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THE DUTY

OF

CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION.

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CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION.

CATECHETICAL Instruction must have been coeval with the human family. At first all knowledge was communicated orally, and handed down by tradition. The first man delivered a stock of important ideas to his children; and they again to theirs, with different degrees of ability and fidelity. The most usual place of instruction was, doubtless, for a long time, the domestic circle. Here the pious patriarch would spend much time in dealing out to his listening children the lessons which he had learned in his youth from his predecessors, and those which he had been taught by his own experience. These instructions were properly of the nature of *catechising*, which may be defined to be "the familiar communication of knowledge, orally." As long as this duty was faithfully performed by parents, the darkness of ignorance and idolatry were prevented, but as soon as it fell into neglect, error and vice must have been the consequence. Of Abraham, God certifies, "I know that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment," Gen. xviii. 19. And God, by Moses, insisted more upon no duty than this, of domestic instruction in the truths of religion. "And the words which I command thee shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down and when thou risest up." Again, "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but teach thy sons, and thy son's sons." Deut. iv. 9, 10. vi. 7. To these precepts the Psalmist refers, when he says, "He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers that they should make them known to their children: that the generations to come might know them, even the children which should be born, who should arise and declare them to their children,"

12-19-33 JMB

Psal. lxxviii. 5, 6. The word *catechise*, is properly Greek, derived from the verb *κατηχησω*, "to instruct with the voice," which is found, in some of its parts, six or seven times in the New Testament, but is commonly translated "to instruct;" because in English, the word *catechise* has somehow acquired a narrower signification than the original term, and conveys the idea of *instruction by question and answer*; whereas, the word in Greek includes all manner of elementary, oral instruction: and it would be desirable to bring back the word to its original meaning. This, however, is of small moment. The passages in which the original word is found, are the following: Luke, i. 4. Acts, xviii. 25. xxi. 22, 24. Rom. ii. 18. 1 Cor. xiv. 19. Gal. iv. 6.

It appears therefore that this mode of instruction is fully recognised in the sacred Scriptures. Indeed, if no other methods of inculcating divine truth were resorted to, than delivering elaborate and continued discourses from the pulpit, very little information would be gained by the young and the ignorant. Preaching supposes and requires some preparatory knowledge in the hearers, to render it useful in communicating religious knowledge. Elementary principles must be acquired in some other way; and this was more especially the case before the invention of printing, when books were very scarce, and few persons were able to read. It seems that the apostles and first teachers of the Christian religion were much occupied in giving religious instruction, from house to house; and we know from undoubted authorities, that in the earliest times of the primitive church, all who applied for admission into the church, from among the heathen, and all the children of Christians, were carefully instructed by catechising; that is, by a course of familiar teaching, *viva voce*. To every church a class of catechumens was attached and formed a kind of school, in which the first principles of religion were inculcated, and certain formulas of Christian doctrine, such as the early creeds, carefully committed to memory, together with portions of the sacred Scriptures. In some places these schools for catechumens became very famous, and were supplied with teachers of the highest character for learning and piety; so that they were frequented by the lovers of sacred literature from other countries. A celebrated institution of this sort flourished for several ages at Alexandria, in Egypt in which Origen was educated, and at which he became the most distinguished teacher. A large number of the treatises written by the fathers, in different countries, and in different centuries, were composed expressly for the instruction of the

catechumens. And until darkness overspread the church, and her unnatural pastors deprived the people of the Scriptures, the church was, as it ever should be, like a great school, where holy men of God devoted their time to the instruction of the rising generation, and of converts from paganism.

In catechetical, or elementary instruction, the grand secret is, "little at a time and often repeated." Whoever would successfully instruct children and very ignorant adults, should avoid the error of crowding too many things into their minds at once. It is as preposterous a practice as it would be to attempt to increase the activity, vigour, and size of the body, by cramming the stomach with as much food as it could hold. Moreover, the truths first communicated should be as simple as possible. Tender minds must not be fed with strong meat, but with pure milk. To accommodate instruction to the state of advancement in knowledge, and to the degree of development of the mental faculties, is certainly that part of education which is most difficult, and at the same time most important. That historical facts should form the commencement of a course of religious instruction, is indicated, first, by the method pursued in the Bible; and secondly by the predilection of all children for this species of knowledge. But at a very early period, moral and doctrinal instruction of the most important kind may be connected with the scriptural facts inculcated, and may always be most advantageously engrafted on them. Doctrinal catechisms are, it is admitted, not commonly understood well by children; but it can do them no harm to exercise themselves in committing the words to memory; for it is universally admitted, that to strengthen the memory, it must be frequently and vigorously exercised: and will it not be much better to have it stored with words which contain the most salutary truths, rather than those which may, by some association, prove injurious on the recollection? Sometimes the having committed to memory such a system as the Shorter Catechism, is of the utmost importance to an individual when his lot is cast where he has no means of correct information; or in case the person should lose his sight or hearing. We once noticed an exemplification of this in the case of a man of strong mind, who had led a busy life, without much concern with books, and who in his latter years was entirely blind. In conversation on the most important topics of religion, in which he took a deep interest, he would continually recur to the answers in the Shorter Catechism, which he had learned when young; and which now seemed to serve as a guide to

