

Murdo A.N. Macleod

Bible Truth Explored



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First Printed 2019 in the United Kingdom

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-910013-19-9

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Published by Reformation Scotland Trust
Whiteside House,
Bathgate
EH48 2RX.

Visit **www.reformationscotland.org** for free material to access and download and for further information about the Trust and the Second Reformation.

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Preface

All the way through Scripture we find an emphasis on teaching the ways of truth—particularly to the young. Each generation is to praise God’s works to the next and to declare the mighty acts He has done. The way the Church has often done this in the past, particularly in times of difficulty, is by catechising. Catechisms teach the basics of sound doctrine by means of question and answer.

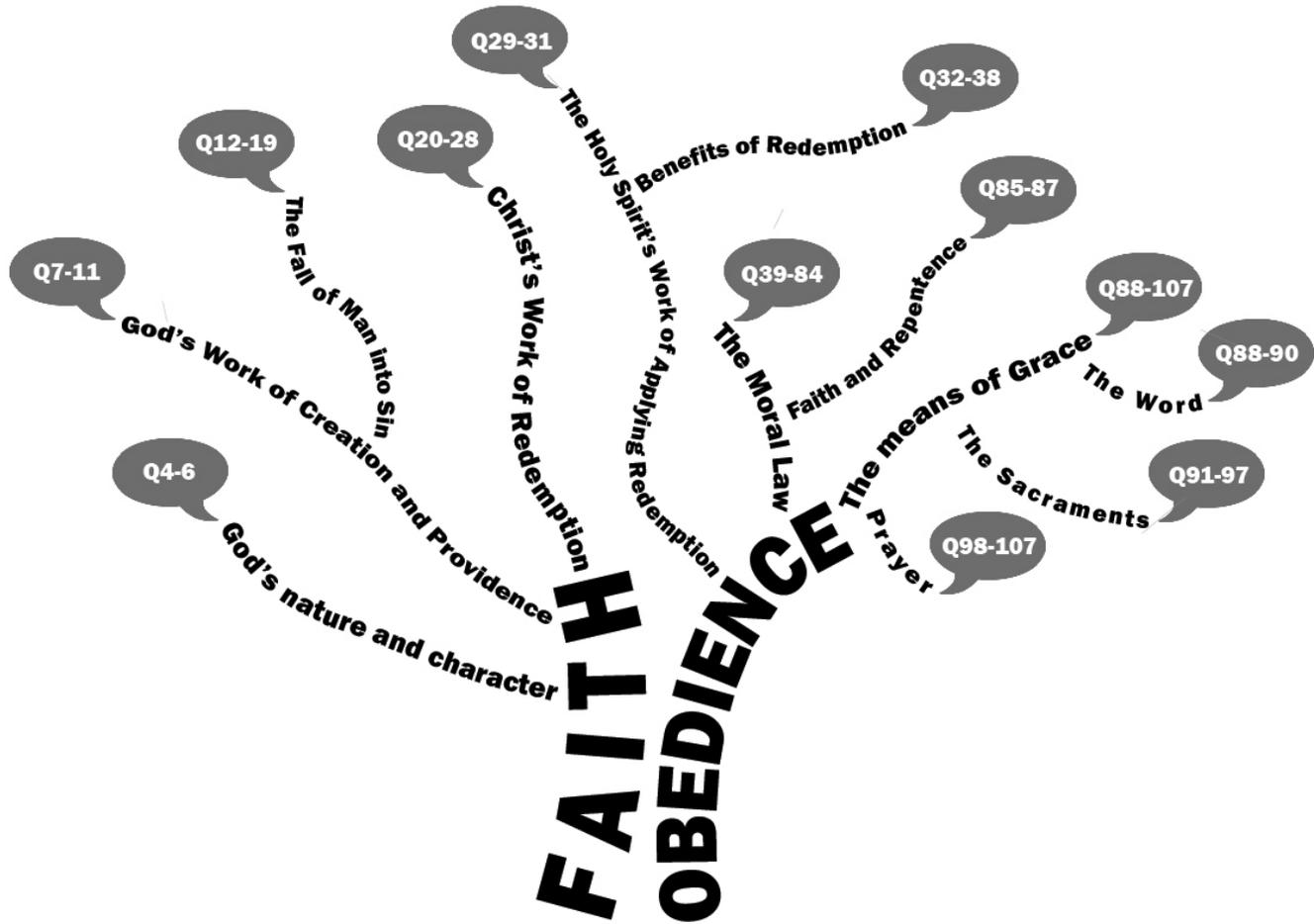
The Westminster Shorter Catechism is one of the most used and best loved ways of teaching Bible Truth. By learning its contents, we are taught what we are to believe and what is required of us by the Lord. Once these truths are fixed in the mind they are not easily forgotten and can prove to be a help and a bulwark in later years.

