## SEPTEMBER 3, 2018

### ALEXANDER NOWELL’S “MIDDLE CATECHISM” PUBLISHED 1572, NOW ONLINE

[Alexander Nowell, “Middle Catechism” / “Catechism or the Institution of Christian Religion, to be Learned of all Youth Next After the Little Catechism, appointed in the Book of Common Prayer” (1572)](https://www.anglican.net/works/alexander-nowell-middle-catechism-or-the-institution-of-christian-religion-1572/)

Every subject, including Anglican identity and theology, is best served by studying the primary sources, instead of accretions of commentary and interpretation. This was the foundational call in the sixteenth century: to investigate and find the authentic truth; to investigate the primary sources of every matter in literature, thought, doctrine, and theology. This great call came to be known as, “To The Origins” or “To The Sources”, or as men called it in Latin in that era, “*Ad Fontes!*”.

We hope to perform the same function here by going *ad fontes* here as well. There is perhaps no more influential Anglican text published in the sixteenth century (apart from the doctrinal Formularies and the liturgical texts) than the set of Catechisms of the Rev. Alexander Nowell, the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. We are now twenty years into the digital revolution, and yet the texts, especially of the Middle Catechism (more below) are completely inaccessible. As the debates swirl around Anglican identity, few are aware of the primary sources and how men and women lived their faith in ages gone by.

What we present to you here (dear Reader), is the Middle Catechism. Dean Nowell had written a series of three catechisms: the Small Catechism which was almost indistinguishable from the Church Catechism; the Large Catechism which was so long and comprehensive that it proved to be too vast for the majority of readers; finally he produced the Middle Catechism, by (as he explains in the preface), taking the large catechism and condensing it down while keeping all of the essential points. Thus came about the “Middle Catechism”, the “Nowell’s Catechism” that was so famous throughout the centuries.

This, Nowell’s Middle Catechism, upon publication, exerted an enormous influence on Anglican public life. It continued to be in vast demand by the public and church officials, and alone of the three catechisms continued to be reprinted, again and again, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such was its doctrinal importance that the Canons Ecclesiastical of 1604 even mandated (canon 79) that it be read and studied in schools, in addition to the official Church Catechism that was printed in the Books of Common Prayer.

If you are looking for an Anglican theological and spiritual masterpiece, then look no further. In a short compass sufficient to educate the youth, this work captures what it terms the four necessities of religious life, and of True Religion: obedience to divine law, the gospel of grace, the true understanding of prayer, and the importance of the sacraments. It covers these materials without academic dryness; from explaining (and expanding) our understanding of the ten commandments in ways you wouldn’t expect, to teaching the nature of faith which a modern skeptic would appreciate, to the delicate piety of prayer, and to the militant and unyielding call to holiness and repentance, this is a spiritual *tour de force*. As mentioned above, there is no text of this Catechism available anywhere online, so we hope to perform a valuable service in making this text freely available here.

God’s blessings.

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