

The Challenge of Catechetical Instruction: From the Perspective of our Theological Task

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Few teachers are so fortunate as those of us who are given the task of teaching the catechism to youth. We have the ideal teaching tool: the Word of Life which like a seed is bursting with vitality (Mt 13:31) and is able to communicate that vitality to those in whom it is planted. (Ga 2:20) We have the ideal Teacher's Guide, the Spirit of God who is able to lead us into all Truth (Jn 16:13). We have the ideal students, young men and women separated from the evil world (Ga 1:4) for the service of the Lord by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who else can enter into a classroom of 7th and 8th graders with so many advantages? The special advantages of the catechism teacher are matched only by the special challenges which he faces in his care for the youthful household of God.

The teacher of the catechism faces a demanding challenge in communication, and he should approach his task with a sense of awe for its dimensions. He teaches a 450-year-old handbook which is a compendium of a document another 1500 years older. He teaches this ancient literature to children too young to recall the recent war in Viet Nam. He teaches from a question-answer book quite unlike any other text the child has ever been exposed to. He uses as an additional resource a book of such variegated sources that within a few minutes a student may be asked to deal with liturgical song, annalistic records, proverbial sayings, history, prophetic and apocalyptic imagery, sermon discourses, and personal letters. In addition, an instructor of the catechism teaches the majesty of God while tucked in a classroom environment ordered by man and filled with the creations of man.

The teacher of the catechism faces also the challenge placed on him by the radical nature of his material. He teaches what is foolishness and weakness in the world to youth prone to admire what is wisdom and power in the world. He teaches love to a society nurtured on the merit of competition, fellowship to a culture rooted in individualism, trust to a generation which often cannot trust father and mother to work at living together to provide a stable home.

Finally, the teacher of the catechism faces the special challenge which is imposed on him by his goal. It is his objective not merely to inform his students but to have a radical impact on their lives. He wants to deliver young people from the tyranny of evil for this life and the next. He wants them to cast off sin and live each day of their lives to the glory of God (Ro 8:10-14).

So somehow the catechism teacher must bring the printed page, which pulses with the life of Christ (Jn 6:63), into contact with the active lives of his students; he wants to bring the catechism to bear on life now; he wants to set before his youth a life which is intelligible to youth and livable by youth. He must communicate to his youth the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so that He reveals Himself to them as the great and faithful "I am" of their existence and so that their excuses to escape His service drop away as they see the life He sets before them as a challenge to be grasped (Ex 2:6,14).

The urgency of bringing catechetical instruction to life has been felt through the ages. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, from the early second century, addresses itself to this task with remarkable directness. It begins, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways...." Then follow explicit, timely admonitions to the church (e.g., "Thou shalt not murder a child by

abortion”). These in turn are followed by a number of paragraphs prefaced with the words, “The way of life is this....”¹

Luther’s Large Catechism is equally concerned about bringing instruction to life. For instance, he wrote like this about men who neglect the Supper:

But there is no reason why we walk so securely and heedlessly, except that we neither think nor believe that we are in the flesh and in this wicked world or in the kingdom of the devil. Therefore, try this and practice it well, [adhering to the Gospel which brings the enmity of the world and of Satan which in turn results in our being tempted into sin and vice] and do but examine yourself, and look about you a little, and only keep to the Scriptures. If even then you still feel nothing, you have so much the more misery to lament both to God and to your brother. Then take advice and have others pray for you, and do not desist until the stone be removed from your heart.²

In the more recent *Instructor’s Manual for Luther’s Small Catechism* this same concern is attributed to the author:

He was aware of the fact that, while Biblical truth could be retained, instruction might become lifeless, mechanical, and even artificial. The author believed Christian education to be a vital living thing, intimately related to other subjects in the school curriculum. With this clearly in mind, he dedicated his efforts in the manual to prevent cold, formal teaching. He sought to explode the idea that would restrict religion to a tight little compartment, separated from the rest of life. Every page of the *Instructor’s Manual* testified to the fact that Christianity is comprehensive and all-inclusive.³

Catechism teaching which brings the catechism to bear on life as our children know it and live it will help them to cherish the catechism as a useful handbook for life always. To bring the catechism close to life in our generation without cheapening it by moralizing, we need a theological doctor’s insight into the content of the catechism and a fine teacher’s understanding of the good management of its materials. Perhaps some of the following comments on our catechetical task will be elemental enough to serve as components in our catechetical teaching theory or stimulating enough to move us to think constructively about formulating our personal approach to our task.

The catechism should be understood as an excellent handbook for communicating a living faith.

