

The Westminster Shorter Catechism

FOR STUDY CLASSES

Second Edition

G. I. WILLIAMSON

R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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To Doris, Sandra, Nancy, and Cathy

PREFACE

This catechism study was written while the author was pastor of one of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. The method of study was as follows: Students were expected to read each lesson carefully before class, and to write out their answers to the questions. Then, at the time of the week when the class met, these answers were recited and discussed. When a wrong—or inadequate—answer was given, the author did not immediately issue a definitive correction. Rather, members of the class were encouraged to evaluate, criticize, and attempt to formulate the right answer. In this way they learned to think out the implications of the doctrine being studied. The goal was to lead the class through discussion to a sharp discrimination between true and untrue, adequate and inadequate answers.

It will be noted that there are diagrams included in appendixes. These are not referred to at any predetermined point in the text. It is expected that the instructor will bring these into use whenever the discussion warrants, in order to help the students to grasp the interrelation of the doctrines being studied. It is the conviction of the author that there is a *system* of doctrine taught in the Bible. It is this system that this workbook aims to inculcate. These diagrams were helpful in the original instance. They were referred to again and again until they were thoroughly understood by the students.

If there is any value in this study—and in the illustrations that go with it—the “catechism kids” of the Mangere Reformed Church of Auckland deserve much of the credit. They were a never failing encouragement to the author as we worked through these lessons together.

QUESTION 1

Question 1 **What is the chief end of man?**

Answer **Man's chief end is to glorify God¹ and to enjoy him forever.²**

1. Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created (Rev. 4:11).
2. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever (Ps. 73:25–26).

According to the Catechism, there is a reason for the existence of human beings. And this reason cannot be found in man himself! This is so because God created man. God created man in his own image. And man, as originally created, was a true image of God because he was God-centered rather than self-centered. His one thought and desire, before sin ruined everything, was to serve God and to take delight in him. When man (Adam) first sinned against God, all was changed. Instead of thinking about how great and wonderful God is, he began to think about himself. He began to think of what it would be like if he (Adam) himself could be great, and of how he could enjoy himself!

THE TWO MIND-SETS

Let us try to show the difference between these two situations. Figure 1.1 represents man (Adam) as originally created. It shows that all the activities of life were performed in the service and enjoyment of God. Figure 1.2 represents man (fallen) as we now find him in sin. It shows that all the activities of life are performed in the service and enjoyment of self!

FIGURE 1.1

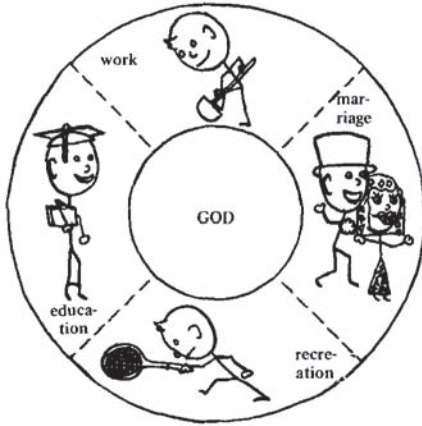
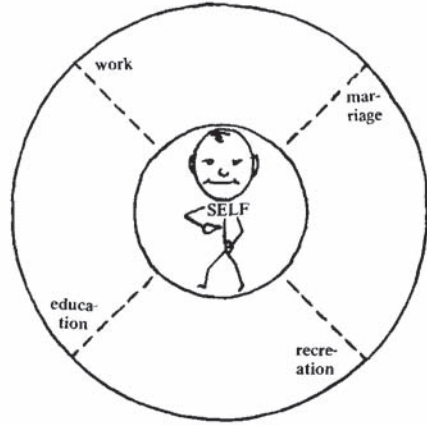


FIGURE 1.2



It is quite true, of course, that there are people who do not live to glorify God and to enjoy him who do not seem to belong to the description given in figure 1.2. They may devote themselves to various things which seem not to be self-centered. A man may devote himself to the service of his country, for example. Or perhaps a man will seek “the good of humanity.” There have been those who have lived by the idea of “the greatest good for the greatest number (of people).” But, in reality, this too is really the same conception of life that we find in figure 1.2. It is the same because it is not *God*-centered, and it is *man*-centered. The person who seeks the good of man as his chief end is really seeking his own good, for the simple reason that he too is a man! So, it is only the Christian (the person who truly believes in the Lord Jesus Christ) who can glorify God and enjoy him forever. And the first section of the Catechism will show how we can become God-centered people who glorify God and enjoy him forever.

