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THE IMPORTANCE OF CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION.

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE
REVEREND E. EVANS,
BEFORE THE OFFICERS, TEACHERS, AND
PARENTS OF THE SCHOOLS OF THE
METHODIST SUNDAY SCHOOL,
FREDERICTON, JANUARY 29th, 1882.

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 them thy sons, and thy son's sons: specially the day that thou standest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live, upon the earth, and that they may teach their children.—Deut. iv. 9, 10.

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them, &c.—Deut. vi. 7.

I have to present unto you one of the most important subjects which can command the attention of the parent, the citizen, and the christian, for, upon a clear conception of its worth, and the right use of proper means, depends the welfare of future generations, the prosperity and stability of our country. Eminent thinkers of every school see that moral and religious education is the want of the age. A generation ago education was the one panacea for all the ills of society; but it was education very loosely defined, and supposed to be included in the three R's. The grand experiments which have been made on so vast a scale have, in a great measure, convinced all observers of every creed, except the atheist, that something more is wanted; that some other element must be introduced to make education useful for the public weal. All this the believer in the bible knew and felt before, but the testimony and arguments of such were rejected as one-sided and prejudiced, and therefore unfit to sway the public councils.

But there are abundant indications that the public mind is returning to a sounder judgment on this subject, and it is seen that the mere communication of knowledge may result in either evil or good, and if divorced from moral influence it is more likely to result in the former than the latter: that the familiar adage that "knowledge is power," presents but half the truth, for without knowledge exerts a moral potency it becomes a positive weakness. Hence that knowledge can have any intrinsic value in and of itself alone is, indeed, the superstition of rationalism and clairvoyance, and is no less misleading than is the merely commercial view of it. Yes, great authorities in education, especially among the Germans, have adopted this maxim, "that life without knowledge is better than knowledge which does not affect life." Philosophers and professional educationists are agreeing with preachers in proclaiming the obligation of a family, the church, and the state, to give a moral as well as an intellectual training; yes, that the obligation is stronger to give the former than the latter. All this is but a faint repetition of the words of the great royal philosopher, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting get understanding." Wisdom, that is knowledge combined with high moral principles and practice. The beginning of this wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Its support and also its outgrowth is confidence in God—"Trust in the Lord with all thy heart; and lean not to thine own understanding."

On account of the vast importance of this moral knowledge, it is necessary that we consider the best methods of instruction. In taking the bible for our guide, we do so with the renewed confidence which its victory over opposing theories and practices in the educational, as well as in other fields, is calculated to produce; and in this as in all practical duties of life we shall find it as David found it, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

In discussing the subject of catechetical instruction I shall, first, glance at the meaning of the texts.

I. The Scriptural authority and precedents for catechetical instruction. In the texts quoted there are three words employed, all of them eminently suggestive, as indicating the method of instruction, and the subjects in which this special method must be employed. One of these words means to cause to know, to use means to impress upon the mind, to teach by experience or by punishment. Effective measures are to be taken so that the mind shall be fully to comprehend, grasp and retain the facts and truths committed to it. The other word, in the first text, is from a root signifying to beat with a rod, hence, to discipline, to train, to drill, to teach. Here we see the idea of constant drill, of patient discipline, of continued repetition, that the mind may become familiar with the truths communicated, that the memory may evince a readiness in recalling the lessons and an easy facility of answering, and an equal ease in applying the truth to the circumstances of life. It implies elementary moral truth ready in the mind for all practical use. The other word, used in

Deut. vi. 7, translated "teach diligently," means in its root rapid repetition, hence to sharpen by rapid rubbings; and, in the text, to sharpen in or sharpen up, as by repeated questions and replies, and thus to inculcate the doctrines of God, and enforce them in daily practice.

