

# **“We Must Attend Thereunto”**

## **Westminster Catechism Question 90 and the PC (U.S.A)**

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*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1 NRSV)*

*You and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability; we can shape events in each other's brains with an exquisite precision...The ability [for language] comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is. (Pinker 1)*

## **We Must Attend Thereunto**

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The power of a word is one of the most astounding capacities of humankind, and it is one of our most holy connections to the Divine. From God's first Word of creation, to His revelation in Scripture, to the living Word incarnate in Christ, words shape God's active involvement in human life. They define us as creatures made in his image, with the ability to articulate and create worlds. We love and live, reach one another, and engage with God through our words. Our very salvation is worked out in part by our openness to receive God's Word in Scripture. Yahweh chose to reveal Himself in living language, through timeless texts that engage us in conversation and relationship with the living and true God.

The central importance of the Word of God is one of the primary features of Reformed theology and Presbyterian tradition. The PC (U.S.A) places Scripture as a focus of our worship and personal lives of faith. The *Book of Order* states, "The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) suggests that worship be ordered in terms of five major actions centered in the word of God (gathering around the word, proclaiming the word, responding to the word, the sealing of the word, and bearing and following the word into the world)" (*Book of Order*, W-3.3202). Because the church so highly values the power of the Word of God for worship, encouragement, teaching, and growth, it is necessary for church members to understand how Scripture engages us in relationship with God and our own responsibility to attend to that relationship.

Renewing our commitment to the transformative power of Scripture and strengthening our understanding of the importance of its literary nature will empower the church in its mission to invite all people deeper into relationship with Jesus Christ. The members of the PC (U.S.A.) need this reminder of their own responsibility to respond to God's Word, and the culture in the United States needs a church who will teach it to engage with God through language and story. The Westminster Shorter Catechism addresses this issue in Question 90.

**Q. 90. How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?**

*That the Word may become effectual to salvation we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love; lay it up in our hearts; and practice it in our lives. (184)*

The Word of God in the Holy Scriptures is an essential part of God's conversation with us. Those who wish to know Christ are enabled through the Holy Spirit to meet God in these words. Question 90 of the catechism directs the church with guidelines about how to approach God's Holy Word. This question and answer pair is a cornerstone concept for the PC (U.S.A.), because it invites us to daily participation and relationship with God, it opens the way to our own spiritual discipline and formation, and it engages with contemporary culture in transformative ways.

Question 90 of the Westminster Catechism is a powerful reminder to embrace the nature of Scripture as holy literature. It is literature that we must approach with our best skills, our most profound humility, and our utmost love. This question is vital to the church today, because it connects Scripture and relationship. Reading well is the way that we can engage relationally with the living God; it is the way that we can demonstrate acts of love; and it is the way we can invite a broken world in a story of redemption.

Salvation through Jesus is made effectual through the reading of Scripture as literature: by engaging people in stories—both our own stories of God's love in our lives and the stories of Scripture that reveal God to us. Eugene Peterson, in *Eat This Book*, explores the significance of God's choice to reveal Himself through story and word: "Story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there, it invites our participation" (40). Encountering literature is a participatory act, a vital way in which we can enter into conversation with God: and conversation is one of the primary expressions of love and relationship with Him.

If the church loses its awareness of Scripture's nature as story, then the interpretation and application of Scripture can become worldly, and it can cut off the ways that God moves most powerfully through words. Peterson observes, "Our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside the church, is for information over story...but we don't live our lives by information; we live them in relationships in the context of a personal God who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation" (41-2). In a world obsessed with information, in a world that wants pamphlets and arguments, news reports, and summaries, the church's focus on Scripture can remind the world about the formative power of literature. Scripture is not simply an end in itself, a book of rules, a final statement to answer all our questions. Rather it is a means to salvation and relationship. If the church preserves its approach to Scripture as primarily literary rather than informational, God has the opportunity to change our hearts and transform our church, as well as engage our culture in new ways. Language is the powerful means by which the Holy Spirit works this transformation and works out salvation in us.

