

Introduction to The Trinity Catechism

What is a Catechism?

The word comes from a Greek word (katēcheō) that means “to make hear,” “to teach” or “to instruct.”

Luke 1:3–4 (ESV) — it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you **have been taught**. (*katēchēthēs*)

Acts 18:25 (ESV) — He **had been instructed** in the way of the Lord...

See also — Rom 2:18; 1 Cor 14:19; Gal 6:6

The Greek word (katēcheō) was not a technical term or specialized word—it simply means to *teach* or *instruct*, but over time this term has been associated with a specific method of teaching.

A “catechism” is a tool used to teach others *verbally*, usually through question and answer.

An ancient church practice

Catechumens – candidates who received methodical instruction to prepare them for baptism. The length of this process ranged from days to years.

There was an elaborate ritual of preparation, with a succession of *scrutinies, in the preceding *Lent, the candidates being finally admitted at the Paschal Mass. Illustrations of early catechetical instruction survive in St *Cyril of Jerusalem’s *Lectures* (c. 350) and St *Augustine’s *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (c. 400).¹

As the Catholic church developed and paedobaptism became the norm, this practice mainly fell out of use, though there was a similar preparation for “confirmation” in the Catholic Church.

¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 302.

Catechisms during the Reformation

Catechisms began to be used extensively during the Reformation to help Christians understand key aspects of the Christian faith. This renewed commitment to Christian instruction also coincided with the printing press.

Examples of significant catechisms from the Reformation:

- Martin Luther wrote a *Small Catechism* (1529) that had enormous influence.
- *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) – significant for Calvinist communities
- Catechism of the Church of England in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549)
 - “The ‘Instruction’ in the BCP in the form of a series of questions and answers ‘to be learned of every person before he be brought to be confirmed by the Bishop’. The inclusion of such a body of teaching in an authorized service book was an innovation in 1549.”²
- The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647) – this is perhaps the most influential, especially in our Reformed theological tradition. It was somewhat unique in that each answer formed a complete thought, even without the question.
- *The Baptist Catechism* (1689), also known as Keach’s Catechism

Historically, these catechisms typically included instruction on the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments.

Catechisms are traditionally a way of teaching:

1. Foundational doctrine
2. The basics of Christian living (primary areas of obedience)
3. A method of prayer (typically using the Lord’s Prayer).

In other words, catechisms are not *just* about doctrine, but more broadly about Christian discipleship—learning from and following Jesus.

The brilliance of the *Shorter Catechism* lay in its brevity and depth of theological insight, which made it ideal for use in homes, schools and churches. The aim was to produce a well-instructed congregation which would be able to use the knowledge thus gained as a basis for appreciating sermons and Christian literature. It was an attempt to create a perceptive response to the teaching of the Bible, which it endeavoured to structure in a way that corresponded to the development of the Christian life.³

² *ibid.*

³ G. L. Bray, “Catechisms,” ed. Martin Davie et al., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (London; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 157.

Modern use of catechisms

By the beginning of the twentieth century, as more Christian books became available, the use of catechisms had significantly declined.

There does seem to be a recent renewed interest in catechisms within the Reformed community.

- John Piper slightly updated *The Baptist Catechism* and published it in 1986. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-baptist-catechism>
- Timothy Keller's *The New City Catechism* "is based on and adapted from Calvin's Geneva Catechism, the Westminster Shorter and Larger catechisms, and especially the Heidelberg Catechism." Keller wrote a great introduction to catechisms that is worth reading. <https://newcitycatechism.com/>

Why do we need another catechism?

If we already have all of these historic and modern catechisms, why write a new one?

An updated, shared discipleship tool

Though there are many ways to teach foundational Christian truths, a catechism is a proven one. "Of the making of books there is no end..." but a shared catechism serves as a *communal* tool for a local body of believers (or denomination) to grow in Christian truth and obedience together.

Having explored many of the various historical catechisms, we wanted to be able to combine some of the advantages of each of them.

A discipleship tool which aligns with our theology

More specifically, we wanted a catechism of our own because there isn't an existing catechism that has precisely our "reformed-continuationist" doctrinal perspective. We also felt the need to address various contemporary issues that historical catechisms did not address.

Where did *The Trinity Catechism* come from?

Like with our *Trinity Confession of Faith*, we started with existing documents and then modified them as we needed.

