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GLORIFYING *and*
ENJOYING GOD

52 DEVOTIONS THROUGH THE
WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

William Boekestein
Jonathan Landry Cruse
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Westminster Shorter Catechism

By
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Glorifying and Enjoying God

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Introduction

B. B. Warfield once remarked that learning the Westminster Shorter Catechism, like arithmetic and spelling, may be a burden—even bringing tears to children. But just as we find other educational subjects worthwhile, so he asks, “Do we not think the acquisition of the grounds of religion worth some effort, and even, if need be, some tears?”¹ Hopefully this work will provide the same benefit without the tears.

The book you have before you is intended not only to increase knowledge but to stoke love for God. Its authors believe that the heart and mind are intertwined, that we will love God more the better we know Him.² Thus, as pastors, we chose to explain the Westminster Shorter Catechism and its biblical underpinnings not only that you might understand the truth better but that the truth would set you free (John 8:32). Better theology, better knowledge of God, leads to deeper discipleship and richer doxology.

1. B. B. Warfield, “Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), 1:383–84.

2. God engages our whole person in religion, the mind and the soul (Deut. 6:5–6; Matt. 22:37; Rom. 12:1–2). “Out of all the times that the Hebrew word for ‘heart’ appears in the Old Testament, our intellectual and rational functions are most often in view.” A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020), 26. As Sinclair Ferguson puts it, “knowing is for living.” Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 2005), 1–9.

A catechism provides written instruction in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith.³ It should be based on Scripture, even a kind of paraphrase of Scripture's content. Catechisms have been called maps that survey the ground of Scripture and help a person to navigate the Bible.⁴ It can and should be read alongside the Bible, which itself uses the question-and-answer format so often employed in catechisms: "Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory" (Pss. 24:10; 119:9; see also Amos 3:3–6). Clearly, while law schools today may utilize the Socratic method of teaching by asking and answering questions, the origin of this method is far more ancient.

Likewise, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, composed by an assembly of churchmen in 1647–1648, asks brief questions and provides brief answers.⁵ This brevity sets it apart from its more expansive companion, the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), which provides fuller detail and rivals even the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) in terms of length and comprehensiveness.⁶

3. The word *catechism* derives from the Greek *katecheo*, found, for example, in Luke 1:4: "that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."

4. G. I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1993), 2–3.

5. For a fuller history of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's origin, see John R. Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 4. "At least twelve Assembly members had published catechisms in England before 1643, and every clerical member was thoroughly acquainted with the duty and art of catechizing." See also Ian Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For a children's introduction to the Shorter Catechism's origin, see William Boekestein and Joel Beeke, *Contending for the Faith: The Story of the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022). The Westminster Catechisms reflect refinements of older catechisms. John Murray notes, "The Westminster Assembly had the advantage of more than a century of Protestant creedal formulation." John Murray, "The Importance and Relevance of the Westminster Confession," in *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2013), 978.

6. Some have suggested that the Shorter Catechism has enjoyed enduring and

Documents like the Shorter Catechism have an intentional ordering.⁷ However haphazard it may appear at first glance, the Shorter Catechism begins with a topic that draws readers in: the meaning of human life. That meaning, or “chief end,” is God oriented, and so the catechism continues to share how we pursue that chief end of glorifying and enjoying God. We learn about God’s Word, God Himself as Trinity, and then God’s plans and actions. While the catechism was designed so that each question stands on its own and does not depend on previous questions, readers can sense an order—question 14 on sin, for example, comes in the context of Adam and Eve’s fall.

The Shorter Catechism logically moves from humanity’s plunge into sin and death to God’s redemption of sinners through Jesus Christ. Questions 21–28 address the life of Christ followed by the application of Christ’s saving work to believers in questions 29–38. Unlike other Reformation catechisms, the Westminster Catechisms omitted questions on the Apostles’ Creed to focus exclusively on biblical content, like the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer.⁸

wide use because it focuses more on the individual and less on the church than its big sister, though the Shorter Catechism does exhibit a churchly piety, particularly in its discussions of the means of grace. See W. Robert Godfrey, “The Westminster Larger Catechism,” in *To Glorify and Enjoy God: A Commemoration of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. John L. Carson and David W. Hall (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 134–38. See also Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, “The Making of the Westminster Larger Catechism,” in *Reformation and Revival* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 97–113. Finally, see also Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2002), xiii–xvii.

