

Catechize!



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From the Editor

What sounds in our ears shapes our souls. This is why, amidst the variety of sounds in our lives—many of which are dissonant—we need catechism. The essential truth of God’s Word sounded in our ears is a tool to shape authentic Christian lives. Church officers should already be convinced of this, since we have each taken vows to uphold and promote the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. So Tom Tyson’s article, “A Dozen Reasons Why Catechizing Is Important,” is meant to help us convince our congregants of the necessity of catechizing.

Everett Henes continues on this theme with his review of Donald Van Dyken’s *Rediscovering Catechism*.

It was G.I. Williamson who helped me, as a young Christian, not rediscover, but discover the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Tom Tyson provided the stick-figure illustrations. Both men have been pioneers in rediscovering the treasure and blessing of catechizing in our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. The number of articles dealing with confessions and catechisms (listed below in “from the Archives”), published since the inception of *Ordained Servant*, under Williamson’s capable leadership, demonstrates the importance these documents in the life of our church. We owe these men a debt of gratitude.

Over the several decades since I was ordained, I have watched that rediscovery unfold as our church has incorporated catechizing into our Great Commission Publications Sunday school curricula and published its first complete volume of the Confession and Catechisms with revised proof texts (*The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 2005).

Jim Cassidy’s review of *Grounded in the Gospel* by J.I. Packer and Gary Parrett uncovers rich historical material, but disappointing suggestions for catechetical innovations. But the best recent development in this rediscovery of our confessional tradition is found in the scholarly work of Chad Van Dixhoorn. His ground-breaking five-volume *Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1653* (Oxford, 2012) laid the foundation for his *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Bob Letham comments on the general usefulness of this volume in the life and ministry of the church: “As Carl Trueman states, it should be read and used by all elders, by Sunday school teachers, and church members.”

Shane Lems reviews Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, and suggests that the book will

be a great help to preachers in applying God's Word.

Finally, a poetic attempt by your editor, to describe the value of catechizing as an antidote to the world's dissonant sounds.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Education

A Dozen Reasons Why Catechizing Is Important

by Thomas E. Tyson

What is catechizing? Simply put, it is systematically presenting Bible truth in a form that can be memorized, understood and embraced, so that the covenant member knows what he or she believes and acts on it. It may be done by parents at home, by the church (in Sunday school classes, catechism classes, and via sermons), or by the Christian school or the home school. The word “catechizing” comes from the Greek verb *κατηχέω* (*katēcheo*), which means “to sound down,” or “to speak with the objective of getting something back in an echo.” So, I am not speaking here of one more Sunday school “doing and seeing” exercise, but rather of the question and answer method, with the employment of creeds and catechisms, and with what we hear God in the Bible chronicling and commanding.

The purpose of this exercise, then, is to underline God’s command that both Christian parents and the church together catechize covenant children both to understand and to embrace the gospel. To accomplish this I intend to identify twelve reasons why catechizing is important.

1. Being a Command of God, It Is Not Optional

The scriptural mandate for catechizing is clear: to Moses, representing the whole of Israel, God said, “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” (Deut. 6:6–7). It is clearly the parents of Israel who are addressed with this command, and in what words are these children commanded to be catechized? In “all the great work of the LORD that he did” (Deut. 11:7, which work is summarized in vv. 2–6). That work is termed *historia salutis*—history of salvation. And how is this Old Testament church to respond? Just to “hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God” (Deut. 31:12–13). That obedient service is termed *ordo salutis*—order of salvation. Catechizing, then, takes into its compass *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, both what God has done to deliver his people out of the estate of sin and misery and what he commands of them by way of fearing him and doing what he commands.

The people of Israel (the Old Testament church) were catechized by Ezra the priest and the Levites (ruling elders?): Nehemiah 8:8 tells us, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

The Lord Jesus Christ, incarnate Son of God notwithstanding, as a son of Israel submitted to his own *bar mitzvah* (catechesis), as recorded in Luke 2:41–52, and as a result “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”

In the Great Commission, as it has been termed, *teaching* appears to be the climax of the command: “discipling,” yes; “baptizing,” yes; but especially “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Consequently, catechizing seems to be anything but an afterthought in the church’s “marching orders.”

