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From the early days of the Restoration Movement, Churches of Christ and Christian Churches distinguished themselves from their near neighbors on the American frontier with a noticeably robust ecclesiology, reflected in, among other things, the theology and practice of baptism. Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott's "high" view of baptism stood out in the context of the Second Great Awakening, wherein salvation often came to be connected to a subjective experience of the Holy Spirit that was externally manifest in ways other than baptism. For evangelists like Charles Finney, someone could respond by approaching the "anxious seat." All of this took place apart from water baptism. Campbell's association of believers' baptism with salvation was denigrated by most evangelicals as "baptismal regeneration" and seen as a regression to salvation by works. In the eyes of many evangelicals today, baptism "for the remission of sins" is still regarded as a false teaching that undermines justification by grace through faith.

Yet not everyone is scandalized by the high view of baptism. Many evangelicals, in fact, are warming up to the teaching, and, in many circles, evangelicals are beginning to say the same thing that Churches of Christ have said all along. This shift is due, in part, to a fresh reading of the New Testament. The efficacy of baptism—or, better, the efficacy of God's work in baptism—is perhaps the clearest ecclesiological doctrine in the New Testament. In addition to the New Testament evidence, there is renewed evangelical interest in patristic resources, and the early church provides unanimous testimony of the indispensability of baptism, summed up in the Nicene Symbol's acknowledgment of "one baptism for remission of sins." The emerging ecumenical consensus, moreover, has favored a similarly high view of baptism, reflected in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order report of the World Council of Churches (for quotations, see "Obiter Dicta" in this issue).

During this year of centennial celebration of Austin Graduate School of Theology (founded in 1917), as we are encouraged to look back and look ahead, it is appropriate to examine a topic that has been—and continues to remain—pivotal to the identity and unity of the Restoration Movement. For, despite all the diversity of faith and practice that now characterizes Churches of Christ, the important place of baptism is one of the few identity markers

that most congregations have maintained. For all the attention that has been devoted to the understanding of baptism, there is always more to learn as we seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

To these ends, we have devoted this issue of *Christian Studies* to the topic of baptism, asking contributors to answer questions such as: What is the sacrament of baptism? How should we think about baptism? How should we practice baptism? How can our theology and practice of baptism be improved? Much of the focus will be not only on what baptism means as a punctiliar moment in time, but also on its meaning as a linear event. Although our churches have been united around passages such as Acts 2:38, there has traditionally been less reflection or consensus regarding what should lead up to baptism and what should follow it. We pray that the reflections on baptism found in these pages will be beneficial to the readers and to the church and will bring glory to God.

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Finding Words to Nourish: “Milk” and “Solid Food” in Earliest Christianity and Today

Daniel Austin Napier

A thorough, biblical study of baptism must attend to the role of teaching in preparing candidates. While one may debate the amount and specific elements of pre-baptismal instruction in very early Christianity, it seems indubitable that significant teaching accompanied baptism.

Baptism initiated the convert into a life of learning. The early church’s self-ascriptions, as depicted in Acts, indicate the role of teaching in their communities. Followers of the risen Jesus self-labeled as adherents of “the Way”¹ or simply as “students” (i.e. disciples).² The one word designation “student” was likely shorthand for “student(s) of the Lord” (9:1). To join the church was to join a community devoted to learning and living within Jesus’ teachings.

In view of early Christian practice, C.S. Lewis’ words to modern seekers are apropos. “God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers. If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you, you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you, brains and all. But, fortunately, it works the other way around. Anyone who is honestly trying to be a Christian will soon find his intelligence being sharpened: one of the reasons why it needs no special education to be a Christian is that Christianity is an education itself.”³

¹ Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

² Acts 6:1, 7; 9:1, 10, 19, 25–26, 38; 11:26, 29; 13:52; 14:20, 22, 28; 15:10; 16:1; 18:23, 27; 19:1, 9, 30; 20:1, 30; 21:4, 16.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1980), 78.

Given the central role of teaching and learning in earliest Christianity, one might be surprised to observe its practice in contemporary congregations.

