

Teaching the Catechism in the Children's Sermon: A New Possibility for Biblical and Theological Literacy

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The use of the children's sermon in worship has long been a matter of contention.¹ Many rightly have criticized this practice for its tendency toward moralism. Rather than serving as an opportunity to communicate the gospel to children in terms they can understand, it frequently lapses into a moralistic message about the children's duty toward their parents, friends, siblings, or church. Others have criticized the way it often degenerates into entertainment for adults when the leader asks questions of the children in a manner reminiscent of Art Linkletter. It usually does not take long for some of the children to figure out that they can elicit a laugh from the congregation if they give the right sort of response. Still others raise the larger question about the theological implications of this practice. What does it say about a congregation's view of worship when it invites the children forward for the children's sermon and, then, dismisses them for their own special worship service or arts and crafts? The net result is that many children reach the fourth or fifth grade without ever participating in a complete worship service. Would the congregation not do better to reform its worship in ways that make it possible for children to participate throughout?

There is another side to these criticisms, of course. Children's sermons are not always moralistic. Often, ministers and Christian educators use them to teach one of the passages of Scripture that will be read to the congregation at a later point in the service. Not only are children given the opportunity to encounter the passage in terms they can understand, but also, adults and youth are invited to overhear it in ways that prepare them to listen more closely when it is read at a later point. Moreover, setting aside a special time for children in the context of worship can represent an honest compromise between the special needs of children and those of adults. It is not easy to preach intellectually demanding sermons to adults that do not leave children far behind, especially children who have grown up watching television and are not used to extended oral communication in formal settings. Is it better to "dumb down" the sermon to include children? Will not contemporary, media-oriented children build a more positive attitude toward worship if they are gradually introduced to this practice over time, rather than being forced to sit through services that exclude them at some point, no matter how hard the preacher tries to include them?

This article will not attempt to answer these questions. My guess is the old adage about arguments is accurate here as elsewhere. In every argument there are always three sides: My side, your side, and the truth. Pastors, Christian educators, and congregational leaders will continue to debate the best way to include children in worship. At least some will come to the conclusion that the children's sermon can play a helpful role, especially when done well. My task in this article is to explore one way the children's sermon might be put to good use: by reviving the Reformation practice of teaching the catechism in the context of public worship. The time is right for

consideration of this possibility, for at least one denomination — the Presbyterian Church (USA) — has recently adopted two new catechisms for use in its preaching and teaching ministries. The children’s sermon potentially is an ideal place, not only to introduce children to these catechisms, but also, to heighten awareness of these new resources among the congregation as a whole.

It has been many years since catechisms were widely used in the Presbyterian Church. Sales of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* peaked in 1892 and declined steadily thereafter.² There were many reasons for the decline in the teaching of this catechism. Its theology and language seemed archaic. The Sunday school gradually displaced the catechism as the most important focus of education over the course of the nineteenth century. The rise of the social sciences and modern educational theory during the first decades of the twentieth century led many to view catechetical instruction as an authoritarian form of indoctrination, insensitive to children’s developmental abilities and interests. While the Lutheran church and the Reformed Church of America continued to use Luther’s *Small Catechism* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* respectively, Presbyterian congregations, for the most part, set aside the practice of catechetical instruction in favor of communicants’ class manuals and confirmation curriculums based on modern educational theory.³ The reintroduction of this practice by the Presbyterian Church at the present moment represents an acknowledgement that the discontinuation of catechetical instruction has not been entirely salubrious. At present, many of its members possess neither a basic level of biblical literacy nor an elementary, “catechetical” level of theological understanding. Both are crucial to the church’s ability to carry out its mission in pluralistic social and global contexts.

This past June at the 210th meeting of the General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church (USA) reversed course by adopting two new catechisms. *Belonging to God: A First Catechism* was written for children in the third and fourth grades, although many church leaders have already noted its usefulness with new members who have little background in the church. *The Study Catechism* was written for middle adolescents and adults and follows the traditional catechetical trilogy of the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. A slightly shorter and easier “Confirmation Version” of this catechism was adopted along with the full version. Since *Belonging to God* was written primarily for children, I will focus my attention on the use of this catechism in children’s sermons. Several introductory comments about this catechism may be helpful.

