

# Considering Catechism for Suspicious Protestants

BY DANIEL H. WILLIAMS

**To introduce new believers to the Church of Jesus Christ is to open for them the rich treasures of the apostolic faith and practice—a faith much larger than any single denomination's claims upon it—sharpened and transmitted through the ages.**

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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.<sup>1</sup> Evidently the wearer thought that the creed possessed power such that merely wearing it could invite God's blessing or ward off misfortune! We have no way knowing whether the wearer actually understood the creed and therefore thought its meaning was powerful, or if the creed was merely a token or emblem of the Church's power, rather like hanging a "Christian" rabbit's foot around your neck.

Similarly, reading a Bible passage or reciting one of the Church's major creeds today does not guarantee that a Christian will be grounded in the truths about God—in God's incarnation through Christ and plan of redemption. The print on the page of the Bible or the sounds of the creed in worship only approximately inform a believer in the task of understanding what the Bible teaches or what the creed is supposed to mean. While Protestants have been quick to point out the importance of the Bible's inner perspicacity—that many parts can be read and basically understood by anyone who shares in the life of the Spirit<sup>2</sup>—it is still true that arriving at a Christian interpretation of the central truths of the Old and New Testaments must be taught.

Likewise, a creed, which in very few words offers the chief principles of the Christian faith, does not interpret itself. As church history has shown countless times, there have been many who have read the Bible (or a creed)

from which they derived bizarre or heretical conclusions. This happened in antiquity; it still happens today.

While faith is something we experience through a gift from God, faith is no less about the content of what Christians believe. Both kinds of faith are learned, but the second kind is based on “loving the Lord your God with all your *mind*.” That is, “the faith” has a particular substance that must be taught to believers. The Apostle Paul talks about this faith in the form of the Church’s tradition as something “handed over” to those who would rightly understand the gospel. For understanding the historic Church’s teaching is “not a matter of one’s own private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20), but of “receiving” that teaching and preserving it.

### **ARTICULATING THE CHRISTIAN MIND**

The earliest developments in Christian education emerged out of situations of need. On one hand, the early Fathers speak most directly of the Church’s tradition in apologetic contexts, when they are defending catholic faith against its detractors. On the other, they draw up summaries of faith for the purpose of instructing new converts. We must not underestimate the importance which the preservation and transmission of the apostolic memory had for the churches of the post-apostolic period. The impartation of Christian teaching to inquirers and learners was a constant in the life of these churches. Allusions to this process of instruction in ethical and theological exhortations demonstrate that catechesis “served as a control with considerable effect on the understanding of the Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup>

We ought to bear in mind that there were no systems yet designed for presenting the Christian faith, certainly no theological textbooks or “Sunday school” type of materials offering a rudimentary outline of Christian belief and practice. The practice of a catechumenate — a series of steps that leads the new believer to baptism and a deeper knowledge of the faith — was created by the early Fathers. It was, in effect, the first version of “Sunday school,” though a temporary schooling with specific aims.

What little we know about the mechanics of catechetical process in the second and third centuries is that the actual teaching of catechumens was done by those who were specially appointed to serve as catechists. Given that most “congregations” were house churches, the work of catechizing new believers took place in the catechist’s own dwelling or some designated spot. When Justin (the Martyr) was arrested in his apartment in Rome, it turns out that there were with him six others whom he was teaching, presumably preparing them for baptism. All seven were executed shortly thereafter for their faith. Likewise, the arrest of Vibia Perpetua took place when the authorities suddenly burst into a catechetical “class.” Perpetua was imprisoned and later martyred with four other catechumens and their catechist in the amphitheater at Carthage on March 7, 203. Simply being taught the Christian faith was no less hazardous than outwardly professing Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Many other well-known Christian intellectuals of the era were catechists. Clement of Alexandria was a leading catechist for the church of Alexandria, as was his most famous pupil, Origen. Almost as renowned was Didymus, the chief catechist of Alexandria in the early fourth century,

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who was made blind by disease at the age of four. Probably the otherwise unknown Marcianus, to whom Irenaeus wrote his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (see below), was a catechist.<sup>5</sup> This early practice of “farming out” the training of new Christians to local Christian philosophers differs from later practices when bishops usually handled this task, or at least the last stages of it. While the

earliest evidence for the process indicates that it varied from place to place, a basic structure seems to run throughout.

