

Meditations on
Belonging to God:
A First Catechism

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A First Catechism

Keith M. Curran



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These pages are dedicated to the congregation I serve, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church of Suffolk, Virginia, who received them in sermon form with eager minds and open hearts and allowed me thinking time to put the series together. I am blessed to serve such a fine church.

These pages are also dedicated to my wife, Debbie, and our four sons, Peter, Kiel, Todd, and Daniel.

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Introduction

In preparing the sermons on which this book is based, I stretched far out on a limb and went against everything I was taught about preparing sermons. As a Macleod-era Princeton Seminary graduate, I know better. I was taught by one of the best preaching professors of that day. As a student with a preaching major and a worship minor, I was challenged by three years of his classes. Our senior preaching seminar for majors included a number of students who have become well-known in the Presbyterian Church, and I think I could have pointed them out back then as we sat around the table in the basement of Miller Chapel. I can imagine them following the Macleod method each week as they prepare powerful and Spirit-filled sermons. I confess that I have backslid and created my own method, for better or worse.

Professor Donald Macleod would have us select a text. (In the mid-1970s the lectionary was not a regular tool for Presbyterians but I am sure that if it were, he would have sent us there for our selection.) Then he would ask us to write down any first impressions prior to the formal textual study, in which we studied the text in the original language and used every commentary we could find. From that study and initial impressions, he would charge us to ruminate and pray for the Holy Spirit's inspiration to lead us to a theme statement or a purpose sentence. Once we could picture where the sermon was going and how it would conclude, we were required to construct an outline. Illustrations and connecting or contrasting Scripture texts were incorporated at this point. Then we were to write out the sermon in manuscript form. After a rewrite or two by Friday, we were set. Some chose to re-outline the message for presentation, while others preached directly from the manuscript. I continue to follow the latter style, and it has worked for me. The sermons included in this book are refined versions of the manuscripts I used on Sunday mornings.

The Macleodian format was *the* way of preparing and writing sermons for an entire generation of Princeton graduates, from the late 1940s to the late 1970s. But in some respects, I veered from the Macleodian method shortly after graduation and developed my own style. Although I incorporate many of the great techniques I learned at seminary, my starting place and stopping point are more Spirit-inspired. Typical starting places are a month or so of themed texts or a series on a matter of practical living, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, or the Great Ends of the Church. By selecting blocks of themes or a book of the Bible, I am able to plan my preaching themes sometimes as much as nine months in advance. This gives me a general direction. Each sermon is placed in a specific file, into which I am able to drop thoughts, illustrations, biblical texts, ideas from books read, and comments heard from persons, newscasts, or television shows. When I come to the file for the upcoming Sunday, it usually contains a handful of starter thoughts and some illustrations to use as building blocks.

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I also have found that a theme sentence or purpose statement is helpful, but I do not use it as the goal of a sermon. Often, by the time I reach the conclusion, the theme I started with has been transformed, transitioned, or dropped as the sermon developed. So now I tend not to try to manage the conclusion before I start, but instead allow the Spirit to work—through the weekly process of study, research, text exploration, theme connections, and the rest—and lead to a more “natural” ending of the sermon. I am frequently surprised where it takes me. Sometimes I want to add a more fleshed-out conclusion than what I have on paper, but I have learned not to mess with it. This approach seems to work well for me.

I share this as a way to answer a question my editor wanted me to address. She asked if I would explain how I worked up sermons based on the contemporary catechism. Specifically, I started with each catechism question and answer and the corresponding texts that are listed after each question and answer. Instead of a three-or four-month block of themes, I had sixty Questions and Answers’ worth of files with which to work. I collected illustrations and other material wherever possible and started to fill up the files. A month before the sermon was to be preached, I pulled the file and looked at it each week, jotting down some ideas and reflections on the theme and texts. Two weeks before it was to be preached, I did a more thorough study of the texts and topics, using commentaries and other resources from my library. The week of the sermon, an outline was set and the illustrations and background material were intertwined to form a rough sermon. Then I would type out the manuscript and refine it by Friday afternoon.

