

The Parks Church Catechism

What is a catechism, and why should I use it?

What is it?

This word (pronounced KA-tuh--KI-zum) may sound harsh and alien to the modern English speaker. Or if you have heard it, you might associate it with the Roman Catholic Church or another “high” church. While we might view catechesis (KA-tuh--KEE-sis), the process of working through a catechism, as something foreign to us and our tradition, that standing ought to be reversed.

The New Testament suggests that the early church followed a pattern or tradition of basic Christian doctrine and practice (see Rom 6:17; 2 Tim 1:13; Acts 2:42; 2 Thes 2:15; Acts 20:27). Although some doctrines needed time to develop in light of various issues that the churches faced (we see Paul clarifying and developing Christian belief in a number of contexts, for example), they acknowledged a set of beliefs and practices that all ought to accept in order to follow the way of Christ faithfully. These were not haphazard or scattered but structured in order to better instruct believers.

Catechesis is just this: instruction of the fundamentals in an orderly manner. It may sound foreign only because it is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning to instruct or teach, which we see used multiple times in the New Testament (see Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; 1 Cor 14:19; Gal 6:6). Many argue that this instruction was done orally between “one who teaches” (catechizer) and “one who is taught” (catechumen).

Thus, throughout the history of the church, catechisms were developed which not only systematically covered that which is necessary for faith and life but did so in a question-and-answer format. The teacher would ask a question about doctrine or practice, and the student would answer with the memorized response. Shorter, simpler catechisms might be written for children or new believers and longer, more advanced catechisms for those desiring to grow deeper in their faith.

Why use it?

False teachings and practices have always threatened to creep into the church and lead us away from God. Jesus warns us of this (Matt 7:15; 24:11; Mark 13:22). Paul warns us (2 Cor 11:1-15; 1 Tim 1:3-11; and many, many more). Peter warns us (2 Peter 2:1-3). John warns us (1 John 4:1). You get the idea. It is all too easy to be taken captive by empty philosophy (Col 2:8), tossed about on the waves of human cunning and deceit (Eph 4:14).

Every generation faces its own errors, its own ways of moving away from the truth of the gospel. In our context in particular, it is all too easy to come under the sway of Darwinism, relativism, secularism, and a whole host of other “-isms,” not to mention pseudo-Christian beliefs that have politicized and weaponized the Word of God. Just as new catechisms have been created in the past to meet the specific errors of their time, so too do we need the Word of God taught to us anew. And catechesis is uniquely situated to do this.

The Language and Heart of Faith

For many in the 21st century, memorization is both difficult and boring. Why memorize when you have access to the knowledge of the internet in your pocket? Taking the time to commit the catechism answers to heart seems simply unnecessary. Nonetheless, doing this embeds within you the language of faith. The basic language of Christian belief becomes part of you, setting a proper foundation upon which greater understanding can be built.

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When these concepts are established in your memory, you will have been trained to think in biblical categories. These ideas can then be brought to life through reading your Bible and devotional books, hearing sermons and lectures, or contemplating and meditating the things of God. Engaging in those activities without a foundation will prove much more difficult to deepen your knowledge of, and thus your affections for, God.

We know that the mouth speaks from the depths of the heart (Luke 6:45). So it additionally follows that if you take the time to embed the language of faith into your heart, it will more readily spring forward in words when given the opportunity, generating a clarity of thought and expression when commending the faith to others. You won't be grasping for the words to express why God created the world or what has gone wrong with the world or why Jesus' death and resurrection provides the only solution to the world's problems. That will come second nature, and you will be able to more readily give glory to God and speak his truth in the face of unbelief and error.

The Unity of Faith

Theologians and church leaders throughout the history of the Church have recognized another essential benefit of catechism. While the previous benefit focused on "you," this one focuses on "us." If I have been taught the language and heart of faith, and you have been taught it, and others have been taught it; we now share that it common. In short, we have grown together in unity around true faith, not around a haphazard mix of individual beliefs.

