

The Shorter Catechism

Question 82: *Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?*

Answer: No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

Having discussed the law of God in Q&A 39-81, the catechism addresses the question of whether a right relationship with God can be established on the basis of law-keeping. In Q&A 82-84 it answers with a resounding “No!”: mankind is unable to keep the moral law (Q&A 82); and although all sins are not equal (Q&A 83), they all come under the censure of God’s wrath (Q&A 84).

1. The commandments reveal God’s glory and express his will

It is important to begin with the purpose of the commandments (see notes on Q&A 39-42 and 43-44). They reveal God’s glory and they express his will.

- (a) The commandments tell us what sort of God we are dealing with:
- the “I AM” who alone is God (there is no other god – as the signs and wonders performed in Egypt have demonstrated), both transcendent over his creation and present with his people;
 - the Holy One who is jealous for his own glory and worship;
 - the King who graciously enters into covenant with the people whom he has chosen for himself – demanding loyalty and promising blessing;
 - and who cares about the right living of his people.
- (b) The commandments tell us what the will of God is for our lives:
- the worship we are to give to him alone, in the right way, with the right attitude, at the right time;
 - the duty we owe to one another in terms of sanctity of authority, life, marriage, property, reputation and heart.

The commandments are not guidelines or suggestions. Creatures-redeemed people-children have an absolute obligation to conform to the will of their Creator-Redeemer-Father (Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:20,48).

The question is, then, *how does my life stack up against this revelation of God’s glory and his will?*

2. The commandments expose the brokenness of the human heart

The answer to Q82 is carefully worded:

- (a) “No mere man...” The failure of mankind “perfectly to keep the commandments of God” does not extend to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was “no mere man” but the incarnate Son of God. Scripture is replete with testimony to his sinlessness (e.g. Ps. 40:8; Isa. 53:9; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:9).

(b) “...since the fall...” Before the fall, Adam was able to keep the commandments of God: he lived for God’s glory by living according to God’s will – albeit, his experience of the breadth of the application of the commandments was as limited as the environment in which he lived (Eden), the society in which he moved (with Eve) and the length of time for which he remained there (before his first sin). But the fall shattered mankind’s ability to keep the moral law.

(c) “...in this life...” By nature all men are enslaved by disobedience – we do not keep the commandments of God – and even when there is the appearance of conformity, this is not because we acknowledge that we are keeping God’s commandments.

But when God saves a man and unites him to Christ, the man becomes a new creature – he receives a new identity and enters into a new relationship with God. This makes it possible for him to keep the commandments because they are God’s commandments. That’s why, for example, the letters of Paul are full of exhortations to holy living (e.g. Col. 3:1-4:1).

But redeemed people continue to break the commandments of God “in this life”. Again, this is evident from Paul’s letters in which he addresses the saints with rebukes (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2 and context of the letter). Paul also knew that he had not attained perfection (Phil. 3:12). Perfection is the state of the redeemed after death, and especially in the life of the age to come when, as resurrected people, we will live perfectly for God’s glory and according to his will.

(d) “...doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.”

The catechism looks beyond the fruit of law-breaking (words and deeds) to the roots of disobedience (thoughts). Just as God commands us to love him with all our heart, soul and strength (Deut. 6:4-5), so we break his commandments in our thinking and our desiring (“doth daily break then in thought...”) and in our doing (“...word, and deed”). (See also notes on Q&A 79-81.)

At the end of his life, John Newton said, “I don’t remember too many things. But I do remember this: that I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour” – not “I used to be a great sinner,” but “I am a great sinner.”

Spurgeon was scathing about people who taught that moral perfection is possible in this life: “Though they persuade themselves that their sins are dead, it is highly probably that the rest of their sins are only keeping out of the way to let their pride have room to develop to ruinous proportions.”

3. The commandments show us our need of Christ

Since in this life we daily break the commandments of God, we are in need of a Saviour of perfect competence – one who is able to save us “to the uttermost”. That is what God has provided in Jesus Christ – “no mere man” – the man who both rendered perfect obedience to the law and died according to the penalty of the law. In Q&A 85 and onwards, the catechism meditate on this Saviour.

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Question 83: *Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?*

Answer: Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Question 84: *What doth every sin deserve?*

Answer: Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.

These questions deal with an old chestnut: whether all sins are the same. Before addressing that issue directly, it would be helpful to notice three assumptions made by the catechism:

- (a) That all sins are heinous in the sight of God. In that sense, all sins are on a level playing field. For example, we might think that speech is unimportant; but Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matt. 12:36).
- (b) That all sins are heinous *in the sight of God*. Thomas Vincent (1634-1678): "Sins are heinous, as they are grievous and offensive unto God." What I think about the actions of other people is of no consequence. What matters is God's approval or disapproval. So if someone asks me, "Do you think that such-and-such is a great sin?", my answer should be, "What I think doesn't matter. The Bible is the final authority, so let's look at what it says."
- (c) That some sins are more heinous in the sight of God than others, and that this is due either to their nature ("in themselves") or their circumstances ("by reason of their aggravations").

1. Not all sins are the same

- (a) *"Some sins in themselves...are more heinous in the sight of God than others."*

Neither the Larger nor the Shorter Catechisms elaborate on how some sins are "in themselves" more heinous in the sight of God than others. However, Thomas Vincent (a young contemporary of the commissioners who framed the Westminster standards), suggests the following:

- Sins committed directly against the majesty of God (commandments 1-4) are worse than sins committed against our neighbour (commandments 5-10). E.g., idolatry is worse than adultery; sacrilege is worse than theft; speaking ill of God is worse than speaking ill of your neighbour.
- Some sins against our neighbour (commandments 5-10) are worse than others. E.g., murder is worse than adultery; adultery is worse than theft; theft is worse than covetousness; sins that have ripened into speech or action are worse than the same sins in thoughts or inclinations.

But this is only generally so. Almost as soon as we read these distinctions between the wickedness of various sins we want to suggest qualifications, i.e. to consider aggravations.

(b) “*Some sins...by reason of several aggravations are more heinous in the sight of God than others.*”

WSC Q&A83 is a summary of Q&A 150-151 in the Larger Catechism. WLC (Q151) asks, *What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?* It answers: “Sins receive their aggravations,

“1. From the persons offending: if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.

“2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace; the Holy Spirit, his witness, and workings; against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many.

“3. From the nature and quality of the offence: if it be against the express letter of the law, break many commandments, contain in it many sins: if not only conceived in the heart, but breaks forth in words and actions, scandalize others, and admit of no reparation: if against means, mercies, judgments, light of nature, conviction of conscience, public or private admonition, censures of the church, civil punishments; and our prayers, purposes, promises, vows, covenants, and engagements to God or men: if done deliberately, wilfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastingly, maliciously, frequently, obstinately, with delight, continuance, or relapsing after repentance.

“4. From circumstances of time and place: if on the Lord’s Day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these, or other helps to prevent or remedy such miscarriages: if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.”

2. All sins deserve the same

In one regard, all sins are equal: “every sin deserveth God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come,” i.e. loss of communion with God, abiding under God’s anger, liable to the miseries of this life, and, at death, liable to the pains of hell forever. Hell is the horrific terminus of unrepentant sinners.

In the light of the answer to Q83, this cannot mean that every sin will receive the same degree of wrath. However, the point being made by the Westminster divines is that the distinction made by the Roman Catholic Church between mortal and venial sins is invalid. A person may drown in a bath as well as in the Pacific Ocean – and every sin, without exception, deserves the just wrath of God; and unless a person’s sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, that person will go to hell.

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Question 85: *What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse, due to us for sin?*

Answer: To escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.

Q&A 85 opens a new section in the catechism. This is a good point at which to pause and look back to see where we have come from, and to look forward to see where we are going to.

1. Q&A 1-3, Setting the agenda

Q&A 1 concerns the goal God has set before us – to glorify and enjoy him forever.

Q&A 2 concerns the direction God has given us to achieve this goal – his Word.

Q&A 3 concerns the main teaching of the Word – what we are to believe about God and what duty God requires of us.

The rest of the catechism then concerns “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” Everything is built on the Word.

2. Q&A 4-38, What man is to believe concerning God

Q&A 4-6 concern God’s being.

Q&A 7-11 concern God’s works: the work of creation and the work of providence. His work of redemption is dealt with a greater length in the following questions.

Q&A 12-38 concern redemptive history:

- The fall of man – why redemption is necessary (Q&A 12-19)
- Christ the Redeemer (Q&A 20-28)
- The application of redemption (Q&A 29-38)

3. Q&A 39-107, The duty God requires of man

Q&A 39-81 concern the duty God requires of man: obedience to his revealed will, revealed in the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

Q&A 82-84 concern the inability, since the Fall, of the descendants of Adam to keep the moral law, and their consequent liability to the wrath and curse of God.

That is us! By nature and by practice we are under the wrath of God. How shall we escape?

The closest the catechism has come to answering that question is in Q&A 29-31 which tells us about the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of the redemption purchased by Christ. But the subject of the verbs in Q&A 29-31 is the Holy Spirit. We wait to be told what we must do – but our wait is now over.

In this scheme Q&A 85 is a watershed.

We have been taken to the law (Q&A 39-81) – but we are law breakers, and we know that we cannot be justified in God’s sight by any human effort (“...all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one...’”, Rom 3:9-10; “...by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...”, Rom. 3:19-20).

So now Q&A 85-107 takes us to the gospel. If we would “escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin”, then God requires of us:

- faith in Jesus Christ and repentance unto life (Q&A 86-87),
- with diligent use of the means of grace (Q&A 88), i.e. that we attend to,
 - the reading and preaching of the Word (Q&A 89-90),
 - the right use of the sacraments (Q&A 91-97),
 - and prayer (Q&A 98-107).

Two cautions are perhaps necessary.

(a) This does not mean that the moral law (summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments) is invalidated. Not at all (“The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good,” Rom. 7:12). Remember the three uses of the law (see study on Q&A 39-42), namely:

- it acts as a brake on sin
- it drives us to Christ
- it teaches us how we should live

The catechism has just shown us the second of these uses. But as redeemed people we will want (in Christ) to use the law to direct our manner of life. Law is “Torah”, the instruction of our Father in heaven, and we shall want to hear his voice and do his works.

(b) The catechism does not mean that “faith, repentance and the use of the means of grace” have replaced the moral law in the life of the Christian.

- For one thing, the very word “repentance” implies that the “in-Christ” relationship that believers have with God entails turning away from sin, and turning towards obedience, i.e. the third of the uses of the law outlined above.
- For another thing, faith, repentance and the right use of the means of grace do not merit justification. We shall see later that faith is the instrument of justification, but not the grounds of justification.

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Question 86: *What is faith in Jesus Christ?*

Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

1. What faith is not...

Perhaps more than ever before we need to start by asking what we mean by the word “faith”. Pluralism has taught a whole generation to use the word “faith” as a synonym for religion. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism are all thought of as just varieties of “faith” – “faith” is the common factor – the only difference among different religions is the way they package “faith” in different words.

But if “faith” is treated nowadays as a synonym for religion, it is also treated as an antonym for science. It is said that science is about the measurable, the testable, the knowable; science is always up-to-date – but faith is conservative, traditional, hide-bound; faith concerns the emotions, the unverifiable, the unknowable. So in this sense people talk disparagingly about “blind faith”.

Or, if they are sensitive – if they feel a need for some sort of connection with “ultimate reality”, beyond the mechanical tedium of scientific experiments and the cold precision of mathematical equations – then they say, “Just believe!” No content is necessary – just the existential act, the decision to engage in “belief”, whatever “belief” might be. “Faith” in this sense is a “leap in the dark”

But this is *not* what the Bible means by the words “faith” or “believe” or “trust”. Biblical faith includes knowledge, conviction and confidence. We know what the God of the Bible says – we are convinced that what the God of the Bible says is true – and we commit ourselves with confidence to this true and living God.

