INSTRUCTION IN THE FAITH: LESSONS FROM JOHN CALVIN

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We need hardly have to be reminded of the state of affairs in the Church today where we are confronted with doctrinal indifferentism, theological illiteracy, discontinuity from our historical roots, no building blocks for evangelistic activity and an aging membership. The situation is not that different from the one facing the Protestant Reformers in the 16th century, after centuries of darkness, superstition, ignorance and idolatry.

What was the Reformation? It was above everything a movement of the Holy Spirit, a revival of true religion. But it was also a recovery of Biblical doctrine, particularly of God-centred theology. It had an identification with the past, especially with Augustine and the early Church Fathers. The work was carried forward by careful instruction in the faith and church discipline.

1 Martin Luther: the Pioneer

Martin Luther was the instrument used of God to break the power of the Papacy and medieval Catholicism. He had a profound religious experience in which he discovered the true way of salvation. He set about to re-form what had been de-formed. He accomplished great things through his preaching and his writing. He said 'I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: I did nothing...The Word did it all.' With the invention of the printing press, the Reformation teaching spread far and wide, through pamphlets and books.

There was much darkness and ignorance to be overcome. Luther resorted to the use of catechisms. It was a tour revealing to him the gross ignorance of his fellow-countrymen that constrained Luther to take up the work of catechizing in earnest: 'I have been impelled to cast this catechism on Christian doctrine into this simple form by the lamentable deficiency in the means of instruction which I witnessed lately in my visitation. God help us! What deplorable things have I seen! The common people wholly without any knowledge of doctrine.' The preparation and production of Luther's Short Catechism (1529) was an immediate and surprising success, a decisive factor in reformation at the 'grass-roots' in the homes of the German people.

2 John Calvin: 'the practical genius of the Reformation'

While rejoicing with Luther in the success of the preached Word we can say that, humanly speaking, if things had remained like that, the subsequent history of Christianity in Europe and America might have been quite different. While the re-discovered Faith of the Gospel was spreading by pulpit and press, God was preparing a man who was destined to define that Faith and consolidate the work of the Reformation. His name was John Calvin (1509-1564). 'Luther led the assault on the trenches', says B B Warfield, 'Calvin consolidated the gains'. In the midst of the confusion generated by the new found teaching, John Calvin was destined to be the leader in defining the new forms. 'He was', in the words of B B Warfield, 'the practical genius of the Reformation'.

After his sudden conversion and the embracing of the Protestant doctrines he wished 'to teach some rudiments whereby those who were touched with any good affection to God might be instructed in true piety', a sort of Catechism, as he afterwards called it. However, because of persecution against the Christians in France he made it at the same time a confession of faith in order that the King of France (to whom he dedicated it) would know the doctrine against which the persecutors were enraged. The work was undertaken while he was in Basel and published in 1536 as The Institute of the Christian Religion, containing almost the whole sum of piety and whatever it is necessary to

1 Originally published in the Witness
know in the doctrine of salvation. It was in that year, as he headed for Strasbourg, that Calvin was forced by Farel to join him in Geneva. In January 1737 Farel and Calvin laid before the council of the city their *Articles on the Organization of the Church and its Worship at Geneva*, probably largely composed by Calvin.

The Articles refer specifically to catechising as an ancient form, no innovation. The *Confession of Faith* was made once for all in Geneva. Thereafter the faith would be handed down in unbroken succession from generation to generation. What is necessary for any age is, however, doubly necessary now when the Word of God has been neglected so long and parents have not taught their children properly. Therefore a “brief and simple summary of the Christian faith” is to be prepared. It is to be taught to the children and they will be examined periodically by the ministers.’ So Calvin set himself to compose an instrument for popular instruction in the faith, reducing to simpler form *The Institutes*. The result was *Instruction in the Faith*, first published in French in 1737, a straightforward exposition of the leading tenets of the Christian faith in brief sections.

