

THE CATECHUMENATE AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY



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Abstract. Over the past two centuries historians of Christianity have offered various theories concerning why and how the early Christian movement took root and flourished in the Greco-Roman world, which was surprising considering its modest beginning, its small size, its lack of cultural resources, and its bad reputation among the elites. This article argues that the formation of the early Christian catechumenate enabled the church not only to reach pagans but to transition them to the very different world of Christianity and to keep them in that world. The catechumenate was necessary because the difference between paganism and Christianity was great enough to require that some kind of bridge be built between the two worlds if Christians hoped to win new converts to the faith and then establish them securely in that faith, and it was effective because it struck just the right balance between making Christianity attractive and accessible and yet setting high standards for membership, which in the long run made the church leaner and stronger.

INTRODUCTION

Consider this curious turn of events: In his account of the early expansion of Christianity, Luke tells the story of several conversions—for example, the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Philippian jailor, the Pharisee Saul (later known as Paul), Cornelius the Centurion—relating how these conversions occurred and what followed in their wake. In each case conversion resulted in immediate baptism.

Now fast forward to the middle of the second century. It is clear that conversion no longer leads to immediate baptism. There is a delay between an initial conversion to Christianity and the administration of baptism—a long delay, too, sometimes up to three years. It is a puzzle to historians. We are less sure of when or how this delay of baptism occurred, largely because of the paucity of sources, but more sure of why. On the surface of things such an obscure historical question might appear irrelevant, just the sort of question that makes people suspicious of the esoteric work of scholars. But

the question is actually far from irrelevant, for it introduces us to one of the central practices of the early Christian period that not only allowed for the survival of the Christian movement but also contributed to its growth. This central practice was embodied in the structure of the early Christian *catechumenate*.

Since the publication of Edward Gibbon's monumental *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,¹ historians have theorized about the reasons why Christianity grew and eventually triumphed in the Roman world. Gibbon laid the theoretical foundation; more than a century later Adolf von Harnack² and A. D. Nock³ built upon it, demonstrating mastery of and attentiveness to a massive array of original sources. More recently Henry Chadwick,⁴ Ramsey MacMullen,⁵ Robin Lane Fox,⁶ E. Glenn Hinson,⁷ Wayne Meeks,⁸ and Rodney Stark⁹ have added their own perspectives. Jan Bremmer's recently published *The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark* sums up, analyzes, and critiques the theories of these three scholars, interacts extensively with secondary sources, and offers his own theory, which he sets forth in four ideas. The movement succeeded, he posits, because of Christian unity, exclusivity, social practices, and religious beliefs, the combination of which was "both unique and clearly highly attractive to the inhabitants of the Roman Empire."¹⁰ This combination was especially potent because it was mediated through the church as a unique religious community.¹¹

There is much historians do not know and cannot learn about early Christianity, due to limitations of the sources, such as growth rates and ac-

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Random House, 2003).

² Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffatt (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908).

³ A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933), 193–253.

⁴ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin, 1967).

⁵ Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D. 100–400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987).

⁷ E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981).

⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

¹⁰ Jan Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark* (Groningen, Netherlands: Barkhuis, 2010), 73.

¹¹ Nock, *Conversion*, 192–93, 210.

curate membership figures from city to city, social status of church members, local and regional variation of beliefs and practices, and methods of evangelism. What we do know, however, is that the Christian movement, beginning in Jerusalem as a small sect within Judaism, gradually separated from Judaism and spread quite rapidly and steadily, though not evenly, through the urban centers of the Roman world, eventually emerging as a formidable rival to other religions long before Constantine came to power. The church demonstrated an unusual capacity to welcome outsiders into the church and to turn them into committed believers.

Surprisingly, scholars have often neglected to focus their attention on one of the primary institutions that the church developed during the early Christian period that enabled the church to establish meaningful contact with pagans and yet maintain high standards of commitment to the faith at the same time. Its basic contours are hinted at as early as the publication of the *Didache* and mentioned more explicitly in Justin's *First Apology*. Tertullian, Clement, and Origen assume its existence, and Hippolytus outlines its basic structure. It is clear from these and other sources that the church, facing problems and challenges as it spread through the Roman Empire, developed a rigorous training program, known as the *catechumenate*, to form people in the faith and to prepare them for baptism. This training program communicated very clearly that conversion implies a commitment to discipleship and that discipleship is not for the few but for the many, not an option but an expectation, not an addition to conversion but an essential feature of conversion.¹²

That such a training program surfaced sometime in the second century makes sense, too, for the church had to adjust to an increasingly large influx of pagans. The difference between paganism and Christianity was

¹² There is a large body of scholarly literature on the early Christian *catechumenate*. See, for example, Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.I.C.A.*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); "Catechumenate," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Gale Publishing Group, 2003); Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991); John H. Westerhoff III and O.C. Edwards, Jr., eds., *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1981); Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, trans. Edward J. Haasl (New York: Sadlier, 1979); Robert M. Grant, "Development of the Christian Catechumenate," in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976); Everett Ferguson, "Catechesis and Initiation," in *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. Alan Kreider (New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 229–268; Robert Louis Wilken, "Christian Formation in the Early Church," in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*, ed. John Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999); E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, rev. ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003).

great enough to require the church to create some kind of bridge between the two. Engineers build bridges, of course, to span a physical barrier—a river or canyon, for example—that prohibits easy crossing. The barrier in this case refers to the chasm that existed between paganism and Christianity. The church had to build some kind of bridge that pagans could cross to transition from their world to the world of Christianity, though some Christians moved in the opposite direction, too, and returned to paganism, as Pliny's letter to Trajan mentions.

Still, the traffic moved mostly in the Christian direction. Apologists served as one kind of bridge as they interacted with pagan elites, arguing that Christianity was not only superior to but also the fulfillment of the best religious impulses of antiquity, whether embodied in Judaism or in paganism.¹³ Ordinary church members functioned as a bridge, too, reaching out to their pagan friends and neighbors. They lived in the same world as pagans; they spoke the same language and shopped in the same markets and worked in many of the same professions. In that capacity they witnessed to their faith and drew pagans into the church. But the church also created the *catechumenate* as an institutional bridge to help pagans move from the world of their traditional religious beliefs to the new world of the Christian faith. In short, Christians became or built bridges to reach and win pagans to the new faith; pagans in turn crossed those bridges to become Christians and to join the church. The church thus erected and maintained what sociologists call "permeable boundaries."¹⁴ It kept distance from and yet engaged with the pagan world. The *catechumenate* played a key role in that process.