Because this was a theologically themed sermon series, I spent a lot more time than usual with the theology books on my shelf. I also found that I kept an eye out for denominational material on particular theological issues. The *Presbyterian Outlook Online* was a big help, as was the PC(USA) Web site. Making theology interesting for the congregation was another challenge. Although I have a few members who really enjoy a sermon that struggles with theological and philosophical matters, most people find that a bit boring. Linking text and theology and presenting it in a listener-friendly way required some creative use of illustrations and personal stories to create interest and to frame the more difficult concepts in ways that speak to a congregation as varied as the one I serve.

Prior to presenting the sermon series, I sent each family in the church a copy of the catechism along with a pastoral letter explaining its value as a faith statement. I encouraged families and individuals alike to use it in their devotional time and family prayers. New members who joined during the year and a half that it took to work through the catechism were also given the material so that they could feel included in the congregation-wide project. Often the children’s sermon would highlight the week’s Q/A theme as well. Occasionally the Q/A would be incorporated into the prayers in the service, and our music team based the hymns, service music, and anthems on the theme of the day. I did take a break from the series for Advent and Christmas,

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but picked it up again at the New Year. I planned to end with Question 60 and the word “Amen” on Easter Sunday. This allowed me to combine a few like-themed Q/As from time to time to fit the schedule.

The congregation received the series very well, and the printed sermons I provide each week usually ran out. I also received requests from missionaries, fellow ministers, and friends of the church to e-mail them the sermons each week. Knowing that the sermons had such value encouraged me to stick with it over the year and a half.

I hope these meditations will inspire others to realize that theology matters in the contemporary church. Whether they are used to supplement curriculum, or for personal or meeting devotions, or for general reading, I hope the Holy Spirit speaks to the church through this labor of love.

1 Who Am I?

John 1:12

Who are we? Why are we here in the universe? What are we? The most basic yet profound questions arise from the simple wonder “Who am I in this world?” Science has tried to answer it. A recent educational television program stated that human beings are here on earth because a large asteroid crashed into the Gulf of Mexico 65 million years ago. The asteroid destroyed the dominant species of life on earth, the dinosaurs, and opened the way for the development of mammals, including primates. We humans would not be here if that six-mile-wide asteroid had not hit the earth long ago.

So . . . we are the result of a geological-astrophysical accident that happened sixty-five million years ago. That’s one way to think about it. Philosophy has tried to answer the same basic question of life, but of all the volumes of philosophy ever written by brilliant thinkers from all corners of the world, none have come close to a satisfying answer.

Over the centuries the church has also wondered, who are we? Why are we here? What are we in the world? But instead of looking through a telescope or an electron microscope for a provable theory of existence, or mining the depths of the human intellect for a profound philosophy, the church has looked outside the created order for the ultimate answer. And only there has the truth been found.

In one era the church answered the question “Whose am I?” by saying, “I belong to God.”¹ In another era the church wondered, “What are we all about? What’s our purpose in life?” And the church answered, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”² In the mid-twentieth century the church asked the question “Why are we here?” The answer provided is that God created human beings so they could respond to God’s love.³ I was created so that I can return the love God shows to me.

But the most basic question of human existence has yet to be answered by the church: “Who am I?” Now twenty-first-century Presbyterians have an answer. A new statement of faith, called *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*, answers life’s most basic question, “Who am I?”

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“Hold it, Keith, a catechism? What’s a catechism?” you may be thinking. A catechism is a statement of faith put in a question-and-answer format for easy learning. A catechism is a series of questions and answers on religious teachings. Our Presbyterian denomination has recently prepared a contemporary catechism called *Belonging to God* to help church members and their families understand what we believe. The time is right for such a tool.

