

## EARLY CHURCH CATECHESIS AND NEW CHRISTIANS' CLASSES IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM

CLINTON E. ARNOLD\*

### I. INTRODUCTION

For twelve years my wife and I were deeply involved in a ministry to new believers at our local church.<sup>1</sup> When we began developing this “assimilation” ministry, we started with an eight-week course that covered many of the basics of the Christian life. We offered the hour-and-fifteen-minute course during the Sunday morning Sunday School time for mixed ages, marrieds, and singles.

The initial idea was for new believers to take the eight-week course as a primer in some of the basics of Christian doctrine and practice and then help them blend into the regular age-graded Sunday School program of the church. A number of constraints prevented this from working well. There was the practical social difficulty of being a newcomer in a Sunday School group that has been together for years, but there was also the fact that these new believers strongly felt the need for more of the same kind of teaching and discussions centered on the basics that they had just experienced.

I had also been doing some reading in the Church fathers about how new Christians' classes were conducted in the early church and came away deeply convicted about the superficiality of what we were doing. There was such a rigorous plan and commitment by church leaders in the first four centuries to ground new believers in their Christian lives. The impact of this reading on my thinking led to some significant changes in our new Christians' ministry, especially the development of a ministry plan and curriculum that would keep them for two to three years.

I have now been away from this ministry for a couple of years, but have continued to reflect critically on what we did in light of Scripture and early church practice. It has become increasingly clear to me that the evangelical church as a whole could benefit from re-examining the testimony of the Church fathers and gleaning insights from how they ministered to new believers.

It may challenge many churches to consider implementing some modifications in philosophy and structure of ministry as they entertain questions such as:

\* Clinton E. Arnold is professor of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised form of my presidential address given at the annual meeting of the Far West region of the Evangelical Theological Society on Friday, May 2, 2003.

- Is a four-week (six-week, or eight-week) new Christians' class really enough?
- Are we getting new believers adequately immersed into the Scripture?
- Have we downplayed the importance of creed?
- Are we helping new believers repent completely of sinful life-styles and practices?
- Are we taking the spiritual warfare dynamic seriously enough in helping new believers grow?

The time is fortuitous for a re-exploration of the early church practice of training new believers—a practice they called the *catechumenate*, derived from the Greek word *katēchein*, meaning “to teach” or “instruct.”<sup>2</sup> Fortress Press has just published a new critical edition of the *Apostolic Tradition*,<sup>3</sup> the earliest source providing us with detailed information about the catechumenate.<sup>4</sup> The majority of scholars have associated the *Apostolic Tradition* with a lost work of Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170–235)<sup>5</sup> especially because a statue in Rome included a reference to a work called the *Apostolic Tradition* in a list of Hippolytus's writings inscribed on the base. The discovery of this document in the last century, first in a Coptic (Bohairic) manuscript and subsequently in a fifth-century Latin manuscript, led scholars to believe that this lost work had now been recovered.<sup>6</sup> The Greek original has never been discovered, but many Greek terms from the original can be inferred on the basis of Greek loanwords in the Coptic.

Paul F. Bradshaw and his fellow editors of the Fortress edition, however, question the association with Hippolytus and regard the *Apostolic Tradition* as an aggregation of material from different sources spanning a variety of

<sup>2</sup> See BDAG, s.v. The verb occurs eight times in the NT (Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25; 21:21, 24; Rom 2:18; 1 Cor 14:19; Gal 6:6), but never with the technical sense of a formal period of instruction that we find in the post-apostolic period. The noun form (κατήχησις) never appears in the NT. Clement of Alexandria appears to have been the earliest father to use the word “catechumen” (κατηχούμενος) in its technical sense of a person receiving formal instruction in the Christian faith; see Michel Dujarer, *A History of the Catechumenate. The First Six Centuries* (New York: Sadlier, 1979) 41. On the usage of the term, see PGL s.v. “κατήχέω.” Other terms used to describe the same phenomenon include “auditor” (*audiens, auditor*), “novice” (*novicio*), and “recruit” (*tiro*).

<sup>3</sup> Although commonly known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, it is also referred to in a variety of other ways in the literature, including the *Traditio Apostolorum* (or, *Traditio*), the *Church Order of Hippolytus* (or, *Hipp. Church Order*), and the *Egyptian Church Order*.

<sup>4</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002). Prior to this, the most popular English translation was by Gregory Dix, ed., *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (reissued with corrections, preface, and bibliography by H. Chadwick; London: Alban; Ridgefield, CT: Morehouse, 1991 [1937]). In recent years, the standard edition has been Bernard Botte, *Hippolyte de Rome. La Tradition Apostolique d'après les Anciennes Versions* (Sources Chrétiennes 11; 2d ed.; Paris: Cerf, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 2.758–59, has described Hippolytus as “one of the most learned and eminent scholars and theologians of his time.” Hippolytus is well known as a bishop of the church in Rome and as the author of *Refutation of All Heresies*.

