

Foundational Faith: Retrieving Catechesis Today

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What Is Catechesis?

Many of us sense something deeply amiss in the church today.¹ Both in society and in our own lives, we can often feel like the ground is shifting under our feet. We don't know what to do about it, though. We have ideas about how we got here, and we need to tell those stories. But once we have diagnosed and analyzed, we also need to repair. If there's a time to tear down, as Ecclesiastes says, there's also a time to build (Eccl 3:3).

Catechesis is about building. It's about building deep foundations in our churches, families, communities, and our lives. The chief cornerstone, of course, is Christ—there's no other foundation than this (Eph 2:20; 1 Cor 3:11; 1 Pet 2:6). But what does it mean to be founded on the rock of Christ, to become living stones built up as a spiritual house for holy worship (1 Pet 2:5)? How do we lay deep foundations so that when the floods come and the rains pour, our house remains steady, because it was “founded on the rock” (Matt 7:25, Luke 6:48)?² That's one of the most pressing questions we face today, and that's what catechesis is about. The fourth-century bishop Cyril of Jerusalem put it like this:

¹ This essay has been adapted from material in Alex Fogleman, *Making Disciples: Catechesis in History, Theology, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025).

² Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Imagine catechesis as a building. Unless we bind and joint the whole structure together, piece by piece, we will have dry rot and leaks, and all our prior work will be wasted. Stone must be laid upon stone in proper sequence, the corners aligned, and the rough edges smoothed over: only then will the complete structure arise.³

Catechesis is the craft of laying foundations for mature discipleship on the chief cornerstone of Christ. It's about becoming rooted and grounded in love (Eph 2:17), about becoming apprentices who take up their crosses and follow Jesus. It anticipates a time when we'll no longer teach one another because the new law will be written on our hearts, because we'll all together drink from the fount of divine wisdom (Jer 31:33).

What do I mean by catechesis? My standard working definition is this: catechesis is basic but comprehensive instruction in what Christians believe, hope, and love.

First, catechesis is *basic*. It's about teaching the fundamentals of the faith. It's simple but not simplistic, intelligent but not intellectualist, practical but not pragmatic. It focuses less on whatever cultural hot-button issues are in vogue today and more on the enduring building blocks of thinking, praying, and living as a Christian. Distinct from evangelism, it is more than the initial proclamation of the gospel. But distinct from preaching and Bible study, it does not presume any prior foundations. Also, because it's basic, catechesis is counter-cultural. This doesn't mean that catechesis is hostile or reactionary, always caught up in whatever the culture warriors are on about. Rather, it's counter-cultural because it deals with fundamental narratives, assumptions, and beliefs. It strikes at the heart of the unspoken beliefs our world says about what is good, true, and beautiful. Catechesis confronts the idols of the age with the gospel of truth.⁴ In catechesis, we dig beneath the surface of things to clear the rot that's eroding our foundations.

Second, catechesis is *comprehensive*. It's not just about doctrine, or just about prayer, or just about spiritual practices. Catechesis is a way of seeing the whole in one glimpse. It gives an all-encompassing view of Christ through the lens of

³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 11, in *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, trans. Maxwell Johnson (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 74–75 (translation lightly altered).

⁴ I owe this phrasing to my friend Aubrey Speers.

faith, hope, and love. Faith, hope, and love here are shorthand for three essential and interconnected aspects of the Christian life. Faith signals Christian doctrine or belief—the intellectual aspect, the life of the mind. Hope is shorthand for the affective, desiring element; it’s about prayer and spirituality, how we relate to God in relationship. Finally, love invokes the ethical or moral life; it’s about what we do and how we live in the world.

Typically, these aspects are expressed through three texts that form the staples of many catechisms: the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. The creed summarizes what Christians believe; the Lord’s Prayer encompasses Christian spirituality; and the Ten Commandments signify the moral or ethical life of the Christian. Together, these three components make up catechesis. And just like with good Trinitarian theology, these three are one: faith, hope, and love are distinct but always inseparable. If we leave any one out, we get a distorted and truncated faith.

