



The Reformed method of Catechizing

It is often said that the Heidelberg Catechism is not adapted as a book of instruction to the wants of either teachers or pupils; that it is too difficult to learn and to teach. But when the objection is thoroughly sifted, there remains nothing for it to rest upon except the length of the answers to some of the questions in the Catechism, and to silence it altogether, let us look back three hundred years and consider the low grade of intelligence among the people, the length of the school term, limited to the winter months, the lack of compulsory education, the few branches taught, and the meager knowledge of the best teachers of the common schools, who lacked utterly in professional training.

In the country the teaching was done by the sextons and bell-ringers, who at the same time followed their trades, while schoolmistresses were provided for the girls. Yet these simple but earnest-minded people, under the guidance of their pastors and with the help of God, advanced the people's knowledge of the Scriptures to such an extent that after the Catechism had been in use fifty years, the Electoral Palatinate delegates to the Synod of Dort joyfully declared that among them the words of the prophet Joel had been fulfilled of late years:

"And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions."

(Joel 2:28)

Today, when systematic instruction is more general and of a higher order, and teachers are trained professionally, it should certainly be possible to attain the same success in the use of the Catechism. The multiplication of subjects in the public schools and the wider distribution of interest on the part of the pupils which it entails, is counterbalanced by the more regular attendance and the greater length of the school term. The religious instruction of the people by the use of the Heidelberg Catechism is greatly facilitated by the clearness and simplicity of the book, so that the contents of the answers need only to be unfolded and illustrated to the pupils. As early as 1585 an attempt was made to remove the difficulty occasioned by the length of some of the answers of the Catechism by the official publication at Heidelberg of a so-called "Smaller Heidelberg Catechism."

This summary was to serve also only as a preparation for the larger catechism. While on the one hand it was a simplification, yet it served to make the later instruction more difficult, because the abridgment of the summary made different forms of expression necessary, which confused the children when they came to learn the unabridged questions of the larger catechism. And after all, the two books were different, which was found to be a drawback in committing the answers, since the memory of children is local rather than logical.

The same end was sought to be gained by the Synod of Dort, in a resolution adopted at its 17th session (Nov. 30, 1618). The teachers were directed not only to drill their classes at least twice a week in memorizing, but were also to explain the fundamental doctrines of the catechism, dividing the pupils into three sections according to their age and capacity. In the first the chief articles (the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Institution of the Sacraments and the requirements of Church Discipline), together with a few short prayers, were to be learned and explained by the use of very brief questions relating to the three parts of the catechism; in the second the smaller catechism was to be used, and in the third section, composed of those advanced in years and in understanding, the larger Heidelberg Catechism was to be used. This resolution, however, was not carried out in the Netherlands. The "Kort Begrip" a brief summary of the catechism, was prepared later.

In the present century also a summary was attempted, in which thirty-six of the most important questions are given a place, without abridgment or division, covering the entire ground of the catechism, for use in the schools and in the instruction of catechumens. This plan would certainly be preferable to the other two, were it not for one serious consideration. The Reformed Church, unlike the Lutheran Church, has but one brief and simple confession of faith, viz., the Heidelberg Catechism, which can be placed into the hands of every church member, while the Lutheran Church has at least six, some of which are quite voluminous, and this plan would soon drive the catechism from the homes of the people and leave only the abridged form.

The simplest way is indicated already in the earlier editions of the catechism, in which eighty-one questions are marked with a *. In accordance with this arrangement the entire catechism was to be taught only in the four electoral colleges; in the ordinary schools only these eighty-one questions were to be used, while in the primary schools the explanation of twenty-two questions was considered sufficient. With this number and with this selection of questions agree in general the regulations for the common schools of Lippe, issued October 18, 1873, according to which eighty-two questions are to be taught and explained in the schools, while the doctrine of the sacraments and the other unmarked questions are reserved for the catechetical instruction preparatory to confirmation. Instruction in the catechism is begun in the middle grades of the schools, for which thirty-two questions are designated with ** and the remaining fifty, marked with a single * are added in the upper grades. These designations are retained in this commentary. The instruction in the catechism assigned to the schools is completed in the upper grades, from which children at the age of thirteen years enter upon instruction preparatory to confirmation, so that the schools work hand in hand with the Church.