<sup>6</sup> This is “an attribution very generally accepted” according to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 774. The *Apostolic Tradition* is now also extant in Arabic, Ethiopic, and Coptic (Sahidic) manuscripts.

geographical regions and dating as early as the mid-second century (with some layers dating as late as the fourth).<sup>7</sup> Others, who see Hippolytus as primarily responsible for the document, would also recognize that it does reflect a compilation of early church traditions. In other words, Hippolytus did not invent the material; he simply wrote down the practices and advocated them in his church setting.<sup>8</sup>

The value of this document, then, is that it preserves many of the traditional ministry practices of churches in the second and third centuries. Although it was known and used in Rome, it may have originated in the East and was certainly widely used there as attested by the fact that it has been preserved in Egyptian (Sahidic and Bohairic), Arabic, and Ethiopic manuscripts. Portions of the *Apostolic Tradition* were used in the composition of several other church orders, including the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the *Canons of Hippolytus*, and the *Testamentum Domini*.<sup>9</sup>

For our purposes, we can safely say that it is the most important bearer of traditions and information on how the churches of the Mediterranean world of the second and third centuries organized and conducted training for new believers.

In this paper, I want to glean several insights from the *Apostolic Tradition* about the ancient church catechumenate that may prove to be instructional for us today. I make no pretension to provide a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the catechumenate. I simply want to make selective observations about the nature and structure of the catechumenate from the *Apostolic Tradition* in conversation with some other ancient sources giving testimony to this practice (such as the *Didache*,<sup>10</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*,<sup>11</sup> the *Apostolic Constitutions*,<sup>12</sup> the *Testamentum Domini*,<sup>13</sup> and from some of the Church fathers). On this basis, I will offer some thoughts on what the contemporary evangelical church can learn from their forbears on this.

1. *Was the catechumenate a “new Christians’” class?* Perhaps the first question that needs to be discussed is on the propriety of speaking of the

<sup>7</sup> Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 14. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001) 11, 31–32, similarly contends that the work contains numerous earlier traditions, but suggests that Hippolytus is the final hand in its composition.

<sup>8</sup> See Dix, *Apostolic Tradition* xxxvii–xliv.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 9–11.

<sup>10</sup> The *Didache* probably dates to the end of the first century AD and was compiled in Syria or Palestine. See Huub van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache. Its Jewish Sources and its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (CRINT 3/5; Assen: Royal van Gorcum and Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 52.

<sup>11</sup> This church order was probably composed in Syria during the first half of the third century. See van de Sandt and Flusser, *Didache* 2.

<sup>12</sup> The consensus view is that the final form of the document was put together c. AD 375 in Syria (probably Antioch). Books 1–6 had an earlier independent existence (3d century) as a church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Book 7 incorporates portions of the *Didache*, and Book 8 utilizes the *Apostolic Tradition*. See Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 9.

<sup>13</sup> This is a church order that incorporated portions of the *Apostolic Tradition*. It probably originates in fifth-century Syria. See Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 11.

ancient church catechumenate as a “new Christians’” class. The section of the *Apostolic Tradition* treating the catechumenate begins with the following statement: “concerning newcomers, those who will give their assent to the faith” (15.1). The church leader who interviews them is guided as follows: “let them be asked the reason why they have given their assent to the faith” (15.2). Similarly, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* says, “When the heathen desire and promise to repent, saying ‘We believe,’ we receive them into the congregation so that they may hear the word, but do not receive them into communion until they receive the seal and are fully initiated” (2.39).<sup>14</sup>

These new people clearly have some rudimentary level of faith. They appear to be aware of enough of the gospel message that they have exercised faith in it and are now taking the step to commit themselves to a rigorous course of study, prepare for baptism, and join the community of believers.<sup>15</sup> In the language of contemporary conversionist evangelicalism, one might say that they have heard an evangelistic message, prayed the sinner’s prayer, and are ready to get plugged into a church.<sup>16</sup>

The difficulty, however, is that the catechumenate was also a formal preparation for baptism. Perhaps the most significant motive for the shift away from the apostolic practice of baptizing immediately after profession of faith<sup>17</sup> to a time after substantive training, mentoring, and preparation had to do with “the concern the ministers of baptism had from the very beginning for the sincerity of the conversion of the candidates.”<sup>18</sup>

The question of whether the catechumenate was a new Christians’ class also hinges on the assumption of a number of early Church fathers that baptism was the occasion for the divine bestowal of salvation and the divine

<sup>14</sup> As cited by Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Gospel and the Catechumenate in the Third Century,” *JTS* 50 (1999) 143.

<sup>15</sup> Even the Roman Catholic historian of the catechumenate Michel Dujarier, *Catechumenate* 64 could affirm, “Admission to the catechumenate supposes an authentic conversion.” He cites *Didascalia* 2.39.4–6, which states, “We do not refuse salvation even to the heathen if they repent and renounce and remove themselves from error . . . when they wish and promise to repent and say, ‘We believe,’ we receive them into the congregation that they may hear the Word.”

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence D. Folkemer, “A Study of the Catechumenate,” in *Studies in Early Christianity. A Collection of Scholarly Essays*, vol. 11: *Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church* (ed. E. F. Ferguson; New York: Garland, 1993) 245, notes, “Though they [catechumens] were not strictly members, they were in some measure considered within the pale of the Church and reckoned as one of the orders. They were part of the Christian community and were regarded as Christians.”

