

## Outline

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## CATECHISM INSTRUCTION

### Introduction

The Word of God speaks about children. It also speaks to children. This is because the Lord God has made His covenant with the believers and their children. In this way the Lord continues to gather His Church. He gives His promises to children no less than to adults. Because children do not know of their riches, they need to be taught. This instruction takes place at home, in school and in the church. This chapter deals with the official instruction of the youth of the church in the doctrine of salvation.

### 1. Scripture

The Bible teaches that children of believing parents belong to God's covenant and congregation. Under both the Old, as well as, the New Testament, the children fully belonged to the people of God.

Genesis 17:7

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you

Exodus 12:37

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.

Exodus 13:1

The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male."

Ps. 22:10

From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.

Ps. 71:6

From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.

Ps. 127:3

Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.

Ps. 144:12

Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace.

Ezekiel 16:20-21

"And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.

Mark 10:14, 16

When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Acts 2:39

The promise is to you and to your children ....

Acts 21:5

But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.

The Bible also teaches us that there is a need to instruct. This instruction applies to all members of the church, but especially the youth.

Hosea 4 : 6

my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children

Dt.6:7

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Eph. 6:4

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord

We receive the indirect information that this instruction indeed took place.

Luke 2:46

After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Rom. 2:18

if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;

Acts 18:25

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord

Gal.6:6

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

This instruction was meant to give practical insight also, as we can see in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 3:1-2

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity

The third element to be considered is that the church has to hand over the apostolic traditions to the next generation.

Deut. 31:12-13

Assemble the people--men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns--so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Ps. 71:17-18

Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.

Ps 78:4-7

We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

2 Thess 2:15

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

2 Tim 1:13-14

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

On the basis of the above we can draw several conclusions:

1. Our children are holy, that is, set apart by the Lord to serve Him. They have the promise of the covenant no less than adults. They have to learn how rich they are and what is required of them through instruction.
2. In teaching the youth of the church the Lord continues to gather, defend and preserve His church. This teaching is the task of the church, and thus under supervision of the overseers. The church of today (minister) hands over to the church of the future (youth) what we have received in the past (doctrine).
3. The youth of the covenant must be instructed in the fear of the Lord. The knowledge they gain must be used to serve God in His kingdom as prophets, priests and kings. This instruction must therefore address the way we live before God. For to know God is to love, obey and trust Him.

## 2. Confessions / Church Order / Forms

### 2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession speaks of teaching in connection with the Bible.

Art. 5

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.

Art. 7

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length.

## 2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism was written as a "textbook" for the instruction of the youth. It speaks about the call "to know" God and His promises. It also shows that children need to know this no less than adults.

- Q. 2 What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?  
 A. First, how great my sins and misery are;  
 second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;  
 third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.
- Q. 22 What, then, must a Christian believe?  
 A. All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.
- Q. 59. But what does it help you now that you believe all this?  
 A. In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting.
- Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?  
 Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.
- Q. 94. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?  
 Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honour Him with all my heart.

## 2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort speak about instruction in the context of conversion and that it pleases God to use means to bring this about.

### Chapter 3/4, Article 17 The Use Of Means

So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed. To God alone all glory, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, is due throughout eternity. Amen.

## 2.4. Church Order

The Church Order stipulates that the Minister has to instruct the children of the church. It also mentions the requirement that in order to come to the table one must make public profession of faith. Catechism instruction is the road that leads to the Table of the Lord.

### Art. 16 The office of Ministers of the Word

.... also to instruct the children of the church in the doctrine of salvation.

### Art. 61 Admission to the Lord's Supper

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life.

## 2.5. Forms

### Form for Baptism

Therefore, infants must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant; and as they grow up, their parents have the duty to instruct them in these things.

Third, do you promise as father and as mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?

**Form for the Public Profession of Faith**

We thank the Lord our God for the grace given us by adopting us to be His children. We acknowledge His love and His power by which He instills in His children the desire publicly to profess their faith in Him in the presence of His holy church, so that they may receive admission to the holy supper.