If catechesis begins in childhood (combined, of course, with the love and prayer that ought to be representative of Christian upbringing), these basics of biblical truth can help guide every child in the church from their baby dedication, to their outward profession of faith, into the waters of baptism, and alongside the table of communion. When two different believers profess to have faith, we can have greater certainty they mean the same things. When two believers participate in baptism, they will be unified in their understanding of what is taking place. When two Christians partake of the Lord's Supper, there will not be disunity because of unbelief or misunderstanding, which the Lord abhors (see 1 Cor 11).

As has been mentioned, catechisms help preserve the Church in unity of doctrine and practice against error, false beliefs and practices, and heresy. How? We share the language of faith which has been embedded in our hearts. Straying from the Word then becomes more difficult as we are bound together to its teaching.

Finally, if we are all taught the language of the faith through catechesis, we are more likely to be unified in our mission of bearing witness to the goodness and glory of God. A business or non-profit is going to achieve its mission more successfully if every member understands what that association is all about, if they are unified around the mission. The same is true of the Church. When we all understand more clearly what we're about, we can be more effective witnesses.

Why not something else?

All of these benefits seemingly could be achieved by other forms of instruction. What makes a catechism's format more desirable? As noted already, the aspect of memorization helps to embed the language of faith more firmly into our hearts. But there is more. A catechism is by design dialogical. That is to say, it's a conversation starter. This makes it more communal and participatory than reading a book or listening to a lecture or sermon. We learn as we engage the things of God together.

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Because of its dialogical nature, we become primed to ask questions about God's Word and to expect an answer. This is good! Questions and doubts are not to be feared and suppressed. They are to be shared and countered with truth. Too many Christians are unwilling to express their questions. But because they know the catechism, question-asking seems natural as it should be. And too many Christians fear their questions because uncertainty about the existence of a satisfactory answer plagues them. But because they know the catechism, they expect that there are good, biblical responses to questions.

This is particularly personal for me. Growing up with my own sometimes unexpressed questions, it took me too long to realize that people throughout the history of the Church have been asking — and answering! — the same questions. I was not alone, and there were solid responses to our questions thought out by people of God who lived in tune with God's Word. The catechism helps us to see this better than other forms of instruction.

See Further

Achtemeier, P. Mark. "Reflections on Calvin's Catechetics." Calvin Studies VI: Presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College and Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson, North Carolina, January 17–18, 1992. Pp 59-76.

https://foundationrt.org/bw/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Achtemeier_Calvins_Catechetics.pdf

Keller, Tim. "The New City Catechism: Introduction." The New City Catechism. Accessed at <http://newcitycatechism.com/introduction-timothy-keller>.

Piper, John. "A Baptist Catechism: Adapted by John Piper." Desiring God. Written January 1, 1986. Accessed at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-baptist-catechism>.

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How was the TPC Catechism prepared? How is it different from other catechisms?

The TPC Catechism is not purely an original work. In large part, it is based on the [New City Catechism](#), taking some of its questions and answers verbatim. The NCC is itself based on the much older [Heidelberg Catechism](#) (1563) and [Westminster Catechism](#) (1647). I have returned to these catechisms as well as John Calvin's Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1545) for insight regarding the general outline of the catechism and for inspiration regarding the framing of questions and answers.

Outline

The structure of the TPC Catechism follows more closely that of Calvin's catechism. Broadly speaking these are: (1) Introduction, (2) Faith, (3) Witness, (4) Worship.

Introduction

First, we entertain perhaps life's biggest question: What is our only hope in life and death? God is our only hope, which we come to find through his Word. Well, what is the Word of God, and why should we trust it? Given that our culture struggles with questions of authority, we must be prepared to answer why we know and trust the Bible as God's Word. We see, in addition, that the Word is the seed for faith, trains us to live this faith out in our public witness, and guides our worship. Thus, the TPC Catechism attempts to lay out that which the Word teaches: faith, witness, worship.

