

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 2

Halifax, 29 July 2007

Q. 2 How doth it appear that there is a God?

A. The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal Him unto men for their salvation.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 19

Introduction:

Just lately, there has been a spate of books written by atheists.

- Some of these have made their way to the New York Times best seller list:
 - Atheist Richard Dawkins has the best seller entitled *The God Delusion...*
 - Sam Harris has written *A Letter to a Christian Nation*.
 - And then there's Christopher Hitchens who published *God is Not Great*

It has been said that these men have no new arguments,

- and that they seem to lack the graces of their forebears...
- They speak with a confidence that is quite unwarranted by their arguments,
 - Then they try to embellish them with a lot of anger and agitation.
- Perhaps some of their agitation is due to the fact that they are trying to suppress what God has made clear to all.
 - That can be very frustrating...
 - The person who tries to deny the fact that he has a mother is going to have a hard time gaining his point...
 - Though more acceptable, it is, perhaps, even more absurd to argue that we have no God...

The topic of our study tonight is "How doth it appear that there is a God?"

- Our purpose is not to turn to philosophy or theistic proofs,
 - but rather to look at what the Scriptures say about this topic...
 - "How doth it appear that there is a God?"
- This is an interesting question...

- and in a way I would like the recast it just a little...
- There is a very real sense in which the Bible does not really address this question directly...
 - or maybe I should say, it says a lot more than this question asks...
- You see, the Bible never really speaks about how we know that there is a God... some God...any God...
 - a mere “intelligent designer” as some have recently called Him...
- The Bible rather speaks of how all men know what God is like,
 - How they know not merely *that* He is, but *what* He is!
 - The Bible shows that even if they or their fathers have never met a prophet,
 - never had a vision from God,
 - never heard the voice of God,
 - never read the scriptures or heard them,
 - and never spoken to one who knew them...
 - They are given enough revelation from the light of nature and the works of God not only to know that there is a God,
 - but also enough to know a great deal about Him!

So first of all tonight,

I. Look at how much is known about God, according to the scriptures, through the light of nature and the works of God (apart from any special revelation):

A. First, we learn about God from His creation...

- This was brought out in the first part of passage we read tonight...
 - Psalm 19:1 tells us that “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows His handiwork.”
- 1. You see, it is not just that we know that there is a God, but that we see the **glory of God** through the things that He has made!
 - a. Just as you learn something about a person by the things he makes...
 - a writer by the books he writes...
 - a chef by the meals he prepares...
 - a carpenter by the houses he has built...
 - a painter by the paintings he has done...
 - a surgeon by the surgeries he performs...
 - and a musician by the music he makes...
 - so you learn about God from the things He has made.

- b. And if the writer or the surgeon or the musician or any of the others do a particularly good job, you see their glory!
 - 1) And so it is when we look at the sun and the moon and the stars...
 - when we look at our own bodies that are fearfully and wonderfully made...
 - When we look through our telescopes and our microscopes
 - When we see the many galaxies and the marvellous design of DNA,
 - we see the glory of God who made them!
 - He is known by His works!
 - 2) If we see all these things,
 - it ought to lead us to praise and worship the One who made them all!
 - We are obliged to do so.
2. And Psalm 19 is careful to show us that every one without exception has this revelation of the things God has created...
- verse 2 says,
 - “there is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.”
 - Not only do they have access to be able to see the glory of God,
 - but His glory is in fact revealed to them whether they acknowledge it or not.
 - Every one is exposed to this revelation—
 - all feel the heat of the sun as it rises upon them from day to day!
3. Romans 1 declares expressly that, because all men know what God is like, all ought to worship Him and give thanks to Him.
- Turn over to Romans 1 with me
 - a. Romans 1:18 says that God is angry against man for suppressing His glory...
 - He calls them ungodly and unrighteous for refusing to worship Him when He has so clearly revealed His glory to them!
 - b. In verse 19-20, He explains that there is no excuse for them to be silent...
 - because the truth about Him has been clearly revealed to them!
 - Not just that He is, but what He is...

