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THE CHURCHMAN

A Monthly Magazine and Review

CONDUCTED BY
CLERGYMEN AND LAYMEN OF THE
CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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The Romance of the Catechism.

WE seldom realize, as we take our Catechism in hand, that it is the one surviving textbook which links the school-boy of to-day with the schoolboy of three and a half centuries ago. King Edward VI's "Latin Grammar," Cromwell's "Soldier's Drill-Book," with multitudes of successors and predecessors, are stowed away in the most forgotten corner of old libraries. But, whilst they are gone, never to be revived, the Catechism, year in and year out, echoes and re-echoes (Greek echo) in question and answer from the lip of teacher and pupil.

The boys and girls who repeat the Catechism in the Sunday-schools up and down the country recite it in the same words as the boys who learnt it in the class-rooms of great schools like Westminster and Winchester, or the children in country churches who recited it laboriously, answer by answer, as they learnt it from the lips of their Parish Priest. As we take it in hand we ask: When and by whom was it written?

The Catechism is one of the successive milestones which mark the rebirth of spiritual learning in the sixteenth century, and, like Tyndale's translation of the Bible, it speaks in English instead of Latin. Until this century, the boy scholars who gathered outside Carfax Church (Quatre Foix) at Oxford used their Latin Catechism as naturally as they used Latin generally as a common medium of communication. But the University scholars were not the only lads in England, and as the English spirit rose, men began to demand books in their own mother tongue. The Reformers bent their energy in this direction, for they knew that the use of Latin as a medium of spiritual instruction was one of the "high walls" which, if it were retained, would, so far as the common people were concerned, as Bunyan says, be a means used by "the Prince of Darkness" to "darken all the windows of my Lord Understanding's House."

For the breaking down, therefore, of this "high wall" three successive steps had to be taken. The Bible was brought within the reach of every thoughtful man. We still find here and there in old English churches one of these very copies of the Bible, translated by Tyndale and Coverdale, chained for safety against the

pillar of every church. From these Bibles a chapter in English was read in the midst of the Latin Service, so that week in, week out, whether men could study the Bible for themselves, and learned and unlearned alike hear the Word of God read in their own mother tongue.

Secondly, the Church Service, instead of being unintelligible to the common people, a far-away intoning in Latin (which half the time the priest himself did not understand) must be gradually translated and brought into general use. The introduction of Cranmer's Litany and the compilation of the Prayer Book from the old Missals and "Uses," darkened by an excessive multitude of ceremonies," gave the men of the sixteenth century our Prayer Book practically as it is to-day. The Book was received with joy "not only among the learned sort," but "among the vulgar and common people, even little boys flocking among the rest to hear portions read." It was these little boys who were flocking among the elder people who were the real hope of England, for it is the young who catch the vital spirit of a new movement far more effectually than an older generation. In order, therefore, that these children might be rooted and grounded in the Faith, a third and most necessary step was taken, and the greater part of the Catechism—down to the explanation of the Lord's Prayer—compiled almost exactly as we find it to-day and inserted in the Prayer Book of 1549.

Catechisms from earliest Church days in Latin had formed an important part of Church teaching, just as Jewish Catechisms had been a stronghold of Jewish instruction. Our Catechism follows on the lines of these old catechisms—that is to say, it centres round what were called the three main headings of the Christian life: the Creed (Faith); the Lord's Prayer (Hope); and the Ten Commandments (Love). The first three clauses as we find them to-day, and the later explanations, were written expressly for the Catechism, and do not bear the trace of earlier hands.

The Catechism in 1549 ended at the words "Amen, So be it," and for a century went no farther. The latter part of the Catechism—clauses as to the Sacraments—touching the keen controversial questions of the sixteenth century (as of every century), were not written until the days of Queen Mary were over, probably because men thought it wiser to give children the main facts of

salvation, and wait till they were older before involving them in controversies which might bring them to the stake. But some fifty years later, although the controversies as to the Sacrament were still raging, in the year preceding the Gunpowder Plot, the time had come when the Church of England doctrine as to Baptism and the Lord's Supper must be outlined if the rising generation were to understand the glory of their birthright in the Church of England and learn the truths which later they would have to defend.

