

Teaching the *Classic Catechism* Workshop
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Book

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See <http://russveldman.typepad.com> for teaching aids, discussion about the *Classic Catechism*, and the link to order copies online from Light and Life Communications.



Origin of the Project

After the birth of my daughter, I became interested in preparing a catechism¹ to instruct her in accordance with Free Methodist doctrine. At first I began to prepare one on my own but soon saw that the task was more involved than I first anticipated. With this realization, I began to search for an existing catechism to use as a starting point, but none were satisfactory for what I had in mind. I considered turning the current Free Methodist catechism (*Foundations of a Living Faith*) into the traditional question-answer format which I find useful for teaching, but Providence led me to a conversation with another pastor in our conference who had received permission to photocopy the old 1952 *Catechism of the Free Methodist Church*² for use in his congregation. I had forgotten about the old catechism, which was already in a question-answer format. After speaking with him, I called the Marston Memorial Historical Center and requested my own photocopy of the old catechism. Later I spoke with Executive Director Gerald Coates who granted me permission to make certain changes and additions to bring the catechism into the 21st century (a list of those changes is available on my blog and at the Light and Life online bookstore).

At the same time I was planning to prepare a catechism for my daughter, our church's Official Board (LBA) was lamenting our children's lack of basic Bible and doctrinal knowledge. We noted that the children growing up in our church, in contrast to children in years past,

(1) did not have a working knowledge of basic Bible doctrine, despite steady attendance

¹ The word *catechism* means "teaching." A Christian catechism is an attempt to present, in a orderly way, essential biblical truths for the instruction of believers, traditionally in a question-answer format.

² The 1898 General Conference of the Free Methodist Church commissioned the bishops at that time to write a catechism for the denomination. By the next General Conference in 1902, their work was ready. The *Catechism of the Free Methodist Church* was published the same year and the content remained unchanged until the 1954 printing where a few of the biblical references were omitted. The original catechism was used widely for many years and even ended up a part of the old Christian Youth Club (CYC) material. When the CYC material fell out of use, so did the original catechism.

- in Sunday School and CLC (Christian Life Club),
- (2) did not know or understand FM doctrinal distinctives,
 - (3) did not have a good working vocabulary of basic biblical and theological terms,
 - (4) did not grasp the “big picture” of how the Bible fits together,
 - (5) lacked confidence in their faith,
 - (6) could not adequately explain the plan of salvation nor the need for it and
 - (7) were lacking a distinctly Christian worldview.

The reasons for this were many; in particular, changes in curriculum over the years has resulted in less significant doctrinal content (especially truth presented in propositional form), teachers in the past knew and taught doctrine more, and many parents in the church today do not teach their children the faith with the same diligence of previous generations. The *Classic Catechism* was originally written to provide a basic resource to address these problems.

Use Beyond the Original Plan

But the *Classic Catechism* has found use far beyond my original vision; indeed it is being used primarily beyond my initial vision. In particular, the *Classic Catechism* is being used in major ways outside of the United States. It is being used in India, Africa, South America and beyond. Currently the *Classic Catechism* is being translated into Spanish, three African languages and Mandarin Chinese. This is due to the fact that some Free Methodist World Missions Area Directors and other missionaries have needed an inexpensive, basic theological text that is in keeping with Free Methodist doctrine to train indigenous pastors and other church workers. In fact, the old *Catechism of the Free Methodist Church* (first published in 1902!) is still in use in some mission fields (partly because the question-answer format is the preferred learning mode of much of the world), so a revised and updated version has been well-received. Hopefully, the Spanish, African languages and Mandarin translations will be available soon in the United States as well. Think of the ministries and churches here that could use these translations now!

Revisions and Expansions to the old Catechism of the Free Methodist Church

A document containing the full list of changes and additions is available on my blog.

