

I'm curious, how many of you had to learn and memorize catechism questions and answers when you were young?

Starting with the folks on Zoom, does anyone remember the first question and answer of the Westminster Catechism? (If someone on Zoom knows the answer feel free to unmute and say it.)

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever

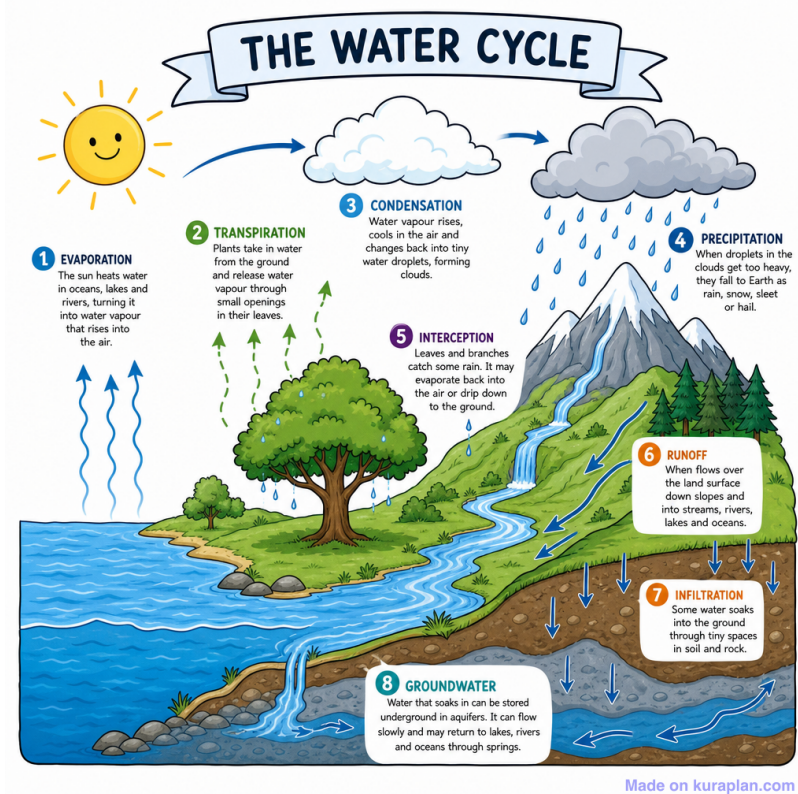
(I don't know if in the 17th C they meant exclusively men? I hope not, and expect that it meant all human beings.)

So, humanity's ultimate purpose is to honor God and find lasting joy in a relationship with God.

I find a strong connection between that ultimate purpose and today's Hebrew text from the lectionary in Isaiah 55. The opening lines, vv 10-11, create a metaphor of the earth's water cycle to God's proclamation to humanity - "as the waters come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, ...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty."

Before I explain the connection I see here, let me just say how awesome it is to read the scientific revelation contained in this text. The ancient Hebrews understood that

when water fell to the earth, it was taken back up again through a natural process. We understand it this way:



The Isaiah text goes on to say this process is necessary so that when seeds are sown, grain may be grown, and bread may be made and consumed, giving sustenance to you and me.

The metaphor says that the Word of God works in a similar way. (Sadly, I don't have a pretty diagram for this one 😞) God proclaims, humans receive it, and in the best of conditions, live it out – thereby accomplishing what God purposed. In the process those who hear and obey fulfill the first catechism answer by glorifying God in their actions, and as a result, enjoying God forever.

Ah, and here is where we lean into the wisdom of Jesus. The Word of God doesn't always land in an environment that promotes abundance. In Jesus' parable, we find the image from Isaiah – of God's Word raining down on earth – in the form of one



who sows seeds, using a scattering method.

Some seeds fell on a path

Other seeds fell on rocky ground

Other seeds fell among thorns, and

Other seeds fell on good soil.

Thankfully Matthew provides us with an explanation of the parable and we grasp an understanding that our ears are not always tuned into God's Word, and our hearts do not always provide fertile ground in which God's word can thrive.

Please note how I described that – I didn't say that some PEOPLE are more apt to nurture God's word. Instead life circumstances often provide the right environment for God's Word to grow within us. They can also distract us from keeping God's Word.

None of us can predict where God's Word will thrive, which is why I so appreciate the scattering method of the Sower. If all seeds were carefully planted in "the right soil" then we would never see circumstances like this:

This tree has *no* business thriving in this rocky environment.

