

Episode 270

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me today, Trevin Wax and Thomas West, the authors of The Gospel Way Catechism—50 Truths to Take on the World. And if you're a regular listener, you know we occasionally bring authors on who published a book that I find intriguing, and this is definitely one of those. So I wanted to have Trevin and Thomas on to ask them some questions I think you'd be interested in, and also ask them some questions that we get at gotquestions.org that fit along with the theme, the topics they cover in the book. So Trevin, Thomas, welcome.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Great to see you, Shea. Thanks for having us on.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Yeah, really thankful for this ministry. Glad to be on.

Shea Houdmann

Awesome. So first question, which I know I'm sure you've been asked a bunch of times, why did you go with the word catechism? Because most people, when they think the word catechism, they think of the torturous lessons they went through as a child and the liturgical church they generally went to, although lots of churches are using it, and other people are not familiar with the term catechism and they think catacombs or something else like that. So what is a catechism, and what specifically were you guys hoping to accomplish with this book specifically in kind of redeeming that term?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Well, I realize that that is a difficult word for some, can be a little scary for others, but it really is just a term that refers to instruction. It's really an ancient discipleship tool that takes basic Christian truths and presents them with a question and answer format so that you're able to, almost in bite-sized chunks, take Christian theology and be able to memorize it. It's a fancy word, but what's funny about it is that historically speaking, catechisms have generally been for kids or for people that are preparing for baptism, and most of the time catechisms have been very accessible. They were meant to be simple ways of understanding Christian truth, and so we decided to keep that word because at the end of the day, it's a tool that we wanted to take out of the old toolbox and dust it off for a new day, and we think it still has power and can be formative in the lives of people today.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

The word simply means the teaching, and it's a simple device for making the teaching of Christianity clear, simple, and memorable so you can get it into your bones, not just into your head.

Shea Houdmann

Awesome. So the Gospel Way Catechism, tell me about it. Obviously, we're not going to summarize the entire book, but what's unique about the Gospel Way Catechism, and what specifically were you hoping to accomplish?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Well, you know, I think what makes it stand out is that this catechism, very consciously so from the beginning of us envisioning it, is we wanted it to be a bit shorter than some of the other catechisms, the classic ones from the Reformation period. We wanted it to focus on the basics of Christianity, but not so much in a way that pushes back against the era of Medieval Roman Catholicism at the time, which is when those classic catechisms arose. We wanted to really take on some of the cultural narratives and things that a lot of Christians are tempted to believe today. You know, secularism, the idea of be true to yourself, expressive individualism, being, you know, the purpose of life is to discover yourself and then to express yourself. You know, some of these different worldviews and cultural narratives that are so prevalent in our time, what we wanted to do with this catechism as a resource was say, here are the basics of Christianity, but in a way that sets up the basics, as opposed to what you may have heard in the world. So the questions and answers have a bit of a not this, but that format. You know, you have heard it said in the world, but I say to you, the Bible says to you, the gospel says something truer, better, richer, deeper.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

The world's catechism, like the story of the world really starts with us. It starts with the self, the self-expressive person. So cultural catechisms begin with self. What sets this one apart is we begin with God and really working it out from there. You know, the great historical catechisms are oftentimes written to help clarify what Christianity is or a particular interpretation of Christianity over against different theological confusions or theological heresies. And what we're seeking to do here is to present Christianity over and against not another interpretation of Christianity or theology, but over and against cultural heresies or cultural confusions about who God is. We're looking to set Christianity in conversation with that.