## **ORIGINS OF CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION**

For the early Christians, theology (or what the ancients called “the true philosophy”) was not a metaphysical exercise detached from the intellectual, spiritual, and liturgical needs of congregations. It was an organic phenomenon; it grew out of the communities which heard the Scriptures and professed the faith. The seed of the Church’s early faith bloomed into various expressions of Bible commentary, creedal statements, doctrinal explanations, hymns, and so on, which articulated in a few words a basic understanding of the Christian Bible and its profession. For good reason we may characterize the Church from the earliest moment of its existence as a teaching church.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest known catechism is a Jewish-Christian outline of ethics known as the “Two Ways.” Jewish in origin, it was immediately adopted in Christian circles by the early second century. Three versions of it have come down to us in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 18-19, the *Didache*, and much later in book VII of the *Apostolic Constitutions*. It begins with the words, “There are two ways, one of life (or light) and one of death (or darkness); and between the two ways there is a great difference.” What follows is a series of ethical injunctions, based on the Sermon on the Mount, directly quoting from Matthew 5 and Luke 6. Jesus’ teaching on the lifestyle for the Kingdom of God is taken at face value and embraced as authentic Christian living. The catechetical nature of these injunctions is made clear from that fact that

they are issued within the context of a congregation: among other things the reader is urged to honor those “who preach God’s word to you” (*Didache* 4.1), all forms of schism among believers are condemned (4.3), and the confession of sins in the church assembly before offering prayer is said to be “the way of life” (4.14). Seeing how the “Two Ways” is immediately followed by baptismal instructions in both the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* underscores its adaptation by churches as part of a catechism.

An acknowledged handbook of catechetical instruction from this period is Irenaeus’ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a late second-century work that survives today only in a sixth-century Armenian translation. The addressee of the work, the same Marcianus mentioned above, is told that its aim is to “set forth in brief the preaching of the truth” by providing “in brief the proof (or exposition) of the things of God,” i.e., a concentrated explanation of God’s unfolding plan for salvation. This condensed narration of God’s redemptive activity was in keeping with a didactic format that naturally lent itself to catechetical purposes.

Irenaeus begins by declaring that our faith “admonishes us to remember that we have received baptism for the remission of sins in the name of God the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate and died and was raised, and in the Holy Spirit of God” (c. 3). Doctrinal elaboration immediately follows this baptismal formula, evidently drawing on the profession of faith that was accepted in the Gallic churches. Irenaeus here lays out the basis “of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life”:

God the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all; this is the first and foremost article of our faith. But the second article is the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, in the end of times...became a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man. And the third article is the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs were taught about God...and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God. (c. 6)

The Trinitarian pattern, or “three articles,” is not fashioned by Irenaeus, but more likely comes from baptismal confession of faith already used in the West at that time.<sup>7</sup> It becomes the doctrinal anchor for the rest of the catechetical manual, and Irenaeus concludes the work by warning readers against doctrinal errors about “God the Father our maker...and the Son of

God and the dispensation of his incarnation which the apostles transmitted to us...and the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (c. 99).

The *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 220), one of the numerous works attributed to Hippolytus, provides unique insight into the worship and organizational practices of the church in Rome. It is intentionally conservative and even recalcitrant since Hippolytus seems to have been writing against what he considered to be recent innovation in the church's teaching; as a result, we cannot be exactly clear whether it represents the instruction given in the church at Rome or the idiosyncratic views of one man. When comparing the *Apostolic Tradition* with the content of other Christian confessions and liturgies we are probably justified in thinking that this document reflects the broader spectrum of Christian teaching, just as it claims explicitly to be recording only the forms and customs already long-established.

Catechumens, when they were standing in the waters of baptism after a three-year period of instruction and probation, were asked to confirm their faith by responding to the following questions (21.12-18):

Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?

Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,  
who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate,  
and died [and was buried],  
and rose the third day living from the dead,  
and ascended into heaven,  
and sat down at the right hand of the Father,  
and will come to judge the living and the dead?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?

This type of interrogatory format is more characteristic of baptismal formulas than of catechetical summaries. The latter were more fluid formulae of the faith and they became the predecessors of the Rule of faith that was being used by the middle of the second century as a test of orthodoxy.

## **EVOLUTION OF CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION**

The instruction of new believers became more sophisticated in the fourth century with the convergence of several trends: greater doctrinal sophistication due to the Trinitarian and Christological debates, the rise of several generations of highly educated and erudite Christian thinkers, and the influx of very many new Christians now that the persecutions were over. The structures for Christianizing converts were more carefully and consistently defined.<sup>8</sup>

A new stage was added in the catechetical process. "Catechumen" became the term for anyone who had enrolled for baptism but had not yet begun the actual period of instruction. In theory and in practice persons

could be regarded as catechumens for years before they took the next step. Many Christians in military or imperial positions took this route, putting off their actual baptism until they were near death because the demands of office required acts of killing, torture, limited participation in old pagan rites, and so on, that were inconsistent with the life of the baptized believer. Emperor Constantine availed himself of this flexibility. Once catechumens proved the intentional sanctity of their life and began to attend the weekly and then daily meetings of instruction (usually held in the period before Easter), they became *competens*, that is, were qualified to go on to the next stage.<sup>9</sup>