- even His eternal power and divine nature (or Godhead).
 - They cannot help but see what He is like when they constantly live in the world He made—and even have their own being in Him!
- c. Verses 21-23 shows that He is angry with them, not just for atheism, but for idolatry—
- that is, not for denying that He is, but for denying *what* He is...
 - for them to pervert what creation has clearly shown them about Him...
 - for them to deny His eternal power and divine nature
 - to suppose that He is something less glorious than what He is...
 - That is what idolatry always does—
 - It supposes that God is less glorious than He is...
- 1) Some worship Him as an impersonal force rather than as a God who loves good and hates evil...
- Think about the Greeks that Paul met at Athens—he warns them
 - Acts 17:29-31: “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”
 - Paul made it clear to them that God was angry with them for making Him out to be like gold or silver...
 - He called them to repent of their idolatry.
 - They dealt with Him as an impersonal power,
 - but they should have known better!
- 2) Then there are those who worship Him, not as impersonal, but as one who is **limited in power** and whose plans can be thwarted by His creatures...
- Think about how He revealed His wrath against Nebuchadnezzar until Nebuchadnezzar at last came to confess that the LORD alone reigns—as he puts it...
 - Dan 3:34-35: I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?”

- 3) So you see then that while of course there is no excuse for atheism...
 - There is also no excuse for idolatry that denies God's eternal power, divine nature, and glory.
 - These are clearly revealed through the things that He has made.
 - No one is exempt from this revelation...
 - Ignorance is culpable in every case.

TRANS> So you see what is revealed through creation...

B. Next, I want you to see what is revealed through providence—that is, through God's ongoing government of the world...

- You learn about a governor or king by the way he governs...
 1. This is brought out in Acts 14:8-18 where we have the account of Paul and Barnabas' visit to Lystra...
 - a. Paul, while preaching, turned to a man who believed the word he spoke
 - This man was a cripple, so Paul healed him...
 - The Lystrans were quite impressed with this...
 - so impressed that they began to worship Paul and Barnabas and to try to offer sacrifices to them.

TRANS> Paul and Barnabas were not impressed:

- b. Look at what they do verse 14:
 - Acts 14:14-17: But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."
 - They mention creation, but then they go on to mention providence—
 - They tell how God has sustained us, doing good, giving us rain and fruitful seasons—filling our hearts with food and gladness...
 - The argument here is that God's gracious government and kind provision for us should have brought forth worship to Him—
 - It should not have brought forth worship to idols!

- They should have known what God was like through the things that He had provided for them.
 - They should have known that He is not a mere man.
2. Paul is saying to them what he said in Romans 2—
- a. That the goodness of God ought to lead us to repentance...
 - When we see how He governs the world—how He provides for us and cares for us
 - It should make us ashamed for not giving Him proper thanksgiving!
 - b. Now someone like Christopher Hitchens will say,
 - But what about all the evil in the world?
 - How can we thank God for that?
 - How can that lead us to repentance...
 - But if you look at Romans 11, you will see that Paul speaks not only of the goodness of God, but also of the severity of God leading us to repentance.
 - In Romans 11:22, he speaks of the severity of God in punishing all those who reject the truth concerning Him...
 - God, by sending troubles into the world reveals His wrath against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...
 - He shows His justice and righteousness by punishing sin.
 - Many today use God's severity as an excuse to deny Him,
 - but according to the scripture, God reveals the glory of His justice by punishing sin.
 - But it ought to have the very opposite effect!
 - Far from making us deny Him, it ought to make us repent!
 - You can argue about how sin ever got started if you want to,
 - but it is much better to put the fire out before you worry about how it got started...
 - As long as sin is still burning in you, you are in no condition to make a credible judgement...
 - When you see a God who pours out fire on Sodom and Gomorrah,
 - it is not your business to question the justice of it,
 - but to respond to God with reverence and repentance.

TRANS> So then, we see that God has made Himself known—not only that He is, but what He is—through creation as well as providence...

- And there is one more way, apart from scripture, that I want to mention...

C. He has made Himself known to us through our conscience.

1. This truth is presented to us by Paul in Romans 2:14-16.

- Let's take a look at these verses:

- Romans 2:14-16: "(for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."

2. It is sometimes thought that our consciences are a blank slate that is written on by our parents and our society...

a. Now I will not deny that we certainly do tend to follow our parents—indeed, according to scripture we all inherit our corrupt sinful nature from Adam.