Educational institutions, if they are doing their job, structure themselves to facilitate ever increasing levels of competence. Growth in competence requires ascending levels of instruction—discernable stages of learning and practice. Grade levels in primary, secondary, and high schools as well as escalating course numbers and prerequisites for university courses illustrate the assumption of growing competence. Even sporting programs and martial arts dojos have specific classes for people at different levels of development.

Where are the levels of instruction found among Jesus' contemporary students? In my experience, few congregations offer differing classes based on levels of spiritual maturity. The same adult bible class and sermon is expected to feed the seeker, the young convert, and the wizened follower of many decades. One might ask what belief should be inferred from this practice. Could the contemporary church be the only educational institution whose teaching practices assume a perpetual failure to improve?

The ancient church, in contrast, expected progression in discipleship and scaled her teaching to match. The writings of the New Testament indicate this was so from her earliest days.

If asked to categorize their teaching practices, the earliest followers of Jesus would not use the terms common today. "Theology" was a word they avoided.⁴ While early Christians often self-identified as a "philosophy", the

⁴ "Theology," as a label for a form of teaching, had pagan connotations in the early centuries. Three forms of "theology" were commonly recognized by the ancients: mythic, physical, and political. Mythic or poetic theology was story-telling about the gods. Homer and Hesiod were theologians in this sense. Physical or natural theology referred to the gods as personifications of the forces of nature. Civic or public theology, as the Stoics described it from Panaetius of Rhodes onward, was the attribution of divine qualities either to rulers, such as the Caesar, or civic aim, such as "Justice" and "Peace," in order to solidify a social group. Tertullian and Augustine of Hippo, both of whom cite Varro, are primary sources of testimonia for these views. See Tertullian, *ad Nationes* 2.1ff and Augustine, *City of God* 4.24–27; 6.12, etc. In addition to these three, we might note that Aristotle used the word to designate one of the three branches of speculative philosophy: mathematics, physics, and theology (*Metaphysics* 6.1). In this sense, theology designated his theory of being *qua* being as developed in

term didn't name a form of discourse or instruction offered.⁵ Philosophy referred to a coherent and comprehensive way of living, not to a subject matter in a curriculum.⁶

Together with generic terms such as “teaching,” “exhortation,” “encouragement,” “preaching,” and “evangelizing,”⁷ early Christians employed a particularly telling metaphor complex to name levels of instruction. That complex of metaphors is the focus of this article.

The milk and chewable or solid food metaphor,⁸ while not ubiquitous in the New Testament, does occur in multiple authors (1 Cor 3:2 and Heb 5:12. Milk also occurs in 1 Pet 2:2 without a contrast to solid foods). Moreover, an examination unbiased toward an ideology of original “diversity” or “pluriformity” in earliest Christianity shows, I think, substantial coherence of meaning in the metaphor's use. At least that will be the direction of my argument.

It is true that ancient philosophers commonly used metaphors of eating and digesting to name aspects of the learning process. Their metaphor of learning or reading as eating was built upon a general parallelism between

Metaphysics book 12. The Stoics included Aristotle's usage in their category of “physical theology,” but it probably should be counted as a fourth usage.

⁵ See chs. 1 and 4 of Pierre Hadot and Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁶ To calibrate one's understanding of ancient philosophy as ways of living, see Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002); Hadot and Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Martha Craven Nussbaum, “The Therapy of Desire in Hellenistic Ethics,” in *Antike Philosophie Verstehen = Understanding Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Marcel van Ackeren and Jörn Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Martin Classical Lectures (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994). Most recently, John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013) provides a needed corrective to a homogenizing tendency in Hadot.

