

Is Catechesis a helpful tool for teaching children?

Catechesis comes from the Greek word *κατηχέω* which means to teach or instruct. A modern and more narrow usage of the verb 'to catechise' is 'to instruct (someone) in the principles of Christian religion by means of question and answer, typically by using a catechism'.¹ This essay will assess the value of the 'question and answer method' for teaching children. It will not assess the merits of individual catechisms, but rather assume that they are sound and biblically based, and assess their usefulness as a teaching tool. Furthermore, this essay will not assess catechesis to the exclusion of other Christian teaching nor in direct comparison to them but instead, explore whether catechising is another useful tool in raising children in the instruction of the Lord alongside bible reading, prayer, learning memory verses etc. This assessment will be made using biblical data, and the example of church history as well as examining the usefulness of the doctrinal content, the method and relational considerations.

An examination of the biblical data shows clearly that children should be instructed in the way of the Lord. The Israelites are commanded to instruct their children about God's mighty, salvific deeds and the content of His law (Ex 13:14, Deut 4:9). This teaching is to happen continually, in a variety of contexts (Deut 6:6, 11:18-19) and was particularly crucial for those who had not personally witnessed the events (6:20,11:2). The responsibility for instructing was laid primarily on parents, and particularly fathers. Johnson argues that Deut 6:20-25 and Exodus 13:14 lay down an

¹ 'Catechize' Oxford Dictionaries, last modified 2016, accessed 15th April 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/catechize?q=catechise>

explicit question and answer teaching format: “*When your son asks you... then you shall say...*”. He claims that catechism was the regular means of education then, and catechizing today has formalised the ancient method. He additionally points to the questions that appear throughout the Psalms (e.g. 42, 120, 121) and the ‘antiphonal elements of call and response’ to justify the use of catechesis.² It seems fair to conclude that call and response features are used in psalms and this has didactic value.

Additionally, parents are to answer their children’s questions as part of their instruction.

The words of God are to be ‘*in your heart and in your soul*’ (Deut 11:8). They are to be delighted in, treasured, meditated upon and not forgotten (Psalm 119:11-16). This describes deep, rich, internalised engagement with God’s word which strongly suggests, but does not explicitly command memorisation. It is not a stretch to suggest however, that memorisation of God’s precepts could aid this rich engagement. In the NT Paul charges fathers to raise children ‘*in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*’ (Eph 6:4). The role of mothers in teaching children is also clearly encouraged through the commandment to children to be obedient to both parents (Eph 6:1, Col. 3:20), younger women are to love their children in the context of a godly home (Titus 2:4-5) and Eunice and Lois are commended for nurturing Timothy in the faith (2 Tim 1:5).

By way of conclusion, the biblical data reinforces that parents are primarily responsible for raising godly children, especially fathers. It demonstrates the kind of content that children need to be taught: God’s saving works and how to live in the world and in relationship with him. It shows that this content needs to be taught repeatedly within the context of an authentic life of faith. It even shows questions and answers as a potential teaching tool. Nonetheless it does not prescribe a particular curriculum, or a

² T. Johnson, *Catechizing Our Children*. (Banner of Truth, 2013), 3.

fully-fledged teaching methodology, nor does it sanction catechising children as strongly as Johnson suggests. Nonetheless, the rich engagement with and meditation upon God's word described in Psalm 119 suggests the usefulness of memorisation.

While there is no fully fledged model of catechesis displayed in the Scriptures, it is a time honoured practice throughout church history. Indeed Strickler comments, *'teaching, by the catechetical method, has marked the history of the church almost from the beginning to the present time'*.³ There are three particular periods of history when both the gospel and the practice of catechesis have flourished: 2nd -5th centuries, during the Reformation and amongst English Puritans. In the 2nd -5th centuries converts were given extensive instruction in preparation for baptism and first communion. Augustine recommended the memorisation of the ten commandments, the Lord's Prayer and Apostles Creed. The Reformation brought a revival of catechetical instruction all over Europe and the United Kingdom, aided by the printing press and contributing significantly to the spread and success of Reformation thinking. Numerous catechisms were written by many of the reformers.⁴ Of particular importance to the topic at hand was Calvin's establishment of catechism classes and specific publications for children including, Calvin's *Genevan Catechism* in 1537 and *The ABC or A Catechism for Young Children* in 1641.⁵ He wrote *'Believe me, Monsignor, the Church of God will never be preserved without catechesis'*. The Puritans particularly stressed the importance of

³ Givens Strickler, 'The Nature, Value and Specific Utility of the Catechisms', in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly*, (eds. Francis Beattie, Charles Hemphill and Henry Escott; Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1879), 117.

