

September 9, 2018

The Practice of Catechism: Becoming a Countercultural, Culturally Engaging, Gospel Grounded Christian

1 Timothy 4:16

The Dark Ages

For many of you, the beginning of the school year is a bigger deal than when January 1 rolls around. It is in our household. Another year of education. Another year of tears and triumphs, of frustration and fulfillment, of anxiety and adjustments. Presumably you have a plan for educating your children. Either you are homeschooling them, or sending them to school somewhere. You have a plan for their learning math, and english and history. What about theology? What is your plan for that? Lest you think this sermon is just about children, let me ask ‘what is your plan for *yourself*? How are *you* going to learn theology this year?’

This sermon is aimed specifically at helping you over the next 52 weeks to learn theology, specifically in the form known as **catechism**. When I first came to Reformed Theology several years ago I heard that word and immediately I thought “that’s Catholic, that’s not what Protestants do.” But what if I told you that the reason *why* the Reformation *happened*—the reason why the Protestants rebelled against Rome—was because Biblical catechizing was *not happening*. J.I. Packer says on this point

“Indeed, it could be well argued that the Reformation itself was a response to centuries of catechetical decline. A largely uninstructed church had been fertile soil for serious error in terms of doctrine, experience, and practice. Luther and his contemporaries fought hard to reform the church in these areas...Theirs was a call to return to the plain teachings and practices of the Scriptures.”¹

¹ J.I. Packer & Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2010), pg. 59

The reason why the Dark Ages were so dark was because the church was not being catechized. In fact, it was Calvin who said in a letter to the Lord Protector of England in 1548: “Believe me...the Church of God will never be preserved without catechesis.”²

What is catechism?

That word is a Biblical word used in several places in the NT³— κατηχέω *katēcheō* in Greek. It means “instruction, teaching or doctrine.” Catechism essentially is teaching or doctrine. In the book of Acts, Apollos, before he became a prominent teacher in the early church was catechized. **Acts 18:25** says “He had been instructed (*katēcheō*) in the way of the Lord.” The Apostle Paul in speaking to the Jews in **Romans 2:18** says you “know [God’s] will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed (*katēcheō*) from the law;” So catechism is not a Roman Catholic idea, it is a Biblical idea. The church has a Biblical mandate to catechize, that is, to teach doctrine. In fact, this is the very essence of the great commission. Jesus said in **Matthew 28:19-20** “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all that I have commanded you.”

The coming evangelical collapse

This is what the church needs now more than ever! We live in an age of information overload and yet we are perhaps the most Biblically illiterate people since the dark ages. Michael Spencer in a 2009 article entitled *The Coming Evangelical Collapse* has said this:

“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

² *ibid*, pg. 23

³ Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; 21:21, 24; Romans 2:18; 1 Corinthians 14:19; Galatians 6:6

nothing about their own faith except how they should feel about it. Our young people have deep beliefs about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey the Scripture, the essentials of theology, or the experience of the spiritual discipline and community. Coming generations of Christians are going to be monumentally ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures.”⁴

That is the burden I feel in this message. If the church does not catechize, if it does not systematically teach the core doctrines of the faith, it simply will not survive. We will be like the church in Joshua’s day—**Judges 2:10-12** “...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 they abandoned the Lord.”

- ☆ The Charge of Catechism
- ☆ The Content of Catechism
- ☆ The Confrontation of Catechism

The Big Idea...

The Church of God will never be preserved without catechesis
(John Calvin)

I. The Charge of Catechism

Paul’s obsession with doctrine

Paul’s two letters to Timothy and his letter to Titus are known as the pastoral letters. He gives explicit instruction for pastors regarding *how* to shepherd the flock of God. What’s shocking to the modern anti-intellectualistic

⁴ J.I. Packer & Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2010), pg. 52

air that we breathe is how Paul's overwhelming emphasis on doctrine. Listen to this summary from 1 Timothy:

