

Training Our Aim

BY GEORGE MASON

Catechism molds the soul of the believer for a life of faithfulness in the world. We must retrieve ancient practices that can shape us into the kind of people who will, as our second nature, glorify God and enjoy him forever.

To his young disciple Timothy, the apostolic mentor Paul writes, “Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering” (2 Timothy 3:10-11). Buried in this list is the cogent phrase “my aim in life.” Other translations render it “purpose,” but the point is the same and plain: to live the Christian life one needs to know what one is striving for, living toward, or aiming at. What is the goal, the ambition, the target?

The first question of *The Westminster Catechism* puts the matter this way: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer to be memorized and recorded in the soul of the disciple is, “To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

This answer, however, is not self-evident to every human being. It must be learned and adopted, lest some other aim in life govern a person’s direction. For example, the *American Declaration of Independence* declares that the Creator has endowed all human beings with certain “unalienable Rights,” among which are “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Happiness, unhappily, has become the chief aim of many, even at the expense of the true pursuit of it. The present possession of personal happiness has become the secular substitute for the spiritual aim of enjoying God forever. The consequences of this shift in aim are deadly to the soul that is made for satisfaction only by glorifying its Creator.

A youth minister found himself counseling a high school football player in his church youth group after the teenager had been suspended from school for being drunk at a party. The young man was chronically abusing alcohol; his grades were suffering and his play on the field declining.

“What do you want to do with your life,” the youth minister asked.

“I want to be a lawyer,” the boy replied.

“And just how do you think you are going to get from here to there on the path you are going?”

Our conduct in life reflects our true aim, whether we are conscious of it or not. If we are primarily interested in immediate pleasure, our behavior will feed that aim. But if we fix our aim on some higher purpose, we will more likely train ourselves to live toward that end.

The Christian life does not happen willy-nilly. “Men are made, not born, Christians,” the early church Father Tertullian famously claimed in *The Apology* (XVIII). He did not mean by that one could not go to heaven unless one is a finished product. He meant that if one’s aim in life is more than simply salvation, if it is instead to be shaped into the image of Christ in order better “to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” then some construction must take place to build the character and better the conduct of the believer.

We Baptists have paid less attention to the matter of Christian formation than they have to eternal salvation. In fact, Tertullian’s dictum might strike us as very odd, since the experience of being “born again” predominates in our language when it comes to making Christians. We might easily see that being born into a Christian nation or to a Christian home or onto the cradle roll of a Christian congregation does not make one a Christian. Yet we do not seem to see that being born again is only the beginning of an intentional life of transformation into the likeness of Christ.

This aim of learning to glorify God requires work, and yet this training does not invalidate the agency of divine grace in the human work. Christians are made by an ongoing process that can be viewed from one side as grace to grace, and from the other as work to work. Churches that take seriously this grace-work of making Christians will devise means to pass on the faith and form the character of Christians from generation to generation.

Catechisms are examples of ways the Church has tried to do just that. A catechism is a systematic plan of education that involves information and formation. It presupposes a people—the Church—who live in such a way that the Christian life is recognizable among them. Catechism requires a Christian who will model that life to one who is observing it—the way Paul did for Timothy. And finally, it demands a serious and studious disciple who wishes to know intimately the “life that really is life” (1 Timothy 6:19).

Catechisms have been common in churches that baptize infants and rare in churches that do not. Children that grow up in sacramental churches have been baptized as infants and then go through catechetical instruction as part of their confirmation experience in late childhood or early adolescence. By learning the faith in a conscious way, they are better able to take for themselves the faith that was pledged to them and shaped into them by parents, godparents, and church leaders. Adult converts similarly undergo catechetical instruction as a means of putting off the “old self” and putting

on the “new self,” as the Apostle Paul put it (Ephesians 4:22-24). This traditionally has taken place before baptism, but has sometimes followed it.

The Baptist emphasis on Sunday school for all ages and faith stages has functioned catechistically. Curriculum in children’s departments during the school-age years includes the main themes covered in typical catechisms: Who is God? Who are human beings? Who made the world? What is the

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purpose of life? How do we please God? What rules should conduct behavior? What is the Bible and how does it function? How are we to pray?

The story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert right after his

baptism has a catechetical ring to it (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). The devil plays devil’s advocate, posing questions to Jesus that probe the identity and mission of the Son of God. He even uses Scripture to trip up Jesus in his messianic identity and mission. Jesus uses Scripture right back to clarify his sense of whom he is in relation to God and what his aim is in life. This private spiritual encounter in the wilderness serves as a training exercise that prepares Jesus for his public ministry to follow.

In the same way, the intentional instruction in the faith that catechism represents shapes the soul of the believer in a way that prepares her for a life of faithfulness in the world. Normally, catechisms address faith, ethics, and prayer by teaching the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer, respectively. A question-and-answer format is customarily applied as the disciple learns that her role in life is to be responsive and accountable to the call of God and the authority of the people of God.

While Baptists are not creedal people, the creeds or confessions of faith can serve well in teaching the historic faith to young people and adult converts. In fact, some such intentional approach is all the more necessary in a time when cultural Christianity has given way to religious pluralism, wherein Christian identity is not secure. The Church must retrieve ancient practices that help to shape the people of God into the kind of people that can, as their second nature, glorify God and enjoy him forever.

If an American moves to Italy and wants to become as at home in that country as a native, careful attention to mastering the history, the culture, and the language is necessary. Just living in Italy does not an Italian make. To serve the learning better, an accomplished and learned Italian might serve as a guide. The learning might take a question-and-answer format, and be structured around routine personal exchanges in various locations and cultural settings. And, since children learn faster and easier than adults, the earlier the process begins the better.

In the same way, Baptists who wish to form the gospel into people in the most effective way will do more than announce the good news and introduce them to the Christian faith. To make Christians that are at home with God and true citizens of the Kingdom of God will take assimilation efforts. The Church will find ways to acquaint converts deeply with the faith: teaching the history of faith (doctrine), training in the codes of Christian conduct (ethics), and speaking the language of the Spirit (prayer).

Evangelization will lead to initiation, an initiation into the “life that really is life.” Christians will learn to train their aim on the chief end of human beings: “to love God and enjoy him forever.”



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