

2nd Edition

The Westminster Shorter Catechism

FOR STUDY CLASSES



G. I. WILLIAMSON

**The
Westminster
Shorter
Catechism**

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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

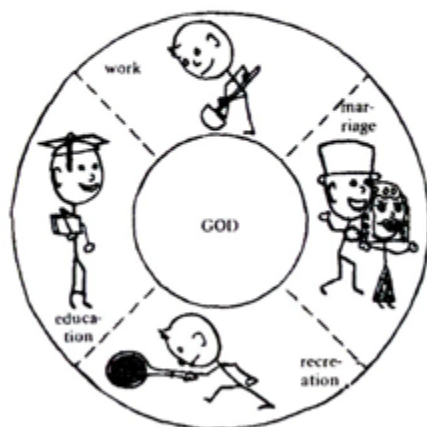
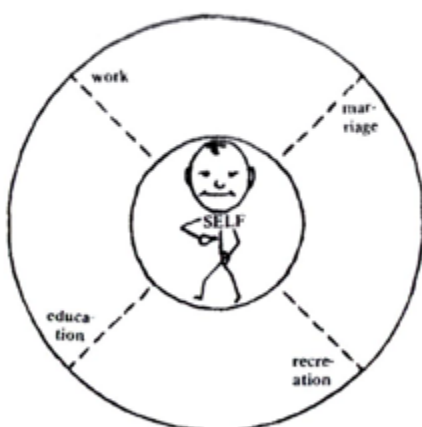


FIGURE 1.2



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

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.

Question 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.

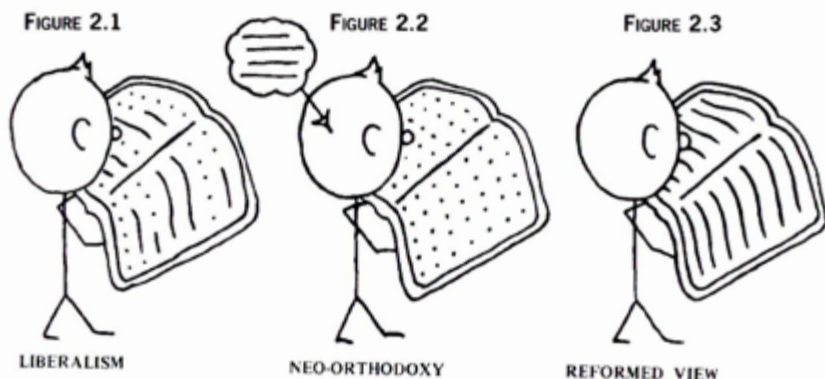
Since the time that this Catechism was written clever men have tried to use the same words ("contained in") with a meaning very different from what is intended by the Catechism. (1) The first (fig. 2.1) is called *Liberalism* (or "the older modernism"). Those who hold this view believe that some parts 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. But they say that *when* people read these words 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?

 QUESTION 3

Question 3 **What do the Scriptures principally teach?**

Answer **The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God,¹ and what duty God requires of man.²**

1. And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name (John 20:30–31).
2. He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Mic. 6:8).

There are many things that we cannot learn from the Bible. (1) For example, the Bible does not provide us with a complete history of the human race. This is not what the Bible was given for. So there are many things in history that we can learn only from other sources. (2) Neither does the word of God provide us with technical information needed in the various sciences. There are no chemical formulae in the Scriptures. We do not find the principles of electronics. (3) As a matter of fact, the Bible does not even provide us with all the information that we might wish concerning Jesus Christ. We do not know very much about his boyhood, education, or home life. And we know nothing at all about his exact physical appearance. One could cite many other examples of what the Bible does not teach. For the Bible was not given in order to teach us everything. It was given to teach us “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”

ESSENTIAL TO ALL TRUE KNOWLEDGE

However, it is also important to remember that the Bible does have something to say about everything. And it has something to say that is

FIGURE 3.1



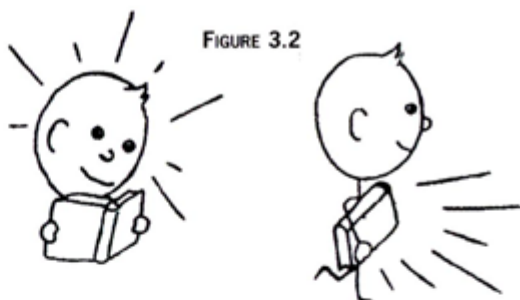
"Such as sit in darkness . . . because they rebelled against the words of God . . ."