2. Faith is confession of Biblical truth

Biblical faith includes knowledge – knowledge of *what* the Bible says. It’s in this sense that we talk about “*the* faith”. *The* faith is the gospel truths we confess – what Paul calls in 2 Timothy 1:13 “the pattern of the sound words”.

This distinguishes the Christian religion from all other religions – the Word of God teaches us to make very specific confessional statements about: the triune God we worship; the creation in which we live; the moral law and the nature of mankind; the effects of sin; the person of Christ and his work of redemption; and the hope of eternal life.

3. Faith is confidence in God’s Word

Biblical faith includes conviction/confidence concerning the *truth* of God’s Word. “By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein...” (WCoF 14.2).

God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2), and his Word never deceives (Ps. 119:160; John 17:17).

It is a fact that God has bound the faithfulness of his Word to real, historical fact. Again and again God speaks of things he is going to do, centuries before he does them, so that when his Word comes to pass, we will know that he is the God of truth (Isa. 41:26-27; 44:6; 65:16), the true God (1 Thess. 1:9). For example:

- He warned Noah about the Flood and told him to build a boat, many years before the Flood came (Gen. 5:32; 6:13; 7:6).
- He told Abraham about the slavery of the Hebrew people and the exodus deliverance six centuries before it happened (Gen. 15:13-14).
- He told Isaiah about the Babylonian exile and Cyrus' decree of restoration 200 years before the event (Isa. 44:28-45:13).
- And he promised to send the Messiah hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus (Isa. 7:14).

In particular, God has bound everything in the Bible to Jesus Christ: "All the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]" (2 Cor. 1:20). That's a colossal claim – that everything God has said and done focuses on Jesus. But Paul goes on in 2 Cor. 1:20 to say, "That is why it is through [Christ] that we utter our Amen to God for his glory." So faith rests with confidence in God's word. When God speaks, faith says, "Amen. God's word is true."

The Catechism speaks about "faith in Jesus Christ...as he is offered to us in the gospel". That is a very specific response to God's Word. We do not know Christ any other way than "as he is offered to us in the gospel".

It is worth noting that the Confession of Faith is fuller in its description of what faith does. It says, "By this faith, a Christian...acteth differently upon that which each particular passage [of Scripture] containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come" (WCoF 14.2). In other words, faith is confidence in the whole of God's Word, and not just those parts that comfort us.

4. Faith is commitment to a Person

Biblical faith must come to commitment to a Person. So the Catechism speaks of "faith in Jesus Christ"; and the Confession of Faith states, "But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace" (WCoF, 14.2).

Thomas Vincent asks, "What is the object of this grace of faith?" And he answers, "The object of this grace of faith is the Lord Jesus Christ, and his righteousness, and the promises which are made through him in the covenant of grace" (e.g. John 3:18; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:22).

Vincent goes on to ask, "When doth the soul rest upon [Jesus Christ] for salvation?" His answer: "The soul doth rest upon Christ for salvation when, being

convinced of its lost condition by reason of sin, and its own inability, together with all creatures' insufficiency, to recover it out of this estate, and having a discovery and persuasion of Christ's ability and willingness to save, it doth let go all hold on the creatures, and renounce its own righteousness, and so lay hold on Christ, rely upon him, and put confidence in him, and in him alone, for salvation."

Notice that Vincent speaks of "discovery...persuasion...confidence" – these are the same as "knowledge, conviction and confidence".

(a) "Faith *in* Jesus Christ..."

The Bible uses a variety of prepositions for the act of faith. For example, we believe "in" Christ (John 3:15), "upon" Christ (Acts 9:42, 1 Tim. 1:16), and "into" his Name (John 1:12). The point is always that Christ is the object of faith. Faith takes us out of ourselves and off dependence upon ourselves, and makes us rely on Jesus Christ instead.

(b) "Faith in Jesus Christ...*alone*"

Saving faith is exclusively in Jesus Christ. God will not allow us to "limp between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21). If we would trust Jesus Christ, we must trust him alone.

It is not uncommon for people to think that salvation requires "Christ plus". For example, in Galatia false teacher said that salvation required "Christ plus the law" (e.g. Gal. 4:8-10); in Colossae it was "Christ plus asceticism and angel worship" (e.g. Col. 2:8,18). Nowadays it might be: Christ plus the covenants; Christ plus Sabbath-keeping; Christ plus Psalm singing; Christ plus family heritage; Christ plus good works; Christ plus Bible knowledge; etc., etc...

But faith rest in Christ *alone* for salvation. "...we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ..." (Gal. 2:16); "...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9).

5. Faith is a saving grace

"Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace..." The gracious aspect of faith is twofold:

(a) Faith is the gift of God

To know Jesus Christ is a gift from God (Eph. 1:17). Our believing is the effect of God's great might working in us (Eph. 1:19). Faith itself is explicitly the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Faith is the work of God's Spirit in us (2 Cor. 4:13).

2 Cor. 4:13 is interesting. A literal translation is, "And having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, *I believed, therefore I spoke*, we also believe and therefore we speak." The framers of the Westminster Confession use this as a proof text for the statement in WCoF 14.1 that "The grace of faith...is the work of

the Spirit of Christ in [the hearts of the elect]”. They clearly understood “the spirit of faith” to be “the Spirit of faith”, i.e. the Holy Spirit who works faith in us.

(b) Faith itself is not meritorious

Thomas Vincent comments: “Faith is a saving grace, not by the act of believing, as an act, for then it would save as a work – whereas we are saved by faith in opposition to all works; but faith is a saving grace, as an instrument apprehending and applying Jesus Christ and his perfect righteousness, whereby alone we are saved.” Thus the grace aspect of faith emphasises the emptiness of faith itself (the empty hand of the beggar that contributes nothing), and the graciousness of God (he freely fills us with every good thing in Jesus Christ).

6. Another thing faith is not – it is never alone

Saving faith excludes all “works righteousness”. But saving faith nevertheless works. . “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26). Words must be matched by works (Jas. 2:14-17), and confession by commitment (Jas. 2:18-25). The gospel is not opposed to the law.

John Calvin (in “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote”) wrote: “I wish the reader to understand that as often as we mention Faith alone in this question, we are not thinking of a dead faith, which worketh not by love, but holding faith to be the only cause of justification. (Galatians 5:6; Romans 3:22.) It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light.”

The Shorter Catechism

Question 87: What is repentance unto life?

Answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.

1. Two words for repentance

The Bible mainly uses two words for repentance:

(a) In Hebrew the word is *shüb* (pronounced *shoove*). The primary meaning of this word is “to turn/return”; so the idea is to turn around and retrace one’s steps, and it is often used in this literal sense, e.g. Gen. 22:5. In Ruth 1, Naomi takes leaves Bethlehem to sojourn in Moab; when he hears that God has provided food in Bethlehem, she returns (*shüb*) to her hometown. This provides a metaphor for the relationship between the covenant community and the LORD: when the community leaves God (for idols), it must repent, i.e. turn back (*shüb*) to God.

(b) In Greek the word is *metanoëō* (pronounced *meta-naw-EH-oh*). This literally means “to change one’s mind”. It is used of repentance, remorse and conversion. Interestingly, Paul uses this verb only in 2 Cor. 12:21, and he uses the related noun (*metanoia*) only in Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:9-10; 2 Tim. 2:25. It was, however, a central theme in his preaching (Acts 20:21; 26:20).

Both words *shüb* and *metanoëō* can be used with good and bad connotations.

2. Two sorts of repentance

Since both words *shüb* and *metanoëō* can be used with good and bad connotations, it is necessary to distinguish between true and false repentance. It is for that reason that the catechism provides its fulsome definition of genuine repentance.

In 2 Cor. 7:10 Paul writes that “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” In fairness, Paul is making a distinction between two kinds of “grief”, not two kinds of repentance. However, for our purposes, it is worth noting that it possible for someone to feel deep regret about a course of action without repenting of it. E.g. a heavy drinker may regret his abuse of alcohol; but while he does not turn from it his grief is actually part of the pain of his condition, not the path out of it. Only when, in his grief, he takes action to stop drinking, can he be said to have repented.

3. Two aspects of repentance

So we turn (no pun intended) to consider true repentance. The catechism indicates that true repentance looks two ways, i.e. back at sin, and forwards to God: “...a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ...”

(a) A true sense of his sin

▪ A true sense of sin

There are false senses of sin.

Obviously sin may be underestimated – called a “peccadillo” – a little sin. A man may say that everyone does such-and-such a thing, so it cannot be wrong, or cannot be “all that wrong”.

Less obviously, the more dramatic aspects of sin may be overplayed. A man may overplay his sinfulness because it attracts him attention – and there is nothing that man-in-rebellion loves more than being the centre of attention.

Alternatively, a man may make up sins to repent of. His conscience is “over active” (sick!). He feels a need for catharsis. He treats repentance like psychotherapy – something to make him feel better about himself.

A man may also fear that he has not repented of all his sins. He may reason that since he cannot know all his sins, he cannot repent of them all, and therefore some of them remain unforgiven. But there is a difference between a “true sense of sin” and an “exhaustive knowledge of sins”. Only God can have the latter, and he only requires of us the former.

David provides us with an example of avoiding these falsehoods. When Nathan the prophet confronted him with his adultery and murder, David simply confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:13; c.f. Ps. 51:4). David identified the true nature of his guilt (his sin was first and foremost against God); he did not invent sins of which to repent; and he did not go over and over the lurid details of what he had done.

A true sense of sin is: informed by the Word of God; conscious of the holiness of God; and submissive to the knowledge of God (i.e. God’s knowledge of one’s sin).

▪ A true sense of one’s own sin

Here are two more blind alleys.

First, a man may refuse to believe that he has sinned. Either he only acknowledges that he is a sinner in a general sense. Or, while he acknowledges some particular sins in his life, he refuses to acknowledge others.

Secondly, a man may be quick to see and deplore the sins of other people, and yet remain oblivious to his own.

David expresses a true sense of sin when he says, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

(b) An apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ

It is unfortunate that the word “apprehension” has come to mean “anxiety, misgiving, trepidation, or even dread”! That is the polar opposite of what the catechism intends. In the catechism the word “apprehension” means “understanding” or “grasp of”.

- An understanding of God's mercy

How do we know that God is merciful? Because he has says so in his Word (Ex. 34:6-7; 2 Chron. 30:9; Joel 2:13; Luke 18:13; Jam. 5:11). The expectation of mercy is not, therefore, wishful thinking. God has revealed himself as merciful.

But for that very reason, it is sinful unbelief to reject the mercy of God. This is an aspect of the pathology of sin – that it drives sinners further and further from the only source of forgiveness. A man may sink into black despair because he refuses to believe that will God forgive “a sinner such as I am”. Or a man may chose not to believe in the mercy of God, and to use that as an excuse to commit more and more sin in defiance of the God he has rejected.

An understanding of God's mercy entails a basic understanding of the sort of God who reveals himself to us in Scripture and through his incarnate Son – that he is good (e.g. Ps. 136:1). Such an understanding is accompanied by desire for more knowledge of that good God, and confidence that God will make that possible. Just as sin drives the sinner from God, so repentance draws him to God.

- An understanding of God's mercy in Christ

Where do we see that God is merciful? In Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17; Rom. 5:6-8; 2 Cor. 5:18; Eph. 1:7-9; Col. 1:19-20).

Our confidence to come to God for mercy is, therefore, predicated on the gospel which shows that God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Our sins have been punished by God already in Jesus Christ crucified; Jesus Christ has been raised for our justification. We therefore understand that “having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:1-2).

This understanding of God's mercy, therefore, does not reduce mercy to tolerance or indulgence. In Jesus Christ we see how God's mercy and God's justice are both satisfied.

