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What is Catechism?

Zacharias Ursinus





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Description: Zacharias Ursinus was one of the primary writers of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most important documents of Reformed churches across the world. As well as the Catechism itself, Ursinus authored commentary on the Catechism as well as various theological essays. In *What is Catechism?*, he defines the word “catechism,” prescribes the proper applications catechisms, and defends the importance of catechization generally. The theologian supports his claims with both Scripture and appeals to the history of the Church and its traditions. Ursinus provides modern readers with a succinct, fascinating look into the formation and reasoning behind Protestant catechisms.

Kathleen O’Bannon

CCEL Staff

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What is Catechism?

by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

Zacharias Ursinus was one of the primary authors of the Heidelberg catechism. This article is found at the beginning of his commentary on this Reformed catechism under the heading,

“Special prolegomena with reference to the catechism”.

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I. WHAT IS CATECHISATION?

The Greek words from which “catechism” is derived, according to their common signification, mean to sound, to resound, to instruct by word of mouth, and to repeat the sayings of another. More properly, however, *κατηχεω* means to teach the first principles and rudiments of some particular doctrine. As applied to the doctrine of the church and as understood when thus used, it means to teach the first principles of the Christian religion, in which sense it occurs in [Luke 1. 4](#), [Acts 18. 25](#), [Gal. 6. 6](#), etc. Hence, catechisation in its most general and comprehensive sense, means the first brief and elementary instruction which is given by word of mouth in relation to the rudiments of any particular doctrine; but, as used by the church, it signifies a system of instruction relating to the first principles of the Christian religion, designed for the ignorant and unlearned.

The system of catechising, therefore, includes a short, simple, and plain exposition and rehearsal of the Christian doctrine, deduced from the writings of the prophets and apostles, and arranged in the form of questions and answers, adapted to the capacity and comprehension of the ignorant and unlearned; or it is a brief summary of the doctrine of the prophets and apostles, communicated orally to such as are unlearned, which they again are required to repeat.

In the primitive church, those who learned the catechism were called Catechumens; by which it was meant that they were already in the church, and were instructed in the first principles of the Christian religion. There were two classes of these Catechumens. The first were those of adult age, who were converts to Christianity from the Jews and Gentiles, but were not as yet baptized. Persons of this description were first instructed in the catechism, after which they were baptized and admitted to the Lord’s Supper. Such a catechumen was Augustin after his conversion to Christianity from Manicheism, and wrote many books while he was a Catechumen, and before he was baptized by Ambrose. Ambrose was also a Catechumen of this sort when he was chosen Bishop, the urgent necessity of which arose from the peculiar state and condition of the church of Milan, upon which the Arians were making inroads. Under other and ordinary circumstances the apostle Paul forbids a novice or Catechumen to be chosen to the office of a Bishop. ([1 Tim. 3. 6.](#)) The *νεοφυτοι* spoken of by Paul, were those Catechumens who were not yet, or very lately had been baptized; for the Greek word, which in our translation is rendered a novice, according to its literal signification means a new plant; that is, a new hearer and disciple of the church. The other class of Catechumens included the small children of the church, or the children of Christian parents. These children, very soon after their birth were baptized, being regarded as members of the church, and after they had grown a little older they were instructed in the catechism, which having learned, they were confirmed by the laying on of hands and were dismissed from the class of Catechumens, and were then permitted, with those of riper years, to celeb-

rate the Lord's Supper. Those who are desirous of seeing more in regard to these Catechumens, are referred to the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, the tenth book, and latter part of the fourth chapter. Those who taught the catechism, or instructed these Catechumens, were called Catechists.

II. WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF CATECHISATION, AND HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN PRACTICED IN THE CHURCH?

The same thing may be said of the origin of catechisation which is said of the whole economy or service of the church, that it was instituted by God himself, and has always been practiced in the church. For, since from the very beginning of the world God has been the God, not only of those of adult age, but also of those of young and tender years, according to the covenant which he made with Abraham, saying, “ I will be a God unto thee and thy seed after thee; ” ([Gen. 17. 7.](#)) he has also ordained that both classes should be instructed in the doctrine of salvation according to their capacity; the adults by the public voice of the ministry, and the children by being catechised in the family and school. As it respects the institution designed for the instruction of adults, the case is clear and admits of no doubt.