Faith

Second, we must understand what faith is and what is the content of the Christian faith. Because God is trinitarian, we speak of God as 3-in-1: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although all three persons of the Godhead participate in every work of God, still the Father is most associated with Creation, the Son with Redemption, and the Holy Spirit with Restoration. In doing so, we come to see who God is and how he acts towards the world, who we are and what has gone wrong, and how all things are to be renewed.

Many catechisms short-change doctrines concerning the Holy Spirit and the Church, and while the center fully remains Jesus Christ, we have attempted to remedy the lack of clarity concerning these two doctrines. The Holy Spirit is the one who applies Christ's work in our lives and empowers us to live like redeemed people. We need to know this! And the Church is God's plan to spread the gospel and restore fallen creation. That too cannot be forgotten.

Witness

Third, when our faith is rightly placed in God, this ought to be expressed in our works. In many catechisms, the explanation of God's moral law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) comes before talking about redemption. In the law, we see our inadequacy and our need for a savior. While this is true, the law was originally given in written form after deliverance. (The Hebrews were freed from Egypt and then given the Ten Commandments.) Thus, the primary function of the law is to guide and preserve those who live within God's saving grace.

In this section, it seemed necessary to consider why it appears that Christians don't follow all of the Old Testament law since this question often arises, especially in the debate concerning homosexuality. ("Why do you not follow the law about abstaining from pork but you do follow the

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law about homosexuality?") And because many want to reduce religion to a private matter, we must consider in what spheres God calls us to bear witness.

Worship

Lastly, all people naturally worship that which they admire and adore. For Christians, it is natural that God be the sole object of our worship. However, many of us have not considered what worship truly is and if God has ordained that our worship take a certain shape. Worship is more than self-expression, and there are in fact regular means of worship. Thus, we consider our reading and hearing of the Word, participating in the sacraments, and offering prayer.

Length

For some, the length of the catechism is daunting. For others, the length of the answers is daunting. It might be of some help to know that I have attempted to be as economical with words as possible while retaining robust answers. The catechism itself (at 52 questions and answers) follows the New City Catechism rather than the older catechisms which generally include well over 100 questions and answers. (Calvin's catechism, for example, includes 373 questions and answers!)

In reducing the number of questions, this sometimes required combining multiple questions from an older catechism into one question for the TPC Catechism. The result might produce a longer answer but one that is more succinct overall. (If memorizing long answers scares you, see the following section for some memorization tips.)

My hope is that overall the word choice of both questions and answers will effectively help to meet the needs, concerns, and errors of our context.

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Section One: Introduction

Q/A 1

What is our only hope in life and death?

True hope is that we are not our own but belong, body and soul, in both life and death, to God our Father and to our Savior Jesus Christ.

Q/A 2

How do we come to know of this hope?

By the light of nature we know of God's almighty power, but by his Word we learn of his fatherly care and redemptive love which overcomes even sin and death.

Q/A 3

What is the Word of God?

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the inspired, infallible, and authoritative Word of God, leading us to trust him in faith, serve him in obedience, and worship him in Spirit and truth.

Q/A 4

Why do we believe that the Bible is the Word of God?

Scripture evidences itself to be God's Word by the purity of its teaching, the unity of its parts, and its power to convert sinners and edify the saints. But only the Holy Spirit can finally illuminate our minds and regenerate our hearts to understand and believe.

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Section Two: Faith

The Father and Creation

Q/A 5

What is the Christian faith which grows from the Word of God?

Christian faith is the movement of our whole self to know, trust, and rely on the faithfulness of God fully revealed in Jesus Christ and freely given by the Holy Spirit.

Q/A 6

What is God?

God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. He is eternal, infinite, and unchangeable in his power and perfection; goodness and glory; wisdom, justice, and truth. Nothing happens except through him and by his will.

