



*Thirty
Questions*

A SHORT CATECHISM
ON THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

TIMOTHY C. TENNENT

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Dedicated to the memory of Susanna Wesley (1669–1742), who was the twenty-fifth child in her family, and became the mother of nineteen children. Few could match her deep commitment to catechesis. It is from her that her sons John and Charles first learned the faith. Her own catechesis which she wrote on the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments was lost in the famous fire when the rectory burned down but her fifteenth child, John Wesley, was miraculously rescued and became her "brand plucked from the burning." It is fitting that today she bears the title "Mother of Methodism."

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Introduction

Christians in the Western world have enjoyed a long sojourn at the center of cultural life. For hundreds of years we could expect that, broadly speaking, Judeo-Christian values were held up as worthy of emulation. People may not have followed the Ten Commandments, but they believed that they were *true* and that they reflected how people *should* live. Christianity was widely regarded as setting forth the proper moral standard for society. Christian values were generally defended in the church, in the home, and in society.

Today, Christianity in the Western world is in the diminishing sunset of that kind of relationship with the surrounding culture. Christian values are no longer defended in society, are not taught in most homes and, surprisingly, are even being questioned in some churches that have lost the courage to teach the Christian faith with reasonable clarity. Our society increasingly doubts that truth is even knowable or that ultimate truth exists. The Bible is viewed as an antiquated and contradictory book with a questionable moral framework.

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There is a growing distrust in institutions and authority, whether the government or the church. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is often viewed as a shrill, disruptive voice in society, associated more with bigotry and anger than sound values, godly character, and wise counsel for life, not to mention a message of forgiveness and eternal life. A recent national campaign by atheists produced billboards across the nation with a picture of Jesus and the words: “Sadistic God, useless Savior, 30,000+ versions of ‘truth’, promotes hate, calls it love.” We also live in a period of skepticism about the reliability of historical narratives, whether the iconic account of George Washington crossing the Delaware or Luke writing his gospel. As Christians, we must recognize that the Western world is entering a post-Christian phase which requires a far more deliberate effort to pass down the faith in an intentional way to our children and, indeed, for all of us to understand the basic framework of Christian thought better. In short, we need a rebirth of catechesis.

The word “catechesis” means “to sound down.” It refers to a teaching exchange between a seasoned, secure Christian and a new believer. The church has invested enormous time and energy into catechesis all through history. Small manuals were produced which were used to teach the basics of Christian faith. They were often in question-and-answer format and generally covered the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, the nature of the church, and the sacraments. There were longer manuals which were used by the church in confirmation classes and shorter

manuals which were used by parents at home. All of the Protestant churches which emerged in the sixteenth century produced catechesis manuals. John Wesley's first encounter with the Christian faith would have been through an Anglican catechism which he learned from his mother, Susanna, who became widely known for her deep commitment to the catechesis of children—not only her own children, but many others as well.

Today, the pace of contemporary life, the exponential rise of time spent in entertainment, and the “light-weight” relational-oriented format of many Sunday school programs, youth groups, and worship services has left us with a whole generation of Christians who have only the vaguest idea as to what Christians actually believe. When pressed by an increasingly skeptical, even hostile generation, Christians are often unable to articulate their faith. Furthermore, because the church itself has not been immersed in a Christian worldview, the moral and ethical life of the church is slowly beginning to conform to the surrounding culture.

The purpose of this meditation is to provide a thirty-day short course in the Christian faith. Like traditional catechesis manuals, it is organized in a question-and-answer format. The questions can be used as a morning or evening devotional during any month of the year. Alternatively, a church or small Bible study group can use the manual over an eight-week period as follows: Week 1, questions 1–3; Week 2, questions 4–6; Week 3, questions 7–11; Week 4, questions 12–15; Week 5, question 16; Week 6, questions 17–20; Week 7, questions 21–25; and Week 8, questions 26–30.