Touching the catechisation of children in the Jewish church, the Old Testament abounds in many explicit commands. In the 12th and 13th chapters of Exodus, God commands the Jews to give particular instruction to their children and families in relation to the institution and benefits of the Passover. In the fourth chapter of the book of Deut., he enjoins it upon parents to repeat to their children the entire history of the law which he had given them. In the sixth chapter of the same book, he requires that the doctrine of the unity of God, and of perfect love to him should be inculcated and impressed upon the minds of their children; and in the eleventh he commands them to explain the Decalogue to their children. Hence, under the Old Testament dispensation, children were taught in the family by their parents, and in the schools by the teachers of religion, the principal things contained in the prophets, viz: such as respects God, the law, the promise of the gospel, the use of the sacraments, and sacrifices, which were types of the Messiah that was to come, and of the benefits which he was to purchase; for there can be no doubt but that the schools of the prophets Elijah, Elisha, etc., were established for this very purpose. It was also with this design that God delivered his law in the short and condensed form in which it is. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,” etc., “and thy neighbor as thyself.” So also as it respects the gospel; it was briefly comprehended in the promises, “The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head.” And in thy seed shall “all the nations be blessed.” They had, likewise, sacrifices, prayers, and other things which God required Abraham and his posterity to teach their children and families. Hence it is that this doctrine is presented in such a plain and simple form as to meet the capacity of children and such as are unlearned.

In the New Testament we are told that Christ laid his hands upon little children and blessed them, and commanded that they should be brought unto him. Hence he says, in [Mark 10. 14](#), “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.” That the catechisation of children was diligently attended to in the times of the apostles, is evident from the example of Timothy, of whom it is said that he

knew the holy Scriptures from infancy; and from what is said in the epistle to the Hebrews, where mention is made of some of the principal heads included in the catechism of the apostles, such as repentance from dead works, and of faith towards God, of the doctrine of baptism, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection from the dead, and of eternal judgment which the apostle terms milk for babes. These and similar points of doctrine were required from the Catechumens of adult age at the time of their baptism, and of children at the time of their confirmation by the laying on of hands. Hence, the apostle calls them the doctrine of baptism and laying on of hands. So likewise the Fathers wrote short summaries of doctrine, some fragments of which may still be seen in the Papal church. Eusebius writes of Origen, that he restored the custom of catechising in Alexandria, which had been suffered to grow out of use during the times of persecution. Socrates writes thus in relation to the system of catechising in the primitive church: "Our form of catechising," says he, "is in accordance with the mode which we have received from the Bishops who have preceded us, and according as we were taught when we laid the foundation of faith and were baptized, and according as we have learned from the Scriptures," etc. Pope Gregory caused images and idols to be placed in the churches, that they might serve as books for the laity and children. After this period the doctrine of the church, through the negligence of the bishops and the subtlety of the Romish priests, became gradually more and more corrupt, and the custom of catechising grew more and more into disuse, until at length it was changed into the ridiculous ceremony which to this day they call confirmation. So much concerning the origin and practice of catechisation in the church.

III. WHAT ARE THE PARTS OR PRINCIPAL HEADS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CATECHISM?

The chief and most important parts of the first principles of the doctrine of the church, as appears from the passage just quoted from the Epistle to the Hebrews, are repentance and faith in Christ, which we may regard as synonymous with the law and gospel. Hence, the catechism in its primary and most general sense, may be divided as the doctrine of the church, into the law and gospel. It does not differ from the doctrine of the church as it respects the subject and matter of which it treats, but only in the form and manner in which these things are presented, just as strong meat designed for adults, to which the doctrine of the church may be compared, does not differ in essence from the milk and meat prepared for children, to which the catechism is compared by Paul in the passage already referred to. These two parts are termed, by the great mass of men, the Decalogue and the Apostles' creed; because the Decalogue comprehends the substance of the law, and the Apostles' creed that of the gospel. Another distinction made by this same class of persons is that of the doctrine of faith and works, or the doctrine of those things which are to be believed and those which are to be done.

