

Pilgrimage in the Mode of Hope: Thoughts on the Usefulness of Catechism

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Catechism and Christian Formation

It has been said that in some churches and homes the catechism is like “the grandfather’s clock that stands on the stairway landing, ‘grim and unyielding,’ defying removal, a valued heirloom, *but isn’t running anymore*.”¹ Most in our day would not describe catechetical material as beautiful, and so can identify with a “grim” portrait, but quite apart from literary aesthetics, we might wish to ask: is the catechism even “running anymore”? As we explore the multitude of educational options for our congregations, do we appreciate the usefulness of the catechism for the formation of disciples?

As Presbyterians we traditionally love our catechisms, and well we should. How many believers have been encouraged by the reminder that our God is not only “almighty, knowing all things” (which on its own is not necessarily comforting) but also “most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (WLC 7)? How wonderful is that catechetical refrain, and yes, how beautiful! Similarly, the language of WSC 3 (“What do the Scriptures principally teach?”) is justly famous for the way it expresses perhaps the principal Christian concern. What can the reader of God’s Word expect to find there? We learn here that those whose end it is to glorify and enjoy God (WSC 1) will find in the Scriptures “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” This is our duty and delight, to glorify and enjoy God, and recalling the language of the catechism here has helped establish many saints in their confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture for their journey in grace.

For these and a multitude of similar reasons we place a high premium on the truths of that Word which teaches us of our Creator and of the way of obedience which pleases him. And in this quest for faithfulness, I expect that in many or even most of our churches we recognize the immense value of the catechism not only for instruction but for forming disciples. We teach it to our children, sometimes needing first to teach it to ourselves, and we do so praying that God will be pleased to use these truths to form them into faithful members of the Body of Christ. Far from a dusty, dry exercise, we recognize that a firm hold on the grammar of the Faith is important not only for the sake of theological orthodoxy but for establishing and deepening the connectedness among members of the community of faith. We are thus eager to hear our children recite the answers perfectly, especially when they become able to demonstrate understanding, but, again, we realize even this is only a big part of a bigger picture of community formation, of the cultivation of the life of discipleship.

¹ Wade C. Smith, “Bringing the Skeleton Out of the Closet,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 12, no. 11 (July 15, 1953): 2; cited by David B. Calhoun, “Loving the Westminster Confession and Catechisms,” *Presbyterion* 33/2 (Fall 2006): 66.

Of course, as Reformed Christians we refuse to use the catechism to the neglect of the Word itself. No, we train disciples in the catechism because we know such training helps the Church to benefit more from the study and preaching of the Bible, and thus to be shaped by that Word. This refusal to allow catechism to eclipse Scripture is an eminently Reformed concern. In his discussion of the practice of Reformed piety, historian Philip Benedict points to a seventeenth-century example of the importance of the Bible together with the catechism: “Whereas the school ordinances of Lutheran Germany rarely ordered classroom Bible reading, preferring instead the memorization of doctrinally safe catechisms,” he notes, “the authorities of the Reformed parts of Hesse mandated the use of the Bible. Full editions of the Bible aimed specifically at young people were also distinctive to Reformed regions of Germany.”² As prominent as the role of the catechism is in Reformed churches, the catechism cannot displace the centrality of the Word of the living God. But not only are the Scriptures and catechism not in tension; there is evidence that they have always belonged together.

First Peter as Catechetical Material

In what follows I am going to take a somewhat unusual approach in my contribution to this issue of *Ordained Servant* on the catechism. Instead of examining the history or some portion of the catechetical parts of our own Westminster Standards, the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, I want to go “behind” these documents to offer some reflections on the catechism in general – the “idea” of catechism, one might say. And in these reflections I will infer the usefulness of the catechism (or catechetical material) for the formation of God’s people from the genre and content of the First Epistle of Peter.³

Many scholars have observed that most of the content of 1 Peter is elementary Christian teaching and for this reason two major theories have emerged regarding its genre. What kind of letter is 1 Peter? How should we identify this body of basic instruction? One theory is that 1 Peter is a catechetical document in letter (epistolary) form. A second theory suggests that it is a particular kind of catechetical document, namely a baptismal homily or liturgy. We should note, however, that both theories see 1 Peter as predominantly catechetical, whether in general or of a specific sort.⁴ Scholars have not

² Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 510.