Now, these words, which were used by Moses in his last solemn address to the people, to show the people what they were to teach, and how they were to teach, are all of them singularly expressive of that mode which is called catechetical, by question and answer orally given. The substance is also equivalent to that contained in our catechisms or books containing a body of elementary knowledge, religious and moral. For the commandments given on Sinai were an important part of this teaching, and the great facts of their history another, thus agreeing with the catechism, it being a brief, simple statement of Christian doctrines and a plain epitome of bible history, both the method and substance being a counterpart to those commanded by the Lord to be used by the Israelites, his chosen people, in the training of their children, and this mode of instruction they continued, notwithstanding their forgetfulness of many of the laws delivered unto them, till the days of the Saviour; and Solomon referred to a constant practice when he said, "Hear ye children the instruction of a father." The whole instruction of the Jews was based on the methods indicated by these words and set forth in the texts. This must be understood not only of the training of mere children, but also, in a great measure, of the methods pursued in their Rabbinical schools for their scribes and doctors of the law. After the days of the Saviour we know that they had a catechism to aid parents and teachers in this duty. As might be expected, the same practice was adopted in the first teaching of Christianity, for years passed before there was a New Testament to teach from; but its truths and facts were catechetically taught, and thousands of the early converts received all they knew from this source; indeed, we find St. Luke referring to the practice by the very word we use to express it. For Luke writes unto the most noble Theophilus, perhaps a Roman of some rank, that he might know more fully and certainly the doctrines wherein he had been catechized. This, as Oostersee observes, is one of the earliest historical traces of ancient Christian catechizing, of which the history of the Lord formed the basis, and on this rested the specific Christian doctrines. Dr. P. Schaff's comment on this verse is pertinent and instructive. "Literally catechized—the specific word should have been retained here and elsewhere, instead of the more indefinite instruct or teach. Catechizing is a primitive and most important institution of the Church, and a preparatory school for full membership." Archbishop Usher says, "The neglect of catechizing is the frustration of the whole work of the ministry." We find St. Luke again defining the exact way in which Apollo, an Alexandrian Jew and a learned man, had been instructed in the way of the Lord—It was by catechizing; by this method he had obtained all the knowledge he had of the life of Jesus, and which he used when he "taught carefully the things concerning Jesus." Paul uses the same word to describe the few learned in his law, quick to discern that which is at variance with the will of God; he is one who had been catechetically instructed in his youth, as well as by hearing the law expounded on the Sabbath.

We thus see by these three incidental allusions, how prevalent this mode of instruction was in New Testament times, as might have been expected, when we remember by whose authority the custom had been originated and enforced. And it is no valid objection to assert that there were no books of instruction like our catechisms used by Jews or Christians at this period, the form is but incidental; then, both Jews and Christians, had by this system of oral teaching a small, compact, serviceable body of simple truths stored in their memories, out of which they could also instruct others by the same method. But, it was liable to error and failure, and hence arose, as by necessity, certain definite forms of statement, having the authority of eminent teachers and churches, as was fully shown immediately afterwards. By the recent discovery of important documents we are able to trace minutely the system adopted by the Church of Alexandria soon after the death of St. John, that very Alexandria where Apollo had his training, for the instruction of those who were taught under her auspices, and without which training it was impossible for any one to become a member. This system of instruction, we also know, was universally followed by the Christian Church at that period. Of all her institutions the most important was that for the training of catechumens. None were admitted into membership without a long course of catechetical instruction, which lasted three years. This teaching was given to the catechumens before the hour of worship; it was divided into three parts corresponding to the number of years em-

ployed. The first was the inculcation of the true character of God, who is the Maker, Ruler and Father of all beings. The second division was the doctrine of Christ and his relation as Son, and his work, also of the Holy Ghost. The third, the history of revelation, the work of salvation, and Christian morals, based on the ten commandments, enlarged and spiritualized by the New Testament teaching; the great doctrine of the Saviour was enforced—"Love is life, the beginning and the end of the law." The first principles of the Christian religion were taught, in order and clearly, by these catechists, and the more advanced were referred to the Holy Scriptures as the supreme authority. The best men were selected for this office, and Clement and Origen labored as catechists and gloried in the name, and laymen were called to it as well as those filling the ministerial office. Thus did the early Christian Church, following the law of God, teach all placed under her care, enforcing this knowledge of religion and morals as taught in the Scriptures; and when this practice declined, and formal and mummeries took the place of scriptural instruction, she lost her power and her brightness waned. Under our present constitution the scholars of our Sabbath School may be considered as catechumens, receiving the religious instruction suitable for their age, and preparing them for that day when their knowledge shall become practice by their personal seeking of the Lord the Saviour. At the Reformation this mode of teaching was again revived, and extensively used; and Luther issued his larger and smaller catechisms, and in this practice he was followed by all the Reformed Churches, and has been adopted by our own. In the series of three catechisms we have a body of truth simple and concise, embodying the substance of scriptural teaching; to teach which should be at once our duty and our delight. That it is our duty is evident from the Scriptures expounded, enforced by the example of the ancient Church, and illustrated by its use at the Reformation, and the most happy results which followed; and, in our position as parents and teachers of the Methodist Church, enjoined upon us by the rules we have solemnly promised to keep. I will now proceed to show—

