Stepping into the Drama

BY GARY FURR

Catechesis invites us to assume our roles in the unfolding drama of God's continuing creation and redemption of the world. Yet we are far more deeply initiated by the powerful catechisms of media, American culture, and capitalism than by the ancient faith of Christians. Can we recover the sense that our life with God is an adventure?

The dynamism of art, the novelist Dorothy Sayers once observed, is that it is three-dimensional. It is not enough for an artist to have a good idea. Her art must become incarnated as a completed work and experienced by an audience for it to have its full life—whether as a play that is enjoyed, a book that is read, or a song that is sung and listened to.[1]

As a pastor in a church that struggles to transmit the Christian life genuinely and faithfully to the people God has called into our fellowship, I suspect Sayers's insight offers a clue to what is missing in our congregational life. We intuitively sense the void of Christian catechesis (instruction and training) among our people, who are far more deeply initiated by the powerful catechisms of media, American culture, and capitalism than by the ancient faith of Christians. Have we lost the sense that our life with God is an adventure? How can we invite our people into discipleship that is full-bodied, life-changing, and three-dimensional?

The entire notion of catechesis invites us to better understand and assume our roles in the unfolding drama of the Triune God's continuing creation and redemption of the world. Let's consider four questions that are critical to this issue.

First, how can congregations today help children, young people, and new Christians embody the central texts of Scripture and the Christian tradition in order to step into their roles, discern the present activity of the Spirit, and cherish the practices of the church?

More specifically, how should Baptists (and other free church Christians) embrace the idea of basic instruction in the faith? There are theological resources within our own way of approaching faith that can guide us.

Third, though catechism calls us into a new community with a distinctive way of interpreting oneself and the world, we can never fully escape the habits and assumptions, prejudices and politics of our social location. What challenges do we face in attempting true catechism in our culture?

Finally, what are some practical ways that we can do this work of catechesis today? As much as we might romantically pine for simpler times (though we probably underestimate the difficulties that Christians faced in those times, too), we live now. What theological and practical resources can we bring to bear to accomplish what we know must be done?

HELPING A NEW GENERATION ENTER THE DRAMA

Catechesis, if we understand it broadly, is about how we transmit the faith to the next generation of believers. Richard Osmer identifies three central tasks of catechetical instruction: preserving the normative faith, interpreting those beliefs and practices amid a constantly changing historical and cultural landscape, and creating and sustaining the educational institutions, processes, and curricula needed to complete the first two tasks.[2]

Traditional written catechisms followed a question-and-answer approach to teaching the faith. The strength of this time-honored method is its clarity in communicating essential beliefs and truths; yet, it runs the risk of reducing the faith to cognitive development while it neglects character formation. Learning the Christian faith is not simply about gaining theological information; it is also about transforming all of the dimensions of the person—the will, the affective life, and behaviors.

Catechetical instruction includes *praxis* (worshiping, praying, witnessing, doing mission, helping the needy, advocating justice, and developing spiritual disciplines), *doxology* (prayer and worship), and *therapeutics* (the inner work of healing, growing in grace, and sanctification) as well as *theology*. Learning the faith, then, is less like a child memorizing the list of state capitals and more like an apprentice learning a trade or a music student learning to sing. Foundational theories and essential skills lead us to a higher level of functioning that is grounded in new knowledge, personal experiences, honed abilities, and crafted skills.

When catechesis operates as it is intended, at the heart of the process is an essential human relationship between a teacher and a learner. This spiritual relationship is the irreducible core. The instructional contents conveyed are only the building blocks of this relationship, just as the spoken sentences of care and love connect human beings in friendships and communities.

The goal of catechesis, then, is not merely information, but formation.[3] It is the "socialization" of new believers into the people of God. They enter a spiritual friendship that introduces them a new conceptual world and fos-

ters a new set of behaviors and attitudes toward life.

It is no wonder, then, that teaching the faith is embedded in every single aspect of what the Church does. Indeed, the "art" of local congregational life is helping others to enter this drama successfully. Each congregation is an instrument of catechism, through both formal and informal instruction and mentoring. People learn the faith as they worship, pray, give offerings, hear sermons, and study the Bible together. Adults and youth learn it in conversations as they ride to a mission project together. Parents and children learn it as they talk about what is going to happen on pledge-the-church-budget day or at the annual church reunion.

A formal catechism class is only the beginning of instruction in the faith. We should operate, in a time like ours, with the assumption that those who gather in our churches do not know the essentials of Christian belief and practice. Ours is a time to be the teaching church.