2. God Has Saved for Himself a Family, Not a Collection of Individuals

Of Abraham, the “father of the faithful,” God said “for I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him (Gen. 18:19). The “way of the LORD” [דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה *derek yahweh*] is two-fold, involving: (1) divine accomplishment, “shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do” (v. 17), and (2) human response, “keep the way of the Lord.” Thus the election of “some to everlasting life” (WSC 20) in the covenant of grace involves the election of Abraham *and* his seed. We understand, therefore, what the task of catechizing was that the LORD laid upon Abraham. And furthermore, that it is a task that has never been abrogated in the New Testament church. Abraham’s was a task not merely to provide a model for the world of adherence to the worship of Yahweh, with the hope that disparate individuals might, here and there, be snatched hopefully from hell. His was also a task to build, maintain, and indeed enlarge a covenant family which would exist to the praise and glory of the God of grace. And that covenant family would never disappear from the face of the earth, but would continue through its generations until the end of the age. That is what we have likewise in the New Testament church, and it forms the foundation for the instruction of the succeeding generations of the family of God’s gracious covenant. It is also why parents and the Christian church today find catechizing important.

3. Covenant Children Are Members of the Church

This is really a corollary of the preceding reason, as we shall see.

If God had determined to save a collection of disparate individuals, willy-nilly, then we would expect that members of the Christian church would consist of all those individuals who express faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As far as their children would be concerned, they would be seen as potential members, and would indeed become such if they happen to choose to believe in Jesus when they grow up. Meanwhile, while they are still children, and make no profession of faith in Christ, they would not be considered church members. Consequently, the church would seek to *evangelize* them, but that would be a far cry from understanding that it is to *catechize* them.

But the truth of the matter is that (as we have already seen above), God has saved for himself a family, not a collection of individuals who are the proper *members* of the church. That family includes the young children of the church’s members, and those children are themselves members as well. Otherwise, God would not have dealt with his people in Old Testament times as he did (again, as I have said above). Now, there is mystery here, to be sure, because it would seem that only those who have faith in Christ should be termed “church members.” And, we do not have an absolute promise in Scripture that every covenant child is, in truth, elect. But we are not here dealing with the

secret counsel of God's will, which we cannot fathom. What we are dealing with is his word of command, which is abundantly clear. And that word commanded the circumcision of Israel's male offspring, thus identifying them from their earliest age as members of the covenant family of Yahweh. Likewise, the New Testament indicates that the infant seed of the church were, and indeed ought to be, baptized.¹ As baptized, therefore, these children are indeed identified as church members. And as church members they deserve to be catechized. We say more: indeed, they *must* be catechized.

4. Catechizing Is the Responsibility of Both Parents and the Church

Biblically it is primarily the family's duty to train the children, and that by the head of the house, the father, chiefly. However, the church, especially on a local level, has a responsibility to assist, augment, and strengthen the impact of the training received in the home. It is the family's responsibility to educate its children in all things of life (arithmetic, geography, biology, etc.) as well as the "way of the LORD"—his precepts, his ethics, his history, and his Word. However, the church and her officers still have a responsibility to educate children from the pulpit and through other means. The church and the family should not allow a false dichotomy to be wedged between them. Rather, they supplement each other in a unique way, a spiritual way. A father should indicate to his children the significance of the church's catechetical instruction, and likewise the church should support the family's role. These two institutions, church and family, should not oppose each other, but instead assist each other like two pillars that hold up the ceiling of truth. Thus, we might inquire: is the father more culpable than the church, when failure occurs in catechizing? I think we have to say: it's a toss-up!