Without the formation of a training program like the *catechumenate*, the Christian movement either would have remained little more than a marginal cult or would have become just one more option in a culture already crowded with other religious alternatives, both old and new. In the former case Christianity would have remained so separate from and suspicious of the larger culture that it would have slowly withered away, as most cults do, showing itself incapable of engaging the culture and winning converts. In the latter case paganism would have simply absorbed Christianity into itself, adding Jesus to its pantheon of gods and Christian rituals to its repertoire of religious practices. In both cases, the Christian movement would have lost its competitive advantage and gradually disappeared as the new, unique, and attractive religion it turned out to be.

But it did not disappear. Instead, it created a robust identity, quite different and distinct from its religious rivals. Over a long period of time it won enough converts to outstrip these rivals, even when facing Rome's hostility. Surprising everyone, the Christian movement endured and eventually prevailed. There are many reasons for this success, as Gibbon, Harnack,

¹³ Nock, *Conversion*, 249.

¹⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 13–21, 191–203.

Nock, and their scholarly heirs point out. But surely one is the establishment of the *catechumenate*, which enabled converts to become genuine disciples and thus helped to produce a formidable community of Christians whose example of faith and obedience provided a clear and winsome alternative to Christianity's two major competitors—Judaism (perceived as being legalistic and separatist) and paganism (perceived as being immoral, polytheistic, and idolatrous). Steady growth made the movement increasingly visible, which only perpetuated the cycle of success. The high level of commitment among its members, which the *catechumenate* itself helped to develop, played a key role in this process. Not that pagan religions failed to make demands of adherents. The idea of commitment was not unique to Christianity. But those demands were mostly embodied in strict observance of rites and rituals, whereas Christianity required commitment to Jesus as Lord, to a moral way of life, and to the church as a community of faith.

Considering the cultural climate, nothing short of a rigorous training program would have worked. The *catechumenate* functioned much like a total immersion program in language study. Such a program becomes almost necessary with languages that are farthest removed and hardest to learn. It is one thing to learn a familiar dialect, which requires little more than casual exposure and practice because the difference is too slight to require much more. It is another thing to learn what seems like a completely alien language. A student must cross the bridge, leaving behind one linguistic world to enter another—and alien—one. The difference between the two is so great that nothing less than complete immersion will do.

I want to make a case for why the *catechumenate* was necessary for the church's growth in the Roman world and what made it so effective in helping to establish and expand the Christian movement. First, I will argue that the *catechumenate* was necessary because the difference between paganism and Christianity was great enough to require that such a bridge be built between the two worlds if Christians hoped to win new converts to the faith and then establish them securely in that faith. Second, I will argue that it was effective because it struck just the right balance between making Christianity attractive and accessible and yet setting high standards for membership, which in the long run made the church leaner and stronger.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM

We know a great deal about the Mediterranean world that Christianity entered and eventually won, and we know a great deal about how the pagan leaders of that world responded to this new religious movement, too. Both the ancient world—its institutions, popular beliefs, religious rituals, pagan writings—and its response to the Christian movement provide evidence that shows something of the chasm that existed between paganism and Christianity.

1. *The Pagan World*

Christianity entered a culture that was teeming with religions, some old and traditional, some new and innovative. The Roman world was religious to the core; religion saturated every aspect of civic life—the arts, the marketplace, education, festivals, athletics, entertainment, and the state. Ephesus, one of the most thoroughly excavated cities of the ancient world, illustrates the cultural realities that Christianity faced in the Middle East. During Paul’s day the city of Ephesus numbered some 250,000 people. It had a huge library, three ports, a theater that seated 25,000, baths (which functioned like modern-day spas and athletic clubs), a stadium, a massive open market, and wide streets teeming with shops and vendors. Religion was ubiquitous. The Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, loomed nearby. Shrines, monuments, and statues of the gods and emperors dotted the urban landscape.¹⁵

The entire religious orientation of the ancient world—its view of religion, its moral behavior, its daily rituals—functioned very differently from Christianity’s core belief system and way of life. Typical Roman cities like Ephesus devoted some 30 percent of its property to public buildings, most of which had a religious or quasi-religious function. Religious and political life was so intertwined that public officials presided over the religious life of the city, attending to its many religious buildings, rituals, and festivals. People visited temples, sacrificed to the gods, paid homage to the Emperor, attended religious festivals, performed ritual functions at shrines and monuments, joined mystery cults, and kept household gods. The vast majority of Romans did not believe in religion, as we would understand it today; they “had” or “used” religion in order to appease the gods and secure their favor, attain individual happiness, ensure the proper functioning of the cycles of nature, and ensure Rome’s prosperity.¹⁶ They did not look primarily to religion to provide a way of salvation or teach a way of life. Instead, pagan religion met the more immediate need of making life good and predictable and secure. Exclusive claims to religious truth were anathema. If there was an exclusive religion in Rome, it was the idea and ideal of Rome itself.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 248. “The innumerable deities and rites of Polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them without at the same time renouncing the commerce of mankind and all the offices and amusements of society.”

¹⁶ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 78–79; Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59.

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

This kind of ubiquitous, syncretistic, and pluralistic religion posed considerable challenge to the church, largely because Christian belief and behavior were so different. A simple “yes” to Jesus would hardly have been adequate, given that most people had no idea who Jesus was, where he came from, how he lived, what he accomplished and demanded, and why any of this even mattered. Methods of evangelism and standards of church membership that might work in our context would have failed in that context. The gap between pagan and Christian was just too great. Christians could assume virtually nothing when trying to reach a population whose view of religion and whose way of life, as saturated as it was with paganism, ran so contrary to Christianity. Converts from Judaism had salvation history to prepare and predispose them, though even in this case the vast majority of Jews resisted the claims of Christianity; it was altogether different in the case of paganism.

