

*How to teach
the Westminster Shorter Catechism*

*A guide to
catechizing covenant children*

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Catechism for Kids
Visit our website
www.catechismforkids.com

Published by Common Life Press,
Schenectady, New York. 2013

ISBN-13: 978-0-9898143-3-1

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Part 1:

What is the Westminster Shorter Catechism?

Chapter 1

Why we do we teach a catechism?

In a church I attended years ago, I asked a seven-year-old boy in my Sunday School class if he could answer a few questions about God.

“Sure!” he replied, beaming at me confidently. “I know all about God!”

I thought I would start with something basic. “How many Gods are there?”

“Eight!” he answered enthusiastically.

“Eight?” I was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“I have counted them before,” he assured me. “There are eight: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, the Lord, God, Christ, and Jesus!”

I could scarcely believe it. This little boy had been in church regularly throughout his entire life. He had sat through countless Sunday school lessons taught by me and other teachers. And he thought we worshiped eight Gods.

I hastily explained to the child that there is only one God, and I briefly reviewed the concept of multiple titles and the Trinity.

The boy stared at me if he wondered whether I had the slightest idea what I was talking about. “Are you sure?” he asked suspiciously.

Eventually, I persuaded him, but the incident haunted me, causing me to reconsider the teaching methods we were using to instruct children in the faith.

The church I attended at the time was not rooted in any historic denomination. None of us had ever even heard of a catechism. Our method of teaching was the same as most other Protestant evangelical churches: we told Bible stories. We related the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. We talked about Joshua and the battle of Jericho, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions' den. We especially told stories about Jesus—His birth, His miracles, and His death and resurrection.

These were all good lessons. But in telling the stories, we tended to assume that the children already knew certain basic facts about God. It never occurred to us that a child could learn story after story about God's mighty deeds and yet never be able to describe God Himself.

The most important thing a child can learn is not the names of all the books of the Bible (although that too is good knowledge). Children must know something about God Himself—His Triune nature, His attributes, and how He reveals Himself to mankind. They must understand what sin is before they can fully appreciate a story about redemption.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is a tool precisely for the purpose of teaching children (and adults too!) these things. The Catechism does not teach Bible stories, but rather, it provides a framework of theological understanding for children to be able to better comprehend Bible stories. If the boy to whom I spoke had known about the Trinity, he would have known that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was not the introduction of a new God to the scene. He would have understood it in proper context and

gained far more immediate benefit from the story. The Shorter Catechism gives exactly this sort of background. It assures teachers and parents that children will never make it through Sunday School without being able to answer basic questions about God.

With this goal in mind, the Westminster Shorter Catechism is set up as a series of questions and answers. The teacher or parent asks questions, and the children are expected to respond with the correct answer. A thoroughly catechized child memorizes the answers and recites them word for word when prompted by a question.

In certain situations (Vacation Bible School, for example), it may be impossible to have children memorize answers precisely. In that case, the Catechism can still be used as an excellent study guide explaining the nature and attributes of God, the fall of man, the covenant, and other basic Christian doctrines. Yet, if at all possible, it is best for children to memorize the Catechism. A Bible lesson may be forgotten. Memorization forces long-term retention of lessons.

For generations, catechizing was the gold standard for training children in faith. During the Reformation, catechisms were produced as a matter of routine for emerging churches. It was assumed that children needed something appropriate to memorize in the course of their religious lessons.

Unfortunately, memorization has largely gone out of style in modern culture. With books so readily available and the internet always at our fingertips, we grow lazy about committing things to memory. Many parents even doubt that their child is capable of recalling a catechism. The intellectual retention of children remains largely untested in modern education, and people are not aware of just how

easily and thoroughly children can remember things when they are taught to do so.

Not only do children remember things easily, but they often enjoy it. Children like to learn, and they enthusiastically proclaim what they have learned. They enjoy the success of reeling off one correct answer after another as they progress through a catechism.