Ps. 107:10, 11

" . . . how great is that darkness!"

Matt. 6:23

FIGURE 3.2



"The entrance of thy words giveth light . . . thy word is a lamp unto my feet . . ."

Ps. 119:130

" . . . and in thy light shall we see light."

Ps. 36:9

very important. In fact, it is so important, that without what the Bible says we cannot really have a true understanding of anything. Let us illustrate.

In figure 3.1 we have a picture of man as he seeks to understand the world (and himself) without reference to God. This could be a modern scientist who "believes" that the world just happens to be here because it evolved. In other words, at the very start of his study and investigation into the secrets of "nature," he just leaves God out completely. The same would apply to those who study history, or geography, or any other subject. For the Bible clearly teaches that everything in the universe is created. Everything is related to God, and it is this relationship to God which is the most important thing of all. Without this relationship being recognized, even "the greatest scientist" doesn't really understand the truth at all. In other words, when men do not begin their thinking with a recognition of the true God, they are in darkness. And because they are in darkness, they cannot really see the light that is in the world. In figure 3.2 we see a picture of a man who has come to see the light. It is the Bible that has given him this light (because the Holy Spirit has regenerated his heart so that God's word is received and believed). But notice that we see two things here. First, we see how a knowledge of the Bible (given by the Holy Spirit) enables this man to believe in the true and living God. Secondly, we see how he is then able to understand his place in the world. He is able to understand that this is his Father's world, and that

he must always seek the glory of God in everything that he does in this world. If this man is a scientist, he will study things in order to see more of God's wonderful creation. If he is a historian, he will study the history of the human race in order to understand the unfolding purpose of God. And so it is in every sphere. It is only by faith (what man is to believe concerning God) that we can walk uprightly (what duty God requires of man).

FAITH AND DUTY

You will notice that this Catechism question introduces the basic outline of the rest of the Catechism. For in Questions 4–38 we have a summary of what the Bible teaches us to believe concerning God. And in Questions 39–107 (the law, the means of grace, and prayer) we have a summary of the duty which God requires of man. There are several things we need to observe at this point. (1) First, we need to notice that the Catechism places the greatest emphasis upon what we are to believe. This is important. It is commonly said today that what a person believes is really not so important. “Everyone has a right to believe whatever he wishes,” say some. “Whatever a man believes is acceptable so long as he is sincere and decent toward others,” say others. As Pope, the poet, has expressed it:

*For points of faith let senseless bigots fight
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right.*

It is true, of course, that no man should be forced by other men to believe anything he does not want to believe. But it is not true that it makes no difference what men believe. For “whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God” (2 John 9). Jesus said, to the woman at the well, “Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship . . . and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:22, 24). Nothing could be more dangerous, then, than to imagine that one can really live a right life while having a wrong faith. “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). It is for this reason that the Catechism puts “what man is to believe concern-

ing God" in first place. (2) Secondly, we need to notice that, when a man does actually have a true faith (if he really does believe what God commands him to believe), he must also do what God commands. In other words, there is no such thing as true faith unless it also results in right practice. "What doth it profit, my brethren," says James, "though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?" (James 2:14). No, says James, "faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone . . . [and] as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (2:17, 26). We see, then, that we would not have a true picture of the Christian life, if the Catechism did not emphasize both "what man is to believe concerning God" *and* "what duty God requires of man." There is such a thing as dead orthodoxy. It means that people profess the true doctrines of the Bible. They understand these doctrines in such a way as to be able to discuss them, and argue for them. But they do not live the way God wants them to live. We must see how wrong this is. And we must see that the Catechism not only puts faith first, but also goes on to teach us that this faith is not a genuine saving faith unless it leads to right practice!