<sup>17</sup> G. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *NIDNTT* 1.158, correctly observes, “In the New Testament, baptism and faith do normally come very close together: the Acts of the Apostles shows adults being baptized as soon as they profess conversion, with no catechumenate in between.”

<sup>18</sup> Dujarier, *Catechumenate* 31. Alan Kreider, “Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus’ Teaching in Early Christianity,” *TB* 47 (1996) 316–18, suggests four reasons why by the second century the church developed a lengthy catechumenate that it required candidates to complete prior to baptism: (1) most first-century converts were Jews or god-fearers; second-century converts were pagans who needed extensive instruction and resocialization; (2) the longer catechetical process was as a result of the theological disputes present in the second century; (3) in an age of persecution, there was a need to screen out possible spies and informers; and (4) the teachings of Jesus required significant time to incarnate and practice as part of the process.

work of regeneration.<sup>19</sup> Some Church fathers, however, could argue that regeneration takes place prior to baptism. In his discourse on repentance, Tertullian says:

Is there one Christ for the baptized, another for the learners? Have they some different hope or reward? some different dread of judgment? some different necessity for repentance? That *baptismal* washing is a sealing of faith, which faith is begun and is commended by the faith of repentance. We are not washed *in order that we may* cease sinning, but *because we have* ceased, since *in heart* we have *been* bathed already (Tertullian, *On Repentance* 6.15–17).<sup>20</sup>

It is not my purpose here to solve the question of the occasion of regeneration in relationship to baptism. The answer to the question of whether or not the catechumenate was a new Christians' class hinges on our perspective on the moment of saving faith. If we believe that it occurs at the time that we put our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ—as I believe—then we can refer to the catechumenate as a new Christians' class.

What matters most for our purposes, however, is learning from the early church how it helped assimilate these pagan seekers into the life of the church.

## II. TIME AND IMPORTANCE

1. *Four weeks was not enough.* Although the NT itself never specifies a particular time frame or a set procedure for training new believers, there are numerous exhortations and narrative examples of the establishment of new believers in Christ. The development of an organized catechumenate may have derived much of its impetus from the second part of Jesus' so-called Great Commission where he enjoins his disciples not only to proclaim the gospel and baptize the new believers, but also "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20). Certainly the entire course of the apostle Paul's ministry could be described as a zealous combination of proclaiming the gospel along with an equally zealous commitment to forming communities of believers and teaching them. He tells the Galatians that "I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19).

As we move into the post-apostolic period, there is widespread testimony of a focused and coherent plan<sup>21</sup> to instruct new believers. There may have been some precedent for the structure and content of the catechumenate in

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Clement, *Pedagogue* 1.30.1–2. Clement appears to envision a process, but states that at baptism, "all our sins are washed away, and immediately afterwards we are no longer evil." He then says that "catechetical instruction leads to faith, and at the moment of baptism faith is instructed by the Holy Spirit." See also, Justin, *First Apology* 66, who speaks of the baptized person "who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration." See the discussion in Annewies van den Hoek, "The 'Catechetical' School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage," *HTR* 90 (1997) 67–71.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in Georg Kretschmar, "Katechumenat/Katechumenen I," *TRE* 18.2.

<sup>21</sup> Dujarier, *Catechumenate* 35, rightly comments, "it was less an institution than a way of doing things."

the Jewish procedure for training proselytes. The ethical teaching of the “two ways” tradition that appears in early Christian catechetical documents (*Barn.* 18–20; *Did.* 1–6) appears to be rooted in Jewish tradition. This is seen most notably now in the comparison of these documents with the “two ways” teaching found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 3:13–4:26).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, we need to recognize that “in regard to the instruction of [Jewish] proselytes before their reception, nothing is known.”<sup>23</sup> We really know nothing of the length of the period of instruction for proselytes, how the time was structured, and very little of the content of what was taught. If it did serve as the model for the early Christians, we actually may learn more about the Jewish pattern from Christian catechetical sources than *vice versa*.

When we begin to examine the sources of the early Christian catechumenate, we discover that it often took place over a three-year span.<sup>24</sup> The *Apostolic Tradition* reflects the practice of instructing them for a span of three years: “let the catechumens hear the Word for three years” (17.1). A three-year period is also attested in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (8.32.16) and the *Testamentum Domini* (3.3).<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria also alludes to a three-year catechumenate (*Stromata* 2.18).<sup>26</sup>

Part of the motivation and concern for a lengthy process was rooted in a desire to foster solid spiritual formation and to protect these new believers against sin, heresy, and apostasy. Thomas Finn summarizes the process well in affirming that, “The key was conversion, itself a journey, or as the ancients put it, a change (‘turning,’ *epistrephein/conversio*) from one ‘way of walking’ to another.”<sup>27</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem reflects on the vital importance of this process of growth for the health and stability of these new believers: “Let me compare the catechizing to a building. Unless we methodically bind and joint the whole structure together, we shall have leaks and dry rot, and all our previous exertions will be wasted” (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Prochatechesis* 11).<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, many evangelical churches today place a minimal emphasis on the training of new believers, especially when compared to the prominence and importance of the catechumenate in the ancient church. Some

<sup>22</sup> It is doubtful that the one-year probation and two-year novitiate for people entering the Qumran community was the source of inspiration for a three-year catechumenate in early Christianity as suggested, for instance, by Dujarer, *Catechumenate* 22–24. It appears that the notion of a lengthy catechumenate did not begin in Jerusalem but rather in Syria at the end of the first century. There were also some significant qualitative differences in the structure and content of the two approaches (e.g. the relinquishing of all property to the leader of the Qumran community).