**Form for Ordination of Ministers**

He shall teach the Word of God to the youth of the church and to others whom God calls, for the Holy Scriptures are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Prayer # 6 A Prayer after the explanation of the Catechism****3. Purpose**

The purpose of catechism instruction is to instruct the youth of the church in the doctrine of salvation so that they may give an answer to their baptism and be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

This leads to several additional purposes:

- a new generation gains knowledge about the Lord, His Word and work;
- a new generation may serve God in their calling as Christians;
- to help the youth participate in the worship of God's Name.
- pastoral interaction between the minister and the youth of the church.

**4. Catechism teaching and preaching**

The catechism teaching and preaching are closely connected. Yet the two are not identical. The catechism lesson should not become a sermon, nor the catechism preaching a youth service. In catechism instruction the emphasis is on instruction and explanation. At the same time it should not become a course in Reformed doctrine either, for that would take the pastoral element away. The catechism sermon should be a lecture, but must remain proclamation of the gospel and the opening of the kingdom of heaven. Although it is true that the catechism sermon does have a more "teaching" element and is also more directed to the youth of the congregation than the sermon on a free text..

There is another connection between the catechism preaching and the catechism as well. The catechism instruction helps the youth of the church to understand the sermons, especially the catechism sermons. This can be noticed when the teaching and preaching deal with the same Lord's Day. The instruction helps the students understand these sermons, and applies what they have learned to their lives. This would mean that if the catechism preaching would disappear, the catechism teaching loses its context. Or, if in catechism class we focus on popular topics and leave out the catechism as textbook, the students will lose the connection with the sermons. This connection between preaching and teaching functions best when the minister himself teaches the classes.

**5. The Task of the Parents**

The instruction of the youth is primarily the task of the parents. This is clear from the texts in the Bible mentioned under point 1. At the same time the priests and prophets in Israel had a responsibility as well. Each, the parents and the office-bearer, has his own task, yet without ignoring the other. When this is done in harmony and obedience the youth will benefit. In the time of the Reformation this parental task was stressed once again. We know that in certain places, four times per year the elders would come to the homes to ask questions of the students as a means to ensure that the parents would fulfil their duty. At the same time the task of the official instruction by the church was not forgotten either. So also today, the fact that the office-bearers instruct the youth may not take away from the responsibility of the parents. As overseers we must see to it, not only that the parents support the work done in the catechism class, but also that they themselves are diligent in instructing and teaching their children the doctrine of salvation.

Parental support is crucial for a proper functioning of the catechism instruction. This support is shown by informing the minister when a student cannot attend, making sure that the students know their catechism and by willingness to deal with problems. In the past years the minister has brought the written exams home to the parents. This helps strengthen the bond between parents and minister.

## **6. The Catechism Class**

### **6.1. Curriculum**

The curriculum of the catechism instruction is determined by the goal of this instruction. The students are instructed in the doctrine of salvation as it is summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. This teaching will deal with understanding what the Catechism says and the implication of this doctrine for the daily lives of the students. The sacraments form the back drop to this instruction. The students have to learn to understand their baptism, be helped to use it, so that they may go to the Lord's Supper. The fact that the three parts of the Catechism coincide with the three points of self-examination emphasizes this even more. The teaching must pay clear attention to the promises and obligations of the covenant. The curriculum is the responsibility of the consistory. This is part of the supervision over the catechism instruction.

In light of the goals mentioned under point 3, the catechism instruction is also a means to teach the youth of the church to appreciate the doctrine of the church and the historical background of the confession. Our children may know that they are not the first ones to learn and say this. Church history is not taught in catechism currently. The reason for this is that this is done in the elementary as well as the highschool. Last, but certainly not least, the catechism instruction must pay attention to the lifestyle of God's children. The unity between confession and lifestyle has to come out in the teaching.

The curriculum is added to the section Mandates and Regulations.

### **6.2. Memorization**

Memorizing the Catechism is a helpful way to help the youth come to know the terms and expressions of the confession. True, there are terms and concepts that especially the younger students do not fully understand. (Although not only the younger students.) The minister has to explain them in his teaching according to their level of understanding. There are students who have a hard time or even cannot memorize. The instructor has to keep in mind the abilities of the students. In case a student does not know the memory work, the parents and if it persists the elders will be involved.

