revivals are not brought about by the fulfilment of ‘conditions’ any more than the conversion of a single individual is secured by any series of human actions. These ‘special seasons of mercy’ are determined in heaven.¹

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This widely held orthodox belief would soon give way to a more pragmatic understanding of revival. Most revivals, which included a profound conviction of sin, were accompanied by some level of emotionalism and excitement. The understanding of revival transitioned into Revivalism when the degree of God’s work in the revival became associated with and measured by the strength of emotion or the physical effects on the people involved. Some preachers became enticed by the fact they could influence the emotions and physical response of their audience. This new found power quickly changed the focus from true spiritual revival into what has become the emotional phenomenon called Revivalism.

The late seventeen and early eighteen hundreds were characterized by general congruence and collaboration among Congregationalists, Baptists and Presbyterians. “In the 1780s Witherspoon could affirm, ‘The Baptists are Presbyterians, only differing in the point of infant baptism.’” At this time both generally affirmed the Doctrines of Grace and were historically orthodox. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield entertained one another in their respective pulpits and had high respect for one another. As Revivalism started to build momentum, the Calvinists doubled down in their hope and practice of preaching the Word of God for the salvation of sinners. Their theology and experience reminded them that repentance of sinners did not depend on the efforts of man but on the divine work of grace in their lives.

It was against these doctrines the Christians of Arminian persuasion were making major effort to transform. The methodical advances and offensives of the Arminians against traditional Reformed believers branded the Revivalism movement. At the front of this

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2 Murray, 163.
3 Ibid., 178.
advance were the Methodists. In fact, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke launched the first American Methodist newspaper in 1789, boldly branded *The Arminian Magazine*. These men were simply following the lead of John Wesley’s British magazine which bore the same title. The Preface to the first issue opened this way:

> Brethren and Friends,
> We are not ignorant that the Gospel has been preached in the eastern and northern parts of the United States, from the earliest settlement of the country; but this has been done chiefly, though not entirely, through Calvinistic medium. . . . However, in this magazine very different opinions will be defended.  

Arminian theology, which champions man’s role, will, and response to God, laid the foundation for what would become the “camp meeting.” Camp meetings were scheduled events where revival was expected to take place. The anticipation of human response brought with it the desire to measure and count the result of God working. In a struggle to find a method to quickly keep track of how many had been converted, it became normalized to count those who came forward (mourners) at the call of the minister. The camp meeting was the birthplace of the “alter call” and the “anxious bench.” William Sweet observes, “By 1812, it was estimated that at least four hundred Methodist camp meetings, large and small, were held annually in the United States.” At these camp meetings, and later in many church services, the pastor would preach a sermon which would be followed by a lengthy invitation to the anxious bench. Requiring a person to physically get up and move forward, the bench was located in the front of the meeting space. It was at this point in the service where people’s attention perked up, watching, waiting to see what would happen, to guess who would rise and go forward. These types of services became normative and what people

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4 *The Journal of Letters*, vol. 3 (1789), 67, quoted in Murray, 179.

expected and desired of their ministers. Even though popular, many felt the use of the anxious bench to be detrimental. “Hundreds may be carried through the process of anxious bench conversions, and yet their last state be worse than the first.” Camp meetings and the anxious bench became accepted by many of the new sects and denominations who had rejected a Reformed understanding of salvation. From this developing majority known as the “New Measure,” American evangelicalism would take on a new face.

Regardless of opposition from older denominations, this wave of change swept across towns and states. It was Charles Finney who played a key role at forming the landscape of Revivalism, and he was the source of much division resulting from his claims that churches that did not experience revival were not faithful to God. Finney’s followers and the Methodists became widely accepted and praised. The revivalists appealed to the wishes of the people and to the idea of the “Simple Bible,” making traditional doctrinal preaching and theological education look unnecessary. Murray explains the ethos of their methods:

Coincided more readily with the new mood in the country than did that of older denominations. Methodist criticism of the past, with its theological inheritance and creeds, found a ready hearing in a generation prone to erase what was old.

However, not all were so quick to let go of the historic practices of the church and the centrality of the preached Word of God. John W. Nevin wrote against the use of the anxious bench stating:

Commonly indeed, those who deal in the anxious seat, rely far less upon the presentation of truth to the understanding, than they do upon other influences, to bring persons forward. Pains are taken rather to raise the imagination, and confound

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7 Murray, 187.