One important distinction to make is that catechesis is not the same as teaching a *catechism*. A catechism is a text—a tool for teaching. Catechesis is a practice, an art, a process of handing over and receiving the Christian faith, an entrustment of a sacred mystery. Catechesis is the craft of discipleship that draws together faith, hope, and love to provide a foundation for the whole Christian life. It involves the whole body of Christ and aims at nothing less than our final transformation in beholding the crucified and risen Lord. Even though “we are God’s children now,” as 1 John puts it, “what we will be has not yet appeared.” We await the final transformation when “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Why Catechesis?

For many reasons, catechesis has gone out of fashion, especially in evangelical circles. It may be something Roman Catholics or Lutherans still do. Presbyterians and Reformed folks may still remember their Westminster or Heidelberg Catechisms. But for most Christians, catechesis is a foreign or forgotten word. We have other things instead: evangelism, mission, small groups, Bible studies, Sunday School, Alpha. Not bad things, of course, but none of these are catechesis. None do the foundational, ground-laying work that catechesis does: giving a basic but comprehensive introduction to the faith.

Catechesis is an urgent task for every age, but each age has its unique challenges. In the early church, it was the doctrine of Christ. In the Reformation, it was justification. Many people would say that the key doctrine of our time is anthropology: What does it mean to be human? We live by the creed of expressive individualism rather than the creed of Christ. Christians are grounded in the gospel of the American Dream rather than the gospel of the risen Lord. Culture catechizes in many and sundry ways—with algorithmically calculated messages to shape our beliefs, feelings, and desires.⁵ Churches without a robust counter-catechesis provide no real alternative. We're left skimming the surfaces, formed by a secular vision of reality in a largely uncontested way.

We need, then, a comprehensive model of Christian formation to address these challenges, and we need to re-form Christians who may have never received a foundational faith. More than just learning new ideas, though, Christians need an education of the heart—a formation of desire. We need not only to know God but to love God, too, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We need a kind of education that can strengthen our understanding of the faith and enable us to have a living encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. We need a retrieval of Christian catechesis.

To undertake such a retrieval, we can begin by looking to the rise of catechesis in the early church. In those days, catechesis mostly referred to the instruction of adults before baptism. In some cases, it could last two to three years, and it was remarkably effective in transitioning pagans to the Christian way of life. Catechesis involved both repentance and spiritual transformation as well as teaching the content of the faith. Catechesis, though, need not be restricted to teaching before baptism. It can refer to teaching the faith at any stage of life in a way that builds the foundations of faith, hope, and love. Catechesis isn't just for children or those brand-new to the faith. Catechesis is for all Christians, for all of life. With that in mind, we can take a closer look at the contours of early Christian catechesis to spark our imaginations for the renewal of Christian formation in our own time.

⁵ On the topic of culture's catechesis, see Alan Jacobs, "Dare to Make a Daniel," *Homebound Symphony* (September 19, 2018), at <https://tinyurl.com/5bv2a6un>.

***Paideia* and *Paradosis*: Early Christian Origins of Catechesis**

The origins of catechesis lie in the Great Commission itself: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). In this one sentence we find three interrelated elements: evangelization, initiation, and instruction—or mission, baptism, and teaching. Making disciples in the early church, in other words, involved a converting education. It aimed at more than simply adding to a basically good foundation. It meant building a new foundation that would provide the building blocks for growing up into the fullness of life in Christ. As a converting education, catechesis drew newcomers into, as one theologian describes it, “a whole pattern of learning to think, feel, and live well as a holy people.”⁶

The first Christians shared many features with other schools of learning in the ancient world—traditions of reading and commenting on texts within a close fellowship of disciples who shared a common life together, often sharing resources as well as set rituals like prayer and fasting. This is essentially the kind of thing we see in the Book of Acts: the disciples “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). For ancient Greeks and Romans, as for Jews and Christians, education is best understood as *paideia*, about being initiated and formed into a certain way of life and sharing in an ongoing cultural inheritance.⁷ Its aim was *eudaimonia*, which we might translate as “ultimate happiness” or “human flourishing,” and the pathway to the goal was virtue, the form of the good life embodied in individuals and communities. To use the language of Pierre Hadot, ancient education was “a way of life,” the goal of which is the transformation of human life through spiritual exercises that included dialogue, study, attention, meditation, and memorization.⁸

⁶ L. Gregory Jones, “A Dramatic Journey into God’s Dazzling Light: Baptismal Catechesis and the Shaping of Christian Practical Wisdom,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 166.