There are others who divide the catechism into these three parts; considering, in the first place, the doctrine respecting God, then the doctrine respecting his will, and lastly that respecting his works, which they distinguish as the works of creation, preservation, and redemption. But all these different parts are treated of either in the law or the gospel, or in both, so that this division may easily be reduced to the former.

There are others, again, who make the catechism consist of five different parts; the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Prayer; of which, the Decalogue was delivered immediately by God himself, whilst the other parts were delivered mediately, either through the manifestation of the Son of God in the flesh, as is true of the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Eucharist, or through the ministry of the apostles, as is true of the Apostles' Creed. But all these different parts may also be reduced to the two general heads noticed in the first division. The Decalogue contains the substance of the law, the Apostles' Creed that of the gospel; the sacraments are parts of the gospel, and may, therefore, be embraced in it as far as they are seals of the grace which it promises, but as far as they are testimonies of our obedience to God, they have the nature of sacrifices and pertain to the law, whilst prayer, in like manner, may be referred to the law, being a part of the worship of God.

The catechism of which we shall speak in these lectures consists of three parts. The first treats of the misery of man, the second of his deliverance from this misery, and the third of gratitude, which division does not, in reality, differ from the above, because all the parts which are there specified are embraced in these three general heads. The Decalogue belongs

III. What Are the Parts or Principal Heads of the Doctrine of Catechism

to the first part, in as far as it is the mirror through which we are brought to see ourselves, and thus led to a knowledge of our sins and misery, and to the third part in as far as it is the rule of true thankfulness and of a Christian life. The Apostles' Creed is embraced in the second part inasmuch as it unfolds the way of deliverance from sins. The sacraments, belonging to the doctrine of faith and being the seals that are attached thereto, belong in like manner to this second part of the catechism, which treats of deliverance from the misery of man. And prayer, being the chief part of spiritual worship and of thankfulness, may, with great propriety, be referred to the third general part.

IV. WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO INTRODUCE AND TEACH THE CATECHISM IN THE CHURCH?

This necessity may be urged,

1. Because it is the command of God: “Ye shall teach them to your children” etc. ([Deut. 11. 19.](#))

2. Because of the divine glory which demands that God be not only rightly known and worshipped by those of adult age, but also by children, according as it is said, “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength.” ([Ps. 8. 2.](#))

3. On account of our comfort and salvation; for without a true knowledge of God and his Son Jesus Christ, no one that has attained to years of discretion and understanding can be saved, or have any sure comfort that he is accepted in the sight of God. Hence it is said, “This is life eternal that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent,” And again, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” ([John 17. 3,](#) [Heb. 11. 6.](#)) And not only so, but no one believes on him of whom he knows nothing, or has not heard; for, “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” ([Rom. 10. 14, 17.](#)) It is necessary, therefore, for all those who will be saved, to lay hold of, and embrace the doctrine of Christ, which is the chief and fundamental doctrine of the gospel. But, in order that this may be done, there must be instructions imparted to this effect and of necessity, some brief and simple form of doctrine, suited and adapted to the young, and such as are unlearned.

4. For the preservation of society and the church. All past history proves that religion and the worship of God, the exercise and practice of piety, honesty, justice, and truth, are of the greatest importance to the well-being and perpetuation of the church and of the commonwealth. But it is in vain that we look for these things among barbarous nations, since they have never been known to produce the fruits of Piety and virtue. Hence, there is a necessity that we should be trained to the practice of these things from our earliest years; because the heart of man is depraved and evil from his youth; yea, such is the corruption of our nature, that unless we early commence the work of reformation and moral training, we too late apply a remedy when, through long delay, the evil principles and inclinations of the heart have become so strengthened and confirmed, as to bid defiance to the restraints we may then wish to impose upon them. If we are not correctly instructed in our childhood out of the sacred Scriptures concerning God and his will, and do not then commence the practice of piety, it is with great difficulty, if ever, we are drawn away from these errors which are, as it were, born in us, or which we have imbibed from, our youth, and that we are led to abandon the vices in which we have been brought up, and to which we have been accustomed. If, therefore, the church and state are to be preserved from degeneracy and final

destruction, it is of the utmost importance that this depravity of our nature should, in due time, be met with proper restraints, and be subdued.