- ✦ Paul's very first charge to Timothy regarded protecting *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 1:3**
- ✦ The purpose of protecting *doctrine* is love — **1 Tim. 1:5**
- ✦ *Doctrine* is only sound if it glorifies God — **1 Tim. 1:10-11**
- ✦ *Doctrine* is what helps us wage the good warfare — **1 Tim. 1:18**
- ✦ Swerving from good *doctrine* will shipwreck your faith — **1 Tim. 1:19**
- ✦ Paul was appointed a teacher of *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 2:7**
- ✦ *Doctrine* exists so we know how to do church — **1 Tim. 3:14-15**
- ✦ The church is the guardian of *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 3:15**
- ✦ Rebates devote themselves to demonic *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 4:1**
- ✦ Good servants are those who teach godly *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 4:6**
- ✦ We are charged to command and teach *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 4:11**
- ✦ Pastors are to devote themselves to *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 4:13**
- ✦ Pastors are to practice and immerse themselves in *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 4:15**
- ✦ Pastors are to watch *doctrine* closely so that salvation will follow — **1 Tim. 4:16**
- ✦ The church is commanded to practice ethical *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 5:7**
- ✦ Pastors who labor in *doctrine* should be doubly honored — **1 Tim. 5:17**
- ✦ The church is charged to keep good *doctrine* before God, Christ and the elect angels — **1 Tim. 5:21**
- ✦ We are charged not to lay hands on people to quickly so we wouldn't share in their bad *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 5:22**
- ✦ Slaves must honor their masters so that *doctrine* will not be reviled — **1 Tim. 6:1**
- ✦ We are commanded to teach and urge *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 6:2**
- ✦ Those who willfully teach false *doctrine* are 1) proud 2) ignorant 3) hungry for controversy and 4) motivated by worldly gain — **1 Tim. 6:3-5**
- ✦ Pastors must guard *doctrine* — **1 Tim. 6:20**

Now there are 41 more similar statements in 2 Timothy and Titus. Doctrine is paramount. What's going on? Modern church philosophies will tell you the exact opposite. 'Lighten up on doctrine, make it funny. Times have changed, we need to change to. The church doesn't need more teaching, it needs more action.' But ask yourself, when these philosophies are taken seriously, when

churches dump doctrine and adopts funny or when it adopts the social gospel, does it follow that the church is strengthened? No the opposite is true. Weakness exists in the church today because the church has become anti-doctrinal. Paul's letter to Timothy is a call for the church to be comprehensively immersed in doctrine.

The kind of preaching that saves

We see that so clearly in our verse. **1 Timothy 4:16** "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching (the doctrine, the catechesis). Persist in this, **for** by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." Do you hear what he's saying? 'Timothy if you abandon doctrine, you and your hearers will be lost.' Doctrinal work *is* saving work. Is that really so strange? Doesn't Paul say almost the exact same thing in **Romans 10? v.13-15** "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 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?"

In Romans 10, Paul focuses on the *need* for a preacher. Not because God *needs* men. God has no *needs*. **Acts 17:25** says that "he [is not] served by human hands, as though he needed anything." It wasn't out of God's *need* that He employs human preachers, it was out of His pleasure and His plan. And therefore, because God decreed that preaching would be the ordinary means by which people are saved, we *need* preaching. So in Romans 10, Paul is focusing on the need for preaching. But that begs the question, what kind of preaching? Will any old preaching do? Is that what Paul meant in Romans 10? That as long as you have some sort of preacher, it doesn't matter what's being said, people will be saved. No. The kind of preaching that saves is gospel-focused, doctrinally-saturated, Christ-centered preaching.

That's Paul's emphasis in **1 Timothy 4:16**. "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching (the doctrine). Persist in this, **for** by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." We know this is Paul's focus because

he already said in **1:11** that doctrine is only sound if is “in accordance with the *gospel* of the glory of the blessed God.” In other words, ‘Timothy, make sure your doctrine is in accord with the gospel. If your gospel is not in accord with the gospel, or if you abandon doctrine you and your hearers will be lost.’ That’s what Paul means. In **Romans 10:13-15** he focuses on the need of preaching. In **1 Timothy 4:16**, he focuses on the content of that preaching—it must be doctrinal, it must be biblical. That’s our **first point**: the church has been charged to catechize, that is, we have been charged to teach, preach, and love Word-centered, Christ-saturated, soul-exhilarating doctrine.