<sup>23</sup> Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (rev. ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 3.1.172.

<sup>24</sup> See Dujarer, *Catechumenate* 48, who notes, “it usually lasted three years.”

<sup>25</sup> Some of the earliest Fathers speak of the catechumenate without mentioning the amount of time involved. Such is the case with Justin Martyr and Tertullian. With regard to Tertullian, Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate* (Message of the Fathers of the Church 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) 116, notes, “That prebaptismal instruction was required is clear; the extent of it is not, though several years is a reasonable supposition.”

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion in Dujarer, *Catechumenate* 42–43.

<sup>27</sup> Finn, *Early Christian Baptism* 2.

<sup>28</sup> As cited in William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995) 66.

churches find it adequate to have a four-week members' class prior to baptism and the acquisition of church membership. Others may have a six or eight-week new Christians' class. How many contemporary evangelical churches, however, have a plan for training new believers over a two or three-year span?

2. *A top priority for the Christian scholars of the day.* As we consider the lives and writings of the most well-known church leaders in the first four centuries, it is amazing how many of them devoted themselves to the task of teaching new believers. I have gained an extraordinary respect and admiration for Origen (185–254), a Church father often remembered primarily for his tendency to allegorize certain narrative texts. In spite of his erudition and scholarly bent, he had a passionate concern for training new believers in the Scriptures and elementary instruction in the faith.<sup>29</sup> According to Eusebius, there were great numbers who came to him for instruction in the rudiments of the faith (Eusebius, *Hist.* 6.3). Origen was preceded in this ministry in Alexandria by Clement (150–215) and Pantaenus.

Tertullian displayed a similar “abiding and passionate concern for the formation of catechumens,”<sup>30</sup> but so did Hippolytus (Rome; 170–236), Ambrose (Italy; 339–97), Cyprian (North Africa; d. 258), Gregory of Nyssa (Asia Minor; 330–395), John Chrysostom (Byzantium; 347–407), Theodore of Mop-suestia (Asia Minor; 350–428), Cyril of Jerusalem (Palestine; b. 349), and many others. In fact, some of the most important works extant from the hand of Cyril are a set of catechetical instructions and messages.<sup>31</sup>

One other important figure in this regard is Augustine. Among his various responsibilities in his work in Hippo, North Africa, was his directorship of a catechumenate. There is so much in Augustine's writings about the catechumenate that William Harmless wrote a 400-page monograph on this topic a few years ago.<sup>32</sup> One of Augustine's most important works providing insight into the fourth-century catechumenate is a document called *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, “On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed.” This is essentially a letter Augustine writes to a teacher in Carthage who has “a rich gift in catechizing” but is struggling and discouraged with his ministry. Augustine here functions as a mentor to Deogratias to encourage him and give him advice in carrying out this important ministry in the church.

If the training of new believers was such an important ministry in the estimation of the well-known leaders and teachers of the ancient church, it is natural to ask whether it is equally a priority among the scholars and Bible teachers of our time. How many seminary professors are teaching in the functional equivalent of a catechumenate? How many evangelical pastors

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Dujarer, *Catechumenate* 55 notes, “This astonishingly dynamic man never ceased to concern himself with the seriousness of baptismal formation. In the expanding Church of his time, it hurt him to see numbers threatening to submerge quality, and he struggled for the purity of the Christian life as it was during the second century.”

<sup>30</sup> Harmless, *Catechumenate* 45.

<sup>31</sup> See his *Procatechesis; Catecheses ad illuminandos; Mystagogiae; and Tituli Catechesium.*

<sup>32</sup> William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Pueblo Book; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995).

value the importance of this ministry so highly that they relinquish other commitments to free up adequate time to teach new believers? Time and busyness are certainly the key issues. But should the teaching of new believers be placed at a higher level of priority necessitating a few other things to be cut from our schedules? For seminary professors, perhaps writing one less article each year and investing more time in teaching new believers might be worth considering. For pastors, perhaps giving an associate the opportunity to do a four-week preaching series could free up a chunk of time to spend with a group of new Christians on Sunday mornings.

### III. LEARNING FROM HOW THEY DID IT

There are four key features from the catechumenate of the early church that I would like to discuss. Although the precise structure and format of the catechumenate may vary from place to place over time, there are four common features that were central to how the catechesis was carried out.

1. *Immersion in the Word of God.* At the heart of the early church catechumenate was reading and instructing these newcomers in the Scripture. Throughout this focused period of time, the emphasis is on exposing them to and immersing them in the Word of God. It is precisely in this ministry that the “teachers” (*didaskaloi*) of the church had an important ministry.