⁷ See the classic treatment of this theme in Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideas of Greek Culture*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939–1944).

⁸ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

Another term for this approach is what the New Testament calls “tradition,” or *paradosis*. While that term can have negative connotations for many people, it can also have positive connotations in Scripture. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold to the *traditions (paradoseis)*” that we taught you, whether that came through the spoken word or from their writings (2 Thess 2:15). Similarly, he tells the Corinthians: “Maintain the traditions just as I handed them over to you” (*kathōs paredōdeka hūmin tas paradoseis katechete*) (1 Cor 11:2). These traditions aren’t just about theological truths. D. H. Williams outlines three kinds of New Testament *paradosis*:

- 1) an evangelical, or kerygmatic, element: the proclamation of the gospel;
- 2) a ritual element, especially with reference to baptism and Eucharist;
- 3) an ethical or moral element, a set of teachings about how to live.⁹

In short, *paradosis* is a way of handing on and receiving a Christian way of life. Christians are those who pass on to each generation a comprehensive way of thinking, praying, and living as one whose entire life is seeking to be conformed to Christ.

The Emergence of the Catechumenate in the Second and Third Centuries

While we don’t hear much about catechesis in the first two centuries, by the end of the second century, Christians were writing about catechesis as a specific practice aimed at preparing new believers for baptism. The term *catechumen* becomes an official status for those who are part of the church but not yet baptized, which meant they couldn’t yet receive the Eucharist—the Christians’ most important ritual action. To prepare for such participation, they needed instruction.

We see glimpses of this instruction in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, written sometime around the year 150. Justin writes: “All those who are persuaded and believe that these things that we teach and say are true, and who give an undertaking that they are able so to live, are taught to pray and ask with fasting

⁹ For helpful introductions to the concept of tradition in the early church, see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

for forgiveness from God for their past sins, and we pray and fast for them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated.”¹⁰

We don’t know how long this process lasted, but some ancient writings suggest that this process could last two to three years.¹¹ It also involved several components: a careful examination of one’s life, especially how catechumens lived with others and cared for the poor; a philosophical style of doctrinal and biblical instruction; and the exhortation to embrace an ascetical lifestyle, usually in the context of a small fellowship of believers gathered around a teacher. This was not a strictly regulated or systematic process. There were no clearly defined “methods” of catechesis. But across different areas of the Christian world, taking up different styles and approaches, an intentional process of conversion and education evolved into what we now call the catechumenate.

One text, the so-called *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to a third-century figure named Hippolytus, tells us a little about this process.¹² Those who are “newly brought forward to hear the word,” Hippolytus says, gather at the home of a Christian teacher, along with their sponsors, and they are asked about why they want to join the church: What are they looking for? What do they expect? They’re asked about their family life and their jobs. Do they have children or slaves, or are they slaves? What do they do for a living? Some occupations, like prostitutes or pimps, were forbidden. Others, like military service or teaching, could be kept, as long as their work duties did not require immorality or idolatry.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.1–2, in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, ed. and trans. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 236–39.

¹¹ The main source for this theory is a text attributed to Hippolytus called the *Apostolic Tradition*, which I discuss below. As a so-called church order document, its contents were adapted and diffused around the Mediterranean world.

¹² For this text, see Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair Stewart, 2nd ed. (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014). Scholars have heavily debated whether this text was written by Hippolytus of Rome in the third century, or whether it was another Hippolytus, or whether it was part of a “school” of Christian learning that developed over a long period of time. There are many surviving variations of the text, in many different languages. Nonetheless, the editor of this volume, Alistair Stewart, makes a good case for why the section describing the catechumenate may indeed represent third-century practice.