5. Parents Vowed to Catechize their Baptized Children

At least Orthodox Presbyterian parents did! They did it when they responded affirmatively to this question: "Do you promise to teach diligently to [name of child] the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?"²

Howsoever faithful and diligent their local church might be, in fulfillment of *its* responsibility to teach the child, the parents cannot escape *theirs*! And, I remind the reader of this: it was a sacred *vow*. Not an indication of one's propensity, wish, or even human promise. It is a vow. In Ecclesiastes 5:4, the preacher warns: "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow." Thus, violating a vow through either negligence, disregard, or even substitution, is a serious matter indeed. It is sin; and, if committed, can be confessed, repented of, and indeed forgiven by God. But that correction, though gracious to the highest degree, does not erase the fact that such a sin, though removed by the blood of Christ, may indeed still have consequences, especially in the life of the child who was not faithfully catechized.

6. Christianity Is to Be Embraced, Not Inherited

¹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 1952), 51–71.

² *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, III.B.1.b.(5),(2) (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 2011), 145.

I say this in order to preclude anyone's thinking that the above mention of God's saving a family, and the inclusion of covenant children as members of that family, mean that such children are automatically regenerated and saved. Such might *seem* to be the case to some, but it isn't! Yes, perhaps strict logic might be seen to demand it, but the Scripture will not allow it. John 3:16 is still there, and it is crystal clear: "Whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Once more, we are faced here with mystery.

But that is precisely why catechizing is so important! Both are true: our covenant children are God's, and they belong to his church; but because that is so, it is all the more vital that those children be instructed in his truth, to the end that they embrace and own that truth individually, and for themselves, by the working of the Holy Spirit, in and through the Word of God. It simply will not do for Christian parents to sit back inactively, with regard to the religious instruction of their children, operating under the foolish and ungrounded hope that their children's baptism and church membership will undoubtedly save them.

7. Knowledge Is Foundational to True Religion

For covenant children to embrace and own God's truth they are going to have to *know* it, in the first place. Thus catechizing is, first of all, instruction in the Bible, God's Word. Here these children learn who God is, and what he requires of them, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man" (WSC 3). Without that revealed knowledge, they will grow up ignorant of God's truth, the foundation of the entirety of their innermost thoughts and outward actions. As such, having not attended to God's revelation, they become, as adults, misguided religionists. They fall into well-intentioned preoccupation with philosophy and ethics but, lacking the foundation of God's Word, fail to draw correct conclusions regarding behavior. They may know *of* the Bible, but they do not *know* it.

This was Adam's sin. He heard of God's command, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17, cf. 3:3); but he lacked true knowledge of it. For if he *knew* it truly, he would immediately and summarily have rejected the serpent's lie: "You will not surely die." Satan was there proposing another course, saying, "God knows that in the day you eat of it, you will become like God knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4–5). But that was a lie, and Adam should have known it because it contradicted the Word of God. Thus we see just how critical true knowledge of God's revelation is, if our covenant children are to be equipped to withstand the temptation to embrace wrong thinking and sinful acting.

Knowledge is the absorption of things perceived or learned, the detection and recognition of truth. So, the Apostle Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus was that God might give them a spirit "of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know the hope to which he has called you." (Eph. 1:17–18). Knowledge comes from revelation, both general and special, so the covenant child is called upon to study both God's world and God's Word. We could even say that in both cases, he is catechized.

8. Knowledge without Wisdom Is Folly

On the other hand, knowledge without wisdom yields smart people who don't use what they know to obey God—and that's bad. That too was Adam's first sin, and it produced arrogance in the heart of our first parent. He knew very well the situation about that special tree: God couldn't have been clearer: "Hands off!" It is forbidden to you. Whatever ruminations of logic, twisted or otherwise, in which you might engage, you may not, and cannot, overturn the "revelation of the knowledge of him" (Eph. 1:17) set forth in crystal clarity in the prohibition to eat of that special tree. Without wisdom, knowledge puffs up, as Paul wrote the Corinthians, and in Adam's case his arrogance and direct violation of God's command led to his death.

All of this yields the conclusion that catechizing is not satisfied simply with communication of the knowledge of God's Word to covenant children; catechizing must include a homiletical purpose, namely, to call the covenant child to exercise wisdom by obeying the commands of the LORD. The children's catechism answers the question, "How do you glorify God? By loving him and doing what he commands." That is wisdom: appropriate action on the basis of, and in the use of, knowledge. It is the opposite of the mindset of the fool in Solomon's *Proverbs*, who is a covenant breaker. The spiritually wise person is the covenant keeper. So, when it comes to catechizing, we are not dealing with *super*-intelligence, but with *godly* application of what is known. Our covenant children are wise when they obey God—another reason why catechizing, indeed homiletical catechizing, is so important!