It is hard for us to imagine today what it would be like to face, day after day, the difficulty of reaching and winning converts in that setting. Paul usually launched his evangelistic enterprise in synagogues, which allowed him the luxury of assuming his audience had at least some level of knowledge about salvation history. He simply had to reinterpret the ancient story in light of Jesus Christ, whom the apostles argued was the fulfillment of that story. But Paul faced a different kind of challenge when speaking to a pagan audience, as we observe in Acts 17. Pagans did not know the story; in fact, they lacked the categories that would make sense of the story. They knew little or nothing about creation, fall, and redemption, about the story of salvation, about the death and resurrection of Jesus and his atoning sacrifice, about faith and obedience, about Trinity and Christology. Moving beyond a Jewish milieu, the early Christians had to start from scratch. A quick and easy conversion to Jesus would have meant almost nothing. Very little in their pagan world predisposed them toward and prepared them to believe in such a religion.

2. *Pagan Criticism of Christianity*

We can catch a glimpse of the difficulty of reaching pagans by studying pagan intellectual elites—the Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins of the ancient world—who launched attacks on Christianity. These pagan critics were at least informed about Christianity, unlike the vast majority of Romans. Still, we can sense when reading them that, though they knew the facts, they simply did not and perhaps could not grasp the true meaning of Christianity because it ran counter to everything they assumed about the nature of religious reality. In these pagan critics we observe, once again, the significant difference between paganism and Christianity.

Take the pagan critic Celsus, who lived in the second half of the second century. A leading intellectual and friend of emperors, Celsus actually wrote a book against Christianity entitled *The True Doctrine*. It is clear

that he had studied Christianity, but it is equally clear that he refused to endorse it and certainly misunderstood it. For example, though mentioning the Incarnation, he did not comprehend its meaning or significance. In his mind it could not be true because it contradicted monotheism. If Christians, he wrote, “worshipped no other God but one, perhaps they would have had a valid argument against others. But in fact they worship to an extravagant degree this man who appeared recently, and yet think it does not offend God if they also worship his servant.”¹⁸ He believed that the Incarnation was therefore impossible, for it would require God to undergo mutation and alteration, something God could simply not do. “God is good and beautiful and happy, and exists in a most beautiful state. If then he comes down to men, he must undergo a change, a change from good to bad, from beautiful to shameful, from happiness to misfortune, and from what is best to what is most wicked.”¹⁹ Celsus assumed that God could do no such thing, for God was by definition transcendent and unchangeable. “It is the nature of a mortal being to undergo change and remolding, whereas it is the nature of an immortal being to remain the same without alteration. Accordingly, God could not be capable of undergoing this change.”²⁰ His argument put him in agreement with the vast majority of Greco-Romans intellectuals, who regarded any kind of incarnation as a violation of Plato’s concept of God and eternity.²¹

Celsus was equally confused by and critical of the crucifixion. He was not above using sarcasm to point out the absurdity of it. “Everywhere they speak in their writings of the tree of life and of resurrection of the flesh by the tree—I imagine because their master was nailed to a cross and was a carpenter by trade. So that if he had happened to be thrown off a cliff, or pushed into a pit, or suffocated by strangling, or if he had been a cobbler or stonemason or blacksmith, there would have been a cliff of life above the heavens, or a pit of resurrection, or a rope of immortality, or a blessed stone or an iron of love, or a holy hide of leather.”²² He judged Christian teaching about the crucifixion as sillier than the stories women tell when tucking their children into bed. “Would not an old woman who sings a story to lull a little child to sleep have been ashamed to whisper such tales as these?”²³

¹⁸ Quoted in Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 104–05. See also *Origen: Against Celsus*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

¹⁹ Quoted in Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 102.

²⁰ Quoted in Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 102.

²¹ Nock, *Conversion*, 236–37. Nock concludes, “There was a substantial objection to any idea of incarnation—of God or a power of him taking human flesh and passing through birth and death, both seeming undignified . . . It was easy enough for an ancient to think of this mortality as putting on immortality,” but “the reverse was not envisaged . . . Humanity, in its essential nature and quality, was regarded as a liability rather than as an asset.”

²² Quoted in Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 96.

²³ Quoted in Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 96.

As in the case of his view of the Incarnation, Celsus rejected the Christian claim of Christ's crucifixion, too, because it contradicted the assumption that deity cannot suffer or change, to say nothing of actually die. Celsus thus viewed Christianity as alien and ridiculous, which led him to reject it completely.

3. *The Early Apologists*

The Church Fathers studied and knew the competition well, and they sought to counter it by emphasizing what set Christianity apart, even when using terms and ideas borrowed from pagan sources (e.g., the *logos*) to make a connection between Christianity and pagan religion or, more typically, pagan philosophy. Much of the apologetic literature from the second through the fourth centuries, from Justin Martyr to Gregory of Nyssa, addressed two rival religions in particular—Judaism and paganism. These two constituted the most formidable religious competition Christians faced in the ancient world.²⁴

The *So-Called Letter to Diognetus* provides an early and illuminating example. Its unknown author refers to the Christian movement as a “new race,” and thus compellingly different from Judaism and paganism. After leveling superficial critiques against Judaism and paganism, he begins his defense of Christianity not by explaining Christian belief, which would be more typical of a modern approach to apologetics, but by describing Christian behavior, the peculiar nature of which was so well known that the author could assume his pagan reader was aware of it. Christians in that day, he writes, did not live like Jews, who were legalistic and superstitious, nor like pagans, who were idolatrous and immoral. Their behavior was simply different, different because their beliefs were different, different in a way that history had never witnessed before. Hence the designation of “new race.”²⁵

This is how *Diognetus* describes the peculiar nature of Christian behavior. “For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or custom. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life . . . They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every

²⁴ See, for example, Athenagoras, “A Plea Regarding Christians,” *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 300–340; and Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 2004), 473–508.

²⁵ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 213.

fatherland is a foreign land.”²⁶ It is true, he writes, that Christians observe the same customs as everyone else, yet even then they do so in a way that makes them different. They marry and have children, but they remain faithful to one spouse and care not only for their own children but also for the children of others who do not want them. They do the same daily work as everyone else, but they refuse to follow pagan rites and customs. They obey established laws, but they go far beyond what those laws require.