Think of the catechism class as an actor's workshop; just as a workshop is not the whole of the actor's training, the catechism class is not all that trains a disciple to enter the divine drama. This means that we must come to every aspect of our life in a congregation with a certain seriousness and artistic spirit. It may be as simple as adding a few explanatory sentences in worship to invite the "stranger" to participate with understanding. (In truth, we will be helping the member of many years understand as well.)

Our lack of seriousness concerning two central features of the Christian life—baptism and the Lord's Supper, or the "ordinances" as Baptists call them—deserves more attention. We have diminished their role through all sorts of "artistic" decisions about them. In our theological reaction to Catholic and Anglican mystery, we have become theological "minimalists" who can say such terrible things as "It's only a symbol" about the rite of Christian initiation.

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Too often we have replaced these public and communal acts with personal experience (as in revivalism) as the beginning of the Christian drama. Or, for pragmatic reasons of entertaining television or radio audiences, we have displaced their observance from the heart of public worship. The first and simplest thing we might do to treat them with seriousness is to return them to the center of our theological understanding and a focal point of our worship. In my church, they are included in Sunday morning worship, not in

some other "time-saving" location in the weekly calendar. The congregation stands when a candidate enters the baptistry, to honor the moment. Members sense that in this solemn moment something important is happening.

To these I would add "ordination" to a calling, or vocation, as something we need to approach with greater seriousness. To be true to our theology, we must preach and practice calling as broadly as possible; it is not only the province of the clergy. We need rituals for commissioning mission groups, calling forth Sunday school teachers, selecting deacons, and ordaining ministers. Who we ordain, bless, affirm, call out, and recognize, as well as how we do it, is a great opportunity to teach about the Christian life.

EXPLORING BAPTIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SCRIPT

Before moving into the resources Christians have both to invite others to step into the drama and to confront the challenges of today's culture, let's explore how the historical Baptist tradition has contributed to the script. We Baptists (and other free church Christians) already have a catechism—a process of transmitting the faith—embedded in our ongoing practices, beliefs, and congregational structures. We emphasize that the local, gathered congregation is the teaching church as well as the worshiping church and ministering church. Religious education is not simply something we "do" at certain times; rather, it is implied by all that our congregations do. The constant danger, unfortunately, is that we will take this entire process for granted and not be reflective and intentional about what we are teaching through our worship and ministry.[4]

The most intentional aspect of our Baptist catechism is found in the self-conscious "distinctives" we preach and teach. In every generation leading thinkers have articulated key themes of freedom, congregation, Scripture, experience, conversion, baptism, autonomy, and voluntary cooperation.

In a famous essay entitled "Why I am a Baptist," theologian Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) distilled these to three major emphases. Rauschenbusch's first reason for being a Baptist was that Baptists set "spiritual experience boldly to the front as the one great thing in religion." Practically, this meant that Baptists emphasized the Bible and personal experience on one hand and de-emphasized creeds on the other.

Baptists are most definitely "people of the Book." If we disagree about many particulars regarding interpretation and application of Scripture, there is no question that our reflections begin in Scripture and our applications cannot be disconnected from Scripture. Those who come into Baptist life often notice how we memorize the Bible, study it, pray with its words and concepts, listen to sermons based on it, and think about it.

This importance of personal experience also implies that learning the Bible is not sufficient. Free churches emphasize the centrality of a regenerate membership, which in simpler terms means that we call for personal commitment to Christ from all who are members of the church. Unapologetical-

ly we ask for a personal decision for Christ, carefully assess it in one another, and nurture it in all the life of the church.

Rauschenbusch's second reason was the Baptist understanding of worship, which he believed is bound up in the idea of freedom. This is embodied most clearly in our understanding of a very crucial doctrine, the priesthood of all believers. A free church, worshiping with a free conscience, leads to the truest and most spiritual worship. My friend Glenn Hinson has described this in my presence many times as the voluntary principle of religion—"for faith to be genuine," he once said at my church, "it must be free." We might also say the converse—for faith to be truly free, it must be genuine. Freedom is always in peril in religion, but so is faith's survival.

The Baptist idea of freedom is meaningless without its companion virtue, responsibility. The priesthood of all believers, in fact, implies this. Not only does this doctrine point to God's freedom to relate to human beings without the mediation of institution or cult, it also reminds us that the work of the people of God is the responsibility of all the people, not just a few.