9. God's Saving Activity Is Both Declared and Explained in the Bible

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are our catechetical text. Whatever creed or catechism we might employ must never be allowed to supersede or trump the Bible. In fact, catechizing should always include memorization of its very words, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11).

10. The Concept of Covenant Is the Key to Understanding the Bible

Genesis 2:15-17 records God's setting up the first of two great biblical covenants, wherein he commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It has been called either "the covenant of works," or "the covenant of life." The second one is the "covenant of grace," and the rest of the Bible after Genesis 3:13 is all about it—but you cannot understand that second covenant without the first. Now, a covenant is indeed what we might call a set-up, or an arrangement. It describes the way God relates to the people he created, to everybody who has ever lived or who will ever live. That is true, at least, of the first covenant, which we're calling the covenant of works. The second one, the covenant of grace, applies only to believers, in the New Covenant believers in Jesus Christ—for Christians.

Here we are discussing the fact that the creator of heaven and earth has such a lively interest in the human race that he talked to man, made arrangements with him, and entered into covenant with him. The first man, Adam, stood as a representative of the whole human race, and plunged us all into sin and misery through his disobedience. And the central theme of the whole of the Bible is this: that God is, and that he is interested in the people he has created, and has done special things for them—supremely a work of salvation—to deliver them from that broken covenant of works through the redeemer of sinners, Jesus Christ. That is why we affirm that the concept of covenant is the key to

understanding the Bible. And that concept is to be pressed upon our children when we engage in catechizing them!

But just what is a covenant, in biblical terms? In the covenant of works God condescended to bless Adam and Eve upon condition of perfect obedience, something only the Second Adam, Jesus Christ would ever achieve. In the covenant of grace God's elect are called into his kingdom by trusting the one who has perfectly obeyed and died as the only acceptable sacrifice for their sins. Both covenants are sovereignly arranged. Man agrees; he can do nothing else, for God has ordered it. That's the case even when man breaks a covenant—for then the penalties that God has imposed will surely come to pass. That is what the Bible is all about—the covenants of God.

Thus, in catechesis covenant children are taught to grasp that the Bible is essentially the story of God's great covenant relationship with man, in two parts: He entered into covenant with Adam, representing the whole human race to follow; then, when Adam broke that covenant of works, God made another, a covenant of grace, which has been in force from the fall of Adam until the present time, and it will go on as long as time endures, to the end. Possessing that grand concept, children have a marvelous key to understanding the whole of the Bible.

11. The Catechism Is a Roadmap of the Bible

Again, we emphasize: the catechetical aid, whether it be the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, or another, must never be held above Holy Scripture. Still, use of such an aid in catechizing covenant children is not to be avoided. This is because such catechisms may nevertheless be helpful; when used properly they may be seen as roadmaps to the Bible. This advice has been remarkably put forth by G. I. Williamson.³ Perhaps just one quote will be sufficient to make his point:

The Bible contains a vast wealth of information. It is no easy thing to master it all—in fact, no one ever has mastered it completely. So, it would be very foolish to try to do it all on our own, starting from scratch.

It would be foolish, because the results that we have from the study made by many great men of God down through many centuries are summarized for us in the catechism. . . . is a kind of spiritual map of the Bible—worked out and proved by others who have gone before us.⁴

When going on an automobile trip, the main thing that needs to happen is that we make the right turns and go on the right roads in order to get to our destination. We may not think that because we have a good map, that our possession of it will guarantee good success. We have to actually “do it on the ground,” as they say. Likewise, saying that the catechism is a kind of “roadmap” of the Bible is not to affirm that all we need is the catechism, i.e., that we can trust it absolutely to get us to where we want to go. No, we must work out the map's directions in actual driving! The catechism can be a real help in our understanding the Bible, but it is only that, and must never be allowed to replace Holy Writ, which *is* all the right turns and roads!

