

Catechism in the Worshiping Community

BY GERALD J. MAST

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In passing along the faith to the next generation of church members, how much of Christian teaching should be explanation and how much example? Is the faith best described or best performed? Are we most persuaded by word or by deed? Without denying the significance of words, many recent authors of books about doctrine and catechism emphasize the neglected significance of liturgical and everyday practice in shaping the minds and bodies of growing believers.

Perhaps the best explanation for this turn to the performative in theories of catechism can be found in a massive new volume on theological method which argues that doctrine can best be conceived as a drama—a stage on which the enactment of Scripture unfolds in the life of the Church. In his book, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 488 pp., \$39.95), Kevin Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, relies extensively on the work of Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar to develop the claim that “what lies at the heart of gospel is not an idea or an ideal or an experience, but an action” (p. 50).

Vanhoozer positions his work at the edge of changing understandings about the meaning of doctrine. Specifically he seeks to offer an evangelical alternative to postliberal Protestant theology, which, following George Lindbeck, had emphasized the story-shaped nature of doctrine and that

beliefs are shaped by particular cultures where Christians live. While this was a useful corrective to the didactic and propositional theology of the Enlightenment era, Vanhoozer is rightly concerned that the transformative and world-challenging gospel event is compromised by such a relativizing approach. Vanhoozer seeks to recover the sense in which God's actions in the world through Israel, Jesus Christ, and the Church are both events to which members of Christ may witness and also words by which believers may extend those gracious acts.

Much of his book is devoted to working out what it would mean for theological method to understand the Church as a "theater of the gospel" with its members a "company of performers" (p. 413). The diligent and patient reader will discover a profound reorientation to such persistent ecclesial issues such as authority, leadership, tradition, and biblical interpretation. Toward the end of the book Vanhoozer draws on acting theory to sketch out some of the practical implications of his method for those practices of Word and Sacrament by which believers are formed into their roles as members of Christ so that they may become martyrs – witnesses to the grace of God revealed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet Vanhoozer's greatest gift is his provision of a new conceptual landscape for doing theology, for performing it, and for passing it along to others.

CATECHESIS THROUGH WORSHIP

The drama of doctrine as conceived by Vanhoozer offers a rich theoretical backdrop for reading several other more practically focused books concerned with the relationship between worship and catechism. Simon Chan's new *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006, 207 pp., \$22.00), for example, proceeds from a strong doctrine of the Church to an eloquent, if not always elegant, articulation of those practices by which the Church makes visible the will of God. For Chan, who is the Earnest Lau Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, the Church is not merely an instrument for accomplishing God's purposes but is itself the "expression of God's ultimate purpose" (p. 21). In other words, the Church precedes creation and is also the culmination of creation. Chan seeks in this work to correct a weak evangelical doctrine of the Church by highlighting the neglected arts and habits of Christian worship that make the body of Christ visible in time and space. These arts, Chan emphasizes, are not to be seen as tactics for the creation of a certain spiritual experience for members. Rather, the habits of worship cultivated by the Church over the centuries are themselves the doxological fulfillment of the Church's mission (or of God's mission in the Church). Put another way, it is in worship that the people of God become who they are in service to God.

Chan's approach raises questions about a variety of conventional evangelical practices that tend to separate the worship of God from the mission

of the Church. For example, evangelism is often construed as a human-centered, purposive program for saving souls. Church-planters use market analysis to design programs that will attract a certain target audience. And mega-churches design a whole variety of services for their members oriented around therapeutic, social, and physical needs.

For Chan, worship should be shaped less by pragmatic goals associated with evangelism or mission and more by the liturgical norms of Word and

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Sacrament. This two-dimensional order of Christian liturgy highlights the Eucharistic meal as the culmination of expectations built through the hearing and reception of the Word through the service. The Word proclaims the coming reign of God; the Eucharistic meal makes that reign visible in the present. Such a reevaluation of Commu-

nion should be taken seriously by evangelicals who have "created a largely hearing community rather than an aural-tactile community" (p. 67).

The incorporation of new members into the Church cannot be separated from this multi-dimensional worship, according to Chan. Catechism must involve basic elements of liturgy and thus prepare candidates for membership to participate rightly in worship of God's people. Traditional catechism has thus focused on three activities: the confession of the triune God in the creed, following the Ten Commandments, and praying the Lord's Prayer. Within such a framework many contemporary issues of discipleship can be addressed vigorously. For example, the creed helps us to address a world of religious pluralism. The Commandments speak to us against the grain of market-centered consumer capitalism. The Lord's Prayer challenges an exchange-focused economy that breeds poverty and homelessness. Chan's book develops practical proposals for both teaching and worship, including a rough outline of contemporary issues to be addressed through liturgy-centered catechesis and a sample order of worship.

CATECHESIS IN A COUNTERCULTURAL COMMUNITY

If Chan offers a provocative critique of much contemporary evangelical worship and teaching, Debra Dean Murphy takes on the liberal Protestant establishment in a book that, like Chan, embeds catechesis in worship, while focusing on catechesis rather than on worship. Murphy works for both the academy and the church—teaching at Meredith College and directing the Christian education program at the 1500 member Fuquay-Varina United

Methodist Church in North Carolina.