⁷ For an overview of some relevant speech types and their components, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

⁸ Paul uses the term “chewables” and the Hebrews writer uses the phrase “solid food.” I consider them to be referring to the same thing. In this article, I'll use “chewables” when referring to Paul's text and “solid food” when the Hebrews writer is in focus.

body and soul. Just as the body requires food to acquire substance, so the soul requires truth to grow.⁹

Often the specific focus, for the philosophers, was reading. The metaphor supplied an ethics of literary consumption. One could become gluttonous in devouring more texts than one could mentally assimilate. The result is intellectual indigestion, or confusion. Unrestrained gorging might result in the student “vomiting” the hastily ingested speech forms without any sign of digestion.¹⁰ In English we have a word for this condition. We call such a student a “sophomore” or “wise-fool.” He eagerly and capably regurgitates elevated sentences, but he does not really know what he is talking about. The verbal formulae might be correct, but he lacks an appropriate basis in thought and experience to deal with their subject matter.

The early Christians’ milk/solid food distinction clearly bears a kinship to the philosophical commonplace of learning as nutrition.¹¹ Nonetheless, it is not identical with anything found in the pagan philosophers.¹² It operates

⁹ For a few examples of the truth-as-nourishment commonplace, see Plato *Phaedrus* 247b-e; Epictetus *Discourses* 1.26.15–17; 2.9.17–19; *Encheiridion* 46; Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 10.31.2. A related metaphor depicts the philosopher as physician of the soul and philosophical arguments as medicine, diet, surgery, or cautery. For examples see Plato *Gorgias* 462bff; Seneca *Epistles* 22.1; 27.1; 40.5; 50.4; 64.8; 72.5–6; 94.24; 95.29.

¹⁰ Epictetus *Discourses* 1.26.15–17

¹¹ For secondary discussions of New Testament usage of the milk and meat metaphor, see James Thompson, “The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13 (1982): 17–40; Karen H. Jobes, “Got Milk? Septuagint Psalm 33 and the Interpretation of I Peter 2:1–3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 1–14 offers a counter-intuitive, and ultimately unconvincing, perspective that milk is God’s grace generically, not teaching; Gail Corrington, “The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (1989): 393–420 argues for a liturgical context with a background in the Isis mystery cult, so also Gail Paterson Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 89–98; Philip Tite, “Nurslings, Milk and Moral Development in the Greco-Roman Context: A Reappraisal of the Paraenetic Utilization of Metaphor in 1 Peter 2.1–3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 no. 4 (2009): 371–400; for an adjacent metaphor without explicit discussion of milk cf. Abraham J. Malherbe, “‘Gentle as a Nurse’: The Cynic Background to I Thess II,” *Novum Testamentum*, 12 no. 2 (1970): 203–17.

¹² The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, is the nearest of kin among non-Christian writers. He utilized a contrast between milk and wheaten bread to describe

within a larger matrix of cognate metaphors, which has no parallel among the philosophic schools. As such, the specific distinction between milk and chewable food seems to carry a distinct range of meanings within the Jesus movement.¹³

What elements comprise the broader metaphor complex within which milk and chewable food find their meaning? The first element goes back, in the early church's memories, to Jesus' own teachings. In his parables, Jesus identified his message of the kingdom as "seed." The same words (*sperma*, *spora*, and cognate verbs) can be used either in a horticultural context or in a biological context. Ancients did not draw a sharp line between the tiny bits of matter that initiated plant life and animal life.

In the parables of the synoptic gospels Jesus employs horticultural imagery.¹⁴ The "seed" falls on various types of soil, which determines its reception and effect. Likewise, Jesus' message will find varied reception and effect depending on what type of heart it encounters. Here the seed produces a new form of botanical life. Yet the botanical seed metaphor explicitly refers to the beginnings of a new kind of human life.

The same words function in metaphorically biological contexts. Some early Jesus followers, also referring to the production of a new type of life from God's word, employed the metaphor of "seed" as that which produces an embryo or the beginnings of a new body.¹⁵ By extending the metaphor, evangelizing could be described metaphorically as a "begetting" or "generating" of a new life.¹⁶ A person in whom this new form of life had been engen-

appropriate training in the cycle of studies for the immature soul before moving on to the "congealed and costly food" of philosophy (*On Husbandry* 9; *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* 19; *Every Good Man in Free* 160). Otherwise, no explicit usage of the distinction can be located among the philosophers. Epictetus characteristically reproaches his students for refusing to be weaned and whining for their nanny instead of growing up (*Discourses* 2.16.39; 3.24.9), but it was a vituperative rhetorical move. The Stoics never developed an explicit distinction between milk and solid food as forms of teaching.

