

Outline Summary of and Thoughts on the Westminster Shorter Catechism by Grover Gunn

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The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with its classic statement that humanity's main purpose is glorifying and enjoying God. These are joint purposes which reinforce each other. We can't really glorify God if our efforts at doing so are merely the joyless fulfillment of a

perceived duty. We can't really enjoy God if we have no sense of His matchless wonder and majesty which inspire praise.

According to WSC Q3, the Scriptures, which direct us how to glorify and enjoy God, mainly teach us what humans are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of humans. After Q3, the catechism summarizes these two broad areas in order. The catechism's teaching is classic Calvinism which accepts without compromise the Scriptures' teaching on both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. In the section on human responsibility, the catechism teaches humanity's responsibility to obey God's moral law (40-41) and fallen humanity's responsibility to obey the gospel (85). This teaching implies that humans are free agents whom God rightfully holds accountable for their own actions. At the same time, the section on God teaches that God has foreordained everything which comes to pass (7) and that God governs every action of every creature (11). True to its Calvinism, the catechism does not compromise any of these Scriptural teachings in an effort to construct a system that is completely comprehensible to the finite mind.

The catechism's section on God explains salvation from the perspective of divine sovereignty. In His sovereign works of providence, God established first the covenant of life, more commonly called the covenant of works (12). This first covenant with its implied promise of life upon the condition of Adam's perfect obedience was a voluntary condescension of the eternal Creator to Adam the finite creature (WCF 7.1-2). Adam broke the covenant of life by sinning against God and fell into an estate of sin and misery (13-17). All humans descending from Adam by ordinary generation sinned in Adam and fell with him (16). This, of course, does not include Jesus, who descended from Adam but not by ordinary generation. God then established the covenant of grace in order to deliver the elect out of their fallen estate through the work of Jesus, the only Redeemer of God's elect (20). This second covenant went beyond a voluntary condescension to a merciful work of salvation (WCF 7.3). Through His priestly death, Jesus satisfied divine justice and reconciled the elect to God (25). The Holy Spirit applies to the elect the benefits of Christ's redeeming work by working faith in them and thereby uniting them to Christ in their effectual calling (29-30). In effectual calling, the Holy Spirit convinces the elect of their sin and misery, enlightens their minds in the knowledge of Christ and renews their wills. The Holy Spirit thus persuades and enables the elect to embrace Jesus Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel (31). We see here that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. All those united to Christ through effectual calling partake of justification, adoption and sanctification and the benefits which accompany these in this life, at death and at the resurrection (32-38).

The catechism's section on the duty which God requires of man explains salvation from the perspective of human responsibility. From the very beginning, God gave humanity His moral law as a rule which humanity is responsible for obeying (40). After Adam's fall through an act of sin, no mere man has been able perfectly to keep these commandments but instead daily breaks them (82). This, of course, does not include Jesus, who is fully man but not a mere man. The punishment which every sin deserves is God's wrath and curse both in this life and that which is to come (84). To escape God's wrath and curse due to humans for sin, God requires faith in Jesus (85). Those who believe receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as He is offered to them in the gospel (86). Saving faith necessarily bears the fruit of repentance and new obedience, especially the diligent use of the word, sacraments and prayer, all of which God makes effectual to the elect for salvation (85,87,88). We see here that saving faith never exists alone in the one saved but always bears its necessary fruit.