*In our reading of this book we come to realize that what we need is not primarily informational, telling us things about God and ourselves, but formational, shaping us into our true beings. It is the very nature of language to form rather than inform...Our best users of language, poets and lovers and children and saints use words to make—make intimacies, make character, make beauty, make goodness, make truth.  
(Peterson 24)*

The Question, "How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?" involves the church in a dialogue about how to approach Scripture, the language that God has offered to us as His revelation. God uses this language to make us, not simply to inform us.

So how can the people of the PC (U.S.A) embrace the literary nature of Scripture and encounter the power of God's word? The answer is in the reply to Question 90, a reply that consists of the most important steps of literature analysis and appreciation.

First, we must *attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer*. Luke warns us, “Therefore consider carefully how you listen” (8:18). The way we encounter Scripture matters, and we must approach it with adequate preparation. A lazy approach to the Word of God can lead to reductive translations and interpretations, but diligence and preparation allows us to treat the text as the important work that it is. Literature demands careful attention, analysis, study of context, and our best intellectual efforts to engage. My studies in Biblical Hebrew have shown me the hard work that is necessary to listen well to Scripture. It takes diligence and preparation to be willing to parse verbs, analyze syntax, and spend the time to know a text well. Peterson highlights the importance of engaged exegesis, “These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortion, and ignorant guess that pollute the text... Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean” (53). Exegesis is hard work, but it involves us in conversation with God about the text; Scripture, as literature and word, reveals God not only in its explicit content but also in the form it appears in. We learn about God’s nature through the exegesis process itself, entering into relationship by the questions that arise from intense study: Why was Scripture preserved in the way it was? Why did God use Hebrew with its particular ambiguities and lack of tense? An attitude of questioning and conversation is one in which we engage the text in prayer, seeking the relationship that underlies the words, rather than simply looking for a quick answer in them. Approaching Scripture with an awareness of its literary qualities and literary demands requires that we bring our best when we meet this text, prepared with all the tools available to our minds and hearts.

To be open to the transforming nature of this process, we must also *receive the Word with faith and love*. It is an act of dedication to meet God in words that often challenge us, since it is not easy to encounter stories that are so far from our own cultural contexts. Engaging honestly with a text requires willingness to listen to it, believe what it says, and love it. Peterson elaborates on how careful attention to Scripture must be done in an attitude of love: “Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen

carefully to what he says. It follows that we bring the leisure and attentiveness of lovers to this text, cherishing every comma and semicolon, relishing the oddness of this preposition, delighting in the surprising placement of this noun” (55). Approaching Scripture as literature involves loving its very words, grammar, and syntax and allowing them to enter us and shape us. If we instead approach Scripture as purely informative, we fail to engage it with love: we are using it to answer our own questions rather than receiving it for the revelation of character that it is. In II Thessalonians, Paul recognizes that it is essential to seek the truth in the Word in love. Without delight in Scripture, interpreters risk missing the point “because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved” (II Thess 2:10). To be good seekers of God in text, we must encounter his Word with delight, patience, and faith that he will meet us in it.

The next step of allowing Scripture to speak as literature is to *lay it up in our hearts*. This word must become a part of us. Informational newspaper articles do not become a part of the people we are, but a poem that we return to, and reread again and again, does shape our perception and interpretation of our experiences. The lines become part of our hearts. Reading Scripture as inspired literature “involves [us] relationally, pulls [us] into participation, *matters* to [our] core identity, affects who [we are] and what [we] do” (Perterson 27). Carefully and lovingly reading a text multiplies the text—allows it to enter into our own story, to encompass our own experiences, and to guide us in unknown situations. We are instructed to engage Scripture with the intent to “hide [God’s] word in [our] hearts,” (Ps 119:11), as we do with the best of literature. Our own spiritual transformation is worked out by permitting God to reconstruct our interior selves through the way we read his Word. When we store Scripture in our own hearts, our stories become continuations and addendums to God’s work in His revealed Word.