¹³ Pace James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) and his numerous echoers.

¹⁴ Mark 4:1–20; 26–32; Matt 13:3–35; Luke 8:4–15.

¹⁵ 1 Pet 1:23; 1 John 3:9.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 4:15; Phm 10.

dered has been “sired again” or “sired from above.”¹⁷ The same root word (*gennaō*) could mean either “to birth” or “to beget, sire”¹⁸ depending on whether the subject is a male or female.¹⁹ In the context of John’s gospel, the one who begets is God the Father and thus metaphorically masculine. Attentive readers of John’s gospel will have been alerted at the beginning to this masculine sense of begetting. For the true light gives to believers the right to become children of God. Such are begotten, not from blood nor from the desire of the flesh nor from the choice of a male, but from God (John 1:12–13).

It’s important, pastorally, to distinguish the notion of “begetting” or “generating” from “being born.” Here is the reason. We live at the mercy of our ideas. And our language naturally calibrates our expectations. When we use the common language of “born again”, our imaginations conjure a fairly short, intense period of emergence. Birth typically lasts from a few hours to perhaps a full day. On the other hand, when one speaks of being generated from above we naturally expect a longer, more involved process of growth and transformation. Conversion imagined as “being born again” conjures a quick change—perhaps a “road to Damascus” sort of experience. Conversion understood as “being generated from above” prepares a person for what might be a year of awkward, searching, incremental morphing into a new life.

Of course, neither generation nor birth are the endpoint of the metaphor complex. Once a newly begotten life comes to term, he or she enters the world as an infant and gradually grows to full maturity. The spiritual pregnancy issues in a life that initially requires specially adapted spiritual and moral nutrition to grow.²⁰ Different forms of nutrition are required for each stage.

¹⁷ John 3:1–8; 1 Pet 1:3, 23.

¹⁸ According to Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 344, this verb is used “mostly of the father.”

¹⁹ Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus in John 3 as meaning “born again.” Commentators often note the ambiguity of the “*anōthen*” particle. It could mean either “again” or “from above.” However, a similar ambiguity resides in the word *gennaō*. Nicodemus is doubly confused.

²⁰ 1 Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:11–14; 1 Pet 2:1–3; see also *Odes of Solomon* 19.

With this larger matrix of metaphors in view, we are in a good position to explore the significance of the milk/chewable food distinction and its referents.

Before we launch into that exploration, however, please consider how this matrix naturally creates expectations of a layered, gradual process of conversion and spiritual maturation. The goal is not merely to be “born again” but to grow up. I hope it will not be considered uncharitable to call attention to a trend of the last several decades. We currently are seeing the results of many thousands who have been “born again” but harbor no intention of every growing into the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). In earliest Christianity, a longer, fuller transformation was expected. A whole life is in view—a new form of human existence that directly emerges from Jesus’ teaching.

The Content of “Milk”: Catechetical or Peri-Baptismal Teaching

While several New Testament writers refer to “milk” and the need of their hearers for “milk”, the content of this teaching is left implicit, with one exception. The Hebrews writer provides a brief catalog of the topics included in the “milk” (6:1–2). Ironically, we only have this catalog because he wanted to gesture toward what he proposed to surpass in his own teaching (6:3). Nonetheless, the catalog is instructive because it probably contains the basic curriculum for early Christian catechesis as the Hebrews writer knew it.

Four topics are listed as equivalent to the milk. The topical order may be indicative of instructional sequence. In other words, we might have an answer to the following question. Suppose a first century “seeker” inquired concerning the church’s faith. What would be the content and order of his or her initial round of instruction? I will expound the list from that perspective.

- 1) Elementary Teaching about Christ (Heb 6:1).