8 Ibid.
the judgment. Exciting appeals are made to the principle of fear. Advantage is taken in every way of the senses and the nerves.\textsuperscript{9}

Camp meeting attendees did not seem to mind being manipulated. The appeal to their emotions was strong and captivating. Church services had now become more interesting, more exciting. A wave of momentum was building in support of the idea of human contribution in salvation. Nevin continues his critique:

They disregard old forms, only to trust the more blindly in such as are new. Their methods are held to be all sufficient, for awakening sinners and effecting their salvation! Old measures they hold to be in their very nature unfriendly to the spirit of revivals; they are the ‘letter that killeth.’ But new measures ‘make alive.’ And yet they are measures, when all is done; and it is only by losing sight of the inward power of truth, that any can be led to attach to them any such importance.\textsuperscript{10}

The disdain for the old measures would continue to grow and become part of the new creed of evangelicalism.

One of the long lasting results of the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening in New England was a change in the evangelical church’s posture toward church history, church authority, and the creeds. Although not characterized by all aspects of the Awakenings, an anti-intellectual movement was born which then became a trademark of Revivalism. As the focus shifted from the effectual teaching of God’s Word toward an emphasis on the emotional response to the teaching, skepticism grew. Nevin critically states:

They have no faith in ordinary pastoral ministrations, comparatively speaking; no faith in the Catechism. Converts made this way are treated with suspicion.\textsuperscript{11}

Statements written in advance, including written prayers, creeds and catechisms, were labeled as stale and non-personal. Nevin continues his analysis, noting:

\textsuperscript{9} Nevin, 14.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
What was looked on as a necessary and beneficial practice by the early church and by the reformers has now fallen into such disuse among Christian people that very few seem to have any understanding or appreciation of the subject. We believe it is to the discontinuance of this practice that we can trace much of the doctrinal ignorance, confusion and instability so characteristic of modern Christianity.  

A new emphasis was placed on the spontaneous, emotional and relational. These new values changed the culture of education within the church. The Revivalism era forever changed the use of confessions, creeds and catechisms.

**Sunday School Movement**

The father of the Sunday school movement was the Englishman Robert Raikes. He was moved with compassion as he saw poor and neglected children who, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, were led out of the school house and into the factories as young as seven years old. They were deprived basic education which left them with little hope for the future. Working six days a week, the children only had one day available for schooling, Sunday. Raikes developed a system of schools which convened on Sundays and taught literacy, arithmetic and religion. Thus, the Sunday school tradition was birthed as an outreach to the poor and underprivileged.

A few decades later the Sunday school would make its way to America where it would take on a new form. Henry Cope reports, “The adoption of the Sunday-school by the church and the recognition of this school as an agency or department of the church for the religions training of the young was the most important step in the development of the Sunday-school.” The integrated function of the school into the church was unique in

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America, giving the American Sunday school its own identity. Explaining the development of the schools, Cope observes, “This school became, not a temporary expedient to rescue the poor and ignorant children, but a permanent institution, discharging a definite function in the life of the church.”

As a newly developed church institution, the schools were led by volunteers, unpaid, and often untrained. In this model, many were able to be engaged in teaching but with mixed efficacy.

The earliest denomination to embrace the need for the school was the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1824 they passed three resolutions concerning the organization of their Sunday Schools. First, itinerant preachers should establish the schools. Second, catechisms should be taught in them. And third, other suitable books should also be taught in the schools. These early schools understood the value of including the catechisms in their educational material. One negative downfall was the transferring of the catechizing process from the responsibility of the home to the primary responsibility of the church. Even under the care of the church, the use of catechisms declined starting in the 1850’s. In 1857 the Methodist Sunday School Union reported only some schools were using catechisms, and very few were faithful to study it. In 1868 the *Sunday School Teacher’s Magazine*, published by the Chicago Sunday School Union, states, “It is very rare to find a Sunday School where the catechism is used at all, and more uncommon to find one where it is faithfully and persistently taught to the entire school.”

Interestingly, as mentioned earlier,

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14 Cope, 75.

15 Ibid., 87.


17 *The Sunday School Teacher*, vol. 3 (1868): 97, quoted in Lankard, 108.
the Methodist Episcopal Church was the first denomination to open Sunday school in America, and by 1868 most all of their schools had ceased using the catechism at all. After just forty-four years the denomination all but let go of the practice completely.