7. Post-Reformation catechisms were not created in a vacuum but often modified existing catechisms. For example, Calvin followed Luther’s order in his first catechism, but in his second, “Calvin reversed Luther’s order by treating the Commandments after the Creed.” It has been argued that such changes reflect theological considerations. See J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 64.

8. For example, Luther included the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed in his catechism as they “plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know.” Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 53:64–67.

Question 39 turns to these, opening a long section on God’s law, summarized in the Ten Commandments.

One could say that question 39 turns to the Christian life—where we are called to obey God, but we fail daily in word, thought, and deed.⁹ Thus, when the catechism concludes its explanation of the Ten Commandments, it turns immediately in question 82 to our failure and repentance. The fact that faith in Jesus Christ is defined here, in question 86, reminds us of our continual need for faith. We rest on Christ not only at conversion, but continually. We repent with faith.

The Shorter Catechism concludes with a discussion of the means of grace followed by a short explanation of the Lord’s Prayer. Notice the catechism’s ending:

The conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer, which is, *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*, teacheth us to take our encouragement in prayer from God only, and in our prayers to praise him, ascribing kingdom, power and glory to him; and, in testimony of our desire, and assurance to be heard, we say, *Amen*.¹⁰

This conclusion suggests the fitting place for study of the catechism itself to end is also in doxology. It also serves as a beautiful finale to the entire catechism, inviting readers to give their own “amen” to the doctrines contained therein.

9. Both the Westminster Shorter and the Heidelberg Catechisms share an ordering that places obedience *after* the saving work of Christ, to show that we are saved by grace and not by works. See Joseph H. Hall, “The Westminster Shorter and the Heidelberg Catechisms Compared,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, Christian Focus, 2004), 2:162–63.

10. Unless otherwise indicated, all song and confessional references are from the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and The Psalter Hymnal Committee of the United Reformed Churches in North America, 2018). All subsequent citations will be abbreviated *TPH*.

Learning the Christian faith via catechism pays great spiritual dividends. Not only was Timothy taught the faith in his family (2 Tim. 1:5), but Apollos was a catechism success story:

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed [*katecheo*] in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord. . . . He greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 18:24–28)

Despite our antihistorical, individualistic modern society that echoes the Athenians' continual thirst for something new, this catechism, though hundreds of years old, continues to remain relevant and helpful because it reflects God's Word, which is still living and active (Acts 17:21; Heb. 4:12). It reflects the pattern of sound words passed down for our edification (Acts 17:11; Gal. 1:11; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:13; Jude 1:3). The Shorter Catechism questions also foster new love: "The people of God show their love as they confess the doctrines of the Bible and as those truths inform their conduct, all to the glory and love of God," writes J. V. Fesko.¹¹ To this end, this book provides devotional theology; the catechism's objective statements of the truth are paired to practical and doxological explanations.

B. B. Warfield reported that when a child explained "What is prayer" to Dwight L. Moody using the Shorter Catechism, he declared, "Thank God for that Catechism!"¹² We pray that you, dear reader, would be able to echo that exclamation.

11. J. V. Fesko, *The Need for Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 17. He concludes, "Far from a cold, rationalistic account of the faith, the Bible identifies confession as a vital ligament and cord of love connecting the church to its faithful covenant Lord."

12. Warfield, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?," 384.

How to Use This Book

Our study of God and His Word in this book is divided into fifty-two sections. This facilitates weekly use. A parent could, for example, use this in family worship as a week's theme, breaking up a chapter and teaching children the questions daily for that week. We have sought to make this book simple and clear, readable by any audience (even those unfamiliar with Christianity), while also deep and rich enough that veterans of the faith find themselves blessedly confronted by God's grace and glory.

Officer candidates in Presbyterian and Reformed churches might also use this to dive deeper into the Shorter Catechism and the system of doctrine to which they must subscribe, particularly during officer training courses that a church may provide. The fifty-two-week layout would also make for a convenient curriculum for a yearlong Sunday school course on the catechism.

We also hope that pastors can find extensive use for this book. May it take some weight off their shoulders in pointing out the practical implications of God's truth, that they may have more to share with their congregations. We also pray that by God's grace the Spirit may use His Word reflected herein to revive weary souls and stoke joy in the Lord.

