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THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED

**An introduction
to the basics of the
Christian faith**

An exposition of the Westney Catechism

Craig A. Carter

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1

Why do we need a catechism?

"In an age of secularism and relativism, the catechism is a symbol of radical discipleship."

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN NEED TO BELIEVE?

The universal church of Jesus Christ cannot be destroyed, but local churches can be, and have been, destroyed at various times in church history. The fact that a certain country was highly Christianized for a long period of time does not mean that the church in that country necessarily will last indefinitely. Any local church including ours is two or three generations away from extinction at any given moment in time.

We can see the truth of this statement in the history of the church. The great church father, Augustine of Hippo, was a bishop, theologian and apologist. He was the greatest Christian thinker of the fifth century and the most influential theologian during the next thousand years of Christendom. But he died in 430 A.D. with the barbarians literally at the gates of his city, and shortly after his death the city was conquered and the Christian church in North Africa was greatly weakened. Within 200 years

of Augustine's death, the North African church was destroyed by invading Muslim armies and, between A.D. 647 and 709, Christianity gradually died out in North Africa. From the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the early Middle Ages, however, Europe was gradually evangelized and Europe became the main stronghold of the Christian faith for a millennium. But today, Christianity is dying out in Europe, and the churches of Europe are in the minority with a decreasing amount of cultural influence. The centre of world Christianity has shifted to North America, yet Christianity is in retreat here too. The main areas of growth for the church during the twentieth century were sub-Saharan Africa and China. Individual, local churches rise and fall and never stand still; Christianity is always either advancing or declining. The church is either growing or declining.

The reasons why local and national churches decline and eventually become extinct are complex. But one thing we can say for sure is that one extremely important factor is a loss of a firm grasp of sound doctrine. This is why the apostle Paul is so insistent in his letters to Timothy and Titus that they make it a priority to teach sound doctrine. Paul writes to Timothy:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:1-2).

This is Timothy's top priority: teach sound doctrine so that the gospel can be passed on from one generation to the next. Later in the letter, Paul urges Timothy to preach and teach sound doctrine as a matter of urgency:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

Why is there such urgency about this task? Paul explains in the next two verses:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Paul writes to Titus specifically exhorting him to "teach what accords with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). In his last speech to the Ephesian elders

Paul warns them that after he is gone:

fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29–30).

The battle for sound doctrine in the church is a form of spiritual warfare in which the eternal destiny of souls is at stake. When a church dies, it is not merely the death of an institution. It means that people have turned away from Christ into damnation and hopelessness and others have lost the opportunity to hear the gospel and be saved. Paul is passionate about doctrine because he is passionate about precious human beings and their eternal destiny. But it is not just Paul who speaks this way; all the New Testament apostolic writers share the same concern.

Along the same lines, Jude writes:

I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

John shows a similar concern for sound doctrine in his first letter when he writes:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

He then goes on to give a doctrinal test to distinguish true from false teachers:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:2–3).

False doctrine is a mark of the antichrist. The wolves Paul spoke of are not just random predators—they are agents or tools of the antichrist, who is, himself, the tool of dark spiritual forces greater than he. The apostle Peter identifies the ultimate source of false doctrine when he warns his readers,

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Paul says to preach and teach. Jude says to contend earnestly. John says to

test the spirits. Peter urges us to resist the devil. Why do we need a catechism? It is a weapon in a spiritual battle the church is called to fight until the return of Christ. The issue is the salvation of souls, the thwarting of the evil powers and the survival of the church in the teeth of foes who would infiltrate, deceive and ultimately destroy her out of hatred for the God she worships and the gospel she declares before the watching world.

There is never any guarantee that the congregation will listen to the Word, but the preacher must preach no matter what. The preaching and teaching ministry of the church is fundamental to the spiritual health and life of the local church. This is why the ministry of *catechesis* is so important; it mobilizes Christians in support of a faithful pulpit ministry so that it is not just one soldier in the battle but the entire army. We must teach the faith to new members, the children of the church and to all who assemble week by week for the preaching of the gospel. Without sound doctrine, the church cannot stand when the winds of heresy and persecution blow against it. This is why John Calvin famously said that the church cannot survive without *catechesis*.¹

The stakes are high: Will the Christian church survive two more generations and hand on the gospel faithfully? This is the question all of us must be concerned with as we ponder the situation in the contemporary world. People today worry about a lot of things: ecological disaster, the spectre of nuclear war, the state of the economy, the threat of terrorism, the culture of death that is tightening its grip on the Western world, and so on. But whether the gospel survives is infinitely more important than all these issues combined, because it concerns the only hope for the world. Will the church preserve the gospel, preach the gospel and hand on the gospel to the next generation of believers? Or will the church distort the gospel, forget the gospel and let it disappear from human history?