³ Tracing the self-conscious concern in the biblical texts for theological education in connection with community formation has become a major area of investigation in biblical studies. For a representative OT example, note Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Brueggemann’s study is stimulating at points but his unorthodox doctrine of Scripture, which controls his approach throughout, renders his work ultimately unsatisfying and unhelpful.

⁴ For literature, see Philip Carrington’s influential proposal for 1 Peter as a catechetical document, *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), and M. É. Boismard, *Quatres hymnes baptismales dans la première épître de Pierre* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1961) for the baptismal liturgy argument. Consult the introductions in commentaries for discussion of the issues and for references to further studies.

reached a consensus on this question, and I will not enter into the debate here. But seeing 1 Peter as a catechetical letter, or perhaps better, a letter containing a large percentage of catechetical material, seems to me to be sound and beyond serious dispute.

For instance, comparing 2:13-3:7 – material concerned with submission in various contexts, such as citizen-emperor, servant-master, wife-husband, as well as the conduct of husbands toward their wives – with parallel passages in Ephesians and Colossians we observe that there has already emerged a common tradition of elementary teaching, a body of material and language commonly received and understood to encapsulate faithfully certain fundamental features of the Christian faith and ethic.⁵ Immediately previous to this material, the opening chapters of the Epistle reflect a concern for similarly basic instruction, but in this case the material is more didactic and theological rather than ethical. However, though the material in 1 Peter is evidently common among early Church communities, this does not mean Peter does not use it for his own purposes. As one would expect, Peter shapes his letter in a way that best reflects his own particular concerns. Though more could be said along these lines, in short, as a major example of biblical catechetical material, the Epistle of 1 Peter is a rich resource for the Church's thinking about the educational facet of its life.

Because some Christians perceive catechetical teaching as a post-biblical, and in some cases, unbiblical tradition (perhaps a relic of Roman Catholicism), the quantity of catechetical material in 1 Peter, as well as its genre, should be instructive. Beyond genre considerations, however, the actual content of 1 Peter is most intriguing, for it suggests the kinds of theological and ethical themes that belonged to the basic truths of the Faith held in common by the churches. And here is our real interest. What theological themes do we encounter here? There are many, but since our purpose is not a full study of 1 Peter's theology, we can highlight *pilgrimage* and the *hope of final salvation* as two of its principal themes.

Peter, Pilgrims, and Progress toward Glory

From the outset of 1 Peter we learn the Church is a community on pilgrimage to a heavenly, incorruptible inheritance (1:3-9). The Church has this inheritance because she has been given new birth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Moreover, this birth is into a living hope, one which lifts the eyes of pilgrims to the salvation “about to be revealed at the last day” (v 5). As Petrine scholar J. Ramsey Michaels notes, “This salvation is not so much something that will come to them as something to which they must go. It is the future ‘goal’ or ‘outcome’ (*telos*) of their faith

⁵ The inclusion of ethical or moral content makes 1 Peter similar to the earliest catechetical material in the first centuries of the Church. On this and related matters see the fine work of Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 1: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). On the early catechumenate, see Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries* (trans. by Edward J. Hassl; New York: Sadlier, 1979) and J. A. Jungmann, *Handing on the Faith: A Manual of Catechetics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959).

(v. 9).⁶ This future orientation sets up the dominant note Peter sounds on the subject of faith: the faith which characterizes the pilgrim community of the faithful is one that perseveres and endures through the “various ordeals” of the present (vv. 5-6, 9). “Tested and proven faithfulness will be exchanged for ‘praise, glory, and honor at the time when Jesus Christ is revealed’ (v 7).”⁷ Thus, in 1 Peter the salvation-hope commended to believers is one wholly consistent with their pilgrim identity: it is a salvation that, though a present certainty in view of the resurrection of Christ, in an equally important respect still lies *ahead*. It is a salvation that awaits the faithful in Christ, that stands at the end of the journey of discipleship. As we advance step by step in the path to eternal life, as we press on by faith with a view to our inheritance and salvation (1:4-5), we do so as those who are called to “marvelous light” or “eternal glory” (1:9). The end of this journey or pilgrimage will mean the sure salvation of all who belong to the Father. As a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” we are also “a people destined for salvation (2:9).”⁸

The motif of the Christian life as a journey or pilgrimage is a major one in 1 Peter,⁹ and so it is with good reason that Michaels has explored the commonalities between this NT letter and Bunyan’s great allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*. However, the pilgrimage theme also highlights an area where 1 Peter and *Pilgrim’s Progress* are discontinuous with much evangelical thinking. Michaels takes up the idea of “going to heaven when we die” and states the problem “is not with the notion of ‘going to heaven,’ but with the qualifying clause ‘when we die.’ For in the New Testament the journey to heaven begins not at death but at the moment a person is called to discipleship.”¹⁰ This is particularly the case in 1 Peter.

