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Can We Say "Catechesis?"

Tommy King

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By Tommy King

Catechesis refers to the process of instruction and formation that occurs prior to one's baptism into Christ and the church. Today, the term catechesis carries a negative connotation in churches of all traditions, but such was not always the situation. In the early church, catechesis was honored, and the catechists in the church were highly esteemed. Through the years, changes in the catechism and in the educational philosophy of the church have affected our understanding of catechesis. An overview of catechesis through church history will help us in understanding its role in the life of the church (if, indeed, it has a role in the church) and in determining a model for catechesis today.

Catechesis in the Early Church

The catechumenate was a well-developed practice of the church during the first four centuries of its history. It was an intense period of instruction lasting several years. According to Richard Osmer, the abandonment of the practice of catechism was the result of several factors.[0] When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, the church experienced a large influx of converts, and pressure was exerted to make the process of initiation into the church shorter and less difficult. Also, political pressures on the Christian Empire of Rome made it advantageous to baptize infants as a means of insuring nationalistic ties as well as religious affiliation. Before that time, infant baptism had been a sporadic practice of the church and was never viewed as the norm for

Christian initiation.[1] With the rise of infant baptism and the shortening of the process of adult initiation, the church further developed the sacrament of confirmation. Confirmation was the rite of anointing with oil and the laying on of hands to signify the imparting of the Holy Spirit. This rite had originally been a part of the baptismal ceremony, but in the case of infant baptism, it was postponed until the person could profess his or her faith. Catechetical instruction continued to be offered to baptized children in preparation for their confirmation, but it was less organized in structure and not granted its previous weight of importance.

Catechesis during the Reformation and Restoration

During the Reformation the emerging Protestant churches returned to the avid pursuit of catechism, with the catechesis becoming an intense period of education following baptism and prior to confirmation. Several catechisms with differing emphases were produced to enable parents and ministers to prepare children for the time they would assume full responsibility for their faith. As Osmer observes, the catechism "was designed to shape the character of its participants at the profoundest level, inviting them 'to find their only comfort in life and in death in their faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,' to recall the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism."[2]

Although catechism was an important concern of the Reformation churches, the churches born out of the American Restoration Movement found little place for

catechesis in church life. With their roots in revivalism and their strong emphasis on conversion as an individualistic, adult decision based on an intellectual or emotional response to the preaching of the gospel, Restoration churches saw no need for the process of catechesis. The crisis conversion model of the New Testament, seen in the conversion examples of the book of Acts, was adopted as the norm for initiation into faith. Actu-

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ally, to delay baptism for a time of instruction seemed not only unnecessary, but dangerous. Additionally, most converts entering the Restoration churches were coming out of other Christian traditions. For these candidates, the correction of certain points of doctrine (especially in the area of ecclesiology) and the acceptance of baptism (which was often a rebaptism) were deemed conversion. There was little need to instill the basics of story or ethics, as these had been learned earlier in life; the proper adjustments made in matters of doctrine and liturgy were sufficient.

Where this development left the children of the church was rarely discussed. Two early pioneers of the movement did wrestle with the method of communicating the faith to children. In articles published in the *Millennial Harbinger,* both Thomas Campbell and J. W. McGarvey discussed the need for rearing children in the faith, with both men assigning the instruction of children primarily to the home, but they did not explore how these children made the transition from children of the church to the full fellowship of the church.[3] The norm of crisis conversion was so entrenched in the nature of the church that it was assumed the children would grow into a time of crisis. If a crisis did not occur naturally, it could be arranged.

Sunday School, Religious Education, and Catechesis

There has been another development since the beginning of the Restoration Movement that has had a dramatic impact on the teaching of children of the church. The Sunday School Movement began outside the church but was taken into the churches in the period between 1830 and the Civil War.[4] By the turn of the twentieth century, it had become the principal method of education of children for most Protestant groups—including the Churches of Christ. At the beginning of the Sunday School Movement, some who valued catechesis issued a warning that the Sunday schools should not supplant catechetical instruction of children, but their opposition was a losing battle.[5] While Sunday schools quickly replaced catechism among some traditions, their advent actually gave the Restoration churches a method approaching catechism. With Sunday schools came printed curricula that reflected the church's insistence on cognitive learning of scripture and the story of salvation. Perhaps this emphasis reached its apex with the development of the Jule Miller Filmstrips, a resource intended for evangelism but widely used in Sunday school classes for adolescents. Entitled "Visualized Bible Study," the filmstrips related the story of salvation and pointed to some implications for liturgy. However, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a decline in the use of these filmstrips and a major rewriting of the printed curricula taught in the churches. These changes can be attributed in part to a dissatisfaction with some attitudes and teachings of the resources, but they can also be attributed to a much more pervasive force: the discovery of the Religious Education Movement.