Churches, likewise, can use this book as they incorporate the Shorter Catechism into their weekly liturgy. The Heidelberg Catechism's fifty-two Lord's Day divisions have lent it to considerable weekly usage in the church, and we were inspired by our Dutch

Reformed brethren in this regard! Congregants could be encouraged to read each chapter the week before or after the corresponding questions are recited during worship. Thus, reading this book might coordinate with worship, granting readers greater understanding of and appreciation for the catechism questions and answers they consider on Sunday.

One final note: if you are not yet a Christian, we are glad you are holding this book. We are hoping you will turn the page and begin reading. We recognize that the Westminster Shorter Catechism is useful not only as a guide in the Christian faith but even as an introduction to it. May this book prove a means by which you discover, perhaps for the first time, your grand purpose in life: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Chapter 1

Why Am I Here?

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Most of us have asked the question, even if we've used different words, "What is the chief end of man?" It is universally human to wonder, "Why am I here? Where am I going? Does it even matter?"

When we ponder our end we are asking, first, a question of purpose. An end is an outcome to work toward, a goal. It is so easy to wander through life aimlessly. I (William) once made an evangelistic visit to the apartment of an unmarried couple. It was dark, warm, and humid: think a hot cave. After letting me in, the man motioned for me to sit down on the floor across from his girlfriend. It was midafternoon, but they were both in their pajamas. Their hair was disheveled. They looked bewildered and defeated. Surrounded by ashtrays, prescription bottles, and stacks of clothes, we talked about life. All they did each day, I learned, was smoke cigarettes and watch the one movie they had on their thirteen-inch TV. Toward the end of our time together I gently asked the woman, "Do you believe that God created you to live for a purpose?" After a long drag on her cigarette, she responded honestly, "Sir, if we have a purpose, we have no idea what it is." Nothing is more demoralizing than purposelessness.

The catechism's first question assumes a purpose and invites us to discover ours.

But even if we do have goals, we sometimes struggle to prioritize them. Pursuing a *chief* end helps us to focus. In “man on the street” style evangelism I once asked a bunch of people in my city this question about ultimate purpose. I didn’t ask, “What are some things you would like to do in life?” but rather the actual first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the *chief* end of man?” The answers weren’t mostly wrong (to make money, to help people, to enjoy life); they just answered the wrong question. No ordinary goal can provide *ultimate* comfort in life and death. A well-lived life will pursue a host of goals, but all of them will fall under a single chief end that is clearly entitled to that top spot. At the beginning of the season, every professional baseball team has the single goal of a World Series victory. They have many other goals as well, but they all support that great goal. The Bible teaches that some goals are more worthy than others (Luke 10:42; 1 Cor. 12:31). The catechism helps us to keep our eyes fixed on the main purpose of life.

“What is the chief end of *man*?” also speaks to our identity, our personhood. It helps us ask, Who am I? What does it mean to be a man or a woman? Am I responsible for creating value for my life, or do I have inherent worth that I experience as I live according to how I have been designed? Too many people don’t know how to live because they haven’t yet grasped who they are.

In response to this great question of purpose, priority, and identity, we might settle for answers that cannot satisfy. For example, when people pursue personal happiness apart from God as their chief end, two problems ensue. First, they become lost in a labyrinth of subjectivity. Experience proves that without a reliable guide we can’t know what makes us truly happy. This is why desirable pursuits often disappoint us. God alone reveals what will satisfy us. Second, we become selfish. Personal happiness can become a monster that tolerates no rivals. The pursuit of happiness shatters families as a

married man looks at another woman and says, “My happiness comes first!”

The same problems of subjectivity and selfishness plague such proposed chief pursuits as productivity, philanthropy, education, or environmentalism. These may be good means but not chief ends. Anything that draws our best energies away from God is idolatry. Idolatry never satisfies.

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” As light is to the sun, God’s glory is the sparkling of the deity. God cannot be made more glorious, just like the sun cannot be made brighter. But God’s glory, like the sun, can be reflected. To glorify God is to advertise Him (Ps. 19:1); He is life’s most significant reality, radically worthy to receive glory, honor, and power (Rev. 4:11). We glorify God when we make it our goal to please Him in all things (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 5:9). An even shorter catechism asks this helpful question: “How can you glorify God?” The answer: “By loving him and doing what he commands.”¹ Glorifying God calls for loving obedience. Without obedience, love is no more than sentimentality. Without love, obedience can give way to a resentful spirit of servility.

