

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 26 / 2013-2014

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Christian Studies (ISSN-4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology. *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for \$3.00 each, plus postage. Correspondence should be addressed to M. Todd Hall, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 7640 Guadalupe Street, Austin, Texas 78752. *Christian Studies* is indexed in ATLA Religion Database. Copyright Institute for Christian Studies. FAX: (512) 476-3919. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu. Email: christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu.

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From its beginnings under founding editor Michael R. Weed, *Christian Studies* has sought to offer “Scholarship for the Church,” as stated in the journal’s motto since 2008. We are pleased with this volume to introduce to our readers two new Austin Graduate School of Theology faculty members, Keith Stanglin and Daniel Napier, and we look forward to their years of service to the church with us.

Christians in America face new challenges today. We are living in what David Bentley Hart has called a post-Christian world. Churches must consider how to adjust to new realities and a cultural environment that appears in some respects less hospitable to the open proclamation and practice of historic Christian faith, while in other respects offering unprecedented opportunities for authentic and powerful Christian witness. How do we communicate the gospel by word and deed to a culture that believes it has already heard and rejected it, but which may never have seen faith working through love? How do we foster authentic transformation into the image of Christ, both in ourselves and in others?

One vital function of scholarship for the church is to raise questions and promote discussion that allows churches to evaluate options for ministry and service. This aim ties together the essays on various topics contributed to this issue by AGST faculty and emeriti. Building on the analysis of Max Scheler, Michael Weed explores the phenomena of *ressentiment*, the toxic engagement of apostates with the traditions in which they were formed. Keith Stanglin asks what use followers of Thomas Campbell have for church history, and how those impressed by Campbell’s vision might need to refine the terms in which it was originally expressed. Jeffrey Peterson explores how the liturgical calendar of the ancient church might help Christians and churches live through the year in the power of the resurrected Christ. Daniel Napier considers how revivalist approaches to conversion may actually thwart true conformity to the image of Christ and reflects on what contemporary churches might learn from ancient catechetical practices. Mark Shipp discusses the challenges of appropriating especially difficult Psalms for use in the church of Jesus Christ. Allan McNicol offers a substantive review of a recent book

on the difficult question of eschatological violence and its implications for our understanding of God's nature.

While each author speaks for himself, the reader of this issue is invited to join the ongoing discussion—and the occasional charitable argument—pursued at the faculty lunch table. We offer this collection to our readers in hopes of spurring productive discussion toward the growth of faith, understanding, and discipleship.

Finally, some changes are coming soon to *Christian Studies*, and we want our readers to be a part. Please go, right now, to your computer, type austingrad.edu/survey in the browser window and take our *Reader Survey*! Make your wishes for the journal known!

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A Sound Beginning: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion¹

Daniel Austin Napier

As members of the Churches of Christ, we have much for which we can be grateful. One such historical emphasis is the way Churches of Christ have vigilantly insisted on a full conversion process that culminates in a lasting commitment to Jesus as Lord. That is the point of our emphasis upon adult believer's baptism. It is worth reflecting theologically upon this emphasis for our own day.

With this concern in mind, we might ask a few questions. What makes for full conversion to Christ? What can we do to foster genuine conversion? What might we do that hinders it? Such are the questions I wish to address in this article, albeit through a reconsideration of a very ancient model of Christian formation.

My concern to understand conversion arises from twin widespread phenomena observable in churches today. The first phenomenon is the presence of many self-labeled Christians that may be described as "half-converted." By "half-converted" I mean the following. Positively, I refer to a person who self-identifies as Christian, participates to some degree in a congregation's corporate life, and hopes for some form of life with God in a world to come. Thus far he or she has turned toward Christ. However, the same person may lack any aspiration to become conformed to Christ's image in every aspect of life. Christian self-identification may predict political party affiliation more

¹ See Keith Stanglin's discussion of "Retrieval Theology" on page 31 of this volume. Also see p. 61 of this article for further discussion.

reliably than marital faithfulness. Prayer, because one finds no basic sense in it, comes sparingly and with difficulty. Moral failures seem routine and unremarkable. Self-sacrifice for the sake of others is not so much a rejected ideal as a foreign concept. It has never appeared as a real option for life. This may not be the individual's fault. Perhaps one has never been told it is a possibility. With pastoral concern, one might diagnose this state as the "half-converted" life. Sadly, it is all too common.

