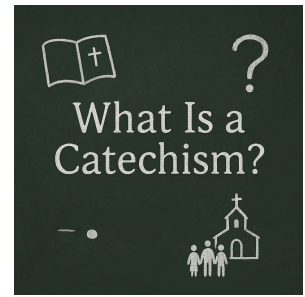


Lesson 1: Introduction to Catechism

This year, Lord willing, we are going to walk together through The Baptist Catechism, a late-17th-century summary of Christian doctrine that stands alongside, and grows out of, the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith.

Before we start memorizing and explaining individual questions and answers, we need to slow down and address some introductory issues:

- What is a catechism?
- Why would we use one today?
- Who is it for?
- How does it relate to a confession of faith and to Scripture itself?



What Is a Catechism?

A catechism is a biblically-shaped, historically-tested tool for teaching the core doctrines of the Christian faith, especially to children and new believers, as a concise summary of what we believe.

It is biblically-shaped in both content and method. In terms of content, a catechism is not trying to introduce new ideas; it is simply gathering and arranging what Scripture already teaches about God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, the church, and the Christian life. In terms of method, it follows a pattern we see in the New Testament itself. Luke tells Theophilus that he has written his Gospel *“that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught”* (Luke 1:4), literally, “the things in which you have been catechized”. The apostles assume that believers will receive clear, ordered instruction in the faith, and that this *“pattern of the sound words”* (2 Timothy 1:13) will be handed down and entrusted to others (2 Timothy 2:2). A catechism is simply one way the church has obeyed that instinct.

It is also historically-tested. From the early church, where new converts (catechumens) were instructed before baptism, through the Reformation, where Luther’s Small Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism were written to teach ordinary Christians, the people of God have used concise summaries of core doctrine to pass on the faith. This Baptist Catechism stands in that stream. Seventeenth-century Particular Baptists took the same concern for careful instruction and produced a catechism that reflected their confession of faith. In other words, whatever else you may think about a document from 1695, it is not cutting-edge or experimental; it is a well-worn tool the church has been using in one form or another for a very long time.

The form of a catechism is intentionally simple: question and answer. The question raises the issue; the answer gives a clear, memorable summary. This format is built for the ear and for the memory. It invites parents to ask and children to respond. It gives children and new believers short sentences they can carry with them even before they have many passages memorized. Each answer is meant to be unpacked and supported by multiple Scripture texts, but the catechism itself provides the “bones” of Christian truth in a form that can actually be remembered.

Finally, a catechism is a tool, not a rival authority. Scripture alone is inspired, inerrant, and finally binding on the conscience. As the London Baptist Confession of Faith puts it in its first sentence:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience. (1689 LBCF Chapter 1 § 1; emphasis mine)

The catechism (or creed or confession) only has value as it faithfully echoes what Scripture teaches.

A helpful picture is this: the Bible is the landscape of God’s revelation; a confession is a carefully drawn map of that landscape; a catechism is the legend and trail guide that helps us read the map and find our way. The map and trail guide can never replace the land, but they can help us see the main features and how they fit together so that we can walk the land more wisely. As we study this catechism, our constant concern will be to trace each answer back into the text of Scripture, not to be devoted to a book from 1695, but so that we will be more firmly grounded in God’s Word.

Who It's For; What It's For

A catechism is written for the whole people of God, but it has a special eye toward those who most need clarity and simplicity. *Historically, catechisms have been used first of all for children.* Fathers are commanded to bring their children up “*in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*” (*Ephesians 6:4*), but many Christian parents feel the weight of that calling without any structure for how to do it. A catechism gives fathers and mothers a concrete way to obey that command: they can ask the questions, hear the answers, and then open the Bible together to see why those answers are true. In that sense, a catechism belongs in the living room and around the dinner table every bit as much as it belongs in the classroom.

Catechisms are also for new believers. Someone who has recently come to faith often knows the basics—that Christ died and rose again—but may not yet see how the doctrines of God, man, sin, grace, and the church fit together. A catechism does not replace regular Bible reading, but it gives a new Christian a “framework” for reading: the big categories are already in place, and as they read the Scriptures those categories begin to fill out. It is much easier to recognize the shape of biblical teaching when you have already learned a simple outline of that teaching in question-and-answer form.

