

From Darkness to Light

- lessons in disciple-making from our great-grandparents in Christ

This article contends for something straightforward yet challenging. Namely, that a crucial means by which authentic, mature disciples of Jesus Christ will be made in the west in the early 21st century will come through revisiting, appropriately revising and innovatively implementing the distinctive way of making disciples developed in the early centuries of Christianity. This was known as catechesis.

Catechesis – what is it?

Catechesis was the term given to a comprehensive process of disciple-making popular in the early centuries of Christianity. Various models of catechesis were developed over the first four centuries of Christianity, and differences in emphases, content and length are evident. Nevertheless ‘classic’ catechesis involved several discernible phases, beginning with the inquiry of a ‘seeker’ and ending with a mature, fully initiated Christian. I sketch out here a somewhat rosy and romantic, but nonetheless essentially accurate composite picture of early church catechesis.¹

1: Gathering Seekers

‘Inquirers’ or ‘seekers’ (yes, the Christian ancients did use that phrase – it isn’t an invention of Willow Creek!) were gathered together in a group and shared in what might now be regarded as ‘pre-evangelism’. Seekers were welcomed by the leader (the

catechist), introduced to each other and to some Christians who also shared in the group. The balance of seekers and Christians was carefully thought out. Seekers and Christians alike were provided with opportunities to share stories of emerging faith. These narratives were often used to point out the leading of God in their lives. Seekers were seeking, they were told, because of God's prevenient work in their lives through the Spirit; it was providence not coincidence that brought them to this point. In this way they were exhorted to begin the pilgrimage of faith in earnest, and the spiritual practices and disciplines such as praying, fasting, repentance and forgiveness probably began at this point. They shared worship in the group, but not yet public worship with believers. This first phase – technically termed the 'pre-catechumenate' – often ended with a special ritualized event, giving opportunity for folk to continue or withdraw with dignity.

2. Growing Catechumens

Next was a lengthy process of further inquiry and instruction. We must not put enlightenment heads on pre-enlightenment shoulders, but it is clear that there was more to catechesis than being taught doctrine. Yes, they were taught the faith; yes, they did read and have expounded the scriptures; yes, the role of the catechist was vital. But notions of 3rd century boring Confirmation classes must be dispelled! There appears to have been an emphasis on experience and encounter, of turning from evil and holding fast to God in Christ. There was discovery and dialogue, prayer and purgation, openness and obedience. There was rite and ritual, rote and rigor. It was as if the whole person – soul, mind and body – was being engaged. Through this came the repeated invitation to believe and this

meant commitment to Christ, His people the Church, the imitation of His lifestyle and the taking up of the life of faith.

3. Preparing the 'Elect'

At a certain point in the process the mood moved from exploration to preparation. The catechumens began to be referred to as the 'elect' and spiritual preparation for serious Christian commitment ritualized and sealed supremely in baptism began in a new and serious way. Prayer, fasting, and ritual exorcisms increased (often over the period of Lent) ending in a joyful, serious, 'public' baptism when for the first time, the believer took his or her place in the congregation of the faithful and shared fully in corporate worship including Holy Communion.

4. Developing Disciples

Some models of catechesis stop at baptism, but many didn't. These outline a continuing context of sharing and teaching (known as 'post' or 'mystagogical' catechesis). It is at this point that further integration into the main congregation took place – throughout Christian history the transition of believers from small, intimate groupings into larger congregations has entailed sensitivity and skill. At this point the believers would be encouraged to exercise the gifting and talents identified and sanctified through the catechetical process, for the good of the Church. It was at this point also that for the first time the baptized believers were referred to as 'disciples'.²

Catechesis – why is it so important today?

Some readers will have found this account of historic catechesis interesting in its own right. Other will not! ‘What has all this got to do with making disciples now, in the 21st century?’ they ask. A good question, to which I believe there are several good answers.