GLORIFYING GOD

To “glorify God” does not mean “to *make* God glorious.” God already is glorious. He has been glorious from all eternity, and nothing

Q u e s t i o n 1

created by God can ever make him more glorious than he already is. To “glorify God” must therefore be understood this way: it means to reflect God’s glory. We see this in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens *declare* the glory of God; and the firmament *sheweth* his handywork.” The beautiful world that God has created is something like a mirror. If you look into that “mirror” you can see the glory of God. The chief end of the heavens and the earth, then, is to declare or show forth the glory of God. But in the case of men there is this difference: we are invited to do this because we want to do it. The heavens cannot help but declare the glory of God. But we are given the wonderful privilege of doing it because we want to do it. That is what Jesus did when he was on earth in service to his Father. “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4). He did what God wanted him to do. He did it because he wanted to do it. In this way Jesus glorified God, and will enjoy him forever!

Many people do not want to glorify God and enjoy him forever. (In fact, none except those who come to repent of their sin and put their faith in Christ ever do.) Since there are many who do not want to glorify God, it may seem that the Catechism is incorrect when it says that “Man’s chief end *is* to glorify God.” But the Catechism is correct. Even if a person does not want to glorify God—even if a person does not want to serve God willingly—he still remains subject to God. “Hath not the potter power over the clay,” says Paul, “of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory” (Rom. 9:21–23). In other words, both the lost and the saved are instruments by which God’s glory is revealed. By means of the one (those who are saved) God’s mercy can be seen and praised. By means of the other (those who are lost) God’s wrath and justice can be seen and honored. The difference is that in the case of those who are lost (who do not repent and believe in Christ) God causes them to glorify him even though they do not enjoy it. But in the case of those who are saved they come to want to glorify God and they do enjoy him forever.

WHAT “CHIEF END” MEANS

When the Catechism speaks of “man’s chief end” it must not be supposed that the true Christian life can be divided up into various departments or compartments separated the one from the other. It is true, of course, that the Christian may have other “ends” (goals, aims, purposes) in life other than what we call “religion.” Worship alone, in other words, is not the whole of the Christian life, nor is “witnessing for Christ,” or “Christian service,” etc. Nor are we to suppose that if a person preaches the gospel he necessarily glorifies God. Many preachers preach false doctrine and do not glorify God. And many Christians do their daily work in the factory or place of business in such a way that they do glorify God! The true view is that when a person seeks to glorify God, he seeks at all times and in all activities alike to do that which is well pleasing in God’s sight. Faithful work, and wholesome recreation, are just as much a part of glorifying God as is the worship of God on the Sabbath, or witnessing to an unbeliever. It is no doubt true that some things that we do are more important than other things. But the true view of Christian discipleship is that which sees the whole of life as that which is to be consciously lived unto the honor of God, and in the service of his name!

Having said that all of life is to be God-centered (fig. 1.1), we must again emphasize the fact that no man can possibly live such a God-centered life until he is converted unto Christ. In order to know *how* we can glorify God and enjoy him forever, we must learn the way of salvation taught in the Bible. We must learn “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” To this we shall devote our attention in the Catechism questions which follow.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by the word “chief” in the Catechism?
2. What is meant by the word “end” in the Catechism?
3. What is meant by the word “glorify?”
4. Why is man’s chief end what the Catechism says that it is?
5. Man, as originally created, was _____-centered.
6. Man, as he became by sin, is _____-centered.

Q u e s t i o n 1

7. What do we mean by saying that the true Christian life is God-centered?
8. What would some people put in the center of figure 1.2 rather than the word “self?”
9. Why is this really just as bad?
10. What does “glorify God” *not* mean?
11. What is the difference between the way in which the heavens glorify God, and the way in which man ought to glorify God?
12. Do the wicked glorify God? Explain.
13. Is it proper for a Christian to have other “ends” besides the end of glorifying God?
14. What departments of life ought to serve the glory of God?
15. Which is more to the glory of God: a person who preaches, or a man who works in a factory? Explain.