Related to the problematic idea of “going to heaven when we die” is the identification or equation of “salvation” with justification, or, in terms of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the moment Pilgrim/Christian loses his burden at the foot of the cross and watches it roll into the tomb. In my copy, this takes place only 41 pages into the story, with 144 pages yet to

⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, “Going to Heaven with Jesus: From 1 Peter to Pilgrim’s Progress,” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 250.

⁷ Michaels, “Going to Heaven with Jesus,” 251.

⁸ Michaels (“Going to Heaven with Jesus,” 251) translates *laos eivj peripoi,hsin* (v. 9) as “a people destined for vindication;” cf. idem, *1 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1988), 109-110. His objections to the NRSV (“God’s own people”) and NIV (“a people belonging to God”) partly on the grounds that the preposition *eivj* has here a distinctly future orientation, is understandable but in my view a more comprehensive reality than vindication is in view. For this reason I prefer, “destined for possession” or perhaps even “salvation,” so long as our understanding of “salvation” keeps in view the comprehensively transformative-constitutive feature of the new creation and is not reduced, as it often is, only to its (nevertheless real and indispensable) forensic or acquittal feature.

⁹ Peter’s “appeal” in 2:11 is directed to “aliens and strangers,” an identification which, in contrast with some current scholarship, is not sociological but metaphorical. Hence the message is extended beyond the immediate audience in their situation to the Church at large.

¹⁰ Michaels, “Going to Heaven with Jesus,” 249.

go.¹¹ Rather than the end or center of the story, Bunyan sees the journey to the Celestial City as having only just begun with the lost burden, so that all that follows his encounter with the cross – the dramatic struggles, temptations, and ultimate perseverance of Christian – is far from dispensable or marginal to his journey to Zion. While he is forgiven he is still not “fully” saved, one might say. For example, there is even a sense in which Christian, as he encounters Vanity Fair in the town of Vanity, never quite leaves the City of Destruction until he is fully and finally received into the Celestial City. One of the more sobering statements comes at this final stage of his journey, in Bunyan’s penultimate sentence, when we learn that Christian saw “that there was a way to hell even from the gates of heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction.”¹²

We easily discover these *Pilgrim’s Progress* themes in 1 Peter as the Apostle focuses the hope of pilgrims on that which lies ahead, and sees the Christian’s salvation story as incomplete until grace has given way to final and full glory. But beyond its nature, Peter also goes on to say something about the character of this pilgrimage. In 1 Peter the journey of faith is christologically shaped; that is, the Church’s path to eschatological life bears the unmistakable impression of the Lord to whom she is united. Much like the Synoptic Gospels and reflecting a major theme in the Apostle Paul’s letters, discipleship in 1 Peter involves suffering with Christ. As “Christ also suffered for [us]” so he left us “an example, that [we] might follow in his footsteps” (2:21). It appears that in 1 Peter suffering is not something we are called to do, so much as something that in the nature of the case we are to expect. Rather than suffering *per se*, we are called to obedience, to do good (3:13, 17). The substantial sections on suffering with and like Christ (2:19-25; 3:8-22) are in fact the centerpiece of Peter’s teaching on discipleship, and this adds an important feature to his pilgrimage theme. Taken together with the hope of glory, Peter’s characterization of the Church as a pilgrim community on a journey to heaven that is marked by suffering with Christ belongs to the heart of his catechetical instruction.

What should we conclude from all of this? Because our intention has not been to provide a full, scholarly analysis of 1 Peter, we will keep our conclusions modest and focused on our chief point of interest: catechism and Christian formation. A major point to keep in view is this: in this letter, Peter evidently believes the future aspect of the Church’s salvation, her pilgrim identity and heavenly inheritance that together shape her self-understanding in the present, and the struggles and ordeals that mark her days of discipleship – in short her *eschatological identity and hope* – belong to the elementary, foundational features of the faith once delivered. With this in view we can capture the aim of Peter’s catechetical or didactic material by saying that the Apostle is interested in *cultivating and nurturing faith in the mode of eschatological hope*. We can say that when commending the essential threads of the fabric of the Christian faith he has in view not the immediate and the pragmatic but the long-term and the eschatological. Here,

¹¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, The Nelson Classics (Illust. by R. H. Brock; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, n.d.).

