

Catechetical Schools in the Early Christian Centuries

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous article we discovered that the attitude of Early Christianity toward education in general was most favorable.¹ At the very beginning of the Christian era the Christians had no schools of their own, and so they sent their children to the secular schools for their education. Soon, however, schools for definite religious instruction and for detailed theological training were established. These schools were known as catechumenal and catechetical schools.

Some writers distinguish between the catechumenal schools and the catechetical schools. This distinction, even though it may appear superficial to some, is worthy of notice.

In the Early Church there grew up, as a matter of necessity, a process of instruction for those who desired to become members of the Christian community (catechumens) but who lacked the requisite knowledge of doctrine and the requisite moral stability. In general these were divided into two groups—those who had merely expressed the desire to become members of the Church, and those who were thought by the Church to be worthy of full admission. Only after candidates had undergone some instruction and discipline were they received into full communion through the sacrament of baptism.

The tendency in this early period was to postpone this rite of baptism for a longer and longer time until eventually the custom gave origin to great evils. These catechumens included children of believers, Jewish converts, and the adult converts of the heathen population. Though to a certain extent the discipline entailed was intellectual, in that it had to do with doctrines, it was for the most part a moral discipline and a moral oversight. In one other respect, in music, this instruction possessed significance. The psalmody of the Early Church, especially in the East, was of conspicuous importance. In regard to moral training, this use of music was prob-

¹ Page 25.

ably of an importance comparable with the function of music in Greek education.

At stated periods in the week, in some places every day, the catechumens met in the porch or in some other specific portion of the Church for instruction and moral training. The custom of catechumenal instruction was universal and through it, supplemented by the oversight of the home which was far more rigid than that of the contemporary Roman or Grecian home, the children of the Christian population received their religious instruction.

From their method, and from their use of the catechism as the basis of their instruction in subject-matter, the catechumenal schools were also called catechetical schools. But by way of distinction this term is better applied to a development of these schools in a few localities into institutions carrying on *a higher grade* of work.

The main portion of this paper which follows is devoted to a discussion of three of the outstanding catechetical schools in the early Christian centuries—at Alexandria, at Antioch, and at Jerusalem.

I. THE SCHOOL AT ALEXANDRIA

A study of the Alexandrian School and of the Alexandrian theology—Jewish and Christian Platonism—centers around three representative names: Philo, Clement, and Origen.

Philo was born in 20 B.C. and was a member of a well-known Alexandrian family. He became a Jewish apologist who wished to defend Judaism against atheism, polytheism, and scepticism. He was concerned to prove that the highest forms of revelation and of human wisdom were contained within the compass of the Old Testament. He adopted the old Greek method of allegorism in his interpretation of the Scriptures.

Philo developed a system of Divine Powers through which God reveals Himself. In the hierarchy of Powers, the “logos” of God is second to God Himself. The “logos” of Philo coincides with the Platonic “nous,” and the intelligible world is the mode which “he” assumes in creating. In the “logos” are inscribed and engraved the constitutions of all other things.

According to Philo, the “logos” is the constitutive principle of human individuality, but “he” is not himself an individual. Therefore, Dean Inge concludes:

The logos doctrine of Philo is nearer to what in Christianity became Monarchianism than to the Arianism with which it has been compared, or to Athanasian orthodoxy. As the logos of God is the archetype of human reason, the mind of man is nearer to God than any other created thing. The great helper of mankind in the ascent to God is the logos: and here Philo tries to unite his Jewish reverence for the written 'Word' of God with his Platonic idealism.²

Until the age of Clement, the Christian Church at Alexandria lay in obscurity. Our information is so scanty that it is difficult to say whether the ideas of Philo and his school were a factor in the Alexandrian Christianity during the greater part of the second century A.D.

In the later half of the second century there grew into importance the remarkable Catechetical School at Alexandria—the earliest school of its kind in the Christian Church. (The schools of the apologists—Justin, Tatian, etc.—were private ventures and not attached definitely to the Church.) The oldest Gnostic schools for the study of religious philosophy were in Egypt, and the Christian Catechetical School may have been modeled partly upon these and partly upon the Jewish high schools.