At the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, therefore, the question of the Catechism was gone into, and a discussion held as to whether our Catechism or a Catechism drawn up by Dean Nowell, of St. Paul's, was the better adapted for general use. The Puritans held our Catechism was too short, Nowell's too long; but after much discussion our Catechism was retained, and sentences as to the Sacraments, adapted by Bishop Overall from Nowell's Catechism, added in as few and concise words as possible.

The Catechism is so short, even with Overall's addition, that we are apt to take it for granted, and forget the great difficulty which the writers must have found in trying to embody the main facts of spiritual life in definite words adapted to young children, and the more especially in a case like this, where definitions had to be found for educated and uneducated alike. It was one thing to write a textbook for educated lads studying in the Grammar Schools for the Universities, who could hardly help being interested in the controversies such as those of the day for which men were answering with their lives; it was another thing to write the same textbook for ignorant boys and girls living in remote country districts, who never had had, or could hope to have, any school teaching whatsoever. The problem, therefore, before the Catechism writers was to discover words which, whilst conveying truth to the uneducated, would at the same time stimulate thought in the educated; and to find definitions which could easily be grasped, and yet contain nothing which would afterwards have to be unlearned. Every previous effort had failed. Pamphlets like "The Children's A B C" were totally inadequate. "The King's Book" and "The Bishop's Book," as their titles show, though written for children, were entirely above their understanding. The Catechism must be intensely practical, must stimulate the spiritual thought and ambition of the young noblemen, and yet be brought

within the reach of farm lads and lasses who, generation after generation, despite the Grammar Schools, would grow up without such a chance of learning to read.

The difficulty of writing such a Catechism makes us ask—Who were the Catechism writers? What traces are there as to by whom, and when, our Prayer Book Catechism was written?

The writers of the Westminster Catechism of a century later are seen clearly enough. They are gathered in the Jerusalem Chamber, under the light of the great window, softened by “curtains of pale thread with roses,” in a room with “a good fyre,” which is “some dainties.” The names of the writers are as well known: Twisse, rejoicing in the death which came upon him in his task, saying, “Now I shall have leisure to follow my studies to all eternity”; Gillespie, wrestling in prayer as he finds the answer to the definition, “What is God?”; and men like Samuel Rutherford.

But of our *shortest* Catechism (for our twenty-four clauses are child’s play compared with the 107 clauses of the Westminster “Shorter,” or, indeed, of any other country) little or no certain record remains. Gathering together, however, what information we can, we find three successive pictures. In the first place, we see the Reforming Party under the leadership of Cranmer and Ridley, two men “much given to prayer and contemplation.” Cranmer writes the clauses so familiar to us with a hand which later, for “offending” in writing his recantation, will, despite his exquisitely sensitive and fearful temperament, be unflinchingly held in the flames until it is consumed. Next him is Ridley, lighting up a pathway for generation after generation of children by bringing the Catechism near them, as but a few years later, in the mists of an early October morning, “in a ditch over against Balliol College,” he will light the candle which “by God’s grace shall never be put out.”

It is hard to say how far the sentences of the Catechism owe their pregnant power to Cranmer, how far to Ridley. Cranmer, with his exquisite modesty, held Ridley to be his superior in controversy, but Henry VIII used to say Cranmer “caught the sow by the right ear.” The proverbial saying in England was: “Cranmer leaneth to Ridley, and Ridley to the singularity of his own wit.”

We seem, in truth, to trace the genius of both men in the clear style of the first three clauses, with their deep underlying current of doctrinal truth. Like the Litany and Advent Collects, they ring with the quiet earnestness of men who know whereof they write, and are prepared to die for that which they affirm.

The second part, "The Dutie to God and to our Neighbour," is the work of Bishop Goodrich, famed for the sudden termination of his sermon at Queen Elizabeth's rebuke, "To your text, Mr. Dean. Leave that; we have heard enough of that." No record remains save the "Dutie" engraved upon the window-sills of the long gallery of his palace at Ely, but fancy sees him pacing up and down the garden, seeking concise words and bidding the stonemason carve them, sentence by sentence, upon the window-sills of the new building. His previous work in "The Bishop's Book" has failed, owing to the abstruseness of its terms; therefore the "Dutie" is engraved so that he can constantly assure himself that no clearer or simpler words are to be found.