Having described how Christians lived, the author then explains what they believed, showing the seamlessness between the two. At the heart of this new religion, he writes, is God’s self-revelation. The God of Christians is not distant and inaccessible. He took the initiative to reach out to humanity and involve himself in human history because he loves. In the end he loved so much that he sent his son, Jesus Christ. Even then God did not send him as we would imagine and expect, in a way that would be fitting for God, at least according to the assumptions of that day. “Now, did he send him, as a human mind might assume, to rule by tyranny, fear, and terror? Far from it! He sent him out of kindness and gentleness, like a king sending his son who is himself a king. He sent him as God; he sent him as man to men. He willed to save man by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God’s way of working. In sending him, God called men, but did not pursue them; he sent him in love, not in judgment.”²⁷

God sent his son to die, to serve as atonement for sin. “He himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us—the holy one for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins except his righteousness?”²⁸ Thus Jesus died in the place of sinful, guilty, helpless people, their guilt becoming his, his righteousness becoming theirs.

The sinfulness of many is hidden in the Righteous One, while the righteousness of the One justifies the many that are sinners. In the former time he had proved to us our nature’s inability to gain life; now he showed the Savior’s power to save even the powerless, with the intention that on both counts we should have faith in his goodness, and look on him as Nurse, Father, Teacher, Counselor, Healer, Mind, Light, Honor, Glory, Might, Life—and that we should not be anxious about clothing and food.²⁹

Some apologists, as we well know, tried to find common ground with pagans to argue for the superiority of Christianity. Others were not so generous. But regardless of their apologetic strategy, they demonstrated by

²⁶ Richardson, “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” 216–17.

²⁷ Richardson, “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” 219.

²⁸ Richardson, “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” 220–221.

²⁹ Richardson, “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” 220–21.

their argument that Christianity was different, different enough to require the church to address the difference and provide converts an institutional means of transitioning into the life of the church.

4. *Roman Persecution*

The difference between paganism and Christianity becomes even more apparent when considering the stories of the early Christian martyrs, for no religion in the ancient Mediterranean world, however odious to Roman officials, suffered systematic persecution except Christianity and Judaism. Something about both Christianity and Judaism made them so threatening that Rome turned against them.³⁰

Christianity was not the only new religion to arrive on the Roman scene, as we have already observed. The Roman Empire became a grudging host to dozens of new religions, most of which came from the East. If Judaism had an advantage at this point, it was its antiquity. Rome respected its ancient origins and traditions. But Christianity was not ancient but new, and small and poor as well. It appealed mostly to urban artisans and small-scale merchants, not to the elites.³¹ It is hard to imagine, therefore, why people in positions of power even took notice of it, let alone thought it deserving of persecution. As late as the year AD 200, some scholars surmise, the church did not comprise much more than 1 percent of the population. Rome was actually quite tolerant of religion. Yet Rome persecuted the Christians.

Scholars are unsure of the exact number of Christians executed during this early period. Estimates vary from three to ten thousand.³² The number does not appear to be very high, if numbers alone concern us. Then again, the total number of Christians was not very high either. Besides, Rome usually targeted church leaders for martyrdom and executed them publically, creating a kind of spectacle, as Rome often did with enemies of the state,

³⁰ Recent scholarship has focused on the role martyr accounts played in the early Christian community. See, for example, Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995); Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Robin Darling Young, *In Process before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006); Nicole Kelley, "Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises," *Church History* 75, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 723–747.

³¹ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.

³² There is simply no way to know. That being the case, the scholars who do provide numbers usually reflect their own bias. Scholars less sympathetic to Christianity offer lower estimates; scholars more sympathetic offer higher.

using crucifixion as its favored form of execution. They assumed that a brutal death before huge crowds would intimidate Christians and break apart the movement.

Justin Martyr, a noteworthy second-century apologist, became a Christian after he had witnessed the martyrdom of several Christians in Rome. He was moved by their courage and serenity, and he was intrigued by a faith that could engender such uncompromising conviction. After his conversion he attempted to explain to secular critics why Christians were willing to die. "We do not give up our confession though we be executed by the sword, though we be crucified, thrown to wild beasts, put in chains, and exposed to fire and every other kind of torture. Everyone knows this. On the contrary, the more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever increasing numbers become believers and God-fearing people through the name of Jesus."³³ Justin knew what he was talking about; he too died for his faith. Like other martyrs, he bore witness to the faith through his death.

There are many famous accounts of early Christian martyrdom, which became so important in the early Christian period that they served as liturgical documents, second in importance to the Bible itself. The accounts of the martyrdom of Polycarp in AD 155 and of Perpetua in AD 202 come to mind almost immediately, both of which reached wide circulation.³⁴ In effect, these accounts both warned and inspired the faithful, awakening them to the demands of discipleship. It made casual conversion less likely, knowing it might lead to death; it made easy apostasy less likely, too, for martyrdom set a high standard of commitment for newcomers to the faith. Persecution and martyrdom underscored the importance of staying true to Christ, no matter the cost.

The charge leveled against Polycarp, the venerable bishop of Smyrna for some fifty years who died when he was eighty-six years old (AD 155) illustrates the point. At his trial the proconsul charged, "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian. This fellow is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches numbers of people not to sacrifice or even worship."³⁵ Polycarp refused to yield to the power of the state and to accept Rome's religious pluralism. He would not acknowledge the legitimacy of Rome's gods and participate in Rome's religious ceremonies. Polycarp believed that there was only one way to know God, and that was through Jesus Christ. Polycarp's belief in Jesus as Lord

³³ Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," in *The Early Christians in Their Own Words*, ed. Eberhard Arnold (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1997), 103.

³⁴ Herbert Musurillo, ed., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

³⁵ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., "Martyrdom of Polycarp," *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 153.

was the real problem. It was his exclusive commitment to Christianity as the only way of salvation that sent him to his death.

Such circumstances forced church leaders to consider very carefully and to plan very strategically how to move people from the world of paganism into the fold of Christianity. A simple and easy conversion was not enough, for pagans had to be converted to an entirely different belief system and way of life that was as alien to them as a language like Chinese is to us. This huge gap required time, patience, and purposefulness. Anything short of that would have undermined the very faith that Christian leaders proclaimed, pagan critics opposed, and martyrs died for, a faith rooted in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To add Jesus to the pantheon of Rome's gods and to present Christianity as just another option in the already crowded field of religion was one thing. A conversion to that kind of religion could have happened quickly and conveniently. True Christianity was another thing altogether.