### **6.3. Attitude**

The students are taught respect for the Word, the confession, and the offices in the church. This has consequences for attitude, dress and behaviour in class. The dress and behavior has to reflect the importance of the instruction. The attitude of the youth is also partly determined by the way the minister approaches them. The minister has to keep in mind that these young people are sheep of the flock that he is called to shepherd.

### **6.4. Instructor**

In the Form for Ordination the minister is charged to teach the youth of the congregation. This does not mean that someone else cannot do it. Due to the number of classes or other obligations it may be necessary to have others teach. Though this is not wrong in itself, the minister has the first responsibility. Catechism Instruction is also pastoral work. The minister comes to know the youth of the church by this work.

### **6.5. Class**

There are many practical aspects to Catechism Instruction which depend on the amount of students, the facilities and the available time. A classroom should have a blackboard and proper desks or tables for the students. The recommended size of a class is 12-15 students. This number is manageable from a teaching point of view, and small enough to keep it personal. The time per class is from 45 - 55 minutes.

## **7. Profession of Faith**

Article 61 C.O. stipulates that the consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. When a student wants to make public profession of his faith, the consistory:

1. Visits these young members to speak about their motives.

The visit about the motives can be approached from different angles. The main point is that the elders can ascertain that the member wants to make profession for the right reasons, i.e. out of love for the Lord. It will be helpful to ask questions that go further than the simple yes and no answers. For further information see below.

2. Interviews them before the consistory about their knowledge of the Reformed faith.

The interview before the Consistory focusses more on the knowledge of the Reformed faith. The capabilities of the student will determine the depth of the questions. Admission to the Lord's Supper is not based on the knowledge of some facts, but on faith in the Lord. At the same time we may expect of members who have been blessed with a good understanding a certain amount of knowledge. The members must also be able to give account of the faith toward outsiders. This interview begins and closes with prayer. The instructor usually asks most of the questions, but the others also have opportunity to ask questions.

3. Announces the names of those who want to make profession of faith

This is done to involve the congregation. In the announcement prior to the public profession we give opportunity to bring in valid objections. This should not become a formality.

### **8. Visit with those who want to profess their faith**

It is the task of the elder to examine the motives of those who want to profess their faith. This is not to be taken lightly, since making profession of faith involves an oath. Members should not profess their faith out of custom, but out of a sincere love for the Lord. One possible approach to this visit is to take the Form for Public Profession of Faith and discuss the questions together, what they mean and what faithfulness to them involves. This visit by the elders should not stay at the "Yes" and "No" level, nor should it turn into a social conversation. The elders have to make sure that certain matters are discussed. The member who is interviewed must be given opportunity to speak. The elders must ask clear questions, and not answer these before the student can respond.

Here follows an outline of such questions. These are not to be used as a check list, but as helps for a fruitful discussion.

1. Begin with asking the question that is expected, "Why do you want to make profession of faith?" The student should be able to give a specific and personal answer. Use the answer to continue the discussion, while keeping in mind what are good motives and what are not.
  - Why do you want to make profession of faith?
  - When and how did you come to this conclusion?
  - How did you involve your parents in this?
  - If someone asked you, "Am I ready to make profession of faith?", how would you help that person? What makes a person ready to do this?
  - Does making profession of faith change your life? Explain.
  - Why is professing your faith done in public?
  
2. The Form for Public Profession of Faith is found between the Form for Baptism and the Form for Lord's Supper. This is a good stepping stone to talk about baptism and Lord's Supper. Does the person have an understanding of the promises given in baptism and do they function in his/her life? Is the person looking forward to celebrating the Lord's Supper?
  - What has making profession of faith to do with baptism?
  - What did the Lord promise you in your baptism?
  - How did the LORD show His love and power in your life?
  - We baptize infants, what does this tell you about your position before God?

