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Learning the Word in Geneva: John Calvin the Catechist

John Witte, Jr.

Abstract

Genevan Reformer John Calvin produced a half dozen catechisms during his tenure in the city from 1536 to 1538 and 1541 to 1564. While not nearly so well-known as his Institutes of the Christian Religion or Geneva Bible, and not nearly so heavily used today as the later Reformed catechisms of Heidelberg or Westminster, Calvin's catechisms were impressive for their biblical acuity, pristine language, and doctrinal precision and for their power to integrate the far flung Calvinist communities of the sixteenth century. This Article samples these catechisms, and analyzes their use in spiritual formation and discipline for both children and adults in Geneva.

Keywords: John Calvin; Geneva; catechism; Decalogue; Lord's Prayer; Apostle's Creed; spiritual discipline; Consistory; schooling; Sunday worship

Introduction

One of my best early interactions with Patrick Graham came in the archives of the Pitts Theology Library, shortly after his appointment as director. There he was covered with dust and leather leavings, excitedly holding an early printing of Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*, and marveling over the woodcut images. We lingered for several minutes, and he showed me later printings of Luther's catechisms and those of his Wittenberg colleague, Philip Melancthon. "Ah, but I forgot that you're a Calvinist," he said, tapping himself on the forehead, and leaving a little more leather dust. "I wish I had one of Calvin's old catechisms to show you."

This was vintage Patrick Graham. It was Patrick Graham, the exuberant archivist, reveling in the craft of collecting and preserving old books and papers, and sharing these treasures with others. It was Patrick Graham, the Christian historian, who knew the wisdom of both Scripture and tradition, and the power of preserving and presenting the literary and artistic icons of the faith -- not least

those beautiful woodcuts of the sixteenth century that he has since collected in a massive digital library. And it was Patrick Graham, the Christian ecumenist, ever alert to the subtle accents of each denomination, and the distinct contributions each of their forbearers made to the church universal.

In this essay -- dedicated to Pat with admiration, appreciation, and affection – I analyze briefly John Calvin’s catechisms that were designed to help the faithful of Geneva learn the Word of God. Calvin produced a half dozen catechisms during his tenure in the city from 1536 to 1538 and 1541 to 1564. While not nearly so well-known as his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or *Geneva Bible*, and not nearly so heavily used today as the later Reformed catechisms of Heidelberg or Westminster, Calvin’s catechisms were impressive for their biblical acuity, pristine language, and doctrinal precision and for their power to integrate the far flung Calvinist communities of the sixteenth century.

Writing the Catechism for Geneva

From the start of his reform efforts in Geneva, Calvin pressed for the proper Christian education of children, calling for a “good catechism” in a “language level to their tender age.”¹ He saw catechetical training as essential for teaching children the Bible in their own vernacular language (not in the traditional Latin of the Vulgate), and for teaching them elementary Christian doctrines and beliefs from the start. Through proper catechetical training, he said, children would learn “the true and saving knowledge of God who claims their lives as his own.” Moreover, as they matured, these properly-trained children would ensure the “propagation” and “preservation of the church in the midst of the world” in succeeding generations. “[T]he Church of God will never preserve itself without a catechism,” he wrote; “for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and causing it to multiply from age to age.” Over time, Calvin hoped, the basic biblical truths set out and learned in catechisms would eventually reunite the church, yielding “a perpetual consent by all in pious doctrine” perhaps even yielding “a single form of catechism for all churches.”²

Not just any catechism would do, however. Following the example of other early Protestant reformers,³ Calvin developed his own catechisms. On his

¹ John Calvin, “Letter to the Protector Somerset, October 22, 1548,” in Jules Bonnet, ed., *Letters of John Calvin*, 4 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973), 2:182, 191-192

² Ibid.; John Calvin, “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva, that is, a Plan for Instructing Children in the Doctrine of Christ,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 88-91.

³ On Lutheran catechisms, see John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 271-75. On Genevan catechisms before and after the Reformation, see Robert M. Kingdon, “Catechesis in Calvin’s Geneva,” in John van Engen, ed., *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and*

first arrival in Geneva, in 1536, he had already prepared his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he called a “simple” and “elementary form of teaching” proper Christian doctrine.⁴ That volume, however, was a substantial theological tract of some 120 folio pages in Latin -- with meaty chapters on the Law (largely the Decalogue), Faith (largely the Apostles’ Creed), Prayer (largely the Lord’s Prayer), the Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist), Christian Freedom, and the Power of Church and State. While that text was suitable for advanced theology students, it was not nearly “simple” or “elementary” enough for youngsters.