The beautiful irony is that in glorifying God we actually find true happiness. The psalmist Asaph found life satisfying only when he learned to enjoy God—when God became his desire, the strength of his heart and his portion forever (Ps. 73:25–26). Asaph lacked strength, direction, and accurate self-awareness until he understood himself in relation to God (v. 17). Only when he reflected on the absolute sufficiency of God could he say, “It is good for me to draw near to God” (v. 28). God is best glorified by those who find in Him everything they desire. God’s glory and our joy are like two pistons firing in tandem in a single engine. A passion for God’s glory energizes our joy; as we enjoy God we pursue His glory. Your flourishing

1. *First Catechism* (Suwanee, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 2003), Q&A 4.

is intimately connected with the God in whose image you have been created. The first people were fundamentally God-centered and happy. They experienced joy in their work, their rest, and their relationships. In the fall humans became self-centered and unhappy.

What is your chief end? You answer that question in how you view your sin, how you trust Christ, how you approach corporate worship, how you work, how you recreate—how you orient your entire life. As God's people are renewed in Christ, they regain the ability to be who they were created to be. God will be glorified by every person He has made. Those who refuse to bend their knees still serve to make known "the riches of His glory" (Rom. 9:23). But only those who bend their knees now can also *enjoy* Him forever.

Chapter 2

Words to Live By

Q. 2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Q. 3. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

If man was made to glorify and enjoy God, then we should eagerly ask *how* we may accomplish this astounding purpose. Without God providing us this direction, our hearts would remain empty and unsatisfied. Thankfully, the answer is not obscure or vague. It is not hidden, written in code in the stars, or discernible only to the wise. God kindly reveals Himself to us and shows us how to seek His glory and enjoyment in His Word. We need His direction, and He gives it freely. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105).

The beautiful world around us declares God’s glory and draws us to consider our Creator, but it does not direct us specifically how we may glorify and enjoy Him. As wondrous as it is that God made man in His own image, gave us consciences, and put a longing for eternity

in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11), even this general revelation gives insufficient direction on how to glorify and enjoy God. This makes special revelation necessary for us.

God has made Himself known in the world in various times and places (Heb. 1:1). He spoke to Moses through the burning bush. He came to Job in the whirlwind. He spoke through the prophets. And to allow later generations to know and praise God, God's revelation of Himself was written down.¹ These writings or "Scriptures" were inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded by human beings in their various times and places, with their own unique styles. The book of Isaiah, for example, reflects not only a particular genre (prophecy) but also a particular style. It differs from Jeremiah's prophecies and from John's gospel, which differs from Matthew's gospel.

Scripture is self-attesting, which is another way of saying that it tells us its divine origins and calls us to listen to it:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21; see also 2 Tim. 3:14–17)

We ought to be convinced that the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God. The apostle Paul rejoiced that the Thessalonians had ears to hear: "When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). The Old Testament spans from Genesis to Malachi, recounting history from creation and including many promises of the coming Savior, Jesus Christ. The New Testament spans from Matthew to Revelation, beginning with the gospel stories of Christ's

1. WCF 1.1.

incarnation and continuing with many letters written to the early churches that were established in the wake of Christ's resurrection and ascension.

This is our "rule," or to use a theological term drawn from that Greek word, our "canon." Because Scripture is from God, it is authoritative. The Word of God is not only a necessary guide but the highest authority above us. When we would be directed by another source, we should check to see how that input accords with the Word, discarding whatever conflicts (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1). We live our lives based on what the Word tells us to do.

Thus, the Bible teaches us "what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man," requiring, first and foremost, faith in Christ.² "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). Grateful for God's gift of salvation, Christians love God and obey His commandments (John 14:15). This is not burdensome, for remember what the Word does: it directs us how to *enjoy* God. It shows us how to enjoy Him as we consider His brilliant handiwork in nature. It directs us that we are most satisfied in serving Him, in sharing in the joy of our Master.