³ G. I. Williamson, “Catechism: A Map of the Bible,” *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* 8, no. 5 (May 1987):1–2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

12. Rejection of the Gospel Has Dire Consequences

Perhaps considering a somewhat different understanding of one verse of the Bible will prove acceptable to the reader, and if so, will form a powerful reason for catechesis. We have already seen that wisdom demands obedience to God's commands from our covenant children; and that obedience must be demanded by the parents of those children. Discipline is not optional, and this is underscored by a careful reading of Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." However, a strict rendering of the original Hebrew text is: "Train up a child according to his way; even when he is old he will not depart from it." Thus, "his way" would appear to be the child's way, and not God's way, yielding this striking conclusion: "spoil your child and he will stay spoiled." If this exegesis is correct, the warning is a powerful reason for faithful (disciplinary) catechizing. For a full explanation of this exegesis, see Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel*.⁵

These, then, are twelve reasons why faithful and ongoing catechizing of covenant youth must be done by parents and the church, *at all costs*.

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⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 158n.

ServantReading

Rediscovering Catechism *by Donald Van Dyken*

by Everett A. Henes

Rediscovering Catechism: The Art of Equipping Covenant Children, by Donald Van Dyken. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000, viii + 146 pages, \$9.69, paper.

“Why do you catechize?” This was a question that I received shortly after arriving at Hillsdale OPC in 2008. The college student asking had been raised in a Christian home and trusted Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. She had read the Bible but had never delved into studying theology. She couldn’t understand the purpose of catechism, and she’s not alone. In answer to her question, I simply asked, “What is God?” After she thought about it for a few moments she responded, “I don’t know; he’s God!” I explained that this was the purpose for catechism and introduced her to question number four in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

The topic of catechism continues to raise the eyebrows of those who have never been involved in it. To some it seems legalistic as we teach our children these questions and answers. Sometimes it can feel that way to parents. What family hasn’t had a family-worship melt down as both children and parents become frustrated over the daily Q&A? To others it looks as though we are trying to indoctrinate our children. The challenge, from a practical and pastoral perspective, is heightened when we consider the number of people who are coming into Reformed churches from a non-Reformed background. With no history of catechism, the case for its importance must be made first.

This is where a book like *Rediscovering Catechism* can be helpful. The book itself is quite short, only 115 pages devoted to the topic with two appendices covering a brief catalog of confessions and catechisms (Appendix A) and publishers (Appendix B). The chapters are divided between a very brief history and explanation of catechism (1–7) and the practice of catechism (8–16). The concluding chapter is one last defense of the practice under the title, “Battle Proven.”

This book has the rare quality of being both a blessing and a frustration to the reviewer. From the outset, however, it must be said that the blessings far outweigh the frustrations. This is a book that you can put into the hands of new families for a small price. It gives a good explanation of the responsibility Christian parents have to catechize. Think of the baptism vow they must affirm, “Do you promise to teach diligently the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?”

The author does not content himself, however, with bare catechism. The goal is not just to memorize answers to questions so that a child’s name can appear in the next issue of *New Horizons*. The goal is to help them understand God’s Word and to know God

(56–57). In this way, the catechism questions are just the beginning (69) as parents, teachers, and pastors have the responsibility to follow up and make certain that the children understand what they have memorized. This is where Dyken’s book is gold for pastors and catechism-class teachers. He gives insights into organizing, preparing, and teaching the classes.

What about those frustrations I mentioned? These might be more imagined than real but I’ll give just three. First, the nature of the book requires short synopses of subject-matter. I understand that. However, devoting only six pages to biblical material on catechizing (and these are small pages) and less than four pages to the entire post-biblical history of catechism (the chapter is subtitled, “From Alexandria to Massachusetts”) is an injustice to the very premise of the book: catechism is biblical and essential. Second, as a Presbyterian minister who doesn’t have specific “catechism classes,” there is much in this book that needs to be reworked in order to be effective for families (where much of catechizing is encouraged in many Orthodox Presbyterian congregations). Finally, there is little emphasis on prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of covenant children. Dyken writes, “Faithful instruction of the next generation is the normal mechanism God employs for the advance and growth of his people” (7). While I don’t completely disagree with this statement, the emphasis on *mechanism* is clear throughout the book. Surely it is not the intention of the author to put prayer out of the picture, but it comes across that way.