II. The Content of Catechism

Systematic vs. Biblical Theology

Preaching is not the only form that doctrine is delivered to the church. It is an essential part of a healthy catechetical ministry, but it is not the only part. When we preach here on Sunday mornings, our main diet is what’s called Biblical Theology. Wayne Grudem gives us a helpful definition: **Biblical theology** is the study of the teaching of the individual authors and sections of the Bible and of the place of each teaching in the historical development of the Bible.⁵ Biblical theology is that verse by verse approach. When we move to 2 Peter next week, we will largely be engaging in Biblical Theology. Systematic Theology on the other hand is different. Again Grudem provides us with a definition: **Systematic Theology** is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” about any given topic.⁶ Systematic theology is the attempt to collect all the relevant data about one subject and then harmonize it and summarize it. It takes all the bits and pieces and helps us to see theology as a total science, as a cohesive system.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994), pg. 21

⁶ *ibid*, pg. 22

Catechism proper

It is systematic theology that gave birth to what we call a catechism. A catechism is a specific *form* of instruction or doctrine by means of questions and answers. I remember being in my mid twenties when I heard my first catechism question on the radio. Q. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. That rocked me. I had never heard so succinctly, so totally what the purpose of my life was. I exist for God's glory, and it is God whom I will enjoy forever. It wasn't until significantly later that I learned that question was first of 107 questions from the Shorter Catechism built in 1647. But that wasn't the first catechism. There were many others. In the age of the Reformation, Martin Luther built a catechism for the German church; John Calvin for the church in Geneva; Zacharias Ursinus built the famous Heidelberg Catechism for the church in Holland. But this question & answer form of teaching goes back well before the Reformation. Augustine was catechizing the saints back in the fifth century.⁷ In fact, this is an ancient practice of the church going all the way back to Jesus Himself.

Jesus the Catechist

Please turn with me to Matthew 16. We recognize Jesus as a preacher, as a doctrinaire, as one who taught penetrating parables, and as one who could draw us close with His stories. But have you thought of Him as a catechist—one who taught by asking questions? Look with me at **Matthew 16:13ff** “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my

⁷ I believe the Apostle Paul catechized. I think that's what he meant in part when he told Timothy in **2 Timothy 1:13** “Follow the *pattern* of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” What’s going on here? Jesus is drawing His disciples into a teaching moment by questioning them. This form of questions that elicited a response was one of Jesus’ favorite ways of teaching.

- ✦ “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” **Luke 2:49**
- ✦ “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” **Matthew 6:27**
- ✦ “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” **Luke 10:25-28**
- ✦ “What are you seeking?” **John 1:38**
- ✦ “Where is your faith?” **Luke 8:25**
- ✦ “...if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” **Matthew 5:46⁸**
- ✦ “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” **Luke 10:36**
- ✦ “Do you want to be healed?” **John 5:6**
- ✦ “Do you love me?” **John 21:15**

Jesus was a catechist. In the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—Jesus asks 307 questions, in contrast to the 183 questions that are asked of him.⁹ In fact, one author said that Jesus asked more questions than Socrates ever did.¹⁰ Plato in his famous dialogs always had Socrates asking his opponent questions. “How do you know that? What do you mean by that? Why would you believe that?” This has become known as the Socratic Method. But Jesus was the true master of this. So now I ask you: Why is this question and answer method so beneficial?

⁸ “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?” Luke 6:33

⁹ Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered*, (Nashville, TN,: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2014), Amazon online preview

¹⁰ *ibid*

The form of catechism: Q & A

What happened at that moment? Were you not searching for an answer? That's the **first reason** why this question and answer form is so beneficial. "Questions inspire people to discover something new, to unearth knowledge. Questions stimulate thought. That's why good teachers ask questions of their students rather than just lecture at them."¹¹ The **second reason** this question and answer form is so beneficial is because it is a very effective way of engraving doctrines on our hearts. "A time-honored [maxim] among schoolteachers is, "no *impression without expression*."¹² A genuine test of our grasp on the truth is our ability to express that truth. The **third reason** why catechism is such an important art to recover is because it is relational. Catechism is a communal method of teaching. The practice of catechism in our home has created a whole host of discussions around the Scripture. That's because it's very nature is dialogical. As we continue to ask our children those questions, it becomes natural to discuss the answers. The **fourth reason** why catechism is helpful is because it builds Biblical categories. When we began in our family, our younger children who were not able to read or discuss yet, were able to memorize the answers. And that began to create categories in their minds. It created buckets of information that we have been able to draw from later. We were having a discussion the other night at the table. Josiah was wrestling with the idea of Jesus having a human soul. It didn't quite square with his thinking. So we went to the Shorter Catechism:

Q.22 How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man?

A. Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a *reasonable soul*, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² J.I. Packer & Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2010), pg. 189

From there we spoke about how if Jesus didn't have a human soul, then He wasn't truly human. And if He wasn't truly human while being truly God, then He couldn't substitute for humans.

