

**Understanding the
Westminster
Shorter Catechism
*in Today's Language***

J. Remington Crooks

APPROACHABLEWORD THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

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To the glory of God and the increase of his kingdom.

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PREFACE

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was written in the 1640s as a teaching tool to educate young Christians in the fundamentals of their faith. It stands among of a body of material considered by many to be the greatest doctrinal work to come out of the Protestant reformation. It was written as a memorization aid in that questions could be asked to which students could recite a corresponding answer.

This book is written as an accompanying text, offering Bible-centered explanation and insights for the various catechism topics. The language of the catechism has been updated for readability, and a few questions have been consolidated so that there is a uniform pace of one to three questions covered per chapter.

Today, some might find the whole notion of a catechism to be rather old-fashioned. I would argue that we need catechism and tools like it as much now as ever. With so many worldly desires and deceptions being faced every day, we need every tool in our arsenal to be equipped for God-centered, productive Christian living.

Catechism forces us to think about our convictions and core values. Is union with Christ a benefit that is added on to a person's life, or is it the bedrock of that life, upon which all else must be grounded? Measured in terms of practical daily decisions, for many Christians today the answer would be the former. And we are reaping the fruit of those collective decisions in shrinking church membership and declining Christian influence in our society. A good dose of catechism, rooted in God's word, and sparked by the Holy Spirit, could cure a multitude of ills.

Take this book and enjoy it in your classrooms, your discussion groups, and on your own. Soak in the rich and historic heritage we enjoy as Christians, and great and precious promises that God brings us through his word.

J. Remington Crooks

For additional resources to accompany this book visit www.approachableword.org.

CHAPTER 1

Question 1 | *What is our primary purpose as human beings?*

Answer | Our primary purpose as human beings is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

In sports you know it's going to be an exciting game when the opening play makes everyone in the whole stadium stand up and cheer. In a way, that's what this first question of the catechism is like—right away things get exciting. From the very start we are asked a question that many people are looking for the answer to, and many others are afraid to ask: What is our primary purpose as human beings? Put another way, why are we here? What is life supposed to be about? These questions may be short, but they're *big* questions.

If you were to ask a thousand people these questions you would probably get a thousand different answers. But we could probably put all of those answers into two basic categories: 1) Life is mainly about God and the things he has said are important, or 2) Life is mainly about people and what they have determined is important. Certainly the greedy and selfish person's answers would fall into the second category—we could say that person is self-centered. But there are many people who do not seem to be self-centered whose answers could also fall in the second category. Worthwhile things such as helping the poor or defending freedom may not be focused on self, but they might not be focused on God either. Some people do things such as these because it makes them feel good about themselves or eases their consciences. Really that is still a form of self-centeredness because it is still about them and not about the people they are helping. Other people might do such

things genuinely for the good of society. We might say they are people-centered. But what the catechism is saying is that we need to be God-centered. We should want most of all to glorify and enjoy God. This is the purpose for which God created us.

The Bible tells us that God made people in his own image. People were created with a purpose—to reflect God’s goodness. When you see your image in a mirror, you see yourself reflected back to you. God created human beings to reflect his own goodness and glory back to him and out into the rest of his creation. God even asked Adam and Eve to do things that were very much like things God would do, such as ruling over the animals God had made. They were God-centered and in perfect relationship with God and his creation. But when Adam and Eve sinned that changed abruptly because they took the focus off of God and put it onto themselves. They chose to do things their own way rather than the way God had said. Instead of thinking about how great and wonderful God is, they began to think about themselves. Life was no longer centered on God, it was centered on self, and only God through Jesus Christ can put the focus of our lives back where it needs to be.

Living with God as our central focus does not mean that we all have to be the same or do the same things. Every person will have different skills and hobbies, different interests, and different perspectives based on his or her own life experiences. Not everyone would make a good nurse, nor would everyone be a good farmer. To glorify and enjoy God is not so much about doing specific things as it is about doing all the things that you do with God and his glory in mind. So you can glorify and enjoy God whether you’re a nurse or a farmer, a writer or a congressman, a builder or a mechanic or a salesperson or a guard or a babysitter. With a humble heart we can glorify God in almost any career or any walk of life, anywhere in the world.