A serious inquirer into the church’s faith would first be given a basic summary of Jesus’ story as embodying the fulfillment of messianic hopes. For anyone from a Gentile background, this would require a significant overview of God’s prior interaction with Israel. Later catechists emphasize the need to provide a concise narrative frame for Jesus’ story that would include creation and primal rebellion, the flood and the division of the nations, the election of

Abraham, the Exodus and giving of Torah, the choice of David, the prophetic testimony, the Exile and return of the Jews.²¹

The organizing focus, however, would be on the life-events, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To put this in words common to the rest of the New Testament, but strangely sparse in Hebrews (only 4:2, 6), the gospel would be preached. For the sake of simplicity, one could think of the gospel as all the stuff that ends up in the gospels. Those stories of Jesus *are* the gospel in earliest Christianity.²² Jesus' story formed a foundation for conversion in the earliest church.

2) The Foundation of Moral Exhortation (Heb 6:1)

The Hebrews writer briefly gestures toward the “foundation of repentance from dead deeds and of reliance upon God.” Too often our translations assimilate this phrase (*metanoiās apo nekron ergōn*) to a quasi-Pauline (really Lutheran) theology of freedom from “works of the law.” But the Hebrews writer has something different in mind. “Dead deeds” are the death-dealing practices of immoral and idolatrous living.²³ This was a staple of Second Temple Jewish apologetic as well as early Christian proclamation (e.g., Wis 12:2; 1 Thess 1:9–10; Acts 14:15–18; 17:30–31; Eph 2:1–6).

²¹ Two primary texts are especially helpful for reconstructing this dimension of early Christian catechesis. The summary of scriptural meta-narrative found in Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), provides a window into the sort of doctrinal and narrative instruction delivered during this stage. Augustine's examples of the first catechetical lessons in Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, The Augustine Series (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2006) indicates this emphasis continues into the early fifth century.

²² This is true even for Paul. When he introduces himself to the Romans, a church he didn't found, Paul's first move is to provide a summary statement of his gospel: “concerning his son who was born from the seed of David according to the flesh and designated son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3–4). If one were to ask, “how could one gesture toward the whole content of the gospel narratives in a sentence?” Paul's statement would be hard to improve upon. In essence, Paul provides the book-ends to stand for the whole. The gospel is all the stories we tell beginning with Jesus' lineage and culminating in his resurrection from the dead. For accounts of synoptic traditions in Paul, see David L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic Tradition in the Regulation of Early Church Life* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1971); and more recently, chapter 5 of David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

²³ James Thompson, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 133.

The basic structure of moral exhortation was a “two ways” approach. (In other words, an exhortation offering a choice between the way of life and the way of death).²⁴ Negatively, the seeker learned to turn from deeds that issue in death. Reliance upon idols, which are empty, futile things, produced stupidity and death. The unfettered license of ordinary gentile life had to be renounced. Positively, this involved a move toward increasing trust or reliance upon God. By learning to rely upon the living God, converts discovered a new form of life.

3) Basic Teachings about Community Practices (Heb 6:2a)

Converts also needed to learn how to live together while engaging in shared communal practices. This stage of teaching involved providing basic coordinates and rationales for that community.

Among the foundational teachings were those “concerning immersions and laying on of hands.” The plural “immersions” probably implies that teaching followed a compare and contrast approach. Baptism in the name of Jesus, to be properly understood, could not be just another immersion. It was of a different order than the repeated ablutions practiced for ceremonial cleansing by the Pharisees and the emergent rabbinic movement²⁵ and by the disciples of John (see Acts 18:24–26). Those entering community life with Jesus’ people needed to grasp the distinctiveness of baptism into his name.²⁶

The “laying on of hands” has two possible referents. The laying on of hands could have been a part of the baptismal initiation that symbolized the conferral of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14–17; 19:5–6). The more likely reference in this context, however, is to a rite of commissioning and fortification for ministry (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6), for which there is precedent in the Torah. For instance, Moses lays hands upon Joshua in order to appoint him (Num 27:15–23; Deut. 34:9). This second reading seems likely since the

²⁴ For examples of two-ways exhortations prior to the Jesus movement, see Deut 11:26–28; 28:1–68; Jer 21:8ff; 1QS 3.13–4.26. For examples within the Jesus movement, see Matt 7:24–27; *Didache*; *Epistle of Barnabas*; *Doctrina Apostolorum*.