Many books can be helpful to a person, but none are like the Word. There is nowhere else to go, no other "rule" that has the power and authority of God's Word. When Jesus said some difficult things in John 6 and some of the crowd left Him, Jesus asked Peter and the disciples if they would leave too. Peter's striking response teaches us much: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68; cf. Deut. 32:47). Only in the Bible do we hear how

2. "Sin and grace in their original causes, various respects, consequents, and ends, are the principal subjects of the whole Scripture, of the whole revelation of the will of God to mankind. In these do our present and eternal concerns lie, and from and by them hath God designed the great and everlasting exaltation of his own glory. Upon these do turn all the transactions that are between God and the souls of men." John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1968), 6:325.

to escape God's wrath against our sin through faith in Jesus Christ. It contains the words of eternal life.

We should be eternally thankful that God has given us direction on how to glorify and enjoy Him. Having God's Word is a great benefit to us. It protects us:

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall. (Matt. 7:24–27)

Without God's Word, we are like a house built on sand; we will crumble when hardship comes. We will crumble in God's judgment.

The Word also blesses us (Rev. 1:3). It is clear enough in its critical parts that anyone can understand it. It not only is clear but also transforms those who read with faith seeking understanding:

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)

God clearly acts and accomplishes important things with His Word. His Spirit works with the Word, going out powerfully and changing lives (Isa. 55:11; Heb. 4:12–13). If you are a Christian, God brought you to new life through His Word (1 Peter 1:23–25). We should therefore all lovingly echo Psalm 119:162: "I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure."

Chapter 3

What Is God?

Q. 4. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

At first blush, it might seem audacious to try to define who God is. To define something is to set limits around it, and (as the catechism rightly acknowledges) God is without any limitations or boundaries—He is infinite. But this infinite God makes Himself known to us—not fully, of course, but nevertheless in very real and true ways. In fact, He welcomes our investigation and study into His person and being—the Scriptures spill open in front of us as a map to make our way toward a saving knowledge of God (Q&A 2–3). If we do not know Him, we have nothing. Jesus tells us, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God” (John 17:3).

So this question is entirely legitimate, and the answer is a critical step in fulfilling our chief end of glorifying and enjoying God. While we will spend all eternity filling in the answer, we can thank the Westminster divines for providing a helpful and succinct starting point, and a profound one as well, as nineteenth-century

Princeton theologian Charles Hodge claimed these eighteen words were probably the best definition ever penned by man.¹

In theology, when discussing God's attributes or characteristics, we often distinguish between communicable and incommunicable attributes. *Communicable* attributes are those we share in some sense with God—aspects of Himself that He *communicates* to us. This should be expected: we are made in His image and so we reflect Him in certain ways (see chapter 7). However, in His being God is entirely distinct from us, and therefore He has attributes that belong properly only to Himself, so we call them *incommunicable*.² This question and answer gives us a window into both aspects of God's being.

The Incommunicable Attributes

To rightly frame our perspective of God, the catechism has us start with the fact that He is “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being.” None of these statements are true of us in our being; they lay the foundation of all the ways in which God is supremely distinct from and incomparable to humanity. To say God is spirit is to say that God is not made up of any material. Although we talk about God's different attributes, they are not pieces that you put together to get a finished product. *Attributes* is a helpful term for us, but in reality God is simply one essence.

As a spirit, God knows no boundaries of any kind. He is not

1. Alexander Whyte, *An Exposition on the Shorter Catechism* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2004), 21.

2. Even this distinction needs some further qualification. Berkhof is helpful: “If we bear this in mind, and also remember that none of the attributes of God are incommunicable in the sense that there is no trace of them in man, and that none of them are communicable in the sense that they are found in man as they are found in God, we see no reason why we should depart from the old division which has become so familiar in Reformed theology. For practical reasons it seems more desirable to retain it.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 56.

limited in terms of space, so we say He is infinite. One ancient Greek philosopher rightly stated that God is a circle wherein everywhere is the center and the circumference is nowhere to be found. Or in God's own words, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jer. 23:24). God is not bound by time either, so we affirm that He is eternal. He was, and is, and is to come (Rev. 4:8). Actually, time cannot properly be attributed to God at all, since He stands outside of time entirely. There really never was a time where God "was" or a time when He "will be"—He just *is* (Ex. 3:14). We are starting to see how, in the words of a twenty-year-old Charles Spurgeon, the study of God "is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity."³

In terms of the incommunicable attributes, the catechism lists finally God's immutability, or the truth that He is unchangeable. If God's attributes could be ranked, one might dare think the Westminster divines saved the best for last, for it is God's unchanging character that is again and again propounded in Scripture as the ground for our hope, assurance, and praise (e.g., Num. 23:19; Psalms 100; 119:89; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8). His love does not change, His mercy cannot fail, His covenant promises will never be broken. His immutability is our "strongest prop for faith," wrote Puritan Stephen Charnock.⁴ The perfections of God are firmly fixed as a noonday sun, so that with Him there "is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). Since He does not falter, there is no reason for our faith in Him or service to Him to falter either.

