

I am His

Learning from the Prayer Book Catechism
All that a Christian ought to Know and Believe
to his Soul's Health

My beloved is mine, and I am his:
he feedeth among the lilies.
Until the day break, and the shadows flee away,
turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe
or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether.

Song of Solomon 2:16, 17

By Gavin Dunbar

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With gratitude this book is dedicated to the parishioners of Saint John's Church, in Savannah, Georgia, for whom much of the contents were first written; and to the members of the Prayer Book Society of the United States of America, who have supported this work with patience and encouragement, and to the memory of Robert Darwin Crouse, priest, on whose teaching it so freely draws.

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INTRODUCTION

To the surprise of novice readers, some of the most exquisite love songs ever written are found in the Bible, in the book entitled the Song of Solomon. What are we to make of them? There is a very long tradition – going back at least to Origen, in the early 3rd century, to Bernard of Clairvaux, in the 12th century, and to the editors of the King James Version, in the 17th century – of reading the Song of Solomon as an allegory of the mutual love of Christ and his Church, personified as the Bridegroom and the Bride. Nor is this arbitrary: for the New Testament, building on hints in the Old Testament, speaks of Christ and his Church in exactly these terms (Ephesians 5:25, 32; Revelation 21:2). In this tradition of interpretation, “My beloved is mine, and I am his” succinctly expresses (as the King James Version head note puts it), “The profession of the Church, her faith and hope”. She gives first place to his love for her, since his unmerited grace came first (1 John 4:10); but it is the effect of his love in us, to engender faith, hope, and love for him.

Christ’s nuptial love for his Church, “elect, holy and beloved” (Colossians 3;12), is manifested in his commissioning of the apostolic ministry to preach the gospel, and to make disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19). Together with evangelism, baptism and catechesis are the foundations of Christian discipleship; and the means by which Christ stirs up and strengthens faith, hope, and charity.

Works of catechesis appear in antiquity and in the Middle Ages; but it was the 16th century that was most prolific in formal Catechisms, typically in question and answer form, though often becoming homiletic¹. The classical Anglican pattern of baptism and catechesis is found in the first Book of Common Prayer, of 1549, whose substance was largely retained in its successors of 1552, 1559, 1662, and in its adaptations throughout the Anglican Communion until the mid 20th century. In this Prayer Book (and its successors) the service of Baptism ended with an exhortation to the godparents, commissioning them to ensure their godchildren learn [archaic spelling alert!] “what a

¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Charity*, Aquinas *xxxxxxxxxxxxxx*, Luther's *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* of 1529 are both widely available, not least in the *Book of Concord* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, Fortress Press, 2000). Thomas F. Torrance, transl. and ed., *The School of Faith: the Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (1959), an exemplary collection of catechisms of the non-Anglican reformed tradition with a fine introduction. Sadly, no one has done the same for Anglicanism, but students should look to Alexander Nowell's 1570 *Catechism Written in Latin Together with the Same Catechism translated in English* by Thomas Norton, republished by the Parker Society, 1853 (reprinted available from Wipf and Stock Publishes, 199 W. 8th Street, Suite 3, Eugene Oregon 97401); Robert Nelson's *Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the church of England* (1703); and numerous secondary works based on the Prayer Book Catechism, of which the latest is probably Canon Frank Colquhoun's *The Catechism and the Order of Confirmation* in the Prayer Book Commentaries (1963).

solemne vowe, promyse, and profession, they have made by you". To this end, "ye shall call upon them to heare sermons, and chiefly you shal provide that thei may learne the Crede, the Lordes prayer, and the ten commaundementes, in thenglish tounge: and all other thinges which a christian manne ought to knowe and beleve to his soules health." For this purpose the Prayer Book itself provided a Catechism, "that is to say, An Instruccion to bee learned of every childe, before he be brought to be confirmed of the bushop", and a rubric after the Catechism further stated:

So soone as the children can say in their mother tongue tharticles of the faith, the lordes praier, the ten commaundementes, and also can aunswere to such questions of this short Cathechisme as the Bushop (or suche as he shall appointe) shal by hys discrecion appose them in: then shall they bee brought to the Bushop by one that shalbee his godfather or godmother, that everye childe maye have a wittnesse of hys confirmacion.

A rubric after the order of Confirmation specified: "there shal none be admitted to the holye communion: until suche time as he be confirmed". Instruction in the Catechism was thus a critical step in Christian initiation, preparing children who had been baptized in infancy for Confirmation and admission to Communion.