A third reason to be a Baptist, said Rauschenbusch, is found in the Baptist understanding of church. He believed that the voluntary, democratic, non-hierarchical, egalitarian spirit of Baptist congregations equipped them better to carry on the Kingdom work in a modern world. This is because the center of those churches is not institutional structure but heart religion that brings a continual experience of reform and vitality.

As we live out these "distinctives," we demonstrate to new Christians how to be in community with one another in the spirit of the New Testament and without rigid authority structures. As we discern God's leadership, do congregational "business," and work through our differences and conflicts, we bring a new generation into our way of church. This is part of the dramatic role they must learn as disciples in the Kingdom.

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RESISTING CONSUMERISM

In every time and place, Christians have faced specific cultural challenges to becoming the people of God. Today in North America, consumerism, individualism, and the impact of technology present huge obstacles to deepening our relationships to one other, to God, and to ourselves (rightly understood) within to the Kingdom of God. Let us examine how our Baptist practices might be resources for responding to these challenges.

Consumerism is powerfully reducing all of the issues of life in our culture to the economic dimension. We even are tempted to measure membership in a congregation and Christian friendship in terms of their financial usefulness to us. Will these people encourage me, help me find a career, and support my family? With whom can I "network" at church? Though the difficulties of this consumerist attitude are endlessly discussed, the practical responses are not always obvious.

One response, I suggest, is in the Baptist emphasis on stewardship, on the careful management and generous sharing of our financial resources. The biblical mandates for generosity and stewardship are not just about "personal morality," nor about "giving to the church offering," but about the proper structuring of all our relationships. For instance, the abuse of money is a major issue in many marital failures. In the days to come, stewardship will be more important than ever. We will drown in a sea of material complacency and our relationships will dissolve into mere partnerships, unless we learn and live the virtue of generosity.

FACING INDIVIDUALISM

The pervasive individualism of our culture, with the attendant lack of genuine community, is a second challenge to true catechism. Family life, community life, parenting, work, personal vocation, and the Church are fraying from the impact of inappropriate individualism.

It often teams up with consumerism to distort our lives. Our sexual lives, for example, are deeply damaged by both—with consumerism turning human sexuality into a marketed commodity and individualism exalting the hedonistic self above all else. The Christian counter-story calls us into God's Kingdom where we surrender our egocentric self in trust to God and we learn to act against our economic self-interest willingly.

Baptists often struggle to articulate this facet of Kingdom life because our history and theological distinctives have been so deeply couched in the language of modern democratic self-determination. Our unique contribution to the modern Church has been our advocacy of religious liberty for all. Historic Baptist calls for freedom were born in succeeding contexts of resistance to oppression and persecution. So today we rightly resist any form of communitarianism that becomes an authoritarian system of domination.

Yet what can prevent our religious freedom from turning into laissez-faire religion? How can we be free to believe without just believing whatever we want? An appropriate emphasis on "individuality" rather than "individualism" will help us. Community without robust individuality turns into either authoritarianism or collective inertia.

We can connect our lives with the stories of great Christians and the story of the Church. Patterning our lives after the lives of believers has biblical precedent. Not only will we serve someone, we will also pattern ourselves after someone. The object is not to produce docile personalities,

but vibrant and energetic ones. This is precisely what happens to church members in the book of Acts. They do not turn into zombies at all. They fight, struggle, advocate, and suffer, but never lose the sense that they are a "we" in all of this.

We can emphasize our solidarity with one another through the free-church practice of testimony. For instance, during worship I have interviewed church members about how their faith in Jesus Christ connects with their daily lives. These interviews have been quite profound as members come to know one another.

USING TECHNOLOGY RESPONSIBLY

A third challenge to catechism today is the overwhelming impact of technology in our society. Though family members and friends are more "stretched out" today—separated by miles, life pace, time, and commitments—their yearning to stay connected has not changed at all. In response to this deep desire, many important new technologies are connective and informational in their nature. So we have e-mail addresses and blogs, MySpace and Facebook, cell phones and instant messaging. Today we can communicate across continents much more easily than our ancestors could speak to people living in the same county two-hundred years ago.

Congregations are challenged by the many competing claims for attention that these technologies present. Fifty years ago a church might expect five to eight hours a week of a person's time, but today two hours a week is an enormous commitment of face-to-face contact. How can we utilize and develop these "technologies of connection" to catechize believers? The Internet puts enormous resources of connection and instruction at our fingertips, but how do we use them without unwittingly surrendering some important dimensions of the faith?

