

A Catechism for Slaves (1854)

"Frederick Douglass's Paper," June 2, 1854, from *The Southern Episcopalian* (Charleston, S.C., April, 1854).



A catechism is a religious book or a series of questions and answers that explain the basic beliefs and teachings of a faith. Before the Civil War, slaves were usually brought into some type of Christian church, depending upon the religion of their owners. Many of these churches published catechisms that were specifically intended to reinforce the role of slaves in society, and especially the slaves' relationships to their owners. Below is an excerpt from one example, though there were many more.

Q. Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you?

A. God does.

Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress?

A. God gave them to me.

Q. Who says that you must obey them?

A. God says that I must.

Q. What book tells you these things?

A. The Bible.

Q. How does God do all his work?

A. He always does it right.

Q. Does God love to work?

A. Yes, God is always at work.

Q. Do the angels work?

A. Yes, they do what God tells them.

Q. Do they love to work?

A. Yes, they love to please God.

Q. What does God say about your work?

A. He that will not work shall not eat.

Q. Did Adam and Eve have to work?

A. Yes, they had to keep the garden.

Q. Was it hard to keep that garden?

A. No, it was very easy.

Q. What makes the crops so hard to grow now?

A. Sin makes it.

Q. What makes you lazy?

A. My wicked heart.

Q. How do you know your heart is wicked?

A. I feel it every day.

Q. Who teaches you so many wicked things?

A. The Devil.

Q. Must you let the Devil teach you?

A. No, I must not.

Document Analysis

1. What is the catechism's message about work?
2. How does the catechism use stories and images from the Bible to reinforce the master/slave relationship?