✓ It is a tool for post-Christendom... as it was for pre-Christendom

Catechesis appears to be a chosen – even anointed – tool for making Christian disciples *in a time of cultural transition*. It was at its most useful and effective in the context of ‘in-betweenness’ and liminality, a period when the Church was moving from the margins of Roman society - weak, misunderstood, sometimes despised - towards a place near the heart of Roman society – powerful, influential and respected. Put more technically, catechesis was a profoundly influential instrument for evangelism, conversion, nurture and discipling during the transition from pre-Christendom to the origins of Christendom.³

Today we are at the other end of the Christendom enterprise. Scholars and theologians of all sorts of persuasions talk about the lengthening shadows of Christendom, the end of the dominant role of the western Church, and its faith as unquestioned public truth. Many now talk of ‘post-Christendom’ to signal, in a variety of ways, the move of Christianity back to the margins of influence, the periphery of importance, witnessed by the fact that it is effectively ignored by huge proportions of our population.⁴

In short, though there are differences of course, there are more than enough similarities and resonances to suggest that the principles enshrined in ancient catechesis are ripe for re-appropriation. I believe its time has come again.

✓ Catechesis made disciples in religiously plural contexts

After centuries of assumptions about ‘Christian Europe’ and ‘Christian Britain’ – itself the language of Christendom – the present and increasing religious and cultural plurality of the west is regarded by some as a fall from grace. Perhaps it is. It is salutary to realize however that the early church lived naturally in a context of great plurality. Catechesis operated effectively when Christianity was not a religious monopoly, or the assumed faith default position. Catechesis was the means whereby people became disciples as they lived cheek-by-jowl with people of all sorts of faiths and belief systems.

This religiously plural context not only included some ‘formal religions’ – the equivalents of Islam and Hinduism today – but also, importantly, ‘implicit’ religious systems – the close equivalents of New Age and New Paganism today. I recall the impact *The Faith of the Unbeliever* made upon me when I read it in the mid 1990’s. It was this book that first convinced me not only of the slow demise of Christendom Christianity, but also of the related need to take seriously the pervasive nature of ‘Unbelief’ that largely filled the gap. Unbelief was not non-belief. Rather an ‘unbeliever... is not someone who does not believe in God’ but one ‘who has chosen to step outside of the Christian tradition either to express an informal faith or to celebrate having no particular religious faith.’⁵ The notion of Christian Britain was blown apart. The persistent folklore

that if the Church got its act together, made worship more relevant, played the right music, heated the sanctuary, ripped out the pews and the like, then hordes of folk would gratefully return to church was rejected for the myth it is. Instead, the Unbelievers of Britain needed engaging with strategies for mission and witness as robust and thought-through as those for any other faith system. Traditional (Christendom) models of evangelism, confirmation training and so on seemed increasingly unrelated to such a situation. Catechesis, as the means whereby Christian disciples were made in a religiously plural environment not unlike our own in the west today, took on new possibilities and potentials.

✓ Catechesis worked effectively in situations when there was very little Christian knowledge, experience and ‘churchedness’ to draw upon.

The context outlined above meant that catechesis took place in an environment in which few people had any real knowledge or experience of the Christian faith, or had quirky or inadequate impressions of it. It assumed very little about a seeker other than that they were seeking. When preparing for baptism, the catechist asked the candidates something like this: ‘When you first sought the Way you did not know what you sought. You did not know the light of Christ, the truth of God, the illumination of the Spirit. Now you do. You have been taught it, experienced it and invited to live in it. Now I ask you, do you want to become a Christian, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?’

Contrast this with (Christendom) assumptions about commitment and belief. Someone turns up for worship three weeks running and in a month they are a property steward!

