
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Catechize Your Church!

“Who is catechizing your church?
Someone certainly is.
If church leaders are not, the culture is.”
— James K.A. Smith

What is *catechesis*? It is *a comprehensive, systematic program of spiritual formation*.

A Short History

During the first 500 years of church history, whenever a new convert joined the church, it was standard practice to have them participate in a three-year period of intense and demanding training in the Way of Christ.

During this time, they were . . .

- (1) drilled in the basic beliefs of the church (often using the Apostles’ Creed as a curriculum),
- (2) trained in prayer (often structured by the Lord’s Prayer),
- (3) schooled in the sacraments or ordinances,
- (4) coached in righteous living, and
- (5) subjected to fasts, sleepless nights of prayer, and deliverance from demonic oppression.

Only after a new believer had completed this rigorous regimen, and their lives had been carefully examined, were they allowed to be baptized and take their place among the faithful.

The early Christians who underwent this intensive program of spiritual formation earned a sterling reputation as a peculiar people who joyfully embraced martyrdom, practiced monogamy, rescued discarded babies, and took in plague victims. And, as substantial spiritual growth was taking place among the Christians, substantial church growth was taking place as new believers were constantly added.

Despite the clear success of this discipleship program, it slowly fell into disuse after 500 AD.

It seems that, after society had been “Christianized”, the Church no longer saw a need for Christians to be catechized.

As a result, the Church’s reputation for virtuous living turned into a reputation for corruption. Other than the training of novices in monasteries, the practice of *catechesis* disappeared for a thousand years until the Protestant Reformation.

After his break with the Catholic church, Martin Luther wrote two books of *catechesis* — a *smaller catechism* for laypeople and a *larger catechism* to help equip leaders.

John Calvin followed suit in 1536 with a catechism that was almost a mirror image of Martin Luther's catechism. Calvin continued to revise and add to his book of *catechesis* until it morphed into a prodigious 1000+ page work. Its name? The *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Over the next 200 years, the Puritans continued to emphasize the importance of *catechesis*.

Richard Baxter took the work of catechizing so seriously that he saw it one of the primary works of a pastor.

During the revivals of the Great Awakening, others, like David Brainerd, made a conscientious effort to catechize all new converts.

Alas, the Puritan revival of the practice of *catechesis* did not last.

In response to the lack of overt evangelism, as a result of the defensive posture taken by churches following the Reformation in Europe, the First and Second Great Awakenings focused largely on winning converts to faith in Jesus Christ.

The revivalists of the 19th and 20th centuries were so focused on winning converts that they often discounted, neglected, and finally lost *catechesis* altogether. In its place, they instituted

follow-up: a quick conversation with a lay counselor who exhorted the new convert to pray, read the Bible, and attend a church.

The systematic spiritual formation of new believers disappeared, the church's reputation for transformation deteriorated to the point where most self-proclaimed Christians were (and are?) no longer distinguishable from the rest of the world.

The evangelical church of today is heir to this unfortunate neglect. The results of our shallow discipleship are all-too-predictable: Low expectations, low commitment, low understanding, low moral standards. This is the inevitable result of an un-catechized church.

For biblical church growth to take place, a new form of *catechesis* is needed to effectively incorporate new believers into a local church.

Dr. Joel Elies is guest editor for this issue of *Growth Points*. He serves as assistant director of doctoral programs at Talbot School of Theology, and is the author of *Christ-Centered Spirituality: A Catechesis for Today* (available on Amazon.com; for bulk discounts, email info@sanctusbooks.com).

Looking for addition resources to practice *catechesis* today? Here are a few recommendations: James Bryan Smith's *Apprentice* series, Jim Putnam's *Real Life Discipleship*, and Randy Frazee's *Believe*.

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