

## **What Exactly is the Westminster Shorter Catechism and Why Memorise It**

William Beveridge, a theologian from the 19th century, said these words near the end of his life: "The older I grow – and I now stand upon the brink of eternity – the more comes back to me the first sentence in the Catechism which I learned when a child, and the fuller and deeper its meaning becomes: What is the chief end of man? To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

It can be said that few things in the course of history have had such a shaping influence in the lives of Christians as the Westminster Shorter Catechism. What is the Catechism, and where did it come from? The Westminster Shorter Catechism, consisting of a summary of Christian doctrine in 107 questions and answers, was written by the Westminster Assembly in London over 350 years ago. After being written, it was adopted immediately by the Church of Scotland and put into use. When Presbyterianism came over the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of this country, the Catechism came as well. And it has been the chief staple of instruction within Presbyterian families ever since. Throughout history, the number of children receiving their religious instruction from the Shorter Catechism has been in the millions.

The Catechism has been acknowledged by many to be the most accurate and succinct summary of the Christian faith ever produced. Its simple question and answer format lends itself to easy memorisation. Yet the amount of biblical truth packed into it is nothing short of astounding. By memorising the Catechism, a person absorbs into his thinking simple, biblical answers to the most important questions of the Christian faith. For instance, have you ever wanted a simple way of explaining what it means to believe in Jesus Christ for your salvation? The Catechism gives a beautiful answer. In #86, it says, "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel."

There is no doubt that the Shorter Catechism has had a profound impact on church history. But is it still useful today? You can probably guess my answer: it has never been more useful! But you'll have to wait for a future issue for my reasons why.

**WHY SHOULD WE MEMORISE THE CATECHISM? (W. Beveridge)**

Now I want to ask a very important question: is the Shorter Catechism

still relevant today? My answer might surprise you: not only is it relevant, but it is the best discipleship tool that the church has. I am convinced that nothing will cause a Christian to grow in his knowledge of the Bible's teaching as much as memorising the Catechism. How can I say this? Let me give several reasons:

1] First, the Shorter Catechism gives us categories with which to understand Christian doctrine. False teaching abounds in this world. As children grow up and face challenges to their faith in college, few things will prepare them as well as a simple knowledge of the Catechism.

2] Second, the Catechism focuses on content. We live in an age in which doctrine is frowned upon and experience exalted. This misplaced emphasis has cut the church loose from its moorings in Scripture. The Catechism reminds us that our beliefs should shape our attitudes and actions, and not vice-versa.

3] Third, the Catechism is radically God-centered. From the very first answer, which says that "man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever," the Catechism focuses our eyes on God. It consistently teaches that the Christian life is the God-centered life.

4] Fourth, the Shorter Catechism challenges parents and children to grow together in their understanding of God's Word. Is it sometimes hard to discuss spiritual things within your family? Few things promote this better than learning the Catechism! Even though children might not fully understand the meaning of everything they memorise, it challenges them to grow in their knowledge, and gives parents the opportunity to explain biblical truth to their children.

My conclusion is quite simple. It would be wonderful to see every individual and family regularly use and even memorise the Shorter Catechism. There are few things more suited to produce men and women of God. In the flowing ebb and tide of new teaching tools and discipleship methods within today's church, the best thing we can do is stand by the old Shorter Catechism, and trust that God will use it afresh in this generation to apply His Word to the hearts of His own.

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The Banner of Truth publishes a paperback book written by Thomas Vincent, "The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture", as well as "The Shorter Catechism" itself.