4. Two actions in repentance

If repentance is turning (*shüb*), then it is turn from sin and turning to God.

(a) Turning from sin with grief and hatred

Thomas Vincent provides a useful exposition “grief and hatred”.

True grief for sin doth consist in our mourning and sorrowing for sin, not only as it is like to bring ruin upon ourselves, but chiefly as it hath brought dishonour upon God's name; not only as it hath wounded our consciences, but chiefly as it hath wounded our Saviour; not only as without repentance it is like to damn our souls, but also as it hath debased and defiled our souls.

Grief for sin is needful in repentance, because it further works the heart unto a willingness to leave sin; because God doth require it, and hath promised mercy to such as mourn for sin.

Hatred of sin...is an inward deep loathing and abhorrence of sin, as the most odious thing in the world, which is accompanied with a loathing of ourselves, as being rendered by sin most loathsome and abominable in the eyes of God.

Hatred of sin is needful...because no affection of the heart will more engage us against sin than our hatred; and when grief for sin is much spent, hatred of sin will put weapons into our hands to fight against it.

It is worth remembering that the strong disaffection for sin that repentance entails is for: personal sin (the sins I commit grieve me); potential sin (I turn in principle from all sin, and disavow it); and public sin (it is a grief that other people sin, Ps. 119:136; Phil. 3:18).

(b) Turning to God with a view to new obedience

Repentance is as good as repentance does. So its sincerity is demonstrated by wholehearted effort at new obedience (Ps. 119:59).

The newness of our obedience is not a new slavery – it is based on the new covenant (the law written on our hearts), is the action of the new nature produced in us by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7:6), and is empowered by God's grace.

The catechism wisely speaks of "purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience". The fact is that we continue to fall short (Rom. 7:7-24); continue to have sin to repent of; and continue to be grieved by sin. Only our final redemption will remove from us the annoying presence of sin.

5. Two parties to repentance

(a) The sinner

The catechism is quite clear that repentance is the duty of every sinner: "a sinner...doth..." This is something the sinner is responsible for doing:

- The first imperative in the preaching of Jesus was the command "Repent!" (Mark 1:15).
- Paul preaching in Athens concluded his message, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent..." (Acts 17:30).
- Paul summarised his teaching Ephesus as "...testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

(b) God

None of this is possible for us without God working in us. Our hearts are hearts of stone – spiritually dead. By nature we do not want to acknowledge our sin – we would cover it up, and go further and further from God. We need God to change us. And that is what he has promised to do (Ezek. 36:26-27). It is for that reason that the catechism calls repentance "a saving grace". In our repentance, all the glory and praise goes to God.

The Shorter Catechism

Question 88: What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?

Answer: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Question 89: How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

Answer: The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Question 90: How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?

Answer: That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

1. An important introduction

Q&A 85-107 take us to the gospel. If we would “escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin”, then God requires of us: faith in Jesus Christ and repentance unto life (Q&A 86-87); with diligent use of the means of grace (i.e. the Word, the sacraments and prayer).

The Word, sacraments and prayer are the outward means by which Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us, as distinct from effectual calling which is the inward means wrought in us by the Holy Spirit (Q&A 29-31).

The catechism acknowledges that the Word, sacraments and prayer are the ordinary means by which Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us. Thus there is a recognition by the Westminster divines that God is not limited to using these means only. Thomas Vincent, who was a young contemporary of the Westminster era is clear about this and gives the conversion of Paul as an example of Christ using extraordinary means.

However, God’s liberty to use extraordinary means is not the same thing as our liberty to devise them. So the catechism speaks of Christ’s “ordinances”. Christ has ordained the Word, sacraments and prayer as the means by which he ordinarily and outwardly communicates the benefits of redemption to us. What he has not ordained, we must not invent (Col. 2:20-23; Matt. 15:9). For example, we may not: replace the reading of the Word with the reading of human writings; supplement the two sacraments with others; add extra-Biblical disciplines to those of prayer (and fasting); or use psychological means (soft lighting, mood music or emotional oratory) to coerce “decisions” from people.

2. The centrality of the Word

The catechism places the Word before the sacraments as a means of grace. God created by his Word (Ps. 33:6) not by any sacrament. The gospel (the message conveyed by words) is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16) not any sacrament. The Word “stands on its own two feet”, i.e. it is self-interpreting, while the sacraments require the interpretation of the Word.

The created order is a means by which God makes himself known (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19-20). But the Word is a far superior instrument of revelation (Ps. 19:7-11). Why so? Because the Bible is “breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Shocking as it may sound, the Bible is not “inspired”, if by “inspired” we mean that God breathed into a human production. What 2 Tim. 3:16 says is the Bible was “expired” by God, i.e. God breathed it out, much as we must breathe out in order to speak. In other words, God is the source of the Bible. What the Bible says, God says. This gives the Word some tremendous qualities:

- *The Word is necessary* That is the point of the contrast in Psalm 19 between the revelation in the heavens and the revelation in the Torah. If we are to have any life-giving knowledge of God, it will come through the Word.
- *The Word is good* Ps 19:7-11 praises the qualities of the Word in a way that is reminiscent of creation week. Just as God looked at everything he had made and declared it “very good” so Psalm 19 declares the Word to be perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true and desirable, i.e. “very good” (Ps. 19:10-11).
- *The Word is comprehensive* The Word is able to give life, wisdom, joy and light. There is no area of life about which the Word does not speak, either directly or indirectly.
- *The Word is searching* Reading and meditating on the Word is a basic discipline in the lives of the people of God (Ps. 1:2). It is by exposing our lives to the Word that our sins are shown up (Ps. 19:12-13) and we see our need of the Saviour. The psalmist guarded his life by the Word (Ps. 119:9), longed to understand it (Ps. 119:18), and found guidance in it (Ps. 119:32).

The reading of the Word is therefore most necessary. But the catechism elevates the preaching of the Word above the reading as a means of grace.

Jesus commenced his public ministry with preaching (Mark 1:14-15); preaching remained the priority in his public ministry (Mark 1:38); and when he commissioned his apostles it was to preach the Word (Mark 16:15).

The first public action of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost was to preach and Luke reports the spread of the gospel in terms of the increase, multiplying, spreading and prevailing of the Word (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). In total, the Word is mentioned about 34 times in Acts; gospel preaching (εὐαγγελίζω) is mentioned 15 times; and proclamation of the Word (κηρυσσω) 7 times.

Paul was conscious that his preaching was the very Word of God, and that its reception with faith was the beginning of life (1 Thess. 2:13).

3. The agency of the Holy Spirit

The purpose of the Word is to effect change, e.g. in the case of creation the Word effects change from non-being into being. The Word is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12) – it is meant to change us; God says that his Word “shall accomplish that which I purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11); Paul says that the Word “is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

But of itself the Word itself cannot effect change in our lives. It must be accompanied by the agency of the Holy Spirit. So that catechism says, “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means...”

How can we understand the Word with ascent, love obedience? We need the Holy Spirit who, said John Owen, “alone can open our heart to God’s Word and God’s Word to our hearts. Only Divine illumination can bring understanding of, conviction about, and consent to, the things that God declares.”

God made this clear in the Old Testament. The “failure” of the Law was its externality; what was needed was the agency of the Spirit to make it internal and effective for real change (Ezek. 36:27).

Jesus promised to send the Spirit to that end: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14).

Paul eschewed high-brow oratory in his preaching so as not to obscure the power and the wisdom of God. His confidence was in the agency of the Spirit: “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit... Now we have received... the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God... The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God... and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned... But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:10-16).

“We were made to recognize truth, a gift that was misused, and then left tattered after the fall of humanity. However, God in his mercy has given us his Spirit who testifies to us as we read his Word that this is his revelation, his gift to us. The same Spirit who helps us to see Jesus as our Saviour and Lord is the one who helps us to grasp the Word of Life, recognizing its authority, and trusting its promises” (Chad van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, p. 15).

4. The profitability of Word and Spirit

So what is the Word good for? The catechism says that when it is accompanied by the agency of the Spirit, it is “an effectual means of (a) convincing and converting sinners, and (b) of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.” By the agency of the Holy Spirit, the Word:

(a) Brings sinners to salvation

Paul describes the Bible as “the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). In particular:

- The Word convinces us of our sin. On the Day of Pentecost, “when they heard this [the preaching of Peter] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37).
- The Word converts us from sin to Christ. “But many of those who had heard the word believed” (Acts 4:4); “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7).

(b) *Builds saints up in holiness and comfort*

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Word of God addresses our minds (teaching right doctrine; reproving wrong doctrine), and our behaviour (correcting wrong ways of behaving; training in right ways of behaving). Its goal is that we become competent disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul repeatedly attributes sanctifying and comforting power to the Word, e.g. “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32); “Therefore take up the whole armour of God...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:13-17); “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18).

5. The responsibility of the reader and the hearer

God has provided the Word as the primary “ordinary and outward means” by which Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us. We are therefore obligated to use the means “with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”

Here are several practical steps recommended by the catechism:

- The Bible must not be left to gather dust – we must open and read it.
- We must read it carefully, taking time over the reading of it, and praying for the help of the Holy Spirit without which the Word cannot change us.
- We must receive it with faith and love – not dismiss it with scepticism. To be sure, there are matters that are difficult to understand and we should be asking questions and looking for answers; but that is quite different from approaching the Bible with the purpose of finding fault with it.
- We must try and meditate on what we have read (“lay it up in our hearts”). “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” (Col. 3:16).
- We must believe everything it teaches us about God, and put into practice everything it teaches us to do. “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (Q&A3).
- We must approach the preaching of the Word in the same way as we approach the reading. Remember the word “especially” in A89!

The Shorter Catechism

Question 91: How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

Answer: The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

Question 92: What is a sacrament?

Answer: A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

Question 93: Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?

Answer: The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Recall Q&A 88 which states that the Word, sacraments and prayer are the ordinary and outward means by which Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us. In Q&A 91-97 we consider the sacraments.

1. What are the characteristics of a sacrament?

We must begin with the fact that baptism and the Lord's Supper are givens. When we think about the "defining characteristics of a sacrament" we are describing what already is – we are not trying to define what ought to be.

The WCoF (27.1) describes sacraments as "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word."

The word "sacrament" is not found in the Bible. But the Bible does describe the rites that we call "sacraments". These rites have characteristics:

- they are "immediately instituted by God" (in the OT they were commanded by the LORD; in the NT by Christ);
- they are signs, i.e. outward and visible actions that point to and represent Christ and the benefits of the new covenant;
- they are designed to confirm and strengthen the faith of those who receive them (by sealing and applying the benefits of the new covenant to believers);
- they are distinguishing, i.e. they mark out those who belong to Christ, and they engage them to serve him;
- they are universal, i.e. they belong to all the members of the Church, throughout the history of the world.

It is important to note that “although it is a sinful thing to deliberately neglect the sacraments, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to them that no person can be regenerated or saved without them” (R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, p. 919).

2. How many sacraments are there?

There are only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Their institution by Christ is recorded in Matt. 28:19-20 and 1 Cor. 11: 23-26 (see Q&A 94-95 and Q&A 96-97 for further discussion).

In the OT there were also two sacraments: circumcision and Passover. “The sacraments of the old testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the new” (WCoF 27.5).

The Roman Catholic Church claims that there are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination and extreme unction. To this we object that:

- the RC understanding of baptism is defective (it teaches baptismal regeneration);
- the Eucharist is a deformation of the Lord’s Supper which the RC church styles as a sacrifice, claiming that the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ by means of transubstantiation;
- marriage was instituted by God but for all mankind and is not as a distinguishing mark of the people of God;
- ordination is not a sign or seal of the new covenant;
- and confirmation, penance and extreme unction are rites unknown in Scripture.