So what does it mean to glorify God? God is, has been, and always will be completely glorious, so when we glorify him we are not in any way adding to his glory. This is not what it means to glorify God. Rather, to glorify God means to reflect or show forth God’s glorious attributes. Psalm 19:1-2 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals

knowledge.” So without a word spoken, God’s creation speaks of or reflects God’s glory. But we who are created in the image of God have a privilege to both speak and act in a way that shows how great our God is. We glorify God by serving him with our whole hearts, and by enjoying his presence and leading in our lives.

Obviously there are many people who are not interested in glorifying God. They find no enjoyment in learning God’s ways. In fact, they are at odds with God at every step. Does the catechism question not apply to them? To answer this question we have to make sure that we are looking at it from a God-centered perspective. Will such people glorify God? In fact, yes. Philippians 2:10-11 tells us that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Every person will bring glory to God, whether willingly or unwillingly. In Romans 9:21-23 Paul says that it is because God wants to show his glory that he endures the sinfulness of some and shows his mercy to others. So both the saved (those who repent and believe in Christ) and the lost (those who do not) will bring glory to God—the one by showing God’s mercy and grace, and the other by showing his wrath and justice. But it is only those who turn to Christ that will enjoy God forever.

We should not overlook the final phrase of the catechism that refers to enjoying God. Many people might find that statement puzzling. For them life with God is about duty and responsibility, or about certain rituals that are to be followed. But living to glorify God should not be confused with legalism. Legalism is following a list of rules and regulations “just because,” or because we think it will make us more holy. God doesn’t ask us to do things “just because,” and the Bible is clear that we are not made holy by anything that we can do. God asks us to do things because of who he is (his character) and the purposes he has planned for us (his will). As we get to know God better, we can truly enjoy serving him and enjoy having the opportunity to walk with him through this life. Enjoying God keeps life fun and is a safeguard against dry and stale religion. Empty religion and legalism is like slavery, but where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. (2 Cor 3:17) There is no more fulfilling way to live than to live all out for God—to bring him glory and enjoy him forever. The rest of

the catechism questions covered in this book show us how to do that.

Study & Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think it means to glorify God?
- 2) Does God become greater or more glorious when we glorify him?
- 3) Will everyone glorify God?
- 4) What kinds of things might a person do who wants to glorify God?
- 5) Couldn't people who do not know God also do some of these same things? Is there a difference?
- 6) What do you think it means to enjoy God?
- 7) If you were living life like God intended it to be, do you think that it would be boring or fulfilling?
- 8) What is legalism? Do you think God is legalistic?
- 9) What kinds of things make religion tiresome or boring?
- 10) What kinds of things make living for God fulfilling?

CHAPTER 2

Question 2 | *What guide has God given to instruct us how to glorify and enjoy him?*

Answer | The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only authoritative guide for glorifying and enjoying God.

If you are going to take a long trip across the country to a place you've never been before, then it would be very useful to you to have a map or guidebook of some kind. Scripture (the Bible) is like our map for glorifying and enjoying God. It tells us where previous explorers have been and what challenges they encountered—people such as Moses or David or Abraham. It also tells us how to recognize our destination. For example, Revelation 21 uses poetic language to describe a city, full of the glory of God, where there is no sin, no mourning or crying or pain. If that is our destination we can look around today and realize that we have not yet come to that place. We can compare what we see around us with what the map (our Bible) tells us, so that we can know if we're moving closer to or further away from where God wants us to be. In Ezra and Nehemiah's day, people hadn't been paying much attention to the Scriptures for some time. One day, when the Scriptures were read aloud, all the people began to weep because they realized how far they had wandered from God's best for them. To pursue God's best for our lives we need to keep our guidebook, the Bible, handy and refer to it often.