The first line of the *Apostolic Tradition* that describes the catechumenate characterizes the catechumens as those who are brought “to hear the Word” (15.1; so also the *Testamentum Domini* 2; *Didascalia* 2.39). The *Canons of Hippolytus* (10.1) similarly describe this as a time that the newcomer “is to be instructed in the Scriptures.” These early documents give little indication of how this instruction was carried out. Given the orality of the culture of that time, we could assume that vast portions of Scripture were read to the new believers. But it was also a time where teachers would provide explanations of what the catechumens were hearing.

This procedure is certainly modeled by Origen in his ministry at Caesarea. The church there held a daily service of the Word<sup>33</sup> in which a large passage of Scripture would be read aloud followed by a sermon delivered by Origen. Pierre Nautin believes that given the length of the readings and sermons, it would have been possible to work through the entire Bible in the span of three years. This would have given catechumens the opportunity to hear the entire Bible read and commented upon during the duration of their catechumenate. Nautin believes that this may explain why the *Apostolic Tradition* describes a three-year catechumenate.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> In some places, the catechumens gathered together early in the morning before going to work for Scripture reading, teaching, and prayer. This practice is attested in the *Apostolic Tradition* (39:1–2; see also 18:1–5; 19:1–2). See the discussion in Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 188–90, and Dujarer, *Catechumenate* 51–52.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Nautin, “Introduction,” in Origen, *Homélie sur Jérémie* (Sources Chrétiennes 232; Paris: Cerf, 1976) 102–5, as cited in Harmless, *Catechumenate* 42.

The pilgrim Egeria observed that in Jerusalem, the bishop spent the first five weeks surveying the whole of the Scripture “expounding first its literal meaning and then explaining the spiritual meaning” (Egeria, *Peregrinato* 46).<sup>35</sup>

In his work on the catechizing of the uninstructed, Augustine strongly emphasizes how important it is for the teacher to lay out the sweep of “salvation history.” He notes:

The narration is full when each person is catechised in the first instance from what is written in the text, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” on to the present times of the Church. This does not imply, however, either that we ought to repeat by memory the entire Pentateuch, and the entire Books of Judges, and Kings, and Esdras, and the entire Gospel and Acts of the Apostles, if we have learned all these word for word; or that we should put all the matters which are contained in these volumes into our own words, and in that manner unfold and expound them as a whole. For neither does the time admit of that, nor does any necessity demand it. But what we ought to do is, to give a comprehensive statement of all things, summarily and generally, so that certain of the more wonderful facts may be selected which are listened to with superior gratification, and which have been ranked so remarkably among the exact turning-points (of the history) . . . We ought to dwell on them for a certain space, and thus, as it were, unfold them and open them out to vision, and present them to the minds of the hearers as things to be examined and admired. But as for all other details, these should be passed over rapidly, and thus far introduced and woven into the narrative (*De Catechizandis Rudibus* 3.6).

Augustine here advocates something similar to what we might call a Bible survey class in a modern curriculum. We need to keep in mind, however, that he is advocating this instruction for every new Christian.

As we consider our contemporary evangelical churches, we need to ask ourselves how well we are doing in immersing new converts in the Word of God. Are they “hearing” or reading through the bulk of the Scripture within the first three years of their walk with the Lord? Are they acquiring a grasp of the overall sweep of salvation history?

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers we face is the assumption that this will somehow automatically happen once they are saved and part of the church. The lesson from the ancient church is that there was an intentional plan to facilitate this.

2. *Teach them the central doctrines of the faith.* In addition to teaching the Scripture, the teachers of the catechumenate bore the responsibility of passing on and explaining the central doctrines of the faith. This is assumed in the *Apostolic Tradition*, but it is made more explicit in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and by a variety of other writers describing the catechumenate.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* calls for the catechumens “to be instructed . . . in the knowledge of the unbegotten God, in the understanding of His only begotten Son, [and] in the assured acknowledgment of the Holy Ghost

<sup>35</sup> As cited in Harmless, *Catechumenate* 65.

... in the doctrines concerning our Lord's incarnation, and in those concerning his passion, and resurrection from the dead, and assumption" (7.3.39). This is merely a representative set of categories of doctrine that the document guides the instructors to teach.

Egeria noted that in Jerusalem catechumens formally received the creed after weeks of hearing the Scriptures (Egeria, *Peregrinato* 46). Cyril apparently used the creed in structuring the curricula for the catechumenate, but incorporated the relevant scriptural passages into his discussion. Cyril explains:

For the present, just listen and memorize the creed as I recite it, and you will receive in due course the proof from Scripture of each of its propositions. . . . And just as the mustard seed in a small grain contains in embryo many future branches, so also the creed embraces in a few words all the religious knowledge in both the Old and the New Testament (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 5.12).<sup>36</sup>

Harmless observes that, "While creedal phrases charted the main lines of this catechetical edifice, biblical stories shaped its interior. . . . Cyril linked Creed and Scriptures in a complex fashion."<sup>37</sup> In her study of Cyril's use of Scripture, Pamela Jackson notes how Cyril expected God to impart grace for growth through his catechetical preaching: "he is proclaiming carefully organized testimonies from Scripture to the truth of God's saving plan, with the hope that through this proclamation God will draw his listeners into an experiential faith response of deeper assent, knowledge, and conversion of life."<sup>38</sup>

In reflecting on the catechetical instruction that he received at the outset of his Christian life, Theodoret (393–460) describes how he learned the Holy Scriptures and received what he now believes, declares, and teaches. He then recites the Nicene Creed and other creedal statements.

