

What Is This Old Fashioned Way ...

Introduction

It is obvious that one needs to know before one can live and act it out accordingly.

It is true one does not need a great deal of biblical knowledge in order to be saved. To live as a Christian, however, requires doctrinal knowledge e.g. about God, man, church. As has been explained ¹:

Although simple, the gospel is far from simplistic; ...It is not so simple for a believer to live a life on this earth as a Christian in compliance with the purpose to which God has called him. Gospel doctrine is the construction material for the house of thoughts. Two main structures of our faith are regulae credendi, namely, what ought to be believed, and praecepta vivendi, what ought to be lived out. They are not randomly mixed like beads in a bag. They must be logical and systematically structured. The establishment of firm believers lies in the completeness and comprehensiveness of such thoughts. Today, the loss of systematic knowledge of faith and belief has made vague the distinction between the church and the world.

Throughout the history of the church, young believers and new converts to the faith went through a process called "catechism." Although this is an ancient practice, it has fallen out of use in contemporary Christianity. Often contemporary evangelicals regard catechesis as an alien concept, and view 'catechesis' and 'catechism' with suspicion as though they were some practices inherited from Roman Catholicism. Ironically it was the Reformers who rekindled and extensively promoted the use of catechesis.

What is Catechesis?

Catechesis refers to the robust process of teaching essential biblical knowledge which anchors the believer in the faith. The teaching is not sporadic but rather systematic, detailed, extensive, effective, and practical. It encompasses educating everyone from young children to the elderly.

More specifically in our current situation, catechism refers to the teaching of the system of doctrines as found within the Westminster Confession of Faith. From the latter, we have the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism. It is the Westminster Shorter Catechism which will form the context of our discussion here.

Catechesis comes from the Greek word *katekeo*, which is used in several places in the New Testament and means "instruct." In some ways, it is a general word for instruction; but very early on in the life of the church, it was a particular form of instruction that focused on the basics via oral communication – to and fro questions and answers. There is a biblical concern for teaching the faith in substantive ways.

Catechesis is derived from the New Testament Greek verb '*katecheo*'. This Greek word means to inform, teach, instruct e.g.:

- Luke 1:3-4
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**.
- Acts 18:25
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.
- Gal 6:6
One who is **taught** the word must share all good things with the one who **teaches**.

The case for catechesis is further reinforced by the frequent use of the words ‘teachings’ (Greek *didache*), ‘doctrine’ (Greek *didaskalia*) and ‘traditions’ (Greek *paradosis*) eg..

- Acts 2:42
And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ **teaching** ...
- Rom 6:17
But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of **teaching** to which you were committed.
- 1 Tim 4:6
... you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good **doctrine** that you have followed.
- Titus 1:9
He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound **doctrine** and also to rebuke those who contradict it.
- 1 Cor 11:2
...you remember me in everything and maintain the **traditions** even as I delivered them to you.
- 2 Thess 2:15
So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.
- 2 Thess 3:6
... you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the **tradition** that you received from us.

In summary, catechesis is biblical and it focuses on the fundamental doctrines of ‘the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3). Catechesis involves instruction that is holistic, addressing the heart, mind, practice and experience. It is foundational for the development of one’s faith throughout life.

Brief History

There were three seasons when catechesis flourished:

(a) Second to Fifth Centuries

As the Gospel spread to Gentiles, anyone who came to Christ, especially from outside of the Christian community, went through a rigorous preparation for baptism that was catechizing, equipping them in the basics of Christian doctrine, Christian living, and Christian praying - often for many months, up to two or three years of instruction - before they were permitted to be baptized and allowed full participation in church life. The church developed ‘schools’ or ‘institutions’ for preparing the believers.

Notable Catechist of this period: Augustine of Hippo

(b) Sixteenth Century

Then catechesis went underground in a lot of ways for most of the Middle Ages, was revived by the Reformers with great zeal, and was the dominant feature of Protestantism, at least through the era of the Puritans.

While catechesis is a process, catechism is best described as a summary of instructions through a series of questions and answers, usually prepared in book form, containing instructions on the doctrines of the Church.

Luther took on himself the task of producing the ‘Small Catechism’; the reason was simple. Luther wrote² :

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who lived in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching,

and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christians, are baptised, and received the sacrament, they do not know the Lord's prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as though they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.