3 Calvin and the Catechism
In April 1538 Farel and Calvin were forced out of Geneva. In September 1538 Calvin joined Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, where he organized and pastored the first French-speaking Protestant congregation. There he clarified his views of church organisation, developed a Reformed liturgy and established a vigorous church discipline. With things back in Geneva deteriorating he was persuaded to return to the city he left and did so in September 1541. He came back with the determination to create in Geneva his vision of a Reformed Church in a Reformed city. As a condition of resuming the work of Geneva he insisted that the authorities agreed to his programme for reform. *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, were adopted: ‘On my return from Strasbourg I made the Catechism in haste, for I would never have accepted the ministry unless they had sworn to these two points; namely to uphold the Catechism and the discipline.’

It was then that Calvin produced the Genevan Catechism. Its primary object was to recover the catechetical teaching of the ancient Catholic Church. He adapted and enlarged the earlier work of 1537, regrouping the material and arranging it in questions and answers. *Catechism of the Church at Geneva, A Formulary for the Instruction of Children in Christianity, in which the minister interrogates and the Child Responds.* It was published in French late 1541 or early 1542. It reached nothing like the classic stature of either Luther’s *Short Catechism* or the *Heidelberg Catechism*. With its 373 questions, The Genevan Catechism is far too long to be memorised by the ordinary child. It misses the brevity of Luther’s catechism. However the Catechism played a very considerable part in the diffusion of Calvinism. It familiarized the faithful with a number of theological questions, and thereby contributed to the religious training of several generations of Protestant believers.

4 Calvin’s view of the Church
The Reformation as Calvin understood was not simply the reformation of the doctrine of salvation along Scriptural lines, important though that was, but also the reformation of the Church and its relationship to society. Calvin had a high view of the Church. He does not hesitate to refer to the church as the mother of the faithful ‘into whose bosom God is pleased to collect this children, not only that by her aid and ministry they may be nourished so long as they are babes and children, but may also be guided by her maternal care until they grow up to manhood, and finally, attain the perfection of faith. What God has thus joined, let not man put asunder (Mark 10.9); to those to whom he is Father, the Church must also be mother’.

Calvin did not believe that there was no possibility of being saved outside of the church, but he did believe that ordinarily God uses the Church as the channel of his grace. The visible church is a divine institution. It is a divine sanctuary where God’s glory is made known. The Church becomes
the sphere of the covenant of grace. It is the sphere into which a person is brought in the covenant of grace and where one continues to experience the benefits of that covenant. It is the teaching taken up in the Westminster Confession of Faith—'the house and family of God, out of which there is ordinary possibility of salvation'.

5 Calvin on Children in the Church

Calvin, like many Reformers of his day, was intensely interested in children and child rearing. He married Idelette, a widow with two children. As parents they were to lose at least three infants. Of one of them Calvin said: 'God has given me a little boy. God took him away' 'The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But he himself is a Father and knows what is good for his children'. In Calvin's view 'the elect are from birth full inheritors in God's covenant and members in the church'. Baptism is the ordinance that initiates them into the fellowship of the visible church. It is in family lines that God's covenant runs for he commits himself not only to us but to our offspring (Ex 20.5-6; Psa 105.8-10).

Infant baptism points to the harmony of creation and redemption. Our salvation involves the renewal of the whole of life. The family is the basic unit God has given us (Gen 1. 26-29; 2.18-25). Far from abandoning it, Christ came to re-affirm and to redeem it. Children are gifts of God. They are his property. He commits them for a time to our care. We cannot be said to educate them for God unless we believe they are his. Infant baptism testifies that God has a claim on the infant, that our little ones belong to him by the pure grace of his covenant. It is all of grace. We rely exclusively on his Word. If we did not give our children daily bread we would be worse than infidels. How much more important is food for the soul of the child, to teach them about the greatest of beings, the best of beings. Education and instruction was at the forefront of the Church’s and parents’ responsibility towards children.

It is interesting to read Calvin's comments on Psalm 8:2, 'If God has appointed children even in infancy the vindicators of his glory, there is no absurdity in his making them the instruments of showing forth his praise by their tongues after they have arrived at the age of seven years and upwards.' Calvin taught and practised that before a child was admitted to the Lord's Supper at about age 11 or 12, they underwent weekly catechism classes (based on 52 question-and-answer format questions on nature of faith, the Creed, the Law, prayer, worship, Word and Sacraments) and learnt to sing the psalms. The assumption throughout, however, was that the child was to be treated as fully Christian (by virtue of the one covenant) and not as an object for conversion. 7-14-year-olds also had to give a public confession of their faith before the congregation. The confession proceeded an oral interview with a pastor and involved a brief verbal testimony. The catechism classes were not with a view to rote learning of answers but with a view to providing young catechumens with a vocabulary for articulating their growing faith.