his thoughts in all his meditations. But the true reason why so many children learn the Catechism without understanding its meaning, is that no pains are taken to explain its doctrines, and to illustrate them, in a way adapted to their capacity. Parents are, for the most part, either incapable of giving such instruction or negligent in the performance of this important duty. "Most parents then stand in need of some helps to enable them to explain the meaning of the Catechism; and such helps have been amply provided, and should be in the hands of every Presbyterian family. We have works of this description by Vincent, Flavel, Thompson, and others of former days; and more recently an excellent exposition of the Shorter Catechism by the Rev. Mr. Belfrage of Scotland; and still more recently we have an excellent set of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism from the pen of the venerable Doctor Green, in two volumes, which we sincerely wish might be found in every family in our church, as a work of sound theology, written in a correct and perspicuous style. And while we are recommending expositions of this excellent little compend, we would not omit to mention with high approbation, the Rev. Matthew Henry's "Scriptural Catechism," in which all the questions are derived from those in the Shorter Catechism; and the answers throughout are in the very words of Scripture. This in our opinion is an admirable work, and ought to be reprinted and widely circulated. We are also free to recommend "Fisher's Catechism," as a valuable doctrinal work, which has been much used in Scotland, and by many Presbyterians in this country. The "Key to the Shorter Catechism," we also approve, and from the testimony of those who have tried it, we are led to believe, it may be made very useful in aiding children to understand the meaning of words and phrases used in the Catechism. The old Presbyterian custom of devoting the Sabbath evening, sacredly, to the business of catechising the children and domestics, in every family, ought to be revived among us where it has fallen into disuse; no other means which have been substituted for this, are likely to answer as good a purpose. Or, if public services in the church are considered on the whole expedient, on this evening, let an hour in the morning, or immediately after dinner be appropriated to this important work; it is as useful to parents, as to children; and is the most effectual method of inducing young persons to commit the Catechism well to memory; and unless this is done, the religious instruction of servants and domestics will be neglected. These family instructions should be conducted with great

gravity and kindness of manner: at such times, chiding and scolding should be avoided; and the addresses to the consciences of delinquents should be made with affectionate tenderness.

We do earnestly hope that attention to doctrinal instruction will not be relinquished, nor diminished, in our church. Hitherto Presbyterians have been distinguished above all people in the world, for a correct and thorough knowledge of the tenets of their own church. No people on earth are so well indoctrinated in the principles of religion, and in the proof of the doctrines believed, as the Scotch, and their descendants in Ireland and America. Other people far exceed them in metaphysical speculations, and in the knowledge of other matters: but for sound religious knowledge, commend us to Scotch Presbyterians of every sect.

The benefits of thorough instruction in the doctrines of religion cannot be calculated. The truths thus received into the mind may prove ineffectual, in some cases, to restrain from open sin; but even in these, the force of the truth is often felt, and the person thus situated, is much more likely to be convinced of the error of his ways than those transgressors whose minds are almost totally destitute of the knowledge of the doctrines of religion. There is, moreover, an unspeakable benefit from the possession of correct doctrinal information, when the mind falls under serious impressions of religion; for then, truths which had been early inculcated, and long forgotten, will revive in the memory, and serve to guard the anxious mind from those enthusiastic errors into which ignorant persons are so prone to fall when they are deeply exercised on the subject of their salvation. Let not the members of the Presbyterian Church, therefore, become remiss in that which has ever been her most honourable distinction; the careful initiation of children into the doctrines of religion, contained in her Catechisms; than which we believe, a sounder system of theoretical and practical theology, cannot be found in any language. It may appear rather extraordinary, that the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, should have prepared two catechisms, as this seems rather calculated to distract than edify the church. But the history of this matter is simply this. The Larger Catechism was first composed by a committee of three members; Dr. Tuckney, Dr. Arrowsmith, and the Rev. Mr. Newcomen; though there is good reason to believe that the first named had the chief hand in the composition. The work was highly approved, but was thought to be too long to be generally com-