 QUESTION 2

Question 2 **What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?**

Answer **The word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,¹ is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.²**

1. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).
2. If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life . . . (Rev. 22:18–19).

Strange as it may seem, Jesus once said that God has “hid . . . things from the wise and prudent, and . . . revealed them unto babes” (Luke 10:21). In other words, some of the most intelligent and best-educated people lack true wisdom. And some very simple people who are not well educated have true wisdom. The reason for this is that man, of himself, cannot really come to the knowledge of the truth. The more a man learns by his own effort (by the unaided power of his own mind), the more he faces the unknown. Just as a balloon, when it is blown up, expands in every direction, so does man’s learning bring him face to face with the endless mystery of the wonderful works of God. For example, new and more powerful telescopes have been invented by men in order that they might study the secrets of the stars. But what has been the result? The result has been this: they now have many millions of new stars to study! This is one reason why scientific theory is constantly changing. For the more men discover, the more they also discover how much more there is that they do not know. Thus, because men cannot know *everything* (there is

just too much!), they finally get discouraged and realize that they cannot really know *anything for sure*.

TWO KINDS OF REVELATION

Now the reason for this is that God did not make man to know everything (or, for that matter, anything) by his own power. Only God knows everything, and so, from the beginning, only God could give to man a sure knowledge of anything at all. From the beginning, this knowledge came to man in two ways. (1) The first way in which God revealed himself is what we call *natural revelation*. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the Psalmist; “and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Ps. 19:1). “The invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20). (2) The second way in which God revealed himself is what we call *special revelation*. For even in paradise God spoke to Adam. Adam had God’s word in addition to his works. Adam, by his study of nature, could know much. But he could not know all. He could not know, for example, what had not yet come to pass. In order to be sure of so “simple” a thing as eating fruit from a tree, it was necessary for him to interpret the “facts of nature” in the “light of God’s word.”

When Adam sinned against God, he rejected God’s word. He acted as if he did not need God to tell him what was right. Instead, he decided to try the so-called “scientific method” (that is, the “trial and error” method) of discovering truth. And from that time to this, Adam and all his posterity (except for those who come to salvation through Jesus Christ) have walked in darkness. This is not because of any “darkness” in God’s revelation. The “light” of God still shines brightly in everything that God has made. But if man in the beginning (sinless Adam) could not understand the “light” of nature, without the “light” of God’s word, how much more is this true for us! For the only way in which man can be saved from sin is revealed in the Bible alone. The revelation of God in nature is sufficient to leave men without excuse. It shows them the glory of the true God so that they *ought* to worship and serve him. But it is only in the Bible that men actually can learn what they must believe (in order to be saved from sin) and do (in order to serve God once more).

THE MEANING OF “CONTAINED IN”

But what does the Catechism mean when it says that “the word of God . . . is *contained* in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?” By these words we are to understand that the very words which we find in the Bible are from God. However, in order to understand this clearly, we need to understand the wrong way in which these words (*contained in*) have been taken.