WHY THE LAW IS TREATED LATER

There is one other thing that we need to mention. The Bible speaks of the law (the Ten Commandments) as "our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). This means that a man cannot come to a true faith in Christ *as his savior* unless he first has come to realize his need. Or, in other words, it is only by the law that sinful men come to know that they are sinful. "For by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). So the question may be asked, "Why doesn't the Catechism *first* talk about the law, and then about the faith in Christ that we need in order to be saved?" In answer to this question we can say (1) that it would not be *wrong* if the Catechism first treated of law, and then of faith. God himself gave the law before he gave the Savior. (2) However, there are good reasons for not having the law treated in first place in the Catechism. What are these reasons? (a) First, there is the possibility that by putting the law first and then the faith in Christ second, the impression might be created that Christ is less important than the law. This would be very wrong. For Christ is

greater than anything else. (b) Secondly, there is the possibility that careless readers could imagine that salvation comes by our doing what the law commands. Someone might say, "First you keep the law, and then Christ will accept you." And this would be completely wrong. For the Bible says that no man can ever be saved by (or because of) keeping the law. As a matter of fact no one (except Jesus) ever really has kept the law of God the way God requires. (c) Thirdly, there is the possibility that by putting the law first, and then faith in Christ second, the impression might be created that we do not need the law of God after we believe in Christ! Someone might say, "Now that I have come to Christ, I do not need the law to tell me how to live." This, again, would be completely wrong. For the law is not only given by God to make us see that we need Christ as our savior, it is also given to show us how we ought to live for Christ after he is our savior. For "this is the love of God," says John, "that we keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3).

In conclusion let us emphasize the fact that the Catechism firmly rejects the choice between Christianity as a doctrine and Christianity as a life. True Christianity is never one without the other. It is always both together: like the good tree and its fruit.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by the word "principally" in the Catechism?
2. Are there things we cannot learn from the Bible? Give an example.
3. Name a subject about which the Bible says nothing whatsoever.
4. How much of the world does the man in figure 3.1 really understand correctly? Why?
5. Why does the man in figure 3.2 understand the world in a true sense?
6. Explain these words from the Bible: "in thy light shall we see light."
7. What are the two basic parts of the Catechism? Explain.
8. Upon what does the Catechism place first emphasis? Why?
9. Is true faith enough? Explain.
10. Would it be wrong if the Catechism treated the law before faith? Why?
11. What are some of the reasons in favor of treating faith before law?
12. What is the most important truth that we can learn from this Catechism question?

 QUESTION 4

Question 4 **What is God?**

Answer **God is a Spirit,¹ infinite, eternal,² and unchangeable,³ in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.⁴**

1. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24).
 2. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God (Ps. 90:2).
 3. For I am the Lord, I change not (Mal. 3:6).
 4. And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM (Ex. 3:14). Great is our Lord . . . his *understanding* is infinite (Ps. 147:5). And they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God *Almighty* . . . (Rev. 4:8). Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art *holy* . . . (Rev. 15:4). The Lord . . . *will by no means clear the guilty*; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. . . . The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and *truth* (Ex. 34:6–7).
-

It was Jesus who said that “God is a Spirit” (John 4:24). The Catechism simply unfolds this text by defining the nature of that Spirit who is God. God is that Spirit who has certain attributes (or characteristics, qualities) which distinguish him from all other beings in existence. It would not be correct, in other words, to say that “God is spirit.” For God is not the only spirit. The Bible says that angels “are . . . all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). If we were just to say that “God is spirit,” then we would fail to distinguish between God and other beings who are also spirits. (This would be a type of pantheism, which

teaches that every spirit is a part of, or manifestation of, God!) But when we say that God is *a* Spirit we make clear the fact that He is distinct from other beings.

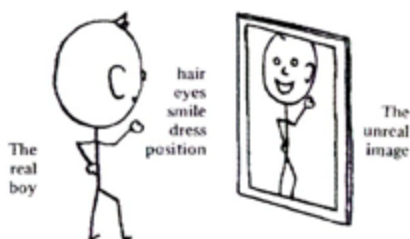
THE MEANING OF THE WORD "SPIRIT"

But what is "a Spirit"? The Bible says, "What man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?" (1 Cor. 2:11). Thinking, or knowing, is an activity of the spirit of a man. And the spirit of a man can be compared with God, since man was made in God's image. The spirit of a man is non-material: it cannot be seen or felt, or weighed, or measured. We might say that "the spirit of a man" is like the thoughts of a man. But even when we have said all that we can safely say, we still have to confess that it is very hard to give a precise definition or description of a spirit. When we ask what a spirit is, we will have to confess that we cannot answer this question fully. There is an element of mystery here that we cannot overcome. But the important thing is that when we confess that God is a Spirit we *deny* that God has any material substance. As the child's Catechism puts it: God has *not* a body like men. God is invisible. No man has ever seen God, and no man ever will see God with his physical eyes (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; etc.). It is a sin (against the second commandment) to try to make God visible by any kind of statue or picture (Ex. 20:4). And the prophet Isaiah asks the question: "To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (40:18). "Lift up your eyes on high," he says, in answer to his own question, "and behold who hath created these things" (40:26).