Much more illustrative material from the various Fathers could be recounted here. What interests us most here is the fact that catechetical instruction not only involved hearing Scripture, but also learning the common confession of the church as summarized in creed. The tendency for the church to begin summarizing the heart of the faith in propositional statements began at the earliest stages as seen, for instance, in Paul's appeal to common creedal confession in 1 Cor 15:3–4.

The focus on learning doctrine has long been a part of a common understanding of "catechism" in Catholic and Protestant circles. Memorization of the creed was probably the main form of catechesis in the middle ages.<sup>39</sup> The Reformers created doctrinal summaries in a question and answer format to

<sup>36</sup> As cited in *ibid.* 66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* See Pamela Jackson, "Cyril of Jerusalem's Use of Scripture in Catechesis," *TS* 52 (1991) 431–50.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson, "Use of Scripture" 436. In the structure of the *Catechetical Homilies*, the Creed is expressed at the end of the fifth homily and expounded in homilies 6–18.

<sup>39</sup> Klaus Wegenast, "Catechesis," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 1.360.

facilitate the understanding and memorization of the doctrine. Learning these written “catechisms” became the focal point in the training of young people and converts to the faith. Other features of the early church catechumenate became less important.

Most evangelical churches today put little emphasis on providing training for new believers in the central doctrines. Some new believers’ classes cover a few of the cardinal doctrines, but a systematic training in the principal doctrines of historic orthodoxy are missing in the curricula for new believers.

In his article on “Catechesis,” Klaus Wegenast bemoans the post-Reformation period for putting people in a “prison of sterile memorization.”<sup>40</sup> But in the process of rejecting the dangers of boring people with doctrine the evangelical church has lost something very important. Rather than rejecting the importance of passing on the creed in new Christians’ classes, perhaps the emphasis should be placed on developing teachers who can show the importance of sound doctrine, illustrate it with Scripture, and highlight its importance in relevant and interesting ways. Once again, perhaps some of this could begin with seminary teachers by developing a renewed vision for a twenty-first-century evangelical catechumenate.

3. *Spiritual and moral formation.* Another common theme that emerges in descriptions of the ancient church catechumenate is the renunciation of sinful life-styles and the cultivation of Christian virtue. The early church leaders were quite admonitory, direct, and uncompromising with the catechumens with regard to their life-styles.

Part of the responsibility of the church leaders was to carefully examine the occupations and practices of the new believers. Certain kinds of behaviors, lifestyles, and professions were deemed inconsistent with the faith. New believers were told in no uncertain terms that they needed to renounce these practices and quit them or they would not be able to join the Christian community. For instance, the *Apostolic Tradition* advises a stern admonishment to pimps and idol makers: “If one is a brothel keeper who is a caretaker of prostitutes, either let him cease or be cast out. If he is a maker of idols or painter, let them be taught not to make idols; either let them cease or be cast out” (*Apostolic Tradition* 16.2–3). Other crafts and professions deemed unacceptable within the life of the Christian community included charioteers, gladiators, prostitutes, magicians, enchanters, astrologers, dream interpreters, and amulet makers. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, *Canons of Hippolytus*, *Testamentum Domini*, and other documents reflecting on the catechumenate reiterate these and add to them.

Sexual issues receive ample attention in the *Apostolic Tradition*. The document advises, “If there is one who did not dwell with a wife, let him be taught not to fornicate (*porneuein*), but either let him take a wife according to the law or remain as he is according to the law” (*Apostolic Tradition* 15.7). Further to this issue, the document states, “If there is one who has a

<sup>40</sup> Wegenast, “Catechesis” 1.361.

wife or a woman who has a husband, let them be taught to be content with his wife, and the woman with her husband" (*Apostolic Tradition* 15.6).

Perhaps the earliest catechetical document extant is the *Didache*, dated by Kurt Niederwimmer to AD 110–120.<sup>41</sup> The document was termed by Didymus a "book of catechesis" (*biblos tes katachēseōs*). The first six chapters of this work present a set of ethical admonitions structured around the so-called doctrine of the "Two Ways." The two ways tradition had its roots in the OT and Judaism (see Ps 1:1–6; 1QS 3:18–4:26; *T. Asher* 1:3–5; 6:4–6; *et pl.*). In its context here, the catechist presents the catechumens with two options: the way of life or the way of death. He commends to them the way of life, which involves the cultivation of virtue, especially the ethics taught by Jesus who preached love as the greatest commandment. He warns them against the way of death and admonishes these new believers to rid themselves of various kinds of vices and ungodly practices. Among the many vices he denounces are "adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, magic arts, sorceries, robberies, false testimonies, hypocrisy, duplicity, deceit, arrogance, malice, stubbornness, greed, foul speech, jealousy, audacity, pride, and boastfulness" (5:1).

