

Discipleship in the early church

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1 Introduction

How did the ancient Church train its members to be faithful Christians? In this paper I will give a brief introductory overview of the methods that churches in the first four centuries developed for what we would nowadays call *discipleship training* or *spiritual formation*.

In the ancient church, there were different focal points for following Jesus Christ as disciple.¹ The first centuries of the church were times of persecution; so *following Christ in the way of martyrdom* was not unknown for the Christian community. Many believers fulfilled in their martyrdom Christ's command to follow him by carrying his cross. A very early record in the post-apostolic period is found in Ignatius of Antioch. According to him, the perfect disciple of Christ is one who follows him to the very end even to death. On the way to Rome he pondered his imminent martyrdom: 'Now I begin to be a disciple'² and when the world shall no longer see his body, he will then 'truly be a disciple of Christ'.³

The love of Christ developed a commitment to make him known, so that to *follow Christ in missionary commitment* could be seen as another form of discipleship; disciples make other disciples. Around 248AD, Origen wrote:

Christians do not neglect, as far as they can, to take measures to disseminate their doctrine throughout the whole world. Some of them, accordingly, have made it their business to travel not only through cities, but even villages and countrysides, that they might make converts to God.⁴

Following Christ in ascetic and monastic life also became a way of radical discipleship. Asceticism was a strong ideal within the context of monastic life although it could also impact all Christians. Human perfection consists of the imitation of Christ. This idea then developed further in the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly in Gregory of Nyssa. The motivation to follow Christ and to live an intense life of discipleship gave rise to monasticism that flourished in the ancient church. For example, prior to 379AD Basil, one of the founders of monasticism in the east, writes:

For, we must deny ourselves and take up the cross of Christ and thus follow him. Now, self-denial involves the entire forgetfulness of the past and surrender of one's will. [...] Readiness to die for Christ, the mortification of one's members on this earth, preparedness for every danger which might befall us on behalf of Christ's name, detachment from this life — this is to take up one's cross.⁵

Following Christ in daily life was the most common form of discipleship. It meant living one's whole daily life in the imitation of Jesus. In this paper we will only focus on this last form of discipleship and on the question of how the Church tried to enliven its (future) members to obeying Jesus Christ in daily life.

2 Catechetical training of Christians

In the ancient Church, the normal Christian formation that all (new) church members needed, was primarily seen as a matter of catechesis. The

¹ The division in four 'types' of discipleship comes from 'On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings, with some Contemporary Reflections' [Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Dialogue Between Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders and the Catholic Church (1998-2006)], published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

² Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 5,3.

³ Ibid. 4,2.

⁴ Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.9.

⁵ Basil, *Longer Rule* 6.

verb *katéche*, like the substantive *katéchésis*, has been used in the New Testament to signify both the act of teaching and its content.⁶

Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386AD) testified to the importance of this process of catechesis for new believers: "Let me compare the catechizing to a building. Unless we methodically bind and joint the whole structure together, we shall have leaks and dry rot, and all our previous exertions will be wasted."⁷

We have enough catechetical works from the ancient church to know what the content of the teaching to the (new) believers was. Catechesis in the early church was in the first place a commentary on the Bible with concrete applications to life. Catechesis was seen as a major task of church leaders. Many of the well-known church leaders of the ancient church set aside much time and energy for instructing new believers in the faith, in spite of their many administrative tasks.

2.1 *Didache*

The earliest example of a catechetical book after the books of the Bible itself, is the *Didache*. The *Didache*, also known as the *Teaching of the 12 Apostles*, is one of the most fascinating books of the Apostolic Fathers. Most scholars believe it evolved between 50 and 150AD; most agree that major parts of the book date from the time before most of the apostle Paul's letters were written.

The *Didache* begins by offering two ways of living, the one of life and the one of death. Its focus is on proper living. The material was a summary of basic instruction about the Christian life to be taught to those who were preparing for baptism and church membership. Then, the *Didache* discusses how things are done in church: baptism, fasting, the Lord's Prayer, what is said at Eucharist. Then it contains some matters related to the proper leadership in church: teachers, itinerant apostles, prophets, bishops and deacons, followed by a final call to follow

the Gospel in view of the expected return of Christ.