Not that the early church represents the "golden age" of Christianity. There is some need for caution at this point, lest the church during this period be promoted to a status that it does not deserve. That the church made compromises along the way seems clear enough. Its rather seamless adoption as the religion of the Empire and its successful, though often superficial, Christianization of the Roman world in the fourth and fifth centuries demonstrate that the church made adjustments and compromises to the Greco-Roman world, too. The influence did not move in one direction only.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CATECHUMENATE

The *catechumenate* became the basic structure the church used to transition seekers or converts (and it was probably both) from paganism to Christianity. It functioned as the novitiate of the early Christian period, exposing people to the costs as well as the benefits of church membership. The special meaning of the term and the use of athletic metaphors to describe its seriousness only underscore the vigorous training that converts had to undergo before baptism made them official members of the church.

1. *The Meaning of the Term*

The word *catechumenate* derives from the Greek term *katecheo*.³⁶ The word itself is rare and surfaces rather late in secular Greek, and it is not

³⁶ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:638–640; Horst Bolz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 2:273; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: United Bible Society, 1988), 414.

found in the LXX at all. Its basic meaning is to share an oral communication that an audience receives, to report, to inform, and also “to sound from above,” as poets did in the ancient world when addressing an audience from a stage. In this sense it refers to a kind of public performance, a “sounding downward” of important ideas to an audience. Over time it was used in two ways: first, to recount something, as in a report of an important event; second, to instruct someone, especially in the rudiments of a subject and a skill.

It appears only a handful of times in the New Testament. It seems apparent that the authors of the New Testament adapted a rare Greek word to convey something that no other word could do. Already Paul uses it in this more technical sense in referring to Jewish instruction in the law (Rom. 2:18) and in his own commitment to speak five intelligible words in a known language rather than ten thousand words in an unknown language (1 Cor. 14:19), which implies these five words are especially fundamental and important. He contrasts the person who teaches (again, in what appears to be a formal sense) with those who are being taught, which appears to provide evidence of a formal teaching ministry in the church (Gal. 6:6).

2. *Training Spiritual Athletes*

Early Christian leaders also borrowed and adapted the language of Roman athletic competition to reinforce the importance of readiness, training, and rigor. There could be no spectators in the church, only athletes, for spectators were sure to fail and fold under the pressure of living in pagan culture and facing possible persecution. The references to athletic training and competition appear often in early Christian literature, and the intent is nearly always the same—to encourage and charge Christians to submit themselves to a regimen of discipline and to live as real disciples. For example, in the famous story of the Gallic Martyrs (AD 177), the writer explains the difference between those who endured suffering and those who, facing the same test, failed; that difference had to do with their willingness to live as spiritual athletes. “It was clear that some were ready to be the first Gallic martyrs: they made a full confession of their testimony with the greatest eagerness. It was equally clear that others were not ready, that they had not trained and were still flabby, in no fit condition to face the strain of a struggle to the death.”³⁷

The use of athletic metaphors points to a view of discipleship that dominated the period, which was embodied in a commitment to genuine faith in Christ, discipline of the appetites, cultivation of virtue, service to the needy, and faithfulness under persecution. Unlike athletic competition

³⁷ Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G.A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1965), 140.

in the Greco-Roman world, however, spiritual training in the church was intended to include everyone, not simply men but women, not simply the young but the old and infirmed, not simply elites but ordinary people. The only qualification was a willingness to follow Jesus as Lord. Discipleship, in short, was not for the faint of heart and weak of will but for those who were ready to be trained in the faith as an athlete is trained in a sport. Age, gender, physique, background, and social status did not matter at all; only commitment and consistency did.³⁸

The Church Fathers were fond of using the metaphor, too. Writing around the year AD 200, Tertullian challenged Christians to view themselves as athletes for Christ.

For the athletes, too, are set apart to a more stringent discipline, that they may have their physical powers built up. They are kept from luxury, from daintier meats, from more pleasant drinks; they are pressed, racked, worn out; the harder their labors in the preparatory training, the stronger is the hope of victory . . . We, with the crown eternal in our eye, look upon the prison as our training-ground, that at the goal of final judgment we may be brought forth well disciplined by many a trial; since virtue is built up by hardships, as by voluptuous indulgence it is overthrown.³⁹

Likewise, Clement of Alexandria identified the training of Christ as one kind of training that stands alongside many others, such as the training of a scholar or orator or athlete. The goals are different, as we would expect, but the rigor is the same.

And there is one mode of training for philosophers, another for orators, and another for athletes; so is there a generous disposition, suitable for the choice that is set upon moral loveliness, resulting from the training of Christ. And in the case of those who have been trained according to this influence. Their gait in walking, their sitting at table, their food, their sleep, their going to bed, their regimen, and the rest of their mode of life, acquire a superior dignity. For such a training as is pursued by the Word is not overstrained, but is of the right tension.⁴⁰

³⁸ Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1967).

³⁹ Tertullian, "Ad Martyras," *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 694.

⁴⁰ Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor," *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 235.

The metaphor continued to appear in Christian writings long after official persecution ended. Even if Christians could no longer expect to die for Christ, they could still live for him and, through rigorous training, become “bloodless martyrs.” The cost would be different, of course; nevertheless, there would still be a cost. Thus Ambrose stated in one of his catechetical sermons:

You are rubbed with oil like an athlete, Christ’s athlete, as though in preparation for an earthly wrestling match, and you agree to take on your opponent. The wrestler has something to hope for: every contest has its trophy. You wrestle in the world, but it is Christ’s trophy you receive—the prize for your struggles in the world. And even though this prize is awarded in heaven, the right to the prize is achieved here below.⁴¹

And John Chrysostom exhorted catechumens to imagine competing as spiritual athletes in a stadium filled with thousands of spectators. “Young athletes, the stadium is open, there are the spectators on the tiers of the amphitheater, in front of them is the leader of the games. Then, there is no middle ground, either you fall like a coward and leave covered with shame, or you act bravely and win the crown and the prize.”⁴²

3. *Early Glimpses*

We gain a sense of the importance of the Greek term as well as the use of athletic metaphors when reading early Christian documents. These documents provide brief glimpses of the early Christian *catechumenate*, though an outline of the actual structure does not surface in the extant literature until the year AD 200. For example, the *Didache*, which probably functioned as a training manual for new believers, begins with a description of the “two ways,” the one referring to the Christian way of life, the other referring to the pagan way of death. Echoes of the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount, reverberate throughout the document. “There are two ways, one of life and one of death; and between the two ways there is a great difference. Now, this is the way of life: ‘First, you must love God who made you, and second, your neighbor as yourself.’ And whatever you want people to refrain from doing to you, you must not do to them.”⁴³

⁴¹ Ambrose of Milan, “Sermons on the Sacraments I,” *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.I.C.A.*, ed. Edward Yarnold, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 102.