Thus in 1537, Calvin published his *Instruction and Confession of Faith for Use in the Church of Geneva* -- first in French, the principal local language of Geneva,⁵ the next year in Latin.⁶ This was a bit more accessible introduction. Using the topical method of Philip Melancthon, it offered the catechumen 33 topics on the precepts of the Christian faith, especially the Decalogue, Creed, and Lord’s Prayer. Here is a sample from the entry on “The Law of the Lord” and the Fifth Commandment to “Honor Your Father and Mother.”

In God’s law is given the most perfect rule of all righteousness, which is for the best of reasons to be called the Lord’s everlasting will. For in its two tables has been included fully and clearly all that we need. The first table has in a few commandments set forth the worship appropriate to his majesty; the second, the duties of charity owed to one’s neighbor. Let us therefore hear it, and afterward we shall see what sort of teaching we are to grasp from it as well as what fruits we are to gather....

v. Honor father and mother, etc. By this commandment there is enjoined upon us piety toward parents and toward those who by the Lord’s ordaining are in authority over us in the place of parents, such as magistrates. That is, we are to render to them the highest reverence, obedience, gratefulness, and whatever duties we are capable of. For it is the Lord’s will that we accord mutual service to those who have brought us into this life. It makes no difference whether

Christian Communities (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 294-314.

⁴ *Ioannis Calvini Institutio Religionis Christianae* (1536), in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, et al., 59 vols. (Brunswick: apud C.A. Schwetschke et filium, 1863-1900) [hereafter CO], translated as *John Calvin, Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), preface.

⁵ “Instruction et confession de foy dont on use en l’église de Genève,” in CO 22:25-74, translated as John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, trans. and ed. P.T. Furhmann (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949).

⁶ “Catechismus, sive christianae religionis institutio,” CO 5:312-362, translated in I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 1-38.

those to whom this honor is paid are worthy or unworthy. For of whatever sort they may be, they have been set over us as parents by the Lord, who has willed us to honor them. And this indeed is the first commandment with a promise, as Paul says, by which the Lord promises the blessing of the present life to his children who reverence with fitting observance their parents. At the same time, he hints that the most certain curse hangs over all disobedient and unyielding children. However, it should be noted in passing that we are bidden to obey our parents only in the Lord. Accordingly, we are not to be required to break the law of the Lord to please them. For in that case we are not to count as parents but rather as strangers those who try to steal us away from obedience to our true Father.⁷

This text, too, proved to be far too complex to serve as an elementary catechism. Over the next three years, while sojourning in Strasbourg, Calvin wrote -- or at least helped to shape -- a much simpler *Instruction of the Youth on Christian Doctrine in the Form of a Dialogue*.⁸ Later called *The Geneva Primer or Calvin's Elementary Catechism*, this was a set of 74 basic questions put by a minister to a child:

- Q. In whom do you believe?
A. In God the Father, and in Jesus Christ his Son, and in the Holy Spirit.
Q. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are they more than one God?
A. No.
Q. Should we serve God according to his commandments or according to human traditions?
A. We should serve according to his commandments and not according to human commandments.
Q. Are you able to accomplish the commandments of God by yourself?
A. No.
Q. Who accomplishes them in you?
A. The Holy Spirit.
Q. And when God gives you his Holy Spirit, can you do them perfectly?
A. Not at all.

⁷ Ibid., 11-14.

⁸ "L'Institution puerile de la doctrine chrestienne faicte par manière de dialogue," in Peter Barth, et al., eds., *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, 5 vols. (Monachii: Kaiser, 1952-1959), 2:152-156 [hereafter OS].