Shea Houdmann

For sure. I mean, your subtitle speaks directly to that, to the 50 truths to take on the world. And we say, I love the question and answer format, because that's what we do here. We at got questions as well. And seeing, I know other

catechisms are kind of that, but to see that specifically be your goal and how it's presented and the this, not that concept. Incredibly helpful. I have already talked to some people going with the workbook that goes along with it. Would this be something we could do not just with youth or with new believers, but a powerful reminder to even more mature believers? Here are the things we believe, here's how they are different from what the world believes, and here's why that's important. I think your book does an excellent job in communicating those things. Specifically, how did the truths of who God is, maybe Thomas, this one would be one for you to lead off on, how did the truths of who God is and who we are in light of that help us to confront ungodly, unbiblical thinking?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Every ungodly thinking, unbiblical thinking, it starts with a distorted view of who God is. And because of that, a distorted view of who we are. So if you think God doesn't exist, then life collapses into the pursuit of pleasure or success. Why not? What else? If you think your own creator, your identity becomes an endless project of self-invention. If we see ourselves not as self-made, then yeah, we can just create whatever we want. We can reinvent ourselves as many times as we'd like. And the truths about who God is and who we are in relationship to Him are kind of like a light switch. And when it turns on, it exposes the false ways of thinking and it really frees us up to be able to live differently.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

I think that's why this catechism matters, because it gives those gospel reflexes and impulses to the Christian. So when the culture is saying to you one thing, the instinct to turn to God and His truth and to understand what God says in response to that cultural narrative really matters. I'll sum it up like this. You know, ungodly thinking begins with that false view of God and that false view of self. And catechesis, this catechism and the process of engaging it, it confronts it and reminds us God is God. We are His. We are seen and known and loved by Him. And that changes everything.

Shea Houdmann

The salt and light, what Jesus said, we are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We're the city on a hill. Those sort of things all talk to how we're supposed to be different. We're supposed to provide something different to the world to attract people to the gospel. And not knowing who God is and who we are in light of that, that's foundational. So I love the book starts there and then moves on. What would you say are some of the other key truths that you go through in the Gospel Way Catechism that really, people, they're foundational, but people often miss those. That they're Christians, they're seeking to follow Christ, but they really don't have a solid grasp on this

particular foundational truth. What's something other than who God is and who we are in light of that?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

You know, I think, I think people that go through this catechism are going to recognize that there's been quite a lot. We've done quite a lot of work in the second section of the book, which is about creation and identity. We think that there needs to be more attention, not less given to creation. In fact, some would say that the big challenges that the church face right now in this millennium are anthropological challenges. That's just a fancy word to mean questions about what is a human being? What does it mean that we are persons made in the image of God? What is the significance of our bodies? What is sexuality? What is true freedom versus, you know, notions of freedom that may be in the world? What is our responsibility, the authority we've been given in creation?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

We spent a lot of time in the second section of the catechism unpacking questions about why did God create us? Why, who are we as persons? What is the unseen realm? Questions about, you know, sexuality, about freedom, as I mentioned, work and rest. These are all there because we believe Genesis 1, particularly the section about God making us in, making humans in his image, is foundational to the rest of the Christian story. We don't have good answers to those questions and are not able to help people understand just how much the way we answer those questions affects how we live our lives, then we're starting off already, you know, way behind in the race, in the Christian race, so to speak.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

And so those are areas where if you look at, if you look at the difference between this catechism and some of the classics is we have to spend more time there because of the particular challenges that are happening in our day and age, you know. Some people have said, you know, the first millennium of the church, the real foundational challenges were Trinitarian and Christological. The second millennium of the church, they were, the whole reformation was over the nature of salvation and how salvation is accomplished. Now we're in this new era and the real question is, what is humanity? What does it mean to be a person embodied, you know, soul and body? What does that mean? And so that's really where we spent a lot of time because we think that the culture is asking those questions.

Shea Houdmann

Next question. I mean, what you said, the Q&A aspect of it obviously very much speaks to me and we found at Got Questions, really opens people

up. It's like, yeah, I've asked that question and I love your focus on the anthropological. If you look at our top 20 questions, there's several in there that are definitely anthropological. And as you can imagine how questions have shifted even in the past several years to focus on gender identity and those sorts of things. And they all eventually go back to not understanding what it means to be created in the image of likeness of God, what it means that we are imago Dei, those sorts of things.