Social scientists tell us that we are living in a post-Christian age, a time when our values and social norms no longer automatically reflect Judeo-Christian ethics and moral patterns. It is a time in history when pluralism and nonreligious values hold at least as much sway in society as the traditional Judeo-Christian value system, long the standard for Western civilization and the basis for our North American way of life. This means that much of what the church teaches in Sunday school, youth group, confirmation class, and in the weekly sermon is at odds with the values expressed on those endless repeats of *Friends* or the current issue of *People* magazine.

I remember being shocked one morning as I read in the newspaper that, according to a recent survey of prime-time television, the show with the most positive references to God and traditional Christian values was *The Simpsons*. Imagine that: the church’s best hope out there in the vast wasteland of television is *The Simpsons*! We can use all the help we can get, but it is the church’s responsibility to provide the tools to help us know what we believe.

Many of those who grew up in the Presbyterian Church in the 1940s and ‘50s can recall memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism, or at least parts of it, sometime in their childhood. Ask a Presbyterian of the so-called Builder Generation, “What is the chief end of man?” and he or she will bark out, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁴ The practice of memorizing the catechism has all but disappeared. Our denominational leaders have rightly discerned that now is the time to revisit the time-honored practice of learning the basics of the faith through the teaching tool of a contemporary catechism. The hope is that the newest generation of believers and their families will find the catechetical style of learning the truths of the Christian faith to be an exciting teaching method and a refreshing challenge for a new century. In a time when cultural values are often at odds with what we hear and experience at church, our denomination is offering an effective tool to teach our children, teenagers, and adults the historic truths about God as expressed in Reformed theology—in order to provide basic theological information to expose countercultural or New Age claims that disguise themselves as spiritual truths, to offer an assurance of grace and love that can’t be shaken, to lead us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to point us to our eternal home.

The sixty questions and answers that make up the new catechism, *Belonging to God*, are a great starting place for twenty-first-century Presbyterians who want to learn the basics of biblical truth and Reformed theology so that they will be able to express them in ways that make sense to our children, spouses, coworkers, or church school classes. In this

Who Am I?

contemporary catechism we find many of the answers people of faith are asking, including the primal question that nags at the psyche of all humanity:

Who am I?

Three one-syllable words. Such a simple question, if answered truthfully, will offer the questioner a peace like no other peace on earth, a calm that no crystal sea has ever known, and a calling like none ever witnessed in the annals of time.

Who am I? Who am I in this heart-pumping, gene-packed life form?

Q. 1. Who are you?

A. 1. I am a child of God.

What Does It Mean to Be a Child of God?

Matthew 18:14; 1 Corinthians 3:23

The second question of the contemporary catechism is a natural follow-up to the first. It asks: “What does it mean to be a child of God?” Being a child of God does not mean we are childish in our faith. Being childish in matters of faith often leads to confusion in our beliefs. For example: A Presbyterian elder took along his young son when he went to the driving range on a Sunday morning. The little boy rattled his father when he asked, “Daddy, do you think God will tell Santa Claus we didn’t go to church today?”

Childish faith does not produce proper perspective. But being a child of God does not mean we are childish. Biblically speaking, being a child of God is a way of saying we belong to God, our heavenly Father, our divine Parent, who loves us with a love that will not let us go. When Jesus spoke about the love God has for his people, he used the illustration of a shepherd who would leave ninety-nine sheep in the pen so he could search for one lost lamb. And the shepherd would not give up the search until the lamb was found and returned to the fold. As Jesus explained it: “In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost” (Matt. 18:14 TEV).

The Greek word for what we translate “does not want” is really a more forceful word than this. A better way to express the Good Shepherd’s desire is to say that God has a “passionate determination” to hold on to every child of God. Being a child of God means that our divine Parent loves us with a love that *will not let us go*. There is a passionate determination on God’s part to keep us in God’s loving care.

Being a child of God also means that God is working behind the scenes, implanting a longing in our hearts that can only be satisfied by a personal relationship with our heavenly Father. Augustine affirmed that our hearts are restless until they find respite in God. As a loving Parent, God not only wants us to come into his presence; he also draws us in by that same parental love.