Soon after the selection of these eighty-one questions, there appeared an admirable book of instruction upon the same, in which both the theoretical and the practical sides received proper treatment. The old Reformed method of catechization, with its gratifying results, was based upon this guide. According to it, *"the words of the text of the catechism, as well as some other subjects which might be obscure to the minds of the children, are to be first explained."* Then *"the contents of each question are to be vividly set forth in very few words, rendering the understanding of the entire question quite easy."* Then the answers are to be analyzed, their Scripture proofs cited, and both are to be explained. Finally *"the children are to be drilled in the catechism"* by the answers which they can frame out of the words of the catechism.

"When" says the conclusion, "teachers and school-mistresses diligently instruct the youth in the catechism, according to this method and under the guidance of their pastors, we may confidently expect that these will obtain a fair knowledge of the fundamental principles of the Christian religion to the joy of their own and of their parents' hearts.

This method of catechizing has been tried in several schools of this kind, and it was found to be easy, even after it had been in use only a short time. And they will discover further that by instructing their children in this way, they themselves will increase more and more in their knowledge of the Christian religion and in true piety ... May our faithful God pour out His holy Spirit, in accordance with His promise, in rich measure upon our children that they may truly know and honor Him, be able to overcome the evil one, and thus become heirs of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, in whom all God's promises are yea and amen. Amen.

The introductory directions cover fourteen pages; then follows the catechism; after which, in an appendix of fifty-two pages, illustrations of the method of procedure are given with individual questions.

According to this guide catechetical training is divided into two parts: "Instruction" and "Exercises". "Instruction" is provided for three grades. It is not to be denied that the method is somewhat mechanical; but it was the only guide accessible to the untrained catechists, and it was not only found necessary to repeat what was to be impressed upon the understanding, but a second part, called "Exercises" was found serviceable. By changing the form of the questions, the children were to be "drilled" to answer intelligently by using the words of the answers in the catechism. In this

way it was hoped to prevent merely mechanical work on the part of both teachers and pupils. By these "Exercises" on the one hand the children are to be brought to reflection, and their knowledge of the truth is to be made more clear and firm, while on the other hand the teachers will have the opportunity to gather from the answers what has been apprehended and what may need further explanation.

In these times there is a disposition to speak disparagingly of this method, which in its essentials has held its place as the mode of catechetical instruction in the schools to this day, as scholastic. But it must be acknowledged in the main as the correct system, not only because its success has proved it to be so, but also because it is adapted to the relation of the schools to catechetical instruction. The chief ends of the latter are to be secured by the minister when he prepares his catechumens for confirmation, and the work of the school is to be looked upon as preparatory to this work. The Heidelberg Catechism makes this work very easy, and, besides its systematic structure, it has a great advantage over Luther's Smaller Catechism in that the material of the instruction need not first be supplied by the teacher, but is furnished in rich measure and in systematic form by the answers of the catechism itself; and to give the children a clear understanding of it, that which they have already committed to memory needs only to be analyzed and explained.

On the other hand the child, after having committed so much to memory, has this advantage that it will not forget the explanations of the several doctrines so readily as when these are given orally, which must be done when the Lutheran Catechism is used. And lastly, this method not only makes the work easier for the schools, but affords a certain guarantee to the Church that nothing can easily be introduced into catechetical instruction that is contrary to the doctrines which are based upon the Word of God, and which are supported by proof texts of the same.

Advice on Catechizing

In the light of my experience, during forty-one years of service (1891) in church work and in schools, and as the result of my own catechetical efforts, and of my observations in visiting schools in which the teachers have adhered to the traditional system, I would recommend the following methods of procedure. This commentary furnishes the requisite material for this purpose.