After this initial review, inquirers became catechumens and were brought under instruction for a period of time. They would meet regularly in the home of a teacher, usually before the start of the workday. After this time of instruction, catechumens prayed together in groups separated by gender and baptismal status. Baptized men prayed in one area, baptized women in another; male catechumens gathered in one place, female catechumens in another. After this time of prayer, the instructor laid hands on the catechumens and prayed for them. While the overall time frame for this process was generally two to three years, in certain cases where catechumens showed exceptional progress, that period could be shortened.¹³ Catechumens who were martyred during this period could be assured they would still receive the same heavenly reward as those baptized. Their martyrdom gained the same eternal glory, for it was a “baptism in blood.”¹⁴

After two to three years, those seeking baptism would undergo another round of examination. This time, the bishop asked their sponsors how the catechumens lived. Had they honored widows, taken care of the sick? Had they lived the faith in deeds as well as words? If so, catechumens could proceed to a final stage of preparation for baptism. If not, they were to be “put to shame,” the text says, because they “have not heard the word in faith.”¹⁵ From this time on, catechumens underwent further exorcisms and anointings; they fasted and prayed in preparation for baptism and their first reception of the Eucharist. This was a time not only of learning but also of cleansing and preparation. At last, they were ready for full membership in Christ’s body, the church.

Word and Deed: The Rule of Faith

What did early Christians teach during this process of catechesis? It’s not easy to tell, actually, but it seems that one of the main components of early Christian catechesis was the “rule of faith” and basic instruction in the moral life of the Christian.¹⁶

The second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons remarks at the beginning of his polemical work *Against Heresies* that Christians receive the “rule of

¹³ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 17.2.

¹⁴ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 19.2.

¹⁵ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 20.3.

¹⁶ For a good summary of the rule of faith in early Christianity, see Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

truth” in baptism—a term he references at several other places to indicate the essential outline of apostolic teaching.¹⁷ In another work, the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus explains in more detail what the rule of faith contains and how it aligns with the biblical story.¹⁸ Addressed to a fellow Christian named Marcianus, perhaps himself a catechist, the *Demonstration* presents itself as a “summary memorandum” of the apostolic preaching.¹⁹ This summary provides an entry point into the whole body of Christian faith and life. It provides guidance for both *what to believe* and *how to live*.

This twofold structure of catechesis—doctrine and ethics, belief and life—is at the core of the rule of faith. By carefully studying and keeping the rule, Irenaeus writes, Christians may obtain a “true comprehension of what is.”²⁰ The rule of faith, in other words, contains theological and metaphysical commitments; its teaching is intended to draw new believers into the true nature of being. It is a call to see God and God’s Word and Spirit as the source of both creation and redemption. Irenaeus tells us why the rule of faith has a threefold trinitarian structure:

The baptism of our regeneration takes place through these three articles, granting us regeneration unto God the Father through His Son by the Holy Spirit: for those who bear the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is to the Son, while the Son presents [them] to the Father, and the Father furnishes incorruptibility. Thus, without the Spirit it is not [possible] to see the Word of God, and without the Son one is not able to approach the Father; for the knowledge of the Father [is] the Son, and knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit, while the Spirit, according to the good-pleasure of the Father, the Son administers, to whom the Father wills and as He wills.²¹

After presenting this rationale for the rule of faith, Irenaeus goes on to tell the narrative of salvation history, with an eye toward how the gospel of Christ’s

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.9.4 (ACW 55:48).

¹⁸ For a good study of this text from a catechetical perspective, see Everett Ferguson, “Irenaeus’ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* and Early Catechetical Instruction,” in *The Early Church at Work and Worship*, vol. 2, *Catechesis, Baptism, Eschatology, and Martyrdom* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 1–17.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 1, in *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 17 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 39.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 3 (Behr, 41).

²¹ Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 7 (Behr, 44).

birth, death, and resurrection is enfolded in the larger biblical story. He shows Marcianus what it looks like when you read Scripture with Christ at the center.

But again, catechesis included not only doctrinal instruction but also guidance in the Christian moral life. Catechesis was a time for helping believers become accustomed to Christianity's distinctive *ethos*. Origen writes to catechumens that now that they have heard the Word of God, they are to "root out vice and set right your barbarous habits."²² In North Africa, Cyprian of Carthage compiled a three-volume collection of Scripture passages to help others teach catechesis. The first volume includes 24 sections on salvation history. The second volume contains 30 sections on theology and Christology, following a creedal structure. The third volume, meanwhile, contains 120 topics on issues of church unity, generosity, patience, and faithfulness under pressure—all of which were key issues of Christian ethics in a time of difficult persecution and testing of faith.