Moreover, instruction in the Catechism was the duty of the clergy:

The curate of every parish once in sixe wekes at the least upon warnyng by him geven, shal upon some Soonday or holy day, half an houre before evensong openly in the churche instructe and examine so many children of his parish sent unto him, as the time wil serve, and as he shal thinke conveniente, in some parte of this Cathechisme. And all fathers, mothers, maisters, and dames, shall cause theyr children, servountes, and prentises (whiche are not yet confirmed), to come to the churche at the daie appoynted, and obediently heare and be ordered by the curate, until suche time as they have learned all that is here appointed for them to learne.

In the hands of a trained catechist, such instruction was by no means a dull affair. In George Herbert's treatment of "The Parson Catechizing" (Chapter 21 of *The Country Parson*) it appears to have been a lively and interactive dialogue, attuned to the capacity of the learners, which he compares to the Socratic method. Though the technique has fallen out of widespread use, it is not altogether forgotten².

² Persons interested in the technique may wish to consult Donald Van Dyken's book, *Rediscovering Catechism: The Art of Equipping Covenant Children* (published in 2000 by the P & R Publishing Company, P. O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865-0817). More generally, there is J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (2010). Packer is also the author of

Herbert values Catechizing for infusing “a competent knowledge of salvation to every one of his Flock”, and thus supplying the foundation upon which Sermons may build. “This is the Practice which the Parson so much commends to all his fellow-labourers; the secret of whose good consists in this, that at Sermons, and Prayers, men may sleep or wander; but when one is asked a question, he must discover what he is. This practice exceeds even Sermons in teaching: but there being two things in Sermons, the one Informing, the other Inflaming; as Sermons come short of questions in the one, so they farre exceed them in the other. For questions cannot inflame or ravish, that must be done by a set, and laboured, and continued speech.” Moreover, although there are other catechisms, he values the “ordinary Church-Catechism” for the sake of catholic unity it enables: “that the same common truths may be every where professed, especially since many remove from Parish to Parish, who like Christian Souldiers are to give the word, and to satisfie the Congregation by their Catholick answers”. In the fragmented Anglican world of the early twenty-first century, and of self-expressive individualism, this ecclesial or churchly aspect of the Catechism has equal value, as a common point of reference and recognition across our divisions.

As the first installment of the *Common Prayer Catechesis Project*, I hope this book proves helpful to many. It is designed for late adolescents and adults, and for the teachers of early adolescents - because you cannot teach what you have not learned. The chapters are short enough that they could be used as discussion starters for a study group, and to assist that process, some suggestions for further reading, and questions for review (to grasp the basic ideas) and discussion (to explore them more deeply) have been appended. All Prayer Book page references are to the 1928 Prayer Book of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America, but the substance of these references is very much the same as that found in the 1662 Prayer Book of the Church of England of the 1958/1962 Prayer Book of the Anglican Church of Canada.

In this book I have taken the liberty of making liberal use of the catechetical writings of some 20th and 21st century Anglican theological writers - C. S. Lewis, famous Oxford don, literary scholar, whose fiction and apologetic works have so millions of copies; Austin Farrer, another Oxford don, Lewis' priest, and a philosophical theologian; Oliver O'Donovan, former Oxford don and priest, best known for his works of moral and political theology; and the late Robert Crouse, not an Oxford don but a Nova Scotian priest and historian of theology, who is not nearly as well known as he should be. In addition, there are some references to the 4th-5th c. Church Father Augustine, the 13th c. medieval doctor Thomas Aquinas, the 16th c. Reformer Martin Luther, and the 16th/17th c.

many sound and lucid works of a catechetical nature, of which *I Want To Be a Christian* (1977), adheres most closely to a traditional catechesis of the Creed, Baptism, Lord's Prayer, and Commandments.

Anglican divine Richard Hooker. My debts to them are obvious; I only hope that I have not traduced their teaching.

The author would be happy to hear suggestions about how this work might be improved and he can be reached by post at St. John's Church, 1 West Macon Street, Savannah, Georgia 31401 or by email at gdunbar@stjohnssav.org.

From George Herbert: *The Country Parson*

CHAP. XXI. *The Parson Catechizing.*

[Catechizing to Infuse Knowledge, Preaching to Inflamm it].