The school at Alexandria emerges from darkness under Pantaenus; but we know very little about its management either under him or under Clement. There were no class-rooms or collegiate buildings. The head of the school gave informal instruction in his own house, sometimes by lectures, sometimes by conversation classes. The usual course was for three years. No fees were charged. The lecturer was supported by free gifts from rich students.

Education was on much the same lines as that advocated by Philo. The aim of education was the acquisition of the "gnosis." The instruction consisted partly of moral discipline and partly of the study of philosophy, to which was added the art of expounding, in accordance with the principles of allegorism, the books which contained the special revelation. The Christian teachers placed Greek philosophy and the Old Testament Scriptures side by side as necessary to the higher knowledge; and among the philosophers, though the Platonists and Stoics were most studied, none were excluded except the "godless" Epicureans. The commentaries of Origen show that Biblical study held a very important place in the course.

² Inge, W. R., "Alexandrian Theology," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, I, 311.

Pantaenus became the first head of the School at Alexandria around 185 A.D. He was learned in Greek philosophy, and he led the way in the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. His work was more catechetical than literary, and he employed the question and answer method.

Clement was born about 150 A.D., perhaps at Athens. After many years of leisurely traveling in Italy, Greece, and the East, he came to Alexandria, where, about 200 A.D., he succeeded Pantaenus as head of the Catechetical School. In 202 or 203 A.D. he was compelled by persecution to leave Alexandria, probably for Palestine and Syria. He died around 215 A.D.

Dean Inge writes thus about Clement as a thinker:

As a thinker, Clement is most important as the author of a syncretistic philosophy of religion, fusing Platonism and Stoicism in a Christian mould. In Stoicism he found a natural religion, rationalism, moralism, and a predominant interest in psychology and apologetics; in Platonism a cosmology, doctrines of revelation, redemption and salvation, and contemplation as the highest state.³

We come next to the name of Origen in connection with the school at Alexandria. He was born around 185 A.D. and was carefully brought up as a Christian. He became a pupil of Pantaenus and Clement, and already in his eighteenth year occupied informally the position of head of the Catechetical School, the older teachers having been scattered by persecution. For many years he was occupied in laborious study and teaching, mainly on the Bible. Later he was driven from Egypt, and he labored at Caesarea for the last twenty years of his life. He died at Tyre in 253 A.D.

Origen believed that that the logos enlightened all men according to their capacities. The double achievement of Origen (carrying on what Clement began) was to destroy Gnosticism, and to give philosophy a recognized place in the creeds of the Church. The second was the price which conservatives had to pay for the first. Henceforth the Church possessed a theology and a philosophy of religion which were far more attractive to the educated mind than the barbaric Platonism of the Gnostics.

The list of the heads of the Alexandrian School after Origen is as follows: Heraclas, Dionysius, Pierius, Theognostus, Serapion, Petius, Macarius, Didymus, and Rhodon.

The Catechetical School at Alexandria lost its importance be-

³ Inge, W. R., *op. cit.*, p. 315.

cause of the following facts: (1) After Athanasius the logos doctrine began to decay in importance; (2) Methodius, the School at Antioch, and the Council of Constantinople in 533 A.D. attacked Origen's orthodoxy; (3) The growing power of tradition began to kill religious philosophy; (4) Christianity gradually degraded into a religion of cultus; (5) The school was finally destroyed in the unhappy struggle between Theophilus of Alexandria and the Barbarous orthodoxy of the Egyptian monks.

Inge summarizes the contribution of the Alexandrian School in the following paragraphs:

The Alexandrians satisfied the legitimate need of their age by providing a scientific doctrine of religion which, while not contradicting the faith, does not merely support or explain it in a few places, but raises it to another and higher intellectual sphere, namely, out of the province of authority and obedience into that of clear knowledge and inward intellectual assent emanating from love to God. Clement and Origen sought to incorporate the best of Platonism and Stoicism in Christianity.