Shea Houdmann

This next question, I want to actually read it because I want to make sure I get the quote accurate. Your book says, the catechism begins with questions about God, not us, because God is the center and point of everything. The world's catechism begins with us. We begin with God. The world teaches that our self is found by looking inward to discover identity and destiny. The Bible teaches that we look upward to God and allow him to narrate our story for us. This is so countercultural. Why is this? Why is it so countercultural? And why is it so important that we completely revolutionize our mindset on this?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Well, I think it's countercultural because everything in the world is telling you, you are the center of everything. Man is the measure of all things. I just even say, even in our practices, the devices that we're carrying around with us, like the phone that we have, the phone is tailored to every, to all of your preferences. Basically you get on a social media site or you get on an app or you get on your phone and everything about the phone is meant to tell you, you are the center of the world. So we are being constantly formed and shaped by impulses that are telling us that everything is, you remember when your parents, when you were a kid would say, hey, the world doesn't revolve around you.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Well, frankly, everything about marketing and advertising in our world wants to actually say, that's not true, that the world should be revolving around us. And if it's not, something must be wrong, right? And so we've got to, we've got to put God where he belongs. He's the blazing center of all things. And we are revolving around him. We find our greatest significance and purpose and hope in being who he's called us to be, which is creatures made in his image.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

And it's incredibly stressful. It creates a lot of anxiety to live with the pressure that I have to look within myself and find something that is exciting and compelling and novel and incredibly nuanced. And then I have to work really hard at projecting and marketing that picture out to the world. We wonder why we're so stressed out. We wonder why anxiety is at an all-time peak. We live

with this enormous pressure. Oh, well, look in there. Come on, come up with something great that's, you know, similar, but slightly nuanced and a little bit competitive. And then when the gospel comes through, oh, just, I mean, it's just what a relief.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

No, no, no. Like, well, you were defined by looking up to God and realizing you're made uniquely in his image. He loves you. He is for you. He does have plans and purposes that he wants to unfold in your life, but he created you and you were made for him and to live in a relationship with him. Oh, it's like the chains come off the freedom that just opens up. Even at the end of that first question on the first page, really appreciated how you bring that up, Shea. It really does. When it starts with God, the relief comes in.

Okay. So I'm not really on the hook to have to figure it out and to broadcast it. Well, no, no, no. Tune into God, live in relationship with him. It's really where the whole project begins.

Shea Houdmann

Learning that it's not about me. It's not about you. So huge because as you guys were saying, that's the message of the world, that we are the masters of our own universe. We are the Lord of our own destinies, all those things. And just recently, I was having a conversation with someone about something else that was going on that I was pretty frustrated about. And the person I was talking to had to tell me, Shea, it's not about you. It's not about you. It's not about you. By about the fourth or fifth time, I was like, got it.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Oh, yeah.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. So like not even, I wasn't raised in the generation where, I mean, I came in, I'm a young Gen X, came in with technology. So I love technology. I'm into it. But to me, like a smart device is a tool for me. But seeing how younger people use it and how you're exactly right. And everything about it is like, I am your slave to make all your dreams come true. And then with AI, customizable, giving different people different answers based on what they want to hear. I mean, we're just going to be getting more and more of this. So revolutionizing at the foundation level is crucial. I love that's what you're, that's what the Gospel Way Catechism seeks to do is like, let's build the foundation correctly. And then through that, we can have the filter in which to interpret everything we see going around us.

