



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Considering Catechism
for Suspicious Protestants
(*Catechism*, pp. 20-29)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Learning Life-Giving
Ways of Life
(*Catechism*, pp. 81-85)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Catechism for Suspicious Protestants

What can we learn from the ancient church's practice of carefully instructing recent converts or those preparing for baptism? To introduce new believers to the Church of Jesus Christ is to open for them the treasures of the apostolic faith and practice – a faith larger than any one denomination's claims upon it – sharpened and transmitted through the ages.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 2:6-8

Responsive Reading: 2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NIV)[†]

If we died with him, **we will also live with him;**
if we endure, **we will also reign with him;**
if we disown him, **he will also disown us;**
if we are faithless, **he will remain faithful –**
for he cannot disown himself.

Reflection

Paul urges the Colossians to remain “rooted and built up in him [Christ] and *established in the faith, just as you were taught*” (2:7). In this way, they will recognize and be able to resist empty, deceitful opinions. Yes, they have received faith as a gift from God (cf. Ephesians 2:8), but it is also about the content they believe. “Both kinds of faith are learned,” writes Daniel Williams. “‘The faith’ has a particular substance that must be taught to believers.”

To prepare new believers for baptism and lead them to a deeper understanding of the faith, Christians soon developed the practice of catechesis. At first, wise leaders were appointed by house churches to give oral instruction, for in the second century there were no books outlining Christian belief and practice. This new practice, Williams observes, gradually evolved:

- ▶ *Catechetical texts were written.* The Church always has been a “teaching Church.” Its earliest hymns, creedal statements, and doctrinal explanations express the basic meaning of the Bible. In the early second century a Jewish-Christian outline of ethics called the “Two Ways” was used in catechesis. By the end of the century, however, new handbooks were written specifically for catechetical instruction. Their features – from the Trinitarian structure of Irenaeus’s *Proof of Apostolic Preaching* to the question-and-answer format of the *Apostolic Tradition* – derive from earlier baptismal formulae.
- ▶ *A preparatory stage was added.* In the fourth century, “doctrinal sophistication [about the Trinity], the rise of...erudite Christian thinkers, and the influx of very many new Christians now that the persecutions were over” led to more careful organization of the process. A new stage of “catechumen” was for those who were enrolled for baptism, but not yet under instruction. “Christians in military or imperial positions took this route,” Williams writes. When they “proved the intentional sanctity of their life and began to attend the weekly and then daily meetings of instruction



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(usually held in the period before Easter), they became *competens*, that is, were qualified to go on to the next stage."

- ▶ *The content became more sophisticated.* By 350, the Jerusalem church had written a creed to be memorized in order to help new believers interpret Scripture. As a "mustard seed contains many future tree branches within its tiny grain," the creed would offer "in a few phrases all the religious knowledge contained in the Old and New Testaments," the bishop Cyril explained. There was also moral and doctrinal instruction, and catechumens "were required to renew their repentance, to show the purity of their intention, and to take seriously their preparation for their baptism."

Today, when "so many claims to religious truth compete in print or cyberspace, the need for imparting the Church's historic tradition is just as critical as it was for ancient Christianity," Williams notes. "Nothing can replace the formation of a theologically and Biblically literate people. Nothing is more essential."

Study Questions

1. What content did the early Christians teach new believers? How were their catechisms and creeds related to Scripture?
2. Which aspects of the ancient Church's practice of catechesis, outlined by Williams, are attractive to you? Which are not?
3. Explaining why new believers should publicly recite a creed, Augustine said, "So you have received and given back what you must always retain in mind and heart, what you should recite in bed, think about in the streets, and not forget over your meals; in which even when your bodies are asleep your hearts should be awake." Do you think this is still true?
4. Discuss Williams' view that "Sunday school may or may not succeed at [the critical job of imparting Christian truth to new believers], and it cannot be left to sermons alone." How well does your congregation accomplish this task?
5. According to Todd Edmondson, what two directions are recommended for catechesis today by Tony Jones and Dorothy Bass? How are these similar to the ancient Church's practice? Do Jones and Bass address your concerns about catechism?

Departing Hymn: "How Firm a Foundation" (verses 1 and 7)

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!
What more can he say than to you he has said,
to you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?