Of course, we believe in the sovereignty of God and the inevitability of his promises. We know that the gospel will not disappear from the earth until the full number of the elect is gathered in from every tribe and nation. But we also know that the gospel has virtually disappeared from certain geographical areas of the world. What we should be concerned with is what will happen to the church in North America. We are responsible for our own culture and for our own church.

Will we pass on the faith to our children and to future generations or will we be the link in the chain that fails to hold? God's providence is mysterious, and we do not see the future as he does. All we can do is look around us at our times and try to understand them on the basis of what we know of the

¹ As quoted in J.I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 51.

history of the church and the teaching of Scripture. As we look at the church in North America today, the picture is troubling. Cultural trends like relativism, atheism and secularism are working against us. We are in a struggle for the souls of our children. It is time to begin to take our faith more seriously and to make sure that we are doing the job Christ entrusted to us as his church.

As parents, we want our children to grow up and embrace faith in Christ themselves. As pastors and deacons, we want the members of our church to be protected from heresy and firmly rooted in Christ. Part of the duty of pastors and parents is to teach those who have been entrusted to our care the basics of the faith. But what, exactly, does that entail? As church members, we want to ensure that our church does not go off the rails like so many churches today have done. We want to ensure that we continue to believe the biblical, orthodox faith.

What are the key beliefs of Christian orthodoxy? As Christians, we want to obey Jesus Christ who commanded the church to evangelize and to teach converts all he commanded. How do we know when we have taught them the basics of Christian faith adequately?

The question: "What do Christians need to believe?" is too broad. We need to break it down into three sub-questions:

1. What do you need to know in order to be *saved*?
2. What do you need to know in order to *serve* the Lord?
3. What do you need to know in order to *guard* the gospel?

The goal of this catechism is to go beyond the basics of what one needs to know in order to be saved. What one needs to believe in order to become a Christian is minimal:

1. We must believe that God exists and that he is a holy and just God whose wrath is directed against all sin.
2. We must believe that we are sinners who are separated from him and under his wrath because of our disobedience and rebellion.
3. We must believe that God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in order to pay the penalty for our sin.
4. Then we must repent of our sins, believe the gospel, and put our trust in Jesus Christ alone as our only hope of salvation, thus acknowledging him as our Lord and Saviour.

When a person knows the first three of these things and then repents, believes and trusts as described above, then he or she is saved. A child can grasp this much, although the profundity of these truths is too great for any

human being to comprehend fully even after a lifetime of study. Once a person does grasp these basics of the gospel, however, he or she needs to be instructed more fully in the Christian faith, baptized and enrolled as a member of a local church. Just as a newborn baby has passed a significant milestone by being born healthy and safe, newborn Christians need to eat, drink, exercise, sleep and grow up.

Birth is the end of the journey through the birth canal, but it is merely the beginning of the journey through life! For the rest of one's life, one needs to grow spiritually by constantly learning more about what it means to be a Christian. Bible study should be a regular part of every Christian's life on a permanent basis. The catechism is a foundation for a lifetime of Bible study. Every Christian should study and digest the teachings in it. We need to establish a baseline for our church so that we can assume that all members of our church understand and believe what the catechism covers. Many Christians will go much deeper, but hopefully none will fail to go this far.

Some of us will be called to go further in our studies. Many people in evangelical churches either have gone to a Bible college or seminary or are enrolled in one at this very moment. In his letters to Timothy, we see how the apostle Paul stressed with great urgency the importance of watching over the flock and guarding the gospel so it could be handed down intact from one generation to the next. Some of us will be called to be shepherds of the flock and guardians of the gospel like Timothy. Those individuals will need further education at a Bible college or seminary.

In our study of the catechism we are aiming at the middle range: *more* than what one needs to know in order to be a born-again Christian and *less* than what a person needs to know in order to be the senior pastor of a church. We are focused on what the ordinary church member needs to know in order to serve as a parent, a Sunday school teacher, a deacon or a Bible study group leader.