Shea Houdmann

In the book, again, I love the Q&A format and love what you chose to focus on. But were there any topics that ended up on the cutting room floor where

like, I would have liked to talk about this or this or this, but in the end, maybe that's book two, anything like that?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

We actually did do a couple of extras just as to give away for people who were pre-ordering the book. I say extras, they were on the top of mind as we were preparing this, trying to get it down to 50. One of them was just about what is a human being just asking that question? Rather, we feel like in the Catechism itself, we get that question answered through a variety of questions. But asking that question on its own was one that we thought could be helpful as in a supplemental way. I don't know if there are any others that Thomas would point to, to say.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

In the part two, where we focus on creation and identity, trying to answer questions to equip the church that are being asked by the church and in the world today, we spent a lot of time thinking about Genesis chapter one, verses 26 to 28 and the cultural mandate. And I remember when we were drilling down in there, question 12, what is our responsibility? We actually began by focusing on what is proper authority in the world today, but we ended up over there with responsibility. And you can just even kind of hear how it sounds. Question number 12, what is our responsibility?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Answer, our responsibility is to represent God by ruling wisely over his good creation, exercising authority in life-giving ways. We are called not to abandon or abuse our authority, but to serve as stewards. You can hear authority still present there, but how do we help Christians understand the cultural mandate? And we go on to talk about work and rest and freedom as well. But yeah, how do we, how do we wrestle with this idea of a proper authority, a proper responsibility as serving as God's vice regents as it is over his creation?

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, that's excellent. Struggling with authority. I don't wouldn't know anything about that. But reading, seeing the book, I think you guys truly did an excellent job in like, what are the 50 most important items to put into the Catechism? I mean, obviously, I, I would maybe take these two out, put those two in those sorts of things. But truly, I'm like, I don't, I really don't know what I would remove. Because like, as you guys were saying, even some of the ones that you guys just mentioned, you do cover it in some of the other points. So it's, it's very thorough. And I love how it's going to a worldview level, helping you to think rightly about these things. And if you're thinking rightly about this, that

will impact your views on authority or views on the creation mandate and so forth. So I truly don't know what I would have changed.

Shea Houdmann

And our recent book was 100 questions, the most 100 most frequently asked questions about God in the Bible. And we're trying to go by the most frequently asked ones. I really don't want these 17 in here. I'd rather swap those out and put a different 17 that I think are far more important. But if it's most frequently asked, okay, I got it. But I loved what you guys chose. It's very organized, it flows from one point to another. And there's a very thorough catechesis on transforming the way we think, helping us to think about who we are in relationship to God and how that impacts everything else. So I mean, give you an opportunity here. Who is this book for? And you're not allowed to say for everybody, who do you think would most benefit by reading this book?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

No, I think we've got a kids version of the Catechism coming out next year that is simplified for middle readers. So we see that resource being the one that's going to be more focused for family discipleship, maybe for parents to walk their kids through. But for this resource, anyone from students and up should be able to take it, understand it. We sought to make it as accessible as possible to really, to really make sure we were not slipping into Christianese all over the place, you know, just because we wanted it to be useful, primarily for two sets of people. One is the new believer, who has just come to faith and needs to a crash course in the basics of Christianity, but in a way that distinguishes and shows how they stay, how Christianity stands apart from some of the worldviews and cultural narratives that they may have had before they became a Christian and are still carrying into their Christian life. So we wanted this to be, hey, if you had 50 weeks, one question a week, one question answer a week with a new believer, and you were to give them this book, would this book be helpful in giving them an overview of Christianity for our day and age?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

That was the first thing. And the second was, what about small groups, Sunday school classes, people that have been walking, you know, with the Lord for a long time, who need a bit of a tune-up, maybe to go back over some doctrines they may already kind of know, but may not see the countercultural implications of those doctrines in their day-to-day lives. We also wanted that to be present as well, so that the light bulb might go on in some good conversations prompted by the Catechism, with some of those discussion questions and things we have in there as well, so that in

community with other believers, they may be able to say, you know what, I've been a Christian a long time, and I've been a little more attuned to the world's way of thinking in some areas I didn't even realize until I really got through this. And so that's the other. And then I'll let Thomas speak a little bit to, we do have an evangelistic hope with this resource as well.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Part of the origin story is, I was church planting in London, England. Trevin and I knew each other from our PhD studies, and both of us heard the call for this kind of a resource from Tim Keller in different ways, and wrestling with the issue as a church planter in, you know, big secular London. I'm approaching, I'm approaching the need as, how do we form people deeply in the gospel in such an overwhelming city as this? The cultural stories, it was on the side of every red bus. It was, it was right there on the tube. I mean, these different visions of what the good life is, and how to live an optimized, carefree existence.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