How often do you apply and work with your baptism? In which situations? Consider that the Lord gave us the sacraments because He is mindful of our doubts and weaknesses. Why do you ask admission to the Lord's Table? Do you look forward to going to the Lord's Table?

3. To believe is to give the answer of faith. This is why the first promise which is made concerns the Word of God. It will be good not only to ask whether the person accepts the Bible as the Word of God but also to ask about the use of the Bible, personal Bible study. Connected to the Bible are the confessions. How does this young member regard the confessions? To say I accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God, has consequences for the future. The basic rule in the church is to be more obedient to God than to man. This is not always easy.
  - What do you confess concerning the Bible?
  - How do you use the Bible in your personal life?
  - What do you do in order to gain a better insight in the Bible?
  - What do you think is meant with the expression "the doctrine of the Word of God"?
  - How important are the confessions in your life?
  - You will promise to steadfastly continue in this doctrine, to reject all heresies and errors. What does this mean and how is this possible?
  - How important in your life is the preaching of the Word, and how does this reflect in your attendance and participation in the worship service?
  
4. The second question deals with the promises of God's covenant and baptism. We have already addressed this in point 1. It also mentions the first two parts of the catechism, the knowledge of sin and redemption in Christ? You can use the Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism as background for your discussion.
  - What is sin? How do you know you are sinful?
  - How sinful are we?
  - What does it mean to confess your sins?
  - How do you fight with a free and good conscience against sin?
  - Do you grieve over your sins? What does it mean to grieve?
  - How do you work with the confession that we are still inclined to all evil?
  - Why does the Bible show us our sin?
  - How are we redeemed? What is redemption?
  
5. This leads of course to the third part of the catechism, the thankfulness. Do you love the Lord. In the catechism the third part is used to explain the ten commandments and the Lord's prayer.
  - Do you love the Lord?
  - What does it mean to love Him?
  - What does it mean in your life to forsake the world and crucify your old nature?
  - In which way does your life show that you love the Lord?
  - Are others able to notice it on you?
  
6. The last question of the Form is not to be overlooked. You could say that the willingness to serve the Lord is now applied very concretely in being a member of the church. We receive salvation within the communion of the church. For the sake of our own salvation we must remain within his communion.
  - Why do you want to profess your faith in this church?
  - What is the church?
  - Why do you need the church?
  - How can you be a living member of the church?



In which way does this determine the way you use your money, establish your friendships, conduct your dating, and prepare your marriage plans?

You will promise that you will submit to the admonition and discipline of the church. What gives you the courage to make such a far reaching promise?

7. When you look at all these promises, it may indeed seem that this is impossible. Therefore do not forget the text at the end of the Form. The fifth chapter of the Canons are also very helpful in this regard. We cannot do it alone. The Spirit has to help us. But He has revealed that he works in us by the Word. Close the meeting with the riches of God's promises of which both baptism and Lord's Supper are a sign and seal.

### **9. Guidelines how to report on a visit to the catechism class**

As a rule, twice per season the elders come to visit the catechism classes. This shows the supervision of the consistory over the instruction of the youth. This is beneficial for minister as well as students. The elders must report on these visits at the next consistory meeting. The report deals with general information, the contents and format of teaching, the students' attitude, behaviour etc., and can include comments and suggestions.

#### **9.1. General information**

The elders should be able to report that the catechism instruction is progressing properly, ie. the minister is teaching the classes, the doctrine of salvation is taught, the attendance is good. These are matters that can be discussed with the minister before or after the class.

#### **9.2. Teaching/Teacher**

Does the contents of the teaching live up to the goals mentioned under point 4? To mention some elements that are of importance here (not every question applies to each lesson, but they may help in evaluating the classes as a whole):

- Is the catechism explained?
- Is the explanation clear and to the point?
- Is the Bible used to show the meaning of the confession?
- Is the confession applied to the lives of the students?
- Is there attention for the theme "our only comfort"?
- Is the level of instruction too high or too low?
- Are the students encouraged to think?
- Is the connection to other parts of the doctrine clear?
- Is the lesson in harmony with the Reformed Confession?