II. The reasonableness of catechetical instruction. The hatred manifested in these days to all definite teaching is shown in the attitude displayed by many against the method of oral teaching. For, its very essence is clear definiteness, its doctrines are sharply set forth, and its notions and language are out of place. A catechism sets out by sharp outlines the teaching of the Bible, as viewed by its author, and authorizes. Those opposed to religious teaching of any kind, and to the bible, set wisely in ridiculing this practice; it is their deadliest foe, and places obstacles in their path which they can seldom remove. To have a body of Christian principles lodged in the mind in the impressionable period of childhood and youth is to secure a vantage ground which can stand many and forcible attacks. Opposition to such training by professed Christians can only, in most cases, arise from ignorance. The method is founded upon the deepest principles of our mental constitution, and upon the character and form of the inspired writings. It is followed by every teacher, and receives the assent and support of all engaged in the great work of education. For an illustration, turn to the works and methods of teaching science, these being outside of our range of instruction may be used for obtaining and illustrating the truth impartially. The vast fields of nature are spread before us, the carpeted earth with all its varied tints of green and brown and golden yellow, the mountains with their misty peaks, the running brook with its babbling story, the rushing rapid, and tremendous cataract, and its terrific storms, the bursting clouds and tempestuous winds, the vivid lightning and awful thunder, the majestic sun and twinkling stars, the vast panorama of nature open for our gaze, a stupendous volume with many leaves, which we may continually turn over, look at, wonder and admire. How does the united wisdom of the learned concur in instructing the youthful student? Is he led by his teacher into coal-dirt and mine, or rocky peak or soaring of our range of instruction may be used bit to form a political constitution or a grammar of the language? Or is the student led from court to court, or parliament to parliament, and then commanded to form a system of jurisprudence or concoct a plan of the best method of government? By none of these methods is he taught; but, first of all, from carefully prepared summaries or catechisms of sci-

ence he is taught the first principles, and from thence to others more advanced is he led onward so comprehend, in some measure, the length and breadth and exquisite beauty and manifold adaptations and relations of the science he is studying, and for its verification he looks upon and tests the things themselves; and he is always taught to refer to nature as the authority for the lessons given him. Then, after a proper course of study, is he ready to go forth and interrogate nature herself and obtain answers which shall expand his own soul and instruct others.

Now look at the Bible which presents its wealth before us. What a variety! "God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." Sixty-six different books, by many authors running over the whole scale of human compositions, history, law, poetry, philosophy, apophthegms, and what no more human production can claim revelation and prediction, discoursing upon the profoundest subjects man can contemplate, and truths which are so vital to his well-being, that he had better have never been born than to overlook or refuse them. Requiring sixteen centuries for their composition, full of references to ancient peoples, kindoms, languages and customs; containing divine revelations of grace and salvation, yet these having distinct references to the conditions, sins and heresies of the times. Is it any more wonderful or unreasonable that the same method should be pursued in communicating this religious and important knowledge, which is so successfully adopted in that which is secular. The mind of man craves for orderly arranged truths and in the catechism we have the whole range of biblical truth, in some of its most important relations and applications, placed before the learner, easy to be understood and committed to memory, while its form, to use the words of the text which sharpens the mind, imparts a keenness of perception and an equal sharpness in reproduction or answering. Disentangled from the history and temporal form we have the saving truth of the bible brought within the compass of a child's understanding and memory. And as he advances the language of scripture is used to show the truthfulness of his lessons, and he is exhorted to read and study this source of all truth. Is not this most reasonable and judicious; and does not the practice of all engaged in teaching the young, sustain the method, a method commanded by God and honored by him when faithfully observed?

So, following the command of God to teach these eternal verities to our children, and the custom of the apostolic and post-apostolic age, we seek to give them an orderly and brief acquaintance with Scriptural truth. They are instructed in the knowledge of God, his perfections, the person and character and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the person and office of the Holy Spirit, man's state as a fallen creature, salvation, its nature and blessed results—the way to attain it. The morals of the Old Testament, enforced by the teaching of the New, and the future state of man.