Memorization of the answers to basic religious questions reinforces another important concept for children—that the basic truths of the Christian faith are absolute. In this individualistic era, many people imagine that it is best to let children decide for themselves what to believe—as though faith is a buffet of equally rich options from which one might pick and choose.

Christianity emphatically rejects relativism. In fact, common sense rejects it also. God must be who He is. If Scripture is true, then other religions are in serious error. If one plus one equals two, then by definition, anyone who declares that one plus one equals three is wrong. We do not ask children to explore the possibility of alternate answers to the question of one plus one. We tell them what the correct answer is, and we ask them to memorize it. Similarly, we should ask our children to accept and remember the answers to basic questions about God.

WSC Q.5. Are there more Gods than one?

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

WSC Q. 21. Who is the Redeemer of God's elect?

A. The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be,

God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.

These things are as certain and unalterable as one plus one equals two. We may have opinions about many things in life (including some theological disagreements), but no professing Christian should ever doubt these fundamental truths.

Catechizing provides children with structure. It gives them the tools they need to better understand Bible stories, and it ensures that they never miss out on the most basic beliefs of Christian faith. By placing these concepts in a simple question-and-answer format, learning a catechism promotes memorization and long-term retention, while reinforcing the certainty of biblical truth.

Chapter 2: Where did the Westminster Shorter Catechism come from?

"The Devil give you colic in your stomach, false thief! Do you dare say the mass in my ear?"

As unlikely as it sounds, this angry outburst was the catalyst launching a chain of events that culminated in the writing of the document known today as the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Jenny Geddes was a Scottish market-trader who lived in Edinburgh in the years following the Reformation. On Sunday, June 23, 1637, she attended a church service at St. Giles' Cathedral.

Tensions were running high that Sunday over a new liturgy being forced upon the church by King Charles I of England. Decades earlier, the Reformation had taken the British Isles by storm. In England, Henry VIII rejected the authority of the pope and set himself up as the head of the new Church of England. In Scotland, the Parliament abandoned Catholicism and established the Church of Scotland.

While both actions loosened the grip of the pope, the resulting churches were widely divergent. Henry VIII set aside Roman Catholicism for political and personal reasons (especially his desire to divorce his wife Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn), and theological conviction had little to

do with it. Although different in name and answering to a new authority, the High Anglican practices of the Church of England differed little from those of Roman Catholicism. The Church of Scotland, however, was founded on the Reformed faith, especially influenced by the preaching of John Knox. Presbyterianism held sway in Scotland.

Although the Scottish masses were in little doubt of their theological loyalties, they were still under the political control of England. In 1625, Charles I ascended to the throne with a dream of uniting England and Scotland in one church under his personal dominion. He supported High Anglicanism as the state church, and he began to implement it in all English churches. Whenever people opposed the faulty theology and extravagant ritual of the liturgy, Charles simply had them arrested.

Charles soon moved to implement High Anglican worship in Scotland, in spite of heavy resistance. And so it was that on June 23, 1637, the Dean of Edinburgh, James Hannay, stood up in St. Giles' Cathedral to read from the new Anglican liturgy, and Jenny Geddes expressed her rage and that of the whole community by calling for a curse upon his stomach. She punctuated her words by flinging a stool at his head.

The spark had been set to the fuel of Scottish indignation. A riot broke out. The angry mob was forced out of the cathedral, but they stayed outside, beating on the doors and flinging rocks at the windows.

Scotland demanded the immediate withdrawal of the offending liturgy, but Charles I refused. A civil war broke out. The Covenanters (a Scottish Presbyterian movement) raised an army to fight against Charles. The king endeavored to overcome the resistance, but his own

Parliament (weary of his tyrannical behavior) had turned against him.

The English Parliament sought an alliance with the Scottish Covenanters to overthrow the despised king. The Covenanters agreed, but on the condition that the new government must uphold Reformed theology in the state church.