Some people might wonder if we really need the Bible. After all, God's creation speaks to how magnificent he is—why would we need a book? One problem with that view is that even though

creation does tell of the glory of God (Psalm 19:1), we are not so good at hearing. Sin has dulled our spiritual senses. Another problem is that some people have become convinced that God doesn't exist or that he didn't make anything that they see, so whatever creation is telling them, they choose to ignore. Sin has made us spiritually hard of hearing. But even if we could hear creation perfectly that would not be enough, because there is other information that creation can't give us. For example, it would be hard to learn about God's compassion or justice just from looking at creation. But more specifically, how would we know about Jesus Christ if it weren't for people that recorded what he did and told other people about him? Paul asks, "How can people believe in Jesus if they've never heard of him? And how can they hear about him unless someone is preaching about him?" (Rom 10:14, author's translation) In fact, God has seen to it that people have been writing about Jesus for a very long time—even hundreds of years before he was born.

God has not left it to us to try to figure out our salvation or how to be right with God. God has said it plainly and has seen to it that faithful men wrote these things down as the Spirit of God was leading them to do. (See 2 Pet 1:21) Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and these became a guidebook for God's people as they settled into the land that God had given them. (This is the Scripture that Ezra read which caused the people to weep!) Other stories and prophecies were added later so that by the time Jesus came, people could go back to the guidebook to see if Jesus matched up with the redeemer that God had consistently promised that he would send. And he did match up—perfectly. Even in our own day the Bible tells us how to recognize a man of God from a deceiver. We must pay attention to the things God has said!

Where do we find the things that God has said? Is any ancient book good enough? No, the catechism tells us that the Word of God is contained in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. These books have known the confidence and trust of Christians since the early church, and the Old Testament was revered long before that. We do not treat any other books with the same authority as we do the Bible. So while it may be very helpful to us to have various books that help us learn about the Bible or to grow in God, we only trust these other texts in so far as we know they

are true to the Old and New Testaments. That is true of this book, and it is even true of the catechism questions and answers that we are studying. While it is informative and helpful, the catechism is not itself the Word of God. That is why you will notice that for every catechism answer there are a number of references to the Scriptures that are given for every major point that is made. We are never free to draw our own conclusions about God or say things about him that do not agree with what he has revealed about himself through the Scriptures. We must go back to the guide by which we can know how to glorify and enjoy him, and that is the Bible.

The reason that the Bible so special to us is that God reveals himself and speaks to us through it. Second Timothy 3:16-17 is a classic verse about this very subject:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

In these verses Paul tells Timothy and reminds us all that the Bible is a special book because God inspired it. We believe that God inspired the people who wrote the different books of the Bible to write what they wrote. We believe God had these things written down so that he could tell us what he wants us to know, important things about life and God's purposes, things about how to glorify and enjoy God. For this reason we say that the Bible is *infallible*. That means that it is not full of errors but we can trust it completely. It does not mean that we are always right in how we interpret it—that would be an arrogant thing to say and would put the focus on us rather than on God. It means that what the Bible says about God or things that have happened or will happen are right and we need to work hard and ask God to help us to understand what the text is really saying. The Bible is also *sufficient*. That is, we don't need any other books to tell us what we really need to know to enjoy God and understand our world. It doesn't mean that there aren't any other books that are important—of course they are. The Bible doesn't tell us how to do math or chemistry even though these are very useful things to know. But we don't need any other book to tell us how to be right

with God—the Bible is sufficient for that. Some religions think that we need other books to be added to the Bible to get the whole story, but these ‘extras’ that God did not inspire usually distort the main things that God is trying to communicate to us. Lastly, the Bible is *clear*. While there may be some passages that are hard to understand, or it may take some work to see how all of the pieces fit together, still ordinary people can understand the basic message of the Bible. It’s not just preachers or scholars that can understand the Bible—you can, too.

Study & Discussion Questions

- 1) How can we know what God is like, what God's plans are and what God expects from us?
- 2) Do any other books carry the same authority as the Bible?
- 3) How do we know that we can trust the Bible?
- 4) Has God ever spoken to anyone outside of the Bible?
- 5) How can we know if we are hearing God accurately?
- 6) What does the Bible say Scripture is useful for?
- 7) Will God ever do anything that contradicts what is written in the Bible?
- 8) What does it mean that the Bible is infallible?
- 9) What does it mean that the Bible is sufficient?
- 10) What does it mean that the Bible is clear?