

Teaching, Learning, and Catechetical Instruction

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Moses, speaking for God, first reminds us of the unity of the divine essence—“The LORD our God is one LORD”—and then of God’s requirement that we love Him with an undivided heart (vv. 4-5). Given God’s nature, we shouldn’t have other gods, nor should we allow our love for Him to be diluted by other loves and commitments. We are to love God with our whole being. Then Moses says that these words are to be in our hearts and we are to teach them diligently to our children.

These words. Specific, set, God-inspired, infallible words. These have precedence over our summaries.

That I command thee. Words that are real communication from our Creator and demand faith and obedience.

This day. Words that God gave them at a particular time in a particular place and under particular circumstances.

Shall be in thine heart. These words must be in our own hearts before we may teach them effectively to others.

Thou shalt teach them diligently. God requires us to teach our children diligently; they will not learn by osmosis.

And shalt talk of them. We are also to talk about God’s words in all kinds of situations: they require application.

Thou shalt write them. We are to acknowledge God’s words in our thoughts, actions, homes, and civil communities.

Luke 2:41-51

The boy Jesus had already learned all He could from His godly parents and Nazareth’s rabbis. Now that He was 12 and at Jerusalem, He had the opportunity to sit at the feet of the best theologians in Israel. He took it. He sat in a teaching session where the doctors of the law would teach, ask questions of the hearers, and respond to those hearers’ questions on the topics at hand. Though Jesus assumed His parents would approve and understand, He entered into a direct relationship of student to teacher with the elders of Israel. He saw this as the next logical and proper step in His preparation for His work as Messiah. The doctors of the law were amazed at His understanding and answers.

Ephesians 4:1-16

Christ has given His Church apostles and prophets, who have recorded God’s word in holy Scripture, and evangelists, pastors, and teachers to communicate those words to the rest of Christ’s Body. The members of that Body are to pass that word back and forth, each according to his gifting and function, so that the Body can grow throughout history to be in fact a Body fit for Christ, its Head. But if this isn’t done in love, it will fall short of Christ’s intentions.

Notice, too, that God has placed human words in the Church. He has established a preaching ministry. The minister of the gospel summarizes and explains God’s words using his own. The pastor’s words are human and uninspired, yet he speaks with authority and divine approval. Like godly pastors, the creeds and confessions of the Church confront us with the word of God. A pastor, however, is one man. The creeds and confessions come from a great many godly men and have received the approbation of tens of thousands more. In other words, in the creeds and confessions we have hundreds of thousands of godly pastors and teachers declaring God’s words to us. Shall we ignore those men because they are human? or because they are dead? Should we not remember that the same Bible that speaks so clearly to us today has spoken just as clearly to the saints in the past? Remember that Paul calls the Church, “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Conclusion

While God’s inspired, infallible words are wholly adequate for His purposes, those purposes include human interaction around those words. God speaks His words to us; He wants us to speak them back and forth to one another so that all the diversity of our personality, our talents and gifts, our personal history and experience, can work together to unlock their richness. This is at least a history-long process: the Church will be doing this until Jesus returns. And for each of us, it is a life-long process. There will always be more divine truth to teach and learn out of the same finite Book.

Teaching God’s word is necessarily a personal act and an interpersonal process. It must be done in love. It can never properly be reduced to the formulaic or the mechanical. Parent and child, pastor and parishioner, teacher and student, must be able to discuss and converse as real human beings, each of whom bears God’s image in a distinctive way. Any instruction in Scripture fails when it becomes mere repetition of poorly understood words.

Some General Observations about the Catechism

1. Catechism (from the Greek word *catechesis*) is simply instruction in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith.
2. Catechisms take the form of a series of set questions and answers.
3. Catechisms are aimed at new Christians and covenant children.
4. Catechetical instruction was a matter of course in the early Church.
5. Catechetical instruction fell out of favor during the Middle Ages; the Reformation emphasis on sound doctrine restored it to the life of the Church. Protestant catechisms preceded Roman Catholic ones.
6. Traditional catechisms emphasize doctrinal content: they remind us that Scriptural truth can be put into words and rationally discussed. Catechisms are adverse to mysticism of whatever flavor.
7. The use of catechisms is consistent with covenant life, for it is a means of teaching baptized children the promises of the gospel so that those children may properly confess and confirm the faith as their own.
8. No catechism should ever replace the Bible in Christian instruction, and we should avoid giving the impression that one has.
9. The Heidelberg Catechism is not inspired, but it is an accurate summaries of the law and gospel and so useful to believers of any age or level of maturity.
10. The Catechism has received the approval of thousands of pastors and teachers over many generations because it is rooted in the word of God and faithfully teaches us its basic doctrines.
11. The Catechism helps us make sense of Scripture: it summarizes and organizes the basic doctrines of the faith so that we can get a better handle on them.
12. The Catechism is a safeguard against heresy and novel interpretations of Scripture: those who have mastered it will not easily fall for “every wind of doctrine” that blows through the church.
13. The Catechism can help fathers instruct their children in the faith.
14. The Catechism can help pastors and elders instruct covenant children in the faith.
15. The time that covenant children spend with their pastor receiving instruction in the catechism helps build an important relationship of love and trust.
16. The Christian who has committed the Catechism to memory will find that he has a wealth of definitions and phrases that will help him make sense of the doctrines of the faith and help him explain them more easily to others.
17. Instruction in the catechism does not by itself qualify the covenant child as a great theologian: it is a good beginning, but there is a great deal more to learn.
18. Catechetical instruction is a means of discipleship and relationship-building; it is not a works-based road to the Lord’s Supper.

See also: *Our Heidelberg Heritage* by Rev. Paul H. Treick @ <<http://www.rcus.org/heidelberg-heritage/>>