And I'm sitting there as a church planter thinking, we have this little core team of a church, like, I need a tool to establish them deeply in the midst of this Western secular story that's, as we were putting it together, like, it comes from that place, like written very much like for those people, so to speak. And many people that we were having conversations with, that I was interacting with in the time, they weren't all in fully committed Christians. A lot had real questions about who is God? What is the whole history of Christianity? Where would this take me? And a lot of what you have here in this resource, it was, it was written by questions that I would receive in the pubs and in the cafes and at the school gate, trying to answer real questions from real people.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

So we think the book will have a unique voice with people who have questions about Christianity or seeking for a clear, honest exposition of the Christian faith. People who probably, when they hear it, they might even identify as, you know what, I'm actually not the churchiest type of them all. I kind of enjoy some forays out here into the ways of the world. It's written with a specific sensitivity because of the place where it comes from. So we hope it actually has an evangelistic edge to it. Something focuses as a very winsome and loving cultural apologetic for people who have real questions about who God is.

Shea Houdmann

One of my reactions going through the book was I can tell Trevin and Thomas have actually had people ask them these questions. It was the way you address them. Sometimes you're like, okay, here's the question, but I'm

actually going to also deal with the question behind the question. And that's, that's what we try to do. We're not always successful, but sometimes we've got to actually just answer their question. But I can tell you've been one on one with people that you've actually dealt with these issues in your lives and in your ministries. There's a very, this is very biblically, theologically sound and so forth, but there's also a very real component to it, very practical. People are actually asking these questions and they need these answers because it impacts so much more. Thank you guys for all the research and I know the hard work you poured into creating the Gospel Way Catechism.

Shea Houdmann

For my last question for you today, I mean, obviously the subtitle is 50 Truths to Take on the World. And we've been throwing out the counter-cultural word. How do you be counter-cultural without being divisive? How do you be, how do you stand out? Would stand out in a good way? I see so many Christians who not questioning their motives, but they, they fight about the wrong things or they argue the wrong way or they contend for the faith with the wrong attitude. How do you, how would you advise someone to, let me just say, be different in a good way, in a godly way, in a Christ honoring way?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

I think that all goes back to the, the posture that you come at Christianity with. You know, when Jesus first was calling the disciples, his question for them was, what are you seeking? It wasn't first, what do you think? It wasn't first, let me tell you, you're wrong. Or, you know, it, it, it, it wasn't even, what are you doing? It was a deeper question of, what do you want? Jesus asks the disciples that multiple times, actually. He also asks the, you know, the blind men on the, on the road to Jericho, that question, what, what do you want me to do for you? What, what is it you want?

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

And I think, I think the counter-cultural element of this catechism is really important, because Christianity has an edge. It does push against some of the, the lies of our world, but it does so in a way that fulfills the deeper longings that lead people to fall for those lies in the first place. And if you don't connect to the deeper longings, then you'll basically just, you'll, you'll, you'll basically become someone who, who, who is, only has the, the, the counter-cultural posture without the deeper discernment of what it is that, that leads people to, to believe certain cultural narratives in the first place.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

And so, you know, Tim Keller used to say, you know, if you do counter-cultural teaching well, it's not going to feel like a debate as much as it's going to feel

like you're breaking people out of prison, because rightly understood, these false ways of living in the world, some of these, you know, secularism, materialism, naturalism, expressive individualism, consumerism, whatnot, they're, they're, as Thomas mentioned earlier, they're exhausting, but they're also, they chain you.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