Q/A 7

Who is God?

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the three persons of the one true and living God. They are the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

Q/A 8

How and why did God create?

Not from any lack or loneliness, but from the abundance of his love, God created all things out of nothing by his powerful Word according to his wisdom, declaring creation to be very good.

Q/A 9

How and for what purpose did God create us?

God formed us in his own image, as male and female, that we might freely know him, love him, live with him, and follow his commands, which always lead to our flourishing. We who were created by God should live to his glory and not our own.

Q/A 10

What does God require of us?

God requires that we reflect his holiness with our whole being: That we love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. What God forbids should never be done, and what God commands should always be done.

Q/A 11

Did God create us unable to fulfill our purpose?

No, not originally. But because our first parents, Adam and Eve, desired to be like God and in willful disobedience ate of the forbidden tree, we are born in sin and guilt, are corrupt in our nature, and falsely bear God's image.

Q/A 12

What is sin?

Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in thought, word, and deed; rebelling against him by living without reference to him; and not being or doing what he requires of us.

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Q/A 13

How ought God respond to our sin?

Every sin is against the sovereignty, holiness, and goodness of God, securing his righteous anger. As a good and just judge, he demands that the offenses against his supreme majesty be paid with the supreme penalty — spiritual and physical death — in order that goodness may be restored.

Q/A 14

What is the effect of Adam's sin on the rest of creation?

Individuals, cultures, and nature are fallen because of sin and subject to brokenness, corruption, and death; and all of creation waits with eager longing for the peace, wholeness, and renewal of God.

Q/A 15

How can God be our only hope if we are left in the misery of sin and condemnation of eternal punishment?

To satisfy his justice and his mercy, God chose to enter into a covenant of grace with us, deliver us from sin and punishment, and reconcile us to himself -- all by the mediation of a Redeemer.

The Son and Redemption

Q/A 16

Who is Jesus?

The eternally begotten Son of God who took on flesh as the Messiah (or Christ), redeeming us and securing our salvation by bearing our sin and sin's penalty on the cross.

Q/A 17

Why must the Redeemer be truly God?

Because of his divine nature, his obedience and suffering would be perfect and effective, and he would be able to bear the righteous anger of God against sin and yet overcome death.

Q/A 18

Why must the Redeemer be truly human?

Because of his human nature, he might on our behalf perfectly obey the whole law and suffer the punishment for human sin, and he might sympathize with our weaknesses.

Q/A 19

Why is Jesus our Redeemer called the Messiah (or the Christ), meaning "Anointed One"?

He is so named because he is the fulfillment of the covenants of grace, the one whom the Scriptures prophesied would be ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet, who reveals to us the nature of God and his will concerning our redemption; our high priest, who reconciles us to the Father by offering the perfect sacrifice of his own body and interceding on our behalf; and our eternal king, who rules us by his Word and Spirit and who keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.

Q/A 20

Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer and die?

This is the gospel: Since sin rightly deserves death but God is full of grace and love, Christ suffered

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and died willingly in our place to pay the penalty of sin and achieved for us the redemption of our body and soul: once and for all the forgiveness of our sin, freedom from sin's power, and eternal fellowship with God.

Q/A 21

Can salvation be achieved outside of Jesus Christ?

No, only by his free gift of grace -- and not by any merit of our own or by any idol we contrive -- do we come to know and experience salvation when we trust in faith his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, repent of our sin, and worship him alone.

Q/A 22

What else does Christ's death redeem?

Christ's death is the beginning of the redemption and renewal of every part of fallen creation, as he powerfully directs all things for his own glory and creation's good in the establishment of his Kingdom of love, peace, and wholeness.

Q/A 23

What do we benefit from Jesus' bodily resurrection?

By being physically resurrected, Christ triumphed over sin and death so that all who trust in him are raised to new life in this world and to everlasting life, in both body and soul, in the world to come.

Q/A 24

Of what advantage to us is Christ's ascension?