⁴² Quoted in Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate*, 96.

⁴³ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Commonly Called the Didache,” in *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 171.

After outlining the “two ways,” the document then explains several liturgical practices, including how the church should baptize new believers. What is telling in this case is that baptism assumes that candidates have already been instructed in the “two ways,” implying that baptism followed spiritual training. “Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then ‘baptize’ in running water, ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ . . . Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.”⁴⁴

Justin Martyr mentions something of the same sort. In his *First Apology* he explains how the church in the middle of the second century baptized new believers. It is clear that an elaborate choreography was emerging, as if the rite was used as a way of inviting candidates to participate in the story of salvation, the rite serving as a kind of bridge into that story. It is also clear that baptism required more than belief; it also demanded a change of behavior, once again reinforcing the idea that belief and behavior were being seamlessly woven together.

I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water . . .⁴⁵

That the *catechumenate* involved a lengthy process of training is clear in Origen. He used Israel’s journey from Egypt to the Promised Land as a metaphor for the catechetical process. He does not equate baptism with crossing the Red Sea, as we might assume, but crossing the Jordan River, which means that the crossing of the Red Sea and passing through the wilderness belonged to the catechetical process. Once again, Origen underscored the importance of training.

When you abandon the darkness of idolatry and when you desire to arrive at the knowledge of the divine law, then begin your departure from

⁴⁴ Richardson, “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Commonly Called the Didache,” 174.

⁴⁵ Justin, “First Apology,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 282.

Egypt. When you have been accepted into the crowd of the catechumens and when you have begun to obey the commandments of the Church, you have crossed the Red Sea. In the halts of the desert, each day, you apply yourself to listening to the law of God and to contemplate the visage of Moses which discloses the glory of the Lord. When you arrive at the spiritual spring of baptism and when in the presence of the sacerdotal and levitical order you will be initiated into these venerable and sublime mysteries that are only known by those who have the right to know them; then, having crossed the Jordan, thanks to the ministry of the priests, you will enter in the land of promise, this land where Jesus, after Moses, takes you in charge and becomes the guide for your new path.⁴⁶

4. *The Apostolic Tradition*

By the early third century it appears that some kind of formal training program was in place, which the documents refer to as the *catechumenate*. The most comprehensive description we have comes from the *Apostolic Tradition*.⁴⁷ Scholars are not sure of the exact date, which should come as no surprise considering its nature as a manual, for manuals tend to evolve over time. But consensus seems to place it in its final form in the fourth century, though it was being used in an abbreviated form far earlier, probably in the early third century. That we have corroborating evidence from Church Fathers like Tertullian and Origen tells us that something of what the *Apostolic Tradition* outlines concerning the *catechumenate* was in wide use by the early third century.⁴⁸

The *Apostolic Tradition* outlines the basic structure of the ancient *catechumenate*, highlighting three features in particular: enrollment, instruction, and rites of initiation. What becomes immediately obvious is the importance of relationships (or what sociologists call social networks), the value of training that addressed behavior as well as belief, and the necessity of a concrete process of initiation that would mark the point of entrance into the community of faith.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate*, 56.

⁴⁷ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ It is natural to ask to what extent a document such as this merely described what was already widely practiced or prescribed what the author hoped would happen. This problem presents itself when reading any descriptive document from the early Christian period. That it reads as a manual indicates that it probably describes what in fact was practiced, however inadequately and incompletely.

a. Enrollment and Sponsorship

First, the document explains the process of enrollment. The Christian movement grew at the grassroots level, at least in the second and third centuries, Christians reaching their relatives, friends, and neighbors through daily interaction in public places. Such a web of relationships demonstrated the kind of love that existed within the Christian community, which meant that the church itself became a primary means of evangelization, a relational womb of rebirth.⁴⁹ Thus evangelism occurred in the setting of natural social relationships.⁵⁰ Once contact was made and interest awakened, believers invited their friends to meet with a church leader, who would examine them to see if they were ready to be enrolled in the *catechumenate* and thus become “catechumens.” Such an examination helped church leaders discern if seekers were indeed ready to be enrolled and begin the process of training. In most cases the believers who brought their friends served as the “sponsor,” also known as the godparent, moving through the entire process with them as a companion and mentor. Relationships, therefore, functioned as a necessary part of the training program.

Here is how the *Apostolic Tradition* puts it: “Those who come to hear the word for the first time should first be brought to the teachers in the house, before the people come in. And they should enquire concerning the reason why they have turned to the faith. And those who brought them shall bear witness whether they have the ability to hear the word. They might be questioned about their state of life, whether he has a wife, or whether he has a slave.”⁵¹ Candidates for the *catechumenate*, in short, had to demonstrate that they were ready for admission and that they had a friendship with a church member who not only introduced them to church leaders but who also could serve as a sponsor or mentor in the catechetical process, however long it took.

Among other things, the examination involved investigating the candidate’s work history. “They shall enquire about the crafts and occupations of those who are brought for instruction.” Anything too closely associated with pagan culture was at the least questioned, and sometimes disallowed. This included professions that in any day or cultural setting would be considered unacceptable to Christians, such as prostitution or gladiatorial

⁴⁹ Thomas Finn, “Ritual Process and the Survival of Early Christianity: A Study of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 69–89; Robert E. Webber, *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 65–72; Tory K. Baucum, *Evangelical Hospitality: Catechetical Evangelism in the Early Church and Its Recovery for Today* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Both Jan Bremmer and Robin Lane Fox argue that we know of few if any evangelists during this period, except for the wandering “prophets” mentioned in the “Didache,” implying that the work of evangelism was done by ordinary believers.