The catechism is to be learned, memorized, and understood; but the goal of catechetical instruction is not merely the imparting of knowledge. The goal of our instruction is the planting and nurturing of faith, that utter dependence upon the mercies of God which alternately and simultaneously calls out for salvation and rejoices in it.

The various parts of the catechism have their own individual roles in nurturing the child’s faith life. Some parts exhibit the creative content of faith, another the heavenward cry of faith, still another the earthy expression of faith.

The Creed rehearses the creative content of faith. In proclaiming the Father, His Son, and the Spirit, the teacher is speaking the gospel which brings forth reconciliation out of bitterness, hope out of despair, and life out of death. The teacher is interested in helping the child to make a proper identification of Jesus like Peter’s “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God;” but he is also interested in removing from their hearts the

¹ Lightfoot, J.B., ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976) pp. 123 and 125.

² *Concordia Triglotta* (Minneapolis: Mott Press, 1955) p. 773.

³ Boettcher, H.J., *Instructor’s Manual for Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) p. ii (Foreword).

theology of glory which abhors the cross (Mt 16:21–25), whether it be Christ's or His followers'. Again the teacher does not want the outcome of his instruction to be a faith which leads to self-glorification because of achievements (Lk 18:12) or correctness (2 Tm 3:5); he wishes to evoke a faith which cries, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18:13).

In dealing with the Creed, the instructor and student should be aware of its form as well as its content. In form it is a confession of faith. As such, it may be used privately or publicly, and the child should know what he is doing with it in either case. When the child recites the Creed to himself devotionally, he is nurturing his faith and he is worshipping God. That is good. But by teaching his children the Creed, the teacher is also helping them to express their faith. He is helping them to assume the responsibility and privilege of teaching their brothers and sisters the gospel in the church service and in the world. The recitation of the Creed in the church is preeminently a recital before men. By it believers are participating in the church's ministry of strengthening the brotherhood. The better the student perceives himself to be sharing in the church's evangelical ministry by reciting the Creed, the more likely it will be that he will use the Creed evangelically and evangelistically outside the church service.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar are like the Creed in that they nurture faith by the gospel. Baptism is treated as a promise-filled creative act of God by which He brings forth a new creation and lays His claim upon its life (Rm 6:4,13). The child of God celebrates his "rebirth day" daily by contrition and repentance. Like Luther the teacher will strive to let the gospel of Baptism predominate over apologetics and over the teaching of procedures and ceremonies which may give the Sacrament the taste of the law.

The Lord's Supper, too, is gospel but the teacher faces the challenge of teaching it in a way that supports faith and repentance. There is the danger that in the polemical teaching of the historical errors he may become a strident defender of orthodoxy at the expense of being an evangelical herald of Christ's faithfulness. He risks setting Lutheran rightness at the center of his student's faith rather than Christ's righteousness. He risks replacing the faithful, forgiving Christ who inspires faith with a system that offers life in exchange for acquiescence. The polemics may be well worth the risk, but the teacher should be aware of what he stands to lose or to gain in the trade-off between polemics and proclamation.

The Lord's Prayer in the catechism is the cry by which living faith seeks the blessing of God. The teacher of the Prayer helps his children to satisfy their yearning to learn how they may break their silence before God. They learn that their dread silence before God cannot be broken except they pray along with Jesus. While they are learning to pray along with Jesus, they still have the right to pray like children. Can we teach them to pray at their level of thinking and feeling? Can we teach them to pray in their own language? Can we like Jesus accept inadequate praying to lead them from level to level? The woman with the issue of blood sought Jesus' help and received it. Jesus did not tell her, "Your perception of Me is inadequate and insulting. First you must learn how to pray and for what to pray before I will listen. And in order to learn these arts you will first have to learn better who I am and what it is My will to do with you." The challenge before the teacher of the petitions is to lead his students to a youthful understanding of a mature prayer so that they will love to pray it along with Jesus and thus mature in their prayer life even as they mature in their faith life. Practical matters relating to prayer (such as postures, times, devotional booklet usage, and memorization of prayers) will naturally be discussed with the class. During their three years of study under Jesus the disciples must have learned much about the practical aspects of prayer simply through Jesus' observed example. While our example is still helpful, the limited amount of time we actually spend with our students suggests that the deliberate discussion of these practical matters could be helpful in bringing the catechism to bear on life.

The Ten Commandments of the catechism are also vitally related to promoting a living faith in our youth. On the one hand they are useful in producing a sense of sinfulness in youth so that they perceive their rebelliousness (Rm 7:7) and their will to be free from the observant eye and the righteous judgment of the Father (Lk 15:13).