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Traditional catechesis manuals pose a question and then provide a short, pithy one-sentence reply. In this catechesis a more lengthy explanation is given which invites discussion, reflection, and interaction. The Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer are included in this manual's appendices. These three selections should be memorized by the individual or the group during the month meditation or during the eight-week study. It is recommended that each day or session begin with a reading of the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments and close with the Lord's Prayer. Throughout the meditation there are passages of Scripture which support the answer. These texts can be read to supplement the meditation and aid discussion as an integral part of the study.

The church has been sustained for nearly two thousand years through a careful commitment to catechesis. By engaging in this study, you are joining with millions of Christians over the ages who not only believed the faith, but learned it, remembering the final command of Jesus to "*teach* them everything I have commanded you" (see Matt. 28:20), as well as the words of Peter who said, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15).

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1

Who is God?

God is a personal being, infinite in love, knowledge, and power. He is perfect in wisdom, goodness, righteousness, justice, holiness, and truth. God is both the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is the final goal and judge of the universe, infinite and perfect in all his attributes.

The Jewish/Christian understanding of God is unique among all the religions of the world. Hinduism remains uncertain whether we can know that God is personal, or infinite in his perfections. Islam affirms that God is infinite in his perfections, but is uncertain if God can be personally knowable. Buddhism is officially nontheistic, denying all first causes, including God. In contrast, Christians affirm that God is personal *and* knowable.

To say that he is perfect in all his attributes is to declare that every attribute of God is enjoyed by him in its perfect state. He is infinitely pure, infinitely holy, infinitely righteous, infinitely loving, and so forth. Because we only know these attributes in fragmentary and distorted ways, we cannot fully comprehend how all these attributes are held perfectly and infinitely by

God. Sometimes we may look at circumstances and not be able to discern how the justice or the love of God is manifest in certain situations. We do find comfort, however, in knowing that in the end, we shall see him as he truly is, and that he will make all things right. In the meantime, we can put our full trust and confidence in God's nature and character.

If you ever go to London you will probably visit Trafalgar Square. It is in the heart of the city and is a well-known tourist attraction. The most prominent feature in the square is Nelson's Column. It is a tribute to Lord Nelson's sea victory over the combined fleets of the French and Spanish Navy in 1805. Although Nelson died in the conflict, the British fleet prevailed and this victory confirmed the superiority of the British navy. The problem is that the statue of Nelson is so high above the square (170 feet) that no one can see what he looked like. He is high and exalted above the square, but he is also removed from the people.

This is analogous to the Christian proclamation about God. He is exalted above all creation. He is perfect in his attributes. But until Christ came we could not fully understand or know what God is like. The Christian view is that in Christ—and only in Christ—is the glory of God known or understood. In Christ, God came down and lived among us, showing us his life and character in intimate detail. In the face of Christ the full glory and grace of God has been made known.

Who is God?

Scripture Reading

1 Chronicles 29:10–13

2 Chronicles 20:6

Job 42:2

Psalm 90

Isaiah 44:6

1 Corinthians 1:30

2

How do we know what God is like?

God has made himself known to us in acts of personal self-disclosure. This self-disclosure occurs in two major ways, known as general revelation and special revelation. General revelation refers to all the ways God has universally made himself known to all people in all places and in all times. General revelation, sometimes called natural or universal revelation, has occurred in two major ways. Those two ways are outwardly through the created order and inwardly in the universal presence of human conscience. First, God reveals his presence, character, and attributes through the created order. Through creation we understand that God is a God of order, beauty, and power.

Second, God reveals his presence and moral character through the presence of human conscience. Even though there are areas where people differ about what is right or wrong, the very presence of the *categories* of right and wrong demonstrate that we live in a moral order. Even young children demonstrate deeply imbedded notions of fairness and longings for justice, and we teach them to “be kind” as a virtue we instinctively value. When someone murders or

steals, we all can testify to a sense of “wrongness.” Likewise, when someone acts sacrificially to help or serve another person or creature, they have a sense of “rightness” about such actions. All this testifies to the presence of a moral order.