The only way that we can "see" God, then, is *indirectly*. We can see him only as we learn to see his "reflection" in the things that He has made. We will try to illustrate this truth in figure 4.1. In part 1, we show our boy—let us call him "Shorty"—looking at his image in the mirror. We see quite clearly that two things are true. (1) First, we see that they (Shorty and his image) are *completely different*, since one is real or alive and the other is not. (2) Secondly, we see that they are *exactly alike*, since the image is a copy of Shorty in every detail.

FIGURE 4.1

PART 1



PART 2

GOD, THE ORIGINAL

incommunicable
attributes

God is a spirit
infinite
eternal
unchangeable

communicable
attributes

being
wisdom
power
holiness
justice
goodness
truth

man, the image

man is a living soul
finite
temporal
changeable

AN ANALOGY

It is much the same when we compare God with man who was made in his image. We see these same two things. (1) We see, first, that God is completely different from man. (2) And yet, secondly, we also see that man was made in the exact image of God. What we want to learn in this part of our study is to see how the Catechism question teaches us to think of God in both of these two ways. We show this, in part 2, without drawing any picture of God (since this is wrong). Now you notice that God has certain attributes (characteristics, qualities) which he does *not* “share” with man. God is infinite, but man is not infinite. God is eternal, but man is not eternal. God is unchangeable, but man is not unchangeable. These attributes we call *incommunicable*, because they belong to God alone. He does not give these to man but retains them for himself only. (This is somewhat like saying that Shorty does not give to his image in the mirror his own solid flesh, etc.) But we also notice that God has certain attributes which He *does* share with man. For he also gave man (before the fall) being, wisdom, power, etc. These attributes we call *communicable*, because God gives them to man in order that he might be like God. (This is something like the way Shorty gives his image in the mirror the same color hair and eyes, the same smile, etc.)

But now we come to the most difficult—and most important—

point. We must realize that even when we speak of communicable attributes, we must remember that there is a difference between God and his image (man), even as there is also between Shorty and his image in the mirror. Both Shorty and his image have a smile. It is exactly the same smile, isn't it? No! When we stop and think about it, we can see that it isn't. For the smile on Shorty is a real smile, and the smile on the image is only the image of a smile! Shorty's smile is greater, just because it is real. So it is with the communicable attributes of God (wisdom, power, holiness, etc.). For God has all these in a far higher sense than man ever can. In other words, God's wisdom is always infinite, eternal, and unchangeable wisdom. His power is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, too. Whereas the wisdom of man, or the power of man, is always finite, temporal, and changeable. (This is like saying that Shorty's hair and eyes are always real, and the hair and eyes of his image are always unreal.)

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

But we must now briefly consider two questions that often arise when we grasp the teaching of the Catechism. (1) First, if God is a Spirit, how can the Bible speak of him *as if* He had bodily parts? We read of "the hand of the Lord" (Josh. 4:24), "the eyes of the Lord" (1 Kings 15:5), etc. In Exodus 24:19 we even read that Moses and others "saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone." No doubt some of the scripture texts which speak of God in such a way are simply meant to express in human terms what we could hardly understand in any other way. But many of these references concern the appearance of God in human form, and they are true descriptions of what people actually saw. But for this we know the reason. Just as angels (who are spirits) can manifest themselves by taking on a human appearance, so Christ likewise did the same during the Old Testament period of history (see Gen. 18:1-5, 16-25, etc.). These were what Calvin called "preludes to his future manifestation" as the God-man. And, of course, our Lord is God, and yet also (because He has a true human nature) does now have hands, feet, etc. (2) Secondly, if God is unchangeable, it is sometimes asked how the Bible can speak of him *as if* he changed. In Gen-