John Calvin published two catechisms. The first was published in 1538. The second one was produced in 1541, was in the question-and-answer format that Luther had advanced, and became known as the 'Geneva Catechism'.

The Heidelberg Catechism, published in 1563, was commissioned in an attempt to unify Lutheran and the Reformed churches of the German Palatinate.

Notable Catechists of this period: Martin Luther, John Calvin

(c) Seventeenth Century

Out of the English Reformation, the Westminster Confession was completed in 1647. The English Puritans did much to advance the catechizing of whole families. Both George Whitefield (nearly a century later) and J C Ryle (more than two centuries later) noted the profound impact the catechism had on the town, Kidderminster, in which Baxter ministered.

Ever since the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, it has been retained largely only in Reformed and Lutheran circles.

Notable Catechist of this period: Richard Baxter

Why Catechesis Has Fallen By The Wayside

The church in the West has largely abandoned serious catechesis as a normative practice. Why has catechesis fallen by the wayside? We need to know so that we consciously overcome the obstacles.

(a) Contempt for External Authority

Over the years, the western culture has dismantled the various authorities that once upon a time were in place. The authority of the parents has been diluted. The authority of the community has vanished (try telling off your neighbour's kids for using foul blasphemous language; or note your reaction if your boss dares tell you that you are not the next best thing since sliced bread and that you need to improve). The authority of the church has been relegated to the margins of life, and has little or enforceability. In these postmodern days, we are left with legislation, not God, as the main source of authority.

The culture encourages us to be our own man (or woman). The church can tell us, but we will decide for ourselves. Personal discoveries are deemed more palatable than having the church dictate what one must believe or do. We deceitfully think we can be Christians on our own terms, according to our own priorities, and according to our likings. We assumed (wrongly) our reaction to realities is more significant than the realities themselves. We cultivate a mode of godliness that rests upon a smudgy, deficient, and sometimes misleading conception of who God really is.

Over time, 'doctrines' becomes a dirty word with overtones of obscurantism, narrow-mindedness, superstition and mental enslavement. There is a habitual disdain and distrust of dogma. Personal fantasies, half-truths and slogans replace the church's teaching and dogma.

Hence, it is an uphill battle to get on-going and receptive participation in catechesis.

(b) Indolence Towards Authoritative Instruction

The next obstacle, which is closely related to the above, is that many do not want to be pushed to think or to learn. Many do not want to be told what to think i.e. authoritative instruction is frowned upon. Thinking is hard work. Studying the Word of God is hard work.

Often, many bible study groups are more like social gatherings for catching up with friends, garnished with a small sprinkling of the study of the Word. The discussions are centred on 'what does this verse means to you' rather than 'what is God saying'.

Participants are led to look directly for personal devotional applications without first understanding the author's points about the greatness, holiness, purpose, ways and mystery of God.

Nurtured in such an environment, it is little wonder there is a resistance to authoritative instruction and little interest in studying anything that doesn't makes one "feel good about oneself".

(c) An Emphasis on "Growing the Church"

In addition to the breakdown in the authority of the church, and a shift of the focal point from the glory of God to the well-being of man, there was another contributory factor. There is an emphasis on "growing the church" that is often simplistic and lacking in holistic concern.

The question now being asked is "How much (that is, how little) do I need to know in order to be saved and live for God?". This made the range of theological themes covered in the older catechism seem excessive and superfluous. We seem quite happy with a diet of slogans rather than meaty doctrines. Our theology is like marshmallows, i.e. sweet and hollow. We brandish mindlessly slogans such as "we must not have too much head knowledge" when the problem is a church that is famished owing to a poverty of God's Word (too little knowledge) and a corresponding lack of application.

Today, there is great temptation to grow the church rather than 'make disciples'. The emphasis is on getting them to come through the front door of the church, rather than "teaching them to observe all that I [Christ] have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). We inherit much of this mindset under the label of "evangelicalism".