Interesting to note is that the instruction to new believers was focused on proper living and on how to participate in the Eucharistic church service. The document is not particularly focused on theological education. In the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca 70-135AD) we see a similar description of the two ways: the way of light and that of darkness. This suggests that in the early church, this practical approach to instructing new believers in what was good and bad, was common.

2.2 *Irenaeus' Proof of Apostolic Preaching*

Around 190AD, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, wrote *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. This catechetical material was clearly written against the background of Gnostic heresies that influenced the church. The book, divided in 100 short chapters, can be summarized thus:

1. Preface (1-3a)
2. Exposition of Apostolic Preaching (3b-42a)
 - 2a. Of God and Man (3b-16)
 - 2b. Salvation History until the coming of Christ (17-30)
 - 2c. Salvation by Son of God (31-40a)
 - 2d. Summary and conclusion (40b-42)
3. Scriptural (Old Testament) Proof of Apostolic Preaching (42b-97)
 - 3a. Preface to this section (42b)
 - 3b. Eternal existence of Jesus Christ (43-52)
 - 3c. Human birth of Jesus (53-66)
 - 3d. Predictions about all aspects of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (67-85)
 - 3e. Calling of gentiles predicted by prophets (86-97)
4. Conclusion (98-100)

Whereas in the first and early second centuries, the focus of catechesis seems to have been more practical, there seems to have been a shift to a stronger stress on theological teaching. This

⁶ Luke 1:4; Acts 18:25, 21:21,24, Rm 2:18; 1 Cor 14:19; Gal 6:6.

⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Prochatechesis* 11.

is logical given the fact that the church was now more distant from the Apostles who were the original canon of all teaching in Church, but also because both non-Christians and heterodox Christians were questioning the beliefs of the church. The members of the Church had to be trained in giving the rights answers when questioned.

2.3 The Apostolic Tradition, Hippolytus

The document *The Apostolic Tradition* is ascribed by many scholars to Hippolytus (170-235AD), a bishop in Rome in the first half of the third century. Whether this is correct is debated but most agree that the document's milieu is early third century Rome. The document was certainly representative for what happened in the churches of Rome in regard to spiritual formation of new members, and it soon spread all over the Christian world as a book to be used in catechesis.⁸

The Apostolic Tradition is full of liturgical and other rules, but of interest for us here is how *The Apostolic Tradition* describes the catechetical preparation of new believers for baptism. Because of its interest, I quote a major part of the text here:

15 Those who are newly brought forward to hear the Word shall first be brought before the teachers at the house, before all the people enter. Then they will be questioned concerning the reason that they have come forward to the faith. Those who bring them will bear witness concerning them as to whether they are able to hear. They shall be questioned concerning their life and occupation, marriage status, and whether they are slave or free. If they are the slaves of any of the faithful, and if their masters permit them, they may hear the Word. If their masters do not bear witness that they are good, let them be rejected. If their masters are pagans, teach them to please their masters, so that there will be no blasphemy. If a man has a wife, or a woman has a husband, let them be taught to be content, the husband with his wife, and the wife with her husband. If there is a man who does not live with a woman, let him be taught not to fornicate, but to either take a wife according to the law, or to remain as is. If there is someone who has a demon, such a one shall not hear the Word of the teacher until purified.

16 They will inquire concerning the works and occupations of those who are brought forward for instruction. If someone is a pimp who supports prostitutes, he shall cease or shall be rejected. If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let them be taught not to make idols. Either let them cease or let them be rejected. If someone is an actor or does shows in the theatre, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected. If someone teaches children (worldly knowledge), it is good that he cease. But if he has no (other) trade, let him be permitted. A charioteer, likewise, or one who takes part in the games, or one who goes to the games, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. If someone is a gladiator, or one who teaches those among the gladiators how to fight, or a hunter who is in the wild beast shows in the arena, or a public official who is concerned with gladiator shows, either he shall cease, or he shall be rejected. If someone is a priest of idols, or an attendant of idols, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected. If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God. The prostitute, the wanton man, the one who castrates himself, or one who does that which may not be mentioned, are to be rejected, for they are impure. A magus shall not even be brought forward for consideration. An enchanter, or astrologer, or diviner, or interpreter of dreams, or a charlatan, or one who makes amulets, either they shall cease or they shall be rejected. If someone's concubine is a slave, as long as she has raised her children and has clung only to him, let her hear. Otherwise, she shall be rejected. The man who has a concubine must cease and take a wife according to the law. If he will not, he shall be rejected.