Special revelation refers to all the ways God has made his nature and purposes known specifically to certain people at particular times, but which are not universally known. Special revelation also occurs in two major ways. The first is through the revelation of Holy Scripture. God has revealed his will, his character, and his purposes to specific people throughout time, and this revelation has been recorded in the Bible. This includes his mighty acts of deliverance, his miraculous interventions, and the specific revelation of his moral character, as in the Ten Commandments revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. The second is through the revelation of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. As noted in the previous meditation, it is through the incarnation of Jesus Christ that we come fully to understand who God is, his saving purposes, and his love. It is through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that the purpose and will of God is applied to the life of the church and the individual believer. In the gospel of John it is declared that “no one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18 ESV).

Christianity is unique because in Christ, God seeks to reveal himself (not just his will). One of Islam’s greatest theologians, Al-Ghazali, famously declared that Allah does not reveal himself, he only reveals his will. In Christianity, we discover that God not only reveals his will, but he also seeks to reveal *himself* and calls us to know him in a personal way.

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Scripture Reading

Psalm 19

John 14:9-11

Romans 1:18-20

Romans 2:12-15

2 Timothy 3:16

Hebrews 1:1-2

Hebrews 4:12

3

What is the Trinity?

Christianity, like all monotheistic religions, asserts that there is only one God. We do not believe in three Gods. However, Christianity is unique in our understanding that the one God exists in three eternal and personal distinctions known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church has used the word “Trinity” to capture this great mystery. The word “Trinity” is a combination of two words, “Tri” and “unity.” The “tri” refers to the three eternal distinctions; the “unity” is to reinforce that we believe in only one God. This is normally expressed by saying that we believe that God is one in essence, but reveals himself through three eternal personal distinctions known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The purpose of this revelation is primarily to demonstrate the personal, relational nature of God. God is, even apart from creation, eternally personal and relational. As the Puritans once observed, “God is, in himself, a sweet society.” There is relationship in the very nature of who God is. The whole universe flows forth from an eternal, relational tri-unity, not from a non-relational, solitary figure as taught by Islam.

The Christian idea that internal differentiation does not contradict God's unity is even testified to in the created order. For example, a stone has little internal differentiation and, therefore, is not particularly unified in essence. If you split a stone into two pieces, you have not destroyed the essence of the stone, you have only created two smaller stones. However, if you cut a tiger into two pieces you do not get two small tigers, you get one dead tiger! Some of the lower creatures can be severed into two parts and still live and move independently for some time. Because their differentiation is low, their unity is likewise low. The more conscious and intelligent a being is, the greater the differentiation and the more profound the unity.

A person possesses a mind, thoughts, and speech. We function as a unity despite internal distinctions. The same point could be made about the body, soul, and spirit of a person. The fact that God himself has internal differentiation does not contradict his unity. On the contrary, we observe this harmony of plurality and unity in all higher forms of life.

The nature and essence of God is admittedly complex and mysterious. A common misunderstanding of God is that he took different forms at different times in history, but could only be in one form at any given time. This, however, is not a proper understanding of the Trinity. The three distinctions are co-existent, co-eternal, and equal. God decided in his self-revelation that the best way for humans to understand him is to see him as one God, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are not three separate modes, or operations, but three eternal relations within the One true God, the Trinity.

What is the Trinity?

Scripture Reading

Genesis 3:6

Genesis 17:1

Psalms 46:10

Isaiah 44:6

Matthew 28:18-20

John 1:1

John 1:34

John 10:30

John 20:28

Acts 5:3-4

Romans 9:5

1 Corinthians 2:9-16

2 Corinthians 3:17

2 Corinthians 13:14

2 Thessalonians 1:12

Titus 2:13

1 Peter 1:1-2

2 Peter 1:1