⁵¹ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 97–98.

combat. But it also included occupations that would seem on the surface to be normal and legitimate, even from a Christian point of view. Still, these “normal” occupations supported pagan religion, however directly or indirectly, which is why the church demanded that catechumens either quit them or, short of that, avoid entanglement with pagan religious beliefs and practices while doing them. Thus sculptors could not make pagan idols, actors could not play roles in the theater that reflected pagan values, teachers could not instruct children in pagan myths, civil magistrates and military officers could not preside over pagan ceremonies that buttressed the state’s power. Church leaders did not view these professions as neutral because the professions themselves often came under the influence, if not control, of pagan religion. In all of these cases, if the catechumen “will not desist, let him be rejected.”⁵² The prohibition of these professions demonstrates yet again the significant difference between Christianity and paganism that the *catechumenate* exposed and reinforced by setting such high standards. Sometimes the church demanded a clean break from the past.

b. Instruction

Second, the document requires church leaders to provide instruction to catechumens and sponsors to sit through the instruction with them. Sponsors were thus exposed to basic instruction in the faith more than once. Moreover, they served as a kind of relational link between the catechumens and the church, which put them in a position to clarify the instruction and help apply it to the daily life of catechumens, as if participating in a kind of spiritual apprenticeship program.

No outline of instruction appears in the early sources, though it is possible to postulate what it might have included, and what it probably did include. Early apologetic works demonstrate how important the Old Testament story was, Jesus serving as its fulfillment. The *Didache*, *So-Called Epistle to Diognetus*, and Athenagoras’ *Plea* indicate that catechumens received instruction in Bible, doctrine, and ethics. Early documents also spell out spiritual and liturgical practices, such as prayer and baptism.

The *Apostolic Tradition* mandates that catechetical instruction be provided but says nothing about the actual curriculum. It does, however, state the intended outcome, which was not simply greater knowledge but also change in conduct. Moreover, it requires that instructors do more than teach doctrine; it urges them to pray for the catechumens, too. Finally, it makes clear that catechumens were welcomed into the fellowship but could not become full and final members until after they were baptized. It reserves the practice of some religious rites for members only, again reinforcing the sense that the *catechumenate* functioned as the precursor to the monastic novitiate. After instruction and prayer, therefore, the catechumens were dismissed before baptized members gave the kiss of peace and received

⁵² Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 99–100.

the Eucharist. Such exclusion from certain rites only buttressed their sacred quality. "Each time the teacher finishes his instruction let the catechumens pray for themselves apart from the men, both the baptized women and the women catechumens . . . But after the prayer is finished the catechumens shall not give the kiss of peace, for their kiss is not yet pure . . . After the prayer of the catechumens let the teacher lay hands upon them and pray and dismiss them. Whether the teacher be an ecclesiastic or a layman let him do the same."⁵³

We learn more about the catechetical curriculum from fourth-century documents, for we have the catechetical sermons of several prominent bishops, among them Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo. Some wrote guidelines on catechetical teaching, too.⁵⁴ Thus a formal body of instructional material was widely available. Bishops told the biblical story (Cyril devoted some eighty hours to this), explained the creed and the Lord's Prayer, and outlined Christian ethical behavior, mostly by using the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, which can be traced all the way back to the *Didache*. Sometimes they explored the mysteries of the sacraments, called the *Mystagogue*, during the eight days after Easter.

c. Rites of Initiation

Third, at the end of the formal training period catechumens participated in a highly choreographed "rites of initiation," which usually occurred during Holy Week and culminated on Easter when the bishop administered baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. These rites of initiation were intended to reflect a spirit of solemnity and mystery, and they enabled the catechumens to pass from outsider to insider, from candidate to member. The rites invited candidates into the story of salvation because the various rituals in which they participated embodied the story. These rituals included exorcisms, anointings, fasting, vigils, scrutiny, renunciation of the devil, affirmation of faith, Trinitarian baptism, symbolic use of clothing, congregational welcome, kiss of peace, recitation of the Creed, administration of the Eucharist, exhortation, and final instructions during Easter week.

Again, we turn to the *Apostolic Tradition*. The process began with another examination, with the sponsor bearing witness to the catechumen's readiness. What one believed mattered, of course; but how one lived mattered, too. "And when they have chosen who are set apart to receive

⁵³ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 103–04.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *The First Catechetical Instruction*, trans. Joseph P. Christopher (New York: Newman Press, 1946). See also William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995) and Thomas M. Finn, "It Happened One Saturday Night: Ritual and Conversion in Augustine's North Africa," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 589–616.

baptism let their life be examined, whether they lived piously while catechumens, whether ‘they honored the widows,’ whether they visited the sick, whether they have fulfilled every good work. If those who bring them witness to them that they have done thus, then let them hear the gospel.”⁵⁵ In this case the “gospel” refers most likely to the creed, which candidates memorized and then recited or at least used during the baptismal service.

During the few days before Easter candidates were busy with last minute spiritual preparation. The atmosphere became heavy with anticipation. Daily exorcisms implied that the devil himself would be especially active in disrupting and undermining the process at the very end. “Moreover, from the day they are chosen, let a hand be laid on them and let them be exorcised daily. And when the day draws near on which they are to be baptized, let the bishop himself exorcise 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 it is impossible that the alien spirit should remain with him.”⁵⁶ Catechumens fasted, kept vigil, and prayed, all in preparation for the great event. Bishops in turn prayed over them and “sealed” forehead, ears, mouth, and nose, as if to erect a spiritual wall of protection around them.

Those who are to receive baptism shall fast on the Friday and on the Saturday. And on the Saturday the bishop shall assemble those who are to be baptized in one place, and shall bid them all to pray and bow the knee. And laying his hand on them he shall exorcise every evil spirit to flee away from them and never to return to them henceforward. And when he has finished exorcising, let him breathe on their faces and seal their foreheads and ears and nose and then let him raise them up . . . And they shall spend all the night in vigil, reading the scriptures to them and instructing them.⁵⁷

This rich choreography culminated in the administration of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. The bishop prayed over the baptismal waters. Then the candidates submitted to one last exorcism, renounced the devil, confessed faith using a three-fold formula that sounds much like the Apostles Creed, and were plunged into the baptismal waters three times. After baptism candidates were anointed with the oil of thanksgiving and the oil of chrismation, and ushered into the church or hall to meet church members, who welcomed them with the kiss of peace. There they received their first Eucharist, which consisted not only of bread and wine, but also of milk and honey, symbols of the plenty of the Promised Land and hope of the coming Kingdom.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 105–06.

⁵⁶ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 106.

⁵⁷ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 106.

⁵⁸ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 110–113.