Some people might question why we need to call it a *catechism*. That word conjures up visions of the Roman Catholic Church for some people, and it doesn't sound very Baptist. But no denomination has a monopoly on biblical words. Non-Baptist churches practice baptism and non-Pentecostal churches emphasize the reality of Pentecost. The Christian Reformed churches are not the only reformed churches in the world; nor are they claiming to be the only Christians. Likewise, Roman Catholics are not the only ones who claim to be part of the catholic or universal church. So we should not shy away from using a biblical word to describe a church ministry just because other denominations use it. And, as we shall see, the Bible itself speaks of *catechesis*. But what, exactly, is a catechism? What is the nature of the problem such a tool helps to address? The best way to answer this question is to turn to Scripture.

I. CATECHESIS IN THE BIBLE

The word *katecheo* is used in the New Testament numerous times, and it means “teaching” or “instruction” in general. However, even in the New Testament itself, there is the beginning of a more specific usage in which this word becomes a technical term referring to the communication of basic Christian knowledge to new converts.²

For example, Luke writes to Theophilus that he has written a well-researched account of the life and works of Jesus “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (*katecho*)” (Luke 1:3–4). If Theophilus was a believer already, then the word *katecheo* here may refer to the formal instruction he received before baptism. As a Greek, Theophilus would not have had the biblical teaching that those brought up in a Jewish family would have had, so he would have been in need of *catechesis* prior to baptism. On the other hand, if Theophilus was not yet a believer, or not yet baptized, then Luke’s Gospel could be regarded as an elaboration on the basic instruction given to a seeker or candidate for baptism. The Gospel of Luke is not a work of apologetics, but of instruction, and may have been written originally for the purpose of being used in *catechesis* or for taking new Christians beyond the basics of *catechesis*.

Paul writes, “the one who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches” (Galatians 6:6). If we simply keep the Greek words in the English translation we could translate this as: “The *catechumen* must share all good things with the *catechist*.”

The *catechumen* is the one being taught. The *catechist* is the instructor. The *catechesis* is the process of teaching new converts and preparing them for baptism. The *catechism* is the written summary of the faith in question and answer format that is used in this process of teaching. All four forms of this word are transliterations of the Greek words used in the New Testament.

Soon after the close of the New Testament canon, the office of “catechist” became a widespread fixture in the early church. As the church moved out of the Jewish milieu and into the pagan, Greco-Roman world, it began to evangelize people with no knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and no understanding of basic theological concepts such as creation and sin. Baptizing such people without a period of basic instruction in the Christian faith seemed irresponsible, so *catechesis* in preparation for baptism became an essential part of the church’s ministry.

But the basic idea of *catechesis* is found already in the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy we read:

² Packer & Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 38.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

This is known as the *Shema*, the creed of Israel: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This is a basic affirmation of the uniqueness of God. There is only one true God, and he demands Israel’s full loyalty and devotion. Therefore, verse 5 continues: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” In verses 6–9 we find that God commands the Israelites to teach these words diligently to their children. By the way, the *Shema* is found in chapter 6 of Deuteronomy, which follows the second listing of the Ten Commandments, which we see in chapter 5.

The book of Deuteronomy is set on the plains of Moab and consists of Moses giving his last exhortations to the people of Israel just before they enter the Promised Land under Joshua. Moses gives the Ten Commandments a second time after the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and then, in chapter six, he stresses the importance of keeping these commands in the pagan environment of Canaan. He tells Israel that they will have long life and blessing in the land providing that they put God first, remember his words and obey his commands. Otherwise they will experience God’s wrath and ultimately disaster.

Passing on the basics of the faith from one generation to the next is the most important thing we have to do as the people of God. This is true in the Old Testament and also in the New Testament, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter. Now we need to take a quick glance at the importance of *catechesis* in church history.

II. CATECHESIS IN CHURCH HISTORY

As the gospel moved from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, it moved from a Jewish context shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures to a pagan context in which religious confusion reigned and numerous mutually contradictory religions and philosophies competed with each other for the attention of people in the late Roman empire. The sheer number of pagan gods was overwhelming. Eastern religious sects were making inroads

into the Western empire. Philosophers who rejected all popular religion and embraced a kind of monotheism were not uncommon.

The exalted ethical monotheism of the Jews proved to be attractive to many non-Jews as the beliefs of Jewish communities in cities around the Mediterranean basin became known. Although the Jews were a thorn in the side of the Roman emperors because of their obstinate refusal to participate in the pagan, polytheistic civil religion of the empire, many Romans nevertheless thought the Jewish religion was vastly superior to the crude paganism of Greco-Roman culture and the fantastic cults being imported from the East. For this reason, each Jewish synagogue had a circle of Gentile “God fearers” who gathered around the synagogue. These people accepted the biblical teaching that there is only one true God and the basic morality of the Ten Commandments as God’s will for humanity. But they did not go all the way and convert to Judaism by accepting circumcision and the obligation to keep the entire Law of Moses.