Religious Education emerged in the first three decades of the twentieth century; but it was not widely accepted into Churches of Christ, because of isolationist tendencies, until the late sixties. Its advent can be related to the rising level of formal education among the church's ministers and a more open attitude among the churches to the ideas of other Christian traditions. In the spirit of catching up with developing educational theory, Churches of Christ began a dialogue with the proponents of Religious Education. The driving force of the Religious Education Association, established in 1903, was to incorporate the findings of modern psychology and education into religious education.[6] Guiding this reform were the principles of Religious Education:

- Transmission of a "fixed and predetermined content" is inherently authoritarian. Educational process is more important than content, for it determines whether or not individuals and groups will actively engage material.
- Present experience is the primary norm by which inherited beliefs and practices are judged, accentuating the importance of contemporary relevance and meaning.
- The primary goals of religious education are personal growth and social transformation.[7]

The results of these goals are obvious among children of the church today. Church leaders are acutely aware that their children have acquired less cognitive information than in generations past. The question is whether this is a positive or negative development.

An evaluation of the effects of the Religious Education Movement among Churches of Christ would no doubt produce a mixed report. It is not the purpose of this writing to call for the church to abandon Religious Education in favor of catechesis. It is a call to realize that Religious Education and catechesis are not the same thing. A deeper exploration of Religious Education would reveal the many valuable contributions it has made to the lives of those in the church, both children and adults. By its nature, however, Religious Education does not seek to instill the foundational principles of catechesis. Catechesis must become another mission of the church.

Is a call for catechesis for children of the church just a nostalgic and uninformed yearning for the way things were? By no means, because Churches of Christ have never fully addressed the need for catechism. Catechesis is a possibility only when churches can name the relationship between the church and its children and can present those children with a form of initiation that is true to both the biblical story and to the reality of their lives. The call for catechesis, by its nature, includes cognitive learning, but it should not be rejected on that basis. Cognitive learning of the story of salvation, the meaning of liturgy, and the lifestyle of God's people is not intended to, nor must it by necessity be, restrictive. The intent of such knowledge is to form a foundation for free thinking. Perhaps those who wish to push beyond rote learning of foundational principles should realize that it is the knowledge of those principles that formed the basis of their freedom and ability to move on to higher knowledge.[8]

Suggestions for Catechesis in Churches of the Restoration Heritage

If catechesis is to be revived in restoration heritage churches, several decisions must be made with regard to form and content of the catechesis. The purpose of this brief article is not to present a fully developed catechism or even a complete outline for catechesis. However, if a church should decide to offer catechesis to its children, the following suggestions are offered for consideration. The assumed context of these suggestions is catechesis for children of the church who are approaching a decision on baptism.

A Three-fold Agenda for Instruction

Analysis of both biblical catechetical material (e.g., 1 Pet, 1 Thess 4:1–5:11; Col 3:1–4:5) and catechetical documents from the early centuries of Christianity (*The Didache*, Irenaeus' *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching,* Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*) reveals that the apostles and the church fathers held certain truths to be fundamental in accepting the life of discipleship. Though they displayed different emphases in the process of catechesis, they also demonstrated remarkable consistencies. Whether their concern was to bring catechumens into the full fellowship of the church or to call disciples back to the fundamentals of faith, the

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apostles and church fathers would summon the learners to encounter the story of salvation, the ethical demands of the story, and the liturgy of the church as it interacted with the story. The analyses also revealed that different teachers viewed different elements of these three categories to be more valuable. These emphases can be attributed in part to the varied situations they addressed as well as the teachers' own personal views as to what was most meaningful to themselves. However, if the church of today is to enter the task of catechesis seriously, it must make every effort to see that its catechesis adequately addresses these three areas.

A few observations concerning the nature of the presentation of these three fundamental elements would be in order before moving on to other concerns.

(1) Story. The story of salvation begins with the creation in all its goodness. Of particular interest is the fact that humanity was created in the image of God. The story includes the fall of humanity with all its consequences and the beginning of God's plan for redemption in the choosing of Abraham. The deliverance of the people of Israel reveals the merciful and saving nature of God and sets the stage for the crowning act in the story—the revelation of Jesus Christ. In relating the mission of Jesus, the story speaks of what was done in his life, his death, and his resurrection; but it also continues by telling what Jesus is doing today and what the end of the story will be. Throughout the process of

narrating the story, one concern is always evident: This is not a story about others; it is the story of the teacher and the listeners. The appropriation of this story in a very real and personal sense is the initial step of living within the kingdom of God.

(2) Ethics. Moral behavior and ethical principles grow out of the story. For those who identify with the story, questions of right and wrong do not find resolution in human logic or in societal trends. Ethics is not a study of rules or even the endeavor to be good. For Christians, ethics is the call to become a part of a story that grants them significance and calls them to specific behaviors. The standard of behavior for people of the story is the revelation of God's own nature and the working out of that nature in the lives of his chosen people. God's concerns are their concerns. His holiness is their goal. And this way of life is made possible through the redemptive act of God in his Son.

(3) Liturgy. People of the story view their liturgy sacramentally. The act of worship is the point at which the invisible realities of God become most visible. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper make visible the saving death and life of the Christ. It is worship that allows people of the story to maintain a grasp of reality so that they might continue to serve and love their God and their fellow humans. When Christians are struggling, they are called to reexamine their acts of worship, because in those acts of worship reality is enacted and appropriated.[9]

The church serves its catechumens well when it gives to them a rich heritage of the story, a firm commitment to living as people of the story, and the ability to see the acts of the invisible God in its acts of worship.