5. There is a necessity that all persons should be made acquainted with the rule and standard according to which we are to judge and decide, in relation to the various opinions and dogmas of men, that we may not be led into error, and be seduced thereby, according to the commandment which is given in relation to this subject, "Beware of false prophets." "Prove all things." "Try the spirits whether they are of God." ([Matt. 7. 15](#), [1 Thess. 5. 21](#), [1 John 4. 1](#).) But the law and the Apostle's creed, which are the chief parts of the catechism, constitute the rule and standard according to which we are to judge of the opinions of men, from which we may see the great importance of a familiar acquaintance with them.

6. Those who have properly studied and learned the Catechism, are generally better prepared to understand and appreciate the sermons which they hear from time to time, inasmuch as they can easily refer and reduce those things which they hear out of the word of God, to the different heads of the catechism to which they appropriately belong, whilst, on the other hand, those who have not enjoyed this preparatory training, hear sermons for the most part, with but little profit to themselves.

7. The importance of catechisation may be urged in view of its peculiar adaptedness to those learners who are of weak and uncultivated minds, who require instruction in a short, plain, and perspicuous manner, as we have it in the catechism, and would not, on account of their youth and weakness of capacity, be able to understand it, if presented in a lengthy and more difficult form.

8. It is also necessary, for the purpose of distinguishing and separating the youths, and such as are unlearned, from schismatics and profane heathen, which can most effectually be done by a judicious course of catechetical instruction.

Lastly. A knowledge of the catechism is especially important for those who are to act as teachers, because they ought to have a more intimate acquaintance with the doctrine of the church than others, as well on account of their calling, that they may one day be able to instruct others, as on account of the many facilities which they have for obtaining a knowledge of this doctrine, which it becomes them diligently to improve, that they may, like Timothy, become well acquainted with the Holy Scriptures, and "be good ministers of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith, and of a good doctrine, whereunto they have attained." ([1. Tim. 4, 6.](#))

To these considerations, which clearly show the importance of catechisation, we may add many others of great weight, especially with the great mass of mankind, such as the arguments which may be drawn from the end of our creation, and from the prolongation and preservation of our lives from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood, etc. We might also speak of the excellency of the object of the doctrine of the catechism, which is the highest good, even God himself, and might show the effect of such a course of instruction,

which is a knowledge of this highest good, and a participation therein, which is something vastly more important and desirable than all the treasures of this world. This is that pearl of great price hidden in the field of the church, concerning which Christ speaks in [Matt. 13:44](#), and on account of which Christians in former times suffered martyrdom, with their little children. We may here refer to the example of Origen, of which we have an account in the sixth book and third chapter of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius. So the fourth book and sixteenth chapter of the history of Theodoret may be read to the same purpose. But if we are ignorant of the doctrine and glory of Christ, who from among us would be willing to suffer on their account? And how can it be otherwise but that we will be ignorant of these things, unless we are taught and instructed in them from our childhood? A neglect of the catechism is, therefore, one of the chief causes why there are so many at the present day tossed about by every wind of doctrine, and why so many fall from Christ to Anti-christ.

V. WHAT IS THE DESIGN OF THE CATECHISM, AND OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH?

The design of the doctrine of the catechism is our comfort and salvation. Our salvation consists in the enjoyment of the highest good. Our comfort comprises the assurance and confident expectation of the full and perfect enjoyment of this highest good, in the life to come, with a beginning and foretaste of it already, in this life. This highest good is that which makes all those truly blessed who are in the enjoyment of it, whilst those who have it not are miserable and wretched. What this only comfort is, to which it is the design of the catechism to lead us, will be explained in the first question, to which we now proceed, without making any further introductory remarks.

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