3. What is the difference between a sign and a seal?

Q&A 92 speaks of “sensible signs” and the actions of representing, sealing and applying. Clearly a sign represents, and a seal applies. So it is fair to ask what the Westminster Assembly means by these terms and how they differ.

(In passing, it is worth noting that the language of signs and seals is drawn from Rom. 4:11, where Paul writes that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”)

(a) Sensible signs and representation

A sign is a picture or a symbol. It represents something we cannot see. Suppose you are driving through an unfamiliar town looking for a car park; you see a blue square with a white P on it; you understand that this is the sign for a car park; but you do not mistake the sign for the reality; you follow the sign until you come to the car park.

In the same way, baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that point to Christ and the benefits of the new covenant. They give us a picture of the work of God's grace (e.g. in the case of baptism, ingrafting into Christ; and in the case of the Lord's Supper, Christ's death is shown forth).

The catechism calls the sacraments "sensible signs" because the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are accessible to our five senses. In the 21st century we might want to call them "tangible signs".

(b) Seals and application

The purpose of a seal is to authenticate. A birth certificate is sealed and signed (NB. this is a different use of the word "sign" – here it means "to confirm with a signature") by a registrar to authenticate it. Once authenticated, the certificate is good for life, demonstrating the registration of person to whom it belongs – he can show the certificate to various authorities (e.g. school, DVLA, Passport Office) and say, "This is me."

The sacraments are seals in the sense that they certify the genuineness of the benefits believers receive from Christ. They say, "This is for real."

Abraham could look at his circumcision and say, "I know that I am in a right relationship with Yahweh because he gave me this sign as a seal of the righteousness he credited to me when I believed his promise about innumerable descendants. This seal therefore also reassures me that God will fulfil the promise I believed."

Similarly, when a believer participates faithfully in the Lord's Supper, he is able to say, "This is me – I belong to Christ and Christ-in-the-totality-of-his-work-of-redemption belongs to me."

4. Why are the sacraments a means of grace?

It is necessary to begin by noting that not all Protestants think that the sacraments are means of grace. It is not uncommon for people to regard the Lord's Supper as nothing more than a commemoration of Christ's death. Their rationale for this is that Christ said, "Do this in remembrance of me." In other words, for them the sacraments are signs but not seals.

Against this "the Reformed tradition insists that...the sacraments are means of grace in which Christ himself is *really spiritually present* and offers himself and the benefits of his death to Christians who receive him and those benefits in humility and faith. His presence and his offer of grace are objective and are in no way *created* by faith, for where there is not repentance and faith such faithless engagement brings judgment, as 1 Corinthians 11:29-31 states. Where there is repentance and faith the sacraments are efficacious, but only because of 'the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them'" (Reymond, p. 922).

This is quite different from what the RC Church says. The RC Church claims that when a priest performs the Eucharistic rite in the proper way and for the proper reason, then the elements actually become the body and blood of Christ. Then, when the laity receive the bread and wine, grace is automatically conferred on the recipients irrespective of their spiritual condition. In other words, what matters is the priest who celebrates the mass, not the people who receive it.

It is against this back-to-front view of the sacraments that the catechism says, “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”

5. What is necessary for the right use of the sacraments?

Q&A 91 says, “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation...only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”

This is remarkably simple. Faith in the promise of God is essential to the right use of the sacraments. It is sad that in the Reformed churches there has been a tradition of hanging back from taking the Lord's Supper out of a fear of “eating the bread or drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner” and so becoming “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 94: What is baptism?

Answer: Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's.

Question 95: To whom is baptism to be administered?

Answer: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized.

The following notes make substantial use of the commentary on chapter 28 of the Westminster Confession of Faith in "Confessing the Faith" by Chad Van Dixhoorn.

1. The baptism of the Christian church

"Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ...for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church... Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world" (WCoF 28.1).

Baptism has a background in OT water ordeals (the Flood, 1 Pet. 3:18-22; the Red Sea crossing, 1 Cor. 10:1-5). But baptism is a specifically NT sacrament, being ordained by Jesus Christ. It is a core element of the commission Christ gave the Church (Matt. 28:29).

Baptism is used by a variety of sects, cults and religions (just as it was used, for example, by the Essenes). But NT baptism is the baptism of the Christian church because God has given the church this symbol to mark "the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church".

2. A five-fold spiritual significance

"Baptism is...not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life" (WCoF 28.1).

The sacraments are "sensible signs" by which "Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers" (Q&A 92). The WCoF identifies five such significances.

(a) A sign and seal of the covenant of grace

Baptism is primarily about God, his person, promises and actions, i.e. redemption *promised and accomplished* – and not about us, i.e. redemption *applied*. "The

enduring importance of baptism rests in what it *always* says about God and his gospel, and not what it *sometimes* says about the person who is baptized.”

Baptism points to (signifies) and validates (seals) the gospel. It testifies to the enduring promise of redemption for all who trust in Christ alone for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:11).

Baptism pictures salvation in a way similar to circumcision. The cutting off of flesh in circumcision was a symbol of the cutting off of sin by Christ, who was completely cut off in the flesh for us – we benefit from this because of our union with Christ: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:11-12).

(b) *A sign and seal of ingrafting into Christ*

Baptism points to (signifies) and validates (seals) the vital connection to the Saviour of the person baptized. This is Paul’s point in Romans 6 and Galatians 3, e.g. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27).

Note that at this point the WCoF does not attempt to qualify this statement, e.g. to explain why not all baptized persons appear to be united to Christ. It simply presents the Biblical data which “presents a strong connection between baptism and union with Christ.”

(c) *A sign and seal of regeneration*

Baptism points to (signifies) and validates (seals) our regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit: “[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

(d) *A sign and seal of remission of sins*

Baptism points to (signifies) and validates (seals) forgiveness. “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

(e) *A sign and seal of life given up to God, through Jesus Christ*

Baptism points to (signifies) and validates (seals) a dedication to God, and a “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). Baptism calls us to be what we are in Christ.

“It is no doubt because baptism is so rich in its significance and is so clearly a pointer to Christ himself, that our Lord appointed it to be continued in his church until the end of the world. And by his Spirit, and in our teaching and in our baptisms, he will be with us ‘always, to the end of the age’ (*Matt. 28:19, 20*).”

3. The use of water

“The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto” (WCoF 28.2).

Water alone can symbolize the giving of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; John 1:33). However, in the early centuries of the Christianity consecrating oil was added to the symbol of water baptism. The medieval church continued this practice and developed elaborate baptismal rites. The Reformers opposed these innovations, returning to the simple use of water.

There are both continuities and discontinuities between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. Water is the element in both; but whereas John’s baptism was accompanied by warnings about coming judgement, Jesus’ baptism is accompanied by the preaching of the gospel. Moreover, only Jesus commanded that baptism be into the triune name of God (Matt. 28:19).

The commission of Matt. 28:19 establishes the fact that baptism is to be administered by men who have been duly authorized to do so.

4. Dipping, pouring and sprinkling

“Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person” (WCoF 28.3).

The Westminster standards allow for the validity of dipping, pouring or sprinkling as modes of baptism. The word “baptism” simply means “washing”. Washing can be real (with a lot of water, as in dipping) or symbolic (with a little water, as in pouring or sprinkling). Four examples of the latter are instructive:

(i) In Mark 7:1-3 the Jews are said to “wash” their hands before eating; in v. 4 they are said by this act to “baptize” themselves; indeed, not only food vessels and storage jars, but also beds receive a “baptism”. There is no evidence that Jews immersed themselves before meals, or their furniture. The baptism was a symbolic washing.

(ii) Acts 2:41 reports the baptism of 3,000 people in Jerusalem in one day. It is unlikely that in such a dry climate, the Jews would have allowed the followers of Jesus to use and pollute enough water to immerse so many people.

(iii) Acts 16:33 reports the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his household. This act, performed in the small hours, was performed with haste, and it seems unlikely that Paul and Silas, the jailer and his household would have travelled through the city to the river or a pool for immersive baptism. It is more credible that Paul simply reached for a jug or a bowl (he and Silas had just had their wounds washed and dressed) and baptized them with pouring or sprinkling.

(iv) Heb. 9:10 speaks of the “various baptisms [washings]” of the OT ritual law. These “baptisms” include the sprinkling of water of cleansing on men (Lev. 14:7) and houses (Lev. 14:51). Thus, the NT does refer to sprinkling as baptism.

Moreover, the act of pouring is symbolic of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:25-27); and the act of sprinkling is symbolic of the forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:19-22) and sanctification (Heb. 10:22). The only plausible picture of immersion (as a down and up motion) in baptism is in Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:12, but this is probably because we think of burial as down into the ground, whereas in Palestine burial was horizontally into a tomb cut into rock; meanwhile the point of these verses is *identification with Christ in his death and resurrection* (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-2 for a dry baptism that involved horizontal motion through the Red Sea).

5. Baptizing believers and infants of believers

“Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized” (WCoF 28.4).

(a) *Baptizing believers*

Acts shows us people believing the gospel and being subsequently baptized (e.g. Acts 2:41; 8:12; 16:14-15). The emphasis is on faith preceding baptism. Also, Acts never tells us explicitly about the baptism of children.

On this evidence alone we could only hold to the baptism of believing adults.

However, (i) it is assumed that the five mass baptisms and four household baptisms of which we are told included children who had come to faith; and (ii) it is inferred that all *unbaptized* believers should be baptized, irrespective of their age.

(b) *Baptizing the infant children of believers*

The proof texts employed by the Westminster Assembly show how they argued for the position that “the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized”. The argument is as follows.

First it establishes continuity between God’s manner of covenantal dealing with people in both the Old and New eras:

- In Genesis 17 the LORD establishes a multi-generational (“everlasting”) covenant with Abraham as the head of the household (Gen. 17:7,9). Indeed “every covenant God has ever formed with mankind has included the child with the parent” (AA Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*), e.g. the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel (at Sinai) and David.
- The OT Church is the same as the NT Church. In Gal. 3:9,14 we see that the blessing God bestowed on Abraham is not restricted to his biological family but “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [has] come to the Gentiles.” In other words, Gentile believers inherit a family-centred covenant rather than an individual-centred covenant – hence the sign of membership of the covenant community is still applied to infants of believers.
- It must be remembered that salvation in the OT era was on the basis of faith (Gal. 3:9; also Rom. 4:11-12). And yet the covenant sign – the symbol of

redemption promised – was applied to infants of members of the covenant community. It is significant then that in Col. 2:11-12 Paul is explicit about the parallel between baptism and circumcision. Baptism – the symbol of redemption accomplished – is applied to infants of members of the covenant community.

- The continuity between the Testaments in the sacraments that symbolize redemption is the reason why Peter could preach about repentance (forgiveness) and baptism (the gift of the Holy Spirit), promising that both the gospel (sins forgiven and gift of the Holy Spirit) and its symbolism (baptism) is “for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38-39).
- The “you” in Peter’s Pentecost sermon were circumcised men; “all who are far off” were uncircumcised people. The promise and the symbol are for both groups, as Rom. 4:11-12 shows. The implication is that faith was always necessary for salvation – but faith did not always precede the application of the symbol of salvation.

With this background, the Assembly’s argument proceeds to consider the privileged position of children with one or more believing parents:

- 1 Cor. 7:14 says that the children of even one believing parent are holy, set apart from the world by God for himself.
- The NT command to baptize is more, not less, inclusive than the OT command to circumcise. Females as well as males receive the covenant symbol. Disciples of all nations are to be baptized (Matt. 28:19) – in the old Jewish Church every proselyte brought his children with him into the Church. Not to baptize the infants of believing parents would be more restrictive than this.
- Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15 show Jesus receiving a blessing children brought to him by their parents.