Finally, Question 90 teaches us to *practice the Word in our lives*. When the Word has done work in us, then that work—the work of the Holy Spirit—bears fruit in our lives. This is the mysterious and

overwhelming power of the Word: what enters in as stories and language changes us and our actions in the world. If we indeed “hear the word [with diligence, preparation and prayer], retain it [store it up in our hearts], [then] by persevering [we will] produce a crop” (Luke 8:15). Luke reminds us that it takes a good and noble heart, a heart willing to do the deep work of encountering God’s Word, to produce a crop in our lives. Peterson recognizes this essential process, “Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love” (28). Attending to Scripture as the Catechism prescribes, reading it with the honor we give to literature, with confidence of the power of language—this attention facilitates the work of spiritual transformation and salvation in our lives.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) today is in the midst of a culture that has suffered from an intent focus on questions of information. As skepticism has become the intellectual cultural norm, the church has lost membership. In response to this trend, the Church can offer a starving world a richer reply than simply an argument or an informational tract. The Church can offer the opportunity for transformation by its commitment to approach Scripture as literature. We know that the work of the Holy Spirit uses the Word to engage us in relationship, not merely to inform us; and this process of relationship is a possibility for all people, no matter how many answers that they do or do not have. We must renew the attitude of approaching Scripture with the hope to see God’s face, rather than the hope to explain satisfactorily the answers to life. The church today must remind our culture, which so much longs for a renewal of wonder and relationship, that the church offers something more than answers—it offers relationship with a living God. By teaching seekers of all stages, from agnostics to mature Christians, to engage the Word as Question 90 recommends, then the Church can assist the Spirit in opening closed hearts to relationship through literature. God offered us more than answers—He offered us His revealed Self. Let us respond to his Word in the way that allows it to change us and the world.

Works Cited

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## Personal Statement

Dear Samuel Robinson Committee,

Though in 2000+ words I could formally explore the implications of Question 90 for the PC (U.S.A.) today, I would like to offer a bit of background for why that question is particularly compelling for me.

The way we intentionally encounter God in His Word is central to my own life and my relationship with Jesus Christ; so I am quick to pay attention to how Scripture is a transformative power for the church. I am an English major, a Hebrew exegete, and a philosopher of mind. I love literature and have experienced the foundational way in which stories shape my person and my perception; words regularly change my life. In studying Biblical Hebrew for two years, I have discovered that I meet God in the process of exegesis as much as the content of reading His word. God's character is evident and His sovereignty is supreme in the very medium of reading and studying his word, as well as in the stories that this study reveals. As a philosopher particularly interested in philosophy of mind, I observe how words define and create our worlds: as Wittgenstein noticed, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"<sup>1</sup>. Biologically, philosophically, and in personal experience I am fascinated by how the boundaries of relationship and self become formed to the words we encounter and use.

These components of my identity have allowed me to explore the nature of Scripture as literature—how it is both a teaching tool and a beloved artistic masterpiece. I am particularly aware of what it means to internalize words, to meet God in his living text. In my own spiritual journey I have discovered the freedom of encountering Scripture as literature rather than information. Engaging more deeply with this complex and beautiful book raises questions for me rather than answers them. But these questions, which I am free to pose to the God that inspired Scripture, drive me deeper into conversation and relationship with Him. While information might satisfy me enough to stop pursuing God, questions facilitate continual intimate relationship. This dialogue models Jesus' ministry. He often responded to his disciples questions with more questions or stories and parables. Jesus didn't lay it out straight; he entered into conversation that builds intimacy and relationship.

My experience in the Presbyterian Church also convinces me that this question is applicable to our congregations everywhere. I grew up in a huge, thriving congregation that recently had over 1000 members complete the Bible in Ninety Days program. I have seen how personally encountering the whole Word has changed the members of our congregation and brought life to our community—primarily through the questions we have raised together at the difficult parts of Scripture that are not easily addressed in a sermon. Throughout college, I have been involved in a small, shrinking congregation which recently lost its pastor. As I have seen members of the congregation step up in personal responsibility, I have seen the importance of claiming Scripture and its questions as a church body. The questions unite us, challenge us to approach Scripture in a counter-cultural way, and have planted seeds for new ways for our body to be ministers. The instruction of Question 90 renews the engagement of people in the church, and for both large and small congregations, allows us to set an example for the community of what it looks like to seek and engage in relationship rather than offer answers. My prayer for the church in the world today is that we might tread forward in a model that offers this deeper relationship to our culture—a culture that has so long been seeking answers in a way that bounces them off the surface of the church rather than into the embrace of God.

Thank you for the opportunity to engage with the Catechism and consider these questions for my life and my church.

In Christ,



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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Jonathan Laventhol. 1996. Web. 28 Mar 2010.