²⁵ For a quick survey of Second Temple Jewish and early rabbinic practices of immersion, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 60–82.

²⁶ Lars Hartman, “*Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*”: *Baptism in the Early Church* (Enskede: TPB, 2003) provides a sound analysis of the distinctives.

Hebrews writer addresses those who have recently suffered expulsion from the synagogue. In such a tense moment, he highlights differences between the two movements. The “laying on of hands” for appointment to service would be such a point of distinction. Despite retaining the name “*semikhah*” (lit. *laying on [of hands]*) for their ordination ceremony, the synagogue eventually ceased the physical laying on of hands and ordained rabbis by proclamation. The most likely reason was to intentionally distinguish themselves from the Jesus movement’s practice.²⁷ This rite of commissioning would have invoked the Holy Spirit to supply the strength to serve (see Deut. 34:9).

Even on the front end of personal commitment, converts needed to understand the range of roles exercised and empowered within the community. This provided them a map for communal life at its entrance. As such, these two rites stood for the basic structure of community life within the early church.

There is practical wisdom in this element of the catechism. New converts can find church life bewildering. If this orientation to communal structures were not supplied formally, it would certainly be required informally or the lack would be felt as communal friction.

4) Bare Essentials of Eschatology (Heb 6:2b)

Finally, the seeker would receive teachings concerning “resurrection of the dead ones and eternal judgment.” These are the most basic elements of Christian expectation concerning the world to come. Not only do these expectations emerge seamlessly from the gospel narratives, they also corroborate the resolve instilled through moral exhortation.

Indeed, catechists of later centuries will remark on the moral stimulus which genuine belief in a coming judgment supplies to the convert.²⁸ While we find substantial overlap of content between ethical exhortation in the philosophic schools and in early Christian sources, the results of Christian

²⁷ Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Believers in Early Rabbinic Literature (2d to 5th Centuries),” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalik (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson, 2007), 659–709 provides a thorough study of a broad-based rabbinic program of revising synagogue practice in order to dissociate Jewish Jesus-followers. This includes their alteration of the *semikhah* ceremony (704–6).

²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.38; 3.57; 3.67–69; 4.26; 4.53; 7.35.

moral exhortation were much more transformative. Why? According to early Christian thinkers, the difference could largely be explained by the distinctive role of eschatology. Although other philosophers preached moral truths, they didn't have the power to consistently change their behavior because they lacked a broader belief in the judgment to come and the resurrection of the body.²⁹ Solid hope fuels moral transformation.

How Common is this Curriculum of “Milk”?

This catechetical synopsis might be quite widespread in early Christianity. Of course, we cannot *demonstrate* the claim. By the nature of the case, any statement on the matter will be partially speculative. We can only infer from a handful of texts. Nonetheless, since nature—as well as the scholarly imagination—abhors a vacuum, I would submit that supposing continuity seems at least as plausible as assuming radical diversity.³⁰ In fact, if the order of the list in Hebrews 6:1–2 were taken to indicate a rough sequence of initial teaching common to early Christian communities, other scenarios might be seen as corroborating.

For instance, consider the interrupted catechism of the Thessalonians and the content of Paul's subsequent teaching letters to them. 1 Thessalonians assumes that Paul's readers have heard the gospel and been introduced to Jesus “who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10). By way of reminder, Paul emphasizes the moral exhortation already delivered (4:1–10a). The new information he supplies relates primarily to the last two categories. His converts need some clarification concerning communal order—how to work in order to help others (4:10b–12) and behavior within the assembly (5:12–22). But the final category seems to be mostly unknown to the Thessalonians. They know Jesus is returning (1:10), but they don't know that his followers who die beforehand will be raised (4:13ff). Why this particular mix of things known and unknown to the Thessalonians? Paul was run from town after perhaps little more than a couple weeks and certainly less than a month (three Sabbaths, Acts 17:2). His initial teaching was curtailed by his flight. If the order of teachings in Hebrews 6:1–2 were standard early Chris-

²⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.67–69; 4.53; and Augustine, *De vera religione* 1.1–4.7.

