**I Believe: The Westminster Shorter Catechism**

Rachel Watson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 2, 2024

Texts: Romans 11:33-36, John 17:13-26

If you were to shout “God is good,” every 80s and 90s youth group member would instinctively respond, “All the time.”

Go into a crowded Starbucks and shout “the peace of Christ be with you” and you’ll likely split the crowd denominationally as they respond “and with your spirit” or, correctly, of course, “and also with you.”

And the response to “the Lord be with you”…“and also with you” is so ingrained in us that it can be used for liturgical crowd control, silencing a room of Christians in mere seconds.

There’s a bunch of these…from “God is great. God is good.” to which the response is “let us thank him for our food.” to “Now I lay me down to sleep” to which many are ready to reply, “I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

And if I say “What is the chief end of man?” I suspect, after a brief nod to the patriarchal language that sounds strange to our modern ears, any person born before the mid-70s is fighting an urge to answer, “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

This is the first, and most well-known, question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a nearly 400-year-old document that has been used to educate Protestant children in the faith for centuries.

It was born out of the work of the Westminster Assembly in the mid-1600s. The Westminster Assembly was a group of 151 people, 121 clergy and 30 politicians representing four ideologies over the form of church government. They were tasked with writing a Reformed statement of faith for the Church in England. You would be proud of their work, completed decently and in order, with numerous committees, that met over the next year and a half to produce the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The theology of the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Erastians, and Congregationalists gathered there was, for the most part, unified around Reformed and Calvinist doctrine. It was the church polity that was the divisive factor. The Episcopalians asserted that final authority should rest with the king, the Congregationalists thought local churches should decide for themselves, the Erastians wanted the civil authorities in charge, and the Presbyterians wanted a government ruled by presbyters, or elders, serving on a series of committees.

This was an argument that would persist for years in the English Parliament and is the reason why the work would never be fully implemented in England. But the Scottish ministers that had assisted in the writing took it home to Scotland where it became the standard for the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and many other denominations, including our own.

As the work on the confession came to a close, the best catechist in England, a man named Herbert Palmer, was called in. Now catechists are people who take the doctrine and turn it into a question and answer format to be used for instruction in Christian education. Which just happens to be a subject that I am very interested in! And, indeed, catechisms are a special interest of mine.

Now, Herbert Palmer, overachiever that he was, actually produced two catechisms. The Larger Catechism was meant to help ministers in their preaching. The Shorter one was meant for work with children, consisting of simple summary statements to be used as guide in teaching the faith. Although the committee didn’t intend it for rote memorization, many children learned to recite this catechism as part of their confirmation journey.

Now, you’re probably thinking, having gotten to know my teaching style over the last nine months, and my penchant for answering questions with more questions, and my favorite sentence starter, “I wonder…,” that I would not agree with memorized catechisms.

And I do value the wonder and the wrestling.

But I also know the power of memorization.

See, when everything is good, we are ready to struggle with the hard questions, seek clarifications, and solve all the problems. But when things go awry, when life doesn’t make sense anymore, when the world is overwhelming, it helps to have those phrases that live in our bones and that float into our consciousness right when we need them most.

In life and in death, we belong to God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jesus loves me, this I know.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Rejoice in the Lord always.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Do not worry about anything, instead pray about everything.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Love your neighbor as yourself. [[7]](#footnote-7)

These memorized truths keep us on the right track.

They remind us of our belongingness to God and our purpose in the world.

They show up, without invitation, when emotions run high and when we are questioning what we should do next.

Having these core ideas that we can access almost automatically when we need them is important. These are the bones of Christian formation. Then we put the meat on those bones, layering our faith on them over the years, building our own lived understanding on top of what we all believe. This is the power of the catechism.

Imagine going to Sunday school each week and being taught some simply stated truth about faith. And then spending the next hour playing with it, creating memories with it, hearing about it playing out in the lives of the people of God, trying it on for ourselves as we think about our own lives, praying about it, making it your own. Imagine sharing these words with trusted adults who share their stories and play with you as you explore.

Imagine doing that year after year, adding details to the richness of the story, learning ways to integrate it into your daily life, adding your own commentary to this summary of faith. Imagine knowing that phrase so well that when things get really bad at school or at work or at home, that memorized truth floats into your mind and brings back all those experiences. You’re grounded in the love of God because of those things that live in our bones and come to us almost automatically.

God is good.

Jesus loves me.

Nothing, nothing at all, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.[[8]](#footnote-8)

My purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.[[9]](#footnote-9)

To glorify God. Yes. That sounds good. Let’s do that.

But how do we do that? Let’s break it down.

To glorify God is to remember that we were made in the image of God and that we’re called to live knowing that.

So what does it mean to be made in the image of God? Well, it doesn’t mean that we inherited God’s nose or bushy eyebrows. It means that our God is a relational God and the image in which we were made is one of relationship…with God and with creation. The image of God we carry is an image of love. For, indeed, God is love.

We see this image most clearly in Jesus. Jesus was human just like us. But he was able to live and love just like God because, of course, he is God. Father, Son, and Spirit exist in a continual dance with each part so in sync that they can’t be separated. They are both three…and one. Jesus imaged God for us. God incarnate. Love incarnate. The image of God lived in the flesh.

When we follow the model of Christ’s life, when we live in obedience to the will of God, we glorify God by making God’s love visible through us. God’s love is one of relationship that calls us to be one with God and one another. We hear this in Jesus’s prayer for us…”As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

We glorify God in our healthy relationships. We glorify God when we do the will of God and work for unity among God’s people. We were made in the image of love and when we live love, we witness to who God is. This is our Christian vocation, our purpose for being here. We are called to participate in God’s work with all that we are and all that we have to offer.

This is the change in theology that the reformers were accentuating. It’s not just our devotion, our life of prayer and meditation. It’s not just a personal relationship with God.

It’s the personal relationship that leads to building of relationship everywhere. It’s thoughts and prayers turned in to action and change. It’s love at work. It’s loving even when it’s nearly impossible. It’s the breaking open of the kindom kind of love.

Jesus came – love enfleshed – to show us how to wear God’s love on our bones and reflect God’s image into the world. Jesus says, “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Our goal in life is not just to *be loved*, for indeed we already are, through no action of our own, but rather it is to *be love*. To carry the love and grace we receive through God into the world so all can see. And the world can be changed. When we do this, we reflect the image of God in which we were made. In this, we glorify God.

What if every decision we made was filtered through this understanding...that our purpose in life is to glorify God by reflecting God’s love through our living? Everywhere. With everyone. Would the way we speak to people change? Would the way we speak to ourselves reflect more grace? Would the way we use our time change? How would social media change if every post was filtered thought this? How would that change the world, one decision at a time?

What if we recited these words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism every morning to ourselves and to our children as an act of Christian formation? What if we let those words wash over us and become the inner speech we hear in our heads every time we need to choose our next step? What if we let those words replace the words of competition and division that the world places there? This is the power of the catechism. So…

Consider this your first homework assignment of the Sunday School year.

What is the main purpose of humankind?

Humankind’s main purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.[[12]](#footnote-12)

May it be so. Amen.

1. BOC, 11.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *“Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal.” Louisville, KY. :Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, #188.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 23:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Philippians 4:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Philippians 4:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Deuteronomy 6:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Matthew 22:39 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Romans 8:38 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. BOC, 7.001 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John 17:21-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John 17:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. BOC, 7.001 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)