- But there is also a sense in which there is much more involved than bad education and bad example...

- There is a sense in which we know better—

- even when we grow up in our perverted society...

- The truth is, we are made in God's image, and though that image is corrupted,

- we still have the imprint there—

- there is still a memory of what we ought to be as creatures made in His image.

b. This is why people get so upset when the truth of God is presented to them...

- They are being told what they know is true!

- They are being reminded of the very things they are trying to deny.

c. It is amazing to see how even these atheists I spoke about earlier have such strong morals...

- They are full of accusations of others and especially of Christians.

1) You should see how Dawkins speaks about the unrighteousness of Lot in *The God Delusion!*

- He gets on his moral high horse...
- But you see, he can't really get on a moral high horse because it is not his horse!
 - It is God's horse.
- Whenever he starts saying what is good and what is evil,
 - he is showing the work of the law of God written on his heart...
 - According to his world view, there is no room for morality.
 - On what basis can he say that Lot is bad or that Christianity is evil?
 - Would Dawkins suggest that his own idea of good and evil is better than the person who thinks it's okay to steal?
 - or would he dare to say that it is wrong to rape little children?
 - Why? On what basis can he say that?
 - because most people say it?
 - Well, most people say there is a God, so how can he say they are wrong if his standard is what most people say?
- By what standard does Dawkins say that certain things are right and others are wrong?
 - Based on his principles, how can he say that anything is good or evil?
 - He can't...
 - But he says it all the time...
 - and every time he does,
 - he shows the work of the law written on his heart.

TRANS> So you see then that the Bible shows us that natural revelation apart from scripture is able to show us not only that there is a God,

- but also what He is like—His glory, His eternal power, His divine nature, His goodness, His judgment, His love of good and hatred of evil...
 - There is no excuse, not only for denying *that* He is,
 - but also for denying *what* He is.

II. But now we should consider further that natural revelation also has its limitations.

- There are two reasons for this...
- A. First, natural revelation can only do so much because of our fallen estate...
 1. Even though it shows us what God is like,
 - and how worthy He is of our worship and thanksgiving...
 - And even though it shows us what we are like—
 - that we have not worshipped and served Him as we ought, and that we have perverted the truth about Him and served idols...
 2. It does not have nearly the effect on us that it ought to have...
 - By natural revelation alone, we ought to be led to repentance...
 - We ought to be brought trembling and ashamed before our God,
 - crying out to Him for mercy.
 - That is the effect it would have on us if we were not fallen into sin...
 3. But because of the fall,
 - we do not naturally receive the truth—
 - either from the scriptures or from natural revelation...
 - The Bible says that we are both **blinded by sin** and **hardened by sin**.
 - Isaiah 44:18 shows that it is a judicial hardening:
 - Isaiah 44:18: They do not know nor understand; for He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand.
 - Even though there is clear revelation, we cannot benefit from it because of our blindness...
 - Even though the revelation is clear, we are too stubborn to receive it because our hearts are hardened.

TRANS> So you see that our sinful natures keep natural revelation from having its proper effect on us.

- The revelation is there and it could do a lot,
 - but we are too perverted to receive it...
 - It is an excellent teacher,
 - but we are not good students...
 - That is the first way natural revelation is limited...

B. Secondly, natural revelation is limited because it cannot tell us how to be saved...

1. It reveals what God is like and it reveals what we are like—shows us that we are sinners who desperately need God's mercy...

- It sets us up as those who need salvation and ought to seek it...
 - but it simply cannot show us what God has done for our salvation!
 - That must come from special revelation such as is found in the Bible.

2. Indeed, even though God's providence brought Jesus into the world and even though we might see Him heal people and we might see Him die on the cross and be raised on the third day, and ascend into heaven,

a. Natural revelation could show us all of that—

- but unless God somehow reveals to us what all these things mean—why they were done—
 - we have no way to put it all together!

b. Who could ever have imagined that God would send His Son from heaven to make an atonement for our sins unless He declared it to us?

- Even if we were given crystal clear understanding from natural revelation so that we perfectly understood the character of God and the nature of our sin,
 - how could we know that God would be merciful to us if He did not declare it?
 - Yes, we would see His goodness in the world and we would marvel that He should be so gracious to sinners as to give us food and glad times...
 - but how could we expect him to give us anything but condemnation at the end from natural revelation alone?

c. This is why Christ commanded the gospel should be preached in all the world...