³⁰ Alfred Seeberg, *Der Katechismus Der Urchristenheit* (Leipzig: A. Deichert), 1903.

tian practice, the specific foci of 1 Thessalonians would be predictable topics to complete a disrupted catechism.³¹

The Intended Effect of “Milk”: Personal Moral Formation

Another point of agreement across authors in the New Testament concerns the criteria for advancing from “milk” teachings to those instructions known as “chewable” or “solid food.” Before pointing to the texts, I often ask my classes to ponder what criterion they would offer. How does one know that someone is prepared for a more advanced course of study in the Way? Typically, we assume the best indicator would be the ability to pass some test of content comprehension. However, in this our aim would diverge from the New Testament writers.

In both the Hebrews writer and Paul, the primary criterion for advancement is moral formation. Here the New Testament writers’ understanding of the goal of teaching is much closer to the ancient philosophers than to our modern notions of educational progress.³² For the Hebrews writer, milk is needed for anyone who is inexperienced in making sense of righteousness (5:13). The moral novice needs the catechetical curriculum with its focus on moral exhortation. More advanced study might be damaging so long as this foundation is lacking. Solid food is appropriate for those who easily discern good and bad because skilled perception has become second nature—habit (5:14). In other words, the Hebrew writer would expect daily practice, as guided by the catechetical “milk”, to produce a person whose habitual responses were substantially transformed. The convert’s ethical progress, rather than a mere capacity to verbally explain previous teachings, would signal his or her readiness for deeper teachings.

³¹ Consider the content of those encyclical letters—Colossians and Ephesians, assuming Ephesians was written for multiple churches—written by Paul to churches he did not personally found. Again, he assumes the basic storyline is in place. After all, he’s writing to churches. They’ve already been gathered and baptized. He fills out some basic understandings of Christ’s work, then focuses on moral exhortation, elaborated by reflecting upon the distinctive significance of Christian baptism. Toward the end of each letter, church order—especially in terms of household conduct—receives consideration.

³² The necessity of moral development before receiving “solid food” was retained and developed by the early apologists, see Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses* 4.38.1; Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.25; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.6.

“chewable” teachings are depth readings of the Old Testament in which God’s peculiar power and essence become known through figurative interpretations. Clement provides an example. “Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us” (citing 1 Cor. 5:7b) exemplifies mystic contemplation.³⁵

Clement’s clue opens some promising leads. In Pauline terms, if Clement is correct, “chewables” would be “mysteries”—things that God had in mind from ages past, left allusions to in the Scriptures, but only recently revealed to Jesus’ people (Rom 16:25–27). The section in 1 Cor 2:6–3:17 would support such a reading. Paul speaks “mysteries” to the mature. These mysteries are alluded to through a composite quotation from Isaiah in which God’s wisdom in the cross was revealed to Paul. A quick survey of Paul’s revelation of “mysteries” shows they are often offered as deep insights into Old Testament writings as they foreshadow realities in Christ and the church (for instance, Rom 11:25ff.; 16:25–27; 1 Cor 2:6ff.; 15:51ff.; Eph 5:31–32).

In the context of Hebrews, a similar identification would fit. The Hebrews writer wants to move beyond “milk” in his teaching and determines to do so if God allows (6:3). Much of his written homily consists precisely of typological readings of Scripture, which Paul would have called “mysteries.”

Given these convergences, I think it safe to consider insightful Christological readings of the Old Testament writings as constituting the “chewables” or “solid food.” These depth readings, at least the more elaborate ones, were reserved for substantially transformed converts and mostly passed on in person rather than in writing. For the fledgling follower of Jesus, catechetical “milk” provided instruction in the four areas expounded above, with the primary goal of personal transformation into Christlikeness.