But, does some one object—"It is true that the method described is the proper one for teaching science, or all other branches of knowledge, excepting this?" But you forget that, in this teaching, we expect divine aid and illumination, and need not, therefore, depend on human aids and expeditives to such a degree. "If any man will to do his will he shall know of the teaching whether it be of God." And, again, "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." I most cordially agree in the main with much of this advanced, and believe that an earnest soul will not be left long in darkness respecting the way of salvation. But obtaining knowledge for ourselves and teaching others are very different processes. Many a man comes to Jesus and receives his salvation, who can give no very intelligible account of either the spiritual changes he has passed through, or the doctrines he believes. And, after all, these texts sustain the use of the catechism: We rejoice in the fulfillment of the Saviour's word in the past, as well as in the present. The great spiritual and intellectual giants of the past "feared the Lord" and will "to do his will." Martyrs and confessors, choosing hardship and imprisonment and death, because they would do his will, spending days and nights in studying his word, in constant conflict with his foes, and in controversy with the prevailing heresies of their days. Their moral grandeur and towering loftiness of soul was only equalled by their mental vigor. If any men penetrated into the secret of the Lord, surely these did it! If any men knew the doctrine whether it be of God, surely these did it! Origen, Augustine, Luther, to mention no later names fought and wrestled on the great battle fields of the church. As the result of these eighteen centuries of conflict we have the clear definite statements of christian doctrine, which are compressed in the small compass of a humble catechism, to give the same truth

learning, and the unflinching zeal, the exalted piety, the moral heroism of these champions of christian truth, left no abiding result, afforded no help in the understanding of God's truth. Is the christian of to-day able to dispense with their labours and can he by his own efforts scale the sublime peaks of truth which it has taken the church eighteen centuries to achieve. If it were not a lamentable fact it might be supposed impossible that any christian would advance such an assertion. Yet alas such is the pride and arrogance of the age, that some persons possessed of but a limited acquaintance with the Bible itself, and whose piety, spiritual attainments and intellectual grasp of its truths are not to be mentioned in comparison with the great church teachers of the past and present, are found saying: "Oh! I will teach the Bible. No catechism for me." As if in teaching the one they were not teaching the other. Another urged is this "I will not teach the catechism because it contains doctrines, children cannot understand." I am sure such objectors have not sufficiently considered the force of the words they utter. For the doctrines are in the catechism because they are in the bible. If you cease teaching the one on this account, so you must the other. It is not seen that there is a great difference between the statement of a fact or truth, in simple and plain language which a child can understand, and the explanation of the fact or truth, which a philosopher could not give, and even which if given to him by a superior being, he could not comprehend with the present limited range of the human intellect.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, is the inspired truth we teach our children and they comprehend it as far as it is needful. But nevertheless that simple statement is the puzzle of all philosophy and of all science too. You object to teach the Unity of the Godhead and the Trinity of persons, the regeneration of the heart, the sanctification of our nature, because a child cannot understand them. Then you have no right to believe these truths yourself; for I am sure neither you nor any man fully comprehends them. They are all divine mysteries in their nature, yet a sufficient knowledge of them we may all possess, even children. Your principle would cut off all teaching by the root; your child is taught at school the wonderful influence of the powers of gravitation, he understands a great deal about it, its modes of operation and laws; but does he know what it is, or did Newton know, or any, or all the men of science of to-day, know what it is? No. Yes, and these scientific men will tell you that it takes for granted that, which is opposed to all experience and all philosophical thought. He is instructed about light and its waves, and learns much about it, all, perhaps, that is practically useful; but he does not understand its nature, nay, not even his teacher, nor any man, and the theory of it implies assumptions, which are preposterous. So, with electricity and the most common things of nature. A sufficient knowledge of doctrine we may all have, a full knowledge is denied to all.

But most of these objections really are rooted in a dislike to some truth taught therein. The tendency of the public mind is towards a hazy and nebulous theology, which, like a fleecy cloud, may assume many forms and varied tints in a few minutes. So a catechism, like a creed or confession, becomes an object of hatred to them. They desire full scope for an unrestricted fancy, and unlimited field of opinion, unfettered by any way-mark or beacon erected in the past. So-called broad or liberal in their views, they are generally the most narrow and illiberal, because their creed is held only by themselves. It was originated where it will die, and where all its disciples were found, in the bosom of its owner. The case of Dr. Thomas, of Chicago, is an illustration of this. He became too narrow for the broad catholicity of the church of which he was a minister. That church has in its standard a full, broad statement of the doctrine of the Atonement. But he fell in with a limited, and a very limited view of it, which had respect to the human side only of the Saviour's death; and, therefore, to preserve her own members who used inspired words, and spoke of Christ as "brought as a lamb to the slaughter," or as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," from being taunted as believers in "the butcher theory." She justly expelled him, and let him go to find a narrower and a narrower creed.