Of course, not every member is content to remain "half-converted." A second phenomenon emerges here. Spiritual aspirations, by God's grace, stir within many. But spiritual seekers among the church's membership often pursue their primary spiritual guidance outside the local church. The current vogue of "spiritual formation" resources, conferences, gurus, and para-church organizations has risen to fill a real gap in the church's life. I am grateful for their existence. However, we must recognize that they represent attempts to complete what the church has left undone. Much of the "spiritual formation" movement today is attempting to provide ways to consummate conversion processes initially aborted by the local church.

What has gone wrong with our congregations to produce these twin phenomena of "half-converted" and "para-church nurtured" Christians? More importantly, how do we move forward in a corrective manner?

Here is my thesis: We don't mature well, because we don't begin well. In other words, we are not maturing normally in Christ, because we have cut short the initial conversion process by pressing for quick profession and immediate baptism before full loyalty to Jesus is established.

We are not alone in truncating the conversion process. Contemporary evangelicalism has institutionalized a type of Christian initiation, inherited from revivalism², which typically aborts rather than completes conversion to

² The salient features of a revivalist conversion theory each need to be questioned. First, the most basic indicator of a revivalist conversion theory is the assumed equivalence of "conversion" and "salvation"—i.e., they are the same event. A Christian, then, may allude to her conversion as being when she "got saved." Second, this singular event of conversion-salvation is punctiliar and thus easily dateable. One may be asked on a retreat registration form to supply this date as an indication of one's genuine Christian status. Of course, the question asked would be worded in a slightly different manner depending on ecclesial tradition. Mainstream evangelicals would ask the date of an internal event, namely, when one "accepted Jesus into your heart"

Christ. While laudably adding immersion, Churches of Christ have tended to mirror the revivalist pattern of aborted conversion. We have at times been clearer about baptism as the entry requirement than about loyalty to Jesus and Jesus' way as the substantive goal of conversion. When baptism itself, rather than loyalty to Jesus as Lord, becomes the goal, then baptism, in practice, becomes a damp altar call.

Theologically, confusions about the beginning and end of the Christian life have contributed to this widespread failure to mature. First, in our account of the beginnings of the Christian life (i.e., justification), we have confused profession with belief. Belief is a readiness to act as if something were true. As such, one can readily discern what I believe by observing my actions. Profession, on the other hand, is publically *claiming* to believe something. Of course, one may profess what one truly believes. Such is the ideal. However, the profession itself does not substantiate belief, rather action manifests genuine belief. Trust in Jesus becomes visible in fruits of repentance.

Since we have failed to distinguish profession from belief, we think God is primarily concerned to hear us publically voice certain utterances. So if I say publically that "I believe Jesus died for my sins," God will be happy and admit me to heaven when I die. Consequently, in our evangelistic strategies, we have often pressed for speedy profession rather than investing in the laborious teaching, mentoring, and spiritual direction of persons, which is needed to enable true belief and genuine commitment to Jesus as Lord.

Having built our membership with people who profess truths, which they are not in a position to truly believe, our secondary pastoral strategies almost

or "received Jesus as Lord and Savior." Churches of Christ would ask for the date of one's baptism, certainly a properly dateable event. However, since baptism has customarily been administered immediately upon sign of interest, often without any substantial process of teaching, the punctiliar theory was at times still operative. So despite the local variations in the recipe for a valid conversion, the shared assumption has been that the product is instantly complete. "From 1996 through most of 2001" would not be a satisfactory response for the retreat coordinators. Third, the revivalist theory views conversion-salvation as an individual transaction with God, which may or may not result in church membership. The church is thus largely assumed to be a free association emerging as a social byproduct of individual conversions. For discussion of these and other elements, see Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion : Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

inevitably degenerate into forms of manipulation. Now we must “motivate” people to adopt behaviors, which they would automatically perform if they really believed what they claimed to believe. These represent the natural outworking of a revivalist account of the beginning of the Christian life.

Second, few congregations have anything approaching a developed account of the end or goal of the Christian life (i.e., sanctification). Even a cursory reading of Paul reveals that his evangelistic practice sought mature Christlikeness of persons as its intended goal.³ Conversion was oriented toward moral and spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, not merely the satisfaction of minimal entry requirements for “going to heaven” after death.

What is needed is a practice of Christian conversion arising from and reliably producing fruits in keeping with a biblically sound and theologically coherent account of the beginning and goal of the Christian life. A well-formed beginning to the Christian life should demonstratively bear the seeds of the end of the Christian life within it.