Murphy's book, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007, 255 pp., \$26.00), begins with a critique of modern religious education programs that abstract the values they inculcate from the particular faith traditions in which they had been embedded. She is further opposed to any kind of public theology that seeks to reduce Christian particularity to commonly held civic virtues such as freedom and justice. Instead she seeks to return to the kind of freedom discovered through dependence on the gifts of the Triune God and through the same kind of obedience to the Father that Jesus displayed. Thus, Murphy is critical of the public ethos of liberal Protestant churches that accepts the terms of American civil religion as a basis for social activism and humanitarian giving.

Murphy establishes an agenda for Christian catechesis that instead of making church members into polite and contributing citizens will rather identify them with the countercultural community of the Church and with alternative ways of knowing that are rooted in the counter-story of Jesus — the “way things really are” (p. 92). As Murphy develops those practices of knowledge in the second half of her book, she emphasizes like Chan the engagement of the whole body in Christian formation through worship. Unlike Chan she stresses the centrality of desire in Christian knowing — in the Augustinian sense of human longing that rightly finds its fulfillment in God. This attention to the power of God-directed human desire provides a dimension of intensity and beauty to Murphy's discussion of the bodily actions of the liturgy: proclamation, baptism, and Eucharist. Murphy wants these sensuous liturgical practices to be intrinsic to the training of church members and for the sharp division between basement education and sanctuary worship to be subverted.

Chan and Murphy assume that the best way for the Church to form its members is through the ancient traditions and habits of the Church. Their approach can perhaps best be described as a recovery of orthodoxy against the corrosions of modern and postmodern assimilation. At the same time, these projects give little attention to the corrosions of empire and cultural assimilation that plagued Christianity during the development and inscription of orthodoxy — for example in the third and fourth centuries as well as in the High Middle Ages. It does finally seem unlikely to me that the rituals, dramas, and recitations associated with classical liturgy can by themselves carry the weight of countercultural witness to the reign of God amidst the ruins of the fading world. For Christians to be truly shaped into the life and mind of Christ, they must break down not just the division between basement education and sanctuary worship but also the barrier between the gathered and the scattered body. This might mean that the ritualistic stylizations of classical liturgy might be deconstructed a bit, just as the worship of daily work might be privileged as holy. For example, might the original

meaning of the Supper of the Lord—a shared meal that followed the pattern of Jesus’ radical insistence on breaking bread with sinners and tax collectors (and including even the betrayer, Judas, during that last table gathering)—offer clues for a more fitting and accessible initiation of Christian hospitality in daily life? And are there other practices of the Church—the discussions that accompany the development and acceptance of the annual church budget, for example—that might properly be conceived of as liturgical acts?

Rather than the Eucharist and reciting creeds, Shenk focuses on embodied practices of discipleship such as rejection of the sword and oaths, reading and discussing Scripture, faithful family life, and voluntary service.

CATECHESIS THROUGH EMBODIED DISCIPLESHIP

For an orientation to Christian education that assumes that practices of discipleship are as significant, if not more so, than the classical liturgical habits in developing countercultural Christians, readers might turn to the work of

Sara Wenger Shenk, who is Associate Professor of Christian Education at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia. In *Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Conversation about Tradition-Based Critical Education* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2003, 211 pp., \$21.95), she gives attention to those practices that have been central to Anabaptist self-understanding and social embodiment. For Shenk, theological knowledge cannot be abstracted from embodied discipleship; yet the embodied practices she focuses on are not so much the recitation of classical creeds or the weekly Eucharist but such mundane and practical acts of Christian discipleship as rejection of the sword and oaths, reading and discussing Scripture, faithful family life, and voluntary service (pp. 152-156).

Rather than posing radical Christian knowledge against the modern project, Shenk places Anabaptist traditions of formation in dialogue with feminist scholarship, post-liberal theology and philosophy, and classical Christian orthodoxy. By organizing her book as such a dialogue among conversation partners, she enacts a crucial practice in radical Christian knowing that is largely overlooked by Chan and Murphy: discussion of Scripture by the believing body under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

While Chan and Murphy are rightly concerned that the Church regains the liturgical authority to actually accomplish the conversion of individuals from the cultural power of consumer capitalism and nationalist imperialism, Shenk is also concerned that the Church itself remains vulnerable to conversion and transformation. In this concern for a critical retrieval of ecclesial habits of formation, she shares the stage with Kevin Vanhoozer, who seeks

to make not the Church's reiteration of cultural difference but the Church's performance of Scripture the central act of communication by which the reign of God is made known.

A missing scene of the biblical drama, then, which Shenk's work begins to rescue, is the transformative potential of discussing our disagreements. As the rabbis have taught us, and as Jesus himself showed, there is nothing more intensely liturgical or worshipful than an animated argument about the proper response of the gathered body to the received Word of God. Of such drama, too, is radical conversion made.



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