After the Civil War, Christian fellowship became a greater emphasis pressing against the strongholds of doctrinal division. Many Sunday school organizations and unions took on the task of formalizing Sunday school structures and content with an emphasis on unity. The effort to create uniformity amongst the schools brought with it some benefits but more negative consequences. For example, from 1870-1908 a set of *Uniform Lessons* were broadly used in Sunday schools across America. Cope is critical of the uniform lesson plans and states:

No student of the history of the Sunday-school can regard without regret the long period of the dominance of the uniform lesson plan. The scheme did not fulfil one of its most important promises, to guide every student through a comprehensive study of the Bible in a period of seven years.19

The plan was comprehensive, but trying to implement it interdenominationally led to its neglect and abuse. The response was a doubled down effort to make improvements, yet through the same broad international organizations. Packer and Parrett recognize:

Here then is yet another great irony. In what was deemed an effort to preserve and promote unity (by removing the historic catechisms from being part of the Sunday school curriculum), attention to those historic summaries of the faith that had previously served as a unifying force among Christians of nearly all traditions was undermined.20

The influence of non-denominational organizations, slowly but surely, led to a doctrinally neutral Sunday school curriculum. Focus was shifted from teaching the doctrines

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of the faith, through catechisms, to teaching the stories of the Bible. Packer and Parrett comment, “While teaching of Bible stories is surely a good thing, this has often been done in a way that separates the particular stories from the broader story of God’s redemptive dealings with humankind.”

The expounding on Bible stories became normative and remains so in many Sunday schools today. Tradition has carried the day in regards to curriculum and educational structures in many churches. For generations church leaders have felt bound to the traditions of the previous generation perpetuating a doctrinally shallow program. This recycling of old ways but not the ancient ways has been a major factor in preventing true progress in Christian education. Packer and Parrett state, “The doctrinal catechism had its heyday in the early American Sunday school, its revival in the second quarter of the nineteenth century; and by the middle of the century it was entering upon its period of decline, from which it has had no revival.” Arguably, the removal of the catechisms from curriculum led to their being forgotten almost altogether and even to their disdain.

**Restoration Movement**

Another product of Revivalism was the Stone-Campbell group. This group was birthed from a Calvinist Presbyterian church and named after the two men generally recognized as its founders. Barton Warren Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) made a decision in 1804 to leave Presbyterianism and promote what they considered a restoration of the early Apostolic church. In a document entitled *The Last Will*

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21 Packer and Parrett, 72.


23 Lankard, 110.
they outlined the key points of their theology: the importance of the unity of all believers, the value of congregational self-governance, the use of the Bible as the source for understanding the will of God, and rejection of man-made creeds and confessions, specifically the Calvinist Augsburg Confession. Those who followed Stone-Campbell would eventually take on various names: the “Christian Church” or the “Disciples of Christ” depending upon whom one asked. Throughout the 1830s-1860s this movement saw significant growth. Many people were eager to adopt their simplified, anti-creedal, version of Christianity. Robert Caldwell remarks, “By the 1860s there were just as many Disciples congregations in the United States as there were Congregational churches and Anglican churches.”24

The Restoration movement is known for the statement, “No creed but the Bible.” This slogan remains today and is purported by many in broader American evangelicalism. Those in the Restoration movement believed avoiding the confessions of faith and catechisms would lend towards greater unity among Christians. It was thought the writing down of specific points of doctrine and outlining details of theology would precipitate more conflict amongst believers. Many hoped that by exclusively using the Bible as the only document of faith arguments and factions would subside. This was a false hope and the Restorationists experienced many internal divisions and schisms regardless of their lack of creeds. The avoidance of creeds, which is indeed a creed itself, forced them to remain vague on many points of doctrine, to keep deeper truths at a distance, and to even minimize helpful fine points of theology.

In this way, it is naïve to say that the Bible alone unites us. In fact the statement “No creed but the Bible” has the ability to be a cloak for significant disunity. Robert Caldwell wisely notes:

By discarding confessions we haven’t eliminated the words of men, and we have probably worsened our problem. By allowing many conflicting views in our churches, we have replaced the confessions of the historic church with the shifting currents of the times.  

Worse yet the wisdom of many saints has been replaced with the narrow wisdom of the youthful individual. The Restoration moment traded the confessions and catechisms of the Westminster Divines for the thoughts of Stone-Campbell. This was a poor trade and left a wake of confusion in what is known today as the Churches of Christ, Christian Church, and Disciples of Christ.

Conclusion

The history of the church in America shows its negligence of the warning of the Reformers. John Calvin famously said, “Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never be preserved without catechesis.”  

Calvin was not doubting God’s promise to advance His kingdom through the church but arguing for the health and life of the church. Many pastors since Calvin, Richard Baxter being one, had labored hard to avoid Calvin’s prediction. Those who were faithful to the Reformers found themselves pitted against the strong momentum of the Revivalist, Sunday school and Restoration movements. Packer and Parrett realized, “In the end it became all too easy in many places for catechesis to be

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25 Van Dyken, 18.

diminished to a mere memorization of the questions and answers in the printed catechisms. This, of course, is wholly inadequate for real learning to occur, and it would not be long before serious educators would quite rightly point out and call loudly and long for something else.”

