

Why Catechize?

Thomas Watson

I intend next Lord's day to begin the work of catechetical preaching. It will not be amiss to give you an introductory sermon to show you how necessary it is for Christians to be well instructed in the grounds of religion. My text is Colossians 1:23, "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled." I have two points.

FIRST, IT IS THE DUTY OF CHRISTIANS TO BE SETTLED IN THE DOCTRINES OF THE FAITH.

It is the apostle's prayer, "The God of all grace ... stablish, strengthen, settle you" (1 Pet. 5:10). That is, that they might not be meteors in the air, but fixed stars. The apostle Jude speaks of "wandering stars" in verse 13. Now, such as are not settled in religion, will at one time or other show themselves to be wandering stars. They will lose their former steadfastness, and wander from one opinion to another. Such as are unsettled are of the tribe of Reuben, "unstable as water" (Gen. 49:4). They are like a ship without ballast, overturned with every wind of doctrine. Beza writes of one Belfectius, that his religion changed like the moon. Every year the Arians had a new faith. These are not pillars in the temple of God. They are reeds shaken every way. The apostle calls them "damnable heresies" (2 Pet. 2:1). A man can go to hell for heresy as well as for adultery.

To be unsettled in religion demonstrates lack of judgment. If their heads were not giddy, men would not reel so fast from one opinion to another. It demonstrates lightness. As feathers will be blown every way, so will feathery Christians. Therefore, such are compared to children. "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro" (Eph. 4:14). Children are fickle, sometimes of one mind, sometimes of another. Nothing pleases them long. So unsettled Christians are childish. The truths they embrace at one time, they reject at another. Sometimes they like the Protestant religion. Soon after they have a good mind to turn Papist.

(1) It is the great goal of the preaching of the Word to bring us to a settlement in religion. "And he gave some ... evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:... that we henceforth be no more children" (Eph. 4:11-14). The Word is called a hammer (Jer. 23:29). Every blow of the hammer is to fasten the nails of the building. Likewise, the preachers' words are to fasten you all the more to Christ. They weaken themselves to strengthen and settle you. This is the grand design of preaching. Not only for the enlightening, but for the establishing of souls. Not only to guide them in the right way, but to keep them in it. Now, if you are not settled, you do not reflect God's goal in giving you the ministry of the Word.

(2) To be settled in religion is both a Christian's excellence and his honor. It is his excellence. When the milk is settled, the cream rises to the top. Now he will be zealous for the truth and walk in close communion with God. It is his honor. "The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness" (Prov. 16:31). It is one of the best sights to see an old disciple; to see silver hairs adorned with golden virtues.

(3) Those who are not settled in the faith can never suffer for the faith. Skeptics in religion hardly ever prove martyrs. They that are not settled hang in suspense. When they think of the joys of heaven, they will espouse the gospel. But when they think of persecution, they desert it. Unsettled Christians do not seek what is best, but what is safest. Tertullian says that the apostate seems to put God and Satan in the balance. After weighing both, he prefers the devil's service and proclaims him to be the best master. In this sense, the apostate may be said to put Christ to open shame (Heb. 6:6). He will never suffer for the truth. He will be like a soldier who turns coat and runs over to the enemy's side. He will fight on the devil's side for pay.

(4) Not to be settled in the faith is provoking to God. To espouse the truth and then to fall away brings an ill report upon the gospel, which will not go unpunished. They "turned back, and dealt unfaithfully.... When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel" (Ps. 78:57, 59). The apostate drops as a windfall right into the devil's mouth.

(5) If you are not settled in religion, you will never grow. We are commanded to "grow up into ... the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). But if we are unsettled, there is no growing. "The plant which is continually removing never thrives." He who is unsettled can no more grow in godliness than a bone which is badly broken can grow in the body.

(6) There is great need to be settled because there are so many things to unsettle us. Seducers are abroad. Their work is to draw people away from the principles of religion. "These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you" (1 John 2:26). Seducers are the devil's agents. They are of all others the greatest felons who would rob you of the truth.

Seducers have silver tongues which can palm off bad wares. They have a sleight to deceive (Eph. 4:14). The Greek word there is taken from those who are skilled at throwing dice for the best advantage. So seducers are impostors. They can throw dice. They can so counterfeit and spin the truth that they can deceive others. Seducers deceive by wisdom of words. "By good words and fair speeches [they] deceive the hearts of the simple" (Rom. 16:18). They have fine, elegant phrases and flattering language. By these they work on the weaker sort.

Another trick is pretending extraordinary piety so that people may admire them and suck in their doctrine. They seem to be men of zeal and sanctity, and to be divinely inspired, and they pretend to new revelations.

A third cheat of seducers is laboring to vilify and nullify sound, orthodox teachers. They would eclipse those who bring the truth. They are like dark clouds which shut out the light of heaven. They defame others in order that they themselves will be more admired. Thus the false teachers cried down Paul, that they might be received (Gal. 4:17).

The fourth cheat of seducers is preaching the doctrine of liberty as though men are freed from the moral law (the rule as well as the curse), and Christ has done all for them in such a way that they need do nothing whatsoever. Thus they pretend that the doctrine of free grace is a key to open the door to all licentiousness.