The catechumenate emerged at a crucial time in the church's life. In this complex season of missional expansion, ecclesiastical persecution, and cultural engagement, Christian catechesis developed as a robust process of *conversion* and *formation*. The church grew rapidly, and one of the reasons is because the catechumenate formed Christians into those whose lives reflected the truth and beauty of the gospel. As the third-century theologian Minucius Felix put it, "As for the daily increase in our numbers, that's no sign of error but evidence of merit; for beauty of life encourages followers to persevere and strangers to join our ranks."²³

Catechesis in the Fourth Century: Preparing and Petitioning

By the time we reach the fourth century, we see a flowering of catechetical practice. The great patristics scholar Jean Daniélou called this the "golden age" of patristic catechesis.²⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, John Chrysostom's *Baptismal Instructions*, Ambrose's *On the Sacraments* and *On the Mysteries*, Gregory of Nyssa's *Catechetical Discourse*, Rufinus of Aquileia's *Commentary*

²² Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.3 (FC 83:118–19; translation slightly altered).

²³ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.7 (LCL 250:411–13). I owe this reference to Michael Distefano, "Embodied Theology in the Greek Apologetic Writings of the Second Century" (Master's thesis, Baylor University, 2023).

²⁴ Jean Daniélou, "Catechesis in the Patristic Tradition," trans. Alex Fogleman, *Communio: International Catholic Review* 47/3 (2020): 617–33.

on the Creed, Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Homilies on the Creed and the Lord's Prayer*, and Augustine of Hippo's *Instructing Beginners in the Faith* and sermons on the creed and Lord's Prayer (*Sermons* 56–59 and *Sermons* 212–216) are only some of the most well-known examples from this widespread genre.

Despite many changes in this period, especially those associated with the so-called Constantinian revolution, catechesis remained focused on a basic but comprehensive instruction in Christian faith and practice.²⁵ Catechists continued to present the faith as a radical transition out of the kingdom of the world, the flesh, and the devil and into the kingdom of God. Doctrinal, ritual, and moral formation were all part of the process of entering the mystery of Christ.

In the fourth century, a person could be a catechumen from an early age, even infancy, yet not baptized until many years later. Like in earlier periods, catechumens occupied an in-between status—no longer pagan, but not yet counted among “the faithful” who had received baptism and shared in the Eucharist. Catechumens attended services to hear public preaching, but they had to leave after the sermon and before the sacraments—a practice often referred to as the *disciplina arcani*, or the “discipline of secrecy.” This practice reflected a sense of the holiness of the church's central mysteries. Knowledge of God was a divine gift and a participation in holy fellowship. It also served to protect Christian communities from those who might report Christians to the authorities for suspected illicit or seditious behavior.

When catechumens made the decision to enroll for baptism, they submitted their names for enrollment in an intensified period of preparation during Lent, with the anticipation of baptism during the Easter Vigil. They received a new name and status for this period. No longer *catechumens* properly speaking, they were “the enlightened” (*phōtizomenoi*) or the “co-petitioners” (*competentes*). Augustine describes the meaning of the name *competentes* like this:

Your very name—*competentes*—signifies that you are longing for the kingdom and aiming at it with all the energy of your minds. What else, after all, are *competentes* but people asking together? . . .

²⁵ The fourth century sees more of a logical development of pre-Constantinian catechesis than a failed departure. For the alternative view that catechesis underwent a dramatic alteration (for the worse) as a result of the Constantinian settlement, see Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), and Everett Ferguson, “Catechesis and Initiation,” in *The Early Church at Work and Worship*, vol. 2: 18–51.

And what is this one thing that you are asking and longing for? ...
 “One thing have I asked from the Lord, this will I seek; to dwell
 in the house of the Lord all the days of my life ... to contemplate
 the delight of the Lord, and to be protected by his temple” (Ps.
 27:3–4).²⁶

This time involved various spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, exorcisms, almsgiving, and sexual abstinence for the married. In some places, there was a ritual called “the scrutiny,” which was like a spiritual examination before baptism. Lenten catechesis involved regular instruction in Scripture and Christian doctrine, following the pattern of the rule of faith. One source from Jerusalem tells us that catechumens met with the bishop for three hours a day during the seven weeks leading up to Easter!²⁷ Instruction varied from place to place but generally included the biblical narrative, moral formation, and the meaning of the creed and the Lord’s Prayer.

