



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Training Our Aim
(*Catechism*, pp. 58-61)
- 📖 Living with Questions of Purpose
(*Catechism*, pp. 62-65)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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First Things First

"What is the chief end of man?" *The Westminster Catechism* famously begins. This reflection on Psalm 8 exemplifies the rich and lively exploration of our faith that first question can spark.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 8

Response (based on Philippians 2:12-13)

As we have obeyed in the past,
let us continue to work out our salvation
with fear and trembling,
for it is God who works in us
to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Meditation

Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.... To work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls, "Working out our salvation," is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)[†]

Reflection

In response to *The Westminster Catechism's* searching question about the ultimate purpose of human life, the answer to be retained in the heart and mind of the believer is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Many catechisms employ a question-and-answer format. They remind us that it is okay to ask difficult questions of meaning and purpose. Indeed, they make us face those questions we usually avoid until trouble comes or until a significant but baffling opportunity arises. "Are we, as the people of God, willing to live with those questions?" Kyle Reese probes. "Are we willing to walk with each other as we discover answers that lead to our vocation in God's world?"

This typical format also reminds us that the answers are crucial. That we are created to glorify and love God, for instance, "is not self-evident to every human being," notes George Mason. It is very different from what our culture teaches—namely, that our spiritual aim should be to achieve personal happiness, which we pursue within the horizon of our freedom. As Mason warns, "The consequences of this shift in aim are deadly to the soul that is made for satisfaction only by glorifying its Creator."

Catechesis is more than just posing questions and memorizing answers. Since it offers us a truthful way of seeing God and the world, catechesis involves character formation as well. For example, what would it mean for us to respond with our lives to that first question and learn to glorify and enjoy God? What practices would we embrace and how would we be changed?

It will help to consider how the psalmist asks God about our place in the divine order of things: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (8:4).



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► *The psalmist puts the question in the context of a powerful God. "We first must learn something about this God who created the heavens and 'established the moon and the stars,'" Kyle Reese observes. God's greatness "is not only seen in the works of creation (8:3), but also in the transformation of words, uttered by helpless babes and infants, into defense against God's own foes (8:2).... God is the sovereign Lord whose name is known throughout the earth. At the same time, God seems willing to risk God's work and words by sharing power with human beings, even babes and infants."*

► *Human purpose is found in responsible stewardship. "You have given [humans] dominion over the works of your hands" (8:6), the psalmist writes in a clear echo of the great creation hymn of Genesis 1. "God seems to hand over a portion of God's work to human beings," Reese says. "It is in this charge that human beings find their call, [their] vocation...."*

We glorify and love God, then, when we embrace and learn our role as disciples within God's redemptive activity in the world. Where do we begin? What do we say? How do we live? The rest of The Westminster Catechism points us to Scripture to guide us in the way we should follow.

"This aim of learning to glorify God requires work, and yet this training does not invalidate the agency of divine grace in the human work," Mason writes. "Christians are made by an ongoing process that can be viewed from one side as grace to grace, and from the other as work to work. Churches that take seriously this grace-work of making Christians will devise means to pass on the faith and form the character of Christians from generation to generation."

Study Questions

1. We do not walk around all the time asking, "What is the point of it all?" When do such questions of meaning or purpose arise for us, according to Kyle Reese? Why is good to be prepared with an answer?
2. In our popular culture – books and magazines, movies and TV shows, and music – what answers do we find to the question, "What is the purpose of human life?"
3. How does Psalm 8 answer the question of life's purpose and meaning? Compare what the psalmist says to the answers you found prominent in our popular culture.
4. Tertullian (c. 160-225) famously wrote, "Human beings are made, not born, Christians." What did he mean, according to Mason? What does this imply about our having a "chief end" (or, ultimate purpose) and our coming to know what it is?
5. Examine the Trinitarian text of Burt Burleson's new hymn, "Make Us All We're Meant to Be." How does it express the paradox that we must continue to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us"?

Departing Hymn: "Make Us All We're Meant to Be"

† Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, revised edition (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1972), 32-33.