Why? Because we readily assume they are 'returning' to faith. Or again, contrast this approach with regular assumptions about evangelism. The great Billy Graham stood in British football stadiums and told folk 'you know you have failed God... turned away from Christ... rejected the faith of your childhood. ...I want you to get out of your seats...' He called people *back*, and in the dying embers of Christendom that made perfect sense. But we are not there now. Now in the vast majority of cases, we would be calling people to return to nothing.

Catechesis, therefore, starting further back, assuming very little, taking longer, is a better process of making disciples in our increasingly post-Christendom culture.

✓ Catechesis worked well in a variety of contexts and among different sorts of people

We tend to assume that the early church was homogeneous, all the same. It wasn't. Christianity in Africa, Syria, Rome or Jerusalem was quite different. Catechetical processes seemed able to work successfully in these quite different places. In the 4th century AD 'full blown' systems of catechesis were developed by Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan – East and West, and in significant respects, different worlds. Yet authentic Christian disciples were made in both contexts through the processes of catechesis which, while certainly orthodox and classically Christian, also reflected the different cultures and needs of the candidates in both places, and as such were quite dissimilar at various points.

It is also worth noting that besides being found in a wide variety of places, catechesis enabled disciples to be created among the rich and poor, educated and uneducated, slaves and free, the somebodies and the nobodies. Christians were made in cities and in villages, in settled times and periods of persecution, among men and women and young and old.

Catechesis, it appears, was just what is so desperately required today, a robust, orthodox, transferable and contextual means of making Christian disciples among a 'rainbow' population of different ages, stages and phases.

✓ Catechesis worked because it was holistic and multifaceted

At least since the Enlightenment – the age of reason, beginning in earnest in the later 17th century – what it means to 'believe' and profess Christian faith has gone through a process of reduction.⁶ Not a reduction as in cooking, where the flavour of the sauce gets stronger, more a reduction in terms of dilution, where something gets weaker and less distinct. The result is that Christian belief, for many, consists of nothing more than a series of mental assents to various doctrinal statements. This mentality permits the understandable but essentially inadequate practice of leading those who respond to evangelistic appeals through a few 'spiritual laws' then, when assent to these is given, declaring the convert to be a Christian. The mindset of modernist Christianity has been essentially cerebral.

Catechesis stands in sharp contrast to this reductionist view of believing. The whole person was involved, not just their head. All the senses were engaged. There was

passivity and reception, decision and action. A healthy balance between believing, belonging and behaving was attempted because in catechesis they were all of a piece; each signaled the authenticity of the others. The equally important balance between individualism and corporate identity, between personal freedom and social responsibilities is evident in catechetical processes. It included opportunities for self-reflection, decision-making and decision-making, personal development, chosen obedience and instruction. In a sentence, catechesis took whole human beings wholly seriously, their complexities, grandeur and sinfulness, potential and pitfalls. Above all there was an explicit reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit, without whose presence and infilling, through convicting, converting, enabling and accompanying, all else was regarded folly.

✓ Catechesis worked well because it took time

The evocative phrase used by ancient catechists to describe the process they facilitated is 'from darkness to light'. When reading their accounts of catechesis the crude image of someone being 'cleaned out' comes to mind! It is as if the process engages the darkness of paganism, sucks a little of it out, then fills the space with the light of the gospel through rituals of cleansing and freeing. This process, repeated over time, and culminating in baptism and communion, brought a person ritually and spiritually from darkness to light. This clearly took time and in our I-want-it-all-and-I-want-it-now society this stands as a salutary lesson that good things cannot all come quickly. Both would-be disciples and the churches that disciple them will have to revise the time, effort and sacrifice involved.

In recent years I have become an Emmaus Road person as much as a Damascus Road one. I think it normally takes time for humans to become Christians. I do not doubt that God can and does ‘zap’ human beings, I’ve been zapped a time or two myself! But equally I have little doubt that becoming a Christian is a journey, like the Emmaus story, with its evocative imagery of taking from morning till night. It is not that conversion is *either* ‘crisis’ *or* ‘process’, it is that conversion *is* a process in which there *are* points of crisis. The whole makes for discipleship. The mistake of much evangelism is not that it stresses the significance of being ‘born again’ but that it equates such vital points of crisis with the complete nature of Christian conversion and discipleship.⁷

I suggest it takes about three years, at least, to get to grips with becoming a Christian. Some would say much longer. Catechists such as Tertullian, Cyril and Ambrose knew this. The full-blown process of discipling they outline takes about three years.