Let me quote from the book *Grounded in the Gospel* p.72:

It seems clear that much of what has occurred in recent decades under the broad heading of "church growth" has been driven largely by the desire to reach as many people as possible for Christ. This noble aim is fed by a biblically appropriate evangelistic passion. But in practice this has often meant that while we are concerned that people come to the church, we have not thought deeply enough about what they will become in time within the church. And this is complicated further by the very human tendency to look for examples of what seem to be "successful" churches and then to simply copy their behaviour. By no means do we mean to imply (for example) that all so-called "megachurches" have sold their souls for the sake of the members. Rather we are concerned that churches of all sizes and shapes need to take more seriously the fact that our commission is to disciple the nations, not merely to draw large crowds to ourselves. When we focus merely on the latter, we may assume (perhaps mistakenly) that we need to lower the bar of expectations to prove attractive to the masses. A rigorous catechetical experience would surely seem unwise by this standard.

(d) Sunday School Movement

This lay-driven ministry began in 1780 when the Englishman Robert Raikes, at his own expense, gathered some Gloucester children together on Sunday morning to teach them reading and writing, to introduce them to religion, and reform their morals. It was more out

of compassion and a para-church endeavour.³ However, soon churches were adopting the Sunday School model for their Christian education efforts, hence the demise of catechesis.

To be fair, much good has been achieved and many have benefited from the movement. One of the unintended consequences of the Sunday school movement, is one could grow up in an evangelical church and feel like he has known the Bible all his life. For a host of reasons, too often in the Sunday school movement, the Sunday School teachers would pick up pieces of Bible stories, but generally speaking were wholly disconnected from the grand story of which the gospel is the center. Bible stories were used merely for their moral values. For example, there is the story of Jonah, of Peter, of Mary, but these stories are all disconnected from the glorious gospel. In some cases, even more tragically, these Sunday school stories were presented in a way actually contrary to the message of the gospel. The story about Jonah becomes a little moral lesson at the end: "Don't be a bad rebellious boy like Jonah." Or the story about Mary and the bottom line is, "We must be good girls like Mary." Unless we keep the gospel central to our catechetical efforts, we are in grave danger. For the past century or so, many children and youth programmes have centred on learning Bible stories rather than being grounded in the truth of God and the Gospel.

Recovery of Catechesis

In 'A Preliminary Discourse To Catechising' by Thomas Watson⁴, he drew our attention to the following:

'If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled.' - Col 1: 23 -

(1) *It is the duty of Christians to be settled in the doctrine of faith.*

(2) *The best way for Christians to be settled is to be well grounded.*

We should be grounded in the knowledge of fundamentals. The apostle speaks of 'the first principles of the oracles of God.' Heb 5: 12. In all arts and sciences, logic, physic, mathematics, there are some praecognita, some rules and principles that must necessarily be known for the practice of those arts; so, in divinity, there must be the first principles laid down. The knowledge of the grounds and principles of religion is exceedingly useful.

This grounding is the best way to being settled: 'grounded and settled.' A tree, that it may be well settled, must be well rooted; so, if you would be well settled in religion, you must be rooted in its principles.

Catechising is the best expedient for the grounding and settling of people.... Catechising is laying the foundation. Heb 6:1: To preach and not to catechise is to build without foundation. This way of catechising is not novel, it is apostolic. The primitive church had their forms of catechism, as those phrases imply, the 'pattern of the sound words,' 2Tim 1: 13, and 'the basic principles of the oracles of God,' Heb 5:12.

So, let's start in this church by making some small steps towards the recovery of catechesis. God willing, for the rest of 2012, each month we will discuss one or two questions from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The aim is to cover the first 11 questions in 2012.

- Q. 1. The chief end of man
- Q. 2,3 The Scriptures and its chief emphasis
- Q. 4-6 God and His nature
- Q. 7-8 The decrees of God
- Q.9-11 Creation and Providence of God

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards wrote⁵ : This is a pleasant way of improving time. Knowledge is pleasant and delightful to intelligent creatures, and above all the knowledge of divine things; for in them are the most excellent truths, and the most beautiful and amiable objects held forth to view. However tedious the labour necessarily attending this business may be, yet the knowledge once obtained will richly requite the pains taken to obtain it. 'When wisdom enters the heart, [and] knowledge is pleasant to the soul' (Proverbs 2:10)."

I pray you would study with us as we attempt to recover the catechesis. Please pray for the church as we do so.

Bibliography

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4 – A Body of Divinity by Thomas Watson

5 – The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth, in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol 22.