At the same time, catechisms are not just for beginners. Seasoned believers, elders, and teachers also need the discipline of stating the truth clearly. The longer we are Christians, the more tempted we can be to live on vague impressions of Bible truth instead of sharp, well-defined convictions. Working through a catechism forces us to ask, “How would I say this? What, exactly, do I believe about God’s *providence*, or about *justification*, or about *the church*?” It exposes places where our thinking has grown fuzzy and helps bring our minds back into alignment with Scripture.

So what is a catechism for? At the most basic level, it is for *clarity and memory*. The questions and answers give us short sentences that can be learned by heart. Those sentences are not meant to sit there as bare formulas; they are meant to become hooks on which we hang many passages of Scripture and many hours of preaching and teaching. Over time, the catechism becomes a kind of mental filing cabinet: when you hear a sermon on God’s attributes or on repentance or on the Lord’s Supper, you have a place to file it.

A catechism is also for *discipleship and unity* in the church. When parents, children, new believers, and long-time members are all learning the same questions and answers, we gain a shared vocabulary for talking about the things of God. It becomes easier to counsel, to correct, and to encourage one another when we already agree on the basic categories. Instead of each household inventing its own private way of “doing doctrine,” the church can walk together in a pattern of sound words that has been tested and proved.

Finally, a catechism is for *stability and protection*. We live in a time when doctrinal confusion is normal and error spreads quickly. A well-used catechism functions like a set of guardrails: it keeps us from drifting off into vague spirituality on one side or into novel speculations on the other. It reminds us, again and again, of the central things:

- Who God is
- What the gospel is
- What the church is
- What God requires of us for belief and practice

Used this way, a catechism is not *simply* an academic exercise, but a means God uses to root Christians more deeply in the truth so that they are not “*tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*” (*Ephesians 4:14*)

If you come all year, pay attention, and do a little bit of work at home during the week, by the end of the year, you will have a better systematic theology than most seminary graduates.

That said, the catechism does not cover every topic or every question of interest.

Catechism and Confession

A catechism and a confession of faith are closely related, but they are not the same thing. Both are human summaries of what Scripture teaches, and both are meant to serve the church, but they serve in different ways. A confession (like the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith) is a church's formal, public statement of doctrine. It is written article by article, in continuous prose, and it is meant to say, "This is what we, as a church, believe the Bible teaches." A catechism takes that same doctrinal content and rearranges it into short, memorizable questions and answers for teaching and discipleship.

You can think of the confession as the church's constitution, and the catechism as the teaching manual that grows out of that constitution. The confession gives fuller, more detailed treatments of each doctrine, often with careful distinctions that matter for ordination, church membership, and unity among elders and churches. The catechism takes the same truths and puts them on the bottom shelf: brief, clear answers that a child can memorize and a new believer can grasp. If you read the confession and the catechism side by side, you will find the same topics: God and his decrees, creation and providence, the fall and sin, the person and work of Christ, effectual calling, justification, sanctification, the church, the ordinances, and so on. The content is the same; the presentation is different.

Because of that, it is important to say that neither a confession nor a catechism stands above Scripture. Scripture alone is inspired, inerrant, and finally authoritative. Our confessions and catechisms are "subordinate standards": they have a kind of derivative authority only insofar as they faithfully echo what the Bible says. In our own congregation, the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BFM2000) is the formal doctrinal statement our elders have adopted and under which the ministries of the church operate. The Baptist Catechism that we are studying in this class is being used as a teaching tool, a way of organizing and expressing core doctrines clearly, in continuity with historic Baptist theology, while everything it says is tested by Scripture.

So when we study the Baptist Catechism, we are not studying something instead of the BFM2000, nor are we trying to smuggle in a new confession by the back door. Historically, this catechism reflects the theology of the 1689 London Baptist Confession, and I will occasionally point out those connections for those who are interested, but our main aim is much simpler: to learn to speak the truths of Scripture in a clear, ordered way that has served many Baptists well. My hope is that this catechism will give us language and categories that help us read our Bibles with greater clarity and also deepen our appreciation for the biblical truths summarized in the statement of faith our church has actually adopted (the BFM2000).