Following the basic narrative of the Bible, *Belonging to God* covers the following material: Prologue (Q1-6); Creation and Fall (Q7-13); God’s Election of a Covenant People: Israel (Q14-21); the Sending of the Messiah: Jesus Christ (Q22-29); the Mission of the Holy Spirit (Q30-45); and the Christian Life: the Lord’s Prayer (Q46-60). While its primary purpose is to help children grasp the story of salvation as a whole, it also provides an introduction to key biblical and theological concepts in simple, definitional terms. In response to the third question, for example, it defines grace as “God’s free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.” It provides similar definitions of the following concepts: image of God (A9), sin (A11), covenant (A15), messiah and Christ (A22), gospel (A32), salvation (A32), church (A35), sacrament (A41), Trinity (A44), prayer (A47), and Amen (A60).

There are many contexts in which *Belonging to God* might be taught in congregations. In a national survey of the church, the committee writing the catechisms

found that pastors and Christian educators were particularly interested in using a children's catechism in four settings: sacrament education, confirmation classes, special "time out" classes in the church school, vacation Bible school, or church retreats, and parental teaching in the home. Use of the catechisms in children's sermons might be used to supplement teaching in all of these settings.

For example, if a congregation were to target a specific season of the church year (e.g. Lent) to encourage parents to teach the catechism to their children in the home, it might offer special classes for parents during the Sunday school hour that would provide them with background information and allow them to share questions that arose in their conversations with their children during the week. Focusing on the catechism in the children's sermon during this period would reinforce teaching going on in the home and would communicate to these families that the entire congregation stands with them in viewing catechetical instruction as an important priority. A similar approach might be taken with sacrament education. A special intergenerational class on the sacraments might be offered to families with young children on a Saturday morning or during an all-church retreat. This class might be followed (or preceded) by a brief series of children's sermons on the sacraments as treated in *Belonging to God* (Q41-45).

Some ministers and Christian educators might choose a more ambitious treatment of this catechism in children's sermons offered over the course of the church year. Questions might be treated seriatim or specific questions might be used to represent a section as a whole. Q15, for example — What is the covenant? — might be used to telescope treatment of the entire section on God's election of a covenant people. The possibilities are as broad or narrow as ministers' and Christian educators' imaginations!

Since catechisms have not been widely used in the Presbyterian Church for many years, some general guidelines on their use in children's sermons might be helpful.

1. Try to determine the central theological idea being treated in the portion of the catechism on which the children's sermon will focus. Catechisms, like confessions, represent second order reflection on the meaning of Scripture. They are designed to help persons gain competence in reading the Bible, discerning what parts are most important, and how to understand confusing passages in light of the canon as a whole. Even a simple, narrative catechism like *Belonging to God* is a theologically-informed ordering of the Bible in its richness and complexity. It functions like a hermeneutical lens through which Scripture is read and interpreted. The first step in creating a children's sermon is to determine the theological ideas at stake in a particular question or series of questions.

Q10, for example, asks, "Why, then, do we human beings often act in destructive and hateful ways?" This question follows the catechism's treatment of God's creation of the world and human beings as created in God's image. The answer to this question does more than merely recapitulate the Genesis account, stating "Because we have turned away from God and fallen into sin." Those familiar with the theological tradition will immediately notice the theological weight implicitly attached to the word "fallen." Across the centuries, the church has treated the origin of sin under the rubric of the Fall. At stake theologically is an understanding of sin as a condition, not merely as the particular acts of wrongdoing which individuals perform (i.e. particular

sing). How to communicate to children that sin is a condition is a creative challenge, to say the least. But it is the theological focus of the catechism at this point and should be taken into account.

2. *Consider your audience. Is it composed primarily of preschool children, elementary age children, or both?* It is very important to keep your focus on the children who have gathered to hear the children's sermon. They are your primary audience, not the adults. Keep your language simple. When concepts appear in the catechism that are too difficult for your audience, try to explain them in terms that children can understand. At the same time, do not talk down to the children. For some odd reason, many adults adopt an infantilizing tone when talking to children in a formal setting. Try to avoid this, focusing instead on the legitimate task of simplifying concepts that may be difficult or foreign to young children.