Some might dispute the value of teaching young people matters which they do not always readily understand. The Bible assures us, however, that if we “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Indeed, if we neglect to train up our children, we can be assured that the world will certainly not hesitate to do it!

The added advantage of catechising is that we also learn what we do not believe: error is identified and we can be on our guard. In this way, we are all better protected against the danger of false teaching and heresy damaging or even derailing our walk with the Lord. In these days of spiritual confusion, we need a straightforward guide to biblical truth.

Bible Truth Explored began as a series of articles in the Explorer Magazine, a monthly magazine for young people published by the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). These articles have been significantly revised and edited to form the chapters of this book. I am deeply grateful to those who have contributed so much to reshaping and editing the content, particularly Catherine Hyde together with Matthew and Janet Vogan. This book is now sent out to a wider public with the prayer that the Lord would be pleased to use it for His own glory.

Murdo Angus Macleod



**What will the Bible
mainly teach me about?**

What is a Catechism?

A catechism summarises the Bible's teachings through questions and answers. The question and answer format allows the truths to be presented in an organised way and makes the truths easier to learn and remember.

When was the Shorter Catechism

written? The Shorter Catechism was produced by a gathering of ministers and theologians called the Westminster Assembly. This assembly met in London in the seventeenth century. They produced a clear statement of the Christian faith, known as the Westminster Confession of Faith. They also agreed biblical principles on matters of worship and how the church should be run. They published two catechisms, the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism, in 1648.

What is in the Shorter Catechism?

The Shorter Catechism consists of 107 questions. It has three main parts. The first part is introductory and consists of Questions 1 to 3. The second part, from Question 4 to 38, tells us what we are to believe. The third part, from Question 39 to 107, tells us what we are to do.

Why learn the Shorter Catechism?

It helps us summarise Bible truth.

The Shorter Catechism is very short. It only includes the most essential doctrines. It covers the key truths about God, creation and providence, how we fell into sin, and God's way of saving sinners. It also unpacks God's requirements for how we should live our lives, and explains what we must do to be saved. It also opens up what we must do to be saved and explains God's requirements for how

we should live our lives. Much (but not all) of the teaching in the Westminster Confession is condensed into the Shorter Catechism. It gives us what we need to grasp first of all.

It helps us remember Bible truth.

Generations of believers, with their children, have not only read the Shorter Catechism but memorised it. By learning it off by heart, we fix its important truths in our mind so that we can use it again and again and so that it shapes our thinking and our behaviour.

It helps us defend Bible truth. By its brief and precise wording, the Shorter Catechism gives us a ready-made articulation of what the Bible teaches. We don't have to start from scratch or use our own words every time we want to explain some part of Christian doctrine. Instead we can use the descriptions and definitions which are carefully crafted, ready and waiting in the Catechism.

“The Shorter Catechism gives us a ready-made articulation of what the Bible teaches.”

It helps us learn Bible truth. In the Catechism we learn about the most important subjects, such as who God is, what He has done to save us from our sin and how we should obey God through

Introducing the catechism

keeping His commandments. It teaches us about this life, and life after death. It also helps us understand about the Trinity and the ways God communicates His grace. We can learn the Catechism ourselves by reading and answering the questions.

What is the purpose of life?

Why did God make me? What is the purpose of life? Why am I here? These are important questions that most people ask at some point in their lives. The Shorter Catechism dives in at the deep end by tackling this fundamental issue in the very first question. "What is man's chief end?" is basically asking, "What is the point of our existence?"

1 What is the chief end of man?

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

No special purpose?

Many people think that we have no special purpose in life. They think everyone can choose their own goals in life, because there is no more to life than enjoying ourselves and getting the most out of our time here. What a poor, selfish attitude that is! Jesus told us about a man who said to himself, "**Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry**" (Luke 12:19). Because that was his sole purpose in life, God called him a fool. The Catechism tells us that we do have a purpose, or an "**end,**" a goal or aim in life.

Many special purposes?

Many people also think that there are many special purposes for living. They include to work and look after our families, education, science and development, and of course recreation. While all these are important in their own place, none of them is our chief end. We have one "**chief**" purpose, one special, supreme aim. Glorifying God is not just the whole point of our existence it is the over-ruling purpose for everything that exists.

To glorify God

Our chief end has two aspects. The first aspect is "**to glorify God.**" Does this mean that we have to try and make God more glorious than He already is? No. We cannot add to God's glory. It is already perfect. It can neither be increased nor reduced.

