

Catechism Whose Responsibility:

The Church or the Parents?

By Jacques Roets

It is important to have a clear Biblical understanding of the answer to this question, for we have a tendency to lean toward the one or the other. Some assume it is the Church's responsibility, which produces the tendency for parents to draw back and leave it all up to the Church. They hardly ever talk to their children about what they are taught, or what they are learning. Others are aware of the high demand Scripture places on the parents and wonder if the Church has any duty at all to catechize the youth. They can even be moved to believe that it is the parents' sole responsibility.

A Shared Responsibility Seen in Baptism

As the Catechism season is getting underway it is important for us to understand that this responsibility does not belong exclusively to parents or the Church. It is a shared responsibility. Both the Church and parents must make sure our children are taught the things of God.

This shared responsibility becomes clear when we understand the covenant of grace. God has placed our children in the covenant of grace. He has placed them in a special relationship with himself. He has placed his name upon them; therefore they are his and he is theirs! (Matt. 28:19-20; Jer. 31:-34; Ezek. 36:27). This is signified and sealed in Baptism.

Now our children are included in this covenant with God, because of God's covenant with the parents (Gen. 17:1-14). Because the parents believe in Christ, God has made their children a part of his special people and the promises of the gospel belongs to them too (Acts 2:37-38; 1 Cor. 7:14).

Because our children stand in this privileged relationship with God they must be taught about God and their responsibility to God (Matt. 28:19-20—notice that the command to baptize is followed by the command to teach).

In most forms of baptism used in Reformed Churches, parents acknowledge that it is their responsibility and they promise that they will faithfully fulfill this responsibility.ⁱ Scripture affirms in numerous places the parents' responsibility (Deut. 4:9-10; 6:1-9; Eph. 6:4).

But this does not mean that it is exclusively the parents' responsibility. It cannot be. The covenant of grace is not the possession of the family; rather, it is the foundation of the family (people) of God. It is not the father who baptizes his children, but it is the ordained servant of the Lord who administers the Lord's sacrament to the children of believing parents in the presence of the Lord and his people.

That is why some of the forms for baptism make explicit the responsibility of the covenant community to assist the parents in raising their children in the fear of the Lord. Like this example used in some United Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches:

“Third, do you promise, in reliance on the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Christian community, to do all in your power to instruct these children in the Christian faith and to

lead them by your example to be Christ's disciples?*[The parents respond]* : We do, God helping us.*[The minister addresses the congregation]* : Do you, the people of the Lord, promise to receive these children in love, pray for them, help instruct them in the faith, and encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers?*[The congregation responds]* : We do, God helping us” (http://www.crcna.org/pages/1976_baptismII.cfm)

Here we see that baptism not only underscores the parents' duty, since they bring the child to be baptized, but it also underscores the Church's responsibility to train the child in the ways of God, since the Church has been entrusted with the Sacraments (Mat. 28:19-20). In baptism we see the responsibility of parents and the Church come together.

Church's Responsibility

The Church has a responsibility to each baptized member to make sure they learn about God and his promises made to them in the covenant of grace. The child in fact must be taught because God will demand of him a response in the future to his covenant promises.

Because this is the case, the Church must make sure that all to whom it administers the sacrament of baptism know the riches of the Lord Jesus Christ and are ready to answer to his promises in the future. If the Church fails in properly educating its members, it not only robs the covenant children of their inheritance, but it will in the end also lead to its own demise!

The Church is “the pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Ignorance of the truth has always undermined the Church in the long run. Therefore, Paul reminds Timothy that his task is not only to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation” but also “to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). The Church has a great responsibility to make sure that it teaches “what accords with sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). We do not want to undermine the very foundation of the Church by wrong teaching. In the past the Church has found that the best way of teaching the truths of God's word to the next generation is by means of Catechizing.

But not only do we want to be faithful to God in maintaining the truth, we also want to be faithful to our covenant youth. They have a rich inheritance in God's promises and the truths of God's word summarized in Reformed Catechisms like the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647). By teaching these truths and having the children hide them in their hearts through memorization we aim to help our covenant children gain insight into God's grace in order to give them greater stability in the Christian life. If we were to do anything less, we would impoverish our children, robbing them of the riches of their inheritance. Most likely we would spiritually handicap them for life!

Parent's Responsibility

But by this work of the Church, the parents are not absolved from their responsibility to teach their children the ways of God's covenant. They are assisted by the Church in fulfilling their duty. They must work together with the Church to make sure their children receive their great inheritance. This means that parents must take a great interest in what their children are taught from

week to week. We must not merely know that they have done their work, but we must seek to know something of the content of what they are learning.

This can be a great help to parents in leading their children to respond to God's covenant promises. Parents have the great duty to impress the truth upon the hearts and minds of their children and help them to see that they have a relationship with the living God through Christ.

To fulfill this duty is often overwhelming. But in the weekly Catechism lesson parents have a natural point of contact to talk about the things of God and how it impacts their lives and the lives of their children. Use it! Don't let this opportunity slip by!

It is also important that parents show great enthusiasm for what their children are learning. Often parents will complain about the amount of work or talk negatively about something related to the Church in front of the child. This may lead the child to despise what he or she is taught or to lose all interest. In this way it is possible for parents, without really intending, to rob their children of their inheritance in God which at best might well spiritually cripple them, or at worst it could lead them to totally reject God.

There are some children with learning difficulties which must be taken into account, but we must guard against using that as an excuse to rob our children. We must help our children learn the most that they are able to learn. We are giving to them their riches in Christ, equipping them for life, helping them to walk with God. May God help us to pursue this responsibility as best we can!

Conclusion

We see, then, that the Church and parents must be working together in ensuring that our children receive their covenant inheritance. The Church and parents must work together to make sure that our children know God and in faith answer God's promises made to them in baptism. What an awesome task! May God bless the efforts of his people to ensure that the next generation will rise up to praise him!

ⁱ I am thinking of the Liturgical Forms for the Baptism of Infants used in many Reformed Churches. Here are two examples of the type of questions asked in Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. Some United Reformed and some Christian Reformed Churches ask this question: "do you (Parents-JR) sincerely promise to do all you can to teach these children, and to have them taught, this doctrine of salvation?" (http://www.crcna.org/pages/1976_baptism.cfm). While Orthodox Presbyterian Churches include this question in their vows for Baptism: "Do you promise to instruct your child in the principles of our holy religion as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this church; and do you promise to pray with and for your child, to set an example of piety and godliness before him/her, and to endeavor by all the means of God's appointment to bring him/her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?" (http://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=137)