American education, including Christian spiritual formation, would be changed forever by the research and teaching of John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey’s theories placed a high value on pragmatism and he purported a “hands on” approach to learning. This further challenged traditional models of Christian education, both in Sunday school, as well as in the home. Educational theory, as well as the changes in broader evangelicalism, allowed the practice of catechesis to fall out of use and into disfavor in America. Nevertheless, there is evidence that evangelicalism is in great need of something more than it currently has. Many have long been calling for a return to catechetical ministry, done with the spirit and vigor of the Reformers. Maybe now the ground is fertile, once again, for a reintroduction of catechesis into the life of the evangelical church in America.

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27 Packer and Parrett, 70.
CHAPTER 6
REFRAMING CATECHESIS FOR TODAY

History has shown catechesis to be foundational for the church and the family during the New Testament era, the Reformation period, and in the times of the Puritans of England and America. However, more recently the practice has waned almost completely out of existence for evangelicals. At the same time the church has seen a decline in the involvement of youth. Consequently, over the last two decades there has been no lack of energy expended in hopes of revitalizing the spiritual interest of young people. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw an influx of money being spent in an effort to woo youth and create a subculture that would protect them from the broader secular culture. But this was not the solution to the current void in spiritual formation, as Michael Spencer noted when he said:

We evangelicals have failed to pass on to our young people an orthodox form of faith that can take root and survive the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars we’ve spent on youth ministers, Christian music, publishing, and media has produced a culture of young Christians who know next to nothing about their own faith except how they feel about it.¹

It would appear then, the absence of catechesis has left a void, a missing framework of theology and doctrine rendering youth spiritual invalids with little motivation to grow. This void has been filled and youth have been catechized by the culture. The church and family

have work to do going forward if the practice of catechesis is to be embraced as a constructive part of the discipleship process.

Opposition

Any effort to engage spiritual formation in the American home and church will face some opposition in light of our current cultural landscape. What is often described as “rugged individualism” has bequeathed Americans with an authority problem. Rather than willingly submit to authoritative instruction from within the church, many tend toward a self-authoritative, almost godlike, posture of entitlement. Dissonance with authority has worked its way into the realm of the church and is reflected in many evangelical’s preoccupation with personal interpretation and application usurping the author’s original message. “Personal guesses and fantasies about God replace the church’s dogma as our authority, a hermeneutic of habitual distrust and suspicion of dogma establishes itself, and dogma becomes a dirty word.”

Thoughts of dogma stir up anti-creedal antidotes. This is the cultural ethos in which a reframing of catechesis must press forward.

The word catechesis, being foreign to most American evangelicals, presents its own challenges. Catechesis is commonly identified with Roman Catholicism and liberal mainline denominations, providing it with a reputation problem. Packer and Parrett claim reputations can be changed with patient education, but “if the term itself is to be such a stumbling block—because of personal or community—wide sensibilities—we really can manage without it.” Most likely there are alternative terms that communicate the whole of what is intended in the

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3 Ibid., 31.
term catechesis. The word *discipleship* is one possibility of a replacement. The discipleship process, as understood by broader evangelicalism, can encompass the full spectrum of evangelism, the teaching of foundational truths, and growing deeper in Christian maturity. In this way, discipleship captures much of same meaning as catechesis. Alternatively, there is power and meaning in reclaiming words from the past. This can be instructional in itself. A different strategy would be, “retain and explain, rather than reject and replace.” Something is gained by retaining the term catechesis, as it awakens us to a new understanding and perspective. Catechesis has the potential to be developed into a rich concept with layers not otherwise conceived by the term discipleship.

Opportunity

In order to be considered useful again, catechesis must be expounded as a weighty concept, full in spectrum, and broad in application. A most helpful source with practical ideas for applying catechesis in today’s church is J.I Packer and Gary A. Parrett’s, *Grounded in the Gospel, Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*. Packer and Parrett commit five chapters to the challenge of implementing catechesis in our current context. They define our topic this way, “Catechesis is the church’s ministry of grounding and growing God’s people in the Gospel and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty, and delight.” This definition expands the scope of all that is included in catechesis. Packer and Parrett envision every person in a congregation, including non-believing inquirers, engaging in the process of catechesis. They lay out three distinct categories of catechesis: Protocatechesis (non-

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4 Packer and Parrett, 31.

5 Ibid., 29.
believers), Catechesis Proper (young believers), and Ongoing Catechesis (mature believers). I believe these categories are helpful as they help cast vision for an intergenerational discipleship process grounded in the historic faith.

