

Laying Foundations of Faith

BY JOHN D. LOCKHART

First Baptist Church in Richmond, Texas, turned to an historical method of catechesis to help children frame their faith expressions and understand the congregation's historical Baptist identity. The catechism class gives a foundation for their children's growth as faithful disciples.

The story is often told (at least, within childhood education circles) about an itinerate missionary who ministered in rather remote communities by teaching the children and their families. One day the missionary entered a new village, gathered the children together, and asked if they knew what prayer was. Most of the children excitedly raised their hands, indicating their eagerness to answer. Calling on one of them, the missionary was pleasantly surprised, if not shocked, at the child's sophisticated answer. It was concise and doctrinally correct. The child's few words were well chosen and well expressed. The missionary invited another child to share his answer to the question about prayer, and the same simple, direct answer was given, word for word. A third child offered the same answer. The missionary quickly realized that this village had been given the gift of a catechism and the people had a foundation for their faith.

It is apparent within congregations across North America today that our pews are full of people who cannot give such clear and precise answers to many questions about doctrine and the history of our faith. The breakdown is obvious. How do we fix it?

Especially within my own Baptist denomination there has been much discussion (and division) over the last three decades concerning our identity — what doctrines we should believe, what practices we should follow, and how we should live with one another and before the world. Some interpreters of this Baptist squabbling have concluded that we have lost our identity

and do not know whom we are or what we believe, that we do not know our historical relationship with one another or within the Church.

At First Baptist Church in Richmond, Texas, we turned to an historical way of teaching our children the faith in order to address these two needs—to help them frame their faith expressions and gain an understanding of our historical Baptist identity. We developed a program of catechesis in order to lay a foundation for their future growth as disciples.

Minister to Children and Education JoAnn Daugherty worked with me to write and edit the 171 questions and answers in our catechism. She also developed activities and lesson plans for each class session. Dr. Curtis Freeman, who was a professor at Houston Baptist University and a member of our church at the time, guided the development of our catechism.

FINDING OURSELVES AMONG FRIENDS

Because the church had been open to using diverse literature and curriculum for several years, the suggestion that we form a new children's class around questions and answers of our faith was readily accepted. We began to explore our options.

The first catechisms that came to mind were those that have stood the test of time—*The Westminster Standard Larger Catechism* and the *Shorter Catechism* of 1647, and the questions and answers found in books of worship, like the most recent edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979). Most Baptists are familiar with parts of these historical catechisms, like the opening question in *The Westminster Standard*, "What is the chief end of man?" and its answer, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever." Catechisms from other denominations were explored: our Lutheran friends shared their books of instruction and local Methodists offered us ideas.

Then another source came to light. We discovered that Southern Baptists have had catechisms from their beginnings! One of the first documents printed in 1863 at the newly formed Sunday School Board was *A Catechism of Bible Doctrine* by James Boyce, the founder and first president of Southern Seminary.¹ With more research we discovered other Baptist catechisms. We reviewed Henry Jessey's *Catechism for Babes, or Little Ones*, (Benjamin Keach's *Catechism*, and *A Catechism of Bible Teaching* by John A. Broadus.² A friend shared a copy of *Joining the Church*, a pamphlet written by W. A. Criswell who was the pastor for many years at First Baptist Church of Dallas. In this catechism (though he does not use that term), Dr. Criswell offers questions and answers about the meanings of salvation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership that he felt important for young inquirers to have before them as they began their discovery of faith.³

We found many catechisms currently used in the Baptist family. For example, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1992 revised *The Baptist Catechism* first developed in Great Britain in 1689. In his new introduction Piper explains what a catechism

is, why it is important, and how it can be used. The word “catechism,” he notes, comes from a Greek New Testament word, *katecheo*, which means to instruct or teach. “It simply means to teach Biblical truth in an orderly way. Generally this is done with questions and answers accompanied by Biblical support and explanation.” Piper reveals his motivation for revising *The Baptist Catechism* when he urges readers, “Make [its questions and answers] part of your family routine.... I am excited about being a partner with you in building a ‘stable and firm’ generation who hopes in God.”⁴

First Baptist Church found itself with many friends as it sought a way to teach children about our biblical and historical faith.

DEVELOPING A RICHER VOCABULARY

We began by searching for the words that could help us discern and share the fullness of our faith. Gaining the words we need to articulate our faith, to express our thoughts and desires about God, and to grow in our relationship with God is a treasure of utmost importance. We gain this language of faith as the words of Scripture become personal for us and as we learn hymns and spiritual songs.