The Communicable Attributes

As the catechism transitions to the communicable attributes of God, it does so by reminding us that God's perfection reaches even to

3. Quoted in J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 18.

4. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:399.

them. He is “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in...wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Even my wisdom or goodness is by no means a constant. But God is all of these things everywhere and always. He so far excels us even in ways we might have a glimpse of commonality. “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8–9).

God is wise: He knows all things. Moreover, He knows how to use that knowledge to the greatest of ends; hence, we also affirm He has all power. In His matchless wisdom, God has chosen to restrain His wrathful power against elect sinners and show them compassion and mercy instead. That is not a sign of weakness but of strength. And it moves us to love Him. A. W. Pink testifies, “The apprehension of God’s infinite knowledge should fill the Christian with adoration. The whole of my life stood open to His view from the beginning. He foresaw my every fall, my every sin, my every backsliding; yet, nevertheless, fixed His heart upon me. O, how the realization of this should bow me in wonder and worship before Him!”⁵

In both His mercy or His judgment, God always does the right thing. This reality is captured in the moral perfections of “holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” The gospel of Jesus Christ is the purest exposition of these attributes. Therein we find that God is set against sin and wickedness and will have it punished, while simultaneously He is moved in love and pity for His wayward children. In Jesus—who is the way, the truth, and the life—the penalty for sin is paid, and a pardon for sinners is freely granted. Again, Pink writes, “God is not only the Greatest of all beings, but the Best.”⁶ What Christian could possibly disagree?

This is the God revealed to us in the Bible. And this is who we are being transformed to reflect, from one degree of glory to

5. A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 21.

6. Pink, *Attributes of God*, 57.

the next, through the abiding Spirit of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). What a thought. It is little wonder why Moses would proclaim in praise of the perfections of God: “Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (Ex. 15:11). Shortly before his death Moses asked that question once again—“Who is like you?”—this time not about God but rather about His people: “Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD” (Deut. 33:29). This is the incomparable privilege of knowing an incomparable God.

Chapter 4

The Holy Trinity

Q. 5. Are there more Gods than one?

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

Q. 6. How many persons are there in the Godhead?

A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

If the catechism initially introduces God with a stark, impersonal interrogative pronoun—“*What is God?*” (Q 4)—the transition to the doctrine of the Trinity assures that God is indeed a *who*. He is a personal God, a God who is to be invoked and embraced as Father, Son, and Spirit. Christianity’s most radical claim about God is that He is Three in One. It is audacious, complex, and mysterious. Yet this subject is completely vital for understanding who God is, proving to be not only doctrinally significant but positively life changing as well.

One Living and True God

Israel’s claim of faith was always that there was only one God to be worshiped, not some pantheon of deities from which they could choose to serve and praise. Nothing was more basic to Israel’s

confession than Deuteronomy 6:4–5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” That was their creed and the most important point of theology to grasp. In response to the surrounding nations’ litany of idols, Israel declared that there are not many gods; there is only One, and He is unique: divinity belongs to Him and Him alone.

And this one God is living. He is not an inanimate object made from wood or stone. He is alive and therefore able to accomplish salvation. He is also true. He is in reality God, contrasted to every spirit and man who by deceit tries to steal God’s glory for himself. “But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth will tremble, and the nations will not be able to endure His indignation” (Jer. 10:10).

This is not only Israel’s creed but also that of the new covenant community of believers: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God” (1 Cor. 8:5–6).

In Three Persons

Jesus Himself upholds the unity of the Godhead as sound orthodoxy when He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 in response to the devil’s temptation (Matt. 4:10). But He also goes on to say things like “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). John declares Jesus to be God at the start of his gospel: “The Word was God” (1:1). Likewise, Luke also ascribes deity to the very Spirit of Jesus (Acts 5:3–5). Moreover, the incommunicable attributes that belong properly to God alone are assigned to both the Son and the Spirit—for example, eternity to the Son in John 8:58 (“before Abraham was, I AM”) and omniscience to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:10 (“For the Spirit searches all things”). So the Scriptures simultaneously make the claim that God is One and that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.