BREAKOUT GROUPS DISCUSSION

1. What key things do children and teens need to learn in order to think biblically?
 2. What basic biblical and theological things do new converts need to learn fairly quickly in order to grow spiritually and adopt a Free Methodist identity?
 3. What are some doctrines members of Free Methodist churches often do not know, cannot articulate, etc.?
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Teaching Ideas

So, how do we go about using the *Classic Catechism*? There is the traditional method of requiring students to memorize a set of questions in preparation for each class. The teacher then asks each student to recite the answers from memory, then teaches on the significance of the questions for that session. That works great if the teacher has students who will memorize the questions on their own. Following are a few other teaching ideas that our church has experimented with on Wednesday nights.

1st and 2nd graders

Here is what my wife did with her class:

The first part of the class begins with reciting the memory verse due for class, which is tied to the night's lesson. Children who can recite their verse earn a chip.

The second part of the class begins with a Bible story to give background to the class' subject focus for that evening. For example, to teach on section II. Creation, she told the creation story from Genesis 1 while the children colored a picture of the Garden of Eden.

The third part of the class focuses on simple questions based on the *Classic Catechism* along with other questions. To teach these, she uses a game each week. While the children continue to color, she quizzes them with the questions that she wrote on index cards (many of the questions in the catechism have been broken down into 2-3 questions by her to simplify them for the children). She goes around the circle to each child and asks one of the questions, giving plenty of hints and even rewording or simplifying the question as needed. If the child answers correctly, he or she gets a chip. The chips are redeemed for candy at the end of class. She repeats all the new questions several times each week, plus repeats questions from previous classes. Repetition is crucial to memorization and offers opportunity for ever-deepening discussion! The kids love the game, love the feeling from gaining competence, and love cashing in their chips for candy at the end of class.

The class ends with the children practicing next week's memory verse.

3rd & 4th grade

Our third and fourth grade class focused on a set of questions for the evening and simply read and discussed them along with a background Scripture passage. They spent considerable time memorizing the Ten Commandments and understanding the Lord's Prayer.

5th & 6th grade

Our 5th and 6th grade class used a more analytical method. For each class the teacher wrote the night's questions and their Scripture references on the board. The kids then read a question, looked up the Scripture passages, and together tried to come up with a good answer based on the reading and what they already knew. After some study and discussion, the teacher read the catechism's answer and the class discussed how close their answer was to the catechism's. During the whole process, the teacher helped them to comprehend the answers as

best they could. A side benefit of this method is that the kids learn to use their Bibles well and develop their reasoning skills.

Youth

Our youth leaders have come up with a different method of teaching the catechism from the other classes. They introduce the new questions for the week, discuss them, have the kids study the supporting Scripture passages and then they play “Jeopardy.” The teacher reads the answers and the teens try to remember the exact wording of the questions. Questions from previous weeks are used as well. All through this, the leaders push for discussion of the answers so the teens will grow in their comprehension of basic doctrine.

Our new basic Wednesday night routine:

- **Large group time** (grades 1-6 together) 6:30-6:40. This will involve a song, group prayer, and a group lesson of some kind, including memorizing the Lord’s Prayer.
- **Individual classes** 6:40-7:35. The 1st & 2nd grade class will continue last year’s routine. Grades 3-6 will follow this pattern:
 - Each student recites memorization question due for evening
 - Study designated questions for that evening in an age-appropriate manner
 - Read and discuss background Scripture passage (for example, the class may read and discuss portions of Genesis 1 while studying the questions related to creation)
 - Optional art project
 - Read and discuss memorization question due next week. Students write out question on index cards to take home.
 - Closing prayer

For each age group it is essential to engage the students as much as possible and to repeat, repeat, repeat the questions from previous classes to reinforce the material and promote comprehension. It is also crucial to always be asking the “so what?” question. This involves discussing why a particular truth is important. Here are a few examples:

II. Creation, B. Humankind. This section teaches on the Image of God that human beings bear. Today, we hear a lot of talk from some groups that give animals the same value as people (PETA), or who support abortion. But if human beings bear the Image of God and animals do not, then humans have more value than animals and unborn humans have eternal value even in the womb or as frozen embryos as do people in nursing homes. We are more than globs of cells at any stage of life; we bear God’s Image *and thus have the capacity to know God*, be creative, philosophize, etc. As I tell the kids at church, “Jesus did not die to save critters!” The Son of God died to save people.