Some years ago John Finney interviewed about 500 folk who had recently professed Christian faith in some public way. He observed that, on average, it took between three to four years from a person’s initial personal interest in Christian faith to the point of formal profession of Christian faith.⁸

If Finney relayed how to open the front door of the church a little wider, Philip Richter and Leslie Francis related how the back door of the church might be closed a little firmer. Their research into why people leave church today suggested that folk did not wake up on

a Tuesday morning and declare to the world ‘I’m giving up church!’ Rather, people went through a process of ‘deconversion’ which, though no firm time-scale was given, suggested a small number of years from the point of initial disaffection to completely severing the ties which once bound.⁹

It seems that it takes humans some time to truly ‘change their mind’. Faith Development theorists have long known this. They suggest we humans move through faith stages throughout our lives. We do not all move at the same speed, or in the same direction, but many experts are agreed that for a person to make a decision to change, at a profound level, takes a period like three to four years.¹⁰

One is led inevitably to the conclusion that some two millennia ago the supreme catechist, a young Jewish Rabbi, who gathered 12 disciples round him and trained and mentored them for about three years, knew exactly what he was doing!

Catechesis – pre-modern discipling for post-modern disciples

In 1981 David Watson made a characteristically passionate and telling analysis of our current situation. ‘*Discipleship* sums up Christ’s plan for the world’, he wrote. ‘Yet for all its brilliant simplicity, it is the one approach that most western churches have neglected. Instead we have reports, commissions, conferences, seminars, missions, crusades, reunion schemes, liturgical reforms – the lot. But very little attention has been given to... discipleship.’¹¹

Catechesis gave full attention to discipleship. Its primary aim was a holistic and healthy experience that included seeking, repentance, forgiveness, conversion, salvation, liberation, teaching, cleansing, committing, believing, belonging, behaving, renewal, infilling, refilling. Such is needed today. Through *Alpha*, *Emmaus*, *Disciple*, *RCIA*, *Essence* and the like we are beginning to see the beginnings of catechesis, and its possibilities. But more is needed if authentic disciples are to be made in our present post-Christendom context, with its heady mixture of challenge and potential. A thorough revisiting, appropriately revising and innovatively implementing of catechesis may be God's anointed tool for discipleship once again.

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Biographical notes

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¹ One of the best accounts of ancient catechesis is Thomas M Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: ritual and conversion in antiquity* (Paulist Press, 1997)

² A helpful outline of these stages is found in *The Study of Liturgy*, edited by C Jones, G Wainwright, E Yarnold and P Bradshaw (SCM press, 1992) pp.127ff.

³ This is illustrated wonderfully in Alan Krieder, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Trinity Press International, 1999)

⁴ See Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Paternoster, 2004)

⁵ Martin Robinson, *The Faith of the Unbeliever*, (Monarch, 1994) p.93.

⁶ See William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Eerdmans, 1989) especially ch1.

⁷ A helpful overview of contemporary approaches to initiation is the Church of England Report, *On the Way* (Church House Publishing, 1995)

⁸ *Finding Faith Today: how does it happen?* (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992)

⁹ *Gone but not Forgotten: Church leaving and returning* (Darton Longman & Todd, 1998) see ch 2 particularly.

¹⁰ See, for example the work of Jim Fowler, especially *Stages of Faith* (HarperCollins paperback edition, 1995) and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (Harper & Row, 1984)

¹¹ *Discipleship* (Hodder & Stourton, 1981) p.18