Several churches developed a ritual of “handing over” (*traditio*) and “returning” (*redditio*) the baptismal creed and the Lord’s Prayer in the weeks before baptism. The bishop would hand over these texts by teaching them to catechumens and encouraging them to study and memorize them carefully—not writing them down on paper but on the “tablet of their hearts.” Then the catechumens would “return” the creed by professing them to the bishop at their baptisms. Bishops spoke of this as entrusting the catechumens with the sacred deposit of the teaching of Jesus handed down by the apostles. They were to safeguard it like the pearl of great price.

Fourth-century catechesis also emphasized ethical instruction, especially through the use of moral exemplars and mimetic imitation. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that “guidance by example is clearer than instruction in words.”²⁸ Teaching by words alone is not as helpful as teaching by both words and deeds: It’s the difference between a lifeless image and a living human being.²⁹ Ambrose of Milan drew from the book of Proverbs and the patriarchs of Genesis,

²⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* 216.1 (WSA III/6:167)

²⁷ This comes from the tremendous eyewitness account of the process of catechesis and baptism in perhaps the 380s by the Spanish pilgrim Egeria in a text called *The Journal of Egeria*, sections 45–47. For a good recent edition of this text, see Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw, trans., *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018).

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 23.1 (FC 58:68–69).

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 23.1 (FC 58:68–69).

such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.³⁰ By giving catechumens both moral precepts and exemplary paragons, he aimed to show catechumens how they could “grow accustomed to enter the ways of the ancients and to walk in their paths, and obey the divine commands.”³¹ In teaching the moral life through both word and deed, catechists helped new believers live into their vocation as images and likenesses of God—Christians who looked like Christ, images of *the Image*.

Finally, catechesis was a form of mystical encounter with God. Gregory of Nazianzus pictured teaching the creed as the Divine Law being written on our hearts, with the catechist as the calligrapher of the Divine Word.³² Augustine, meanwhile, thought of teaching the creed as the “new law” written onto our hearts (Jer 31:33).³³ To convey this mystical significance, many Christians used music and hymns to teach the faith. Ephrem the Syrian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Ambrose of Milan are three of the best-known examples of those who wrote poetry and music to “enchant” Christians with the beauty of truth.³⁴ They did not want catechumens merely to know God in an abstract way but to be enraptured by the divine glory.

Drawn into the Divine Light: Baptism and Mystagogy

This enrapturing education culminated in the dynamic rite of baptism itself. In the fourth century, baptisms mostly happened at Easter, as the culmination of the Lenten season of repentance. Baptisms were dramatic public rituals: the “Christian spectacles” (*spectacula Christiana*) that countered the popular pagan spectacles of the gladiator games and the amphitheater.³⁵ Augustine wrote that in these rites, the power and mercy of God were “being handed down secretly and firmly through the sacred realities by which we are being

³⁰ Many of these can be found in *Ambrose of Milan: Seven Exegetical Works*, ed. Michael McHugh, FC 65 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972).

³¹ Ambrose, *On the Mysteries* 1.1.

³² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.44–45.

³³ Augustine, *Sermon* 212.2.

³⁴ The significance of “enchantment” here is well articulated in Brian Dunkle, *Enchantment and Creed in the Hymns of Ambrose of Milan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁵ On the following, see Thomas Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist, 1997).

initiated.”³⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus likewise expounded the extraordinary gifts conveyed in baptism: “This illumination is renunciation of the flesh, following of the Spirit, communion in the Word, setting right of the creature, a flood overwhelming sin, participation in light, dissolution of darkness.”³⁷

Just before the baptism, catechumens faced west and publicly renounced Satan and “all his pomp,” and then they turned east and confessed their allegiance to the triune God. Stripped naked, they were led down into the baptismal font, which in some cases was a large, eight-sided font that symbolized their entrance into the time of resurrection, the “Eighth Day.” Arising from the tomb of their watery graves, the newly baptized were anointed with oil, adorned with white robes, and given a taste of milk and honey. These rites symbolized their entrance into the life of the Holy Spirit, being “clothed” with Christ, and entering the promised land. They were at this point permitted to exchange the kiss of peace and join the faithful in celebrating the Eucharist for the first time. They were now welcomed into full membership in the church.