Hippolytus concludes with an exhortation to new members that they live out their faith through works of obedience. “And when these things have been accomplished, let each one be zealous to perform good works and to please God, living righteously, devoting himself to the Church, performing the things which he has learnt, advancing in the service of God.”⁵⁹

Thus by the early third century the *catechumenate* involved three discrete stages.⁶⁰ It began with informal contact with non-believers, which led to formal enrollment, initial examination, and involvement of a sponsor. It then provided instruction in the biblical story, the creed, and the Christian way of life, assuming that such knowledge would lead to genuine change of life. Finally, it culminated in Holy Week, when church leaders scrutinized candidates one more time and led them through a highly choreographed process of initiation that involved fasting, prayer, vigils, exorcisms, anointings, baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. Thus belief, belonging, and behavior were woven together into a seamless whole, no one element predominating over the others. By the time we reach the fourth century the evidence is both clear and cogent. We have Egeria’s detailed description of the *catechumenate* in Jerusalem, as well as her stirring account of the Great Week (Holy Week).⁶¹ We have Cyril’s catechetical sermons, which corroborate Egeria’s account; we also have the catechetical sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine.

THE CATECHUMENATE IN POST-CHRISTENDOM

Christendom emerged during the Middle Ages through the long and complex process of the Christianization of Europe. Christendom refers to that period of Western history in which Christianity functioned as the official religion and the church as the dominant religious institution in society. Moreover, it was assumed that people were Christian largely because they were born and baptized into the faith, and then sustained in the faith through a lifetime of church education (when it was available) and sacramental participation. Thus people did not have to become Christian by decision, commitment, or training; they simply were Christian because of their inevitable association with—or total absorption into—Christian culture.

⁵⁹ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 113.

⁶⁰ By the fourth century, and perhaps earlier, the church added a fourth stage, largely because catechumens waited so long before submitting to baptism (Augustine comes to mind as a telling example of this trend). In this case catechumens enrolled in a short training program that occurred during Lent, which culminated in their participation of the rites of initiation during Holy Week. The western church called this special group *competentes*.

⁶¹ John Wilkinson, trans., *Egeria’s Travels*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999).

Christendom forced church leaders to change the purpose, function, and even name of the *catechumenate*. Its main purpose was no longer to prepare people for baptism but to Christianize them afterwards, whether through confirmation, membership in a monastery or a Third Order movement, participation in a catechism class, or involvement in one of the many renewal movements that began to emerge throughout Europe in the late seventeenth century. More recently para-church organizations, like Young Life for high school students, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for college students, and Bible Study Fellowship for adults have served a similar function. In each case the primary goal was—and is—to Christianize Christians, instruct them in the faith, and lead them into a deeper experience of Christian discipleship, and thus to renew the larger church. No longer called the *catechumenate*, these various movements nevertheless functioned as extensions of this ancient practice, though under very different conditions. They served as a bridge, not between paganism and Christianity but between Christendom and genuine Christianity, whatever “genuine” Christianity happens to mean (and that of course depended upon the cultural setting).

The long reign of Christendom in the West, however, is coming to an end, which is forcing the church to consider once again what it means to function as an outsider institution.⁶² Such a change of status is also challenging the church to reconsider the role of the ancient *catechumenate*. What might rediscovery and recovery of this ancient institution imply?

First, the church could reinstate the ancient practice itself.⁶³ Such reinstatement would require some modifications, of course, largely because, while the ancient church functioned in a pre-Christendom environment, the modern church functions in a post-Christendom environment, which means that, far from a lack of familiarity, which was the case in the cultural setting during the early Christian period, western society now suffers from the wrong kind of familiarity. For some churches the rite of confirmation could function as a useful setting; in other cases preparation for believer baptism could provide the proper setting; in still other cases a new members class could serve as a workable setting. Regardless of the setting, the church would have to consider carefully what formation requires in light of the growing secularity of society. Formation itself must have a goal or end in mind, which I would call “functional maturity,” that is, being well established in the basic story, doctrine, and practices of the faith.

⁶² See two recent books on the end of Christendom in the West: Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); and Douglas John Hall, ed., *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997).

⁶³ The Roman Catholic Church has done just that. In the 1970s a group was commissioned to use the ancient church as a model for developing a new rite of initiation, which was released as R.C.I.A. (Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults). Operating under the assumption that the old rite focused on infant baptism, the new rite emphasizes reaching and discipling adults.

I passed through a confirmation class when a teenager growing up in a mainline church in the 1960s. The class required youth like myself to memorize the Creed and the Ten Commandments, which we then had to recite aloud, and to study the Heidelberg Catechism. The church aimed to inform us about church doctrine, which it had inherited from the Reformation. Barely adequate then, this kind of formation is no longer adequate now. Catechumens must learn doctrine, to be sure; but they must also learn what the Christian story is and how Christians must live in light of that story. And they must learn these and other things under the guidance of a mentor and in the arena of real life rather than a classroom.

Second, the church could use important cultural rites of passage as opportunities to develop a modified kind of *catechumenate*. In the case of infant baptism or dedication, churches could train a core group of veteran parents who would teach and mentor new parents; in the case of marriage, churches could train veteran married couples to prepare young couples for marriage. Further, churches could recruit veteran Christians to serve as mentors in a new members class and lengthen the class from the typical weekend or four weeks to a year, and they could charge veteran leaders to train newly elected elders before they assume the duties of office. Using these and other occasions, churches could thus adapt the ancient *catechumenate* to a modern setting.

Finally, the church could strive to change its culture into something more like a sports team, once again taking the notion of training seriously. Good sports teams succeed not only because they have gifted athletes and competent coaches but also because they cultivate a culture that engenders commitment and discipline. Good athletes work hard, strive for the success of teammates, exhibit true sportsmanship, and serve the larger community. Good coaches set a positive example, demonstrate humility, encourage their athletes, and expect the best from them, both on and off the field. The vast majority of church members do not see themselves as spiritual athletes but as spiritual spectators. There is no easy way to change the culture. But it can be changed over time, starting with the leadership and spreading slowly to more and more members. Such a culture of commitment would help define the nature of authentic discipleship, which in turn would make it easier to fold new members into the fellowship. As the church would discover, in the end quality matters more than quantity, and eventually leads to quantity anyway. If the early church serves as an example, we know that slow, steady growth is far more effective than a burst of growth that cannot be sustained over a long period of time.

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