Christ physically ascended into heaven in order to rule and reign on the throne at the right hand of the Father, in whose presence he advocates for us and from whom he sends his Spirit to us.

The Holy Spirit and Restoration

Q/A 25

Who is the Holy Spirit?

He is eternally God who proceeds from the Father and the Son and binds the Trinity in divine love. He was the promised blessing and power of God in Scripture and is now poured out irrevocably to all who believe.

Q/A 26

How does the Holy Spirit effect faith and redemption in us?

The Holy Spirit freely draws us to faith in the gospel by enlightening our corrupt mind, convicting us of our sin, and regenerating our dead heart. What Christ achieved for us, the Spirit applies within us as he unites us to Christ.

Q/A 27

What are the achievements of Christ given to us by the Holy Spirit?

When the Spirit unites us to Christ in faith, we receive justification, our declared righteousness before God; adoption, acceptance into his family as inheritors of righteousness; and sanctification, our gradual death to sin and renewal in righteousness.

Q/A 28

What further benefit do we derive from the Holy Spirit on a daily basis?

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As he takes up residence within us, the Holy Spirit continually comforts us in grief, guides us with discernment, gives us spiritual gifts, and empowers us to live as the redeemed people of God's Kingdom.

Q/A 29

To whom does the Holy Spirit offer the grace of God?

God in his mercy demonstrates common grace to all by restraining the effects of sin and enabling works of culture for human well-being, but only those whom he calls into saving faith and unites with Jesus can be called sons and daughters of God.

Q/A 30

What is the Church?

All those whom God has gathered and preserved for himself constitute a new community, a new family. United together by faith, the Church spans time and place, gender and race, age and class -- loving, following, and worshipping God under the authority of his Word.

Q/A 31

What is the mission of the Church?

God sends out his community to bear witness to the grace and glory of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the gospel and prefiguring Christ's Kingdom in their love for one another and in their grace-filled service to the world.

Q/A 32

Why is it essential to belong to a local church?

God primarily and regularly reveals the mystery of salvation through the church in Word and sacrament. And by committing to other believers, we receive and share love and wisdom, joys and sorrows, correction and encouragement in order to live to the glory of God more faithfully.

Q/A 33

What hope does everlasting life hold for us?

Soon we will live with and enjoy God forever in his Kingdom, in the new heaven and new earth, where we will be fully and forever freed from all sin, and sin's corruption, and will inhabit renewed, resurrected bodies in a renewed, restored creation.

Q/A 34

What happens after death to those not united to Christ by faith?

At the Day of Judgment they will receive the fearful but just sentence of condemnation pronounced against them. They will be cast out from the favorable presence of God, into hell, to be justly and grievously punished forever.

Q/A 35

What is the summary of the one faith shared by the Church?

The Apostles' Creed expresses what we believe in these words:
We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,

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suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church,

the communion of the saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

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Section Three: Witness

Q/A 36

Since we are redeemed by grace alone, through Christ alone (and not by any work of our own), must we still do good works and obey God's Word?

Yes, Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, also renews us by his Spirit so that our lives may show love and gratitude to God in repentance; so that we may be assured of our faith by the fruit of our lives; and so that by our godly behavior others may be won to Christ.

Q/A 37

What are good works?

All good works originate in faith, are motivated by love, conform to God's law, and are intended for God's glory. They do not depend on our own opinion or human tradition.

Q/A 38

Where and why did God establish his law?

God established his written law in the Old Testament to guide and preserve those under the covenant of grace, that they would walk in holy fellowship with himself and each other. The law reveals God's holy nature, our sinfulness and disobedience, and thus our need for a perfect Savior.

Q/A 39

Must we today follow the whole law of the Old Testament?

Christ fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf, making it unnecessary to worship according to the ceremonial and civil laws, but enabling us to live according to the moral laws.

Q/A 40

What is the basic outline of the moral law stated in Scripture?