The nucleus of many of the churches Paul founded on his missionary journeys came from the ranks of these God-fearing Gentiles. But soon these churches were engaged in outreach to complete pagans who lacked even the basics of monotheism and the moral law of God. They came from polytheistic backgrounds in which religion and ethical behaviour were completely unrelated. It soon became apparent that *catechesis* was no luxury in such a situation if the church wanted to avoid being paganized by converts who would bring paganism into the church. By the second century, we find that one of the main tasks of bishops and elders was *catechesis*.

The exact wording of the Apostles’ Creed was finalized around the seventh century, but the basic creed in various local versions with minor variations goes back to the second century.³ Thus, from very early in church history a version of the Apostles’ Creed has been used in the preparation of candidates for baptism. In many instances, the person being baptized would have quoted the creed from memory as a confession of faith prior to baptism. The weeks leading up to baptism, which often took place at Easter, were spent preparing the candidates for baptism by teaching the creed. The importance of this task is seen in the fact that the chief pastor or bishop of a city or area often did the teaching personally.

During the early Middle Ages, the emphasis on catechism declined along with literacy and general educational standards. But by the high Middle Ages, when universities were founded, we see a great leap forward in education. This period saw the founding of the great teaching order, the Dominicans. The most famous Dominican of the medieval period was

³ John H. Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1973), 22–24.

Thomas Aquinas, and a major part of his ministry was preparing friars to preach and teach the Bible to people and to engage in evangelism and apologetics. But the *catechesis* of the general church-going population was still at low ebb when the Reformation began in the sixteenth century.

All the Protestant Reformers strongly emphasized *catechesis*. John Calvin said: "Believe me...the Church of God will never be preserved without *catechesis*."⁴ Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer and many other Reformers even wrote catechisms for their own churches, some of which are still in use today. Wherever the Reformation spread, grammar schools to teach everyone to read were started; one of the primary motives for the emphasis on universal literacy and education was to enable everyone to read the Bible personally.

When the English Particular Baptists emerged out of the Church of England during the Puritan era in the seventeenth century, they also took *catechesis* seriously. The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 was a major statement of the Reformation in England, and it was produced along with a Larger and Shorter Catechism for use in teaching the faith to congregations. Baptists produced the First London Confessions in 1644 (second edition in 1646) in order to show that they were not Anabaptists and, in fact, shared most of the theology of the Westminster Confession. The only major differences were the articles on baptism and church government. A Second London Confession was drawn up in 1677 and then ratified by over 100 Baptist congregations in 1689, in continuation of the Reformed Baptist tradition. An English Baptist minister named Benjamin Keach was involved in drawing up a catechism that is today known as Keach's Catechism, to go with the Second London Confession.

Reformed Baptists in both England and America continued to uphold the theology of the London Confessions and to utilize catechisms in their ministry. For example, in 1753, the Philadelphia Association adopted the Second London Confession and Keach's Catechism for their own use.⁵ In 1855 a young Charles Spurgeon edited a version of Keach's Catechism for the use of his congregation, the New Park Street Chapel. The most famous Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century wrote in the introduction:

I am persuaded that the use of a good Catechism in all our families will be a great safeguard against the increasing errors of the times, and therefore I have compiled this little manual from the Westminster

⁴ As quoted in Packer & Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 51.

⁵ See the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith being the London Confession of Faith Adopted in 1742 by The Baptist Association with Scripture References and Keach's Catechism* (Sterling: G.A.M. Publications, 1981).

Assembly's and Baptist Catechisms, for the use of my own church and congregation. Those who use it in their families or classes must labour to explain the sense; but the words should be carefully learned by heart, for they will be understood better as years pass. May the Lord bless my dear friends and their families evermore."⁶

Throughout the first three centuries of Baptist life and witness, the catechism was an essential tool of Christian education. Regrettably, however, the twentieth century witnessed a drastic decline in the use of the catechism due to a number of historical factors, none of which were beneficial to the church. We need to revive this early church, Protestant Reformation and Baptist tool for inculcating a sound faith in our people.