Even with these weaknesses, this book is a wonderful tool for those involved in the lives of covenant children. Perhaps it could be paired with a book that gives further examples of family-based catechism lessons, like Star Meade’s *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds*.¹ This, along with sound instruction regarding the place of prayer for and with our children, will aid us as we instruct parents to trust in and act upon the Lord’s promise to be a God to them and to their children.

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¹ Star Meade, *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions Based on the Shorter Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000).

ServantReading

Grounded in the Gospel *by Packer and Parrett*

by James J. Cassidy

Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way, by J.I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010, 238 pages, \$16.99, paper.

When I read the subtitle of this book, I was thrilled and could not wait to dive in. Finally, a book about discipleship that is not based on some Johnny-come-lately program that will be replaced within a decade with another trendy book. “Old-fashioned” is speaking my language!

And I was not disappointed—at least not at first.

It became at once evident that the authors are attempting to reverse a current trend in evangelicalism which moves the church's discipleship ministry away from systematic, theological training. In the place of this trend, the authors propose the way of catechesis. They propose recapturing and advancing the notion of catechetical instruction as the primary way to disciple Christians. As a Reformed pastor and father I could not agree more!

The value of the opening three chapters far exceeds the cost of the book. In these chapters the authors shoulder the burden of showing how catechesis is both biblical and historical. Chapter two demonstrates, successfully in this reviewer's opinion, how catechesis is a biblical idea. The argument, however, is almost overdone. Can one make a case that is too biblical? Well, of course nothing can be *too* biblically grounded! But the impression one receives by the end of the chapter is that the Bible is itself a catechism—everything in the Bible is catechetical! I believe practicing catechesis is a biblical notion, and the authors show that, but they also say more than they set out to prove. More helpful is chapter three where the book maps out the rich Christian heritage of catechesis. The church is at its strongest when it is catechizing, and so the church today does not need to come up with newfangled forms of “creative” discipleship.

However, despite this desire not to reinvent the wheel, there are many original elements throughout the remainder of the book (chapters 4–10). It is at this point where my excitement for the book began to wane. Attempts in the rest of the book are made to produce and organize theological material to be used catechetically. But given the rich catechetical tools of the faith (outlined so well in chapter three!), why do the authors try to create something new? It seems as if the old-fashioned idea of catechesis suddenly gives way to a new-fashioned idea of how to produce and organize your own catechism. The authors could have shortened the book considerably by leaning on the old catechisms rather than trying to construct new ones. Furthermore, there is a sense that the authors want to promote a catechism of “mere Christianity.” We are exhorted to avoid those old catechisms which were polemic and militated against other churches, like Rome (e.g., 155–160 where we are told that Heidelberg Catechism answer 80 is “problematic to say

the least”). If we can get all churches to do mere Christianity, we can help ecumenicity. We receive exhortations about making the gospel a priority (chapter five), but how can we do that in league with other churches which our old catechisms regarded as denying the gospel? By the time one gets to the end of the book, one gets the impression that a new ecumenical agenda is being smuggled in through an old-fashioned practice. In other words, for all its (right) criticisms of evangelicalism the book remains indebted to the broadest evangelicalism there is.

This is not to say the book should be jettisoned altogether. If more evangelicals read the first three chapters, that would be good for Christianity at large. Doing catechesis is a good thing, and if people are introduced to the benefits of catechesis in the tradition of the Reformed creeds and catechisms, then we might very well see a new reformation in our day. However, if the old-fashioned practice will be carried out with a new-fashioned mere Christianity then believers will not be built up the way the authors hope. So, as in all things, let the reader understand and take what is helpful and let the rest go.

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ServantReading

Confessing the Faith *by Chad Van Dixhoorn*

by Robert Letham

Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith, by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014, xxvi + 484 pages, \$30.00.