⁴ including but not limited to Martin Luther, Oecolampadius, Leo Jud, Wolfgang Capito, Martin Bucer, Pierre Viret, Jean Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, Olevianus and Ursinus, Thomas Cranmer, John Ponet, Alexander Nowell, John Craig,

⁵ Johnson, *Catechizing Our Children*, 11.

catechesis in the home, both for whole families and children. Thomas Watson warned, ‘*To preach and not to catechise is to build without foundation*’.⁶ In our time, there is an emerging interest in catechesis resulting in the New City Catechism for both adults and children released in 2012 and the emergence of advocates such as J.I. Packer, Gary Parrett, Kevin DeYoung and Tim Keller. The practice of the church throughout history is obviously not conclusive and yet, the words of Johnson on this issue resonate: ‘*Be very slow, very slow indeed, to ignore so great a cloud of witnesses*.’⁷

This section will discuss whether catechesis provides helpful content for teaching children. That is, is it valuable to systematically teach children doctrine? Some common objections are that catechesis is too propositional, too complex and an unnecessary addition to teaching the bible. On the other end of the spectrum, Abraham claims that the current generations of Christians, ‘*do not have the basic concepts needed to identify and speak of spiritual experience; when they arrive at seminary they are functionally illiterate doctrinally*’.⁸ This assessment is reinforced by the research of Christian Smith that American teens are ‘*incredibly inarticulate about their religious beliefs. At best the beliefs themselves are vague and at worst, they contradict Christian faith and have been instead labelled ‘Moral Therapeutic Deism*’.⁹ Into this context, it certainly seems valuable to teach children doctrine and to do so in a way which encourages them to articulate the truths themselves. To be sure, doctrine needs to be

⁶ Johnson, *Catechizing our Children*, 15.

⁷ *ibid*, 15.

⁸ William Abraham, ‘Catechesis and revitalization’, in *Interpretive Trends in Christian Revitalization in the Early Twenty-First Century* (ed. Steven O’Malley; Lexington: Emeth Press, 2011), 246.

⁹ S. Meade, *Give Them Truth: Teaching Eternal Truths to Young Minds*. (1st ed. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015), 28-29.

explained clearly and simply to children but there are numerous resources for doing so in age appropriate ways such as the Shorter Catechism for children.

Q. 1. Who made you?

A. God.

Q. 2. What else did God make?

A. God made all things.

Q. 3. Why did God make you and all things?

A. For his own glory.¹⁰

Certainly it is more important that a child know the Scriptures than a catechism, and yet ultimately, understanding the scriptures is for the purpose of knowing God which requires a level of integration. The argument that catechesis is too propositional fails to acknowledge that Christianity itself is propositional. Meade recognises that many of the objections to teaching children ‘facts’ and catechesis are premised on the problematic assumption that propositions are opposed to genuine faith and relationship with God.¹¹

Next, it is important to examine the method of catechesis, particularly the benefits and limitations of rote learning. Moreover, it is necessary to assess the extent to which catechesis is merely rote. Smelley outlines three limitations of rote learning.¹² Firstly, the content can have little effect on the life of the learner. In this instance rote learning is purely ‘recall or recitation’ without absorbing content meaningfully. Secondly, rote learning inhibits the ability of the learner to manipulate information and

¹⁰ ‘Catechism for Young Children: An Introduction to the Shorter Catechism’, Centre for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, last modified 2016, accessed 15 April 2016, http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/cat_for_young_children.html

¹¹ Meade, *Give Them Truth*.

¹² J. A. Smelley. ‘Rote Learning: A Revived Strategy for Religious Instruction’. *Christian Education Journal* 10/2. 3 (2013): 311

apply it to new situations. Thirdly rote learning is likely to be forgotten soon after it is recalled, especially if it is learned for a test. In contrast the most productive learning is ‘meaningful or active’ learning. This learning occurs when new knowledge is placed within the context of existing knowledge and applied to different situations by the learner. Unlike rote learning, meaningful learning produces both good retention and good transfer.