Another means is to unsettle Christians by persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). The gospel is a rose that cannot be plucked without prickles. The legacy Christ has bequeathed is the cross. While there is a

devil and a wicked man in the world, never expect a guarantee of exemption from trouble. How many fall away in an hour of persecution! "And there appeared ... a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns.... And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven" (Rev. 12:3-4). The red dragon, by his power and subtlety, drew away stars, or eminent professors, who seemed to shine as stars in the firmament of the church.

To be unsettled in good is the sin of the devils (Jude 6). They are called "morning stars" (Job 38:7), but they are "falling stars." They were holy but changeable. As the vessel is overturned with the sail, so their sails swelled with pride and they were overturned (1 Tim. 3:6). By unsettledness, men imitate fallen angels. The devil was the first apostate. The sons of Zion should be like Mount Zion, which cannot be removed.

SECOND, THE WAY FOR CHRISTIANS TO BE SETTLED IS TO BE WELL GROUNDED.

"If ye continue grounded and settled." The Greek word for "grounded" is a metaphor which alludes to a building that has the foundation well laid. So Christians should be grounded in the essential points of religion and have their foundation well laid. Here let me speak to two things:

1. We should be grounded in the knowledge of fundamentals. The apostle speaks of "the first principles of the oracles of God" (Heb. 5:12). In all arts and sciences, logic, physics, mathematics, there are basic rules and principles that must necessarily be known for the practice of those arts. So, in divinity, the first principles must be laid down. The knowledge of the grounds and principles of religion is exceedingly useful.

a. Otherwise, we cannot serve God aright. We can never worship God acceptably unless we worship him rightly. And how can we do that if we are ignorant of the rules and elements of religion? We are to give God a "reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). If we do not understand the basics of religion, how can it be a reasonable service?

b. Knowledge of the grounds of religion greatly enriches the mind. It is a lamp to our feet. It directs us in the whole course of Christianity as the eye directs the body. Knowledge of fundamentals is the golden key that opens the chief mysteries of religion. It gives us a whole system and body of divinity, exactly drawn in all its lineaments and lively colors. It helps us to understand many of those difficult things which occur in the reading of the Word. It helps to untie many Scripture knots.

c. It furnishes us with armor of proof-weapons to fight against the adversaries of the truth.

d. It is the holy seed from which graces are formed. It is the seed of faith (Ps. 9:10). It is the root of love. "Being rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17). The knowledge of principles promotes the making of a complete Christian.

2. This grounding is the best way to get settled: "grounded and settled." In order that a tree may be well settled, it must be well rooted. So, if you would be well settled in religion, you must be rooted in its principles. Plutarch wrote of someone who tried to set up a dead body, but it would not stand. "Oh," said he, "there needs to be something inside." So, that we may stand in shaking times, there must be a principle of knowledge inside. First grounded, and then settled. That the ship may be kept from overturning, it must have its anchor fastened. Knowledge of principles is to the soul as the

anchor to the ship. That holds it steady in the midst of the rolling waves of error, or the violent winds of persecution. First grounded, and then settled.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Consider the reason why so many people are unsettled. They are ready to embrace every new opinion. They dress themselves in as many religions as fashions. It is because they are ungrounded. See how the apostle joins these two together, "unlearned and unstable" (2 Pet. 3:16). Such as are unlearned in the main points of divinity are unstable. The body cannot be strong which has the sinews shrunk. In the same way, neither can that Christian be strong in religion who lacks the grounds of knowledge. They are the sinews to strengthen and establish him.

2. Consider how very necessary it is to lay down the main grounds of religion by means of catechizing. In this way, the weakest conscience may be instructed in the knowledge of the truth. It may be strengthened in the love of it. Catechizing is the best expedient to ground and settle people. I fear one reason why more good has not been done by preaching is because the chief heads and articles in religion have not been explained in a catechetical way. Catechizing is laying the foundation (Heb. 6:1). To preach and not to catechize is to build without foundation.

This way of catechizing is not a new invention. It is apostolic. The primitive church had their forms of catechism, as those phrases imply, a "form of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13), and "the first principles of the oracles of God" (Heb. 5:12). The early church had its catechumens, as Grotius and Erasmus observe. Many of the ancient fathers urged it, like Fulgentius, Austin, Theodoret, Lactantius, and others. God has given great success to it. By thus laying down the grounds of religion catechetically, Christians have been clearly instructed and wondrously built up in the Christian faith. This was so evident that Julian the Apostate [a Roman emperor who sought to turn the empire away from Christianity and back to paganism"Ed.], seeing the great success of catechizing, outlawed all schools and places of public literature and instructing of youth.

It is my plan, therefore (with the blessing of God), to begin this work of catechetical preaching next Sabbath day. And I intend each following Sabbath, in the afternoon, to make it my whole work to lay down the grounds and fundamentals of religion in a catechetical way. If I am hindered in this work by men, or taken away by death, I hope God will raise up some other laborer in the vineyard among you who may complete the work which I am now beginning.

This is a slightly modernized version of "A Preliminary Discourse to Catechising," taken from A Body of Divinity (1692), by Thomas Watson, a collection of 176 sermons on the Shorter Catechism by an eminent Puritan pastor (quoting the KJV, of course). Reprinted from New Horizons, January 2001.