If you think you're going to discover your purpose in life by, by living by your deepest desires, well, that just means you're going to be chained to whatever your deepest desires are, which can also come into conflict with each other. And so the, the gospel should come up, yes, there's going to be a confrontational element to it, but it should come about as a balm to the soul. It should bring rest and relief. Come all you who are burdened, weary laden, I will give you rest. And so that's ultimately what we're going for. We don't want to dull the edge of Christianity at all, but we want to make sure that we use Christianity, not so much as a sword, but as a scalpel to do surgery on the heart, to help, to help people understand the, the, the infection in the world so that they can receive healing in Christ.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Now, we begin in the introduction of the book with a quote by one of our, our mutual great influences, a missionary theologian, Leslie Newbigin. And Newbigin has a great question. Newbigin says, what if, instead of trying to interpret the gospel through the lens of our culture, what if we tried to interpret our culture through the lens of the gospel? And Newbigin goes on to ask that great question, what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the Gospel and modern western culture? And so much of Newbigin's project was around that idea that Christianity, it is a missionary encounter between the Gospel itself and every culture that it comes into contact with.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

But the nature of that encounter and the method that we employed here in this resource is one where we seek to connect, so we're saying hey, I see what you're on to, like I see the positive thing that you are going for. We connect. We affirm what we can. We connect. But then we have to confront. And part of that confronting is often a critique, showing up, hey, do you realize how this good impulse, I mean, you're going somewhere, how it actually doesn't get you all the way that you're trying to go to, and then we seek to convert. So the method that's employed here is a very warm, friendly, like for God and for the world vision of connecting. Yes, there's there's there's confronting and there's critiquing going on, but it's all within aim to converting and showing people there's there's a better way to live.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

So what we hope shows up in the life of the reader isn't someone going around with the scowl, just now ready to hunt within the culture. You've missed the point. We hope it develops a loving and warm missionary instinct in the hearts of people where we're becoming more attuned at picking up, oh, hold on, that's actually a story that's becoming popular in the world. But I'm deeply rooted in the biblical story, and I understand these stories can't just get blended together. There's gonna be a missionary encounter. And sometimes there's a sharp edge at the point of contact, but the point is conversion and winning people to the gospel way.

Shea Houdmann

Well, that's great. I hear your heart throughout the book. I don't see it as like the confrontational apologetics that people often think of when they think of apologetics. I loved the, I think you said it was Tim Keller who said that the Evangelistic encounter shouldn't seem like a debate but an attempt to break someone out of jail. I love that. That's a beautiful picture. The idea that we are not seeking to win an argument we're seeking to win a person.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

That's right.

Shea Houdmann

So our attitude, like you said, the foundational attitude we approach confronting the world is the way we approach being counter-cultural. Determines in large part the success of it. Obviously, God has used, I've seen God use awful gospel presentations on people with terrible attitudes and brought people to Christ. But if we are to be following Christ's examples the way he was counter-cultural doing it with the right attitude is crucial.

Shea Houdmann

Trevon, Thomas, thank you for for joining me today, but thank you more so for the Gospel Way Catechism, because I mean it's I loved it I think it's much needed and I think the way you guys approach it is It's great. Love the Q &A. Love everything about the format and love even how you narrowed it down to 50. It seems, most people wouldn't describe 50 as a narrowing, but trust me, I realized how much more could have gotten into this. You just truly did a great job, and I'm praying that God uses it.

Shea Houdmann

So just for our listeners to know that there'll be links to where you can purchase the Gospel Way Catechism in the show notes, and the YouTube description when this goes live, and also at podcast .gotquestions .org. So, Trevor, Thomas, thank you again for joining me. May God use the Gospel Way Catechism mightily for His glory.

Trevin Wax and Thomas West

Thank you so much, Shea. Thank you.

Shea Houdmann

The Got Questions podcast with Trevor Wax and Thomas West, authors of the Gospel Way Catechism. Got questions? The Bible has answers. And we'll help you find them.