On October 12, 1643, the Westminster divines, a group of 121 clergymen, began work on a set of standards intended for the new state church. The resulting documents were the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Larger Catechism, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism. These works were accepted by Parliament in 1648, the same year that King Charles was finally overthrown.

The victory for the Reformed state church in England did not last very long. In 1660, Charles II (the son of Charles I) was restored to the monarchy and reinstated the Church of England. The Westminster Standards were officially revoked.

Although no longer a political document, the Westminster Confession and the supporting catechisms continued to gather momentum in Reformed churches throughout the English-speaking world. History and politics moved on, but the Westminster Standards remain unrivaled as a summary of Scriptural teaching. The Westminster divines had done their work very well.

Chapter 3: How are the Westminster Standards authoritative?

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the accompanying catechisms are summaries of the Bible. The Confession has some similarity to statements of faith commonly employed by evangelical churches. The key difference between them is the length and depth of the content. Most statements of faith are only one or two pages, touching a few key topics and granting only a sentence or two to each. The Westminster Confession contains thirty-three chapters, with a median length of five paragraphs per chapter. Topics range from the Triune nature of God to the proper administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is far more comprehensive and sweeping in its discussion of Christian doctrine than an average statement of faith.

The Larger and Shorter Catechisms are meant to be tools for the teaching of many of the same concepts contained within the Confession, and with the addition of a few other key features such as the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. The Shorter Catechism serves as an elementary introduction, while the Larger Catechism gives a more thorough and detailed discussion of basic Christian doctrine.

The Westminster Standards are strictly summaries of the Bible. There is no new material in them. In fact, each point is supplied with references to Bible verses to

demonstrate that it is derived directly from the plain teaching of Scripture:

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

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God (*Psalm 86, Isaiah 60:21, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 6:20, 10:31, Revelation 4:11*), and to enjoy him forever (*Psalm 16:5-11, Psalm 144:15, Isaiah 12:2, Luke 2:10, Philippians 4:4 Revelation 21:3-4*).

While people are working on memorization of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, they may use a version that leaves out the Scriptural references to make reading easier. However, for in-depth study, it is generally considered a good idea to include scriptural references. Teachers encourage students to look up the Bible verses so that they know that these theological concepts are found in Scripture.

The Westminster Standards are considered authoritative only insofar as they accurately summarize Scripture. Or, to put it another way, it is the Bible that is authoritative, and the Westminster Standards are considered binding because they reflect Scripture, not because they contain authority in themselves. The Bible is the Word of God, and it is infallible. The Standards are well-respected as summaries of the Bible, but these summaries are not infallible—it is possible that the Standards incorrectly summarize certain things, and if that were found to be so, people should abide by the Bible, not the Westminster Standards.

Christians are never permitted to declare that they disagree with some portion of God's word. We are all called to submit to the word of God in everything. However, Christians sometimes do take exception to certain minor

portions of the Westminster Standards (for example, the identity of the antichrist), without being declared outside the church.

While a few minor points of the Standards may be debated, Christians for generations have acknowledged that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are some of the best and most accurate summaries of Scripture in existence. The Standards were never intended to be thorough treatments of every topic, and there is still much to be learned about Scripture after we conclude a study of the Shorter Catechism, but the basics are all there—God, creation, covenant, the fall of mankind, redemption through Christ, forgiveness of sins, obedience to God, sacraments, and prayer. These and other topics are explained concisely and accurately in 107 questions and answers in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Chapter 4: How is the Westminster Shorter Catechism organized?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is composed of 107 questions and answers. At first, this document may appear intimidating! People often wonder how to begin. Should they start at the beginning? Or should they pick out the shortest questions first? Are there more important parts of the catechism to focus on and less important parts to review later?

A good rule of thumb is simply to start at the beginning and work directly through. The Westminster divines put a great deal of thought into the organization of the catechism. What seems, at first glance, to be a lengthy, rambling series of questions is actually a carefully crafted system designed to assist memorization.