“In deciding whether to include children, even infants, in household baptisms, Reformed Christians have always found sufficient evidence in the five realities seen in these biblical passages: (1) the continuity of the covenant of grace, (2) the parallels between baptism and circumcision, (3) the setting apart of believers and their children, (4) the expansion rather than the contraction of that covenant, and (5) Jesus’ willingness to richly bless children brought to him by parents who trusted in him. Those who are children of Abraham by faith, just like those who were once children of Abraham by birth, should give their children the sign and seal of the gospel, and pray that they will come to understand and believe the gospel their parents hold so dear” (Chad Van Dixhoorn, p. 376).

6. The neglect of baptism and baptismal regeneration

“Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be

regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated” (WCoF 28.5).

Moses (or his son) was almost killed by God for neglecting to circumcise his son (Ex.4:24-26) and Jesus rebuked the religious leaders who had not submitted to John’s baptism, thus rejecting the purpose of God for themselves (Luke 7:30). The neglect of baptism is serious. Nevertheless, “grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it.”

Having said that, “grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto [baptism]...that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.” This is illustrated by the case of Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24). We do not, therefore, teach that baptism, of either adults or infants, results in their regeneration. The sign is not to be mistaken for the thing signified.

7. The usefulness of baptism

“The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time” (WCoF 28.6).

Baptism is more than a sign – it is also a seal, i.e. it has “efficacy”, and when used properly the Holy Spirit exhibits and confers the benefits of the new covenant.

“Right use” of the sacrament is necessary – it is not a charm, a rite of passage, or a tradition.

Notice the qualifications: the grace offered is conferred by the Holy Spirit on (a) “such...as that grace belongeth unto”, (b) “according to the counsel of God’s own will”, and (c) “in [God’s] appointed time”. In other words, God the Holy Spirit is sovereign in this affair. Baptism does not work *ex opere operato*.

But baptism *is* a means of grace used by the Holy Spirit:

- “As many of you as were baptized into Christ *have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:27).
- Paul links “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).
- Christ sanctified his church “having cleansed her” not only “with the word” but also “by the washing of water” (Eph. 5:26-27).
- Peter was able to say, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).
- When people “received [Peter’s] word were baptized” “there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 96: What is the Lord's Supper?

Answer: The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ's appointment, his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.

Question 97: What is required for the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?

Answer: It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.

1. The sacrament of Christ's body and blood

The Lord's supper is the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.

- It is "according to Christ's appointment". The Synoptic Gospels record the institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20). Paul also records the institution of the sacrament as something he had received from the Lord (1 Cor. 11:23).
- It is the sacrament of which the elements are bread and wine, representing Christ's body and blood. Jesus himself "took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to [his disciples], saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19); and he took a cup of wine after eating, and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).
- The occasion of the institution of the sacrament is doubly poignant. On the one hand, it entailed a backward look at Passover, the annual meal which commemorated the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt, when death came upon every firstborn (male child and animal) not "covered" by the blood of a Passover lamb. On the other hand, it looked forward to the sacrifice of "the Lamb of God" which would be accomplished within about twelve hours, and which would accomplish the deliverance of God's people from the tyranny of sin and Satan.

2. The commemoration of Christ's offering

In the Lord's Supper "Christ's death is showed forth", i.e. the Supper is a commemoration of his death on the Cross.

This is important because the sacrament is not to be thought of as an offering or a sacrifice itself. The idea that the sacrament itself is any sort of sacrifice is the error of the Roman Catholic Church which regards “the mass” as a sacrifice.

“In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God, for the same: so that the popish sacrifice of the Mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of his elect” (WCoF 29.2).

That the Lord’s Supper cannot be a sacrifice is demonstrated by the teaching Hebrews:

- Jesus came with the intention of making a once-for-all-time sacrifice of himself on the Cross. He does not offer himself repeatedly (Heb. 9:25-26);
- The work of Jesus is finished, in demonstration of which he has sat down at his Father’s right hand (Heb. 10:11-12);
- Nothing more is needed – indeed a repeated sacrifice would be a demonstration that sins remained unforgiven (Heb. 10:3);
- Moreover, God himself has accepted the once for all sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:17), and “where there is forgiveness of [sins and lawless deeds], there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb. 10:18);
- A bloodless sacrifice (as the mass is styled by the Roman Catholic Church) can have no merit, because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22).

Actually, because the mass is said to be a bloodless sacrifice, it is sometimes called “the offering of a commemoration”, or, as the Old Testament would have termed it, a “memorial offering”. However, the Reformed Church rejects this too. Jesus said, “Do this *in remembrance* of me” – so we regard the sacrament as the “commemoration of his offering”.

If anything is offered in the Lord’s Supper, it is thanksgiving for Jesus and his work of redemption.

3. The reality of Christ’s presence

Having said that the Lord’s Supper is a commemoration of Christ’s offering, it is also necessary to confess that Christ is really present in the sacrament – as the catechism says, “worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood.”

How far can we press this?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that when the bread and wine used in the mass are consecrated by the priest, they really change into the substance of the

body and blood of Christ, even though the outward appearance of bread and wine remain. This is the idea of “transubstantiation”. The Confession of Faith rejects it as something contrary to Scripture (e.g. in Luke 24:39 Jesus, risen from the dead, shows himself to his disciples, asserting that he has flesh and bones just like them), and to common sense. The idea of transubstantiation “overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries” (WCoF 29.6).

But it is an over-reaction to say that the Lord’s Supper is a *mere* commemoration of Christ’s death. For example, Paul asks, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [a ‘fellowshipping’] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation [a ‘fellowshipping’] in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). Clearly Paul regarded the Lord’s Supper as more than *just* a commemoration of Christ’s death.

In other words, Christ is spiritually present in the Lord’s Supper (neither “really present” as per transubstantiation, nor “really absent” as per much of Protestantism).

The Confession of Faith (29.5) says, “The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ.”

The point being made by the Confession of Faith is that Christ did not say that the bread was *like* his body and the wine *like* his blood; rather he said, “This *is* my body; this *is* my blood of the covenant.” He used the language of the reality and not the language of the symbol. But the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine – they are called Christ’s body and blood only in a sacramental sense.

Artur Weiser’s commentary on Psalm 36:8 (“They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights”), while not a comment on the Lord’s Supper, is nonetheless appropriate:

The sacrificial meal in the house of God becomes for [the Psalmist] the symbol and an indication of man’s communion with God; the sacrificial offering becomes for him the symbol of *God’s* grace and presence which he allows man to share. The material act performed in the divine service is the symbol of a more sublime process of a spiritual nature; indeed, it stands for something even more important: in the act of partaking of the sacrifice, which God, as it were, offers to those who visit his house as a hospitable gift, the lovingkindness of God himself is at work, in that he himself is the Giver; and in this effective sign his grace is *really* experienced. The divine service is the bridge between God and man where in a world depending on man’s sense-perceptions God makes his grace perceptible to man, and man, on the other hand, becomes assured of the spiritual reality of God by means of the symbol that effects his senses.

4. The participation of Christ's people

The implication of the above is that the Lord's Supper is not a machine that works *ex opere operato*. Rather, it is those who partake of it by "faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" who find that they have real communion with Christ in the Supper. So the catechism says that those who would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper must:

- "Examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body"

Discerning the Lord's body means "understanding that Christ's body was broken on the Cross as the only way in which reconciliation between God and man could be achieved." In other words, when Christ's people participate in the Lord's Supper, they should be deliberately conscious of the fact that they are "showing forth the Lord's death" – that communicating is a most solemn act because of its intimate connection to the most awful event that ever occurred.

- "Examine themselves...of their faith to feed upon [Christ], of their repentance, love, and new obedience"

The solemnity of communion, however, has actually deterred many believers from communicating – they feel themselves unworthy. However, none would ever be worthy if worthiness were a matter of human effort! Moreover, such a notion of "worthiness" is a contradiction of the gospel which says, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1).

Instead, what is required is faith in Christ, together with the graces which accompany true faith, namely, repentance (turning from sin), love (turning to God), and new obedience (the purpose of turning from sin and turning to God).

- "Examine themselves...lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves"

"Why does coming to the table unworthily involve eating and drinking damnation? ...The answer is found in the great privilege of partaking of a meal which so perfectly pictures our participation in Christ. It is intended to nourish Christian faith. To come to the table without that Holy-Spirit-worked faith in the Saviour is to try to seize a gift which can only be given. Coming to the table then becomes the personal symbol of a man or a woman's presumption. The supper becomes an emblem of the arrogance of someone who fancies he or she can fellowship with the Father, without coming through his Son" (Chad Van Dixhoorn, p. 398).

It is for this reason that the Reformed Presbyterian Church practises "session controlled communion" and "fencing of the Table" – the goal is to deter unbelievers from participating in the sacrament to their great hurt.

The Shorter Catechism

Question 98: What is prayer?

Answer: 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.

At this point it is good to remind ourselves of how we have come here. Since Q&A 85 the catechism has been dealing with how we are saved. To escape the wrath and curse of God, due to us for sin, God requires of us (a) faith in Jesus Christ, and (b) repentance unto life, with (c) the diligent use of all the means of grace. Q&A 88 tells us that that are the outward and ordinary means of grace are (a) the Word, (b) the sacraments, and (c) prayer. We have considered the first and second of these. Now, in the closing ten questions we consider prayer.

1. Prayer has three elements

The catechism identifies the three principle elements of prayer: supplication (“offering up of our desires unto God”); confession (“confession of our sins”); and thanksgiving (“thankful acknowledgement of his mercies”).

2. Prayer is Trinitarian

We are not interested in any form of prayer other than Biblical prayer. The catechism (largely) assumes this – but in today’s pluralist culture we have to be clear about it. Biblical prayer is essentially Trinitarian:

- it is offered to God the Father (Matt. 6:9; Eph. 3:14);
- through God the Son (John 16:23; Heb. 10:19-22);
- by the enabling of God the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15,26-27).

We will deal with prayer to God the Father in the next study; and we will look briefly at prayer enabled by the Spirit in the next section. But just now we will consider what it means to “pray in the name of Christ”.

Prayer in Christ’s name isn’t just a matter of concluding each prayer with a phrase such as “in Jesus’ name”. Rather, to pray in Jesus’ name is to pray in dependence on him. He is the one Mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5); there is no access to God except through him (John 14:6; Heb. 10:19-20). So we pray “in the name of Christ” whenever we pray like the tax collector in the parable, who “standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13).

By implication, prayer based on the merit of the person praying is not prayer that God hears (Luke 18:11-12,14).

3. Prayer is for the helpless

This phrase comes from “Prayer” by Ole Hallesby. Hallesby writes, “[Helplessness] is unquestionably the first and surest indication of a praying heart. As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless... I know very well that we offer many and beautiful prayers, both privately and publicly, without helplessness as the impelling power. But I am not at all positive that this is prayer. Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray... Listen, my friend! Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas.”

That is why the Psalmist says, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps. 62:8). The man who recognizes that he is helpless flies to the only Helper.

In fact, in the believer’s very experience of helplessness in prayer he is sustained by God: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26-27). So Jesus called the Spirit “the Paraclete” (John 14:16,26), because he counsels and consoles Christ’s people, not least in prayer.

4. Prayer teaches us submission

In prayer we come face to face with whether we will submit to the will of God. We cannot present any and every desire to God – some of our desires are simply sinful (Jas. 4:3). So prayer is a great tool of sanctification:

- how well do I know and understand the revealed will of God?
- to what degree have I mortified sinful desire in my heart and embraced the revealed will of God?
- am I willing for God to say “no” to legitimate desires, confident that he knows better and sees further than I do?
- will I persist in prayer until I am convinced that God has answered me?