Common Concerns

Any time you mention a "catechism", certain questions and worries tend to surface, especially for those of us who did not grow up with this kind of instruction. It's better to bring those concerns out into the open and address them directly than to leave them buzzing in the background all year.

"Isn't this a Roman Catholic thing?"

For some, the word catechism immediately calls to mind the Roman Catholic Catechism or childhood memories from a very different church context. It's important to remember that the word itself is simply biblical language for orderly instruction in the faith. Long before Rome produced its modern catechism, Christians across the centuries—Augustine, the Reformers, the Puritans, and many Baptists—were catechizing believers, especially children, with short summaries of doctrine drawn from Scripture. So we are not borrowing a Roman practice and baptizing it; we are returning to a broader and older Christian practice that Protestants and Baptists have used gladly. This is just a common method for teaching any topic, whether religious or secular. This is also how we teach math.

“Doesn’t memorization just produce dead formalism?”

Memorization by itself does not produce faith; neither does ignorance. Scripture itself gives us short, repeatable summaries of truth ([Deuteronomy 6:4-5](#); [1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#); [1 Timothy 3:16](#)) and expects those to be taught and repeated. The problem is not knowing words *by heart*; the problem is knowing words *without the heart* (or not knowing the words at all). Our goal in using a catechism is not to train people to parrot answers they do not believe, but to put clear, biblical truth into our minds so that the Spirit can press it into our hearts. As we memorize, we will also explain, question, and apply what we are learning. The aim is warm, informed devotion to Christ, not cold recitation.

“Will this replace reading and teaching the Bible?”

No. If a catechism ever becomes a substitute for Scripture, it has been badly misused. In this class, the catechism is a *servant* of the Word, not a *competitor*. Each answer is meant to drive us toward specific passages and patterns in the Bible. We will constantly be asking, “Where do we see this in Scripture?” and we will open our Bibles together to find it. The catechism gives us sentences to hold in our heads; the Bible gives us the full, living voice of God speaking those truths into our lives. In this sense, the catechism *is* teaching the Bible, just using a different method. This is similar to how a sermon teaches what the Bible says without replacing the Bible itself as the authority.

“Isn’t this just for kids?”

Catechisms have often been written with children in mind, and rightly so. Children need clear, simple, orderly teaching. But that doesn’t mean adults are done with catechesis. Many of us have been in church for years and have never been required to state basic doctrines clearly. Walking through a catechism as adults exposes fuzzy spots in our thinking and helps bring our beliefs into sharper focus. The same questions and answers that help a child *begin* can help a mature believer *deepen* and *clarify* what they already confess. In that sense, catechism is *child-friendly*, but not *child-only*.

“What if I disagree with something in the catechism?”

This is a fair question, and in a church context like ours it needs to be asked. As we have already said, *Scripture alone is our final authority*. We saw earlier in this lesson that the 1689 LBCF begins with this assertion. The BFM2000 makes a similar assertion in Section I, The Scriptures:

[The Holy Bible / Scripture] reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.

Our congregation has adopted the BFM2000 as its doctrinal statement. This catechism is being used as a teaching tool, not as a new or replacement confession. If you come to a question where you’re not sure you agree with the wording or the emphasis, that is an *opportunity*, not a *threat*. Bring your Bible. *Ask questions*. Compare what the catechism says with what you see in Scripture and with what our own statement of faith says. Where there are differences of conviction at a finer level, we can talk about them openly and charitably. The goal of this class is not to pressure anyone into a particular historical confession, but to help all of us think more carefully and biblically about the faith we profess.

Conclusion

Taken together, the concerns above actually *highlight* why a catechism can be so valuable. It forces us to be explicit about what we believe and why, to distinguish between Scripture and human summaries, and to pursue *unity in truth* rather than *unity in vagueness*. If we keep the Bible open, keep our consciences bound to the Word of God, and use this catechism as a humble tool for teaching and remembering, it can greatly strengthen both our confidence in the gospel and our ability to pass it on.