Look back for a moment at the table of contents in this book. You can see a systematic approach. This book is divided into two main sections: background information (*What is the Westminster Shorter Catechism?*) and practical application (*How should we teach the Westminster Shorter Catechism?*). But that is not all. Each of the main sections is subdivided into chapters, and each chapter covers a topic of interest to the reader. Furthermore, if you look inside each chapter, you notice that there is a progression of thought. Each paragraph leads to the next paragraph, so that the chapter as a whole tells a story or presents some information.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has a very similar structural plan. The catechism begins with two big questions which function as an introduction:

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

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

WSC 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.

We are told immediately in this introductory section that our main purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy God, and that the Bible is the word of God and the only direction we have to tell us how we should glorify and enjoy God.

With this idea of our main purpose in life now fixed firmly in our minds, and with assurance about the infallible nature of Scripture, we can move on to the rest of the information with a renewed understanding of the importance of the material that we are learning. Nothing is more vital than learning about God through His word!

The third question in the Shorter Catechism serves as a table of contents:

WSC 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.

Remember that the Westminster Shorter Catechism is a summary of Scripture. Therefore, this question is telling us what material the rest of the catechism intends to cover. There will be two main sections: (1) what man is to believe concerning God, and (2) what duty God requires of man. Questions 4-38 will cover what man is to believe concerning God, and Questions 39-107 will discuss the duty that God requires of man.

Now we have our main sections, but that is not the end of the organizational schema. There are “chapters” within each main section. In the first main section (*what man is to believe concerning God*), for example, Questions 3-19 discuss the fall of mankind into sin. Questions 20-28 tell us about our Redeemer. In the second main section (*what duty God requires of man*), we have portions on the Ten Commandments (Questions 39-81), prayer (Questions 98-107), and other topics.

Even within each “chapter,” there is progression of ideas. Consider the example below:

WSC 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.

WSC Q.8. How doth God execute His decrees?

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

WSC Q.9. What is the work of creation?

A. The work of creation is God’s making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.

WSC Q.10. How did God create man?

- A. God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.

WSC Q.11. What are God's works of providence?

- A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

Notice the progression of concepts. First we are given a definition of God's *decrees*, then we are told how God works out His decrees (*creation* and *providence*), and then we are given a definition of *creation* and a definition of *providence*. If you continue on from there, you will see that the Shorter Catechism explains how creation and providence are tied together as God provided in a special way for the humans that He created.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is carefully charted out to encourage students to think through various concepts. The systematic organization of it lends to learning. Furthermore, the most important ideas are placed at the very beginning of the catechism, so that if someone only gets through a few questions of the catechism, they have still learned a great deal about God.

Begin at the beginning, and use the system within the catechism to full advantage! Take the concepts one at a time and let each one lead you to the next, until you have reached the end of the basic course in Christian faith contained in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

*Organizational Plan
of the Westminster Shorter Catechism*

Introduction (Q.1 – Q.2): God is of utmost importance in our lives, and He has revealed Himself to us through the Scriptures.

Table of Contents (Q.3): We will discuss (1) what we should believe about God and (2) what God requires of us.

Part 1: What we should believe about God

Chapter 1 (Q.4 – Q.6): Nature of God

Chapter 2 (Q.7 – Q.12): Decrees of God

Chapter 3 (Q.13 – Q.19): The Fall of Mankind

Chapter 4 (Q.20 – Q.28): Our Redeemer

Chapter 5 (Q.29 – Q.38): What God Has Given Us

Part 2: What God requires of us

Chapter 6 (Q.39 – Q.81): The Ten Commandments

Chapter 7 (Q.82 – 88): Sin and Restoration

Chapter 8 (Q.89 – Q.90): The Preaching of the Word

Chapter 9 (Q.91 – Q.97): The Sacraments

Chapter 10 (Q.98 – Q.107): Prayer

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