The church I serve has loads of young children. They run around on Sunday mornings in the narthex and really make themselves at home. To honor the importance of children in the church, the architect was asked to include a special way to recognize the children of the church in his design for

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our new building. He came up with a children's wall. Attractive bricks fill the wall in front of the main entrance to the sanctuary. On each brick a child is honored using a brass plaque with name and date of birth or baptism. The brick wall surrounds a stained glass window, created by a local artisan, that depicts the scene from Matthew 19:14, where Jesus said, "Let the children come to me." Children eager for a blessing surround Jesus. In the story, the disciples try to keep the children at bay so that their jumping up on his lap or tugging at his tunic with grimy hands will not disturb him. But Jesus orders his disciples aside and welcomes the little ones. They giggle at his deep Galilean voice and grab for his calloused carpenter's hands. And in his blessing of the children his voice is still reverberating around the globe two thousand years later. "Don't stop them! Let them come close to me. The spiritual treasures of heaven belong to children such as these" (Matt. 19:14, paraphr.). God is encouraging us to come close.

Biblically speaking, being a child of God means we are part of the family. The apostle Paul reminds us, "You belong to Christ . . ." (1 Cor. 3:23). You will never be traded to another team for a future draft choice. Your contract will not be bought out. You will never be laid off or let go or fired. You cannot be stolen in the middle of the night, locked out of your heavenly home, or cut off in a storm, because a child of God belongs to God.

Yet once in a while we forget that we are children of God. We forget that we have already answered the first question of the contemporary catechism. So it is important to be reminded of who we are. A classmate of mine at Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes, has a great illustration in his book *Hustling God* about how we can forget that we belong to God. What would happen if a baby eagle were adopted by a family of snakes? As it grew up, its little wings would grow and the eagle would try them out, but the snakes would say, "No, no, no. Don't ever try that. Your wings are ugly. What you should do is crawl on your belly. Hide under a rock and bite anyone who scares you." Can you imagine anything more pathetic than an eagle pretending to be a snake?

Barnes says, "We can never justify acting like a snake just because we live in a world that is filled with snakes. Nor can we excuse our venom by saying, 'Just get used to it, because that's who I am.'" ⁵ Who am I? Am I a snake that looks like an eagle? That is not who you are! "You are God's creation, and he didn't make you angry, cynical, or deadly. You can pretend to be a snake if you insist, but God will never settle for it."⁶

Harry Potter lived in a muggle home. Muggles, according to the story, are non-magical folk. The family tried to raise Harry as a muggle. They did everything they could think of to make him as ordinary and unimaginative as they were. Harry lived a muggle's life that cramped his spirit even more than living in a tiny closet under the stairs cramped his dreams. Harry was like an eagle raised by snakes; his wings were tied. Then the letter from Hogwarts School of Wizarding and Witchcraft came, inviting him to attend the school in the fall. But the muggles would not let him see it. Hundreds of letters arrived, and then thousands of them that reminded Harry who he really was. Harry

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wasn't a muggle! Harry was magical! In fact, he was the most famous person in the wizarding world!

Isn't that what the Bible is trying to tell us? You are not a snake. You are not a muggle. You are not an accident of nature. You are a child of God. . . . Remember who you are and whose you are. It doesn't matter if you are white-collar or blue-collar, a Dead-head or a Parrot-head, a Ms., Mr., or Mrs. If you are a Gen-Xer or a Boomer, a Yankee or a good ol' boy, a Hokie, a Blue Devil, a Tiger or a Redskin fan, it makes no difference. You may be a Methodist or a Lutheran, a Presbyterian or a Catholic. You can be an introvert or an extrovert, a Democrat, Republican, or Green Party member. Paul says that none of these matter when it comes to who we are in God's sight (Gal. 3:28–29). You are a child of God and that means you belong to God, who loves you very much.

Q. 2. What does it mean to be a child of God?

A. 2. That I belong to God, who loves me.