Q. And yet God condemns and rejects everyone who does not perfectly fulfill his commandments.

A. It is true.

Q. By what means will you be saved and delivered from the condemnation of God?

A. By the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Q. How can this be?

A. Because by his death he has given us life and has reconciled us to God his father.

Q. And to whom do you pray?

A. God.

Q. In whose name do you pray?

A. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who is our advocate and intercessor.⁹

This *Instruction of the Youth*, and local variations on the same, became a common teaching tool in Calvin's Geneva – in households, churches, and schools alike. It was also later used by the Consistory of Geneva to assess the basic spiritual literacy of persons who were hailed before it to answer for various offenses, not least delinquency in church attendance.¹⁰

While this elementary text remained popular, Calvin prepared another catechism for more advanced students. This he completed in draft in 1542 and published with revisions in 1545 as *The Geneva Catechism*.¹¹ It appeared in both French and Latin editions, and aimed to replace the complex and bulky 1537/8 *Instruction and Confession*.¹² This new Geneva catechism offered 373 pairs of questions and answers for the "Minister" and "Child" to recite to each other. The 373 questions were further subdivided into 55 clusters, allowing for efficient coverage of the whole catechism in a single year of Sundays and holy days.¹³ It was organized around the four doctrinal headings of Faith, Law,

⁹ Ibid. This early catechism was incorporated into later primers used in Geneva, such as *L'ABC François* (1561) and *Instruction des chrestiens* (1562), which also included the texts of the Apostles' Creed, Lords' Prayer, various daily prayers, a short summary of the faith, and a collection of important biblical passages. See Rodolphe Peter, "The Geneva Primer or Calvin's Elementary Catechism," in John H. Leith, ed., *Calvin Studies Series V: Papers Presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College* (Davidson, NC: Davidson College Presbyterian Church, 1990), 135-161.

¹⁰ See Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community from 1536-1564* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Jeffrey R. Watt, "Childhood, and Education in Geneva," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33 (2002): 447.

¹¹ "Le Catéchisme de l'église de Genève, c'est a dire le Formulaire d'instruire les enfans en la chrestienté," in CO 6:1-160; "Catechismus ecclesiae Genevensis, hoc est, formula erudiendi pueros in doctrina Christi," in OS 2:72-151. The French edition is translated in T.F. Torrance, ed., *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clark, 1959); the Latin edition is translated in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 88-139.

¹² Ibid., 90.

¹³ Kingdon, "Catechesis," 303.

Prayer, and the Sacraments to allow for a main theme in each season. Several of the entries were peppered with biblical citations, and had just enough theological flavoring and fiber to give a catechumen the capacity to reason about the Christian faith on his or her own. Compare this engaging discussion of the Decalogue and the Commandment to “Honor Your Father and Mother” in *The Geneva Catechism* to the more austere and declarative statements on this topic that we quoted above from the 1538 catechism:

M. What rule of life has he given us?

C. His law.

M. What does it contain?

C. It consists of two parts: the first of these contain four commandments, the other six. So the whole law consists of ten commandments in all. (Ex. 24:12; 32:15; 34:29; Deut. 4:13: 10:3)

M. Who is the originator of this division?

C. God himself, who delivered it written on two tablets to Moses and often declared it reducible to ten sentences...

M. Let us pass to the second table.

C. It begins: Honor thy father and thy mother.

M. What does the word honour mean for you?

C. That children be with modesty and humility compliant and obedient to their parents, that they give them reverence, that they help them in need, and that they devote their labour to them. For in these three branches is contained that honour which is owed to parents.

M. Go on.

C. To the command a promise is added: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

M. What does this mean?

C. That by God’s blessing those that offer due honour to their parents will live long.

M. When this life is so full of hardships, why does God promise its long continuance as a blessing?

C. However great the miseries to which it is exposed, yet there is a blessing of God towards believers in his nourishing and preserving them here, if only for this reason, that it is proof of his paternal favour.

M. Does it follow conversely that the man who early and before his due time is snatched away from the world is cursed by God?

C. Not at all. Rather it sometimes happens that a more a man is loved by God the earlier he is removed from

this life.

M. But by so doing, how does he fulfill his own promise?

C. Whatever earthly blessings God promises to us are received on this condition: in so far as is expedient for the good and salvation of our soul. For ordinance would be very preposterous unless the matter of the soul always took precedence.

M. What about those who are contumacious towards parents?

C. They will not only be punished at the last judgment; here also God will inflict punishment on their bodies, either by removing them in the midst of their days, or bringing them to an ignominious death, or by other means.

M. But does not the promise speak expressly of the land of Canaan?

C. That is so, so far as the Israelites are concerned; but for us the term extends most widely and ought to be expanded. For whatever locality we inhabit, since the whole earth is the Lord's, he assigns it to us for a possession (Ps. 24:1; 89:2; 115:16).