Our initial starting point was *The Baptist Catechism (Keach)*, a 1689 document written by Reformed Baptists. Yet, they pulled most of their catechism from the 1647 *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

Here are the sources behind the 104 questions in *The Trinity Catechism*:

- **22 questions⁴** are original to *The Trinity Catechism*. Our original questions and answers typically reflect our theological distinctives:
 - Complementarianism (15–18),
 - Continuationism (43, 88),
 - Connectionalism (103),
 - Missional (101–102), and
 - Gospel-Centeredness (26, 37, 79).
- **44 questions⁵** come from the [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#) with *very slight changes* to make it clearer and modernized. The *Shorter Catechism* is the work of the Westminster Assembly that produced the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a *Larger Catechism*, and a *Shorter Catechism*, along with a *Directory for Public Worship* (1647–1648).
- **27 questions⁶** come from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* but with *significant or very significant changes*.
- **6 questions⁷** come from [Keach's Catechism](#), a 1689 Reformed Baptist catechism. Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) was an English Reformed Baptist connected to the 1689 London Baptist Confession. Historians do not think he is the sole author of the Catechism, but his name has become attached to it.
- **4 questions⁸** come from Piper's 1986 [A Baptist Catechism](#)⁹, a work he did based almost entirely on *Keach's Catechism* with a few additions of his that were really strong;
- **1 question** comes from the 1563 [Heidelberg Catechism](#) (our question 3). Written in Heidelberg, Germany, it is largely the work of Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583).

The Overall Logic to *The Trinity Catechism*

There is an overall flow to the Trinity Catechism that we tried to highlight by breaking it up into various sections. Here we want to go over the basic logical flow of the questions and then look into the questions in more detail. We'll go over the questions in this class but also in the next two Sunday mornings.

⁴ Original Questions: 15–18, 24, 26, 35, 37, 43, 49–53, 79, 81, 86, 88, 101–104

⁵ *Trinity Catechism* questions from WSC with minimal changes: 2, 5, 7–14, 19–20, 23, 27–34, 36, 38–39, 45, 48, 54–60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 80, 92, 97

⁶ *Trinity Catechism* from 1647 WSC with changes (sometimes theologically significant): 21–22, 25, 40–42, 44, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75–76, 78, 82, 89–91, 93–96, 98–100

⁷ *Trinity Catechism* from Keach's Catechism (Rev. John Bippon's 1794 edition as found in 1851 edition published by American Baptist Publication Society): 1, 4, 46–47, 83–84

⁸ *Trinity Catechism* from Piper's 1986 "A Baptist Catechism": 6, 77, 85, 87

⁹ Accessed at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-baptist-catechism>.

Order of Salvation (Questions 1–47)

- This essentially tells the story of salvation from God to creation to redemption.
- This is the “redemption accomplished” stage of our salvation. It doesn’t get into our personal application of God’s salvation but deals with what Christ did and what hope God’s people have in general.

Our Duty Before God (Questions 48–75)

- Following *WSC* and *Keach*, our catechism then turns to our duty before God.
- This is the duty of ALL people before God.
- Here we look at the two great commandments (love God, love our neighbor) and also the Decalogue (Ten Commandments).

Our Response (Questions 76–104)

- Looking at our duty in the two great commandments and the Decalogue reminds us of our sinfulness and need for a Savior.
- That’s why the Catechism focuses next on *our personal response* to Christ’s offer of salvation.
- Faith and repentance then leads to baptism, church membership.
- The Lord’s Prayer fits here as a response to our new relationship with God.
- The *Trinity Catechism* ends with a look at our mission (individually and as a church and as God’s people on earth) and great hope (new heavens and new earth, the resurrection).

Section One (Questions 1-3) “Our Chief End and Comfort”

Three questions from the big Three: Keach, Westminster Shorter, Heidelberg.

Question 1: from Keach

Since our direct starting point for *The Trinity Catechism* was *The Baptist Catechism* (*Keach*), and our Catechism is a Reformed Baptist catechism, it seemed appropriate to begin with the first question from Keach’s Catechism.

1. Who is the first and greatest of all beings?

God is the first and greatest of all beings.

Psalm 8:1; 97:9; Isaiah 44:6

Notice the God-centeredness of this opening question. Before we get to our purpose (Q2) or to our comfort (Q3) we begin with the reality of God Himself.

Question 2: the famous opening question from WSC

This question has been used in thousands and thousands of settings to quickly and concisely remind Christians what they should be about. Amen!

2. What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 11:36; Psalm 73:25-28

Question 3: the famous question from the Heidelberg Catechism

This is a very densely packed answer, but in a single paragraph (originally a single sentence) it covers enormous portions of the Christian life. It points us powerfully to key orienting and anchoring truths we need in order to live in faith in whatever circumstances we face.

3. What is our only comfort in life and death?

Our only comfort is that we, with body and soul, both in life and death, are not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully paid for all our sins, and delivered us from all the power of the devil; and so preserves us that apart from the will of our heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from our heads. Yes, all things must work together for our salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures us of eternal life and makes us sincerely willing and ready, from now on, to live for him.

Romans 14:7-8; 1 Cor. 6:19; 3:23; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 1 John 2:2; Hebrews 2:14; John 10:28; Matthew 10:29-31; Romans 8:3-4, 16, 28

How to prepare for the remaining classes

The best preparation for class for the next two weeks would be to read through the questions and answers at least once. Come with any questions you might have about them.



- Class two will discuss **Sections 2–6/Questions 4–47**.
- Class three will discuss **Sections 7–11/Questions 48–104** as well as **practically how to use The Trinity Catechism**.