Such a practice would not be a quick fix. It would require engaging in the hard, slow work of conversion on the front end, in order to construct a spiritual foundation from which Christian maturation could better develop. There once was such a practice. The early church, under pressure of persecution and in fidelity to Christ, developed an extensive catechetical practice designed both to engender true belief and to set a clear trajectory towards a fully transformed life.

In hopes of finding help for our day, we turn now to consider the ancient Christian model of catechesis. But a word of caution is in order. The following account is purely descriptive. Much of what follows will certainly sound strange. Its feel is foreign. I have made no effort to domesticate the third and early fourth century practices. It is important to recognize they are indeed different from ours. We cannot simply adopt their practices. I am not advocating a mere reproduction of this model.

Nonetheless, the early Christian catechumenate also constitutes the sole example of a fully developed process of conversion both based on normative commitment to adult believer’s baptism and functioning within a religiously

³ See James Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

plural environment. So it addressed similar issues to those of our day from a kindred theological stance. As such we would do well to weigh carefully the elements of the model and remember its historical fruit in the formation of many who literally shed their blood in order to confess Jesus as Lord. Surely, if any brothers and sisters are worth listening to, the martyred church is.

Conversion in Early Christianity: An Ancient Model of Formation

May I ask you to imaginatively follow a typical third century convert with me? We will observe Theophilus as he makes his first acquaintance with the church, hears the gospel, and comes to trusting, transformative commitment. In so doing we will gain a basic overview of the early church's catechetical process. We may also catch glimpses of possibilities for our own day.

Stage One: Basic Formation in Faith and Moral Transformation

(POTENTIALLY UP TO TWO-THREE YEARS IN DURATION)⁴

Theophilus was a Greek craftsman who lived with his extended family in the city of Carthage, North Africa. He first found interest stirring when he noticed Chrestus, a slave engaged in the same craft. Chrestus lived according to a moral sense that Theophilus admired but could not understand. On several occasions, Theophilus had observed Chrestus give to others from his meager resources and repay hostilities from other slaves with genuine kindness. Puzzled, Theophilus resolved to ask Chrestus the reason for his actions. The answer involved a strange tale about a crucified teacher who lived again, along with Chrestus' offer to introduce Theophilus to someone who could better explain.

⁴ The first, and longest, stage of the early Christian catechumenate requires the most detective work to reconstruct. Unlike the orations delivered throughout Lent and the weeks preceding and following Easter, we lack full transcriptions of the everyday instruction delivered to the developing convert during the first phase of instruction. Fortunately, we do have scattered references in the Fathers and a handful of primary texts, which likely reflect this stage of teaching, from which reconstruction is possible.

Enrollment in the Catechumenate and Initial Instruction

Theophilus' initiation into the faith began when Chrestus introduced him to Possidius, the church's head catechist. Sponsorship was an essential feature of the catechetical process. Chrestus had now become Theophilus' sponsor and would accompany him through the entire process from initial instruction to full immersion.⁵

On this introductory meeting, Possidius interviewed Theophilus and Chrestus together. The questions were crafted to assess Theophilus' motives, current moral fault lines, professional commitments, educational background and degree of previous knowledge about the faith. But the questions were not directed to Theophilus alone. Chrestus was asked to vouch for Theophilus' answers. The interview helped Possidius discern how best to lead Theophilus into a fully committed faith.

Following the interview, Possidius delivered his first instruction to Theophilus in the presence of Chrestus. The basic outline of the first instruction consisted of an overview of the story of God's deeds from creation to the fulfillment of God's promises of the church seen in the present day. Of course, much had to be left out, but the primary joints or "knuckles" of the story structured this teaching. Augustine of Hippo describes the appropriate way to summarize the grand story.

What we ought to do, however, is to give a general summary sketch of all the content in such a way that a certain number of quite remarkable events are selected, ones that our listeners find particularly appealing and that constitute the critical historical turning points.⁶

So Possidius narrated God's deeds to Theophilus, tailored to his spiritual state. The summary traced the highlights from Creation to Noah (18.29–

⁵ If a seeker approaches the catechist without a sponsor, a sponsor is soon provided for the seeker.

⁶ *Instructing Beginners in Faith* 3.5, p. 64 in Augustine, Raymond F. Canning, and Boniface Ramsey, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, (The Augustine Series; Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006). Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this work. A very helpful contemporary analogue would be Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for Baptism : Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2001).