Is this a contradiction? No, though it is certainly a marvel! It is not a contradiction, because these three persons belong to the one Godhead, which refers to the essence of divinity. There is only one divine nature, and yet this nature subsists in three distinct persons. So while there is “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” these three are “the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” The Father is first not because He is more God than the Son but because He begets the Son. The Spirit is listed finally not because He is less God than the others but because He proceeds from the Father and the Son. All three are equally God and therefore equally deserving of our worship, honor, and praise.

Lest we think this is heady doctrinal speculation that should be reserved for the seminaries, we would do well to remember that without the Trinity we would be nothing and have nothing. Herman Bavinck says that “in the doctrine of the Trinity beats the heart of the whole revelation of God for the redemption of humanity.”¹ John Owen writes, “Take away...the doctrine of the Trinity, and...there can be no purpose of grace by the Father in the Son—no covenant for the putting of that purpose in execution: and so the foundation of all fruits of love and goodness is lost to the soul.”² In other words, there is no Christianity without the Trinity. Paul shows us the Trinitarian shape of the gospel in Galatians 4:4–6: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’”

Every aspect of salvation involves the direct agency of God, yet the three divine persons act in distinct ways. The Father is the initiator of salvation—the one who sends the Son and the Spirit. The

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:260.

2. Owen, *Works of John Owen*, 16:341.

Son, now being sent, does the work necessary to reconcile us to God: He redeems us from the curse of the law and makes us qualified to receive adoption as sons. The Spirit then works this benefit into our hearts in faith. The Spirit is also indispensable in the work that the Son came to do. He was powerfully present at His incarnation (Luke 1:35), His baptism (Matt. 3:16), His temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1), His teaching (Luke 4:14–15), His crucifixion (Heb. 9:14), and His resurrection (Rom. 8:11). Everything that the Son came to do He did in obedience to the Father, through the power of the Spirit, and for the benefit of sinners like you and me.

Comprehending the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our human ability. But it is not surprising that our finite human intellect cannot fully understand the nature and being of the infinite God (Isa. 55:8). Although understanding *how* these things are true is beyond our human ability, still we can know with certainty *that* they are true because God has revealed them clearly in His Word. We may not be able to comprehend the Trinity, but it's *because* of the Trinity that we can apprehend God.

Chapter 5

Divine Decrees

Q. 7. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Q. 8. How doth God execute his decrees?

A. God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.

We are made to know God (Phil. 3:10). As we form friendships, even among equals, we come to know who our friends are and what they do. So it is as we grow in a loving relationship with the One who is our King, our Father, and our Friend. God is a being perfect in all His attributes. One of God's attributes is His power. That God is powerful presupposes that He works. Question 8 introduces God's work of creation and providence as the execution of what question 7 calls "the decrees of God," His "one comprehensive plan" that cannot be thwarted.¹

1. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 102.

God executes His decrees through creation and providence, the making and maintaining of all things that have been, are now, and will ever be.²

The Facts about God's Decrees

Knowing that God is working out His plan can be a great comfort to people whose lives seldom work out as they had imagined.

*God Foreordains Whatever Comes to Pass*³

God has a purpose that He works out in all things “according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). In Isaiah 46 the Lord puts on notice those who follow false gods. Idols are impotent. Don’t miss Isaiah’s searing mockery: “From its place it shall not move. Though one cries out to it, yet it cannot answer nor save him out of his trouble” (v. 7). God is different. He declares the end from the beginning. Before anything happens, God has ruled it to be so. “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.... I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it” (vv. 10–11). Whatever God wants happens. Not even Satan can act apart from God’s permission (Job 1:12).