As we come to the church of the fourth century, a time when more are joining the church and there is less cost of being a Christian, Augustine calls his catechumens to a moral transformation. He expects Christians to give up drunkenness, covetousness, fraud, adultery, fornication, public spectacles, sorcery, astrology, and divination (*De Catechizandis Rudibus* 7.11). He now struggles in a context, however, where Christians have compromised significantly with the world and do not display the kind of moral integrity that should characterize Christians. He reflects the difficulty of training new believers in a setting where they see hypocrisy. Augustine warns that a new believer should not "let himself fancy that any such [immoral] course may be followed with impunity on his part, simply because he sees many who are called Christians loving these things, and engaging themselves with them, and defending them, and recommending them, and actually persuading others to their use . . . [A new believer] must be sedulously warned against letting his hope rest on man" (*De Catechizandis Rudibus* 7.11).

I could easily multiply the testimony of various early Christian leaders such as Tertullian, Hippolytus, Chrysostom, and others on the importance of inculcating virtue and getting rid of sinful practices for participants in the catechumenate. Suffice it to say that strong teaching and direct admonitions on moral transformation were a very important part of the ancient church catechumenate.

As we once again think of the contemporary evangelical church context, one wonders if this is still a priority and in what contexts this kind of inquiry and admonition take place. We clearly struggle against a powerful cultural pressure not to intrude into someone else's private affairs and especially not to make any kinds of judgments about their moral behavior and life-style.

<sup>41</sup> Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 53.

The most natural place for this to occur is in the context of relationships built either in a small group setting or in a mentoring relationship. Earning respect and the right to be heard is crucial for effectiveness in gently but firmly speaking into the life of a new believer.

A hard question that we need to ask of ourselves is whether there is an intentional and structured part of the curriculum for ministering to new believers in our churches that addresses issues of life-style and Christian behavior in a direct way. Is there a process that helps new believers confront and deal with such sin issues as sexual impurity, bitterness, rebellion, greed, and unforgiveness as well as cultic involvements and adherence to false religious beliefs?

4. *Deliverance ministry.* One of the common and widespread characteristics of the ancient church catechumenate was what evangelicals today might call “deliverance ministry.”<sup>42</sup> This is well illustrated by a passage from the *Apostolic Tradition*:

Moreover, from the day they are chosen, let a hand be laid on them and let them be exorcised (*exorkizein*) daily. And when the day draws near on which they are to be baptized, let the bishop himself exorcise (*exorkizein*) each one of them, that he may be certain that he is purified. But if there is one who is not purified let him be put on one side because he did not hear the word of instruction with faith. For the evil and strange spirit remained with him (20.3–4, 8).

The passage probably does not imply that this happened daily for three years, but speaks of a second stage of the catechumenate immediately preceding their baptism.<sup>43</sup> This instruction appears in every versional form of the *Apostolic Tradition*, including the Sahidic, Arabic, and Ethiopic, implying that this was the practice in these areas of the church as well.

A similar instruction is contained in the *Testamentum Domini*:

And when the days approach [for the occasion of baptism], let the bishop exorcise each one of them separately by himself, so that he may be persuaded that he is pure. For if there be one that is not pure, or in whom is an unclean spirit, let him be reprov'd by that unclean spirit. If then anyone is found under any such suspicion, let him be removed from the midst [of them], and let him be reprov'd and reproach'd because he has not heard the word of the commandments and of instruction faithfully, because the evil and strange spirit remained in him (2.6).

Egeria attests to this practice in the Jerusalem catechumenate (*Peregrinatio* 46). Similarly, Cyril of Jerusalem urges the catechumens to receive

<sup>42</sup> Finn, *Early Christian Baptism* 6, notes that “although the rites differed, the dynamics of exorcism remained fairly constant” in the various catechetical traditions.

<sup>43</sup> Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition* 109, views it as a period of time following the election to baptism. See also the *Canons of Hippolytus* 19, which speaks of an exorcism taking place on the Saturday before baptism: “On Saturday, the bishop assembles those to be baptized; . . . [he] extends his hand over them; he prays and drives from them every malignant spirit by his exorcism, and these spirits will not return to them henceforth through their actions” (as cited in Finn, *Early Christian Baptism* 221).

the exorcisms with earnestness and goes so far as to say that “without exorcisms the soul cannot be purified” (*Prochatechesis* 9). In one of his writings on catechesis, speaking about an exorcism prior to baptism, he told a catechumen, “on the command to stretch out your hand, you renounced Satan as though he were there in person” (*Mystagogical Catechesis* 1.2).

Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrose, Cyprian, Augustine, and other early Church fathers all attest to this practice. It certainly cannot be described as a practice isolated to the Roman church; it was practiced in the catechumenate in Syria, Jerusalem, Egypt, North Africa, Asia Minor, Italy, and elsewhere.

A corollary to this practice was a time of renunciation of Satan and deliverance during the actual baptismal ceremony. As the new Christians were baptized, they were also instructed to make a verbal renunciation of Satan:

And a deacon shall take the oil of exorcism and stand at the left hand of the presbyter . . . And when the presbyter grasps each one of those who will receive baptism, let him command him to renounce, saying, “I renounce you, Satan, with all your service and all your works.” And when he has renounced all these, let him anoint him with the oil of exorcism, saying, “Let every spirit be cast far from you” (*Apostolic Tradition* 21.8–10).<sup>44</sup>

Immediately following this exorcism and renunciation of Satan, the person being baptized would confess their allegiance to Christ in a creedal form:

I believe in the only true God, the Father, the Almighty, and his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior with his Holy Spirit, the giver of life to everything, three in one substance (*homoousios*), one divinity, one Lordship, one kingdom, one faith, one baptism, in the holy catholic apostolic church, which lives forever. Amen (*Apostolic Tradition* 21.12).