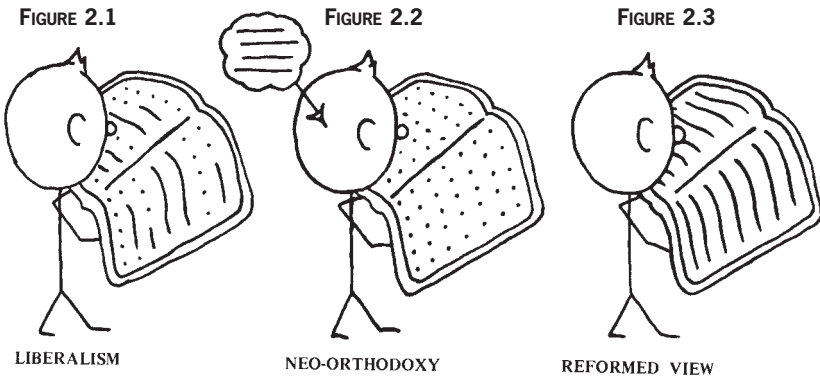
Since the time that this Catechism was written clever men have tried to use the same words (“contained in”) with a meaning very different from what is intended by the Catechism. (1) The first (fig. 2.1) is called *Liberalism* (or “the older modernism”). Those who hold this view believe that some parts of the Bible are the word of God (_____), and that other parts are the word of man (- - -). They believe that they can decide for themselves which part is true and which part is false. (2) The second (fig. 2.2) is called *Neo-orthodoxy* (or, the “new modernism”). This view is found today in many Protestant denominations. It is sometimes called “Barthianism” (after a famous theologian, Karl Barth). Men who believe this view say that the whole Bible is the fallible word of man (- - -), God somehow uses these words so that through them they receive (in their own minds) the true word of God (______). Any part of the Bible can be the means by which the word of God comes to man, but it may be one part of the Bible that “speaks” to one man, and another part that “speaks” to another man. (3) The third (fig. 2.3) is the *Reformed* view. This is the view of the historic Christian faith. This is the view which is taught in the Catechism. Those who hold this view believe that the whole Bible (every single word) is the truth of God. No part is uninspired. And even when the Bible is read by an unbeliever, it is still the word of God from cover to cover. In other words, the Bible *is* the word of God (______).

THREE IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

If the Bible is the word of God, the only rule to direct us how we may glorify God and enjoy him forever, then three further things may be said. (1) First, we may say that the Bible is *infallible*. This means

Question 2

THE BIBLE CONTAINS THE WORD OF GOD



that everything that the Bible says is true. This does not mean that you can take every statement of the Bible as true apart from its context (or setting). For example, Psalm 53:1 says “There is no God!” But this is only part of the statement. The whole statement reads: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” Only when we read the whole Bible and understand what it *means* can we say that every statement is infallible. (2) In the second place, we may say that the Bible is *clear*. The Scriptures were written so that ordinary people could understand them. God speaks directly to children even (Eph. 6:1–3). Some churches deny this. They say that it is only the priests or scholars who can understand the Bible. (It is true, of course, that there is much in the Bible that we do not understand. Even scholars have more to learn.) But God, by his Holy Spirit, can and does lead ordinary people to understand quite clearly the things they need to know in order to be saved. (3) And finally, we may say that the Bible is *sufficient* (we do not need something else in addition to the Bible in order to know what we need to know). Many false religions deny this. The Roman Catholic Church says that we need tradition as well as the Bible. Mormons say that the *Book of Mormon* is needed as well as the Bible. Modernists tell us that we need “the findings of science” as well as the Bible. But Jesus said that the Bible is sufficient by itself (Rev. 22:18–20). The man who has the Bible, says the Bible itself, is “thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:15–17). And what about the Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms of Reformed

churches? Well, we must always remember that these stand far below the Bible. They are not intended to be, and must not be treated as if they are, equal to the Bible in any way. We use them as convenient summaries of the teaching of the Bible. But we must never be content to just “believe the Catechism.” We must always make sure that we personally prove the teaching of the Catechism by the Bible. Only then will our faith be acceptable and secure.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by the word “contained” in the Catechism?
2. What is meant by the word “scriptures”?
3. What is meant by the word “rule”?
4. Are the educated and intelligent more certain to know God’s truth than the uneducated and simple? Why?
5. Was man’s knowledge originally supposed to come from nature alone? Why?
6. What are the two sources of “truth”?
7. What is the principle of the so-called “scientific method”?
8. What does natural revelation alone (by itself) now do for all men?
9. What does *Liberalism* mean when it says the Bible “contains” the word of God?
10. What does *Neo-orthodoxy* mean by saying this?
11. What does *Reformed* Christianity mean by saying this?
12. What do we mean by saying the Bible is *infallible*?
13. What do we mean by saying it is *clear*? Who (for example) denies this?
14. What do we mean by saying it is *sufficient*? Who denies this?
15. If the Bible is what we say it is, why do we have the Catechism?