These carefully chosen words of faith allow us to share with another generation the hope we have in God. The right word at the right time, Solomon taught us, “is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11). Indeed, we lean toward profanity, vanity, and emptiness when we use words carelessly (at the wrong times or in the wrong ways) in communicating the intimacy of our relationship with the Triune God.

Catechesis is about sharing the gift of this language with new believers. As babies begin to grow, we measure their maturity by the way they use language—by how many words are in their vocabulary and how they put those words together into sentences. We watch for when our children begin to use certain words and expressions, and when they can ask us more intimate questions. It is the same with maturity in Christian faith. New believers can be taught the right words to use, maybe before they understand them all. This language of faith will help children in the faith to frame their most intimate experiences with God in profound, rather than profane, ways.

Many adult believers, even those who have “grown up in church,” have a limited understanding of what they believe and an inadequate vocabulary to express their faith. Their beliefs are still framed in terms of emotional experiences that have never been measured through theological reflection. Since they have not learned a creed, they have no clear channel for learning how to express what they believe, and they are left to discover or develop their own language of faith. Though these expressions may be genuine, they are inadequate for voicing a mature faith.

This often comes out, for example, when I am planning a funeral service with people of faith. Some have said to me, “I believe in ‘the old rugged cross,’ pastor. That’s my faith.” Or, “‘Amazing grace that saved a wretch

like me' is my story." When I ask for further clarification, often they can give none. "Oh, he walks with me, and talks with me, and tells me I am his own," and other snippets from the church hymnal, may be the only creed and the most significant biblical commentary they have studied to learn a language to express their faith.

As helpful and expressive as the words of these hymns may be, our church has chosen not to limit our faith to that one form of language.

UNDERSTANDING OUR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Any congregation that seriously commits to a ministry of catechism must really believe in its children. Why teach them the words of faith if they cannot learn or if their learning is not important?

Teaching children about faith, fortunately, can be much easier than teaching adults. This is so because many adults are deeply entrenched in the religious views they hold, and often these are opinions based on emotional connections to experiences, rather than thought-out truths grounded in their study of Scripture. When an adult's views are challenged, especially when they are held with limited reflection, the results can be tragic. Children are not yet invested in these emotional connections as deeply as the adults. They are easier to teach; they are eager for reflection. By the age of twelve, Jesus knew the importance of asking questions and seeking answers from the teachers in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52). What an exciting future we open for our children when we teach them the language of faith as those gifted teachers taught their language to Jesus.

As they enter adolescence, our children need expanded categories and a framework for thinking in theological ways. In middle school and high school, they are being taught to think about

complex personal, political, and moral issues. In the novels they must read, they are introduced to every major philosophy of life that they will be asked to interpret. They will explore chemistry, physics, and biology at levels that leave their parents in the

dark. Yet, have we introduced them to a theology that will help them evaluate and dialogue with these other ways of understanding their lives?

The middle-school years are not too early to begin teaching our children about systematic theology. That is why we introduce our catechism to our fifth- and sixth-grade students. They need to know that they can think, and think hard, about their faith, for they are entering a significant season when

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they are being introduced to competing narratives (or, stories of life) the world offers.

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

During the time when our church developed its catechism, various Southern Baptist groups were struggling to find the right words about the Bible, Christ, and living the Christian life as individuals and in community. Many Baptists had worked over the years to find good words, full of meaning, to articulate their beliefs in confessions and covenants. One of the best efforts was *The Baptist Faith and Message of 1963* (hereafter, *BFM*). Believing that the *BFM* was accurate for understanding and expressing our Baptist faith, we included in our catechism the text of many of its “articles,” including the doctrinal statements on The Scriptures (The Bible), God, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Man (God’s People), Salvation, God’s Purpose of Grace, The Church, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, The Lord’s Day, and The Kingdom and Last Things. To accompany these articles we constructed 132 questions and answers that reflect their wording as closely as possible.

The *BFM* brought order, structure, and focus to our catechism; it provided language that Baptists had developed over several centuries of growing in understanding and voicing their faith. Working with the 1963 statement allowed us to address issues related to Baptist identity that were being challenged in later revisions of this statement of faith.

We added almost forty questions and answers concerning the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer, which are important topics covered in most traditional catechisms. And we borrowed other wonderful questions and responses from classical Baptist catechisms. For example, we would fight less about our opinions if we truly understood this insight from James Boyce’s catechism:

Q. Does (the Bible) teach us every thing about God?

A. It does not; no language could teach us the full glory of God, nor could we ever comprehend it.

Wouldn’t it be refreshing to be in a study group where members humbly shared their comprehension, knew they could not be too dogmatic about a conclusion, and eagerly awaited your insights? How might Southern Baptist identity have been transformed during the last thirty years if just this one question and answer had been lived out?