6 The Case for Catechetical Instruction

1) Calvin saw it as going back to an ancient practice

In the address to the reader in 'The Catechism of the Church of Geneva', Calvin says:

'It has always been a matter which the Church has held in singular commendation, to see that little children should be instructed in Christian doctrine. That this might be done, not only were schools opened in early times, and people enjoined to teach their families well, but it was also a public practice, to examine children in the churches on articles of faith common to all Christians. That this might be carried out in order, a formulary was used which was called a Catechism. Thereafter the devil rending the Church and making it a fearful ruin (the marks of which are still visible in most of the world), overthrew this sacred polity, and left nothing behind but certain remnants, which cannot but beget superstition, without any edification. This is 'confirmation' as they call it, in which there is nothing but mimicry, and has no foundation. What we set before you is nothing else than the use of things which from ancient times was observed among Christians, and which has never been
neglected except when the Church has been wholly corrupted

2) He saw it is the way that the truth is spread
Council of Trent said 'the heretics have chiefly made use of catechisms to corrupt the mind of Christians.' Calvin believed that the foundation of all religion lies in knowledge. That is so clear in his Institutes. He would agree with Richard Baxter: 'Ignorance is you disease, knowledge must be you cure.' If the Biblical truth was to spread it would have to be presented in a form which ordinary people could understand. The Puritan Richard Greenham claimed that the catechism teaching built up the Reformed Church and seriously damaged Roman Catholicism.

3) He saw in catechising a necessary complement to preaching
'Whatever others may think, we certainly do not regard our office as bound in so narrow limits that when the sermon is delivered we may rest as if our task were done. They whose blood will be required of us, if lost through our slothfulness, are to be cared for much more closely and vigilantly.' Richard Baxter, whose vision for catechising is expounded in The Reformed Pastor, said that he came to the painful conclusion that 'some ignorant persons, who had been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse of conscience in half an hour's close disclosure, than they did from ten years' public preaching'

4) He saw it as the way the Church is conserved.
He appealed to the King of France: 'Believe my Lord that the Church of God shall never be conserved without catechism, for it is as the seed to be kept that the good grain perish not but that it may increase from age to age. Wherefore if you desire to build a work of continuance to endure long, and which should not shortly fall into decay, cause that the children in their young age be instructed in a good catechism.' There was in Geneva the co-ordinated efforts of family, state and church in rearing children.

7 The Influence of the Genevan Catechism on Scotland
The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in the first year of its existence, provided that while there should be two public services on every Lord's Day, the first service should consist of worship and preaching, and the second should be given to worship and the catechizing of the young and ignorant. The First Book of Discipline in 1560 enjoins instruction of children and youth 'especially in the Catechism as we have it now translated in the Book of Common Order called the Order of Geneva'... 'afternoon must the young children be publicly examined in their Catechism in the audience of the people, whereof the minister must take great diligence as well as cause the people understand the questions proponed as answers', and the doctrines contained therein also.

The Catechism here referred to is the translation of Calvin's Genevan Catechism. It was the French edition of 1541 that was translated for use in Scotland - its 373 questions and answers being divided up into sections suitable for use Sunday by Sunday in the regular instruction of the Church. Without knowledge of the main topics covered by the catechism, no one was to be admitted to the Lord's table. 'Calvin's Catechism,' says Dr Douglas Kelly 'may well be considered the greatest single theological influence on the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Indeed the famous first answer of Westminster, “Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”, is taken ultimately from Calvin, though probably by way of a Latin adaptation of it by Leo Jud'. Richard Baxter said: 'If the Westminster Assembly had done nothing more than produce the Shorter Catechism they would be entitled to the everlasting gratitude of the Christian church....next to the Bible, it was probably the best book in the world'.