The definition of catechesis that Packer and Parrett put forward expands beyond that of catechisms, offering freedom to develop and even create new educational tools. They state, “It may well be that the pattern deemed best for sixteenth-century Europeans in a broadly Christianized world may prove to be far less fitting for many of our ministry contexts today.” With this inspiration to think afresh, one can consider what opportunities exist for the church as well as for the family in the home.

In the Church

Preaching the Catechism

Preaching the catechism sounds like a practice the Puritans may have considered. Surprisingly, it is more common today than may be expected. In 2013, Joel Beeke wrote, “Having preached the Heidelberg Catechism for thirty-five years, I am convinced more than ever that good catechism preaching promotes the church’s intellectual health, enhances her spiritual comfort, and increases the fruitfulness of her member’s lives.” The practice of preaching the catechism is worthy of consideration, even if it is outside the norm for most evangelicals.

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6 Packer and Parrett, 29.

7 Ibid., 191.

Of course, many different views exist on how to best incorporate the catechism into a sermon. Some would argue it is appropriate to make the catechism questions and answers the primary focus of the message, using Scripture to support the various points made. Peter Y. De Jong (1915-2005) was a proponent of this method. Explaining De Jong’s position, Beeke remarks, “Agreeing with Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), De Jong believes that basing a catechism sermon on a single Scripture verse or select passage does not advance the sermon; rather, it actually does injustice to the intention of the Lord’s Day, which summarizes all that Scripture says on the topic being presented.” De Jong’s method is a hard sell to those who value expository preaching. For example, Paul Zylstra is one who feels De Jong goes too far by raising the catechism above Scripture. Zylstra proposes a method that uses Scripture as the primary text and the catechism questions in service of the Scripture. In addition to these two methods there are various combinations used by pastors find benefit in annually presenting the catechism to their congregations.

For those who have never experience catechetical preaching, the practice may seem foreign. Beeke makes a convincing argument for the practice:

In churches where catechetical preaching is not practiced, some doctrines may not be touched upon (depending on the pastor) for several years or even decades, whereas good catechetical preaching ensures the periodic repetition of nearly every major doctrine of the Bible. Our people will then hear the whole counsel of God as contained in His Word on a regular basis. For believers, this will be their comfort and delight.

Clearly, incorporating the catechisms into the sermon, even if it is not weekly, is an opportunity to reshape the presumptions a congregation has about them. Speaking often

9 Beeke, 64.
10 Ibid., 65.
11 Ibid., 78.
about catechisms, their relevant questions, and their benefit will have a profound effect on the opinions of those listening.

**Children’s Ministry**

Due to the history of catechisms being primarily used with children, this may be the easiest place to reintroduce them. Armed with a holistic perspective on catechesis, it is possible to move beyond a simply catechism memorization program. But before moving beyond, let’s consider the profound good in having kids do just that. The Sunday school and Children’s church hours are perfect venues to introduce children to the rich material contained in the confessions and catechisms by using the skill of memorization.

In contrast to many current Sunday school models that employ an emphasis on doing and seeing, Donald Van Dyken understands the biblical Reformational model to be:

*Catechizing, a method of teaching in which hearing and speaking are central. If the church needs men and women of faith for the days ahead, we must return to listening to the Word, and from there to asking questions, and then getting answers.*

It is easy to take this thought process for granted but it is counter culture in the arena of educational models. Some human development theories of the 1990s and early 2000s placed a high value on experiential outcomes and question based learning. Students were encouraged to learn by asking questions first; the process of working backwards would lead them to the right conclusions. The research of Benjamin Espinoza exclaims, “Though human development theory has helped us recognize that the *process* of coming to know is vitally intertwined with *what* we teach, the *process* must not neglect the need for substantial

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theological engagement in the practice of cultivating Christian faith."\textsuperscript{13} Catechisms provide this needed structure for educating. The catechism gives the student the substantial theological material based on the Word, offers up the correct question, and instructs him in the answer. The question still lingers; does the church want to revert to the ancient practice of committing to memory so many questions and answers? Offering a convincing argument, T.F. Torrance tackles this question from another angle. The importance of truth being presented to the student objectively has already been seen. Torrance advocates the church teach in such a way that trains the student to submit to the truth:

\begin{quote}
It is an important step in any branch of scientific research to learn to ask the right questions . . . Christianity does not set out to answer man’s questions. If it did it would only give him what he already desires to know and has secretly determined how he will know it. Christianity is above all the question the truth puts to man at every point in his life, so that it teaches him to ask the right, the true questions about himself, and to form on his lips the questions which the truth by its own nature puts to him to ask of the truth itself that it may disclose or reveal itself to him. Now the Catechism is designed to do just this, and it is therefore and invaluable method in instructing the young learner, for it not only trains him to ask the right questions, but trains him to allow himself to be questioned by the truth, and so to have questions put into his mouth which he could not think up on his own, and which therefore call into question his own preconceptions. In other words it is an event of real impartation of the truth.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

It is not enough to teach truth to our children, more is desired. These life-changing truths need to be internalized. In order to accomplish this, the preconceptions the child has already developed must be challenged. The question and answer format helps achieve just this.