III. CATECHESIS TODAY

Our age is marked by a decline in doctrinal preaching, Bible study and general Christian knowledge. The cultural environment of North America is growing more hostile to biblical Christianity with every passing year. Only a few years ago, many public schools educated children according to the morality of the Ten Commandments. Saying the Lord's Prayer in school was common, and Bible reading was not uncommon. Today, public school children are indoctrinated in the acceptability of sexual pleasure as a morally neutral, recreational activity. Christianity has been banished from the schools and the world of entertainment, with the result that the only way children will learn about God, the Bible and Christianity is from their families and in church. The change in just a few generations has been fundamental and far-reaching, and the church has been slow to react appropriately.

We increasingly live in a social environment more like that of the early church or the Reformation than like the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This means that we must take the task of educating children and adults more seriously than ever before. One way we can do this is to revive the ministry of *catechesis*.

John Calvin's statement that the Christian church could not survive without *catechesis* is a strong claim, but not one that can easily be refuted. In a situation such as the one we face, it becomes more obvious with each passing year that his view is the sober truth. A Baptist church is always two or three generations away from extinction. If there is not frequent revival and frequent evidence of the Holy Spirit regenerating individuals in the

⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *A Catechism with Proofs* (Chapel Library, 2603 West Wright Sreet, Pensacola, FL 32505).

church, then the church will decline and die. And, if new Christians are not properly instructed in the faith, they will not become mature, contributing members, able to pass on the faith effectively to the next generation. *Catechesis* is not a luxury or an option but a necessity for the church today.

CONCLUSION: A SURVIVAL PLAN FOR THE CHURCH IN A HOSTILE CULTURE

In such an environment as ours, we need three things:

1. Clarity

First, we need clarity about what we believe. We need to know what we believe, why we believe and how what we believe affects the way we ought to live. We cannot rely on Hollywood or public schools or general culture reflected in peer pressure to shape the beliefs and morals of our people. If we do, our people will become pagans. We need more than vague platitudes and clichés; we need a clear moral vision based on clear doctrinal beliefs. We need to know how what we believe differs from what the world around us believes and how to defend our convictions. Clarity is indispensable if we want to be faithful and pass on our faith to the next generation.

2. Catechesis

Second, if we are to have clarity, it will only come through knowledge that is clear and concise. We need to take the task of catechizing our children, new converts and those who seek membership in our church about the basics of the faith. We cannot assume that adults entering into our fellowship know the Bible or even basic doctrine. Sometimes we find new members who have been well taught, and we are glad when that is the case. But it would be foolish to presume it in all cases. When we baptize someone, we should make sure the candidate knows the basics of the faith first. And we need to follow the spirit of the commands in Deuteronomy 6 and teach our children constantly, clearly and with personal conviction.

3. Courage

Third, we need to have deep, personal convictions about what we believe. The time of testing is coming, in which those who are real Christians will be separated from those who are unwilling to suffer for the faith. Courage comes from clarity and *catechesis*; this is why we are introducing this teaching tool at this time. May God grant us the courage to believe, the courage to stand and the courage to continue in the gospel.

To believe in truth in a relativistic age is a political act that is deeply offensive to the powers that be. To speak the truth in such an age is an act

of radical discipleship that brings persecution from worldly powers. To teach the truth to our children is an act of faith in a world that wants to wrest our children from us and rob them of faith in the gospel. To embrace a catechism is in itself an assertion that there is such a thing as truth, it can be summarized in words, and we are ready to let our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no.” In other words, we are ready to submit to the truth of the gospel and take our stand on it.

To some people, teaching and learning a catechism sounds boring and old fashioned. But to those who are on fire with the truth of God, it is like a long cold drink of water to a man in the desert and like a seven-course meal to the one who has not eaten in days. Loving doctrinal truth is one of the ways we love the One who said he was “the Truth.” It is an act of radical discipleship.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you sense a growing gap between what you believe as a Christian and what the society around you believes? Can you give an example?
2. After the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, they did not keep the law and eventually were sent by God into exile in Babylon. What role do you think their failure to do *catechesis* played in this decline into judgement? Can you think of a biblical example where the lack of doctrinal knowledge hurt the people of God in the period when they were in the land?
3. What do you think would have happened if the early church had not catechized new Gentile converts? Is there any danger of similar things happening to us today?
4. Did you know that for most of Baptist history, Baptist churches used catechisms? Why do you think that practice declined in the twentieth century?
5. The author speaks of doing *catechesis* as an act of “radical discipleship.” What do you think this means?