

[1961. "The Catechism." A Review of *The School of Faith* by Thomas F. Torrance. *Bible Presbyterian Reporter*, Vol VI, No. 3. Mar.]

THE CATECHISM

Gordon H Clark

Our grandfathers, when they were children, had memorized the Shorter Catechism. As they grew up, they probably read the Larger Catechism. Today some of us do not know that there is a Larger Catechism, and our children do not know that there is a Shorter Catechism. Even some ministers have not memorized it. In the Reformed Church of America and other Reformed churches, the same is doubtless true of the Heidelberg Catechism. And are there any of us who have heard of two catechisms written by John Craig, or even the Geneva Catechism written by John Calvin?

Thomas F. Torrance, Professor of Church Dogmatics in the University of Edinburgh, has prepared and Harper and Brothers has just published, under the title, *The School of Faith*, the texts of these catechisms along with The Little Catechism of 1556, The Latin Catechism of 1559, A Catechism for Young Children of 1641, and the New Catechism of 1644.

In this day when modern educators deride catechetical instruction, it is interesting to read something in its defense. Dr. Torrance insists that all education, secular as well as religious, requires impartation of some information. Reasoning without an object, reasoning about nothing, is futile. Some objective material must be furnished to the mind of the student. This is particularly true of Christian education because Christianity is an historical religion. There can be no knowledge of Christianity apart from information about the life and death of Jesus Christ; and there can be little knowledge about Christianity apart from further historical data. A knowledge of Christianity also requires doctrinal information. The historical events must be given their Christian interpretation. All this, a catechism does.

There is another advantage in catechetical instruction. Modern educators complain that the material in the catechisms is beyond the experience of children, and that good educational procedure will never outrun the child's ability to understand. Dr. Torrance does not agree. For the very reasons that the catechism goes beyond the child's level of comprehension, it tends to stretch and develop the child's understanding. Contrary to modern American theories, it is always good to give more than the pupil can grasp. And this is what a catechism does.

There is still another point in favor of catechetical instruction. Not only must a student be taught a certain amount of information, but he must also learn what questions you should ask. He must judge between silly and serious questions. He must distinguish between important and trivial questions. And at the least he must ask questions. The catechisms show us what questions to ask. Dr. Torrance thus makes a good case for teaching the Catechism, and it would be well if the readers of this article should introduce this system into their homes and Bible schools.

Most unfortunately in the 126 page introduction, Prof. Torrance does not do justice to the contents of the catechisms. His theological arguments are tinctured with some debilitating philosophy. His notion that truth

is "personal," which he borrows from a Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (p xxiv), his distaste for systematic theology (p. xliii), and his skepticism as to the value of logical validity (p. lxix), led him to a reputation of important sections of the Westminster catechisms.

According to Dr. Torrance the Westminster documents are too scholastic and rationalistic. The earlier catechisms were more free and biblical. One of his specifications is the (later) distinction between the Covenant of Grace, which God made with Abraham and with us, and the Covenant of Redemption, in which the Son covenanted with the Father to save the elect. Calvin is supposed to have had only the former, by which restriction he was able to keep the covenant subject to Christ. But the introduction of the Covenant of Redemption, which Calvin is not supposed to have thought of, subjects Christ to the Covenant idea and so overshadows Him and leads to disobedience to Him. Just how the Covenant of Redemption can overshadow Christ or minimize His position is something Dr. Torrance fails to explain. He even admits that the ability of his objection "is not very evident in the great champions of Covenant theology." Yet he proceeds to make the charge that "it was only with the massive attention given to the historical Jesus in the 19th century that the hardened Covenant idea broke up, it's formalistic grip upon Reformed theology was loosened, and the way was cleared for thorough-going obedience to Jesus Christ" (p.lxiv-lxv).

This is an amazing tribute to Modernism – to think that the quest of the historical Jesus, that 19th century movement which denied the messianic claims of Christ, or if admitting them concluded that Jesus was insane, has cleared the way for a thoroughgoing obedience to Christ which Covenant theology prevented! When it comes to estimating who was the more obedient to Christ, the Westminster divines or the 19th century theologians, the decision is not difficult to make.

This type of objection to Presbyterian theology occurs in several forms throughout the Introduction. In a meaningless play on words, the author commends the dialogical theology of the catechisms above dialectical theology – as if the truths enunciated were different when expressed in questions and answers from what they are when expressed in ordinary continuous form. Somehow only the Covenant of Grace is dialogical.

Theology must also be ecumenical. Dialogue must be maintained with all our brothers in Christ. Perhaps we may agree with Dr. Torrance on the wording of this remark; but by itself it leaves many questions unanswered. Let us ask: who are our brothers in Christ? With whom in particular must we maintain this dialogue? What organizations are to be regarded as true churches of Jesus Christ? Is the church of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) a Church of Jesus Christ? Dr. Torrance does not mention the Mormons; but he does mention the Roman Catholics. Now, the Westminster confession says, "There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof: but is that anti-christ, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ and all that is called God." (XXV, vi). In another section Romanists are classed with idolators.

But it is not only with the Roman Church that Dr. Torrance wishes to maintain relations. This ecumenical conversation, without which we lose the truth, must include the unbelieving Jews as well (p. lxix). Apparently to be a brother in Christ, it is not necessary to believe that Jesus is Lord. One may even believe that he was an imposter. Such is the science of ecumaniacs.

Nonetheless, it would be a good idea to buy the book and study the catechisms. Their authors were real Presbyterians and did not entertain the novel notions of their present editor. We can ignore the Introduction and

study sound Biblical doctrine as expressed by these eminent men of God.

END