

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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## THE EMBODIMENT OF WISDOM

5<sup>th</sup> February 2017

Proverbs 4:1-9

Revelation 5:11-14

How well do you know your Shorter Catechism? I wonder if there are any of us here who had to learn it in childhood, question by question? I know there is still at least one man in Newtonmore who knows it, because he likes to talk to me about it. Fortunately, I also know it, if not by memory, at least in a general way. This is not because I had to learn it as a child. No, the Shorter Catechism once paid me \$1000!

At the seminary in Chicago where I studied there was an annual competition based on the Catechism. It had been endowed generations before and as it happened the endowment money had been spectacularly well invested, so that the prize money, which was to be paid to the top ten students who entered for the competition, was substantial. However, it was many years since the Catechism was part of the syllabus, and so the competition had lost prominence in the academic calendar. The way it worked in my day was that if a sympathetic professor knew a student might be in a bit of financial low water, he or she might drop a hint that the competition was to be held on such and such a day. There was also a very small notice put up about it. The Theology professor had to write the examination paper and mark it, and so he always hoped that only ten students or fewer would turn up, since then they could all be given an award and he wouldn't have to do any marking.

Well, I needed the money, so thought I might enter. Of course, it might be that more than ten students should show up and we might have to answer the questions set, so I did read up on the Catechism beforehand. In the event, there were ten of us, so we wrote our names on a piece of paper and went away. Later the awards were made! And I have always had a soft spot for the Shorter Catechism on that account.

If you have encountered the catechism you will probably remember the first question: *What is the chief end of man?* And the answer, which, of course, says *Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.* It is a wonderful answer. We are created to glorify God and to enjoy him. Not to have grim duty towards him, but to enjoy him. Our worship of him should give us joy.

Does anyone know how many questions there are in the Catechism? There are 107, and the last one, which is one of a set of questions designed to ensure that the student not only knows but understands the Lord's Prayer, brings us pretty much back to where we began. Question 107 says: *What doth the conclusion of the Lord's prayer teach us? And answers, The conclusion of the Lord's prayer, which is For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever, 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.* And so the catechism begins and ends with us glorifying, praising and enjoying God.

So what? Why should we think of this document, drawn up four hundred years ago, now? Now, when we live in an age of anxiety, with new griefs and struggles and worries appearing around every corner, why bring up the shorter catechism? And the answer is because it reminds us, as does Scripture, what is the wisdom we need to live in these days.

Someone who lived in the days just before the catechism was written, whose work influenced the Westminster divines who wrote it, was John Calvin. Calvin was a Frenchman, trained as a lawyer but whose passion was theology, because of the intense relationship with God he had come to know and to foster. He lived most of his life in exile from his land, forced exile, because of his protestant beliefs.. He knew all kinds of opposition and he knew personal loss and grief – his mother died when he was four, his father not long after he grew up, and when he eventually married, he buried all three babies he and his wife ever held. And don't tell me that people felt such things less than we do now. They expressed their grief more stoically, maybe, but did not feel things less.

Calvin, in his multifarious writings said he found in the Psalms, "All the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." The man understood fear, worry and grief.

When it came to thinking about the answer to such negative emotions, here is what Calvin had to say: "The stability of the world depends on the rejoicing in God's works....

If on earth, such praise of God does not come to pass... then the whole order of nature will be thrown into confusion..." Let's say that again, "The stability of the world depends on the rejoicing in God's works." It is when we grow slack or cease to glorify God that the world gets out of kilter, the whole world and our personal worlds.

"We are cold when it comes to rejoicing in God!" wrote Calvin. "Hence, we need to exercise ourselves in it and employ all our senses in it – our feet, our hands, our arms and all the rest – that they all might serve in the worship of God and so magnify Him."

Isn't that magnificent advice! We need to employ our whole selves in rejoicing in God. This morning our reading from Revelation took us into the throne room of Christ, the lamb of God, into the throne room of his and our heavenly Father, and what we heard proclaimed there is as true in a time of persecution and difficulty – which was what was going on when St. John had his revelation, as it is in a time of peace – of which at that time the church had known very few.

In the throne room of heaven, Jesus is ascribed worthy of "power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing." Now this is not a wish list which the denizens of heaven have for the Lamb; it is a description of what is now and eternally true about the Son of God. And amongst that, glory is given for his wisdom.

What does wisdom look like? We have spent the last three weeks approaching this question. When we come to think about what the Bible teaches us about wisdom, we find that, as so often in Scripture, what we expect to be an abstract concept is really embodied in God's Son, Jesus.

Wisdom, then, has a human face, the face of Jesus.

We have seen that wisdom is given by God – so was Jesus. We have seen that wisdom is found in delighting in our days and making the most of them – as did Jesus. We have seen that wisdom turns the human understanding of concepts like success, or how the world works best, on its head. As did Jesus. Wisdom has a human face.

In the book of Proverbs, at times Solomon pictures wisdom as a person – as a woman, in fact. In the heavenly throne room, we discover that wisdom is not abstract, but tactile: it is the one who is the lamb of God. Wisdom is Jesus. And for this, as for so much else, God the Son and God the Father and God the Spirit is to be praised. One of the purposes of the book of Revelation is to invite us to worship and lose ourselves in adoration as we join our prayers and praises with those of the heavenly beings and the angels, who hold bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints, of you and me. We are invited, it is wise for us to remember, to spend our days in praise of God.

John Calvin said that the stability of the world depends up on our doing this. He was talking in spiritual terms, but also in terms of human world order: Calvin tended not to separate the two. Calvin knew that if we spend more time in worship of God, glorying in him, really giving his praise our all, then this will change our way of looking at the world which God has made and it will change our way of interacting with our fellow human beings, made in God's image. Praising God is the wisest thing we can do, as it reminds us of our limitations, of our dependency, of our need, and of where all our need is met.

And so, we come back to the Shorter Catechism and the wisdom of the seventeenth century divines. *What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.* We were created to glorify God, to show his glory in our very being and in every word we speak and every action we take. And if we have not been able to live up to that high calling, if we have fallen from our original purpose, Christ, who is the embodied wisdom of God, has restored us, by his death and resurrection giving us his perfection, lifting us up into his presence as children of God. We were created to glorify God and our right place is in God's throne room with the worship of heaven. If we would be wise, we will look to Jesus the embodied wisdom of God, and in following his example, give our energies to glorifying him in word and song, in prayer and in the way that we live our lives before him. Amen.

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