And yet, she exists and she persists! We have no business assuming where good soil exists!! We have no business trying to judge WHO is ready to have the Word of God thrive within them and who is not.



And yet, through a great majority of Christian history the assumption was made that there were only a select few who were really attuned to the Word of God, and they alone were authorized to funnel it down to the “common folk.”

Protestant churches like ours are a result of faithful people revolting against religious systems that promoted only a few having access to the Word of God – especially through the reading and interpretation of scripture.

We are heirs of the Reformation that swept through Europe in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Lutheran churches were planted in Germany and throughout Scandinavia; the Reformed churches, originating in Switzerland, spread into Germany, France, Transylvania, Hungary, Holland, England, and Scotland. Eventually immigrants to the land that became the United States of America brought these religious traditions with them, and established over time, who our denominations are.

Of course there is A LOT of history that shaped us – and one sermon cannot capture it all. What we can do is examine what emerged from the Reformation to better understand why we worship the way we do. At the center of it all is cultivating that “good soil” – an environment within each person that promotes a life expressing abundant grace.

When our spiritual ancestors in the Protestant Reformation asked, “What should happen when God’s people gather for worship?” they were not trying to invent

something new. They were trying to recover what they believed had always been at the heart of Christian worship.

Perhaps the most significant change was **returning Scripture to the center**. In the medieval church, the Bible was certainly read, but the climax of worship was understood to be the sacrifice of the Mass. Reformers like Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and especially John Calvin insisted that before we ever speak to God, God first speaks to us through Scripture. That conviction continues to shape us today. Every service begins with God's Word, followed by the proclamation of that Word, our response in prayer and praise, and our gathering at Christ's Table. Worship is not a monologue; it is a holy conversation between God and God's people.

The Reformers also believed that **everyone should understand what was happening in worship**. For centuries, Western worship had been conducted primarily in Latin, a language most ordinary people could not understand. Scripture, prayers, hymns, and liturgy were translated into the language of the people so that every worshiper could hear, understand, and participate in God's story. That is why we read Scripture in everyday language, pray in words we understand, and invite every voice to join in praise.

Participation itself became a hallmark of Reformed worship. Instead of watching while priests and choirs carried out the service, **the congregation became active participants**. The Reformers embraced the biblical conviction that all believers share in Christ's priesthood. So we sing together. We pray together. We confess together.

We listen together. We offer ourselves and our gifts together. The pastor's role is not to perform worship on behalf of the people but to help lead the whole congregation in offering worship to God.

The Reformers also **simplified the church's sacramental life**. They recognized only those sacraments they believed Christ had clearly instituted: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism became understood as God's covenantal act, incorporating us into Christ and welcoming us into the household of faith. And while Protestants have differed in how they understand Christ's presence at the Table, our Reformed tradition has long affirmed, with Calvin, that the risen Christ is truly present through the Holy Spirit, nourishing us with grace as we receive the bread and cup in faith.

This same desire for clarity led to **greater simplicity in worship itself**. Calvin removed ceremonies he believed distracted from the gospel—not because beauty was unimportant, but because nothing should eclipse the good news of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries we have recovered many ancient practices, from observing the Christian year to celebrating Communion more frequently, yet our worship still reflects that Reformed impulse toward simplicity, allowing the Word and Sacraments to remain at the center.

Even **music was transformed**. Before the Reformation, choirs often sang on behalf of the congregation. Afterward, **the congregation itself became the choir**. Luther gave the church new hymns. Calvin encouraged the singing of the Psalms. Their shared

conviction remains ours today: worship is not a performance offered to us but the joyful song of God's people offered together.

If all of this sounds familiar, it should. Every Sunday we gather, confess, hear God's Word, respond in prayer, offer ourselves, celebrate the sacraments, and are sent into the world with God's blessing. Whether in a Presbyterian congregation or a United Church of Christ congregation, that pattern reflects centuries of Reformed conviction.

There is room for variety between our traditions. Presbyterians generally preserve a more structured liturgical pattern, while the United Church of Christ grants greater freedom to individual congregations. Yet beneath those differences lies a common heartbeat: worship belongs to the whole people of God. It is grounded in Scripture, centered in Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, and offered not by spectators but by participants who have been called together by God's grace.

We are nurtured and sustained by this act. And recalling the words of Isaiah, when we share the good news in word and deed, we return God's Word back to God having fulfilled God's purpose for it. It is grace-in-abundance in practice. The pattern of weekly worship allows the cycle to continue.

Next week we'll discuss the order and flow of the service itself, before spending time in subsequent weeks on each of those movements.