II. Creation. This section also explains that God created everything good and perfect. People need to understand that the world was not always the way it is now. Many children do

not understand this because they do not have a biblical worldview. **III. The Fall** explains why the world is such a mess (sin). Many people today teach that human beings are basically good. The Bible says humans have a sinful nature and therefore do sinful things, sin being both a condition and action. Due to sin, all humans justly face judgment. When people don't understand this, they don't see their desperate need for salvation.

I. God, A. Nature and Attributes. In this section, God's nature and attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, love, etc. are listed and defined. These attributes speak to every other aspect of theology. For example, consider prayer: because God knows everything he can hear my prayers and knows what to do; because he is all-powerful he is able to answer effectively; because he is loving he cares to act; because he is all-wise he knows how best to act; and because he is present everywhere no place or person is beyond his touch. That's total coverage! If any one of God's attributes were not present, prayer would lose most of its meaning. Understanding this can strengthen a believer's faith in God hearing prayers and compel him or her to pray more.

V. Salvation, C. Fruits of Salvation. This section highlights different aspects of salvation - justification, adoption, sanctification and regeneration (and there are more aspects of salvation in Scripture than these 4). Students are blessed when they begin to understand how comprehensive salvation is and how utterly transforming coming to Christ can be. Justification frees me from the guilt and penalty of sin - an act totally completed at the moment of conversion. The charges are dropped - the conscience is free! By adoption, God becomes my Heavenly Father, a warm, familial experience that enables an intimate relationship with God. In regeneration, the heart is actually changed, creating new life and making it possible to love and obey God and have victory over sin. On and on the implications go.

Adults

Adults may wish to study section by section through the Catechism, looking up the Scripture passages and discussing their support of the questions. As with all ages, it is important for the teacher to keep the big picture of the Catechism in front of the students so they have a sense of the story and interlocking nature of doctrine that the Catechism is teaching. It may be helpful or intriguing for some adults to compare sections of the Catechism with Catechisms of other theological traditions, such as the Martin Luther's *Short Catechism* or the Reformed *Heidelberg Catechism*. Doing this can help students more clearly grasp Free Methodist doctrinal distinctives. The Catechism works well with new believers and with seasoned ones.

New Converts

The catechism is great discipling tool for use with new converts. A weekly meeting where a few questions are discussed and their implications for living are explored can open up a new world for a new convert and help them appreciate more deeply what God has done for them and how to live for God. A new convert at our church has deeply appreciated the help the catechism has given him in "getting up to speed" with biblical concepts and terms. Now armed with a basic theological foundation (and a booklet to refer to), he can understand Scripture so

much better and has come to understand fairly quickly what God expects of him and what is possible in his walk with God.

As I have taught the catechism to adults on Sunday night, we go through it section by section. Most of my preparation time goes into preparing what I call “So What?” talks to go with each section, which addresses the relevance and difference our beliefs make in life, spiritual growth, evangelism, apologetics, worldview, etc. Done this way, a teacher can give a basic overview of systematic theology.

Home Use

The Catechism may be used in family devotions around the dinner table, or in personal devotions, too. I intend to have my child memorize the questions word-for-word and be able to reference some of the foundational Bible passages for major doctrines. Imagine a child by late elementary school age being able to define justification, explain the basics of the Ten Commandments, understand well the basics of salvation and more. Is that not fertile soil for the Holy Spirit to work with?

Other ideas

Local Ministerial Candidates, study material for MEG Board interviews, review for pastors and teachers, J-Term text, membership class ...

BREAKOUT DISCUSSION GROUPS

1. What are some ways you could put the *Classic Catechism* to use in your own congregation?
 2. How can we get people in our churches to buy into the idea that they need to learn doctrine?
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Final thought: However the Classic Catechism is used, repetition and memorization is key to developing a working theological vocabulary, learning theological expressions and laying a foundation for comprehension. And when biblical doctrine and its implications is grasped, real change happens.