In his foreword, Carl Trueman correctly says that “Chad has spent more time and devoted more attention to the minutiae of the Confession than anyone else has ever done, excepting perhaps the Westminster delegates themselves. There is no safer or more learned guide to the Confession.” With that this review could conveniently end. Nevertheless, for the sake of a fuller explanation we shall continue.

By now there can scarcely be a reader of this journal who is unaware of the massive work that produced the complete minutes and papers of the Westminster Assembly, published in five volumes by Oxford University Press. Chad Van Dixhoorn was the editor and driving force behind this, assisted by a range of others. It was based on his PhD dissertation at the University of Cambridge, which—on top of the dissertation proper—extended to seven volumes that included the minutes and a large rediscovered section of the journal of John Lightfoot, a particularly learned member of the Assembly. Much of this material was produced from the virtually indecipherable seventeenth century shorthand in which the records of Assembly debates were written. Paleographical assistance was required.

The final Oxford University Press volumes include all extant papers, correspondence and other incunabula, together with a range of indexes. It has spawned a number of recent studies on aspects of the Assembly's theology, on the theology of the Confession and Catechisms taken together in context, and on the theological and historical background to the Confession.

None of this is evident in the commentary before us. The scholarship is hidden, the learning worn lightly. The book is what it claims to be—a guide for the reader of the Confession who, one must assume, has little time for the details that underlay its production. It is all the more valuable for that. Van Dixhoorn simply expounds the text; his learning is evident, for those able to recognize it, in the clarity, accuracy and astute nature of his comments. This is a work of vast scholarship, presented in the most judicious manner, without the trimmings. As such it should become the standard work for consideration of the Confession and will be particularly needed for ministers, elders, and the general church member.

There have been other commentaries on the Confession over the years, some more scholarly, others designed for a popular readership. We know what they are; they have done yeoman service. However, none exemplify the rigor and accuracy of Van Dixhoorn's work. I made a number of spot checks on particular aspects of the Confession

where a sophisticated treatment of historical context, theological nuance, seventeenth-century word usage, and the inter-relationship of a range of theological co-ordinates is needed to pry open the intention of the divines. In each instance, Van Dixhoorn handles such questions clearly and deftly. This is not a critical edition, in the sense that he expounds the text rather than probe some of its weaknesses; the intent of the book and the nature of its readership govern the whole.

Here and there, on a very few occasions, one might differ but usually only in a matter of nuance and presentation. Notwithstanding, one matter relates to the question of civil disobedience. Van Dixhoorn's exposition of the chapters on civil liberty and the civil magistrate inculcate obedience and submission to governing authorities. In this he echoes the words of the Confession in their surface meaning. He backs this up by reference to Paul in Romans 13 and Peter in 1 Peter 2. Yet the Assembly was a commission of Parliament at a time when it was at war with the King. Clearly the divines believed in the rightness of taking up arms against Charles on the grounds that he had usurped powers that were not his; their participation in the Assembly was at the risk of their lives, knowing that if Parliament were to be defeated they themselves would be liable to be tried for treason. There is a subtext to the Confession's comments on these matters. The adjective "lawful" in *Confession* 23:4 ("It is the duty of people ... to obey their lawful commands") carries enormous weight in this context. Charles, Laud and their friends were seen as acting unlawfully; Parliament was free from this constraint. Moreover, Parliament was regarded as taking up arms lawfully in defense of its constitutional rights, which went back as far as Magna Carta in 1215.

That is all. I highly commend this book. As Carl Trueman states, it should be read and used by all elders, by Sunday school teachers, and church members.

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ServantReading

The Heart Is the Target *by Murray Capill*

by Shane Lems

The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text, by Murray Capill. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2014, 272 pages, \$16.99, paper.

Writing and preaching sermons is tough work—and that’s an understatement! The preacher has to labor in the original languages, lexicons, and commentaries. He has to know the background, context, structure, and flow of a text, not to mention the main themes and points found in the text. Then he has to organize the sermon in a way that is faithful, clear, and easy to follow. After this, he has to actually preach the sermon in a pastoral manner to the congregation. And if he doesn’t apply God’s Word in his sermons, he still has not done his duty. Writing and preaching sermons is tough work indeed!

