

# The Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly

by John Murray

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*The Westminster Assembly's Catechisms were the result of a prolonged study of catechism, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms being completed in 1647 and 1648 respectively, and were intended to serve a different purpose from the Confession of Faith.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:2, Matthew 13:52, Matthew 27:57, Matthew 28:19, Acts 14:21

**Topics:** "Discipleship Training", "Bible Study"

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## Description

The preacher emphasizes the importance of making disciples as instructed by Jesus, highlighting the significance of teaching and instructing others to follow His precepts and become adherents of His teachings. The sermon draws parallels to the Chinese Proverb about teaching someone to fish for a lifetime. By engaging in inductive Bible study, individuals can equip themselves to 'feed' spiritually for the rest of their lives on earth. The NT verses provided showcase examples of individuals becoming disciples of Jesus and the command to make disciples of all nations.

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## Transcript

In the records of the Westminster Assembly we find a great deal of debate concerning catechism long before the date upon which the Assembly actually turned to the composition of the two Catechisms with which we are familiar. This prolonged study of catechism was not, however, lost labor; in very admirable fashion it fitted the Assembly for the framing of the Catechisms that were finally adopted.

It was early in 1647 that the Assembly addressed itself to the composition of the two Catechisms we know as the Larger and Shorter. On January 14th of that year it was ordered "that the Committee for the Catechism do prepare a draught of two Catechisms, one more large and another more brief, in which they are to have an eye to the Confession of Faith, and to the matter of the Catechism already begun". From April 15, 1647, a good part of the time of the Assembly was devoted to debate on the Larger Catechism.

It was on August 5th that a committee was chosen to take in hand the matter of the Shorter Catechism. On August 9th we have the first mention of report on the Shorter Catechism. There are several references to the Shorter Catechism in the course of the next two months. On October 25th we have reference in the Minutes to debate on the Shorter Catechism. Considerable speed must have been made after that date, for on November 15th the Shorter Catechism was read as far as the fourth commandment and was ordered to be transcribed. On September 10th Mr. Gower made report on the last questions of the Larger Catechism. Several minor changes were made after this date but on October 15th the Larger Catechism

was completed and it was ordered to be transcribed so that it might be sent to both Houses of Parliament. On October 22nd it was ordered to be sent.

Not later than November 25th the Shorter Catechism was completed, for on November 26th the prolocutor of the Assembly reported that the Shorter Catechism had been delivered to the House of Commons the preceding day and that the House extended its special thanks to the Assembly for its care and pains in the preparation of the said Catechism.

In no country has the Shorter Catechism exercised a greater influence than in Scotland. Yet the evidence requires the conclusion of A. F. Mitchell that "though in Scotland, as elsewhere, this catechism has been, and deservedly so, the most popular of all the productions of the Assembly, it was the one with the elaboration of which the Scotch Commissioners had least to do" (The Westminster Assembly, London, 1883, p. 429).

This conclusion must not, however, be allowed to obscure or minimize the importance of certain other facts. The Shorter Catechism was completed on or before November 25, 1647. On November 15th the Catechism was read as far as the fourth commandment and was ordered to be transcribed. It was only six days earlier that Samuel Rutherford took his leave of the Assembly. Rutherford was, therefore, at Westminster until the greater part of the work on the Shorter Catechism had been performed and for three weeks after the Larger Catechism had been completed. In this connection the minute of October 15th is full of interest and significance. After the Larger Catechism was ordered to be transcribed, we find that upon motion by Mr. Rutherford it was ordered to be recorded in the Scribes' books that "the Assembly hath enjoyed the assistance of the Honorable Reverend and learned Commissioners from the Church of Scotland in the work of the Assembly; during all the time of the debating and perfecting of the 4 things mentioned in the Covenant, viz. the Directory for Worship, the Confession of Faith, Form of Church Government, and Catechism, some of the Reverend and learned Divines Commissioners from the Church of Scotland have been present in and assisting to this Assembly". It would, therefore, be going too far to say that the Scottish Commissioners exercised no influence in the preparation of the Catechisms. Rutherford may have exercised considerable influence in the preparation of both Catechisms. And Gillespie may have exercised considerable influence in the preparation of a great part of the Larger Catechism. Besides, it must be remembered that the Scottish Commissioners took a very active part in the prolonged study of catechism that antedated January 1647, when the Assembly addressed itself to the task of preparing the two Catechisms finally approved. Even though, as A. F. Mitchell points out (*op. cit.*, pp. 414-15), the Scottish Commissioners in these earlier discussions favored a method of catechising different from that followed in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, it is nevertheless impossible to believe that the influence, theological influence at least, of the Scottish Commissioners has not left its mark upon both Catechisms. Furthermore, we must not forget that the order of January 14, 1647, directing the Committee for the Catechism to prepare a draft of two Catechisms, instructed the Committee to have an eye to the Confession of Faith and to the matter of the Catechism already begun. Though it is true, then, that the Scottish Commissioners had less to do with the preparation of the Catechisms than with the other documents, there are also several considerations which prevent us from concluding that their influence was negligible.

From December 1647, to April 1648, considerable time was devoted to the preparation of the Scripture proofs for both Catechisms. By April 12, 1648, the proofs for both had been completed, for on that date the proofs were ordered to be transcribed and sent to both Houses of Parliament.

On July 20, 1648, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland approved the Larger Catechism and on July 28th the Shorter. The two Catechisms and the Confession of Faith as well as the acts of approbation of the General Assembly were ratified and approved by the Convention of Estates of the Scottish Parliament on February 7, 1649.

The Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly were, of course, intended to serve a different purpose from that of the Confession, and any comparison of the Catechisms with the Confession should bear this in mind. It should be said, however, that the formulations of the Catechism, especially of the Larger, are at certain points an improvement over the formulations of the Confession. It is altogether natural that the greater maturity of thought attained at the time the Catechisms were prepared should have had this effect. For example, the formulation of the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace found in the Larger Catechism is more lucid and felicitous than that found in Chapter VII, Section III, of the Confession. A comparison of this section with Questions 30 to 32 in the Larger Catechism will readily show what is meant. Again, the definition of the sinfulness of the estate into which the fall brought mankind, given in both Catechisms, is in at least one respect more adequate than Chapter VI, Sections I to IV, of the Confession. This concerns the question of the imputation of the guilt of Adam's first sin, a doctrine distinctly asserted in the Confession (Chapter VI, Section III) but not clearly grounded in the covenant relationship between Adam and posterity, as is done in the Larger Catechism, Question 22, and in the Shorter, Question 16. Well-grounded may be the surmise of William Cunningham that the discussions taking place in France in connection with Placaeus' doctrine of mediate imputation and the decisions of the Synod of Charenton (1644-1645) had become better known and their implications better understood when the divines prepared the Catechisms. In any case, greater precision is manifest in both Catechisms than appears in the Confession. Examples like these show how necessary it is, in determining the position of the Westminster Assembly, to consult the Catechisms as well as the Confession, and in the matter of the subordinate standards in Presbyterian churches a great deal is to be gained by the inclusion of the Catechisms as well as the Confession.

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