As Packer and Parrett have suggested, Catechesis is greater than memorization. It is more like a set of gospel lenses through which ministry is seen. Enveloping the full spectrum

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of catechesis into children’s ministry will affect every element: teachers, curriculum, and songs. Selecting teachers who live out the gospel and can communicate the Scriptures is vital. Their lives must reflect the message being taught. Curriculum needs to be more than informative Bible stories. The stories need to be set within the grand narrative of redemption portrayed in the Old and New Testament. Continuity between the two Testaments is evident in the doctrines put forth in the catechism. Quality content will help children understand both biblical history as well as church history portraying God’s commands and mighty works throughout time. The questions and answers of the catechism can be appropriately woven into each week’s teaching. Songs will be chosen not only for their catchy tunes, but for their substance. Working truths into the heart in the way only music can, the message of the song is to been seen as instructive. Each element of the children’s ministry can work in one accord, allowing for a deep, gospel centered, historic faith to be presented winsomely and effectively. This is the broader package of catechesis that Packer and Parrett propose churches consider. A rich children’s ministry will be prepared to reach out evangelistically, train up new believers, and seek to mature those older in the faith.

**Adult Education**

One of the toughest audiences in which to introduce reform is adults. Even when there is a felt need, it is difficult for adults to make the necessary adjustments to implement change. However, these challenges should not discourage a move toward a healthier adult education program. Aligning adults is necessary as they are the church leaders, teachers, and parents. Packer and Parrett describe three types of teaching environments that need to be addressed as changes are sought. They are *formal, non-formal, and informal* venues in which
education takes place.\textsuperscript{15} Traditionally the formal Sunday school hour has been seen as the primary location for adult education. Packer and Parrett state, “While some form of a serious schooling in the Faith and in the Scriptures is always necessary, it is unwise to view such teaching/learning experiences as the only sort of education we should engage in.”\textsuperscript{16} There are many avenues to learning, and one must be reminded people have different learning styles that need to be taken into account.

Packer and Parrett describe formal education as those times that are explicitly designed for education, such as a Sunday school class, a Bible study, or a catechumenates class. Non-formal educational experiences are those that are intentionally planned, yet not designed specifically for education. Examples would include a worship gathering, a Home Group, or a service opportunity. Informal education refers to the whole range of interactions that are unplanned and unstructured yet are still formative.\textsuperscript{17} Thinking through each of these three teaching environments with the lens of catechesis will protect a church from a narrow application. Similar to children’s ministry, the goal with adults is to bring to bear the full spectrum of the gospel and its application to all areas of life. Adults will be captivated by the gospel when they see its implications on history, philosophy, relationships, service and polity.

There is not one right way to see this through. Packer and Parrett are willing to expand the paradigm. They declare, “Let it be said at once that the schoolmaster style and the stress on memorizing are not integral to adult catechizing, and that some fruitful variants on the old austere procedure have recently been developed.”\textsuperscript{18} A newer development that

\textsuperscript{15} Packer and Parrett, 167.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 167-168.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 190.
Packer and Parrett mention is *Christianity Explored* which was developed by All Souls Church, in London. This is a seven week series based on the book of Mark that can be done with a friend or a small group. It is both evangelistic and discipleship in nature. Each week a question is explored which the group works together to answer by searching the Scriptures. This is just one practical first step in engaging adults in catechesis. Continuing to press out of the norm, Packer and Parrett offer, “There is more than on way to skin a cat, and no limit should be set to human ingenuity in the packaging the catechetical process—provided that the syllabus of the Gospel doctrine gets fully and properly covered.”19 With this generous view of catechesis in mind, churches have many opportunities to be creative and try new ideas in an effort to capture the hearts of adults with the gospel.

In the Home

Possibly the most important location for a reintroduction and reframing of catechism is the Christian home. The home can be a place of refuge, solace, love and recuperation. Sadly, it can also be a place of disruption, anxiety, neglect and pain. Addressing domestic Christian education will inevitably tap into the sources of both the pleasure and pain of home-life. Parents, to the surprise of some, are responsible for what happens or fails to happen under their roofs. A large portion of this responsibility, and one that is largely neglected, is the spiritual nurture and education of children. James Smart wrote:

In Old and New Testament times the parent in the home carried the primary responsibility for the education of its children in the faith, and that the father was recognized as having a priestly function. Again in the Reformation the home came into prominence and both parents were expected to guide the children and young people in the study of the Bible and the catechisms and to lead them regularly in worship.20

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19 Packer and Parrett, 190-191.