esis 6:6 we read: “and it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.” When a man repents, he changes his mind. But how can God repent if He is unchangeable? The answer is that when Scripture speaks like this of God, it always tells us first that it is man who has really changed. Man changes in his attitude or relationship to God. From this change in man himself there comes a change in God’s manner of dealing with man. But the change is not really in God, it is only in man. God is always holy. But it is only when man sins against God that he comes under that holy anger which God always has against sin. The reason that God cannot change is that He cannot deny himself (see 2 Tim. 2:13). In other words, God is always determined in what he does by his own perfect nature. So, when a good creature becomes evil, God is necessarily grieved. He could not possibly be otherwise in view of his own unchangeable holiness.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the meaning of the word “spirit”?
2. Define these terms: infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.
3. Why can’t we say that God is spirit?
4. Are there other spirits besides God? Explain.
5. To what might we liken a spirit?
6. What does this Catechism answer teach us to deny as respects God?
7. What are the two kinds of attributes belonging to God?
8. Give a brief definition of each.
9. Are the communicable attributes the same in man as in God? Explain.
10. What does the Bible mean when it speaks of God as having hands, feet, etc.
11. What does the Bible mean when it speaks of God as repenting?
12. Be ready to discuss figure 4.1 showing how it illustrates the teaching of the Catechism.

 QUESTIONS 5–6

Question 5 **Are there more Gods than one?**

Answer **There is but one only,¹ the living and true God.**

Question 6 **How many persons are there in the Godhead?**

Answer **There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,² and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.³**

1. There is none other God but one (1 Cor. 8:4).
2. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19).
3. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen (2 Cor. 13:14).

These two Catechism questions set before us the most important doctrine in the Christian faith. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. Someone has said that *all* error somehow traces back to a defective view of God. In any event, we cannot be *too* certain of this most important truth.

GOD IS TRIUNE

The doctrine of the Trinity can be expressed in three statements: (1) there is *one* God; (2) the Father *is* God, the Son *is* God, and the Holy Spirit *is* God; and (3) each of these three persons is *distinct* from the others. It will be observed that in the statement of this doctrine two seemingly contradictory truths are carefully safeguarded. These two truths are: the unity, and the plurality, of God. The unity is ex-

pressed in the fact that there is only one God. The plurality is expressed in the fact that there are three who are God. And it is often said that this makes no sense. Such false cults as Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, ridicule this doctrine of the Trinity. They say that those who believe this doctrine really believe in three Gods! Those who say this are not "trinitarians" but "unitarians." That is, they believe there is only one person (the Father, or Jehovah) who is God. They teach that Jesus is a *created* being (not self-existent, as the Father), and that the Holy Spirit is merely a name for the power of God (not a person, as the Father). Unitarians (of which Jehovah's Witnesses are but one example) hold to the oneness of God, but deny that there are three distinct persons who *are* God. Polytheists (meaning: many + gods) believe that there are more than one being that may be called God. But they do not believe that these "gods" have *one* identical essence or substance of being. Mormons are polytheists.

Both of these—the unitarian and the polytheistic—seem simpler to understand than the doctrine of the Trinity. But let us not suppose that this is any argument *for* them, or *against* the historic Christian faith. For "my thoughts are not your thoughts," said the Lord, through his prophet Isaiah, "neither are your ways my ways" (55:8). In other words, we must always remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is *not* something that men have come to believe because it seemed reasonable to them. No, the only reason that we have for believing this doctrine is that Scripture allows no other view. Let us now consider some of these scripture truths which require us so to believe.

THE THREE ESSENTIALS

(1) *Scripture clearly teaches us that there is but one living and true God.* "The Lord is God and . . . there is none else" (1 Kings 8:60). "For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God" (1 Cor. 8:5–6). "I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God" (Isa. 44:6). No truth is more emphatically or persistently taught in Scripture than this. There is but one God who really exists.

(2) *Scripture also teaches us clearly that not only the Father, but also the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are God.* Since no one disputes the