For example, A41 defines a sacrament as "a special act of Christian worship which uses visible signs to present God's grace for us in Jesus Christ." Those familiar with the Reformed confessional tradition will recall that sign and seal language is frequently used in this tradition to describe the theological meaning of the sacraments. While seal language does not appear in *Belonging to God*, it is used at several points in *The Study Catechism* and is best treated when that catechism is studied. In A41 of *Belonging to God*, the term in need of clarification is "visible sign." How might this be done?

Even preschool children are likely to be aware of the many signs they see when they are riding in a car. They see Stop signs and Yield signs, as well as Speed Limit signs and Construction Ahead signs. These are "visible signs," reminding the driver to do something. Children also are aware of audible signs like the siren of an ambulance or police car, signs they can hear. Drawing on concrete examples of visible (vs. audible) signs encountered in their everyday life, the children might be asked to describe the visible signs used in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The water-washing is a sign that reminds us that we are made clean in Christ. The bread and wine are signs of Christ's broken body and shed blood, signs of God's love for us.

Those familiar with developmental theory are aware of the important differences between preschool and elementary age children. Broadly speaking, preschool children can follow relatively simple stories, with limited plot development and few characters. Often, the strongest connecting points between our teaching and their experience are the emotions that our teaching projects, especially if we are using simple stories. We should strive to present the catechism in a way that allows preschool children to identify with the characters' feelings of fear, excitement, amazement, relief, and so forth. Elementary age children can understand concepts in concrete terms. They also have the ability to follow more complex stories in which the plot develops through several scenes and includes a larger cast of characters. Which age level is the primary target audience of your children's sermon? The catechism was written primarily for third and fourth grade children. If your primary audience is preschoolers, you should work hard to render its concepts to terms this age level can understand. Consider using very simple stories.

3. *Do not try to cover everything at stake in a particular question or section of the catechism in one children's sermon.* This principle is basic to all preaching and

teaching. Just as every passage of Scripture has more richness than can be covered in any particular sermon, so too, many parts of the catechism raise more issues than can be covered in a single children's sermon. Be selective, especially in working with young children. Better that you cover one idea well, than many superficially. As the old saying goes, the only way to get to water is by digging one hole deep, not many little ones!

4. *When possible, link the catechism question on which your children's sermon is focusing to the Scripture passages on which it is based.* The committee writing the new catechisms included passages of Scripture with each of the questions. In many instances, the wording of the catechism echoes the wording of Scripture. In almost all cases, its questions point to a particular part of the canon. When possible, include in the children's sermon the central passage of Scripture on which the catechism is based. When dealing with the portion of the catechism focusing on the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, for example, retell the Scriptural account of Pentecost or read the story as narrated in a children's Bible.

5. *Keep the larger story of salvation that the catechism unfolds constantly before the children.* Children learn the Bible in bits and pieces in the contemporary church. They may focus on one story in their Sunday school class and hear a completely different passage during worship. They may be in church one week and absent the next. One of the most important roles *Belonging to God* can play in today's church is helping children form a sense of the Bible as a whole, linking both parts of Scripture into a coherent story of salvation. As noted above, the way the catechism tells this story is the product of second order theological reflection, informed by the far tradition as well as contemporary theology. Obviously, the Bible is more complex than the narrative "smoothing" which inevitably accompanies this sort of construction. As a starting point for children's initial theological reflection, however, the use of narrative is appropriate. Not only is it appropriate to the internal connections which Scripture creates between its various parts, but it also is appropriate to the "form of coherence" that elementary age children use to make sense of the world in which they live.⁴

The obvious implication of the catechism's accent on narrative is to remind the hearers of a given children's sermon of those parts of the story that have already been covered. A few sentences at the beginning of the sermon will suffice: "Over the past few weeks, we've seen how the catechism describes God's creation of the world and how we humans, created in God's image, turned away from God and fell into sin. Today, we are going to focus on God's response: God's creation of a special, covenant people — Israel. Some of you might wonder, "What is a covenant?" Well, that's a question which the catechism itself asks..." Constant review of the basic story line that the catechism unfolds will afford children the opportunity to internalize this narrative.