The seriousness with which Christian leaders took pre- and post-baptismal instruction is evident in how meticulously they formulated and taught the faith. The anonymous writer of the *Apostolic Constitutions* makes clear that *competentes* should become acquainted with the truths about God's identity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and that the one God is truly a Trinity. It is this God and no other being or force who made and orders the world and whose laws have given guidance throughout history, tailored for each stage. The convert should discover both the truth about his own created nature and that he stands responsible before God for freely following after the good and the true according to catholic faith.<sup>10</sup>

Augustine (354-430) offers a review of the fundamental elements of the Christian faith in *On Catechizing the Unlearned* and the *Enchiridion*. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-after 394) does much the same thing in his *Address on Catechetical Instruction*. Without ever mentioning the creed, Gregory presents a theological narrative of salvation history, supported by scriptural references and allusions, defending a pro-Nicene/Constantinopolitan position on the Trinity. He calls this narrative the "gospel revelation," and its overall end is to show both how "[God] is united to us in so far as he sustains existing things [as creator]" and that "he united himself with our nature in order that by its union with the Divine, it might become divine."<sup>11</sup>

A number of sermons and addresses from this period show that the catechizing process was becoming more formalized and unified as the Church received an ever larger number of converts. A female pilgrim to Jerusalem named Egeria in the later fourth century alludes to the elaborate preparatory steps which catechumens had to undergo during the forty-day period before Easter.<sup>12</sup> She observes that not only the creed but also instruction on doctrinal and moral issues were imparted to the new believers. The actual course of instruction is outlined in a set of addresses delivered by Cyril, the Bishop of Jerusalem, to baptismal candidates during Lent (probably in 350).

Now the one and only faith that you are to take and preserve in the way of learning and professing is being committed to you by the Church as confirmed throughout the Scriptures. For seeing that not everyone can read the Scriptures, some because they lack the learn-

ing [i.e., they are illiterate], and others because, for one reason or another, they find no opportunity to get to know them, we can acquire the whole doctrine of the Christian faith in a few articles and so prevent any soul from being lost by not learning the faith.

At this stage listen to the exact form of words [i.e., the Jerusalem creed] and memorize this faith, leaving it to the appropriate time when each article it contains may be built up from Holy Scripture. For these articles of our faith were not composed out of human opinion, but are the principal points collected out of the whole of Scripture to complete a single doctrinal formulation of the faith. And just as the mustard seed contains many future tree branches within its tiny grain, so also this faith embraces in a few phrases all the religious knowledge contained in the Old and New Testaments together. Be sure, brothers, to “hold the traditions” [2 Thessalonians 2:15] which are being imparted to you, and “write them on the table of your hearts” [Proverbs 7:3].<sup>13</sup>

Cyril shows the catechumens that nothing in the church creed is contrary to the biblical message. Being schooled in the creed’s particularities was the first step not only in learning what the Bible means, but also in preparing to read the Bible with insight.

He urges his listeners to persevere with the intensive classes of instruction because the goal is to arm them against error and provide a solid foundation for the Christian life. Cyril proceeds to lay forth “indispensable teachings” on God, on Christ’s divinity, incarnation, and passion, on the Holy Spirit, on the soul and body, on bodily resurrection, on the centrality of Scripture, and on the catholic church. Besides the sessions of instruction, the catechumens were required to renew their repentance, to show the purity of their intention, and to take seriously their preparation for baptism.

## **STEPS IN CATECHESIS**

Integral to the catechumenate process was confiding the local church’s creed to the candidates’ memory and understanding. For this very reason, the creed was not something for writing down. It was to be handed over to the mind and dwelt upon in the heart so that it became a part of the believer’s spiritual formation. As Augustine commented to catechumens in North Africa, “The creed builds you up in what you ought to believe and confess in order to be saved.”<sup>14</sup> This process of giving over and explaining the creed to catechumens was called *traditio symboli* (*symbolum* being the Greek word for the Latin *creditum* or creed, and *traditio* meaning literally handing over or delivering up, whether documents or concepts).