1. Let the teacher himself read clearly and correctly the questions to be committed to memory at the time he assigns them, then let one or two of the children read them in the same way; and for the sake of making the memorizing easier, let the teacher explain special expressions or constructions which are unfamiliar to the children. This will require but little time if the teacher confines himself to the purpose for which he makes explanation.
2. When the questions are to be explained, let them first be recited, together with the proof texts, by a number of children. Let the teachers see to it that what has been committed to memory be neither drawled out nor declaimed, but that in a simple way only the principal words be emphasized. "Aufbeten" (to speak as one would a prayer) is the expression that was used by our forefathers and that is still in use in some localities. Then let the explanation take the following course:
 - a) When it is necessary, as is frequently the case, the answer is only the completion of the question of the catechist framed in such a way that the gist of the question of the catechism may be brought out in a brief answer.
 - b) The answer of the catechism is then separated into its parts, so that the children may be led to frame their answers to the questions addressed to them out of the text of the catechism.
 - c) Next, the parts of the answer of the catechism are to be explained in such a way that the teacher himself will introduce the new matter and will at the same time bring to the recollection of the children, by means of questions, what they have already learned. The teacher, however, needs to guard against falling into the habit of using merely dry

definitions, as was the case in the time of Dinter. The catechism was not prepared as a mere manual of memory exercises.

- d) In connection with each part, Scripture proofs pertaining to it are to be cited, and, if necessary, briefly explained (which has been kept in view throughout this commentary). These, however, are not intended to explain but to prove the different statements. According to the fundamental principle of our Church, reformed according to the Word of God, the purpose of these Scripture passages is to show how fully the doctrines of the catechism are in accord with the Scriptures.

When a familiar example from biblical history, or from life, or a proverb can be introduced naturally to illustrate a point, it is to be done to make the instruction more animated. It is not well, however, to expand illustrations in all their fulness and detail, as this would take too much time and would interrupt the continuity of the instruction itself. They ought to be restricted to the point in hand. It is a very undesirable method to have the text of the catechism rehearsed without analysis and to have it followed by a bare recital of the proof texts. Such a course indicates that the teacher lacks both in industry and skill.

3. In the last place, what has been explained is to be briefly reviewed. The same is to be done at the opening of the next lesson, in order to keep up the connection with what follows. For instruction in the catechism must not be, at least in the upper grades, disconnected, but systematic.

Catechetical instruction is to be given in the middle and upper grades of the school, while Bible history begins in the lower grade, and is continued in the other two grades together with the catechism. In the middle grade, when one teacher gives the instruction in the three grades by himself, he may attach the explanation of particular questions of the catechism to the study of different events in Bible history without assigning a separate hour to instruct in the catechism. In the upper grade most of the time set apart for religious instruction is devoted to the catechism. How far the work is to be carried and what particular principles of catechetical instruction are to be applied at different times, must be decided by the teacher himself in the light of his normal training, and must be learned in part by experience.

In the light of my own experience I can assure anyone who (1) prepares himself thoroughly for catechetical instruction, (2) follows the above method, (3) keeps within proper bounds, that he will be able, by the help of God, to advance the children entrusted to him in the knowledge of the catechism, according to their several gifts and capacities, as far as it is necessary and possible.

One thing more. Religious instruction in the schools is not only to open the understanding to an apprehension of the truth revealed in God's saving Word, as this is apprehended in the questions of the catechism, but also to secure its experience in the heart, Only what proceeds from the heart reaches the heart, and such believing Christian experience is presupposed in all the questions of the Heidelberg Catechism. One is properly prepared, therefore, only when that preparation is prayerfully made, and then the exercises of the catechism will also be edifying. The apostle James also gives good advice which is applicable to catechists (James 1:5):

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not and it shall be given him."

As it is within the province of the schools to teach the catechism in preparation for the church, so in turn it is the duty of the church and the home to cooperate with the schools. Only where these three factors work in hearty unanimity can the true end of religious instruction be attained. This was kept prominently in view when the Heidelberg Catechism was introduced, and accounts for the early reputation of the adherents of the Reformed faith, that both old and young were firmly established in the knowledge of saving truth, and though much persecuted, were willing and able to defend their faith. They provided for the furtherance and confirmation of their people in the knowledge of Christian truth by means of catechetical instruction in the schools, catechetical instruction and sermons on the catechism in the church, and by home training.

If the Heidelberg Catechism is ever to bring its richest blessings again into our Reformed congregations, and the ancient loyalty to Scripture is to regain its supremacy, the schools, the Church and the family must cooperate in every way possible and with the greatest earnestness to re-establish faithful catechetical instruction, and the Reformed method of catechizing must be revived.

Otto Thelemann

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