5. Prayer requires contrition

Jesus taught us to pray for forgiveness (Matt. 6:12). Don’t be content with a general confession. Be specific (see the example of specific confession made by Daniel, Dan. 9:3-19). But don’t be introspective to the point that you refuse to let go of your sins – believe the promise of forgiveness (1 John 1:9) and move on.

6. Prayer is incomplete without thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is the confession of God’s goodness: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (Ps. 136:1). The knowledge of God’s goodness fills us with confidence in prayer: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 99: What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?

Answer: The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

1. Why is the Word of God the rule of prayer?

Prayer is nothing if it is not a coming to the living and true God, bring our thanksgiving for his goodness, the confession of our sins, and the urgent requests of our hearts. But the only way we can know these is through the Word of God.

(a) The Word of God reveals the God to whom we pray

To whom do we pray? We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. In other words, we pray to the triune God who reveals himself in Scripture. Apart from God's self-revelation in the Word, we would not know him, and we could not come before him.

The Word reveals that this God is:

- Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer – we are completely dependent on him
- Holy, holy, holy – he is utterly transcendent and righteous
- Glorious – he is to be worshipped because the point of everything is his glory
- Great – he is to be worshipped because he is in complete control of everything
- Good – he is to be worshipped because he provides everything
- Gracious – he is to be worshipped because he freely forgives and justifies

This Scripture revelation of the God to whom we pray directs our thanksgiving.

(b) The Word of God directs our confession

The Word also exposes our sinfulness. We don't need to psychoanalysis to bring repressed inner conflicts to the surface. We need the Bible to shine the light of God's holy, righteous and good law upon our hearts so that we can see how and why we have sinned (Rom. 7:7-12; Heb. 4:12). In this way our confession of sin will be driven by the Word of God and not by introspection.

(c) The Word of God directs our supplications

The Word reveals the will, the priorities and the promises of God. We can have confidence when we align our requests with these. This is one reason why you should aim at having a good knowledge of the Bible.

Actually, this is how the Bible presents us with godly men praying. In Numbers 14:17-19 Moses prays for forgiveness according to the revelation of God's nature

recorded in Exodus 34:6-7. In Daniel 9:1-19 Daniel prays for the restoration of the Jews according to the prophecy of Jeremiah 25:12. In Acts 4:24-30 the early church prays that God would honour the promises of Psalm 2 by granting boldness to the apostles despite the opposition of the powers that be.

There are many examples of prayer in the Bible which help us to learn how to pray, e.g.: the prayers of David found in many of the Psalms; the prayers of Paul scattered throughout his letters; and, of course, the Lord's Prayer.

Notice that all of these prayers are very brief. Do we substitute length for reality? "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (Jas. 5:16)

2. How can we use the Word of God to direct our praying?

The Lord's Prayer is a model NT prayer (beginning with the distinctively NT form of address to God, "Our Father"). However, since it is a model (In Matthew 6:9 Jesus says, "Pray then *like* this..."), we are not meant to repeat it mindlessly or bound to follow it slavishly. Rather, along with the rest of the Bible, it sets the course of our praying.

(a) Adopt the perspective of the Bible

We allow the Word of God to direct our praying when we adopt the perspective of the Bible. For example:

- We are commanded to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). This is the perspective of the Bible – everything is from God, through God and to God, to whom is the glory eternally (Rom. 11:36).
- Scripture urges "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people..." Why? Because of God's perspective: "this is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

In that light, our praying shouldn't be selfish or parochial. It ought to be expansive. There is a place for asking for our daily bread – but it isn't the first place. So allow the Bible to teach you God's priorities, and then prioritize these in your praying.

(b) Plead the promises of the Bible

We allow the Word to direct our praying when we plead its promises.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) wrote a book called "A Method for Prayer" in which he provides models of how Christians can make exclusive use of the language of Scripture to express their prayers. O.P. Robertson writes about this, "Prayer in this form is nothing more and nothing less than what the old Puritans called 'pleading the promises'. God has made promises to his people. His people respond by redirecting those promises to the Lord in the form of prayer. How could a God who is faithful to his word fail to answer prayers of this kind?"

The Shorter Catechism

Question 100: What doth the preface to the Lord's Prayer teach us?

Answer: The preface of the Lord's Prayer, which is, *Our Father which art in heaven*, teacheth us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us; and that we should pray with and for others.

Since in 21st century parlance a "preface" is usually less important than the book it prefaces, calling "Our Father..." the "preface of the Lord's Prayer" is as unfortunate as calling Exodus 20:2 the "preface of the Ten Commandments" (see notes on Q&A 43-44). This is no "preface" – this is the very heart of prayer!

1. Why did Jesus teach his disciples to pray?

Jesus taught his disciples this model prayer because they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1f). Having observed Jesus at prayer, they felt their inadequacy and wanted to learn. That is a good place to be!

Indeed, in the teaching that follows Luke's record of the Lord's Prayer Jesus emphasises (a) a sense of need, (b) persistence, and (c) confidence in the goodness of God as the heavenly Father who gives the very best.

So, do you want to pray?

2. What is the first word of prayer?

The first word of prayer is "Father!" This is the distinctively New Testament way in which God's people address him.

(a) Praying like the Son

We have seen previously that the full revelation of God the Father awaited the incarnation of God the Son (see Q&A 6).

God is the Father of the Lord Jesus in a unique way. Jesus is the only begotten of the Father. In the Gospels Jesus calls God "my Father" over 40 times. On another 100 occasions he simply addresses God as "Father". John's Gospel we see Jesus delighting in: the knowledge of his Father; the will of his Father; the fellowship of his Father; and the life and the glory that his Father shares with him.

Don Carson comments that in prayer "the overwhelming tendency in Jewish circles was to multiply titles ascribing sovereignty, lordship, glory, grace, and the like to God. Against such a background, Jesus' habit of addressing God as his own Father and teaching his disciples to do the same could only appear familiar and presumptuous to opponents...personal and gracious to followers."

So when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Our Father in heaven," it's implicit that he wants us to pray with delight that is like his delight – with direct, familiar and intimate access to God.

(b) Praying by the Spirit

Moreover, “because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6).

So for the believer to pray “Our Father which art in heaven...” is not presumptuous. The believer really is an adopted child, and God himself has done everything necessary for him to pray like a child.

3. How do we pray as children to the Father?

(a) We draw near to God...as children to a father

God’s purpose in salvation is to “bring us near” (Ex. 15:13; 19:4; Eph. 2:13; Heb. 4:16; 10:22). (By implication, we are far away until we are saved, Eph. 2:12.) Our “drawing near” not characterized by terror (like a man drawing near a tiger!), but by the confidence of children approaching their most loving father.

(b) We draw near to God...with reverence

Terror – no. But reverence – yes! God is in heaven. He is “the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy.” Therefore, we must approach him with reverence; he says, “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit” (Isa. 57:15).

(c) We draw near to God...with confidence

But since God is in heaven (the position of all authority and all power – see Revelation 4-5 – the first thing John sees in his vision of heaven is a throne) he is able to help us. Moreover, since God is our Father, he is also willing to help us.

Therefore, we draw near to him with confidence because prayer is not a waste of time – our Father in heaven is both “able and ready to help us”. “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

(d) We draw near to God...with one another

More often than not prayer is something we do alone. The “you” in Matthew 6:6 is singular *thou*, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.”

However, prayer is also a corporate activity. Notice the plural pronouns in the Lord’s Prayer: our, us, we. This suggests that praying together:

- strengthens bonds – we identify as brothers and sisters when we pray “Our Father”;
- underwrites needs – if we pray for “daily bread” together we ought to be ready to share what we have;
- demands reconciliation – how can we ask together “forgive us our debts” and not at the same time forgive one another?
- encourages solidarity – when we pray “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” we are committing to stand with one another – no one is left exposed; no one is left behind.

The Shorter Catechism

Question 101: What do we pray for in the first petition?

Answer: In the first petition, which is, *Hallowed be thy name*, we pray that God would enable us, and others, to glorify him in all that whereby he maketh himself known; and that he would dispose all things to his own glory.

Thomas Watson: “In this petition, we pray that God’s name may shine forth gloriously, that it may be honoured and sanctified by us, in the whole course and tenor of our lives. It was the angels’ song, ‘Glory be to God in the highest.’... This petition is set in the forefront, to show that the hallowing of God’s name is to be preferred before all things. It is to be preferred before life... It is to be preferred before salvation. Rom ix 23... [It] is the first and great petition; it contains the most weighty thing in religion, which is God’s glory. When some of the other petitions shall be useless and out of date...yet the hallowing of God’s name will be of great use and request in heaven; we shall be ever singing hallelujahs, which is nothing else but the hallowing of God’s name.”

Watson proceeds to ask the following three questions

1. What is meant by God’s name?

(a) God’s name is who he is (see also Q&A 53-56)

D.A. Carson: “God’s ‘name’ is a reflection of who he is... God’s ‘name’ is God himself as he is and has revealed himself, and so his name is already holy. Holiness...has to do with the very godhood of God.”

(b) God’s name is also “anything by which he may be known”

Since a “name” is that by which a person is known, Q&A 54 includes in God’s name his “titles, attributes, ordinances, Word, and works.”

2. What is meant by hallowing God’s name?

To “hallow” is to set something apart from common use to some sacred use – the vessels used in the temple were set apart for the worship of God. So when we “hallow God’s name”, we do not not use it – rather we use it properly.

D.A. Carson: “Holiness...has to do with the very godhood of God. Therefore to pray that God’s ‘name’ be ‘hallowed’...is not to pray that God will become holy but that he may be treated as holy (cf. Exod. 20:8; Lev. 19:2, 32; Ezek. 36:23; 1 Peter 1:15), that his name should not be despised (Mal. 1:6) by the thoughts and conduct of those who have been created in his image.”

Again, this reminds us of the third commandment (Q&A 53-56). “take” means “to lift up” or “to carry”. “Taking the name of God” is about requesting, expressing, experiencing or claiming relationship with God (calling on him for salvation, Joel 2:32; confessing him, Ps. 97:12; swearing oaths in his name, Deut. 6:13; speaking by his authority, Deut. 18:19; bearing his identity, Num. 6:27). But to

“take God’s name in vain” is to treat it as thing of no substance, i.e. treating him lightly, as though he were not “I AM”; and/or transferring his reputation to other “gods” and treating *them* as though they were “I AM”.

God will hallow his name (Lev. 10:3; Ezek. 20:41; 39:27). When we pray “Hallowed be thy name”, we pray “that God would hallow and glorify his own name, by magnifying himself in the world, and by disposing all things for his own glory” (Thomas Vincent).

3. When may we be said to hallow and sanctify God’s name?

God’s chief end (no less than man’s) is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”. God is therefore properly jealous for his glory (Isa. 48:11). By praying the first petition, we are aligning our will with God’s will at the most basic level. Often our prayers are focused on our lusts (see the prayers of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, cf. Jas. 4:2-3).

The way into true prayer demands that we straighten out our desires and put them in the right order, e.g. praying for reformation of the things in the Church that dishonour God before we pray for revival; praying for humility and repentance in the nation before we pray for peace and prosperity (G.I. Williamson).

Th. Vincent comments that when we pray “hallowed be thy name” we are praying that God would cause the chief design of our thoughts, words, and actions to be the glory of God, and that God would enable others also to hallow and glorify his name. So we pray that God would enable us to hallow and glorify his name:

- by confessing and forsaking our sins, which rob God of his glory;
- by admiring and adoring God in his glorious titles and attributes, in his infinite excellencies and perfections (i.e. getting big, life-changing views of God);
- by believing, loving, and obeying God’s word;
- by observing and attending upon God’s worship and ordinances;
- by magnifying God in his works, and making use of his creatures for his glory (e.g. doing your work well, and using natural resources wisely and justly);
- by sincere, diligent, zealous, and constant endeavours to promote God’s honour and interest in our places and relations (i.e. being intentionally *Christian* in all your duties and offices).