The permanent value of their syncretistic schemes will always be differently judged while men continue to be 'born either Platonists or Aristotelians'; those who would oust metaphysics from theology can have but scanty sympathy with the Alexandrians. But if speculation on Divine truths is permissible or even necessary, no Christian theologians deserve a higher place than Clement and Origen, who made a serious and not unsuccessful attempt to combine in their creed the immanence and transcendence of God, universal law and human freedom, the universal and the particular in revelation, a lofty standard of practical ethics and world-forgetting contemplation.⁴

II. THE SCHOOL AT ANTIOCH

The Church of Antioch had played an important part in the early spread of Christianity, and from early times had been the center of important movements in the realm of thought. The earliest reference to anything like an organized Christian school of instruction occurs in connection with the condemnation of the heresy of Paul of Samosata in 269 A.D. At a Council of Bishops which met at Antioch in that year and which condemned Paul, the latter's teaching was exposed by Malchion, a presbyter, who was the head of a school of Greek learning at Antioch.

However, it is in the time of Lucian (died 311 or 312 A.D.), the presbyter and martyr, that the School of Antioch first comes clearly to light. He is said to have studied in the schools of Edessa

⁴ Inge, W. R., *op. cit.*, p. 319.

and at Caesarea. The influence of Paul of Samosata's teaching upon Lucian is unmistakable, and between 270 and 299 A.D. he appears to have been outside of the communion of the Church. His teaching represented a compromise between the Adoptionism of Paul and the Logos Christology of Origen. At the same time he taught the idea of a created logos, and in this respect he handed on to his disciples a tradition which found its most logical expression in Arianism. The School of Lucian was the nursery of the Arian doctrine. The Arian leaders, Arius and Eusebius of Nicodedia, were pupils of Lucian.

Two unmistakable characteristics of the School of Antioch were: (1) the use of the dialectical philosophy of Aristotle; (2) the grammatical and literal exegesis of Scripture.

The history of the later School of Antioch really begins with Diodorus, bishop of Tarsus from 378-394 A.D. He upheld the Nicene cause at Antioch. His friendship with Basil is important as marking the union between Cappadocian and Antiochene orthodoxy. In his opposition to Apollinarism he was led to conceptions of the person of Christ which in later times caused him to be regarded as a precursor of Nestorianism. He was the inspirer and teacher of the two most famous representatives of the School of Antioch—Theodore and Chrysostom.

Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia (died 429 A.D.), developed the teaching of his master Diodorus. He has points of contact with the Pelagians in his teaching on sin and the fall, free-will and grace; and in his Christology, he was the immediate precursor of Nestorius.

John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople (died 407 A.D.), was another representative of this School. He was the popular teacher and preacher rather than the exact theologian, and his commentaries on Scripture, which are marked by profound insight into human nature, are the work of a homilist rather than a critical student.

The condemnation of Nestorianism by the Church in 431 A.D. was fatal to the development of the School of Antioch and to the reputation of its great representatives. But, while the proscription of Nestorianism was fatal to the School of Antioch and led to its decline, its teaching was carried on under Nestorian influence in the schools of Edessa and Nisibis.

Strawley presents the following summary of the significance of the School at Antioch:

The permanent service of the Antiochene school lies in its effort to correct a one-sided view of the factors and methods of revelation. To the emotional, mystical religion, which tended to lose the human element in the Divine, whether in inspiration, or the person of Christ, or the relations of grace and free-will, it opposed conceptions which endeavoured to do justice to the dignity and worth of human nature. While the Alexandrian theology started from the Divine side, and deduced all its conclusions from that as its source, the Antiochenes followed the inductive and rationalistic method, which consisted in a careful examination of the facts of human nature and experience. The philosophical basis of the one was Platonist, while that of the other was Aristotelian. In Christology the school of Antioch centered attention upon the historical Christ: in its doctrine of inspiration it affirmed the immediate and historical reference of Scripture: in anthropology it insisted upon the reality of human freedom. It regarded the purpose of the Incarnation as the accomplishment of man's destiny rather than as the deliverance of him from the consequences of sin. The struggle and conflict provoked by the commandment became a means of educating man to realize his freedom of choice and his weakness, and so of raising him out of the stage of subjection to the passions and mortality into the higher life of immortality and sinlessness which has been won for him by Christ. The two standpoints, the Alexandrian and the Antiochene, represent complementary aspects of Christian theology.⁵

