



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Laying Foundations of Faith
(*Catechism*, pp. 66-72)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Laying Foundations of Faith

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:41-47

Meditation

So you have received and given back
what you must always retain in mind and heart,
what you should recite in bed,
think about in the streets,
and not forget over your meals;
in which even when your bodies are asleep
your hearts should be awake.[†]

Augustine, Sermon 215.1

Reflection

When his congregation wrote a new catechism, John Lockhart recalls, they searched for "carefully chosen words of faith...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 deepens new believers' relationships with God by enriching their language of faith. Then they can "frame their most intimate experiences with God in profound, rather than profane, ways," Lockhart writes. Unfortunately, even many church-going adults "have a limited understanding of what they believe and an inadequate vocabulary to express their faith" — they still frame their beliefs in terms of emotional experiences that are unmeasured by theological reflection. Left to create their own language of faith, they find that their words, though genuine, are inadequate for voicing a mature faith.

The congregation made important discoveries along the way:

- ▶ *Helpful models are available.* Since church members were willing to explore widely in the Christian tradition, they quickly found themselves "among friends." They gathered ideas from historical catechisms (like *The Westminster Standard Larger Catechism* and *Shorter Catechism*), questions and answers in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Lutheran books of instruction, and their Methodist neighbors. They "discovered that Southern Baptists have had catechisms from their beginnings" in the 1860s, so they eagerly reviewed Baptist catechisms from the last two centuries. In overall structure, their new catechism follows the doctrinal statements of *The Baptist Faith and Message of 1963*, but it adds questions and answers concerning the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, which are important topics covered in most traditional catechisms.



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► *Children can think theologically.* They “are easier to teach [than adults] and are eager for reflection,” Lockhart notes. “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.” So, Lockhart’s congregation teaches the catechism to fifth and sixth-grade children. As they enter adolescence, children “need to know that they can think, and think hard, about their faith, for they are entering a significant season when they are being introduced to competing narratives (or, stories of life) the world offers.”

► *Catechesis helps children live with the vital questions.* “In our catechism we have suggested that asking the right questions is important, though the answers are unfinished,” Lockhart says. “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 children enjoy working with adults who take their thoughts seriously. And the teachers report that they learn much in return from these young theologians.

“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,” Lockhart concludes. “We have found that catechesis is a marvelous way to lead our children into a lifetime of learning.”

Study Questions

1. For John Lockhart, what are the most attractive features of the traditional question-and-answer approach to catechism?
2. What benefit does Augustine claim for it in the meditation?
3. Do you have lingering concerns about this approach?
4. What is the advantage of a local congregation writing its own catechism? What are some pitfalls? Did this congregation adequately address these dangers?
5. Where would your church turn for help to write a catechism?
6. Why did this congregation add the following question 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”?

Departing Hymn: “Author of Faith, Eternal Word” (verses 1 and 2)

Author of faith, eternal Word,
whose Spirit breathes the active flame;
faith like its finisher and Lord,
today as yesterday the same.

To you our humble hearts aspire,
and ask the gift unspeakable;
increase in us the kindled fire,
in us the work of faith fulfill.

Charles Wesley (1740), alt.

Suggested Tunes: WINCHESTER NEW or HESPERUS

Laying Foundations of Faith

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, 3, and 4 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To examine why and how the members of First Baptist Church, Richmond, TX, created a catechism for their children.
2. To weigh the advantages and drawbacks of this approach to catechesis.
3. To consider where your congregation would turn for help in writing a catechism.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Catechism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Author of Faith, Eternal Word” locate the familiar tunes WINCHESTER NEW or HESPERUS in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

John Lockhart recalls a story about “the missionary [who] 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.”

Sensing 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,” Lockhart says, “The breakdown is obvious. How do we fix it?” (*Catechism*, 66).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to increase your desire and give you wisdom to share the language of faith with children in your congregation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 2:41-47 from a modern translation.

Meditation

You may read the meditation in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Reflection

This is the second of three studies of how congregations might approach catechesis today. The first one, “Introducing Children to Worship,” examines how worship trains young children, and the following study, “Spiritual Direction,” explores one-on-one guidance in the faith for adults. This study considers using a ques-

tion-and-answer catechism with older children and adolescents. All of these approaches, however, may be adapted for believers of other ages and at various levels of maturity.

Tailor your session to address members' concerns. If they express doubts about the traditional question-and-answer method, spend time discussing their reservations. If they show interest in the approach, consider how your congregation might use it.

Study Questions

1. Lockhart emphasizes that the traditional question-and-answer format (1) gives us a richer theological vocabulary to articulate and understand our relationship with God, (2) encourages us to ask vital questions that we might otherwise ignore, and (3) points us toward dynamic answers that guide us "toward a dynamic and faithful dialogue with one another, [our] teachers, and God." The approach does not close off questioning and exploration of the faith, but invites us to an ever deepening engagement with it. A catechism, when it is drawn from the extensive Christian heritage, puts us into conversation with wise saints in other cultures and times. In this way, it can be a corrective to our theological parochialism.
2. Augustine believes that when we memorize the answers of a well-constructed catechism, they will shape the way we think and live throughout the day. In this way they shape our character and become second nature. They make us receptive to God's presence: "even when your bodies are asleep your hearts should be awake."
3. Encourage members to mention other concerns. Perhaps they worry that the traditional method leaves too little room for questioning and reflection, requires too much trust in authority, is not sufficiently critical of the tradition, and so on. To what extent could these concerns be addressed by wise planning of the catechism?
4. A local congregation can tailor the catechism—its language, length of answers, number and order of topics covered, and so on—to the new believers who will use it. Schedules and lesson plans can be developed for teachers, and creative projects and discussions constructed for students. The church will learn much from the process of writing the catechism and will have pride and ownership in their education program.

Among the pitfalls are the catechism might be poorly written, badly organized, or theologically parochial; the writers and editors might not be trusted by the congregation; and there might not be wide support for its use. First Baptist Richmond, TX, was fortunate to have theologically sophisticated leaders who were trusted by the congregation. They studied catechisms from a variety of Christian traditions, but followed the order of presentation of a doctrinal statement the church had long respected.

5. This raises the question of trust and authority (not power). Are there theologically trained, well respected leaders in the congregation? Does your church honor the leadership of a denomination or branch of the Christian tradition? Are the catholic (universal) creeds read? Would your church work with certain churches, a college or seminary, or another church group to develop a catechism? To which publishers would you turn for guidance?
6. Recent theological debates in North America have been bitter and vengeful, in part because our theologies are so debased and entangled with political and cultural agendas. Many participants have been uncharitable and lacking in humility; they have not listened for the truth in their opponents' views. James Boyce's statement encourages humility. "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?" Lockhart asks. "How might Southern Baptist identity have been transformed during the last thirty years if just this one question and answer had been lived out?"

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.