This is a vision for “the whole course and tenor of our lives”. No affection, attitude, action, duty or relationship is excluded. The whole is “holiness to the LORD” (Zech. 14:20-21).

David Brainerd: “My heaven is to please God, and to glorify him, and give all to him, and to be wholly devoted to his glory: that is the heaven I long for, that is my religion, and that is my happiness, and always was, I suppose, ever since I had any true religion; and all those that are of that religion shall meet me in heaven. I do not go to heaven to be advanced, but to give honour to God.”

The Shorter Catechism

Question 102: What do we pray for in the second petition?

Answer: In the second petition, which is, *Thy kingdom come*, we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

1. What is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God is God's rule.

God does not become King – he has always been, and will always be, King: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations” (Ps. 145:13); “The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt... Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting” (Ps. 93:1-2).

The throne of God is mentioned 40 times in the book of Revelation – God's kingdom is the theme that runs through the whole account of history, from creation to consummation.

God rules over everything:

- Creation: “The LORD reigns... Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved” (Ps. 93:1);
- The world in rebellion: “The floods have lifted up, O LORD... Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty” (Ps. 93:3-4).
- His redeemed people: “The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice... Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice...” (Ps. 97:1, 8).
- New creation: “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth” (Ps. 98:8-9).

However, God has chosen to rule in a particular way – through his incarnate Son: “He who sits in the heavens laughs... ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’” (Ps. 2:4-7). “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Ps. 110:1).

So the first word of the public ministry of Jesus was “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

The rule of Christ is predicated on his death and resurrection – it is because of his obedience, even to the point of death on the Cross, that God “has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...” (Phil. 2:9-11). God has “seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named,

not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:20-22).

It is from that position of universal dominion that Christ now exercises the power of kingdom. Our experience of that power is what the catechism calls “the kingdom of grace”, i.e. God’s rule, now, in the hearts of his people. God’s law is written on our hearts and minds (Heb. 10:16); we have been made willing in the days of Christ’s power (Ps. 110:3).

Wonderful and all as the kingdom of grace is, it is not everything. God has promised his Son, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps. 2:8), and “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool” (Ps. 110:1). The fulfilment of this promise must encompass everything. The catechism calls this “the kingdom of glory”.

2. How does the kingdom of God advance?

(a) “We pray that Satan’s kingdom may be destroyed.” The advance of the kingdom of God necessitates that the kingdom of Satan be destroyed.

The Bible does not allow us to imagine that Satan’s kingdom is equal and opposite to God’s kingdom. Satan’s authority is:

- illegitimate – he is called “the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2);
- time limited – his “kingdom” had a beginning (the Fall) and will have an end (Rev. 20:10);
- greatly weakened by Christ’s victory on the Cross (Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8).

Satan is compared to a strong man who has been stripped of his weapons and bound, and whose house is now being plundered (Matt. 12:28-29). When we pray “Your kingdom come”, we are praying for the plundering of Satan’s kingdom, i.e. the liberation of men and women from his tyranny.

(b) “We pray...that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it.”

The Larger Catechism expands helpfully on what this means:

- “The gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in...”

We pray that the gospel of the kingdom may spread through all the nations of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20). But not all nations are the same. God has ordained that the Jewish people should have a particular role in the history of redemption. The Larger catechism acknowledges this by speaking separately of the calling of the Jews and the bringing in of the fullness of the Gentiles (Rom. 10:1; 11:12, 25-26, 30-32).

- "...the church furnished with all gospel officers and ordinances, purged from corruption..."

The church is not the kingdom. But at present the church is the sphere in which the powers of the kingdom operate; the church is the instrument of the kingdom in the world. The proper ordering of the life of the church (Eph. 4:11-16) is therefore an essential aspect of the coming of the kingdom.

- "...countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate..."

Although the kingdom of God is not a political kingdom, nevertheless it has political implications. The State is no more neutral than is the family or society. Just as we desire to see the family and society brought into obedience to Christ, so also we desire to see the State brought into his obedience. We therefore pray for the officers of the State (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

- "...that the ordinances of Christ may be purely dispensed, and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, and the confirming, comforting, and building up of those that are already converted."

We desire the edification of the church – that through the right use of the means of grace, she might be built up in faith, love, commitment and numbers (Acts 4:29-30; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 1 Pet. 5:10).

3. When will the kingdom of God be consummate?

"We pray...that the kingdom of glory may be hastened."

Present conditions are temporary – Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

At the end, Christ will come in glory as the great King (Matt. 25:31-46). He "will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12).

Then "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 9:7).

This is that the catechism calls "the kingdom of glory". It is the final state: "when all things are subjected to [the Son], then the Son himself will also be subjected to [the Father] who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

We do not know when Christ will come again (Matt. 24:36). But when we pray "Your kingdom come", we express our desire that it would come soon. This is the cry (in Aramaic) of the ancient church: *Maranatha!*

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 103: What do we pray for in the third petition?

Answer: In the third petition, which is, *Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*, we pray that God, by his grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to his will in all things, as the angels do in heaven.

Thomas Vincent's 17th century commentary on Q&A 103 is so helpful that I have virtually copied it in these notes.

1. What is meant by “the will of God”?

The will of God comprises:

(a) The will of God's precept, i.e. that which he is pleased to require of us. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

The will of God's precept comprises faith and action, and is given in Scripture: “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (Q&A 3).

(b) The will of God's providence, i.e. that which he is pleased to do with us and unto us. “...always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you” (Rom. 1:10); “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil” (1 Pet. 3:17).

The will of God's providence is observed in history: “God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (Q&A 11).

There is an obvious and important difference between these two aspects of God's will – precept is knowable in a way that providence is not. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). The will of God's providence is “secret” because we cannot know it until we observe it (and even then, both our observation and understanding are finite and flawed). The will of God's precept is “revealed” and we do know it and are bound both to believe it and to do it.

The will of God's providence concerns God's control of our diverse (and ever-changing) life situations. The will of God's precept concerns God's normative (and never changing) will for human life. The will of God's precept finds its applications within the life settings determined by the will of his providence. For example, the fifth commandment does not change, but the applications of the fifth commandment are different for parents and children, and different for children in their minority and adult children.

2. What does it mean to pray that the will of God's precept be done?

When we pray that the will of God's precept be done, we request:

(a) That we (and others) may be enabled to know and understand it.

"Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart" (Ps. 119:34).

"...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light... Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:8,17).

"...we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9).

(b) That we (and others) may be inclined and enabled to obey and do whatever it is the will of God to command.

"Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain" (Ps. 119:35-36).

"Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground" (Ps. 143:10)

"And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek. 36:27).

3. What does it mean to pray that God's providence be done?

When we pray that the will of God's providence may be done, we request that we (and others) might have compliance of will to the providence of God. Such compliance will be seen when we thankfully accept God's merciful providences, and when we patiently submit to his afflictive providences.

"And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'" (Luke 1:38).

"And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, 'Let the will of the Lord be done'" (Acts 21:14).

4. How are we to pray that God's will may be done?

We are to pray that God's will may be done by ourselves and others: on earth; universally; readily; unweariedly; constantly; even as it is done in heaven.

"Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word... Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul" (Psalms 103:20,22).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 104: What do we pray for in the fourth petition?

Answer: In the fourth petition, which is, *Give us this day our daily bread*, we pray that of God's free gift we may receive a competent portion of the good things of this life, and enjoy his blessing with them.

These notes are based on R.T. France's commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew (New International Commentary on the New Testament), pp. 243-249.

1. The priority of the first three petitions

The first half of the Lord's Prayer is concerned with God's honour, God's kingdom, and God's purpose. Only after that do our needs find a place.

The first three petitions are in the form of "wishes", i.e. "May your name be hallowed; may your kingdom come; may your will be done..." They are in effect a doxology, an act of worship. In this way, the second set of three petitions (which take the form of second person imperatives, i.e. "Give us...; forgive us...; lead us not...") are set within the overall priority of God's will rather than our desires.

2. The generosity of God

The catechism speaks of our daily provision as "God's free gift". This emphasises the generosity of God.

The first of the petitions for our needs concerns material provision. This is consistent with the general tenor of Scripture in which God the Creator is revealed as bountiful towards all he has made, e.g.

- "Out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Gen. 2:9).
- "These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things" (Ps. 104:27-28; 145:15).

In this context we are encouraged to depend on God, e.g. "You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Ps. 104:14-15); "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me" (Prov. 30:8).

The generosity of God is a matter for thanksgiving: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God..." (Phil. 4:6). In this context, Paul makes it clear that asceticism (considering the body to be bad and so treating it harshly) is not Biblical. Paul had learned the secret of contentment – how to be brought low and how to abound, how to face plenty and hunger, abundance and need (Phil. 4:12).

The generosity of God engenders peace of mind: "...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

3. The modesty of our request

The catechism speaks of our daily provision as "a competent portion of the good things of this life". This emphasises the modesty of our request. We are asking "for our needs, not for our greeds".

The word translated "daily" has been subject to considerable debate. It has not been found in other Greek literature of the period. It may be related to a very similar word used in Acts 7:26 which means "on the following day". But whether the word means "today" or "tomorrow" the sense is the same: we are asking God for his provision for the near future. It is a reminder that our walk with God is a daily walk.

In modern Western culture, the provision of food is planned a long way into the future. Daily dependence on God seems remote to our experience. It would not have been so in the world in which Jesus ministered. In the ancient world labourers worked for one denarius per day – enough money for each day's needs. A day of sickness potentially meant disaster for a labourer's family. Similarly Jesus and his disciples, as itinerant missionaries, could not take the daily provision of their needs for granted. Jesus himself depended on his Father's provision (Matt. 4:3-4); and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand and later the four thousand were clearly acts of compassion for people in great need – it was not Jesus' practice to provide for himself or his disciples in this way.

Two responses to this seem appropriate:

- deliberate daily mindfulness of our utter dependence on God;
- sincere generosity to those in need (2 Cor. 8:14-15; 9:8-10 and context).

4. The relationship of children to their Father

The catechism speaks of enjoying God's blessing with the good things of this life. This emphasises the relational aspect of the prayer.

The catechism gives Ps. 90:17 as a proof text: "Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands." We bring even our "competencies" as well as our "incompetencies" to God for his blessing.

Matthew 6:25-33 tells us that part of what it means to recognize God as our Father in heaven is to be prepared to trust him for food, drink and clothing: "...your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (Matt. 6:32). The fourth petition expresses this trust in the simplest form. Even bread, the most basic of daily food, comes by God's daily provision. It is, therefore, a proper subject for prayer, and not to be taken for granted. If this is true for something as simple as bread, then how much more for all our other physical needs.

The Shorter Catechism

Question 105: What do we pray for in the fifth petition?

Answer: In the fifth petition, which is, *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*, we pray that God, for Christ's sake, would freely pardon all our sins; which we are the rather encouraged to ask, because by his grace we are enabled from the heart to forgive others.

"The first three petitions stand independently of one another. The last three, however, are linked in Greek by 'ands,' almost as if to say that life sustained by food is not enough. We also need forgiveness of sin and deliverance from temptation" (D.A. Carson).

1. Sin as debt

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our debts." But the catechism explains that "we pray that God, for Christ's sake, would freely pardon all our sins."

The word debts is important. We owe God something – obedience. Sin creates an obligation (a debt) to God (one that we cannot possibly repay). "Sin is likened to a 'debt' because it deserves to be punished. But when God forgives sin, he remits the penalty and drops the charge against us" (Stott).

