

WHAT IS A CATECHISM?

The Word Itself

If the word *catechism* sounds unfamiliar to you, don't be too surprised. It's not used as commonly today as it was in the past. However, it's not a complicated word. If you trace back its origin it comes from a Greek word (*katecheo*) which simply means *to teach*, especially when the instructor is speaking face-to-face with the students.

It's also a word that is found in the Bible, although you would not notice this in English translations since they do not use the noun, *catechism*, or the verb, *to catechize*. However, the original Greek word is found, for example, in Luke 1:4, where the gospel writer explains that he has written, "an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been *taught*." Presumably, then, Theophilus had learned about salvation in Jesus Christ by listening to preaching or some kind of oral instruction. Now Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gives a written account about whom Jesus is and what he did. Other Bible verses which use the verb, *to catechize*, include Acts 18:24-25 and Galatians 6:6. Each time the word is translated as *to teach* or *to instruct*.

The Basic Structure

A catechism, then, is a teaching tool, which is especially suited for oral instruction. This also explains why the Heidelberg Catechism, and other catechisms as well, are set up in a question and answer format. When you read it, it's like you're right there in the classroom, with the teacher asking the questions and the students giving the answers. In addition, the answers in the Catechism are generally quite short and carefully structured. Some even have a poetic rhythm or ring to them. All of this helps to make the Catechism a memorable and useful tool for instructing people in the basic truths of salvation in Jesus Christ. There are 129 Questions & Answers in the Catechism, divided over 52 sections called Lord's Days.

After the first, introductory Lord's Day on the main theme of comfort, the Heidelberg Catechism is divided into three main parts:

- Our sin & misery (Lord's Days 2-4)
- Our deliverance from sin (Lord's Days 5-31)
- Our thankfulness to God for such deliverance (Lord's Days 32-52)

The second part of the Catechism (Lord's Days 8-22) contains an extensive explanation of the Apostles' Creed, one of the most widely used ecumenical creeds. The third part provides detailed instruction about the Ten Commandments (Lord's Days 34-44) and the Lord's Prayer (Lord's Days 46-52).

The Bible and the Catechism

At the same time, the Catechism is not a replacement for Scripture. It is meant to lead you deeper into the Word of God, not draw you away from it. That's why under each Lord's Day you'll see lists of Bible references, often called *proof texts*. Even though each list is selective, it gives you an idea which Bible passages the Catechism is summarizing in each answer.

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