However, there can be variation in how God's creatures display His glory. Think of the sun. We cannot make the sun shine brighter, but clouds sometimes hide or block the sun's brightness. We cannot make God any more glorious than He is. But our sins are like clouds, which hide or overshadow God's glory. Our sins make the world a darker place and obscure God's honour.

To "**glorify God**" is not to add to His glory but to live in such a way as honours Him and declares His gloriousness to all who see and hear us. It is to live a life of obedience to God, not hiding His glory behinds clouds of disobedience.

Our duty is to do everything to the glory of God. Our lives are not divided into parts,

"We have one 'chief' purpose, one supreme aim."

“Enjoying God means being pleased and delighted with who God is.”

one part about spiritual matters and the other part worldly concerns. It is not a case of having one part of our lives obeying God and another driven by a desire to please and glorify ourselves. Whether at home or work, study or leisure, our whole lives are to be focused on glorifying God.

To enjoy God

The other aspect of our chief end is **“to enjoy God for ever.”** Enjoying God means being pleased and delighted with who God is, finding Him to be the one source of our deepest satisfaction and pleasure. This enjoyment is a consequence of glorifying God, although it should not be our main motivation for glorifying God. We should glorify God because God is so glorious, not because of the pleasure we may consequently experience.

When we think of how we enjoy God, we can think both of enjoying Him in this world and of enjoying Him in the world to come.

Enjoying God in this world

The Christian enjoys the presence of God. This is because God has restored a friendly relationship between Him and them. Instead of being afraid of God and antagonistic towards Him, the Christian finds pleasure and satisfaction in the presence of God.

The Christian enjoys pleasing God. Instead of making it their priority to please themselves, or keep other people happy, the Christian enjoys thinking about God and how they can serve Him and glorify Him best with their lives and talents.

The Christian enjoys activities in which they meet with God. Instead of being most happy when God is pushed to the back of their minds and feels very far away, the Christian enjoys every opportunity to spend time with God. These opportunities include reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping church services on the Lord's day.

Enjoying God in the world to come

The Christian's enjoyment will last **“for ever”** because God is everlasting. The enjoyment of God which the believer has in this world is only a little foretaste of what they will enjoy in eternity. In heaven, they will be able to completely and continually glorify and enjoy God.

Our chief end is something that should absorb our attention and energy. It should never be far from our thoughts that the main reason for our existence is to glorify and enjoy God. When we are more concerned about our own glory, and find our pleasures in other things, we show that we are not fit for our main purpose and our priorities are all wrong. We should take Paul's advice, **“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God”** (1 Corinthians 10:31).

🔍 Something to think about...

- What does it mean to glorify God, since it is impossible for us to make God any more glorious than He is?
- Life is pointless without an ultimate purpose. Some people find the Bible negative because it tells them about their sin but isn't their idea of a meaningless world governed by chance the most negative?

Personal reflection

If you were write a list of '*Things I Enjoy,*' would you include God? If not, what needs to change?

What is the only guide for life?

In Question 1 we saw that our chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever. But how do we go about fulfilling this purpose? How will we know what to do? Question 2 explains that God has told us what we need to know.

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

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.

God has given His Word

God has given us our reason and our conscience. From these we have some sense of moral right and wrong and some ability to work out what God is likely to be pleased with. This is sometimes called ‘the light of nature.’ God also displays His glory in creation and arranges things in providence so that we can get some idea of what angers Him and what He finds acceptable. This is sometimes called ‘general revelation.’ But neither the light of nature nor general revelation – nor both combined – is an adequate source of information as to how we may glorify and enjoy God.

“In His Word God communicates to us what we need to know in order to achieve our chief end.”

Instead, God has given us His Word. This is sometimes called ‘special revelation.’ We have **“the Word of God,”**

a revelation from God Himself, in words that humans can understand. In His Word God communicates to us what we need to know in order to achieve our chief end. Obviously, God’s Word does not include everything that is possible to be known. But what it does include is everything that is necessary to be known for salvation – what we should believe and how we should behave.

God has contained His Word

God has spoken at various times in long ago history through prophets, and by dreams, visions and audible voices. But now He has given us His Word in writing. He has collected up everything He wants us to know, and compiled it into the Bible. God’s revelation of everything we need to know is not scattered around in multiple locations. He has **“contained”** it for us inside the scope of **“the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”**

When the Catechism says that the Word of God **“is contained in the Scriptures,”** it does not mean that the Scriptures include some content we can call God’s Word alongside other content which is not God’s Word. All of Scripture

is God's Word. Nor does it mean that the Scriptures consist merely of written words which become the divine Word of God when we receive it. Scripture is the divine Word of God whether or not we receive it as such.