Similar to the pre-baptismal time of deliverance ministry, the practice of exorcism is also widely attested over a broad span of time.

This was a logical time for the early church to deal with the evil spiritual influences on these people as they forsook their pagan religions and magical practices to embrace the living and true God. It had long been a conviction of the OT and Judaism that involvement in idolatry was tantamount to communing with unclean spirits (see Deut 32:16–17; Pss 96:5; 106:36–38; *Jub.* 11:4–5; *1 Enoch* 19:1). This was also the conviction of the apostle Paul that he expressed to the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 10:19–21). Thus, converts from the worship of the Mother Goddess, Dionysus, Mithras, Sarapis, Isis, and all the other deities as well as new believers who had a background in magical practices, astrology, and divination were taught to renounce their

<sup>44</sup> See also Tertullian, *The Chaplet* 3.2–3: “When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels.” See also the *Canons of Hippolytus* 19. The term translated “service” in *Apostolic Tradition* 21.9, probably πομπή in Greek, is expanded by the *Testamentum Domini* to read, “your worship your displays and your pleasures.” Stewart-Sykes, *Apostolic Tradition* 121, regards this as a threefold interpretation of the original word bringing out the shades of meaning implicit in the original.

former beliefs and practices. Another early Christian writer well illustrates this conviction:

Everyone who has at any time worshiped idols and has adored those whom the pagans call gods, or has eaten of the things sacrificed to them, is not without an unclean spirit; for he has become a guest of demons, and has been partaker with that demon of which he has formed the image in his mind, either through fear or love.<sup>45</sup>

This ministry of deliverance was done, however, in a wholistic approach to discipleship which simultaneously involved in-depth study of the Scriptures, learning Christian doctrine, and the cultivation of a distinctively Christian life-style.

We now pose the question of how this facet of the early church catechumenate should inform contemporary evangelicalism. This is certainly the hardest feature of the catechumenate for us to consider seriously because it is so foreign to our current practice. It is also a form of ministry that runs quite counter to the prevailing naturalistic world view that has even found some inroads into the church. We face fellow Christians who tell us that belief in demons or evil spirits is tantamount to a belief in elves, dragons, and a flat earth.<sup>46</sup> Or we may encounter other forms of skepticism such as reflected in a quip by a recent commentator on one of Paul's letters: "A belief in the devil has lost its plausibility. Whoever today still feels threatened by the devil or believes in his fangs is probably himself in the fangs of a fanatical sect."<sup>47</sup>

Few would doubt the fact that there is an abundance of questionable, sensationalistic, and harmful practices taking place in some sectors of the church today. But could we be overreacting by denying this form of ministry altogether? Perhaps more thought, study, and effort need to be given to the task of identifying how to integrate an appropriate form of this ministry into contemporary church practice, especially given that it was a universal feature of the ministry to new believers in the early church.

If we may be tempted to dismiss this mode of ministry to new believers by considering it irrelevant to people who have been raised in a world view that is so different from first-century polytheistic culture, then we need to consider how contemporary Western culture is changing underneath our feet. The extraordinary rise in the popularity of pagan religions is well documented.<sup>48</sup> Eastern religions, native American religions, and folk Islam are also becoming increasingly popular. This is part and parcel of a massive shift of world view tied to what is loosely called "postmodernism." One of the

<sup>45</sup> Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* 2.71, as cited in Henry A. Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism. Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 124.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 4.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Hübner, *An Philemon, an die Kolosser, an die Epheser* (HNT 12; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997) 267–68: "Der Teufelsglaube verlor seine Plausibilität. Wer heute noch mit dem Teufel droht oder sich in seinen Fängen glaubt, ist meist selbst in den Fängen fanatischer Sekten."

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars. Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Winepress, 1997).

key features of this new trend is a quest for spiritual experience. How is the contemporary evangelical church doing at reaching and making growing disciples of people from this kind of background? Are we equipped and will we be equipped to help root and establish them in Christ? It is precisely at this point where the practice of the early church can help us gain some perspective on how to minister effectively to people with this kind of background.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There are many additional features of the early church catechumenate that we could discuss with profit, such as the size of the group, the role of mentors, the issue of a separate worship service for them, and what characterizes a true seeker. I have chosen to focus here on some of the principal characteristics of the early church catechumenate that are widely attested geographically and chronologically.

The early church sets for us a challenging example on how to train new believers and help them grow in Christ during the first three years of their walk with the Lord. It is my hope that evangelical churches would invest more time, thought, prayer, planning, and resources into a healthy assimilation of new believers.

Perhaps one of the greatest pieces of advice comes from Augustine who passed it on to his friend Deogratias in advising him on how to carry out his teaching responsibilities with the catechumens. He says that “we should endeavor to meet them with a brother’s, a father’s, and a mother’s love” and seek to be “united with them thus in heart” (*De Catechizandis Rudibus* 12.17). The heart of the Father is to give all good things to his children.