In our current day the calling of parents remains the same but calling does not always equate
its execution. Throughout the ages each generation of parents has had its own set of
advantages and struggles in the arena of educating children in the faith. Smart reveals, “It
may help the parent to know that he is entangled in a problem that reaches far beyond
himself, involving the whole Church and the character of Christianity in our time.”

Studying the history of catechesis revealed only a few periods of short success by the church
and family. Christian education in the home is vital to the life and future of the church and,
therefore, a focus of attack by the Enemy.

The church and parents can partner together in the work of catechesis at home. This
partnership is important to establish and effort is required to maintain a right balance. Van
Dyken expalains:

We have to take care that the elders to not usurp the role of parents. In God’s
covenantal structuring of the church he has never set elders or catechism teachers
between parent and children or in place of parents. Elders, therefore, may not shove
parents aside, nor may parent vacate their position in favor of elders. Instead, the
elders fulfill their role by insisting and ensuring that the parents of the church obey
God’s command to instruct their children in his ways.

The success of the partnership between the church and parents rests on each part
fulfilling its intended role. Husbands and wives also must live out their biblical roles in
marriage as they shepherd their children. In a day and age where gender roles and the
covenant of marriage are undermined, this alone can be a major challenge. Children are
changed when mothers and fathers live out Ephesians 5:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of
the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

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21 Smart, 177.
22 Van Dyken, 101.
Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Faithful submission to the Word of God is the foundation for healthy Christian education in the home. Capable, organized, driven mothers will need to exercise restraint and patience as they encourage their husbands to embrace their role as spiritual leader in the home. Tired, dispassionate, disengaged fathers will need to proactively pursue what feels foreign to them. Effective are the married couples who are united in their efforts to live out their biblical roles and united in the call to raise their children up in the Faith.

One major challenge is helping parents address their own insecurities. As parents are taught of their marriage roles and educational responsibilities to their children, they simultaneously become keenly aware of their own inadequacies. This awareness can become fuel for their own spiritual development or a retardant ensuring inaction. Many parents fear they will be placed in a situation with their own kids that will be highly embarrassing to them. Sadly, the result is often silence in the home on the most important subjects. It is dangerous to believe silence is a safe posture to take with children. Smart acknowledges:

> It is a delusion to think that a parent who says nothing about religion to his child has no religious influence upon the child. The underlying convictions and principles express themselves in action and word so that, day by day, a picture is built up of what lies beneath the surface. It is impossible for a child not to notice what his parent’s value most in life.

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23 Ephesians 5:22-25 (ESV).

24 Smart, 185.

25 Ibid., 178.
The silent parent is actually teaching quite loudly. Parents need to be reminded that their attitudes towards the Lord’s day, family worship, prayer, the Scriptures, and their spouse are all preaching values and priorities to their little ones.

Recently some helpful catechetical resources have been developed that can be used by parents in the home. One helpful tool that is tailored for children as well as adults is the New City Catechism (NCC). The NCC is organized into fifty-two questions, one for each Lord’s Day of the year. Each of the answers has two parts, an adult version, and a child’s version which is contained within the adult. As parents are working with their children, they too can be engaged in a more robust experience.26 When children get older and work with the longer answers, they don’t have to start from scratch since the work they have already accomplished is incorporated. Making it portable and appealing to the younger generation, the creators of NCC have made it available as an App to be used on a phone or tablet.

Another resource that can be used in the home is Kevin DeYoung’s book, *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism*. This book uses the Heidelberg Catechism as its framework. It, too, is broken into fifty-two sections, one for each Lord’s day. Coupled with the catechism questions and answers, DeYoung provides an article of commentary that could be read as a family and then discussed. When using this with younger children, the focus could be on memorization while the adults glean from the articles.

In keeping step with Packer and Parrett’s broad view of catechesis, parents have many options when it comes to bringing gospel centered, meaningful Bible teaching into the home. Resources such as the *Jesus Storybook Bible* can be used with all aged children and

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can become a launching pad for many spiritual conversations. Using quality content is important, but the key is simply this: to use it. As parents seek to follow God’s command and raise their children in the Faith, the imperative is to take the first steps and get started.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

At the onset, it was my intention to highlight the necessity of a thoughtful reintroduction of catechesis into the life of the family and church. A cursory survey of church history has revealed the development, use, and disuse of catechisms by the orthodox church. Early church fathers like Augustine saw the need to intentionally instruct those who were young in the faith. This need was met with basic catechetical practices and the formation of catechumenate schools. The Reformers faced new challenges as they sought to clarify biblical truths while differentiating from the Roman Catholics. Calvin, Luther, Ursinus, and the Westminster Divines all contributed their best efforts to develop catechisms to be used for the spiritual formation and preservation of the church. Most notably the Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Shorter Catechism were widely distributed and translated. Richard Baxter is known for his intentional effort to implement parish-wide catechesis. Baxter saw great success and tasted the personal rewards of spending quality time with the families under his care. Through his numerous writings including *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter was able to encourage many toward a practical, family oriented, catechetical ministry. As the decades past, the practice of formal catechesis proceeded toward disuse.