III. CYRIL AND HIS CATECHETICAL LECTURES AT JERUSALEM

Cyril was born in Jerusalem around 315 A.D. He received a liberal education, and was ordained deacon by Bishop Macarius in 335 A.D., and was ordained priest by Bishop Maximus in 345 A.D. Notwithstanding Cyril's youth he was entrusted with the responsible duty of instructing the catechumens in Jerusalem and preparing them for baptism. In 348 A.D., in his office as catechist, he delivered the *Catechetical Lectures* by which his name is chiefly known. In 351 A.D. Cyril was made Bishop of Jerusalem, and a stormy ecclesiastical career followed. Three times he was deposed, and three times he resumed the occupation of his see. He died in 386 A.D.

Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* were preached "without book" on the evenings of the weeks of Lent in 348 A.D., in the basilica of the Holy Cross erected on Calvary by St. Helena. These lectures

⁵ Strawley, J. H., "Antiochene Theology," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, I, 593.

are valuable because they are the first and only complete example of the course of instruction given in the early centuries to candidates seeking admission to the fuller privileges of the Christian Church. Their value is also great because of the testimony they bear to the canon of Scripture, the teaching of the Church on the chief articles of the creed, and on the sacraments, and from the light they throw on the ritual of the Church of the fourth century.

Cyril's catechetical lectures were eighteen in number. The list of subjects treated in them is as follows:

1. Hortatory
2. On sin and confidence in God's pardon
3. On baptism
4. Abridged account of the Faith
5. Nature of Faith
6. Monarchy of God
7. Father
8. Omnipotence
9. Creator
10. Lord Jesus Christ
11. Eternal sonship
12. Virgin birth
13. Passion
14. Resurrection and ascension
15. Second coming
- 16, 17. Holy Ghost
18. Resurrection of body and the Catholic Church

The style of Cyril's lectures is clear, dignified, and logical; their tone is serious and pious. A brief survey of their lectures will indicate clearly that his pupils were called upon to think, to put forth intellectual effort, to discipline the will, to arrive at sound judgment.

Certain outstanding characteristics of Cyril as a teacher deserve notice:

1. He devoted himself to the purely religious side of Christian education.
2. The spirit of his teaching was one of sternness and gentleness splendidly combined.
3. The titles of his lectures show a methodical progress of thought.

4. He always prepared the pupils' minds for the new teaching that was to follow.
5. He employed much repetition.
6. He had great literary ability.
7. He showed his powers of adaptability by packing a single sentence full of instruction and meaning even for differing types of minds.
8. He expressed graphically and succinctly the truths he wanted to remain in the minds of his hearers.
9. He would solve a theological difficulty by comparing it to some fact within the hearers' knowledge.

We close our discussion with the following comparison of Clement of Alexandria with Cyril of Jerusalem which has been made by Geraldine Hodgson:

It has seemed better to put S. Clement of Alexandria and S. Cyril of Jerusalem more or less side by side, because they offer in rather a remarkable way examples of men who, being learned, used their learning unconsciously as it were, for the furtherance of the Christian Faith. They concentrate their attention more closely on the purely religious side of Christian education. If S. Clement's *Paedagogue* seems to deal in the main with moral training, S. Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* show us the intellectual side of Christian education, the care for the mind, the appeal to the understanding, the stimulus to the will.⁶

⁶ Hodgson, G., *Primitive Christian Education*, pp. 180, 181.