M. Is there nothing more remaining in this commandment?

C. Though the words refer to father and mother only, we must understand all who are over us, since they have the same ground.

M. What is the ground?

A. This, that the Lord has raised them to a degree superior in honour. For there is no authority, either of parents, or princes, or governors of any kind, no empire and no honour, except by God's decree; for so it pleased him to order the world.¹⁴

This remained the standard catechism for the youth and young adults of Geneva for the rest of the century. It was also used as a teaching tool for new adult converts to the Reformed faith or emigres who came to the city in great numbers to escape persecution in Catholic lands. *The Geneva Catechism* circulated widely in the far-flung Reformed communities of France, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and New England. Even when it was eclipsed by local catechisms, its four-part division of faith, law, prayer, and the sacraments became the standard theological framework of Reformed catechisms until the twentieth century.

¹⁴ In Calvin: Theological Treatises, 107-08, 113-14.

Establishing the Catechism in Geneva

The founding documents of church and state in Protestant Geneva repeatedly called children, parents, clerics, teachers, and community members alike to help establish and teach the catechism. Already in his 1537 *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva*, Calvin argued that mandatory education of children was essential: “[I]t is strictly required and quite necessary for maintaining the people in purity of doctrine, that infants of tender age be so instructed that they are able to give reason for their faith, so that evangelical doctrine is not left to decay and, and also that its substance be diligently maintained and transmitted from hand to hand and from father to son.”¹⁵ Calvin grounded this teaching in the example of the early church, which he took as axiomatic for the new Protestant community of Geneva:

[I]n ancient days, a definite catechism was used for initiating each one in the fundamentals of the Christian religion; and this might be a formula of witness, which each could use to declare his Christianity. The children were individually taught from this catechism, and had to come to testify their faith in the church, to which they were unable at their Baptism to render witness. For we see that Scripture has always joined confession with faith; and it has told us that, if we truly believe with the heart, it is right that we ought also to confess with the mouth to that salvation which we believe. Now if this ordinance has ever been proper and appropriate, it is more than ever necessary now, in view of the neglect of the Word of God which we see in most people, and the contempt of parents in instructing their children in the way of God, from which one sees a remarkable rudeness and great ignorance which is quite intolerable in the Church of God.

The order which we advise being set up is that there be a brief and simple summary of the Christian faith, to be taught to all children, and that at certain seasons of the year they come before the ministers to be interrogated and examined, and to receive more ample explanation, according as there is need to the capacity of each of them, until they have been proved sufficiently instructed. But may it be your pleasure to command parents to exercise pains and diligence that

¹⁵ In *ibid.*, 48.

their children learn this summary and that they present themselves before the ministers at the times appointed.¹⁶

Calvin repeated this call for regular catechization many times over – in private letters, biblical commentaries, and city ordinances alike.¹⁷ The famous Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541), which Calvin drafted for Geneva and were restated in 1561, put it thus:

At noon on Sundays all citizens and inhabitants shall take or send their children to catechism....

A particular form of instruction is to be composed for them and, besides the teaching which is to be given them, they are to be questioned about what has been said to see whether it has been well understood and remembered.

When a child has been sufficiently instructed to pass on from the catechism, he shall solemnly recite the sum of what is contained in it, and he shall do this as a profession of his Christianity in the presence of the church.

Before this has been done, no child is to be admitted as a communicant to the supper, and parents are cautioned not to bring them before the time, for it is very perilous both for their children and for their fathers to present them without good and sufficient instruction, which is the purpose of prescribing this order.

That there may be no misbehavior, it is ordered that when the children go to school they shall assemble there before twelve o'clock and that the instructors shall keep them in good order in each parish.

Furthermore, their fathers are to send them or see that they are taken; and so that there may be a minimum of confusion the distinction between the parishes is, so far as possible, to be observed in this connection, as has been said above concerning the sacraments.

¹⁶ In *ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷ See texts collected in John Witte, Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin's Geneva 2: The Christian Household* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), chap. 9.

Those who contravene this order shall be called before the Company of elders or delegates (*commis*). And if they are unwilling to comply with good counsel the matter shall be reported to the Council.