First Things First

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Unison Response	Unison Response
Silent Meditation	Silent Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how questions about the meaning and purpose of human life arise.
2. To explore how catechesis (when it follows a traditional question-and-answer approach) requires us to ask difficult questions of meaning and points us to Scripture for answers.
3. To contrast popular culture with *The Westminster Catechism* on whether and how we should respond to questions about the ultimate meaning of human life.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Catechism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"I love the scene in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* where hobbits Frodo and Sam talk about the nature of adventures," writes Kyle Reese. "Prior to their perilous journey, Sam had believed adventures were something that famous heroes or heroines went looking for in order to cure their boredom. Now he has learned that rather than looking for their adventures, these individuals landed in the midst of their tales, which brought with them a host of unsettling questions. Sam's insight leads him to this pressing question in the midst of his and Frodo's journey, 'I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?'" (*Catechism*, 65).

Sam's wise query is at the heart of the Christian faith. Indeed, it is the very first question we should ask, according to *The Westminster Catechism* which begins this way: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer, it turns out, is not only about us, but also about God.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to use our honest and faithful questions to draw us to himself.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 8 from a modern translation.

Response

Read the response together aloud.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Our contributors have been saying that a catechism can lead us to ask the important and difficult questions about our faith and guide us to answers in Scripture. This discussion, drawing on the articles by George Mason and Kyle Reese, exemplifies this with a concrete example – the famous first question and answer of *The West-*

minster Catechism (1674). This catechism, written by the Westminster Assembly during the English Civil War, was published in a “larger” version for proclamation from the pulpit and a “shorter” version for instruction of children. Both are available online at www.ccel.org. The catechism was widely adopted by Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist churches.

The phrase “to glorify God” may seem quaint to us today, but it is good New Testament language that means to make known and bring honor to the activity of God in the world. Paul deploys this language in Romans 15:5-9 to explain how harmony within the Christian community points to God as its source and exemplifies God’s purposes for the world.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to discuss when they’ve raised questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Reese says we ask them when we face great difficulties (e.g., a tragic death, great failure or disappointment, or overwhelming demands) or significant opportunities that reorganize our lives (e.g., changing careers, welcoming a child into our family, or moving across the country). When life is turned upside down in these situations, we must reevaluate our fundamental commitments, expectations of others, and plans for the future. We even may question God’s faithfulness and the significance of family and friends. If we have an answer to the question of meaning, we will know whom we should trust and how to determine the direction forward in life. We will have trained our aim (in Mason’s phrase).
2. “The present possession of personal happiness has become the secular substitute for the spiritual aim of enjoying God forever,” Mason says. Members may give examples of movies, books, and songs that promote a self-centered, pleasure-oriented aim. Does popular culture promote other large aims for human life? Or, do all of the anti-heroes and dark comedies of popular culture suggest that human life has no purpose? Either way, the catechism stands in stark contrast to this, proclaiming (1) that human life has a transcendent purpose and ultimate meaning and (2) that it is found in loving community with God and others.
3. The psalmist locates the meaning of human life within God’s larger purposes for creation. Our lives find meaning because God has created and loves the world and because he invites us into careful understanding and loving stewardship of parts of the creation. Encourage members to contrast these two models of human creativity: the vision in Psalm 8 of stewards who discover new ways of loving and caring for one another and for God’s creatures, and the cultural vision of individuals determining their own values and serving self-created ends. In the first model, human creativity is supported by and reflective of God’s creativity; in the second, it is in competition with God’s power.
4. “[Tertullian] did not mean by that one could not go to heaven unless one is a finished product,” Mason writes. “He meant that if one’s aim in life is...to be shaped into the image of Christ in order better ‘to glorify God and enjoy him forever,’ then some construction must take place to build the character and better the conduct of the believer.” He warns that fellow believers within his Baptist tradition readily see “that being born into a Christian nation or to a Christian home or onto the cradle roll of a Christian congregation does not make one a Christian. Yet we do not seem to see that being born again is only the beginning of an intentional life of transformation into the likeness of Christ.”
Even though our ultimate aim is “imprinted” in our humanity, in the sort of inclinations and needs we naturally have, we only become aware of that aim and faithfully committed to it through training a certain way of life and community. In this sense, others must teach us how to put off the “old self” and put on the “new self” in Christ Jesus.
5. Each verse is a prayer addressing the three persons of God. The second verse emphasizes God’s gracious work in saving, directing, and calling us “to be all we’re meant to be.” The final verse alludes to our work of “professing,” “pursuing,” and “becoming.”

Departing Hymn

“Make Us All We’re Meant to Be” is on pp. 49-51 of *Catechism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.