mitted to memory by children, the committee was therefore directed to prepare a catechism containing the same truths, in a more condensed form. The Shorter Catechism is therefore an abridgment of the Larger, and by comparison it will be found to contain the substance of the Larger, expressed with more brevity, but containing, for the most part, the very language of the original. It was formerly a frequent thing for young persons of both sexes, in our church, to commit to memory, accurately, the whole of the Larger Catechism. Whether this practice is continued in many of the Presbyterian congregations, under the care of the General Assembly, our information is not sufficient to enable us to declare; but we cannot but believe that young persons who have accomplished this object, have acquired a treasure which may be to them of more value than thousands of silver and gold. One thus armed with the panoply of divine truth, will not be liable to be "carried about with every wind of doctrine," and every wild spirit of enthusiasm which may be abroad in the world; and when he reads religious books, or hears discourses from the pulpit, he will not only be capable of understanding them better than others, but will carry about with him a test, by which he can make trial of the correctness of what he hears or reads, and thus be in a situation to obey the apostle's exhortation, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." We cannot be contented to let the opportunity pass of bestowing merited commendation on those denominations of Scotch Presbyterians who are not in communion with the General Assembly, for their indefatigable industry and care in giving doctrinal instruction to their children. In this respect, it must be acknowledged, they greatly excel all other denominations of Christians in our country. Among them, we have reason to believe, there has been no falling off in attention to the Catechisms; and few instances ever occur of the members of these churches being seduced by the insidious arts of the propagators of error and infidelity.

The question may occur to some, To whom does it belong to give catechetical instruction? We answer, to all who are capable of teaching any thing of divine truth correctly. But, especially, it is the duty of parents, guardians, masters, school-masters, elders and ministers. All who can be enlisted in the service should be engaged to teach those more ignorant than themselves. And we feel constrained to give our testimony strongly in favour of Sunday Schools, in which so many persons are employed, so beneficially to themselves and others, in giving instruction out of the Bible. When this is

called a new institution, it surely is not meant that any new instruction is given; or that there is any thing new in the manner of communicating religious knowledge. The whole novelty of the thing consists in the success of the attempt to engage such a multitude of teachers in giving lessons, and such a multitude of scholars in learning them. But we would respectfully ask, whether parents, and ministers, and elders, have not become more remiss in catechising since the introduction of Sunday Schools?

In order to render the public catechising of children profitable, the pastor of the flock must manifest a deep and lively interest in the exercise. If he should appear indifferent, and attend on catechetical exercises in a formal or careless manner, no great good can be expected to arise from such meetings; but if he will take pains to arrange all the circumstances of such exercises: so as to render them interesting to old and young;—if he will propose special subjects of inquiry, refer to proper books, and converse freely with his people on this topic, a spirit of investigation will be excited, religious knowledge will be pursued with diligence and alacrity, and catechising will be found to be the most effectual means of diffusing correct information on the doctrines of religion.

If common schools were what they ought to be, seminaries in which Christian doctrine was carefully taught, then our schoolmasters would all be catechists, and the children would be trained in the knowledge of God, and their duty. The business of catechising youth seems also to be one of the appropriate duties of the eldership: for surely these officers ought not to be restricted to mere matters of order and government. As leaders of the people, they should go before them in religious instruction; and it would be an expedient, as it is a common arrangement, to have each parish so divided into districts, that every elder would have a little charge of his own to look after, the families within which he might frequently visit, and where he might frequently collect and catechise the youth. If ruling elders are commonly incompetent to perform such a work as this, they are unfit for the office which they hold, and can be of little service in the church in other respects. It is now becoming matter of common complaint, that our ruling elders are not generally sensible of the important duties which belong to their office, and are not well qualified to perform them. But how can this evil be remedied? We answer, that the effectual remedy will be found in an increased attention to instruction in the doctrines of the church, by which means many will ac-

quire a taste and thirst for religious knowledge; and whenever this occurs, there will be rapid progress in the acquisition of such a fund of sound theology, as will qualify them to communicate instruction to the young and ignorant. In the mean time, let every pastor meet with the elders of his church, once in the week, for the express purpose of discussing questions which relate to the duties belonging to their office: and thus those who are really desirous of executing their office in a faithful and intelligent manner, will become better and better prepared for their important work every year.