God has decreed everything that comes to pass “for his own glory,” His own honor, dignity, and reputation. If that sounds self-ish, remember that human drive for praise is poisoned by excessive self-interest. But because of who He is and what He does, God’s self-interest isn’t excessive. God alone is worthy of all glory (Rev. 4:11). Creatures cannot take credit for the good we do. The best human works are community projects. Exquisite paintings are influenced by artists’ teachers and painted on canvases made by others. But as “the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 21:6), there is no one with

2. The topics of creation and providence are so vital that they will be considered in the following three chapters.

3. We will cover God foreordaining the salvation of the elect and His passing over of the reprobate in Q&A 20 (see also WCF 3.3–8; WLC 13).

whom God can share the credit for creation and providence. Even creaturely good works glorify the goodness of the Creator (Matt. 5:16). And God glorifies Himself in the best possible way. The path to human greatness is inescapably paved with fortuitous miscalculations and the deliberate mistreatment of others. But God is glorified by the “wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will.”⁴ God never sins that good may come of it.

God’s Decrees Reflect His Perfection

The Larger Catechism beautifully links God’s decrees to such divine perfections as wisdom, freedom (or might), holiness, eternality, and unchangeableness.

Because God is wise, His works reflect His wise plan. “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens” (Prov. 3:19). Many of our decisions are nearly accidents. We combine limited knowledge, mixed intentions, and meager strength, and we hope for the best. Unlike us, God doesn’t deliberate between options, finally settling on His best bet. He knows with infallible understanding.

Because God is free, His hand is never forced. God is sovereign, “free and independent of any force outside of himself to accomplish his purposes.”⁵ He never makes a decision under duress. God counsels Himself (Rom. 11:34–35; Eph. 1:11) and performs what He wills. God, without the slightest stress, has already decreed the outcomes of even the decisions we make under pressure.

Because God is holy, He never decrees incorrectly. We compromise. God never does. We will not always like what happens in our lives or in the world around us. But we can believe that God is running the world well. In holiness God decreed to allow the fall and subsequent sin. As with God’s decree to crucify Jesus, so too His

4. WLC 12.

5. Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008), 39.

purpose in allowing sin is holy. The second person of the Trinity willingly and deliberately lived out God's decree to suffer for our salvation. His pain was redemptive; so is the pain of believers. This is a mystery to us.⁶ But we can be confident that all things will result in God's glory and the restoration of the elect.

Because God is eternal and unchangeable, His decrees "are not successively formed as the emergency arises, but are all parts of one all-comprehending plan."⁷ "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18).

The Beauty of God's Decrees

Psalm 3 describes one of the worst relational disasters we can imagine. King David's son Absalom turned against him. He so threatened David's reign that David narrowly escaped the city with only a few loyal friends. As David fled, a man named Shimei cursed him, slandered his character, and assaulted him with stones. David's friend Abishai indignantly pleaded: "Please, let me go over and take off his head!" (2 Sam. 16:9). Here is David's response: "Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day" (vv. 11–12). David used God's divine decrees to find peace in a hard place. This painful experience didn't happen by chance. God ordered it. It didn't mean David was worthless. It meant that God's good plan for a man He loved required this hard ordeal.

Knowledge of God's decrees can free us from the domination of negative emotions. In our anxiety the future seems scary.

6. Berkhof explains the paradox like this: God "renders the future sinful act absolutely certain, but [He] determines (a) not to hinder the sinful self-determination of the finite will; and (b) to regulate and control the result of this sinful self-determination" (*Systematic Theology*, 105).

7. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 537.

Understanding God's decrees enables us to trust Him even for the future we can't control. In our shame we feel uncomfortably self-conscious about what we have done or have had done to us. But in union with Jesus—who experienced the shameful death of the cross for us—we can believe that “as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ” (2 Cor. 1:5). In our frustration we feel dissatisfied because of unfulfilled needs or unresolved problems. But believing in God's decrees convinces us that “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11). If we feel stuck in God's story, it is because we have lost sight of what we already know about what God has written: all things work out well for His children (Rom. 8:28–30).

God's decrees can even motivate our obedience. That God's decrees are unchangeable might seem to suggest that our choices don't matter. It is just the opposite! The choices we make are how we experience what God has decreed for us. By the law and gospel, God obliges us to use the means that He has ordained for the accomplishing of His purposes.⁸ Believing in Christ means participating in His death and resurrection. For Christ, glory came through suffering. He walked the path of death because He was confident of being raised up in newness of life (Heb. 12:2). So must we. God has decreed His will, which He will surely do. He has also made “known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that . . . He might gather together in one all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:9–10). Because we believe that God's plan is good, we can faithfully walk in the footsteps of our Savior's path.

8. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 107.

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