

A Lower-Church Case for the Catechumenate

The catechumenate is a way to disciple people in faith by providing mentorship and a place to explore the Way of Christian faith and ask faith questions without judgment. Founded on Jesus' way of discipling, the catechumenate is the original school of faith out of which theological education was born. Because it is all about growing in the knowledge of God, a Reformed theological darling, you'd think that Presbyterians would be all over the catechumenate, but it's not uncommon for wary reactions instead. With a face reading like those in the presence of a pushy used car salesman, you can almost hear Presbyterians listening to an explanation of the catechumenate thinking, "What are you trying to sell me?" and "What's the catch?" If interest is piqued, the questions turn to "What's the takeaway?" and "How can we leverage this?"

If the catechumenate is understood as yet another "latest/greatest program to save the church ever," such misgivings are wise, for the catechumenate does not save people, nor does it transform them. It only makes a space in time in which people may meet the living Lord in Holy Spirit, who transforms us.

But this may be why most Reformed folks are a bit more reticent than higher liturgical churches when it comes to the catechumenate. It's not that they're more spiritually resistant than most or that they eschew ritual. The real reason is theological. Reformed theology is, at its core, sacramental (though our practices may belie this). We think everything we do should be about meeting the living Lord. All our church practices are supposedly catechumenal in spirit to the point where we're baffled as to the need for the catechumenate. Because the Spirit blows where it will, we're suspicious of anything that smacks of human programming that requires conformity.

Brian Gerrish demonstrates in his book *Grace and Gratitude*, that all of John Calvin's theology is sacramental.¹ Calvin understood life itself as a gift of grace with Jesus Christ being grace incarnate. The Holy Spirit is the down payment for the time when God's grace will reign in all its fullness, but which we experience now, in part, through God's activity in the world (*i.e.*, God's Reign), which the church points to. Baptized into Christ we are adopted by the Lord and, in gratitude, we grow in the knowledge of God (*i.e.*, faith) and live by serving God and one another under the Lord's sovereign rule. Knowledge of God is not, according to Calvin, simply knowledge about God. Rather, growing in the knowledge of God is growth in our relationship with the Lord. This is not simply a personal relationship with Jesus as our buddy, but growing into the body of Christ, like a baby grows into its head. True knowledge of God, then, requires living as part of the church, which, in turn, serves humanity as Christ's body.

Baptism is into Christ and his Way of life in which the church mentors us. But baptism is not something we do; it's what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ as something we live out of, into, and toward. This doesn't mean that our participation is moot. As Calvin maintains, just as the Eucharist is ineffectual to participants without

¹ Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993).

faith, the promises of baptism are null if not claimed. Faith is required to receive the fullness of Christ's sacraments.

However, Reformed theology stresses God's action to the point where systematic step-by-step preparation to receive the gift of God's grace in baptism is downplayed. This is what many see the catechumenate as — a step-by-step progression of faith toward the font marked by rituals that allow entry into the next stage of growth. If that is all the catechumenate is, we are right to be wary. The catechumenate is intended to be more fluid, like water itself, conforming to whatever enters into it, just as the Spirit accommodates to us and our needs in order to nurture us so that we can grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. After all, at its origin, the catechumenate was not a prescriptive program, but a description of how faith is fostered through conversations about the faith. At its best, the catechumenate provides a space in time for these conversations as we learn, live, pray, serve, and worship in intentional communion with one another to the glory of God.

Some might say that such activities are a description of church. And it is! Everything we do as church, not just the catechumenate, should be considered an opportunity to encounter the living Lord. Every Sunday school class provides mystagogy for the baptized. Each worship service is drenched in the fountain of God's goodness, nourished by the body and blood of Christ. Each act of service for others is an extension of the table. This is why the need for the catechumenate is something of a mystery to some folks.

Why Lower-Church Traditions Need a Catechumenate

All this begs the question: if the catechumenate is a space in time in which we can grow in faith by meeting the living Lord, and if this should also be true of all church practices, why do we need the catechumenate? Couldn't we just do catechumenal church? YES! We should. But without the pattern of the catechumenate in our DNA, how will we know how to do this?

The catechumenate heightens seekers' awareness of what it is that makes the church *church* — namely, the movement of Christ's Holy Spirit in us and the world by reflecting upon faith's practices more deliberately and deeply. It helps people learn how to read scripture, pray, serve, and participate in worship by meeting them where they are with the questions they have. In addition, the catechumenate encourages the church to pray for those seeking Christ and offers an opportunity for believers to pass on the faith one-on-one to someone who's really interested (instead of doing cold-calling evangelism). It helps people into the pool for healing at their own pace instead racing to meet a deadline of some angelic church-year descent or waiting around for thirty-eight years (See John 5:2-9). Meaningful rituals mark significant faith passages with the prayer of the community. In the process, not only catechumens are transformed; the church, too, grows more and more into the likeness of Christ as all of ministry flows from the font to the table and out into the world.

All this is the Lord's doing, and it is grace upon grace, for which we can only offer our service of grateful praise in all we do, with all that we are. Regardless of exactly how a catechumenate is done, and doing it well means that it won't be done the same way each time, setting aside time, space, and energy to disciple seekers and those who wish to go deeper is something that high church, low church, and mid church are all called to do. Exactly how they'll go about the catechumenate will take different forms.

If you'd like to learn more about the catechumenate, consider sending a team to one of this year's training events or host your own training event by asking a team to come to your church. But do come and see what the catechumenate is all about so that in Holy Spirit you can discern how best to proceed.

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