6. *Use a variety of ways to communicate your ideas in the children's sermon, including visual aids, word pictures, music, and objects when appropriate.* At first glance, the catechism as a teaching tool seems to privilege an exclusive reliance on verbal communication and logical thinking. After all, the Greek term *catechesis*, from which "catechism" is derived, means oral teaching. Not all children learn best through words, however. Some learn best by "seeing" an idea represented pictorially or by

singing it in simple rhyming verse. Others learn best through the study of written texts, not oral communication. In calling attention to the different learning styles children bring to every educational experience, including the children's sermon, I am pointing to something good preachers and teachers have long known. Only now, they can point to research like Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to back up their intuitions.⁵

Employing recent research on the brain, genetics, idiot savants and prodigies, evolutionary biology, and cognitive psychology, Gardner has identified seven different forms of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Recent brain research indicates that certain of these intelligences are localized in different parts of the brain and have their own, relatively autonomous developmental trajectory. Musical intelligence, for example, often, is present in highly developed forms among persons who have lost linguistic abilities due to lesions in the brain.⁶ Mathematical intelligence seems to be located in the right hemisphere of the brain in right-handed persons, begins to come into its own by ten or eleven, and peaks early in adult life.⁷ Almost none of the great mathematicians have developed their most important theories after the age of forty!

Recognition of these various forms of intelligence should sensitize adults teaching the catechism not to rely exclusively on verbal or logical-mathematical approaches in their communication.⁸ Rather, they should think in terms of multi-modal communication, appealing to a range of intelligences in order to communicate their message.⁹ They should help the children "see" the stories they tell by creating word pictures. They should draw on music when appropriate, using simple songs to communicate their message. They should appeal to the personal intelligences, using examples that relate the ideas of the catechism to concrete, personally-relevant life situations. They should use visual aids like puppets, flannel boards, or other objects, if they can be used to communicate the meaning of the catechism in appropriate ways. At times, they should explain basic concepts of the catechism in concise, logical terms, especially when speaking to middle elementary age and older children.

Taking these six guidelines seriously would raise children's sermons based on *Belonging to God* to a high art. Far more reflection, preparation, and performance energy would go into this part of the worship service than is now ordinarily the case. It is not easy to balance the first guideline (finding the central theological idea in part of the catechism) with the last one (finding multiple, creative ways of communicating this idea). Similarly, exercising selectivity in what is treated in a single children's sermon (guideline three), while keeping the story of salvation which the catechism unfolds (guideline five), is no easy task. Is it worth the effort? I believe it is. Children's sermons taken this seriously would acknowledge the presence of children in worship in a manner that is not paternalistic. Nor would it minimize the importance of including children in the worship service as a whole. The task of interpreting Scripture to children through the lens of the new catechism would be a genuine form of proclamation, potentially helpful to youth and adults even as it is primarily directed to children.

Notes

¹ For a balanced critique of the children's sermon, see William Willimon, *Keep Them in Their Place? Worship Alive: Children in Worship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, undated) and Charles Foster,

Proclaiming the Word with Children, Worship Alive: Children in Worship (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, undated).

² Richard Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 144.

³ For an extended discussion of this process, see *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

⁴ The term “form of coherence” is an abbreviated form of one of the aspects of James Fowler’s structuralist account of faith, what he calls “form of world coherence.” See, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), ch. 22, especially, pp. 233-45. This aspect for elementary age children focuses on the narratization of experience.

⁵ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

⁸ This principle holds true for adults every bit as much as children. It is widely recognized, for example, that lay people learn much of their theology through the hymns they sing. Seasoned preachers, likewise, know that they must create word pictures (spatial intelligence) and weave vignettes focusing on application (the personal intelligences), if their sermon is to be effective. Perhaps, this is why many adults are so responsive to good children’s sermons that rely on multi-modal communication.

⁹ For a helpful discussion of this point, see Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994), Ch. 6. As Armstrong notes, multi-modal teaching points in two directions: (1) the cultivation of the various intelligences throughout the curriculum, leading to an equal emphasis on the arts, sciences, and physical education, and (2) teaching ideas or skills primarily oriented to one of the intelligences by way of other intelligences (e.g. using music to teach Hebrew paradigms). The point being made here, obviously, is focusing on the second of these.