
IS THE SHORTER CATECHISM WORTH WHILE?

by Benjamin B. Warfield

The Shorter Catechism is, perhaps, not very easy to learn. And very certainly it will not teach itself. Its framers were less careful to make it easy than to make it good. As one of them, Lazarus Seaman,¹ explained, they sought to set down in it not the knowledge the child has, but the knowledge the child ought to have. And they did not dream that anyone could expect it to teach itself. They committed it rather to faithful men who were zealous teachers of the truth, “to be,” as the Scottish General Assembly puts it in the Act approving it, “A Directory for catechizing such as are of a weaker capacity,” as they sent out the Larger Catechism “to be a Directory for catechizing such as have made some proficiency in the knowledge of the grounds of religion.”

No doubt it requires some effort whether to teach or to learn the Shorter Catechism. It requires some effort whether to teach or to learn the grounds of any department of knowledge. Our children—some of them at least—groan over even the primary arithmetic and find sentence-analysis a burden. Even the conquest of the art of reading has proved such a task that “reading without tears” is deemed an achievement. We think, nevertheless, that the acquisition of arithmetic, grammar and reading is worth the pains its costs the teacher to teach, and the pain it costs the learner to learn them. Do we not think the acquisition of the grounds of religion worth some effort, and even, if need be, some tears?

For, the grounds of religion must be taught and learned as truly as the grounds of anything else. Let us make no mistake here. Religion does not come of itself: it is always a matter of instruction. The emotions of the heart, in which many seem to think religion too exclusively to consist, ever follow the movements of the thought. Passion for service cannot take the place of passion for truth, or safely outrun the acquisition of truth; for it is dreadfully possible to compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, to find we have made him only a “son of hell.”² This is why God establishes and extends his Church by the ordinance of preaching; it is why we have Sunday schools and Bible classes. Nay, this is why God has grounded his Church in revelation. He does not content himself with sending his Spirit into the world to turn men to him. He sends his Word into the world as well. Because, it is from knowledge of the truth, and only from the knowledge of the truth, that under the quickening influence of the Spirit true religion can be born. Is it not worth the pains of the teacher to communicate, the pain of the scholar to acquire this knowledge of truth? How unhappy the expedient to withhold the truth—that

¹ Minister of Allhallows, London; Master of Peter-House, Cambridge. Said to have been great in learning (“an ocean of Theology”), “eminently skilful in managing controversies in divinity,” and “thoroughly studied in the Holy Scriptures.” Yet of him it was said, “I never admired his scholarship so much as I did his patience, the lesson in which he grew so perfect in the School of affliction.” He died in peace, Sept. 9, 1675. All notes supplied by the editor.

² Matt. 23:15.—Ed’s note.

truth under the guidance of which the religious nature must function if it is to function aright—that we may save ourselves these pains, our pupils this pain!

An anecdote told of Dwight L. Moody³ will illustrate the value to the religious life of having been taught these forms of truth. He was staying with a Scottish friend in London, but suppose we let the narrator tell the story.

A young man had come to speak to Mr. Moody about religious things. He was in difficulty about a number of points, among the rest about prayer and natural laws. “What is prayer?” he said, “I can’t tell what you mean by it!” They were in the hall of a large London house. Before Moody could answer, a child’s voice was heard singing on the stairs. It was that of a little girl of nine or ten, the daughter of their host. She came running down the stairs and paused as she saw strangers sitting in the hall. “Come here, Jenny,” her father said, “and tell this gentleman, ‘What is prayer.’”⁴ Jenny did not know what had been going on, but she quite understood that she was now called upon to say her Catechism. So she drew herself up, and folded her hands in front of her, like a good little girl who was going to “say her questions,” and she said in her clear childish voice: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.” “Ah! That’s the Catechism!” Moody said, “thank God for that Catechism.”