Contemporary Usefulness

If the above reading is accurate, it answers a perennial question among evangelists and ministers. Where does one begin when instructing a seeker? What is appropriate at the earliest stages and what should be reserved for a later time? With or without biblical guidance, this practical question presses every minister. If there were no biblical guidance, we would have to manufacture an approach on our own. By God’s mercies, we do have the outlines

³⁵ *Stromata* 5.10.66.5.

of a clear biblical curriculum for the first instruction. Moreover, it bears all the marks of deep, practical wisdom in initiating seekers. As a longtime evangelist, it strikes me that I could not improve on this basic list of topics.

So, here are some schematic suggestions for a first round of instruction in the Christian faith. First, always begin with telling the stories of Jesus as they are found in the gospels. Allow the narratives to evoke questions, and strive to bring those questions back to Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. In order to render this account of Jesus intelligible, provide a basic overview of God's interactions with humanity from creation to the New Creation. But make Jesus the central focus.

Second, make use of Jesus' teachings—especially the Sermon on the Mount. Moral instruction should occupy a central place. This is easily interwoven with the narrative presentation. As one provides an overview of the Old Testament, the stories should highlight positive and negative examples—trust in God leads to life, deeds set against him produce death. Much of Jesus' moral teaching is interwoven with specific encounters in which the moral instruction provided needed guidance or correction. We too should provide the narrative frame with our moral exhortation.

Third, church order isn't an afterthought. We convert people to Jesus. We must never lose this central focus. However, this involves incorporating them into a community of Jesus' students. As a matter of kindness, we should supply some basic coordinates for life in a new community along with the biblical-theological rationale for those practices. For those of us who are long familiar with church life, it's easy to forget how odd the church's regular practices and specific roles are to an outsider. Providing a basic orientation to how things work in the congregation alleviates disorientation and eases a convert's nerves.

Finally, take time to clarify the resurrection of the body and the day of the Lord. Hope motivates. Converts suffer much in the process of radical personal change. Only a clear set of expectations will focus the will and enable actual change. A basic account of Christian hope will provide all that is needful and helpful.

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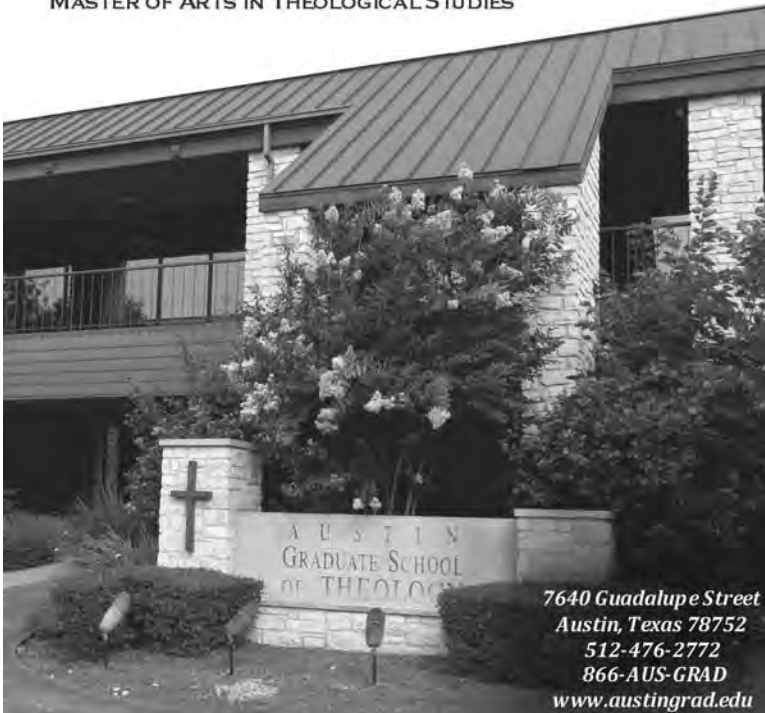


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