LIVING WITH VITAL QUESTIONS

The Apostle Paul was confident that one day we would know spiritual truths “fully,” but he reminded the Corinthian Christians that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” and do not have all the final propositions settled (1 Corinthians 13:12). Indeed, grasping this fact about the human condition is a sign of thinking like an adult and putting away childish ways (13:11).

Though many people today hunger for a type of scriptural certainty, learning to live with vital questions and dynamic answers will better prepare us to grow in faith. In our catechism we have suggested that asking the right questions is important, though the answers are unfinished. If we can put the right questions into the hearts of our children, with answers that guide them toward a dynamic and faithful dialogue with one another, their teachers, and God, we will nurture disciples whose faith continues to mature throughout life.

The brightest times in the catechism class, reports our first teacher Sandy Bills, occur when students discuss the questions. Sandy worked very hard to develop the discussion aspect of the catechism class. The students, she observes, already have some of the questions rolling around in their heads and they are waiting for a safe place to ask them. They are excited about working together and with an adult who takes a child's thoughts seriously. Sandy testifies, as do many teachers of children, that she learns much from her students; indeed, her discussions with these young theologians transform how she thinks about her faith.

The students need a framework on which to hang the truth they are discovering. Cindy Salch, our second teacher, has emphasized the memory work that can provide them a structure for many years of thinking.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

We have learned several important lessons over the years as we have taught "Foundations, Questions and Answers of Our Faith."⁵ For one thing, children love to be considered and treated as important to adults. Some students said they were pleased that they were studying their first theology class! They were grateful that we did not just give them another set of stories, but called them to reflect more deeply on the stories of their faith. They were pleased that we gave them "adult things," such as *The Baptist Faith and Message*, and invited them to share their thoughts on God, the Bible, and other significant matters of faith. Our prayer is that they will continue to approach learning in this way, that they will remain active in questioning and discussing and not just passively receive others' thoughts.

We have found that there is too much material in our catechism for a one-year study during the Sunday morning Bible study hour. One option that we are considering is to enrich the program with short retreats focused on a *BFM* article, the Ten Commandments, or the Lord's Prayer. Another option is to extend the class to a two-year study, which would allow more time for discussion that makes for good students and for the memorization that helps build the foundation for so much future thought.

Our methods are not without their problems. For instance, we offer the catechism class on Sunday morning because this is when most families come to church and we have found that children need to attend class regularly to grasp the material. Yet many families today, even those who are active in a

variety of church programs, attend only two Sundays or less each month. Children are increasingly mobile on weekends, sometimes because their parents are separated, but often because they enjoy more opportunities for family travel. Some might attend more regularly if we scheduled the catechism class at another time during the week.

Though we introduce the parents to our catechism, we would like to include them more often in the class discussions of the material. Most of our parents are not familiar with a Baptist catechism, so they do not truly understand the learning process that their children are experiencing. If they were more active in the class, parents would have a wonderful opportunity to learn theology with and from their children, and they would be more accountable for helping their children memorize and discuss the catechism questions and answers outside of class.

As we continue to teach the catechism to our children, we are considering how we might study the catechism through the whole congregation. Just as the *Heidelberg Catechism* in one edition is divided into sections to be considered each Lord's Day throughout the year, our catechism could be incorporated into worship services for a year's study and celebration of faith.

Too many Christians over the years have recognized the value of memorization and organization of theology through a catechism for us to ignore this form of discipleship training. We have found that catechesis is a marvelous way to lead our children into a lifetime of learning.

NOTES

1 Tom J. Nettles, ed., *Baptist Catechisms: "To make Thee wise unto salvation"* (Tom Nettles, 1982), 3.

2 These and other important Baptist catechisms were collected by Broadus in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, Library of Baptist Classics 11 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), edited by Timothy George and Denise George. John A. Broadus (1827-1895) was the first professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the second president of the school.

3 W. A. Criswell, *Joining the Church* (Dallas, TX: First Baptist Church of Dallas, 1964).

4 John Piper, *A Baptist Catechism* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethlehem Baptist Church, 1992), 2.

5 I gathered these lessons from personal interviews I recently conducted with the catechism teachers, Sandy Bills and Cindy Salch, and the writer and editor, JoAnn Daugherty.



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