fact that the Father is God, according to the Scriptures, we will cite only one scripture on this point. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18). But Scripture also declares the Son to be God just as clearly. In Psalm 45:6 we read, concerning the Messiah, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." And again, in Isaiah 9:6-7, "unto us a son is given . . . and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God. . ." In the New Testament we read that "the Word was God" (John 1:1). And when "doubting" Thomas came to realize the truth, he came and fell before Jesus and said, "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Christ the Son is therefore, beyond any question, called God. But we also discover in the New Testament that Christ possesses the attributes of God. He has life in himself (John 1:4; 5:26)! He is everywhere present (Matt. 28:20). He was already existent in the beginning (John 1:1). We also note, in the New Testament record, that he performed the works of God. "All things were made by him" (John 1:3). He sustains all things (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). "What things soever he [the Father] doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise" (John 5:19). And as we have seen (John 20:28), He was even worshipped as God. But, if the Son is thus called God, possesses the attributes of God, does the work of God, and even receives the worship that properly belongs to God, then what can we conclude except that He *is* God? And the same thing exactly may be said of the Holy Spirit. The evidence is of the same sort, and follows the same line. We will therefore give only one example of each type of evidence. In Acts 5:3-4, the Holy Spirit is called God. "But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost . . . thou has not lied unto men, but unto God." In 1 Corinthians 2:10 we are told that the Holy Spirit has the attributes of God. "For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." The Holy Spirit also does the work that only God can do. "It is the spirit that quickeneth" (that is, makes alive [John 6:63]). And to the Spirit belongs the worship and reverence that is God's. "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men," said Jesus, "but blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men" (Matt. 12:31). Again, we see that since the Holy Spirit is called God, and has the attributes of God, and does the

work of God, and is to be worshipped as God, we can only conclude that the Holy Spirit is God.

(3) *Scripture also makes it clear that these three are distinct persons, and that they are equal in power and glory.* In early Church history there were two serious errors into which men fell as they tried to solve the mystery of the Trinity. (a) One of these was called “Modalism.” It meant that God, according to this view, was one person, but that he “plays different parts” much like an actor who appears in a play, first as one character, and then (after a quick change into a different costume) another. They believed that while God played the part of the Father, there was no Son, and no Holy Spirit. And when He played the part of the Son, there was no Father, or Spirit. The reason that this was rejected by the Church is quite simple. It is because all three persons of the Godhead manifested themselves at the same time. “And *Jesus*, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw *the Spirit* of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo *a voice from heaven*, saying, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16–17). While Christ stood before men, the Spirit came down, while the Father spoke out of heaven. It could not, then, have been only one person playing three different parts, one after another. (b) Another was called “Monarchianism.” This, of course, comes from the word “monarch,” which refers to a king. And the basic idea was that only one of the three persons of the Godhead could really be “King.” These people therefore said that God the Father was greater than the Son or the Holy Spirit. And they did not believe that the three persons were equal in power and in glory. It is possible to make this teaching seem to agree with Scripture. For Christ did say, “My Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). If we look only at texts such as these, we can begin to feel that there is a truth in this old view. But when we read such texts as Philippians 2:6 we can see why the Church rejected this error. For Christ, “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” In respect of his eternal divine nature, Christ is equal with the Father. It is only in respect of his human nature, and because He took such humiliation upon himself, that He can say “my Father is greater than I.” Remembering this, we will not be attracted by this ancient error.

THE INESCAPABLE CONCLUSION

By the evidence of Scripture, then, we are driven to the doctrine of the Trinity—one God—three who are God—three who are distinct. And it is interesting that we have scripture statements that really do not make sense except in the light of the formulation of the Catechism. Christ said to baptize “in the *name* of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19). He did not say “*names*,” and so could only have referred to one being. Yet observe again: He did not say “of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” as if they were merely synonymous terms (like: me, myself, and I). No, He carefully distinguishes between these three as having each his own identity and personality, that is “of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” And this is the doctrine of the Trinity. It is true, of course, that the doctrine is fully revealed only when we take into account the whole teaching of Scripture. Yet it is interesting to observe that even from the beginning of divine revelation there is always an equal emphasis upon the two foundation truths contained in the doctrine of the Trinity. There is an equal emphasis upon the fact that God is unity (one God) and a plurality (more than one person). “And *God* said, Let *us* make man in *our* image,” we read, “so *God* created man in *his* own image . . .” (Gen. 1:26-27). Here is a mystery that remained locked, until the key was given in the full New Testament revealing of the Triune being of God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. State the three essential truths that make up the doctrine of the Trinity.
2. What does “Godhead” mean?
3. What does “substance” mean?
4. What do unitarians believe? What modern cult is unitarian?
5. What do polytheists believe? What modern cult is polytheistic?
6. Is the doctrine of the Trinity easy to understand? If not, then why do we believe it?
7. Cite a text of Scripture proving that there is only one God.
8. What four things which properly belong to God only, also can be proved from Scripture to belong to Christ and the Holy Spirit?

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