

REDISCOVERING
CATECHISM

REDISCOVERING CATECHISM

THE ART OF EQUIPPING
COVENANT CHILDREN

DONALD VAN DYKEN



P U B L I S H I N G

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Preface

This book is written to aid in the renaissance of catechism, particularly to revive the catechetical method of training children. The art or perhaps we may say the grace of catechizing has been a potent force in the history of the church.

This book is addressed to readers whose churches teach catechism but perhaps are unaware of its principles and history, to those whose churches have dropped catechism teaching, and to those who are unfamiliar with the concept. This book addresses all who hold their children dear, love the church of Jesus Christ, and greatly long to see the extension and expansion of Christ's kingdom.

The book covers two general areas. Chapters 1 through 7 investigate the meaning and history of catechizing; chapters 8 through 17 outline practical considerations and steps for productive catechizing. Since each section is largely self-contained, you may turn to either section first. It is my prayer that the Lord, through this work, will excite in his churches that indomitable spirit of conquest that characterized the "saints who nobly fought of old."

For whatever is unworthy in this work I take full responsibility. For whatever is true and worthy I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to all the little and big children it has been my joy and privilege to catechize these past twenty years; to my late and beloved father, the Reverend Harry Van Dyken, a man of the covenant and of great compassion,

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and a catechist nonpareil; and above all to my faithful God and Father, who through Jesus Christ has always cradled this poor sinner in his covenant love with such incredible long-suffering and faithfulness.

Chapter 1

A Tale of Two Cities

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” So Charles Dickens opens his *Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel of London and Paris in the days of the French Revolution. His words also describe our times.

Although our times are bad enough, it will not do for Christians to moan and wring their hands. History is full of bad times when God called up men and women of strong faith and glorious deeds, and we must prepare our children for that call. The best means to fulfill that duty, as this book will try to convince you, is by returning to catechism teaching, a method of instruction in biblical truth that the church has used for centuries.

In the first two chapters we will do some groundwork. First, we must be sure that our confidence is in Christ. Second, we will see that Christ is leading churches today back to the biblical model of teaching the Word through careful questions and answers. Third, we’ll note that families are reclaiming their children from the world. Fourth, we’ll see that we can firm up and safeguard these gains if the church and the family will join hands. Fifth, we’ll note that if we return to the Christian heritage of catechizing children in the truth, the church may well look ahead to a faithful and victorious future.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS ARE NOW

Only in such an atmosphere of sober biblical optimism does a return to catechism fit so well. However, since you are swimming against the rising tide of moral degeneracy and anti-Christian activism, you will probably need convincing proof.

In the first body of evidence we'll consider, God testifies about his Son in relation to our own time and tomorrow. Today is the best of times because Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 1:5). Our Redeemer rules upon the throne at the right hand of God. By him the universe was created (John 1:2); by his law all things are ordered and upheld; by his blood he is redeeming his people from every corner of the world. It is the best of times because God witnesses that Christ shall reign until all his enemies are crushed (1 Cor. 15:25).

Is Christ reigning now? Looking at the top of any page of your newspaper may, paradoxically, reassure you. The news media may sometimes irritate or enrage us, but they chronicle, unawares, a daily fact that many Christians overlook. Every page gives the date—the day, month, and year. The date reminds us that this is “the year of our Lord.” We have a daily reminder of the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the best of times because as this King governs the affairs of mice and men, he orders all things for the benefit of his church (Eph. 1:22–23). He numbers our hairs (Matt. 10:30); he knows more about us than we know of ourselves. This powerful Redeemer-King holds his people in his hand and has promised that no one can snatch them out (John 10:28). Therefore, if we must go through what seems the worst of times, we are held in the best of all hands, inseparable from the best of all loves (Rom. 8:38–39).

Those are the facts as God reports them in his Word.

They testify, don't they, that we live in the best of times? We should appreciate our need for encouragement. The world outside and the old man inside attack us daily, wear down our hope, and slow down our efforts. Only when God re-aligns our hearts to these grand eternal truths are we strong again.

Remember the incessant opposition that confronted Moses, David, and Paul. Their strength and perseverance caught breath again only through their vision and grasp of eternal Truth. Imparting that vision and grasp to the rising generation is the target of catechizing.

THE TALE GOES ON

It is the worst of times, and it is the best of times. For today as always, history is the tale of two cities, the city of man and the city of God, Babylon and Jerusalem, the world and the church. The battle between the two continues, but the outcome is never in doubt.

While we live in the worst of times, let us embrace what is best. Let us take the invincible truths of almighty God, pour them into the minds and hearts of our children, and send them forth into the field of battle.

Let us join the Calvin of the Reformation and say, "We who aim at the restitution of the Church, are everywhere faithfully exerting ourselves, in order that, at least, the use of the Catechism . . . may now resume its lost rights."¹

In the next chapter we will see how Christ is moving the hearts of his people today.