- How shall they hear without a preacher?
 - The gospel must be declared to us or we will never know it.

TRANS> And so we might conclude from seeing the limitations of natural revelation that we need two things if we are to be saved...

- we need to have our corrupt nature changed so that we can receive God's revelation...
- And we need to have the gospel preached to us so that we might know what we are to believe to be saved.

- As our Catechism says,
 - **The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal Him unto men for their salvation.**

III. Lastly then, I want you to see how God provides His Word and His Spirit for all His elect.

A. The promise to provide these is presented to us in Isaiah 59:21:

1. Let me begin with verse 20:

- Isa 59:20-21: “The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,” says the LORD. “As for Me,” says the LORD, “this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the LORD, “from this time and forevermore.”

2. Do you see the two things that God promises to His covenant people here?

a. First, He promises that He is going to send a redeemer to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob....

- He is telling His people that He is going to send a saviour to take away their sins!
- The whole Old Testament cultus was designed to teach people to look earnestly for this coming redeemer!
 - He would come to those who turn from transgression—
 - He would in fact come to turn them from transgression...

b. Verse 21 is the second thing He will do and tells how He will turn them from transgression...

- His Word and His Spirit will not depart from them!

1) The **Word** is the report of what He will do in Christ to take away their sin...the gospel or the good news that is to be believed...

- It is the special revelation of God to sinners.
- God is promising to preserve the gospel among His people so that they will know and believe the truth...
 - the truth that alone can set them free...
 - In Mark 16:15-16, Jesus said:
 - “And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

- It is by believing the word of the gospel that we are saved...
- John in his first epistle, says:
 - 1 John 1:1-4: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.
 - He says here that he and the other apostles declare God’s word so that those who hear might have eternal life...
 - by believing the gospel, the word of salvation that God has given to His church.
 - The Word that will not depart from all who turn from transgression in Zion...the kingdom of God.

TRANS> But we saw before that they were both blinded and hardened to His revelation...

- sin made them incapable of receiving either natural or special revelation.
- 2) But there is also the promise that **His Spirit** will not depart from them!
 - In Ezekiel 36, the LORD explains in very clear language that the Spirit will change them to make them able to receive God’s Word...
 - Ezekiel 36:25-29: “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.”
 - When Nicodemus comes to Jesus to speak to Him about salvation, Jesus is surprised that Nicodemus does not understand this truth...
 - He explains to him that one must be born of the Spirit if he is to see the kingdom of God...
 - Sin has blinded us all, and it is only when God opens our eyes by the working of the Spirit that we are able to believe.

- Paul explains to the Corinthians that when the unbelieving Jews read the word, it does not profit them because they have a veil over their eyes...
 - But when the Spirit comes, they veil is taken away and the word becomes living and active in them to impart saving faith.
 - As Luke describes it in Acts 16 concerning Lydia,
 - Acts 16:14: Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And...she and her household were baptized.
 - She was imparted life by the Spirit and the Word.

B. So you see then that natural revelation shows everyone about God...

- Our ignorance about God's glory and nature is not due to any insufficiency in revelation...
 - it due solely to our perversity as sinners...
 - There is no excuse for ignorance and idolatry.
 - Learn from this that you ought to worship and give thanks to God as you behold Him in creation and providence...
- But you also see that natural revelation alone cannot save any one...
 - We only come to know God in a saving way when His word and Spirit are graciously given to us...
 - The word by itself is utterly powerless, but when accompanied by the life giving Spirit, is able to save.
 - Psalm 19 began with natural revelation and its universal declaration of God's glory...
 - But in verse 7 it takes up a accolade about special revelation declaring:
 - "The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul!"
 - It is not natural revelation, but the word that is able to convert the soul because it is only through the Word that the gospel is made known to us.
 - Learn from this that you ought to pray earnestly that God's word and Spirit would work to bring about salvation in us and in our children and in the world...
 - And you ought to earnestly seek the Word in order that you might have life.
 - And having received it,
 - you ought to give thanks to your God, for He has become your salvation!