The last sentences are the work of Dean Nowell, revised by Bishop Overall. Nowell's Catechism, though written later, reminds us of his mastership at Westminster, where he had introduced the reading of St. Luke's Gospel and the Acts once a week amongst his elder boys, and after, as Dean of the Abbey, had used his experience among schoolboys for the writing a Catechism. The Hampton Court Conference finds his sentences too long, and requests Bishop Overall to restate them "in the fewest and plainest affirmative terms that may be." No clue remains as to Overall's success, save his skill in classical scholarship. He was more at home in Latin than in English, and it is on record that, when called to preach before the Queen, he complained "that he had spoken Latin so long that it was troublesome to him to speak English in a continued oration."

It was well for England that throughout the sixteenth century, from first to last, the leaders of the Reformation Party cared above all else for the education of the young. We cannot tell how much of the purity and scholarliness of Spenser and Shakespeare, and the sturdy manliness of Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh, was due to a sense of their duty to God and to their neighbour inculcated by the new learning. A chance leader, like King Edward, "however zealously determined for God's cause," might early pass

away. But the influence of youths brought up in schools like that of St. Paul's, founded by Dean Colet in 1510, "*Schola Catechizationis puerorum in Christi fide et bonis literis*," where "one hundred and fifty and three," so many as the net of "great fishes," lifted up "their lillie-white hands in prayer to God," would not so easily pass away.

But whilst the Catechism in one sense springs from the rebirth of the sixteenth century, in another it is of far deeper origin. Like the stones of Solomon's Temple, which had been formed thousands of years before they were brought to the Temple, so the foundation-stones of our Catechism bear the landmark of successive rebirths of the spiritual world thousands of years before. Thus, the Ten Commandments mark the redemption of the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai; the Lord's Prayer is shadowed by the approaching Cross; the Apostles' Creed, if not, according to tradition, drawn up by the Apostles at the outbreak of the persecution at Jerusalem, yet marks the outcome of the immediately succeeding centuries of persecution. Storm clouds of pain and anguish ever precede a rebirth of truth. "If it die, it beareth much fruit," holds good in national as in personal life, and gives hope that a new and cleansed world may arise to us out of these days of later tribulation.

Days of anguish resemble the storm clouds which gathered over a lake in Northern Canada during the darkest war crisis, and at sunset changed from lowering darkness into the form of a glowing, fiery anvil. The spectators in canoes, under the shadow of the silver birches, watched in awed silence whilst the fiery clouds glowed still more fiercely, till they began to pale as a cloud-like cathedral of pearly whiteness slowly welled out of the midst of the fire. So from the agony of Mount Sinai, Calvary, and the persecutions of the early Church and of the Reformation, comes our Catechism, which children recite Sunday by Sunday as they master the truth as to their birthright in the Christian world.

It is in this scanning of the Catechism pages by the boys and girls of our country for more than three hundred years that the romance of the Catechism lies. A few pages tell the tale of our Christian life from the Baptismal to the Burial Service, and we turn them over lovingly, for each has a beauty and pathos of its own; but the Catechism we are apt to pass over as comparatively dry reading, thinking a textbook inserted in the Prayer Book one

of the least picturesque and inspiring of the Services amongst which it finds itself. And yet, if we would study it carefully, we would see that it has a dignity and a pathos of its own. Generation after generation of boys and girls study it at the time when the unknown possibilities of their future lives are lying ahead of them, and they are turning over in their minds the question as to whether or not they will, in the freshness of their youth and opportunity, pledge their life and loyalty to God.

Looked at thus as a dividing line, the Catechism becomes one of the most touching and inspiring parts of the Prayer Book. It is a pledge of purity and selflessness like the freshness of the first spring foliage, for these boys and girls, as they decide for the right, take an onward step outside the narrow circle of their own personal interests into the far-reaching sweep of the councils and plans of God, and pledge themselves for outpost or inpost duty, as God may call them, in the conquest of the world for purity and the right.

E. M. KNOX.