How many have had occasion to “thank God for that Catechism!” Did anyone ever know a really devout man who regretted having been taught the Shorter Catechism—even with tears—in his youth? How its forms of sound words come reverberating back into the memory, in moments of trial and suffering, of doubt and temptation, giving direction to religious aspirations, firmness to hesitating thought, guidance to stumbling feet: and adding to our religious meditations an ever-increasing richness and depth. “The older I grow,” said Thomas Carlyle⁵ in his old age, “and now I stand on the brink of eternity, the more comes back to me the first sentence in the Catechism, which I learned when a child, and the fuller and deeper its meaning becomes:

What is the chief end of man?

To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Robert Louis Stevenson,⁶ too, had learned this Catechism when a child; and though he wandered far from the faith in which it would guide his feet, he could never escape from its influence, and he never lost his admiration (may we not even say, his reverence) for it. Mrs. Sellars, a shrewd, if kindly, observer, tells us in her delightful “Recollections” that Stevenson bore with him to his dying day what she calls “the indelible mark of the Shorter Catechism”; and he himself shows how he esteemed it when he set over against one another what he calls the “English” and the “Scottish” Catechisms—for the former, as he says, beginning by “tritely inquiring ‘What is your name?’” the latter by “striking at the very roots of life with ‘What is the chief end of man?’ and answering nobly, if obscurely, ‘To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.’”

³ 1837-1899, American evangelist; supposed to have traveled more than a million miles and addressed more than 100 million people in his world-wide evangelistic campaigns.

⁴ Question 98 of the Shorter Catechism.

⁵ 1795-1881, Scottish historian, biographer and essayist, principally on social and political subjects.

⁶ 1850-1894, Scottish author, famed for *Kidnapped* (1886) and *Treasure Island* (1883). Raised under “Calvinism whose moorings he had dropped but which intrigued him to the end.” *Chambers*, sv.

What is “the indelible mark of the Shorter Catechism”? We have the following bit of personal experience from a general officer in the United States army. He was in a great western city at a time of intense excitement and violent rioting. The streets were over-run daily by a dangerous crowd. One day he observed approaching him a man of singularly combined calmness and firmness of mien,⁷ whose very demeanor inspired confidence. So impressed was he with his bearing amid the surrounding uproar that when he had passed he turned to look back at him, only to find that the stranger had done the same. On observing his turning the stranger at once came back to him, and touching his chest with his forefinger, demanded without preface: “What is the chief end of man?” On receiving the countersign, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”—“Ah!” said he, “I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy by your looks!” “Why, that was just what I was thinking of you,” was the rejoinder.

It is worth while to be a Shorter Catechism boy. They grow to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God. So apt, that we cannot afford to have them miss the chance of it. “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it.”⁸

“Is the Shorter Catechism Worth While?” from *The Westminster Teacher* (April 1910); reprint, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—I*, edited by John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 383-384. Warfield (1851-1921), was an American Presbyterian Scholar, one of the greatest of modern conservative Calvinist theologians, premier defender of the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of the Bible; 34 years professor of didactic and polemical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary; accomplished linguist, voluminous writer. “Perhaps no theologian of that age is as widely read and has had his books kept in print so long as Warfield.”

The Shorter Catechism is the production of some of the most learned and godly pastor-theologians that ever lived. Its origin was this: in the year 1643 an Assembly of 121

ministers, with 30 lay representatives, was convened, by an order of the British parliament, in Westminster. They were soon joined by commissioners from Scotland. They sat more than five and a half years. They hoped to have formed a rule of faith, and a form of government, for both nations. What they did was ultimately rejected by the English, and adopted by the Scotch. The Presbyterian church in this country derives its origin from that of Scotland, and has taken its Confession of Faith (with some important alterations relative to civil government), and its catechism (with only one slight alteration), from the Scottish model. These standards were adopted by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in May, 1788; and were adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America, one of the successor bodies of that original Synod, in December of 1793.

⁷ “air, bearing, or aspect, as showing character.”

⁸ Prov. 22:6.