Finally, the **fifth reason** why catechism is so helpful is because it leads to meditation. Memorization leads to mediation. Meditation is that spiritual rumination, that mental chewing of ideas, that in turns waters the soul that it may grow.

The self-irrigating Christian

William P. Farley wrote an article called *The Self-Irrigating Christian*.¹³ He encountered a foreman on a vineyard in Napa Valley, California on a road trip he was on, and began to ask him questions. "How old do these vines get?" He answered "Oh, some can live eighty to one hundred years, but they reach their peak productivity at about thirty to fifty years." "In fact," he continued, "the flavor doesn't concentrate in the grapes until they advance in years. That's when we get our best wine." As Farley continued to query the sun-weathered foreman, he discovered an amazing truth. Some of the vines have what is called a tap-root. The main root that goes down thirty to forty feet into the soil, some of them reaching the subsurface water table. When that happens the vine becomes self-irrigating. It can withstand droughts for longer seasons than those vines who have no taproot. That's how catechesis works. Doctrine is that deep well of water that waters the soul in times of drought. Catechism is the root that draws out that water. When Monica and I discovered that Justus had autism, those early years were a real trial to learn how to live with him and disciple him because he was different from our other boys. Things often didn't go like we expected them to go, and we often were pressed to the very edge of frustration. But we had a taproot. When one of us would get frustrated, we very often asked each other the Q.11 from the Shorter Catechism

Q. What are God's works of providence?

¹³ The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Winter 2004

A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

It gave us words to meditate on and to remember that God is in control of even this situation as well. Catechism helps you become a self-irrigating Christian.

Catechism teaches us to ask the right questions

Think again of some of those questions that Jesus asked in the gospels:

- ✦ “Who do you say that I am?” **Matthew 16:15**
- ✦ “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”
Matthew 6:27
- ✦ “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” **Luke 10:25-28**
- ✦ “What are you seeking?” **John 1:38**

Jesus is teaching us the right types of questions to ask. We often ask the wrong types of questions. We often pursue smaller truths at the expense of bigger truths. The catechisms gather the most important types of questions and places them before our souls.

- ✦ What is God? (Shorter Catechism Q.4)
- ✦ How and why did God create us? (New City Catechism Q.4)
- ✦ What is sin? (Larger Catechism Q.24)
- ✦ What is your only comfort in life and death? (Heidelberg Q.1)

The essentials of the Christian faith

Not only does it teach us to ask the right questions, but it puts before us the essentials of the Christian faith—the law,¹⁴ the gospel,¹⁵ and how to worship

¹⁴ The Decalogue

¹⁵ The Apostle’s Creed

God.¹⁶ In other words it give us our doctrine, duty and delight. It ministers to the whole man and whole woman of God, not neglecting our heads, or our hands or our hearts. It provides us with a rich doctrinal, ethical and doxological feast.

What Sola Scriptura does and does not mean

I feel like we must answer an important objection at this point that lingers in my heart and perhaps in some of yours. “What’s all this talk of catechism? Just give me the Bible. After all, isn’t *Sola Scriptura* our motto? The Bible alone?” So **first** let me say that all catechisms, all creeds, all sermons, all confessions of faith are subordinate to the Bible. All human compositions are limited, and fallible. The Bible alone is “the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds [and catechisms] depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures.”¹⁷ Any higher view of their authority is unbiblical and is our first step back to Roman Catholicism.

Having said that it is important to understand that Sola Scriptura does not mean “no authority *except* the Bible” it means “no authority *over* the Bible.”¹⁸ To dismiss creeds and catechisms because we have the Bible would be like children telling their parents “I don’t need you because I have the Bible.” Remember where we started in this message. Paul emphasized the continual need for doctrine for catechesis in the church—63 times in the pastoral letters. This need for doctrine is so misunderstood today. I was interviewed on the radio a few years back over the issue of Calvinism. The host had another teacher on the line and we were supposed to engage in a debate, this man coming from the other side. What ended up happening was that he began advocating that that all systems of theology, all doctrine be laid down, and that we simply read the Bible in our church services. After the show ended I pointed out to the host that if we took that man’s advice of simply reading the Bible we would be disobeying the

¹⁶ The Lord’s Prayer and the Sacraments

¹⁷ *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, Ed. Phillip Schaff, 6th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, Reprint 2007), pg. 7

¹⁸ *ibid*, pg. 69

Bible. The Apostle Paul didn't command Timothy to simply read the Bible. He did command that. **1 Timothy 4:13** says "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture," but then the verse continues [and] "to exhortation, to teaching." Teaching what? Doctrine. You see we can't obey Scripture unless we teach doctrine, unless we catechize. That's our **second point**: the content of catechisms are meant to help us to ask the right questions, to mediate on the most essential truths, and to help form us into self-irrigating Christians.