These are the Ten Commandments:

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below--you shall not bow down to them or worship them.

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony.

You shall not covet.

Q/A 41

Is it enough that we follow these commands by the letter of the law?

No, if we have died to ourselves and risen with Christ, then we ought to cherish with joy the direct commands of God, remembering that they guide and preserve true human flourishing, and allow all they imply to be impressed upon our hearts.

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Q/A 42

Are there any areas of life to which the moral laws of God do not apply?

No, in work and leisure, in private and public, in word and deed -- our entire life stands as a testimony to the goodness and holiness of God and the love, joy, and peace of his Kingdom.

----- *Break: More on the Ten Commandments* -----

What does God require in the first, second, and third commandments?

First, that we know and trust God as the only true and living God. Second, that we avoid all idolatry and do not worship God improperly. third, that we treat God's name with fear and reverence, honoring also his Word and works.

What does God require in the fourth and fifth commandments?

Fourth, that on the Sabbath day we spend time in public and private worship of God, rest from routine employment, serve the Lord and others, and so anticipate the eternal Sabbath. Fifth, that we love and honor our father and mother, submitting to their godly discipline and direction.

What does God require in the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments?

Sixth, that we do not hurt, or hate, or be hostile to our neighbor, but be patient and peaceful, pursuing even our enemies with love. Seventh, that we abstain from sexual immorality and live purely and faithfully, whether in marriage or in single life, avoiding all impure actions, looks, words, thoughts, or desires, and whatever might lead to them. Eighth, that we do not take without permission that which belongs to someone else, nor without any good from someone we might benefit.

What does God require in the ninth and tenth commandments?

Ninth, that we do not lie or deceive, but speak the truth in love. Tenth, that we are content, not envying anyone or resenting what God has given them or us.

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Section Four: Worship

Q/A 43

What is true worship?

Worship, empowered by the Spirit and directed by the Word, is our fitting response of praise and thanksgiving to the transformative presence of God in our lives. By it, our faith is nourished, our affections deepened, and our witness encouraged as he is given what is due his glory.

Q/A 44

What are the ordinary, outward means by which Christ communicates the gospel to us and the Spirit incites worship in us?

Christ ordained that, through the witness of the Church, the Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer be our primary avenues of receiving and responding to the grace of God.

Q/A 45

How is the Word of God rightly to be read and heard?

We must receive it in faith as the true words of life; store it deeply in our hearts through diligence, preparation, and prayer; and practice it faithfully in our lives.

Q/A 46

What are the sacraments or ordinances?

The sacraments or ordinances given by God and instituted by Christ, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper, are visible signs and seals that we are bound together as a community of faith by his death and resurrection. By our use of them the Holy Spirit more fully declares and seals the promises of the gospel to us.

Q/A 47

What is baptism?

Baptism is the washing with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It signifies and seals our adoption into God's covenantal family, our cleansing from sin, and our commitment to belong to the Lord and to his Church.

Q/A 48

What is the Lord's Supper or communion?

Christ commanded all Christians to eat bread and to drink from the cup in thankful remembrance of his broken body and poured out blood for our redemption. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of Jesus' presence in our midst, spiritually feeding and nourishing our souls while uniting us in communion to God and to one another. It also anticipates the day when we will eat and drink with Christ in his Father's Kingdom.

Q/A 49

What is prayer?

Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God in praise, petition, confession of sin, and thanksgiving in order that we might deepen our relationship with him and be more fully conformed to his image.

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Q/A 50

With what attitude should we prayer?

We should approach God in humility, recognizing his sovereign majesty over all things; in truth, remembering that we belong fully to him; in confidence, knowing that Jesus intercedes on our behalf; and in loving gratefulness for his gracious goodness to us.

Q/A 51

What should we pray?

The whole Word of God directs and inspires us in what we should pray, including the prayer Jesus himself taught us.

Q/A 52

What is the Lord's Prayer?

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.