There are quite a few helpful books on preaching—with which many *Ordained Servant* readers are familiar. But there are not many solid books that go into the details of biblical sermon application, so it is certainly worth pointing out a good one here: *The Heart is the Target* by Murray Capill. This book discusses the nuts and bolts of sermon application from a Reformed and biblical perspective. Capill says it this way: “Effective expository preaching takes place when biblical faithfulness and insightful application are inextricably bound together” (14).

The first part of the book is what Capill calls the “living” aspect of application. In this section he explains how God’s word is living, active, and profitable. Capill writes that application has to do with the life of the preacher and the lives of the hearers. To apply God’s Word to God’s people, God’s minister must know the Word, believe the Word, and be nourished from the Word himself. Capill also notes that biblical application aims at the heart of the hearer, which includes the mind, conscience, will, and passions. Furthermore, since people in the pews are all quite different, Capill takes a whole chapter to show that “one size doesn’t fit all” in application (chapter 5).

In the second part of the book the author gives details of how to apply Scripture. Here the topics of kingdom living, redemptive history, indicatives and imperatives, and a holistic approach to application are discussed. Thankfully, Capill purposely avoids legalism and moralism in his discussion on application since he constantly focuses on grace and the gospel. While I don’t necessarily agree with Capill’s brief notes on cultural transformation, I did appreciate his explanation that pastors must preach biblical truth in a way that is applicable for the various vocations to which God has called his people. At the end of the book there are some illustrations and helpful charts that summarize several of the outlines in the book.

I've read a good handful of preaching books before this one, but I have to say this one was more challenging and thought provoking than most. There were some parts of the book that were so good that I outlined them on a separate sheet to help me do the work of application better. In fact, some outlines are even still on the white board in my study as I type this review! One important thing I learned in the book is to be *proactive* about applying Scripture. That is, in sermon preparation and writing I shouldn't wait until the end to make application points. Rather, I should be thinking about application early on in the process.

There isn't enough space to explain all the specifics of why I appreciate and recommend this book. One example will have to do. In chapter 6, Capill encourages preachers to do four things with a biblical truth: 1) state it, 2) ground it, 3) impress it, and 4) apply it. How do we impress and apply the truth in a way that "hits" the hearts of the hearers? In these various ways: 1) appeal to people's own judgment, 2) anticipate and answer objections, 3) give reasons, motivations, and incentives, 4) be specific, pointed, and direct, 5) use illustrations for clarity, 6) provide testimonies to the truth, 7) show what it looks like in practice, 8) use fresh and vivid words, and 9) speak personally and passionately. This is an excellent chapter because Capill explains in detail these various ways of applying God's truth in sermons.

If you're a pastor who would like some help applying God's Word in your preaching, do yourself (and your congregation!) a favor by studying this book. Even if you don't agree with every part of it, I'm certain it will be very helpful if you approach it with a teachable mind. As pastors, of course, we should always be students of homiletics. This book is a good teacher in that department!

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ServantPoetry

G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

Catechism

There was a sound in my ear
Threading its way inside,
Maneuvering to the center, near
My heart to chide, to chide

Me for heeding another voice
Whose questions craved an answer,
Always amid surrounding noise,
The familiar sound was always there.

It was the ancient garden query,
“Has God said? Is God even there?”
The questions make us mortals weary.
For we see the answers everywhere.

But then that other voice prevailed,
“Why are you here?” it inquired.
To know the weight of glory veiled
By rebel strategies inspired.

To magnify and celebrate the master
Craftsman who made me like him,
His words shape me like a pastor
Filling mind and soul to the brim.

That’s the precision of catechism—
A voice that challenges the atmosphere
We breathe each day through the prism
Of this world’s dark, hopeless drear.

O, the sounding in my ear, in my ear
Of a word so dense with reconciliation—
A word from a redeemer’s lips so dear,
The catechism of my salvation.