Instead, to say that the Word of God **"is contained in the Scriptures"** means that the whole of God's special revelation is confined to the Scriptures. We won't find God's revelation of how He wants us to glorify and enjoy Him anywhere other than the Scriptures.

God directs us only by His Word

The Scriptures are **"the only rule"** which God has provided to direct us on the question of glorifying and enjoying Him. A 'rule' in this sense is the ultimate authoritative standard. Of course it is appropriate to refer to secondary, subordinate rules, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith and indeed the Shorter Catechism itself. We can also use the help of theologians, philosophers, historians, linguists, ethicists, scientists, and others to understand what we should believe and do. But these other sources are all subservient to the Scriptures and we should respect them only to the extent

"Our ultimate authority is always the Scriptures."

that they are true to Scripture. Our ultimate authority is always the Scriptures.

Our only rule is **"the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."** The 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are what constitute the Scriptures, the Word of God. All and only these 66 books are the Word of God.

God uses His Word **"to direct us."**

This was God's purpose in giving us the Scriptures, and He designed the Scriptures to be exactly what we need. Because these are God's words, they come with all God's authority, all God's truthfulness, and all God's accuracy. Because God is not only true but also faithful, He has provided us with a revelation that can be understood. Although not every part of Scripture is equally easy to understand, yet Scripture is sufficiently clear that ordinary people who read it straightforwardly are capable of grasping its main messages.

So, if we want to know how to fulfil our chief end, what we need to do is consult the Scriptures. The Scriptures are exactly what God wants us to know in order to glorify and enjoy Him, they are entirely reliable, and they are to be simply accepted and reverently obeyed.

🔍 Something to think about...

- Where can we hear the Word of God speaking today, other than in Scripture?
- How far should we follow our conscience as a guide to right and wrong? How far should we follow the customs of our godly forefathers as a guide to how we should behave?
- What features of the Scriptures make them fully adequate to be our only rule to direct us?

Personal reflection

Read Psalm 119:24. What is your response to God's Word?

What are the Bible's main teachings?

God's Word is our authority to direct us how we are to glorify and enjoy Him. What then is the main content of God's Word? Question 3 highlights the two main areas of teaching in Scripture: what we are to believe about God, and how we should live. In other words, the main teachings of the Bible are about faith and action. Question 3 sets the scene for all the remainder of the Shorter Catechism. The Catechism will expand on 'what we are to believe' in Questions 4 to 38. Then it will cover 'what we are to do' in Questions 39 to 107.

3 What do the scriptures principally teach?

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

What we are to believe

The Bible was not given to teach us everything we could ever learn in this world. It does not tell us all about all the details of our daily lives. It is not meant to give us a complete history of everything that has ever happened in the world. That is not its purpose. It is given to teach **"what we are to believe concerning God."**

"Without the Bible we cannot find out what we need to know about God for salvation."

What we believe matters

Some people may say that it does not matter what you believe so long as you have faith of some kind. The Bible never encourages this way of thinking. God's Word states clearly and often that it alone is the truth. It shows us the only way to God. The Lord Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me"** (John 14:6). We must know what we should believe. The Bible tells us what this is.

What we are to believe about God

The Bible tells us what we are to believe about God. Question 4 goes on to tell us what God is like. We need the Bible in order to believe this. Although creation tells us of God's power (Psalm 19:1), it does not tell us about salvation from sin.

Without the Bible we cannot find out what we need to know about God for salvation. Without it, we would be ignorant about God's mercy and grace in Christ. We would know nothing of how and why the Lord Jesus came into the world. Without the Bible how could we know clearly about heaven and hell and how sinners may be saved?

How we are to live

How should we live? Some people say we do not need to worry about this, we should just live as we like. This goes against the teaching of the Bible. It is not enough to know what we are to believe; we must also obey what the Bible tells us.

We are to obey God because He is our Creator and also our Ruler. He has an absolute right to demand our obedience and we have no right to disobey Him.

As we read the Bible we see that it has very clear instructions on how we are to live our lives. No matter how old or important we are, its rules are the same. It speaks to parents and children, to rulers and ordinary people, to rich and poor.

The Bible tells us that above all else we need to repent and believe, turning from our sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

“The Bible tells us that above all else we need to repent and believe, turning from our sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour.”

🔍 Something to think about...

- What are the two main areas of teaching in Scripture? (2 Timothy 1:13)
- Does it matter what exactly you believe, as long as you have faith of some kind?
- Can you list a few places in the Bible where we are given very clear instructions on how we are to live our lives?

Personal reflection

The answer to this question provides the structure for the whole of the Catechism. Does it provide the structure for the way that you live your life?