THE Countrey Parson values Catechizing highly: for there being three points of his duty, the one, to infuse a competent knowledge of salvation in every one of his Flock; the other, to multiply, and build up this knowledge to a spirituall Temple; the third, to inflame this knowledge, to presse, and drive it to practice, turning it to reformation of life, by pithy and lively exhortations; Catechizing is the first point, and but by Catechizing, the other cannot be attained. Besides, whereas in Sermons there is a kinde of state, in Catechizing there is an humblenesse very sutable to Christian regeneration, which exceedingly delights him as by way of exercise upon himself, and by way of preaching to himself, for the advancing of his own mortification; for in preaching to others, he forgets not himself, but is first a sermon to himself, and then to others; growing with the growth of his Parish.

[The Prayer Book Catechism as a means of Christian Unity]

He useth, and preferreth the ordinary Church-Catechism, partly for obedience to Authority, partly for uniformity sake, that the same common truths may be every where professed, especially since many remove from Parish to Parish, who like Christian Souldiers are to give the word, and to satisfie the Congregation by their Catholick answers.

[Catechizing required of all, but in different ways]

He exacts of all the Doctrine of the Catechisme; of the younger sort, the very words; of the elder, the substance. Those he Catechizeth publickly, these privately, giving age honour, according to the Apostles rule, I *Tim.* 5. I.

He requires all to be present at Catechizing: First, for the authority of the work; Secondly, that Parents, and Masters, as they hear the answers prove, may when they come home, either commend or reprove, either reward or punish. Thirdly, that those of the elder sort, who are not well grounded, may then by an honourable way take occasion to be better instructed. Fourthly, that those who are well grown in the knowledg of Religion, may examine their grounds, renew their vowes, and by occasion of both, inlarge their meditations.

[Not only words, but meaning - the method of questions and answers]

When once all have learned the words of the Catechisme, he thinks it the most usefull way that a Pastor can take, to go over the same, but in other words: for many say the Catechisme by rote, as parrats, without ever piercing into the sense of it. In this course the order of the Catechisme would be kept, but the rest varied: as thus, in the Creed: How came this world to be as it is? Was it made, or came it by chance? Who made it? Did you see God make it? Then are there some things to be beleaved that are not seen? Is this the nature of believe? Is not Christianity full of such things, as are not to be seen, but beleaved? You said, God made the world; Who is God? And so forward, requiring answers to all these, and helping and cherishing the Answerer, by making the Question very plaine with comparisons, and making much even of a word of truth from him. This order being used to one, would be a little varied to another.

[The value of varied questions and answers]

And this is an admirable way of teaching, wherein the Catechized will at length finde delight, and by which the Catechizer, if he once get the skill of it, will draw out of ignorant and silly souls, even the dark and deep points of Religion. *Socrates* did thus in Philosophy, who held that the seeds of all truths lay in every body, and accordingly by questions well ordered he found Philosophy in silly Trades-men. That position will not hold in Christianity, because it contains things above nature: but after that the Catechisme is once learn'd, that which nature is towards Philosophy, the Catechism is towards Divinity. To this purpose, some dialogues in *Plato* were worth the reading, where the singular dexterity of *Socrates* in this kind may be observed, and imitated.

[Its practice]

Yet the skill consists but in these three points: First, an aim and mark of the whole discourse, whither to drive the Answerer, which the Questionist must have in his mind before any question be propounded, upon which and to which the questions are to be chained. Secondly, a most plain and easie framing the question, even containing in vertue the answer also, especially to the more ignorant. Thirdly, when the answerer sticks, an illustrating the thing by something else, which he knows, making what hee knows to serve him in that which he knows not: As, when the Parson once demanded after other questions about mans misery; since man is so miserable, what is to be done? And the answerer could not tell; He asked him again, what he would do, if he were in a ditch? This familiar illustration made the answer so plaine, that he was even ashamed of his ignorance; for he could not but say, he would hast out of it as fast as he could. Then he proceeded to ask, whether he could get out of the ditch alone, or whether he needed a helper, and who was that helper. This is the skill, and doubtlesse the Holy Scripture intends thus much, when it condescends to the naming of a plough,

a hatchet, a bushell, leaven, boyes piping and dancing; shewing that things of ordinary use are not only to serve in the way of drudgery, but to be washed and cleansed, and serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths.

[Questions inform, Sermons inflame]

This is the Practice which the Parson so much commends to all his fellow-labourers; the secret of whose good consists in this, that at Sermons, and Prayers, men may sleep or wander; but when one is asked a question, he must discover what he is. This practice exceeds even Semons in teaching: but there being two things in Sermons, the one Informing, the other Inflaming; as Sermons come short of questions in the one, so they farre exceed them in the other. For questions cannot inflame or ravish, that must be done by a set, and laboured, and continued speech.