These technologies of connection can help us to do the work of "instruction in the faith" in a different way. They should not replace our face-to-face connection, but we can supplement and sustain the relational core of our relationships by the strategic use of these technologies. For instance, I regularly maintain contact with younger members of the church through e-mail, and I am giving thought to how sophisticated, interactive "discipleship" resources could be placed on the Web. Most church leaders are very familiar with the frustration of trying to carry out membership orientation and instruction in the faith in a traditional, long-term classroom setting with a typical weekly schedule, though it is still the best way.

Might "distance" discipleship training sessions on the Internet replace the old hour on Sunday evening? What about creating a "curriculum for new Christians" on the church Web site for those who struggle to be present through the week? Adults on the go these days spend a lot of lonely time in hotels and motels and in "crowded isolation" on airplanes where a chance to listen to something of significance would be appreciated. Laptop comput-

ers, DVD players, CD players, and iPods offer vastly expanded opportunities to teach believers.[5]

Even while we explore increased use of these technologies of connection, we must also work in the opposite direction to maximize opportunities for face-to-face relationship in the context of faith. Believers need intensive and unprogrammed occasions to talk to and learn from one another. A spiritual retreat can offer quiet, unhurried times for reflection and renewal, where we can work our way through our deepest dilemmas in the presence of God.

While we use laptops, DVD players, and iPods to teach believers, we must also work to maximize opportunities for face-to-face relationships. Believers need intensive and unprogrammed occasions to talk to and learn from one another.

Instruction in the faith should also provide opportunities to explore our sin and seek reconciliation. (I choose the word "explore" rather than "confess" even though I mean the same thing.) Is not the exploration and understanding of our brokenness, repentance, and sharing the journey of forgiveness part of our vocation? In worship, discipleship, and instruction, we need to be about the work of reconciliation, not of improved perception. "Looking well" is sometimes more important in the middle-class American congregation than "being well." We desperately need, through spiritual direction, confession, sermon, and worship, a fellowship where we can "be ourselves" in order to be better selves.

CONCLUSION

If the Christian life is like an unfolding drama that we are invited to enter, then growing in discipleship is less like reading a play than it is practicing our part with a master actor. We are not learning merely to recite, but to live and act. This is a beautiful analogy for catechesis.

Too often we approach our life as a series of problems to be solved, Dorothy Sayers noted, though the harder we try to "fix" things the more problems we seem to have. The artist can help us here, "since the artist does not see life as a problem to be solved, but as a medium for creation."[6]

Like a budding actor in a play, our life becomes our medium for creation. Life has certain possibilities within it, and our goal is not to make it do everything, but to bring out what it contains as its potential. There is always something we can "make" of our life, whatever problems we encounter or limits that we have; there is always the possibility that, through imagination and hope, something wonderful can be made of it.

Our work is not to master, to control, or to fix our life, but to explore life as a wonder and a possibility and "to cooperate with it in love."[7]

The same is true of the Christian life. Catechism is far more important and far more demanding of our best efforts than we imagine. We have only begun when the baptismal class is finished. What faces us is the nurturing of a spark into a life aflame—one that has learned by lived experience how to love, serve, suffer, and sacrifice so that we might live in God's Kingdom that has come to pass.

NOTES

1 Dorothy L. Sayers reflects on this Trinitarian structure of art throughout *The Mind of the Maker*, new edition (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004; originally published by Harcourt Brace New York, 1941), but especially chapter three, "Idea, Energy, and Power."

2 Margaret A. Krych develops Osmer's view in "The Future of the Catechisms in Teaching," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 21 (October 1994), 333-339. Also see Richard Robert Osmer, "The Case for Catechism," *Christian Century*, 114 (April 23/30, 1997), 408-412.

3 See Robert Mulholland's fine discussion in *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

4 In *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), religious educator Maria Harris emphasizes that the church does not *have* a curriculum, it *is* a curriculum. Each congregation forms new members through *koinonia* (common life), *leitourgia* (worship), *didache* (teaching), *kerygma* (proclamation), and *diakonia* (ministry). They are not always aware of doing this. Thus, Harris helpfully distinguishes the explicit, implicit, and null curriculums in every congregation—i.e., the things they *try* to teach, things they convey invisibly that sometimes contradict what they explicitly espouse, and things they are unaware of and therefore miss out on teaching.

5 Identifying, creating, and pulling together the appropriate written and recorded discipleship materials will be much less difficult if like-minded churches and organizations "link" their resources through the Internet. For example, churches can link to this article and other materials from the *Christian Reflection* series through the "Ethics Library" of the Center for Christian Ethics at *www.ChristianEthics.ws*.

6 Sayers, p. 188.

7 Sayers, p. 186.

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