Involvement of Parents

Most Christian parents recognize their responsibility in passing their faith to their children, but many parents have grown to rely on the organized teaching program of the church to meet that need. We cannot assume that such an approach is effective. James Thompson, after examining the New Testament passages relevant to the nurture of children's faith, states:

Although children have a place in the community, the task of instruction rests with fathers. In the early church, there is no record of educational institutions established by the church for the sake of children. The church provided training programs for new converts, but not for children. The home

was apparently the place where the faith was communicated from one generation to the next.[10]

If the church chooses to participate in the education of children, and if the church chooses to be involved in assisting children in their preparation for Christian initiation, the church must also involve the parents in the process. In his survey of the history of catechism among the Reformation churches, Richard Osmer notes:

Typically, parents bore primary responsibility for teaching the catechism to their children. . . . During home visitation by church officers or the minister, the progress of children in learning the catechism regularly was checked, and parents were held accountable if their children seemed to be neglecting this duty. . . . In order to make sure that parents had sufficient understanding to carry out their teaching role, ministers were to preach and teach regularly on the material covered in the catechism.[11]

Any approach to catechesis should invite the parents to be involved and enable them to perform their task. Even as the families of the church are reflecting the varied structures of families in the surrounding society, parental involvement must be a goal.

Images of Baptism

Believer's baptism is the crucial step of initiation into the full fellowship of the church. Churches of Christ have held to this biblical and ancient practice. However, we have often limited ourselves to using only one of the biblical images of baptism: baptism as death, burial and resurrection. This image is very effective in cases of crisis conversion—where an adult is coming from a worldly existence into the church. However, it does not fully represent the situation of a child of the church. Dramatic conversion implies dramatic change, yet for a child nurtured in the faith, disciplined in behaviors and inculturated in the story, the change experienced following baptism falls short of the drama portrayed in our teaching. If this is the only picture of baptism we have to offer our children, then we are preparing them for a clash between expectation and experience, and, in effect, we are devaluing their baptism. We must ask the question, Are there biblical images of baptism other than death to sin and resurrection to a new life?

The answer is that there are indeed many images found in scripture that give meaning to the act of baptism. G. R. Beasley-Murray lists the following:[12]

- forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38)
- cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11)
- union with Christ (Gal 3:27)
- union with Christ in death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4)
- sharing of risen life (Rom 6:1–11)
- participation in Christ's sonship (Gal 3:26–27)
- consecration to God (1 Cor 6:11)
- membership in the church (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27–29)
- possession of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 6:11;12:13)
- new life in the Spirit/regeneration (Titus 3:5; John 3:5)
- grace to live according to the will of God (Rom 6:1–11 Col 3:1–4)
- deliverance from evil powers (Col 1:13)
- inheritance of Kingdom of God (John 3:5)
- pledge of the resurrection of the body (Eph 1:13–14; 4:30)

Another list of images is presented in the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—Commission on Faith and Order.*[13]

Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one who is baptized both with Christ and with his people. The New Testament scriptures and the liturgy of the Church unfold the meaning of baptism in various images that express the riches of Christ and the gifts of his salvation. These images are sometimes linked with the symbolic uses of water in the Old Testament. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–5; Col 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph 5:14); a reclothing in Christ (Gal 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the Flood (I Pet 3:20–21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor 10:1–2); and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division, whether of sex or race or social status, are transcended (Gal 3:27–28; 1 Cor 12:13). The images are many, but the reality is one.

Another significant list is given by Susanne Johnson.[14] She states that through baptism we are:
- united with Christ and his work and given a share in the ministry of reconciliation and redemption (2 Cor 5:18)
- incorporated into Christ's body on earth, the church (1 Cor 12:13)
- given the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13–14)
- forgiven of sins, cleansed, with the image of God restored (Acts 22:16)
- reborn from the womb of God (2 Cor 5:17)

To the question, What does baptism mean? William Willimon offers the answer: "Everything that water means!"[15]

The truth of the images of baptism rests not in any one image nor in the total of all of them. In our attempts to explain baptism totally, we sometimes give the impression to our children that the effect of baptism is dependent on the correct understanding and actions of the one being baptized. We forget that baptism, like salvation in general, is essentially something that God does. The image that we choose to understand the effect of baptism can be one or several among the many. The truth is that, as we grow into our baptism, we will find new meaning in each of the images. The act of baptism is unifying. The variety of images of baptism speaks to the individual. We owe it to our children to allow them to hear all the images and to appropriate those images most meaningful to their lives.

Conclusion

The process of catechizing the children of the church deserves a congregation's best efforts and most fervent prayers. A church cannot choose to be unintentional in this endeavor, nor can it assume that its own children will benefit from the same teachings and methods as the unbelievers outside the community. Evangelism of our children begins the day they are born, and their full initiation into the community's fellowship must reflect that lifelong process.

TOMMY KING preaches for the Glenwood Church of Christ in Tyler, Texas and. is guest editor of this issue.