17 Catechumens will hear the word for three years. Yet if someone is earnest and perseveres well in the matter, it is not the time that is judged, but the conduct.

18 When the teacher finishes his instruction, the catechumens will pray by themselves, separate from the faithful. The women will also pray in another place in the church, by themselves, whether faithful women or catechumen women. After the catechumens have finished praying, they do not give the kiss of peace, for their kiss is not yet pure. But the faithful shall greet one another with a kiss, men with men, and women with women. Men must not greet women with a kiss. All the women should cover their heads with a pallium, and not simply with a piece of linen, which is not a proper veil.

19 After the prayer, the teacher shall lay hands upon the catechumens, pray, and dismiss them. Whether such is one of the lay people or of the clergy, let him do so. If any catechumens are apprehended because of the Name of the Lord, let them not be double-hearted because of martyrdom. If they may suffer violence and be executed

⁸ It was widely used; it has been preserved in Egyptian (Sahidic and Bohairic), Arabic, and Ethiopic manuscripts. Portions of *The Apostolic Tradition* were used in the composition of several other church orders, including *The Apostolic Constitutions*, the *Canons of Hippolytus*, and the *Testamentum Domini*.

with their sins not removed, they will be justified, for they have received baptism in their own blood.

20 When they are chosen who are to receive baptism, let their lives be examined, whether they have lived honorably while catechumens, whether they honored the widows, whether they visited the sick, and whether they have done every good work.⁹

People interested in the Christian faith were first seriously questioned, and then entered into a period of three years of learning. This strict control of whether people were worthy of baptism was needed because of the fast influx of new believers. The teaching of these new believers was mostly, it seems, what was also taught to all believers in church in the first part of the liturgy. After that initial part they had to sit apart in church to pray by themselves, and after these prayers they would be blessed by the laying on of hands by the preacher – who could be a layperson or clergy. They were then dismissed before Eucharist. After a period of about three years they would be allowed to be baptized, based on the testimony of their lifestyle.

From this document we learn that in Rome at the beginning of the third century, catechesis was not separate from the community of the church, even though there was a clear distinction between those preparing for baptism through catechesis, and those already baptized members of the church. Christian formation was not individualistic but took place in the community of believers.

With the growth of the churches, the number of catechetical works increased. This is how the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity describes these instructions:

Even with many differences of style and cultural background, these catechetical instructions aimed at orienting and motivating the choices and practical behaviour in life. They sought to move the heart, not only the mind, and to lead to liturgy, to the sacraments, and to service in the ecclesial community as well as in the world.¹⁰

⁹ Hippolytus (?), *The Apostolic Tradition*, 15-20.

¹⁰ 'On Becoming a Christian'.

A focus on the sacraments, especially Baptism and Eucharist, is obvious in all catechesis in the early church. Typical of this approach are the *Catechetical Lectures* of Cyril of Jerusalem who wanted to help the faithful during the phase before and after the initiates received the sacraments of initiation — Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Cyril explained the symbol of the faith, the rite, and the meaning of the initiation. Tertullian's *On Baptism* (c. 198-200), Ambrose's *On the Sacraments* (387) and *On the Mysteries* (387), and Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Catechetical Homilies* (c. 347-348) have a similar focus.

