

Questions 1–6

FOUNDATIONS





Question 1. Who is the first and chiefest being?

Answer. God is the first and chiefest being.

The Baptist Catechism begins with God.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Baptist Catechism is nearly identical with the Westminster Shorter Catechism. One of the most obvious differences between the two is that the first question of the two catechisms is different. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with what may be the most well-known catechism question and answer in the world: “What is the chief end of man?” Answer: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Why is this question and answer so well known? Well, there are a couple reasons. One, there are a lot of people who begin to memorize the Shorter Catechism who get no further than the first question! Two, it is a really delightful and foundational truth and deserves to be carefully considered and observed. When a person deliberately orders his life so that he will glorify God and enjoy Him forever, he will live his life well.

I sometimes see in antique stores some rusty old tool that I cannot identify. Often there is a label that states the price of the item and identifies what it was used for. I think that many people today have forgotten the worth of human life and have no idea what humans were made for. For those who have forgotten, and for any curious angelic observers, humans have a tag that identifies our worth and what we were made for: “Made in the image of God” and “To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

Why would the Baptists bypass such a classic opening question and opt for “Who is the first and chiefest being?” The Baptists were making plain a

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fundamental truth that the authors of the Shorter Catechism assumed could be taken for granted. Namely, all truth is founded in God and His character, and therefore any summary of Christian teaching must begin with God.

Like the Bible, the Baptist Catechism does not attempt to prove that there is a God. God's existence probably cannot be proven to satisfy someone who has become a skeptic, and His existence does not need to be proven to satisfy a person who is willing to believe the truth. We do not need to convince a newborn baby that there is oxygen in the air and that she needs to breathe it. She was designed to breathe it. She may grow up to be a stubborn person who denies that oxygen exists, but as long as she lives, she lives breathing—and being kept alive by—the very thing that she denies. God is more essential to life than air. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God's existence may not be recognized by a skeptic, but to the seeing eye, we live in a world that is bursting with God. If we cannot see evidence of His existence, it is our own fault. As an insightful poet observed, “’Tis ye, ’tis your estranged faces that miss the many-splendored thing.”¹

Just as we cannot live without God, we cannot know anything without God. The fact that we can think at all is because of God. Jesus is “the true light, which gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). If, as the theory of evolution would have us believe, our capacity to think is nothing more than the result of the random movement of atoms, it does not make sense that we would trust our reason to be a reliable guide for perceiving reality. A young man in a church that I pastored was a great intellectual and had read a whole library full of books. For years he remained a non-Christian, holding back from committing himself to Christ while insisting that he had to have reasonable proof that Christianity was true. One day, it dawned on him that he could not prove that reason itself was trustworthy; he had simply taken it on faith that reason was reliable. He suddenly realized that he was lost on a shoreless sea and had no compass. He told me later, “I

1. Francis Thompson, “In No Strange Land,” *A Treasury of Great Poems*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (Galahad Books, 1955), 1008. A poem well worth committing to memory.

had to take something by faith, so, I decided that I would believe that the Bible was a reliable guide to truth.” I asked him, “And it was shortly after you accepted the Bible that you became a Christian?” He answered, “It was virtually simultaneous. You see, I knew what the Bible said about Christ.”

God is the first being.

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god’” (Isa. 44:6).

There was a time when only God existed. No one created God; He simply always exists. He is eternal. One of His names is “I AM.” No one else in the universe can legitimately call himself “I AM,” because everyone other than God is dependent on someone else for his existence. Only God is self-existent. If you cannot understand this, do not worry; no one can. Many of the most important ideas in the universe are not like riddles that we must decipher; they are revelations that we are to believe. God’s eternity is one of those essential truths that has been revealed, and we believe it because God has said it. When you become convinced that something is true because someone has said that it is true, that is faith.

Since God is the first being, it follows that God has created everything that now exists, including us. Because God created us, He knows how we were made to live, and He has every right to tell us what to do. We are like a character in a novel or a play or a video game: our entire world has been created by the author or designer. He has designed our world, and He has designed us to live according to the rules He has implemented. God has given us all the tools we use to know anything in this world of His that He has created. He has given us His Word. He has given the capacity for reason, along with a desire to know. We did not write the play, and we did not cast the characters or design the set. It is not our place to criticize all that. It is our responsibility to play the part and fill the role that has been assigned to us.