As the final stage of preparation before the actual baptism, the *traditio* was held off in many churches until Holy Week, and given on the Sunday before Easter. This is how it was in Milan during the time of Ambrose

(c. 340-397), who described the creed as a “spiritual seal, which is our heart’s meditation and, as it were, an ever present guard.”<sup>15</sup>

But the culmination of the delivering the church’s faith was the *redditio symboli* – the believer publicly giving back (reciting by memory) the creed before the congregation. Augustine calls the act of personally professing the church’s creed a “holy martyrdom,” “a holy witness to the truth of God.”<sup>16</sup> What had been received from God was now being offered back to God as a symbol of the believer’s commitment. Without this part of the process, the catechism was not complete. For this *redditio* was also an act of worship for the new believer; it was his vocal response to God, affirming the truths received before the congregation. In Sermon 215 Augustine explains the future implications of *redditio* or this last stage of catechesis:

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. (215.1)<sup>17</sup>

## **CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTION TODAY**

We need to take note of the ancient church’s focus on catechesis, that is, on carefully instructing recent converts or those preparing for baptism about the biblical and doctrinal fundamentals of the Christian faith. In the preface to his manual of Christian instruction, Gregory of Nyssa declared that “religious catechism is an essential duty of the leaders ‘of the mystery of our religion’ (1 Timothy 3:16). By it the Church is enlarged through the addition of those who are saved, while ‘the sure word which accords with the [Church’s] teaching’ (Titus 1:9) comes within the hearing of unbelievers.”<sup>18</sup>

We are acting in accord with Gregory’s remarks when we insist that new

Christians or new members be taught much more than the congregation’s leadership structure and polity, stewardship plan, and mission statement, or be given a brief denominational summary. Too often we assume potential church members already know the fundamentals of their faith, whereas in reality they are incapable of explaining even the basics of “the pattern of sound teaching” (2 Timothy 1:13).

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To introduce new believers to the Church of Jesus Christ is to open for them the treasures of the central points of the apostolic faith and practice—a faith that is larger than any one denomination’s or church’s claims upon it—sharpened and transmitted through the ages. This need for equipping 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. 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.

If it is the case that the Church, as the Apostle phrased it, “is the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), then ecclesiastical leadership must not shirk from the critical and time-consuming job of imparting Christian truth or catechizing those who profess to be Christian. Sunday school may or may not succeed at this task, and it cannot be left to sermons alone. In this information age where 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. Nothing can replace the formation of a theologically and biblically literate people. Nothing is more essential.

## NOTES

1 “Fragment of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” in G. H. R. Horsley, ed., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Sydney, Australia: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1981), 103-104.

2 A doctrine formulated by Augustine and augmented by Martin Luther a millennium later.

3 E. Glenn Hinson, “The Apostolic Faith as Expressed in the Writings of the Apostolic and Church Fathers,” in Hans-Georg Link, ed., *The Roots of Our Common Faith* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1984), 117.

4 For translations of *Martyrdom of Justin* and *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, see Herbert Musurillo, ed., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

5 E. Ferguson argues that Marcianus, the recipient of the *Proof*, was not a catechumen, but a catechist and was therefore receiving further guidance as a teacher from Irenaeus. “Irenaeus’ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* and Early Catechetical Instruction,” *Studia Patristica* 18:3 (1989), 131.

6 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Tradition of the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 52.

7 In chapter 100, Irenaeus refers again to this passage as the “three articles of our seal,” a clear indication that it was used as part of the pre-baptismal instruction.

8 William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 51-56.

9 This period of instruction was called the *Quadragesima*, or the “fortieth,” because it occurred in the forty days before Holy Week (though some areas took a longer period of time for instruction and others much shorter). By the end of the fourth century this pattern of instructing catechumens for (what was later called) Lent had become generally established. Augustine uses the term *competens* when he describes his excitement in anticipating his baptism: “Do we silence the testimony of our own experience, do we go so far as to forget how intent, how anxious, we were over what the catechists taught us when we

were petitioning for the sacrament of the font—and for that very reason we were called *competentes*?” (*On Faith and Works* 6.9).

10 *Apostolic Constitutions* 7. 39, 1-4. The final compilation of this text appears to be from the latter half of the fourth century.

11 *Address on Catechetical Instruction*, 25.

12 One English version is *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, translated by G. E. Gingras (New York: Newman Press, 1970). For the specific passage where she describes the details of how the church applied the process, see D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture and Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2006), 85-88.

13 *Catechetical Addresses*, 5.12.

14 Sermon 214.1.

15 *Explanation of the Creed*, 10-11.

16 Sermon 215.1.

17 Cf. Sermon 212.2. “So now, I have paid my debt to you with this short sermon on the whole Symbol. When you hear the whole of this Symbol, you will recognize my sermon briefly summed it up. And in no way are you to write it down, in order to retain the same words; but you are to learn it thoroughly by hearing it, and by heart, but keep and go over it in your memory. For everything you are going to hear in the divine Symbol is already found in the divine documents of the Holy Scriptures.”

18 *Address on Catechetical Instruction*, preface.

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