The *Diary of a Pilgrimage* by Egeria, a rich lady who visited the holy land around 400AD, described the rites before Baptism in Jerusalem at that time. The norm was still that catechists had three years of instruction before their baptism, but Egeria describes how in Jerusalem, catechetical instruction was given to those being baptized three hours each day during the seven weeks before Easter. The teaching began with an overview of the Scriptural events of salvation history. The last two weeks before baptism at Easter were used for explaining the creed. The candidates were supposed to know the creed by heart and to explain its basic meaning. Then, after Baptism, for a whole week the bishop explained the meaning of the sacraments that had just been received. Bible, creed and sacrament were the overall topics of the baptismal instruction. It included a strong spiritual dimension, with such features as discussion of The Lord's Prayer, and instructions about moral living.

3 Elements of spiritual formation

Even if the catechumenate, in its organization and structure, was focussed on the initial stage of Christian existence, in its significance and objectives it intended to be pedagogy of the faith, which continued throughout the whole of life. Having gone through catechesis with others and

being baptized together with them, created a strong bond of community.

The catechumenate was followed by on-going formation. There was obviously continuity between the catechumens hearing the church's teaching during their time of initiation in church services, and then hearing the same teachings by the same preachers in daily mass and weekly Sunday worship services after their Baptism

3.1 Word of God

Central in the formational teaching in catechesis were the Holy Scriptures. This aspect of formation was part of catechesis, but it was not different from the teaching all church members received in the formal meetings of the church. Proper formation in Church was verbal and directional. It told people how to live and what to believe, based on the Holy Scriptures.

I find it an interesting challenge to consider how new believers were taught in sermons that were intended just as much as for the mature believers in church. Teaching was not done separately, but in the one community. The major difference for unbaptized new believers was not in the aspect of teaching in the first place, but in them not being present at Eucharist.

3.2 Baptism and Eucharist

I agree with Abou Daoud who proposes that the process of discipleship should focus on Baptism:¹¹

[Baptism] must be a major goal of our missionary activity. [...] Discipleship leads to baptism, then after baptism one is further instructed in the teachings of Christ and obedience. In fact, discipleship becomes the means of evangelism.

I like to suggest here also, that in the ancient church, the sacraments were not only taught in catechesis and that catechesis was not just a preparation for participating in those sacraments, but that catechesis also intended to make these sacraments an important part of the continued

spiritual formation in the early church as *foci* of the Christian faith. The new believers had prepared for the sacraments and now these sacraments testified to the believers for the rest of their life. This is fully in line with how the Apostles in the New Testament often referred to Baptism and Eucharist for spiritual teaching of the believers.

One reason why these sacraments could play this formative role, was because they were celebrated in a liturgical context. The same words and rituals were used each time, thus repeating the same 'Gospel facts' in every worship service. The continuous re-enactment of the salvation history of God with mankind was the great discipleship tool, especially as the ancient church functioned in low-literacy contexts and in societies where oral communication was preponderant.

Baptism and Eucharist were permanent visible reminders of the Christian faith and life. They had an important formational impact on the believers. That the sacraments in themselves had this permanent formative role to play was for instance recognized by Cyril of Jerusalem, who offered special catechesis immediately *after* baptism. Baptism was not only a special *rite de passage*, but it was a permanent proclamation in itself. Cyril's catechesis "was designed to lead the neophytes to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the celebrated mystery. It assisted believers to enter more deeply into communion with God, to penetrate into the spiritual and mystical depth of faith, to progress in what many Eastern Fathers referred to as "deification" in Christ through the Spirit."¹² Baptism and Eucharist were the focal points for the ancient church's teaching of the faith.

3.3 The Creed

As soon as the church created formal Creeds, these were used in the training of new believers. They had to learn the Creeds by heart and they needed to be able to have a modicum of understanding of them. This was specifically taught in

¹¹ Abu Daoud, 'Sacrament and Mission Go Together Like Bread and Wine, Part I: Baptism, Discipleship, and the Apostles' Creed', St Francis Magazine (SFM) 4:1, June 2008.