Despite these limitations, Smelley also provides two benefits of rote learning.¹³ Firstly, rote learning is the foundation of meaningful learning because meaningful learning always requires prior knowledge. Secondly and relatedly, rote learning builds a knowledge base. In other words, in Christian education it builds biblical categories in the minds and hearts of children that act as a foundation. The concepts that are rote learned can be built upon through the child’s life as they receive new insights from further teaching. On the basis of these benefits alone, Smelley and others declare rote learning indispensable.^{14 15} It has been suggested that the movement away from rote learning is a result of developmental educational theory being pushed too far, to the point that epistemology and child centred, authentic learning is valued more highly content.¹⁶

However even beyond this defense, catechesis need not be mere rote learning. While catechesis is not less than rote and memorisation, its supporters unanimously claim that it is more.¹⁷ The content of the questions and answers is designed to be taught

¹³ Smelley, 312.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 312.

¹⁵ D.M. McInerney, Dennis M and V. McInerney. *Educational Psychology: Constructing Learning*. (3rd ed. Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education, 2002) 93.

¹⁶ B. D, Espinoza, and B. Johnson-Miller. ‘Catechesis, Developmental Theory and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education’. *Christian Education Journal* 11/1. 3 (2014): 12.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Catechizing Our Children*, 69,

with explanation and a view to understanding, not just memorisation. This can be done by referring to the major underlying bible passages of each doctrine and by thinking about what the doctrine means for believers.¹⁸ Outside the confines of formal instruction, parents can apply parts of the catechism to ordinary situations or as they read through parts of the Scriptures. In this way, the knowledge of catechesis is not ‘dead weight’ but knowledge that is both rote learned and more fully understood, engaged with and applied.

The third broad area in which catechesis needs to be assessed is whether it is a relationally helpful tool for teaching children. Catechesis has historical, communal and interactive elements that will be addressed in turn. First, catechesis has the potential to ground children in the historical faith in much the same way as an historic creed, assuming the use of a historical catechism. It provides a point of connection between young Christians, older generations of Christians and historical Christianity. Secondly, catechesis has the potential to be a unifying and motivating communal experience if catechesis is incorporated into church life and encouraged in the home in a complementary way. For example, Johnson’s church dedicates every fourth year to teaching an age appropriate catechism in Sunday school. For that year, the adults are also instructed in the Shorter Catechism during the Sunday evening service.¹⁹ Thirdly and most importantly, catechesis brings parents and children together in an interactive dialogue and promotes asking questions and seeking explanations. It is valuable for children to actually articulate gospel truths for themselves, not just hear them. For

¹⁸ Meade, *Give them Truth*, 195.

¹⁹ Johnson, *Catechising our Children*, 69.

It appears that members of Johnsons church attend twice a day on Sunday and receive an exegetical sermon at the morning service

adults who have been converted later in life or who want to strengthen their own Christian foundations, it also teaches them and highlights areas of weakness or ignorance. In the words of Spurgeon:

*You do not thoroughly know any truth till you can put it before a child so that he can see it. In trying to make a little child understand the doctrine of the atonement you will get clearer views of it yourselves, and therefore I commend this holy exercise to you*²⁰

Relationally, catechesis provides opportunities for children to connect with the historical faith, with the church community and with their parents. In an Australian context where catechesis has fallen out of use, the first two benefits are largely null, but the third is still significant in creating a pattern of parents and children discussing doctrine.

It seems that many people reject catechesis quickly and staunchly on the basis that it is too boring, too hard, that it involves too much rigor and rote and that it produces head knowledge without producing faith. Each of these ‘defeater beliefs’ contains some truth and there is no doubt that catechesis can be done badly. If catechesis is used, these concerns ought to shape how it is used.

However, earnestly striving to teach children in line with the Scriptures, using the time honoured method of catechesis, in a meaningful, age appropriate and fun way appears possible and desirable. Moreover, it has the potential to bring parents and children into a helpful shared learning experience, anchored in the historical faith in a way which could lay solid doctrinal foundations and prepare children for a lifetime of learning and

²⁰ C. Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children: A Book for Parents and Teachers on the Christian Training of Children* (Pasadena: Pilgrim Publications), 73.

articulating the most excellent truth of the gospel. In a modern Australian context, I think catechesis could be used alongside bible reading, learning memory verses and other means to faithfully pass the gospel to children. I would expect this to happen within the context of the home with little input from the local church given the current absence of catechesis in church life.

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