The question has often been agitated, whether it would not be expedient to have an order of catechists, whose duty it should be to attend to this whole concern; and the idea has been favourably entertained by some in the Presbyterian church. But to us it appears, that such an office would be worse than useless: for, if the catechist be taken from among the members of the church, where he is expected to officiate, and this must be the case if every church is supplied with one or more, then why not constitute him at once a ruling elder? Surely the mere name of *catechist* would not qualify him to give instruction; and if he is qualified, would he not be as able to teach, if called by the name elder as catechist? And if the office is judged to be expedient, because we cannot obtain well qualified elders, how can it be supposed that competent catechists could be found? The idea of some, however, is, that to perform the duties of catechising well, requires much more time than men can commonly afford from their own business; and, therefore, proper persons should be employed at a reasonable salary, to devote their whole time to this important branch of instruction. Now all this is very reasonable, and brings us to the very point mentioned before, viz. that schools, among Christians, should have it as their chief object, to bring up children in the knowledge of divine things; and the proper catechists of the church would be the teachers of these schools. If it be said, that school-masters are often incompetent to perform this part of their duty; we reply, that the same thing would be true if they were called catechists; or if other persons were sought for, in the present state of the church, there would exist the same difficulty in obtaining them as there is now in finding well qualified school-masters. The truth is, the church should take pains to train men for this very office; and the parents should set a much higher value on it, than they have been accustomed to do; and the office

ought to be rendered more respectable, and more desirable than it is at present.

It may, perhaps, be thought by some, that the prevalence of Sunday schools renders it unnecessary for church officers to concern themselves with the instruction of the youth under their charge. If, indeed, the schools of this description within the parish are under the special superintendence and tuition of the Pastor and Elders, there is no good reason why catechetical instruction should not be given in a Sunday school as well as any where else. Catechising is an exercise peculiarly suited to the Sabbath, and if the officers of any church should agree to conduct this part of instruction in these valuable institutions, it would certainly be an improvement on the plan on which they are commonly conducted. But when, as is commonly the case, these schools are made up of children of different denominations, and are under the direction of persons not connected with any one church, their existence and prosperity, while it will greatly facilitate pastoral labours, ought not to be considered as a substitute for catechising. We are afraid, however, that some pastors, as well as many parents, have become remiss in this part of their duty, from the mistaken idea, that their labours in this field are now superseded. This mistake should be carefully counteracted; and while the benefits of Sunday schools are gratefully acknowledged, the instruction of our youth in the Catechisms of our own church should be pursued with increasing diligence.

The old Presbyterian plan of conducting catechising did not confine this method of instruction to children and youth, but extended it to all persons except the officers of the church. And certainly one of the chief hinderances to the success of catechetical instruction has been that it commonly terminates too soon. When children have arrived at the age of twelve or fourteen years, they take up the opinion that they are too big and too old to repeat the catechism; in consequence of which, until the institution of Bible classes, our youth received no appropriate instruction, in many congregations, in that period of their lives which of all others is most important for improvement in knowledge. While we are strong advocates for catechetical instruction, we are at the same time warm friends to the method of instruction pursued in Bible classes; and we should be pleased to see both these methods of instruction extended to all ages and conditions of men; for who is there that has not something yet to learn? And what upon earth is so worthy of time and pains as the knowledge of God's word, and the doctrines of his wonderful love and

grace! Every man who contributes to the increase of this kind of learning by his writings, should be deemed more a public benefactor than he who invents the most useful machine. Let all, then, whom God has entrusted with so excellent a talent as that of writing well on theology, take heed that they do not hide it in a napkin or bury it in the earth; for never was there a time when there was a greater need of good books and tracts to counteract the floods of error which are issuing from a thousand sources; and never was there a period when the effect of good writing was so extensive. By means of the improvements in printing, and the facilities of conveyance in our day, opportunity is afforded of circulating opinions throughout the land; and if religious men sleep, there is no doubt that the enemy will sow his tares plentifully. Let the friends of truth, therefore, be watchful and wise, and ever on the alert, in seizing opportunities of enlightening the world with the pure doctrines of the word of God.

THE END.