The Ten Commandments can also serve our youth as the outline of a program for dynamic living. They are a welcome challenge to a young Christian. Jesus challenged His disciples by the call, "Be ye therefore

perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48). He was encouraging them to strive for obedience. We misuse the passage, “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Is 64:6), if we let that passage quench the new man’s will to please God (Ph 3:12). By the indiscriminating repetition of this passage we can quench the Spirit of life which God has given to our youth. Let the young Christian learn well the filthiness of his works and let him never forget it; but let him also hear the challenge to attain perfection sounded as appealingly and cogently as in the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). Let the teacher of the commandments face with courage and sensitivity the responsibility to teach the commandments as a challenge in living meaningfully before God.

Each part of the catechism has its own contribution to make in the creation of a living faith within our catechumens. Our effectiveness in capitalizing on the excellent qualities of the catechism will depend, therefore, on our sensitivity to the role of each part in creating a living faith, as well as on our ability to bring each part to “life,” i.e., to bring the catechism close to the daily life of the child as he actually lives it so that he feels the world’s sin is his sin, the world’s Savior His Savior, and the commandments of God his own challenge to act out what he believes and confesses.

The Catechism should be understood as a handbook for communicating a living faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ.

The Ten Commandments are the will of our living Lord, not merely a statement of certain ethical principles. The Creed is an expression of faith in a lively God, not a statement of abstract truth. The Lord’s Prayer is a cry to the Father, not merely a healthy spiritual exercise. The Sacraments are gifts from the Father thankfully received, not just expressions of the religious dimension of the human personality.

In modernism it appears that Christ has become a theological abstraction rather than a real, living Lord. The Jesus of history is distinguished from the Christ of faith. The Christ whom modernists worship is not the historical Jesus but an abstraction which they believe was created by the mind and heart of the early church. He is an ideal without human reality. In this way modernism deprives the church of a living Lord Jesus as the object of faith.

Threatened by the encroaching sea of modernism, the catechism teacher faces a considerable challenge in seeking to communicate faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ who died rather than in a theological abstraction. The challenge has become even greater with the change in artistic taste in our churches. Some of us can remember growing up in churches where the Jesus of the Gospels was represented in the chancels as a real living, dying human being. Thus, we were easily led to believe not just in man’s redemption but in man’s Redeemer, Jesus of Nazareth. Today images of the living Lord Jesus have frequently given way to abstract symbolism. The teacher of the catechism will then probably have to assume a special responsibility to confront his children with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who is and who was and who is to come. He will have to teach the Jesus of history effectively to combat the notion that the God of Article II is only a theological abstraction.

Another difficulty which faces the teacher, as he uses ancient documents to communicate the faith, is that he may be perceived as teaching a *God who was* rather than a living *God who is and who was and who is to come*. Jesus labored mightily to impress upon His generation that in Him they were presently experiencing the kingdom of God (Mt 4:17); He was telling them that God was effectively ruling their lives at that very moment in Himself. The glory of His rule lay hidden under the cross, but it was no less a real, present rule. Today also Christ’s rule is hidden under the cross but it is real and it is present (He 2:8,9). Our children have blemishes and perfections, weaknesses and talents, enemies and friends, failures and successes, temptations and sins, forgiveness and salvation—but in all this Jesus is ever their Lord. The apostles labored by letter to teach the presentness of Christ’s kingdom. Not least of these laborers was the Apostle John whose Revelation was dedicated to convincing his readers that the Lamb of history is the present King over all Caesars, all natural disasters, all social ills, even Anti-christ and death (Re 5:1–7). Jesus is Lord, the Alpha and Omega who is and who was and who is to come (Re 1:8).

How can the teacher effectively proclaim the Lordship of Christ as present? How can he let the God of the past effectively illumine the God of the present to evoke the present cry of faith, “Jesus is Lord”?

Our ability to make real Jesus’ present Lordship of our students’ lives is linked to our determination to direct our teaching to the lives our students really are living. If a child does not recognize the life the teacher is talking about as being his own, he may be hard-pressed to see Jesus as the Lord of his life. We need to direct our teaching to the battles our youth are actually fighting, to the ethical questions which actually perplex them, to the errors with which they are actually dealing or by which they are really endangered if we want Jesus to be the living Lord of the lives they are actually leading. This raises difficult questions for the teacher. How can he get close enough to his children to know what their battles, questions, and dangers are? How many pet stories from his distant youth must he sacrifice to have time to talk about the somewhat different challenges of youth now? How much does he risk if he subtracts a few minutes from the time he usually allots to the discussion of historical theological problems (e.g., transubstantiation) in order to come to grips with current and felt temptations? How can his teaching effectively keep *the Lord who was* bonded together with *the Lord who is and who is to come*? How can he teach the Lord of history so that He is seen as the living Lord of the present?