Archibald Alexander, who founded Princeton Theological Seminary, was brought up on the Shorter Catechism. The invaluable roll of catechetical instruction in a young child's life is beautifully captured in Charles Hodge's remarks about the important influence it had in Alexander's childhood:
The principles of moral and religious truth contained in that sublime symbol, when once embedded in the mind, enlarge, sustain and illuminate it for all time. That God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth is a height of knowledge to which Plato never reached. A series of such precise, accurate, luminous propositions, inscribed on the understanding of a child, is the richest inheritance which can be given to him. They are seeds which need only the vivifying influence of the Spirit of life, to cause them to bring forth the fruits of holiness and glory. Dr Alexander experienced this benefit in its full extent.

We have a striking testimony to the value of catechising from Professor T F Torrance who brought together in 1958 the Catechisms of the Reformed Church in Scotland in the volume The School of Faith. A basic principle of scientific activity, he says, is learning to ask the right questions. But because of the Fall, we avoid the right questions, and this is where the Christian community, through its catechetical instruction, is able to help us become 'reconciled with the truth'. He observes that generations of children brought up on the Catechism have had greater capacity for conceptual thinking (as opposed to merely pictorial thinking) than those who never memorized it.

8 Application for Today

1) **We need catechetical instruction for historical continuity.**

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said: 'To destroy a people you must first sever their roots'. The same can be said of Christianity. The roots began to be severed in the 19th century Scotland. In counselling youth workers, the American evangelist D L Moody 'urged them to have done with colourless catechisms and tedious verse learning, and to act on the belief that children should trust Christ as a Friend'. It is here that the Reformed Church, with its creeds, confessions and catechisms and theological tradition, provides people with the historical continuity that so many crave today. We must be aware that the usefulness of Reformation theology lies in its emphasis upon God. Theologies, the catechisms and the liturgies which flowed from the Reformer's pens all indicate that there was a piety which was concerned above all with God. The emphasis of the Reformers was always much more on the identity and action of God than upon human experience of him. The two are, of course, inextricably linked, but the accent always falls on the divine half of the equation.

2) **We need it for theological literacy.**

According to Dr Robert Reymond ‘a theological illiteracy which invites the rise of wholesale heresy pervades the Church.’ One of the characteristics of modern evangelicalism is the lack of discernment in professing Christians. Believers need to be well-grounded to withstand error. Carl Trueman in speaking of the need to make sure that the doctrinal preaching of the Gospel passes from the pulpit to the pew says: The history of the Church is peppered with examples of churches which enjoyed powerful, faithful preaching for many years and yet which all but collapsed into doctrinal apathy and even heresy on the death of their minister. While a number of reasons could be given for this, one underlying factor has to be the failure of the message to pass effectively from the pulpit to the pew’ John MacLeod in his *Scottish Theology* describes how the powerful preaching of the seventeenth century produced a people who were very theologically minded, and goes on to remark that “this was none the less the case as the outcome of the catechetical method of instruction that was current.”

3) **We need it for fixing truth in the mind**

J Gresham Machen "The truth is, there can be no real progress unless there is something that is fixed. Archimedes said “Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world” Well Christian doctrine provides that place to stand. Unless there be such a place to stand, all progress is an illusion. The very idea of progress implies something fixed. There is no progress in a kaleidoscope’

4) **We need it for the implementation of covenant theology.**

There has been a tendency in recent years in Reformed Churches in Scotland to undervalue the significance of infant baptism and to exalt the Lord's Supper to a higher plain. In the course of a
sermon preached in Gilcomston Church, Aberdeen on 26 May 1968, and entitled 'Bringing up Children in Faith, not Fear', the Rev William Still said: 'The reason why the doctrine of infant baptism is so much maligned in evangelical circles is that it has not been believed. It has not been lived out.' Dr Samuel Miller who claimed that 'children are the hope of the Church' said: The Primitive Church considered herself as the common mother of all baptized children, and exercised a corresponding care over them, that they might be trained up as generation to serve the Lord... In too many instances, a superstitious regard has been paid to the mere rite of baptism whilst the most deplorable neglect of the duties arising from, and connected with, that rite has been manifested, not only on the part of the parents, but of church officers.' Let us strive to be consistent in our Covenant beliefs. Our children belong to God. We must educate them for him. Catechisms will prove invaluable for us and for them in seeking to articulate their growing faith.