¹² Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 172. The point is made in Stanley Fish, “Progress in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1972), 224-64.

catechism, as basic instruction in points of Christian teaching, serves to shape the community of the faithful in hope of eternal life.

Reflections: Hope, Eschatology, and the Formation of a Pilgrim Community

As church officers we ought always to ask how we might be more faithful as educators of the body of Christ. Keeping in view our theme that education in the Faith belongs to the broader goal of community formation in the image of the glorious Christ – not only intellectually (seen narrowly as the bare acquisition of correct theological language) but ethically (in terms of obedience in all its forms) – it is clear this is not an unimportant question. At the very least, as an instructive example of the early Church’s perspective on the core content of the Christian confession and life, the catechetical material of 1 Peter presses us to examine our assumptions about basic theological instruction in our churches. In particular, it appears to me that the plainly eschatological orientation with which Peter operates in his discussions of the Church’s identity and hope, as well as the gospel by which she lives, needs to find its way into our educational endeavors. If, with Peter (and the rest of the Old and New Testaments), we believe eschatology is the context within which we must locate the identity and hope of the Church, this needs to find expression practically in our churches.

Allow me to be more concrete. As officers of the Church, I would commend to you what Peter’s letter suggests implicitly about discipleship or Christian formation, and in particular the catechetical or teaching *content* which this process includes. While we might be inclined to consider the “eschatological” in Scripture and theology an important but (at least functionally) peripheral part of the Christian faith (and thus something to be left for “advanced” or spiritually mature Christians in their special classes or reading groups), this mentality does not measure up to the evidence of New Testament faith and practice. Peter, at least, is evidently convinced the eschatological features of the Christian faith outlined above belong not to an advanced Christian education curriculum but to the basic, foundational body of teaching with which the faithful should be instructed and encouraged. If we remember that 1 Peter is heavily catechetical in genre (or at least in the nature of its content) perhaps we will find here a challenge to our own perceptions about what are the truly basic, and thus most important, truths to be taught to prospective members, not to mention the congregation at large.

Perhaps a suggestion would be welcome at this point. I recall profiting as a seminary student from the catechetical practice of the church of which I was a member, Calvary OPC in Glenside, PA. During my time there, it was customary to begin the Sunday School hour with a brief lesson from the Westminster Larger Catechism. For about a nine-month stretch I participated in the rota of seminarians taking this responsibility for five to seven minutes or so of instruction each Sunday. The Larger Catechism is a theologically rich but generally unfamiliar document, even to lifelong presbyterians,¹³ so

¹³ On which see the fine article by Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, “The Making of the Westminster Larger Catechism,” available online at http://www.the-highway.com/larger-catechism_Dixhoorn.html. This is an expanded revision of an earlier article published in *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* 21:9 (October 2000) 11, 16-17.

this practice served not only to establish the congregation more firmly in the structure and grammar of the Reformed faith but also, when it was combined in a thoughtful way with the patient study of the Scriptures themselves, to cultivate a reading of the Scriptures that was sensitive to its theological contours. In addition, over time it may also help the congregation develop an expectation and taste for preaching that is consistent with the Scriptures, which is no small matter! In my view, weekly lessons like these (not necessarily lengthy ones, either!) which weave together the study of the Bible and the WLC are a wise and effective way to aid the community of faith in filling out her understanding of the basic features of our biblical and Reformed tradition. This is especially the case if there is a determination to lead God's people into an appreciation of the eschatological character of our identity and hope, such as 1 Peter does. In our day when the integrity of the Reformed tradition is being challenged at the most basic level by both postconservative evangelicalism and panconfessionalism – both evidently increasing in popularity – the regular and patient exposition of the Westminster catechisms in the OPC holds the promise of developing a new generation of believers who are shaped and formed by the Word of God and appreciative of the consistency, scope and glory of the Reformed faith. In turn, those who are truly shaped by the Word of God are, as a result, shaped and formed as faithful pilgrims on the path to their inheritance. After all, it is God himself who, as Peter tells us, having “called [us] to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish” his people (5:10). A community of saints called to glory and “established” in this pilgrimage by God himself: there can be no higher goal in church education than to serve this glorious end.