III. The Confrontation of Catechism

Cultural Catechizing: the counter-catechesis

The truth is that everyone has a catechism of some sorts, everyone has a creed—both sacred and secular people alike. Every culture has an orthodoxy.¹⁹ Every culture has answers to questions that it expects you to answer in a particular way. There is a catechism happening on Capitol Hill over the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. He has been grilled by liberals on questions regarding *Roe v. Wade*. There is outrage because he is not answering in the way they desire.²⁰ All around us there is a constant counter-catechesis taking place. Consider three snapshots throughout history of this counter-catechesis.

Snapshot 1: Satan in the Garden

This is the first counter-catechesis. When man was still innocent. He asked a question? "Did God actually say?" What was Satan implying in his catechism? "Who is God to speak to you? Man you don't realize how big you are, how great you are. God is keeping you like a slave, and using you as a servant. Why don't you stand up for yourself? Why don't you assert yourself?"

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²⁰ Recently, I had a Christian brother tell me of the catechism he was asked when he was a potential employee at a technology firm: "How old is the universe?" He told me they would only hire those who gave the answer they wanted.

Why don't you stand on your dignity and demand your rights? Don't be put down any longer. Stand up."²¹

Snapshot 2: What is the chief end of man?

What many people don't realize is that between the New and Old Testament the greatest philosophers like Plato, Socrates, Aristotle lived. It was from this atmosphere of high Greek learning that the Apostle Paul speaks in **1 Corinthians 1:22** "Greeks seek wisdom." However in all their wisdom, Jonathan Edwards tells us this "The philosophers were miserable bewildered in all their researches after the chief good [that is, they were trying to answer the question: "What is the chief end of man?"]. Each sect, each subdivision of a sect, had a chief good of its own, and rejected all the rest. [The philosopher Varro tells us that they advanced] no fewer than 288 opinions on this matter."²²

Snapshot 3: "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you"

These were the repeated words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount: "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you."²³ What is He doing? He's contrasting the culture's catechism with the catechism of the gospel. "You have heard that it was said"—meaning "this is what the culture tells you is true"—"but I say to you." This is what He was doing in **Matthew 16:13** when He first asked His disciples: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" How do the disciples answer? By giving him the counter-catechesis of the culture. **v.14**

²¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Sermon: *He is our Peace*—Ephesians 2:14-16

²² *Thy Word is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*, Ed. Peter A. Lillback & Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, PA.: P & R Publishing, 2013), pg. 494

²³ Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44

“And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”²⁴

Catechism is countercultural and culturally engaging

This is why catechism is the one of the most countercultural things that you can do, because you are learning and burying in your soul the answers to the most important questions—and these answers run absolutely antithetical to the catechism of this world. However, this is precisely why catechism is so culturally engaging. Because it equips you to answer the question “What is the reasons for the hope that is in you.” **1 Peter 3:15** “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you;” In his book *Expository Apologetics*, Voddie Baucham says:

“The gospel has not changed over time. The message has remained constant from the time of Jesus to our day. Therefore, the objections to the gospel have not changed. People are asking the same questions today that were asked of Jesus and the apostles. There may be different nuances, but the core issues are the same. Thus, if we familiarize ourselves with the basic categories of questions and key biblical texts that address them, we will be well equipped to engage...”²⁵

The catechism confronts us with the gospel

But the most important aspect of catechism is that it confronts us with the gospel. The first question to the Heidelberg Catechism asks “What is your only comfort in life and death?” Dear congregation how do you answer that

²⁴ Snapshot 4: Joshua and the Promised Land

When Joshua was about to lead Israel into Canaan, he realized that there would be competing catechisms that Israel would soon face. **Joshua 24:15** “...if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The warning was clear: ‘you will soon be faced with a foreign culture that will seek control of your head, heart, and hands.’

²⁵ Voddie Baucham Jr., *Expository Apologetics: Answering Objections with the Power of the Word*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2015), pg. 86

question? The world answers it in very specific ways with its competing catechism. **Materialism** - If I can just get more stuff, a better job, more money, more clothes, more toys, then I will have the comfort I need. **Radical Individualism** - If I can just achieve more personal liberty, more autonomy, unshackled from all authorities then I will have comfort. **Hedonism** - If I can pursue more pleasure, more self-indulgence, and escape through food, sex, alcohol, t.v., then I will achieve comfort.