Significant to this shift in America was the transformation of the revivals of the late-1700s into the Revivalist movement. The faithful preaching ministry of the church was swapped for tent meetings and the drama of the anxious bench. Expository teaching of God’s word and theology became passé. An anti-intellectual, anit-credal movement was born under
the guise of unity and a commitment to a misinterpretation of the priesthood of all believers. Several new denominations and churches linked arms forming Sunday school unions, launching magazines, and developing shared curricula. In an effort to unify the doctrinally divisive catechisms were quickly put aside and replaced with Bible story based programs. By the middle of the 1800s catechesis had all but disappeared from the majority of churches in America. Today’s evangelical church finds itself in similar condition, struggling in the area of effective spiritual formation with young people as well as adults.

Many are leaving the church disillusioned and disappointed, seeking a house-church, emergent church, or no church at all. It is easy to be discouraged by the trends and practices of current evangelicalism. The culture has done well to catechize believers filling the gaps the church has left open. This is seen quite clearly on university campuses across the nation. Christian students are struggling to maintain and defend their faith as they face a barrage of secular critique. Christians know the Bible stories but lack the theological framework and foundation needed to complete their worldview. The cultural catechization is also evident in the home as parents lack theological lenses through which to filter their decisions. Consequently children in believing homes are being sent to secular schools and given powerful technology without appropriate shepherding and guidance. Parents assume incorrectly that children will simply figure it out as they did in generations past. As the pace of our culture has accelerated, feeding a fast-food instant gratification mindset, Christian parents have struggled to be set apart. The lack of spiritual formation is evident as parents mimic their children in their addictions to food, social media, leisure and entertainment. Where is the church to go from here? Is their hope for a reformation amidst American
evangelicals? Reintroducing catechesis has the potential to help meet the current need in the church. But doing so will require creativity, patience, and education.

The research has shown catechesis has a reputation problem. In light of this, a helpful first step would be to redefine catechesis as “the church’s ministry of grounding and growing God’s people in the Gospel and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty, and delight.”¹ Defining catechesis this way broadens its scope and allows people to consider a wide range of implications. It opens the door for churches to consider incorporating catechesis into the worship service, children’s ministry and adult education. Packer and Parrett suggest, “Before anything else, adjustments in our diet are needed, or we shall never be lithhe, virile, upright Christians—strong, resilient, and passionate for God in the way that evangelical Christians in days past were.”² It’s well known that making diet changes is never easy and requires more than a mere announcement of intention. Trying to convince the church they need to reconsider their posture toward spiritual formation will be no easy task. One common leadership mistake that is made when pursuing change is to forget people don’t like change. A certain level of buy-in is needed before the process can even start. If the church is to change its diet to one that includes catechesis, members must first believe change is imperative.

On a positive note there is evidence that churches and families are already working to make changes in this vein. The most common reentry point for catechesis is children’s ministry. Using Packer and Parrett’s broad definition of catechesis, children’s ministers can reconsider the content for Bibles lessons, how they approach memory work, and even the

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² Ibid., 10.
criteria they use for the selection of teachers. Once children adapt to the rhythm they carry it with them through adolescence. Youth programs have the opportunity to incorporate catechesis as part of their worldview and apologetics curriculum. Adult education can be augmented to include exposure to the whole of the Scriptures, Gospel centered theological surveys, and the catechisms themselves as tools to be used at home.

This brings us back to the heart of catechesis, the home. God has called parents to shepherd their children, teaching them who God is and all he has done. This is not an easy task and the catechisms were developed as a help. The church is called to support the family in this important and often neglected endeavor. Children are called to honor their parents and look to them as models to emulate. As the church, parents, and children live out their unique callings, the people of God will grow. History reveals plainly the benefits and challenges of catechesis. Obviously catechesis is not the answer to all the church’s problems. Church and family life are quite complex and no one discipline will act as a fix for all. But after much time and consideration on this subject, I must agree with John Calvin when he declared to the Lord Protector of England, “Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never be preserved without catechesis.”

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