For the purpose of observing who are performing their duty and who not, the above mentioned delegates (*commis*) shall keep a watchful eye.¹⁸

This language was echoed in a 1547 ordinance for the country churches, and in 1549, 1550, and 1560 morals legislation for Geneva.¹⁹

While catechesis was certainly known in Geneva prior to the Reformation, what was new in these ordinances was that a child could not be admitted to their first communion without knowing the catechism. And being a communicant member of the church was essential to attaining not only full spiritual participation but also full social standing in the community of Geneva. Only fully communicant members of the church could get married, have their children baptized, act as godparents, and get poor relief and hospital access in the city of Geneva. Moreover, those adults who were not communicant members, or who were temporarily banned from Communion, were routinely shunned.²⁰ This made proper catechesis on the way to confirmation and full communicant status even more essential.

The duty to teach the catechism fell not only on parents and siblings, and on church ministers and elders, but also on the teachers in the local Genevan elementary schools. This *petite ecole* or *schola privata* was part of the *Collège de Rive* in the early days of the Reformation, before being subsumed into the Genevan Academy of 1559, which added advanced (university-style) training in theology and eventually other subjects, too.²¹ Local chroniclers report that

¹⁸ CO 10/1:15-30, using translation in *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, trans. Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966), 35-52.

¹⁹ In *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 76-82; Emile Rivoire and Victor van Berchem, eds., *Les sources du droit du canton de Genève*, ed., 4 vols. (Aarau: H.R. Sauerländer, 1927-1935), 2:500, 530 (items 841, 867).

²⁰ Thomas A. Lambert, "Preaching, Praying, and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison 1998), 255-263; Christian Grosse, *L'excommunication de Philibert Berthelier. Histoire d'un conflit d'identité aux premiers temps de la Réforme genevoise, 1547-1555* (Geneva: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie, 1995), 47ff. See further examples in Raymond A. Mentzler, ed., *Dire l'interdit: The Vocabulary of Censure and Exclusion in the Early Modern Reformed Tradition* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).

²¹ See Karin Maag, "Calvin's Academic and Educational Legacy," in David Foxgrover, ed., *The Legacy of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Studies Society, 2000), 11-26; id., *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education, 1560-1620* (Aldershot: Scolars Press / Brookfield VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1995). The *Ordres l'ecole* (1559) of the Genevan Academy are in CO 10/1:65-90, with a translation in Frederick Eby, *Early Protestant*

Genevan students began their catechism training at the age of six or seven as part of their traditional instruction in the arts and humanities, and this continued for the next four or five years. Thrice a week the students would march ceremonially up to St. Pierre Cathedral, the main church on a hilltop in the city, for instruction and a sermon from Calvin or another qualified minister. On Sundays, the ministers in each of the three parish churches in Geneva would teach students the catechism in a formal class held between morning and afternoon services. Every child of age was expected to attend catechism in the parish church which their family attended, with the classes graded according to age and ability.²²

Once the five-year program of catechesis was completed, the student was expected to recite the catechism publicly in the Sunday church service as part of his or her public profession of faith.²³ As Calvin described it, the child when “of age would present himself to the Church, to make a profession of faith, would be questioned on each head, and give answers to each. If he was ignorant of any point, or did not well understand it, he would be taught. Thus, while the whole Church looked on and witnessed, he would profess the one true sincere faith with which the body of the faithful, with one accord, worship one God.”²⁴ Upon a successful examination, the next Sunday, the child would receive his or her first communion, and be embraced thereafter as a full member of the body of Christ.

These catechetical ideals proved hard to implement, despite the arduous efforts of Calvin and the Consistory of Geneva. Calvin’s correspondence and the later Consistory records of Geneva are chock full of cases of parents and students who neglected their catechetical duties, skipped school, Sunday worship, and catechism classes, or betrayed woeful ignorance of the most elementary teachings of the Bible and tradition when examined.²⁵ But here was a sturdy foundation of education and habituation of the Reformed faith on which later generations would build for centuries.

Educators: The Educational Writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Leaders of Protestant Thought (New York/London: McGraw-Hill, 1931), 253-67.

²² I.M. Green, *Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 277ff.; Watt, “Childhood and Education.”

²³ P. Mark Achtemeier, “Reflections on Calvin’s Catechetics,” in John H. Leith, ed., *Calvin Studies VI: Presented at the Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College* (Davidson, NC: Davidson Presbyterian Church, 1992), 60.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.19.13.

²⁵ See the collection of cases in Witte and Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva 2*, chap. 9 and discussion in Jeffrey R. Watt, “Childhood and Youth in the Geneva Consistory Minutes,” in Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004), 43-64.