What is your own comfort in life and death?

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

The counterintuitive gospel

You see the catechism confront us with the gospel. It is the message of the cross that we need to be constantly confronted with because it is so countercultural, it is so counterintuitive. For two reasons. **First**, because the world tells us that we are pretty good people, that given the right opportunities, the right encouragement, the right choices, we will do the right thing. That is all wrong. You do not do the right thing. Because the right thing is to live every breath for the glory of the King. We are so man-centered that the morality of the world has been adopted by the church. The world believes in the golden rule: that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But you see it starts there. You can't start there because man is not the center, God is. Having man be the center is very core of sin. That's why the catechism says "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, *am not my own.*" You don't belong to yourself. You have a Master. Doing the right thing means loving Him with all your heart, all

your soul, all your mind, all your strength, all the time. Can anyone claim that they have done that? No. **1 John 1:8** “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Dear unbelieving friend, you have been confronted this morning. You stand guilty before your Master. You have lived for yourself. You have made choices without reference to your God. You have acted as if He doesn’t matter. What will you do on the Day of Judgment when He brings you to account?

The **second** reason the gospel is so counterintuitive it is too good to be true. Once you truly see yourself for who you are, you have to ask: how could God ever forgive someone as selfish, self-centered, self-righteous as me? The world’s answer is this: “As long as your good deeds outweigh your bad things, certainly God will accept you.” The problem is, that is not what God says. Jesus said in **Matthew 19:17** “*If you would enter life, keep the commandments.*” Here’s the thing: God doesn’t judge on a curve. You must never fail in one commandment. You must never have an impure thought or motive. Every commandment must be obeyed spotlessly. The Bible says “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (**James 2:10**). ‘But that’s impossible’ you say. Nobody can do that. Exactly. “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (**Matthew 19:26**). Only God through Jesus Christ is capable of saving such a sinner as you. That’s the essence of the gospel. That Christ died for sinners. The Apostle Paul said “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst” (**1 Timothy 1:15**).²⁶ How perfect. You are a sinner, and Jesus is the Savior of sinners. Unbeliever, if you trust Him, hope in Him, surrender yourself to Him, you will be saved.

Dear believer, you already possess that comfort. You already belong body and soul to Jesus, and He belongs to you. When He died your sin died. When He was raised, it is the guarantee that you will be raised on the last day. And now you are free to live to Him. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh

²⁶ NIV

I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (**Galatians 2:20**). That’s our third point: that catechism confronts the world with the truth and it confronts our hearts with the gospel.

Application:

Here is our plan over the next year. First, starting next week, we are going to adopt the New City Catechism as part of our regular worship service here at the Well. The New City Catechism contains 52 questions, one for each week of the year. It covers the essentials of the Christian faith—creation, fall, redemption, glory, the ten commandments, the apostle’s creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the sacraments. In other words—it contains the three main parts of the Christian life: the doctrine of the gospel, the duty of the gospel, and the delight of the gospel. Our plan is to take each question and teach them at 9:30 am in Sunday School. This class is open to everyone, but it is specifically designed for jr. high to high school kids. We do hope adults will come because we believe you will greatly profit from catechism just as the ancient church has. There will be another class after the main service following the same schedule for the youngest children so they can start hiding these things away in their heart.

Secondly, every week we will insert a new question in our bulletin. Our desire is to confess these truths together. Public corporate confession has been part of the spiritual DNA of the God’s people since the beginning. The Old Testament is full of instances of Israel publicly confessing their faith together. The New Testament as well. Paul points to this in **1 Timothy 3:16** “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.” We believe that confessing this mystery of godliness every week will help shape and form us as a body.

Lastly we hope that this catechism will help you at home for family worship. I know that as the spiritual leader of my home, family worship is a massive challenge. Often times I just don’t know what to cover. The New City Catechism helps to provide content each week to go over with your families. The easiest way to get access is through an app on your smart phone. Not only is

the Scripture provided for each question, but there is a commentary from both an older author and a contemporary one. If you don't have a smart phone, we have copies of the catechism you can have. Our ultimate goal is to immerse you in the essential doctrines of the faith. We want to be a people that is grounded in the gospel.