The format of the lesson must have the attention of the elders as well. Each teacher has his own way of teaching, but yet the overseers must see to it that the format serves the overall purpose. It can also be that in dealing with this problems come to light and can be addressed.

- Does the minister keep the attention of the students?
- Does he keep order?
- How does he use the time?
- Is he open for questions and reactions from the students?
- Does he respect the students?
- Does he stick to his lesson plan?
- Does he use old lesson plans, or make new ones?
- Is the presentation fitting with what is taught?
- Is there a good atmosphere in class?

### 9.3. Students

The students are an important component in the catechism instruction. They are the ones who must learn and benefit from this. During the time that a young member is in catechism class he or she goes through a crucial stage in his/her life, from children they become adults. This process of maturing brings with it its own struggles. During their years of catechism instruction the attitude of students can change, for the better or for the worse. Their involvement and participation will also vary because of this. Some of the elements the elders can pay attention to are:

- Do they know their catechism?
- Do they participate
  - in listening
  - in answering
  - in asking questions
  - in singing/ praying
- Do they show respect for the Word of God, the confession?
- Do they show respect for the minister?

### 9.4. Comments

In the end the report has to conclude whether the instruction is done properly yes or no. The report has to be more than, it was enjoyable, or it was a waste of time. It is true that the bottom line is whether the instruction is in accordance with the Word of God. But the elders can be of help as well when they also give their evaluation, or give suggestions. If there are areas of weakness or outright concerns they should be identified so that they can be addressed. Hopefully in this way the role of the elders gains on meaning and the catechism instruction is not the sole responsibility of the minister but done under the supervision of the church.

To help the reporting it would be good to use a Form that can be filled in and put in the archives. In this way there is a written proof and it becomes easier to follow up on suggestions. A Form for reporting is added to this chapter.

## 10. Other Classes

### 10.1 "Those whom God calls"

The Form for Ordination of Ministers lists as one of the duties of the Minister that he "shall teach the Word of God to the youth of the church and to others whom God calls, for the Holy Scriptures are able to instruct them for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." The Form makes special mention of those whom God calls. They are persons who want to be joined to the church. It is the task of the Minister to instruct these persons.

The Form gives the general rule. The way this is worked out depends in many ways on the situation. It makes a difference whether you are dealing with an older or younger person, whether you are dealing with someone who has never been raised with the Bible or someone who knows the Bible, whether they have been member of another church, or have never been a member of any church. It also makes a difference whether the person comes because of a relationship or simply because he/she wants to join. It is therefore difficult to indicate how long a person should be taught. It is not unreasonable to expect the instruction in the Catechism to last for two years and then an additional year to deal with the other confessions and prepare the person for profession of faith. This gives the person time to become acquainted with the doctrine of the church and the life of the congregation. This gives the overseers time to see whether the person is genuine in his or her desire. As a rule the instruction takes place by the minister, but at times it may be necessary to involve others. Often the initial instruction is done on a personal basis, though later on in the process the person, if possible, can be integrated in the regular classes. It is important that the elders ask and/or receive regular updates on the situation.

**10.2. Instruction of Handicapped**

Handicapped members belong to the congregation no less than all the others. There are many different handicaps. For some there will be no hindrance to take the regular catechism class, for others instruction may be difficult or superfluous. Some handicapped members can be part of the catechism class, even though they cannot do everything that the others are able to do, others will need special instruction. Each situation has to be evaluated on its own merit. The consistory must be aware that also the instruction of these members is under their supervision.

**11. Evaluation**

1. Are we in agreement with regard to: Scriptural data and Purpose?
2. Review the curriculum. Are there any matters that need our attention? If yes, how will we deal with them?
3. How is the contact between minister and parents?
4. How many students are there? How many classes?
5. Review the arrangements for the classroom. Are there any changes needed? How will we deal with them?
6. Do the elder visit regularly? Does the reporting function well?
7. Are there older young people who have not made public profession of their faith? What do we do for them?
8. If there are students who are challenged, how are they being taught? How does this work?
9. Are there "outsiders" who are being taught? How is this work progressing?

**12. Literature**