The week following Easter, the newly baptized were finally taught the meaning of the sacraments. Having been kept in the dark about the meaning of the sacraments before baptism through the discipline of secrecy, they now learned about them in what is often called “mystagogical” preaching. Mystagogy simply means a “leading into the mysteries,” with the term “mystery” being roughly equivalent to the term “sacrament.”³⁸ The bishop would teach the newly baptized about prayer, worship, and the sacraments, which were now available to them through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. With Spirit-opened eyes, they could now begin to comprehend the awesome power of the mysteries of faith.

³⁶ Augustine, *On Order* 2.9.27, trans. Michael Foley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 75.

³⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.3, in *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 100.

³⁸ See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures on the Sacraments*; Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*; and Ambrose, *On the Mysteries*. For an excellent study of “mystagogy,” see Hanna Lucas, *Sensing the Sacred: Recovering a Mystagogical Vision of Knowledge and Salvation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

Conclusion

There is much to learn from this approach to Christian catechesis today. But most of all, by retrieving patristic catechesis, we can begin to recover the foundations of faith: foundations that are laid squarely on the rock of Jesus Christ. Patristic catechesis was a converting education—a basic but comprehensive instruction in what Christians believe, hope, and love. It was a time of building new foundations that would form disciples into the image of Christ. Catechetical instruction was an intellectual, spiritual, and social transformation in which catechumens learned new ways of believing, living, and loving as Christians. It was a pedagogy of enchantment and an education of desire—a time when believers were formed in heart and mind, building knowledge and love of God on the one foundation of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this sounds too demanding. The bar seems too high. Well, yes and no. On the one hand, yes: catechesis is hard. It is demanding. But only in the ways that following Jesus is *always* hard. Discipleship is costly because Jesus bids us nothing less than to come and die, as Bonhoeffer famously put it. (Though the cost of *nondiscipleship*, as Dallas Willard added, is even costlier.) And this is all the more difficult in a culture that is hard at work to distract us from the abundant life Jesus offers. It *is* hard to slow down and introduce hurried and harried people to the true rest that Jesus makes available. It *is* hard to make space in our hectic lives to patiently work through people's deep pains and questions without giving pat answers.

But on the other hand, the burdens of catechesis are easy and its yoke is light. Catechesis doesn't require adding *one more thing* to an already overloaded schedule and burned-out staff. It doesn't require expensive operational budgets or elaborate technical expertise. It simply requires attending to what's happening in front of us. What is the Spirit doing here? How is Christ already catechizing us? Beginning catechesis is as simple as gathering a few fellow travelers on the Way and seeking God together through thinking, praying, and trying to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

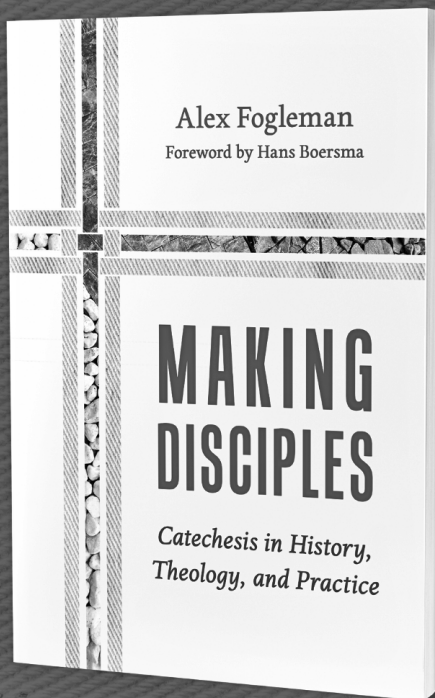
And it turns out that many people *want* this. I've heard so many people say, "I've been a Christian my whole life, and no one's ever walked me through the basic elements of faith before!" Furthermore, if they don't find a comprehensive vision for life in Christ, they'll look for it elsewhere—in online

communities, partisan politics, youth sports, or work. People are searching for a life of deep meaning and purpose, and we sell the gospel short when we offer a mere religious hobby.

It's not that catechesis is too hard. It's that we've forgotten how essential it is for the health and vitality of the church and the lives of its members. I'm convinced that retrieving catechesis is one of the most urgent tasks for our time, with the power to build up the church in powerful, Spirit-filled ways. As one of my catechetical heroes, J. I. Packer, once put it, "where wise catechesis has flourished, the church has flourished."³⁹ I'm willing to bet he was right.

³⁹J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 184.

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