"The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

*Text from John Rippon's A SELECTION OF HYMNS FROM THE BEST
AUTHORS (1787), alt.*

Tune: FOUNDATION

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Catechism for Suspicious Protestants

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the practice of catechesis, the instruction of new believers and those preparing for baptism, developed in the early Church.
2. To examine our suspicions about written catechisms today.
3. To consider how true catechesis is much more than memorization of theological truths.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Catechism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “How Firm a Foundation” locate the familiar tune FOUNDATION in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“One of the stranger ancient citations of the Nicene Creed appears on a small piece of papyrus placed in a magical amulet from the later fifth century. Evidently the wearer thought that the creed possessed power such that merely wearing it could invite God’s blessing or ward off misfortune!” writes Dan Williams. Was the creed for this person “merely a token or emblem of the Church’s power, rather like hanging a ‘Christian’ rabbit’s foot around your neck”?

In this study, Williams challenges us to early Christians taught new believers “the biblical and doctrinal fundamentals of the Christian faith.” Equipping them with these truths “cannot be displaced in favor of simply giving one’s own testimony anymore than to imagine personal experience of the faith can be substituted for a reasonable grasp of that faith,” he writes. “To do so would be like handing out magical amulets for new believers to wear simply as emblems of a faith being used, but not grasped” (*Catechism*, pp. 20 and 28).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members discernment as they prayerfully consider their roles in instructing new believers in the faith.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 2:6-8 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study outlines how the practice of catechesis developed in the Church during the second through fourth centuries. Daniel Williams addresses *where*, *when*, and *how* new believers were instructed in the basics of the Christian faith and *who* were their teachers, but he emphasizes *what* they were taught. You might use these five pronouns to organize your summary and discussion of the material. Use this opportunity to articulate any suspicions members may have about the practice of catechesis. Do they disagree with the *goals* of catechesis

or the ancient *methods*? If the suspicions revolve around the methods, you could shift the discussion to Todd Edmondson's review of the two recent approaches advocated by Tony Jones and Dorothy Bass.

Study Questions

1. The focus of ancient catechesis was on learning clear statements of key doctrines about God's creation of the world, humanity's fall into sin and death, God's redeeming activity through Jesus Christ, and God's life with humanity and the world through the Spirit. It was essential to understand these matters correctly in an empire filled with competing notions about God, humanity, and the world. Yet, as Irenaeus writes, these doctrines were not memorized only for intellectual benefit, but they served as the basis "of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the *consolidation of a way of life*." In other words, belief and practice were never separated.

As the bishop Cyril explains to catechumens in Jerusalem, his church's creed says nothing contrary to Scripture. Indeed, its concise statements will help them summarize and understand the biblical message and guide them to read the Bible with insight. Where do new Christians turn for guidance in reading the Bible today?

2. Members might begin by reacting to the content of catechesis discussed in question one. But encourage them also to examine *where* (in small group settings in house churches or catechetical schools), *when* (in intensive courses lasting several weeks or years, often in preparation for baptism on Easter), and *how* (through doctrinal explanations tied to Scripture) new believers were instructed in the basics of the Christian faith, and *who* taught them (wise members of the house churches, professional catechists, or the pastor or bishop). What might we learn from each aspect of the ancient practice of catechesis? What might we change in order to address the needs of new believers today?
3. Clear statements of essential beliefs can be so embedded in our "mind and heart" that they shape how we think "in bed,...in the streets,...over [our] meals"; they can inform our dreams and unconscious thoughts. Ask members to take a minute to think of Scripture passages, hymns, or words from a creed that they retain in this way. Has it been helpful to have such key thoughts memorized? Would it benefit new believers to be formed by them today? How do we benefit from remembering the same thoughts in common with other Christians?
4. Discuss how well the congregation's Sunday school classes (and other discipleship training groups) for children and adults address the Christian faith and practices in a systematic way. Are sermons organized in a series to introduce new believers to these? How often does the congregation read a creed or confession of faith in public worship? Is there a class especially for new believers or new members? If so, when does this class meet (before baptism or church membership), and what instruction is given? Are new believers and new members formally shepherded in some other way by pastors or teachers?
5. Both Tony Jones and Dorothy Bass stress formation of character and shaping our actions. They think catechesis should inculcate "the living qualities of Christian practice without forsaking substantive doctrinal matters." On the one hand, Jones commends ancient Christian practices of reading Scripture (*lectio divina* and reciting psalms in the daily offices), praying (centering prayer, the Jesus prayer), Sabbath-keeping, keeping silence, pilgrimage, walking a labyrinth, and spiritual direction. On the other hand, Dorothy Bass re-describes Christian practices in contemporary terms, such as honoring the body, hospitality, forgiveness, healing, and discernment. Both return to a church practice of requiring catechumens "to renew their repentance, to show the purity of their intention" through their actions. Their stress on learning practices corrects our tendency to reduce faith to an intellectual exercise.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.