¹² On Becoming a Christian.

catechesis, but it was also repeated in the liturgy of the Church. In each church service this reminded the believers of the basis of their faith. According to S. Chan, reciting the Creed is more than a mental reminder of what we believe:

When we recite the creed, we are doing more than telling ourselves what we believe; we are engaged in what in speech-act theory is called a performative act. We are making a pledge of self-giving to the God we believe in. In the practice of recitation, the creed functions like a nation's national anthem or pledge.¹³

What do we teach believers in the process to Baptism? Why not make the Apostolic Creed the centre of our teaching? That is wholly in line with what the ancient church taught new believers, and it is also the Creed that is used by the major churches in the world today. It ensures that we focus on the heart of the Christian faith, and not on the latest fad; for the new believers this is also strong unifying factor with all other Christians.¹⁴

3.4 Prayer

The Lord's Prayer was part of the instruction to new believers. New believers were ordered to learn this Lord's Prayer by heart. Thus, they were taught how to pray, and after Baptism, during Eucharist they would pray this same prayer over and over again. What they learned during their time of initiation would be repeated weekly in church for the rest of their life. The *Didache* commanded the believers to pray the Lord's Prayer three times each day. Hereby the Church reminded the believers again and again of how to pray.

3.5 Spread all over Roman Empire and beyond

It is interesting to note that the liturgies and rituals as briefly described before, spread rather fast all over the Roman Empire and beyond that Empire, even though the church initially did not have a highly formalized leadership structure. Even after the break-up of the unity of the church, in different cultures similar liturgies and rituals were celebrated. The main contextualization was the translation of the liturgy in the Roman, Greek, Aramaic, Coptic or Armenian language.

This unity in liturgy and ritual, even in spite of some major political and theological differences, was the result of a strong sense of community among the Christians: a community in the first place with the apostles, and also with all early fathers of the church. The liturgies that were inherited from them were not to be tampered with. We should wonder whether this is not an altogether more wholesome approach to the Church and its worship, than the efforts to create worship styles and theologies that 'match' each and every culture.

4 Conclusion

To the above examples of the sermon, Baptism, Eucharist, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer we could add other liturgical elements like the confession of sins, the announcement of forgiveness, the readings from Holy Scripture, greetings each other with the kiss of peace, etc. that because of its weekly repetition played an important role in the formation of Christians in the ancient church. I propose that in our work of making disciples or spiritual formation, we take liturgy, sacraments and the language that pertains to that, seriously.

¹³ S. Chan, 'Rediscovering the Catechumenate' *Church & Society* (2005, Vol 8(1), p. 4.

¹⁴ Abu Daoud in 'Sacrament and Mission Go Together Like Bread and Wine, Part I', writes: 'what is to be the content of our teaching to our disciples? [...] Should we pick up the latest fad from the West, like the *Prayer of Jabez* or the latest Rob Bell videos? Or should we judiciously exegete entire books of the NT? For how long does this go on? What are we trying to accomplish? I suggest two things: The goal of our discipleship is baptism: this comes quite clearly from Matthew 28 once we understand that there is an important sequence in the Great Commission. Second, as our goal is profession of faith in Christ in baptism, at least initially, the content of our teaching should be the Apostles' Creed.

Or to say in other words, that we *adopt a robust Nicene approach to the Christian faith*.¹⁵

The liturgy was the early church's most effective manner of Christian formation for all of its members. After the formal period of instructions for newcomers (which was part of the liturgy), the believers were taught the Christian life weekly through the liturgy of the church – the verbal and visual re-enactment of all the basic aspects of the Christian faith. Through its liturgy and all aspects in it, the believers were taught how to be true followers of Jesus Christ.

This Christian formation – *discipleship training* – was church based, communal, and led by church leadership. It was not something separate for those interested in discipleship classes, but something all believers were forced to undergo, initially in formal training, and after their Baptism, through participation in the communion of the saints in the normal life of the Church.

¹⁵ Thomas Oden coined this as 'paleo-orthodoxy'. Abu Daoud makes a similar point in his articles 'Mission and Sacrament, Part II', in *St Francis Magazine (SFM)* Vol IV No 3 (December 2008) and 'Mission and Sacrament III: A Paleo-Orthodox Approach to Contextualization in the Muslim World', in *St Francis Magazine (SFM)* Vol V No 2 (April 2009).