The catechism should be understood as a handbook for communicating a living faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ by the gospel.

The center of gravity in the catechism is the Second Article. There is no way to bring man into a right relationship with God except by the News which is digested in the truths of the Second Article. All the majesty and wisdom of the Creator does not succeed in making men wise enough to say thank you to God for all His benefits. Therefore it pleased God to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching, by telling the story of His Son’s suffering and dying for His enemy, man (1 Co 1:21).

The Gospel is story, history. It is not system. If we make it essentially a finely reasoned system supported by the majesty of God in inspiring an infallible Scripture, we risk diverting it from its essential function of being the Good News of God’s weakness and foolishness in dying for sinners. In that case we may tend to change the church’s fundamental task from proclamation of doctrine to argumentation about doctrine, from announcing the gift of righteousness to setting a standard of rightness, from wooing the lost sinner by Christ’s death to demanding submission under God’s majesty. The mistake is to put first what will naturally follow. We then may tend to elicit from our pupils not a beggar’s cry for life and strength but the religious man’s penchant for standing in judgment on others less enlightened.

Fundamentalism, for instance, issues a responsible call for literal acceptance of the Sacred Scripture but the result of its rationalistic appeal to the authority of Scripture can be that the various doctrines of the Bible begin to stand in competition with the living Lord Jesus Christ as independent objects of faith. Thus also the Scriptures may be used to minister to one’s pride in one’s orthodoxy rather than to call one to repentance and to faith in the gospel of the Crucified.

Men deny the doctrine of inspiration at great peril but men give it Christ’s place at the center of their faith also at great peril. We should avoid both perils as did Luther himself in both the Small Catechism and in his life. Let the story come into our students’ lives as Jesus came into Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem—in lowliness, but with proper attention to His majesty. Let the story win our children’s hearts by its grace so that then they also accept its authority. Then we have learned Paul’s way (1 Cor 2:2–6).

There is another way in which we risk turning the Gospel into an intellectually overpowering, intricate system: by studding our presentation with a host of proof passages drawn from an impressive array of sources and from contexts with which the student is quite unfamiliar. How much “proof” can a youthful intellect absorb? How can a teacher avoid nurturing the notion that the key to salvation is knowledge of a rather esoteric text in religious law? How can the teacher preserve a fine economy in the use of passages to preserve the Scripture’s character as News rather than rules? Perhaps catechetical teaching is best supported by vigorous Bible history study. Bible history study should help the children to perceive Jesus as the Lord of Life rather than

the Giver of a complex legal system or the Prescriber of a subtle doctrinal code. Certainly the first understanding is better than the last two.

Another problem inherent in the “intellectual system” approach to catechetical training is demonstrated when a student finishes the class and asks, “But what can I say to my friend who doesn’t believe the Bible? We don’t have a common starting point for talking.” That starting point is not necessarily in a book about which we have common feelings and opinions; that starting point is in the common life we lead under the providence of God, experiencing both His blessing and His judgment. All about us God is constantly revealing Himself in wisdom, in power, in goodness, and particularly in wrath. The signs of His judgment surround us (Ro 1:18ff; Re 6:1–17). By these signs He seeks to rob men of all earthly security that He Himself may become their Security. We stand together with the unconverted in experiencing these natural revelations and from that common starting point we can begin to speak meaningfully about both sin and Him who is our only Security in the changing tides of life.

Another failing of the student mentioned above is that he has not perceived that the gospel is beautiful by reason of the grace of God which it reveals. The beauty of the gracious God can win faith even before (though, of course, not necessarily before) there is talk about the infallibility of the spirit-giving record which has preserved the Gospel. The jailer at Philippi story is an instance of the Gospel’s power to comfort a sinner by its grace without deliberate preliminary effort to establish its divine authority. “The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in the field” (Mt 13:44). The poor finder can delight in its substance even before he is aware of its perfect form. A thirsty man can delight in a drink of water even before he has discovered the faultless symmetry of its molecules.

Let the center of gravity in our communication of a living faith be the Second Article, the Good News, the surprising history of God’s humiliation, that our children’s day-by-day relationship with God may be informed by trust in His faithful and forgiving love. Jesus lives. “He lives, He lives, who once was dead; He lives my everliving Head.” To the sinner that is beautiful, self-authenticating News from the Spirit of God. Its design is to win the faith of the sinner crushed by the law. Let our teaching of the catechism reflect the grand design of the gospel.