

# Catechismal Christianity

by Jonathan Perz

Having faith and understanding your faith are two entirely different matters in modern Christianity. Many profess to have faith, and even show signs of that faith in various aspects of their lives, but have little or no understanding of the faith they cling to so tenaciously. What is the explanation for this phenomenon?

Is it possible that the faith of many is not based in God's word, but in catechisms? A catechism is defined as an oral instruction; a manual for catechizing; specifically a summary of religious doctrine often in the form of questions and answers; a set of formal questions as put as a test; something resembling a catechism especially in being a rote response or formulaic statement (Merriam Webster's Dictionary).

Catechisms exist in every denomination. They are sometimes called statements of faith, creeds, tenets of faith, and even testimonies. Some have written catechisms, which are occasionally modified and updated, as need requires. Others rely upon oral catechisms, handed down from generation to generation, teacher to student, preacher to convert. Catechisms even exist among those who are "non-denominational."

Why are these catechisms so dangerous? Why must we be concerned with them? How can we avoid catechisms' slippery slope?

## **Catechisms Become Creeds**

Over time, all catechisms become creeds. These creeds usually replace the teaching of God's word and often undermine the very word they are supposed to uphold. For example, many believe that salvation is by faith alone, but after careful consideration are forced to acknowledge that this teaching is not founded in Scripture, but in the creed books of men. Because this catechism is so deeply engrained, those who will not acknowledge the truth believe the lie (2 Thess. 2:11). Therefore, their faith is in their creed, not in God's word (Rom. 10:17).

Students of God's word are not solely to blame, as teachers of God's word often reinforce the catechism by not speaking as the oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11). Instead of emphasizing Scripture, they emphasize their synopses of Scripture. Instead of quoting the passage and then expounding upon it, they quote their catechism and then buttress it with proof texts. There is a world of difference between the two.

## **Catechisms Breed Spiritual Weakness**

Spiritual strength starts with a depth of knowledge and ends with the application of that knowledge. Consider the babe in Christ (1 Pet. 2:2; Heb. 5:12-14). When watered down summaries consistently replace solid, meaty, deep and principled teaching, depth of

understanding among the general populace of Christianity is nonexistent. This renders false teachers more influential, as there are less vanguards for them to overcome (Eph 4:14). False doctrines are then easily assimilated into the mainstream thinking. Besides this, the bar that measures faithfulness (Rom. 10:17) is consequently lowered by the mean knowledge of God's people. Those with the most knowledge become the leaders, though their knowledge is often catechismal.

### **Catechisms Create the Wrong Impression About Christianity**

When catechisms are emphasized, some of the most critical aspects of salvation are overlooked and deemphasized. Trying to uphold a statement of faith often results in neglect in areas Jesus said were important. For example, in an effort to be open and affirming, many neglect clear Biblical teaching to repudiate sinful conduct (Eph. 5:11-12; 2 Cor 6:14-18). This leaves people to believe that Christians are so loving, that they are not opposed to anything (e.g., homosexuality, adultery, fornication, etc.). In an effort to be kind and trusting, many neglect clear Biblical teaching to be wise and watchful (Matt. 10:16; Acts 20:29-31). This often results in Christians being stereotyped as naïve and gullible, rendering us easy prey in a dark and malicious world. Space fails to record the damage done by the emphasis of one doctrinal point over another. Christians must be careful not to strain out the gnats only to swallow a camel (Matt. 23:23-24).

### **Catechisms Eliminate the Struggle of Learning**

There are altogether too many lazy students of God's word today (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15; Phil. 2:12; Acts 17:10-11). Many want to stand on the shoulders of giants without first learning to stand on their own two feet. Christians want to gain knowledge by inspiration, not perspiration (1 Tim. 4:13, 15-16). There is far too much reliance upon preachers and teachers and far too little reliance upon God's word. Most memorize catechisms, not the underlying Scriptures which often disprove their catechisms. This is folly and building on the sand (Matt. 7:24-29).

The struggle of learning goes beyond the textbook ... beyond the catechism. While principles and expectations are clearly set forth in Scripture, the lessons God teaches can only be learned by practice and experience. Consider patience (Jas. 1:2-4). The caterpillar, if deprived of the struggle of breaking free of its cocoon will soon die, for its wings will not have the strength to fly.

### **Catechisms Stifle Healthy, Beneficial Study and Discussion**

A spiritual stifling and overbearing environment will inevitably cultivate stagnation and error. When one is apathetic and indifferent to all but their pet catechisms, they will stagnate in other key areas required for growth as a Christian (cf. 2 Pet. 1:5-11; 3:18). Catechisms are often insulated from honest investigation, making them perfect harbors for error and false doctrine. Since they are never questioned and examined, they are never seen for what they truly are—erroneous creeds that lead astray.

Furthermore, those who hold dear to catechisms either do not appreciate the benefits of healthy debate or improperly engage in the defense of their catechisms by resorting to unscrupulous tactics and hiding behind debating chicanery. No position or conviction should ever be withheld from honest evaluation. Such criticisms are not only good, they are commanded (cf. Acts 15; 1 John 4:1; Rom. 12:9).

### **Catechisms Produce an Unhealthy Reliance Upon Traditions**

Not all traditions are bad, but neither are all good (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15 and 1 Cor. 11:2 with Matt. 15:6). Many of the things practiced by Christians are founded in tradition, not in faith. Each and every denomination has those dearly held traditions that are given preeminence, even when their continued exaltation is detrimental to genuine faith. Many abhor lawful practices on principle, simply because they would undermine some long held tradition, regardless if the lawful practice would prove more fruitful and expedient than the long held tradition. The status quo becomes the catechism and anyone who would question the catechism is a change-agent, heretic, and troublemaker. It is not a question of what is authorized, it is a question of what we have always done.

### **Conclusion**

Catechismal Christianity is not conducive to growth, it instead festers decay (2 Pet. 3:18). It is not indicative of work, but typical of laziness (Phil. 2:12). It does not represent diligence, but it characteristic of indigence (2 Tim. 2:15—NKJV). Strict adherence to catechisms is tantamount to wearing a pair of glasses prescribed by Satan himself, they will blind you to the truth, they will never help you to be a disciple of Christ indeed and will never lead you to salvation. Let us determine to know the truth and truly be His disciples (John 8:31-32).