Surveying the whole subject, I am confident that while there may be a great deal of Bible reading, that much of its value is lost for want of this foundation work; and the view obtained of its truths is confused and fragmentary; and that a catechumen of the early church after his three years' instruction, and when he made his profession of faith by repeating what is called the Apostles' Creed, or the youthful Vaudois, who led with his persecuted parents to Alpine peaks for refuge

from the persecutor, and knew only the "Noble Lesson" which had been taught him from early childhood, had a firmer grasp and a nobler conception of the blessed contents of the sacred writings, than many a youth who passes through the desultory reading and teaching of many modern Sunday schools, and which practice is thought by some to be the very acme of perfection. I now briefly glance.

III. At the importance of Catechetical Instruction. It is not only commanded, as we have seen, and reasonable, as I have endeavored to show, but the most blessed results follow.

We are instilling the first principles of the doctrine of God in the hearts of our children, that they may not be carried about by every wind of doctrine and foolish craftiness of men lying in wait to deceive them. We use our advantage, seizing the first chance to imbue the mind with truth ere it is occupied by error. With what scrupulous care we watch over our children to preserve them from the deadly diseases which everywhere lurk to carry them off and desolate our homes. But what deadly malism there is diffused in literature and in conversation; it reaches them when, and where, we little suppose. This poisonous breath is inhaled, it cannot be baneful; but we have untold opportunities when the mind is eager, sensitive and favourably disposed when the impressions made are almost sure to be ineffaceable, when the operations of divine grace are less likely to be resisted, which grace we should always expect as promised and typified in baptism.

What precious moments are these; what golden opportunities; parents, teachers, use them, they will never return.

It would aid the public ministry of the word, for how much of this falls unavailing, because of the lack of this careful preparation for it. It would create a sense of the value of religion in the heart of the child. It would be impossible for a parent to teach these "words" diligently unto his children and talk of them sitting in the house, walking by the way, when lying down and when rising up, without a sense of the nearness of God and the importance of religion growing in the child mind to an extent which would surprise those who have not obeyed the command of the Lord. A sense of God would be cultivated, and the heart suitably prepared for the reception and saving belief of the more advanced truths of our holy religion in after years.

This duty cannot be delegated to others, they may aid, but the responsibility is with the parent. The decline of parental authority on this continent is universally acknowledged and deplored; and the evil consequences may become far more apparent than they are at present. The cause is evident, the commands of the Lord in this as in other respects have been ignored, and disastrous results have followed. "Whosoever a man soweth that shall he also reap"; is an eternal and immutable decree of divine government. The truth is not only to be received and cherished by the parent, but it must be taught to the children. "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"; and that a part of the divine law, and which follows is equally binding, "but teach them, thy sons, and thy son's sons." No church, and no teacher, however ardent and faithful in the execution of their respective duties, can absolve the parent from his duty. It is of divine appointment. I entreat you to train your youthful charge "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Fathers are repeatedly addressed in the New Testament thus to care for and train their children. But alas how many neglect the plainest precept of the word.

It is teaching for eternity. When all other knowledge shall have passed away this shall remain. Of all training this shall be the most eventful and productive. When science, art and commerce, shall have completed their round and fulfilled their office in the divine economy for the education of mankind; only then in full prospect of never-ending ages and cycles of ages, shall we be able to estimate, aright the value of saving truth, the unapproachable dignity and importance of the parental office and the responsibility of the teacher's vocation.

My dear friends I have endeavored to be faithful, in dealing with you on this all important subject; what I have said will be received in the spirit of love. If I have failed in directness of application, may your diligence in seeking in this book for divine guidance make amends for my lack. May the blessing of Almighty God rest upon your labours as teachers and upon your training and example as parents that at the great day each may be able to say in the presence of the assembled myriads, "Behold I, and the children the Lord hath given me."

AMEN.