However, the word "debt" is not the last word on sin. As a matter of fact, the explanation which follows Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer speaks about "trespasses"; Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer speaks about both "sins" and "those indebted to us"; Peter in Matthew 18:21 talks of "my brother who sins against me"; and in the following parable Jesus speaks of financial debt. So sin is debt, but also more than debt. Indeed, the OT regularly speaks of "iniquity, transgression and sin".

"Iniquity" entails perversity and twistedness. When it functions in relationships among people, it is called "injustice". In God's eyes it is "wickedness".

"Transgression" supplies the sense of intentionality. It entails rebellion – knowing where the boundary lines lie, and then deliberately stepping over them – knowing what God requires, and then deliberately rejecting his authority. It is a breach of faith, an act of treachery.

"Sin" is falling short of the standard or missing the mark (Rom. 3:23). In this sense, sin entails failure and frustration, and may even be unintentional.

The most characteristic feature of sin is that it is directed against God; any idea of sin that does not accentuate the contradiction that it offers to God is defective.

2. The centrality of forgiveness

Sin enslaves the sinner (Eph. 2:1-3). That is one reason why we can never pay our debt to God – like a rapacious loan-shark, sin has us on such a high rate of interest that our compound debt is out of control!

What is needed, then, is a radical form of forgiveness – one that deals not only with the debt aspect of sin, but also its slavery – a forgiveness, in fact, that entails a complete change of era. That is what God in Christ has provided (Gal. 1:3-4; Col. 1:13-14).

3. The cost of forgiveness

Such a forgiveness is costly beyond all reckoning – it required God himself to absorb the debt we owe. But he had created us, deliberately, in such a way that he cannot simply “write off” our sins as “bad debt”. Instead, our debt must be paid. It has been paid, therefore, by God himself – the incarnate Son paid our debt in our nature. That is why the catechism says that “we pray that God, *for Christ’s sake*, would freely pardon all our sins.” We are invoking the merits of the One who said on the Cross, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

4. The culture of forgiveness

The petition for forgiveness is the only clause of the prayer which is singled out for comment (Matthew 6:14-15). Reflecting on this comment, the catechism says that “we are the rather encouraged to ask [for the forgiveness of our sins], because by [God’s] grace we are enabled from the heart to forgive others.”

The point of Jesus’ comment is that forgiveness is a reciprocal principle. Jesus returns to and underlines this point in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). Peter had asked Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21); and Jesus had replied, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:22); and then he expands on this reply with the parable.

“...our forgiveness of others [certainly does not earn] us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own. It is the disparity between the size of debts which is the main point of the parable of the unmerciful servant. The conclusion is: ‘I forgave you *all that debt* (which was huge)...; should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’” (Stott).

The point is that the dynamic of “the age to come” (the age into which forgiven people have been liberated by Jesus’ cross-work) is grace – we have received grace, and we are to exercise grace in all our relationships. We are to behave in the way that our Father in heaven behaves (Matt. 5:43-48).

That is undoubtedly why the fifth petition is “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” rather than “...as we forgive the debts of others” – Jesus is throwing the focus off debts and onto people – your relationships with these *people* must be gracious relationships – when you forgive their offences, you must be reconciled to them. That’s the culture of the Father’s house.

The Shorter Catechism

Question 106: What do we pray for in the sixth petition?

Answer: In the sixth petition, which is, *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*, we pray that God would either keep us from being tempted to sin, or support and deliver us when we are tempted.

After a petition for the forgiveness of past sin comes one for protection from future sin. Moreover, within this petition there is progression – first a request to be kept free from temptation, then a request for rescue if tempted. Either way, we need God’s help and protection in the face of the devil’s desire to lead astray.

John Stott comments, “Perhaps we could paraphrase the whole request as, ‘Do not allow us so to be led into temptation that it overwhelms us, but rescue us from the evil one’. So behind these words that Jesus gave us to pray are the implications that the devil is too strong for us, that we are too weak to stand up to him, but that our heavenly Father will deliver us if we call upon him.”

1. What this petition says (and does not say) about God

This petition does not say that God might lead us into temptation. A negative request does not imply that the opposite is to be expected. A husband who says to his wife, “Don’t ever leave me,” is not necessarily assuming that she is likely to.

The Bible is clear that God is righteous: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one” (Jas 1:13). In fact, the Bible affirms, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Thus, calling on God to be rescued from temptation is the right thing to do – daily.

2. What this petition says (and does not say) about temptation

The Greek word translated “temptation” (*peirasmos*) is ambiguous – it can mean “a trial” or “a temptation”. Trials are not necessarily bad. Clearly God does test his people (e.g. Gen. 22:1; Deut. 8:2). It was, after all, the Holy Spirit who led Jesus out into the wilderness “to be tested” (Matt. 4:1).

Trials are often unpleasant and unwelcome – they grieve us (1 Pet. 1:6). No one enjoys the exam hall or the dentist’s chair. However, God has a good purpose in trials (Rom. 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7). So we do not pray that God would give us a trial-free life – that is clearly not God’s will.

Instead, here the word *peirasmos* “denotes inward temptation, which may fitly be called the scourge of the devil, for exciting our lust... All wicked emotions, which excite us to sin, are included under the name of *temptation*” (Calvin).

3. What this petition says (and does not say) about the evil one

The parallel between the two parts of the petition is clear – temptation (*peirasmos*) is the work of the tempter (*ho peirazōn*, see Matthew 4:3 and context). The Greek of the sixth petition can be translated “deliver us from *the evil one*” – that is how most commentators understand it. The evil one was the source of the first temptation (Gen. 3:1-6,13); our first parents’ sin plunged the whole family into bondage to sin and Satan; and so the evil one continues to be the ultimate source of temptation.

However, the evil one is not omnipresent, omnipotent, or omniscient – he is a creature and therefore of limited capacity. But as a prince is said to act even though it is his servants who do his will, so the evil one is attributed with action (e.g. 1 Pet. 5:8) when it is his minions (spiritual or human) who act (Eph. 2:2).

Moreover, the petition reminds us that the evil one is defeated. Not only is God the absolute sovereign whose will Satan inevitably fulfils (albeit against his own will), but Jesus has also bound the tempter (Matt. 12:28-29), first when he repulsed him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11) and supremely when Jesus died to “deliver us from this present age that is of the evil one” (Gal. 1:4).

4. What this petition says (and does not say) about us

If we learn anything about ourselves from the sixth petition, surely it is that we are weak. There is no room for presumption. “Let others trust as they will in their own capacities and powers of free choice, which they seem to themselves to possess. For us let it be enough that we stand and are strong in God’s power alone” (Calvin).

“The sentence ought to be resolved thus, *That we may not be led into temptation, deliver us from evil*. The meaning is: ‘We are conscious of our own weakness, and desire to enjoy the protection of God, that we may remain impregnable against all the assaults of Satan.’... We conclude from this petition that we have no strength for living a holy life, except so far as we obtain it from God. Whoever implores the assistance of God to overcome temptations, acknowledges that, unless God deliver him, he will be constantly falling” (Calvin).

That does not mean that we are to throw up our hands and say that all hope is lost and that we will inevitably fall before temptation. The point of the petition is that it is God’s will to deliver us from temptation – in Christ we have died to sin, and sin is no longer our master (Rom. 6:1-14) – and God has given us prayer as the primary means by which we run to him for safety: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). Jesus himself did just this in Gethsemane.

Moreover, if we are serious about overcoming temptation, we will take pre-emptive steps to avoid it (Prov. 4:14; 5:8). “The disciple is conscious of his weakness, and does not expose himself unnecessarily to temptation in order to test the strength of his faith. Christians ask God not to put their puny faith to the test, but to preserve them in the hour of temptation” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

The Shorter Catechism

Question 107: What doth the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer teach us?

Answer: The conclusion of the Lord's Prayer, which is, *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*, teacheth us to take our encouragement in prayer from God only, and in our prayers to praise him, ascribing kingdom, power, and glory to him; and, in testimony of our desire, and assurance to be heard, we say, *Amen*.

Having laid out our requests before God for his support, forgiveness and defence, the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer turns the focus away from us and brings us back to our most basic commitment to God. But whereas at the start of the Lord's Prayer this basic commitment took the form of petition ("your kingdom come") and submission ("your will be done"), now at the end it takes the form of worship ("for yours is the kingdom...") and confidence ("Amen").

1. In what do people often place their confidence in prayer?

In Matthew 6 Jesus warns us about two false grounds of confidence in prayer:

- Presumption – "God will hear me because I am a good person, as everyone knows" (Matt. 6:5-6; see also Luke 18:9-14). Presumption also underlies the way that prayerless people turn quickly to prayer when disaster strikes, and just as quickly turn from it when normality returns (see book of Judges for many examples).
- Ritualism – "God will hear me if I use the correct formula" (Matt. 6:7-8). Ritualism treats prayer (and God) like a mechanism, i.e. like a branch of magic. It may also express a fear that God is indifferent ("I need to find a way of attracting his attention"), or hard to please ("I need to impress him with my words if I'm to have any hope of getting what I want from him").

Either way, presumption and ritualism in prayer both begin and end with "me" – my needs, my effort, my achievement, my merit.

2. Why is God our only confidence in prayer?

In contrast, the catechism says that we are "to take our encouragement in prayer from God only." Calvin comments on the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer, that "it was not added merely for the purpose of kindling our hearts to seek the glory of God, and of reminding us what ought to be the object of our prayers; but likewise to teach us, that our prayers, which are here dictated to us, are founded on God alone, that we may not rely on our own merits."

In other words, ritualism is unnecessary because God is personal (three-personal!) – which means that he is very interested in us and very pleased to help (Heb. 4:16); and presumption is futile since the focus of the kingdom, the power

and the glory is not us but God. Instead of ritual, there must be trust; and instead of presumption there must be praise.

The conclusion of the Lord's Prayer teaches us "in our prayers to praise [God], ascribing kingdom, power, and glory to him."

- Kingdom is God's right to act. It is his authority, his right to rule not only in the lives of his people, but over everything that he has made (see Q&A 102). God is sovereign. Revelation 4-5 gives a vision of the throne room of heaven – it is the throne room of heaven that directs the events that unfold in chapters 6-22. "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign" (Rev. 11:17).
- Power is God's ability to exercise of his rule, and therefore also the actual execution of his sovereign will (see, for example, Q&A 7-8). "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps. 115:3). We are reminded of the power by which God brought all things into being (Rev. 4:11), the power by which he continues to sustain all things (Heb. 1:3), and the saving power by which he will renew the whole of creation (Phil. 3:21).
- Glory is God's purpose for acting. It means not just his own essential glory as God, but also the praise that he receives from all his creatures because he is King. "Everything in his temple is saying 'Glory!'" (Ps. 29:9).

Kingdom (right), power (ability) and glory (purpose) are the necessary and sufficient reasons for God to act. And since the reason for prayer is to (a) submit to God's acts, (b) request God to act, and (c) praise God for his acts, we have in the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer the necessary and sufficient grounds for confidence in God in prayer.

3. How do we express our confidence in God in prayer?

It is liberating for us to remember that we are just creatures and to confess that the kingdom, the power and the glory are not ours! It takes a great burden off our shoulders to know that we are not ultimately responsible – more than that, to know that we have access in prayer to the One who is ultimately responsible.

So "in testimony of our desire, and assurance to be heard, we say, *Amen*."

"Amen" comes from the Hebrew root which suggests firmness, reliability or certainty. God himself is called "God of Amen", i.e. "God of truth", in Isaiah 65:16.

The root word first appears in Genesis 15:6 when Abraham believed the Lord, i.e. he said his "amen" to God's promise of a child. In a similar way, 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, "All the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory", i.e. we affirm our trust in God that in Christ he has fulfilled for us all that he promised (Josh. 21:45).

Thus, when we say "Amen" at the end of our prayers we are asserting our confidence in God, that he who has the right, the ability, and the purpose for action, will indeed act on our behalf.