19.32), from Noah to Abraham (19.33) and Abraham to David (20.34–20.36), from David to the Babylonian Captivity (20.37) and the Babylonian Captivity to Christ (21.38), culminating in an account of God’s deeds from the First Coming of Christ to His Second Coming (22.39–24.44). Theophilus was told that the perfect epitome of the story, as well as its culmination, is found in God’s humble love descending to us in Christ. As such, Christ embodies the principle by which God has been approaching us, indeed pursuing us, since the very beginning.

Possidius concluded by exhorting Theophilus to live in a manner worthy of God’s humble love in light of his salvific deeds. Focal points for moral striving were addressed. Theophilus must guard himself against relapsing into idolatry. He must seek to resolve anger before evening. Sexual immorality must be shunned and all forms of deceit renounced. Chrestus would be his companion in the spiritual and moral journey to follow.

This teaching rang true to Theophilus and he indicated his initial assent. So Possidius completed Theophilus’ enrollment among the catechumens by praying over him, signing him with the cross and giving him a taste of salt in Jesus’ name. (Salt was a preservative and symbolically embodied a prayer for the catechumen to be preserved through the trials of conversion to come.) From this point on, Theophilus was considered a Christian, though only a “catechumen” and not yet one of the “faithful.”⁷ Theophilus and Chrestus were dismissed with a blessing and the task of living out Christian teachings.

Joining a Catechetical Group

At the next catechetical instruction, Possidius integrated Theophilus and Chrestus into a group of catechumens at a similar moral and spiritual level.⁸

⁷ If persecution arose and he was called upon to confess Jesus, Theophilus would be expected to confess. Should he be martyred, his salvation would not be doubted. The early church held that martyrdom constituted a “baptism in one’s own blood.”

⁸ Consider the testimony of Origen. “[A]s far as they can, Christians previously examine the souls of those who want to hear them, and test them individually beforehand; when before entering the community the hearers seem to have devoted themselves sufficiently to the desire to live a good life, then they introduce them. They privately appoint one class consisting of recent beginners who are receiving elementary instruction and have not yet received the sign that they have been purified, and another class of those who, as far as they are able, make it their set purpose to desire nothing other than those things of which Christians approve’ (Origen, *Con-*

This group would meet twice weekly over the course of the next couple of years. The content of the curriculum would be a deeper exploration of the biblical history of salvation coupled with insightful moral exhortation and mentoring leading to personal renovation. Three practices especially made the early Christian catechumenate much more than a “Christianity 101” class.

First, mentoring facilitated spiritual and moral growth.⁹ Apart from camaraderie in the transforming process, sponsors provided an external diagnosis to the convert. None of us see ourselves in a fully accurate manner. Chrestus’ frank observations provided Theophilus with a regular check on self-deception and a stimulus for moral striving. Likewise, Chrestus was expected to help Theophilus make sense of the teachings imparted in the catechetical sessions. If a particular point was opaque to Theophilus as a newcomer, Chrestus as one of the faithful elucidated the matter.

Second, each session concluded with a team of “exorcists” praying over Theophilus and other catechumens individually for their deliverance from evil.¹⁰ “Exorcism” was the early church’s word for this process, but that word conjures inaccurate images to our Hollywood-fed minds.

Basically, the exorcism process acknowledged that there are multiple layers of agency within a person, and the person does not have direct access to every layer. There are parts of me that need changing, but I cannot simply choose to change them on my own. Thus God’s help is needed and prayer is appropriate.

To develop a more accurate picture of the typical effects of exorcism, consider this description from the mid-third century.

We affirm that the whole human world has evidence of the work of Jesus since in it dwell the churches of God which consist of people converted through Jesus from countless evils.... [T]he

tra Celsum 3.51 [trans. Henry Chadwick; Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1980 (1953), 163]).

⁹ A moving testimony to Origen’s manner of mentoring the catechumen, written by a person he taught and converted is Gregory Thaumaturgus’ *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen*.

¹⁰ By mid-third century there were 52 exorcists active in the church in Rome (cf. Eusebius and John Ernest Leonard Oulton, *The Ecclesiastical History Vol. 2 / with an English Transl. By J.E.L. Oulton* (London: 1964)..

name of Jesus still takes away mental distractions from men, and daemons and diseases as well, and implants a wonderful meekness and tranquility of character, and a love for mankind and a kindness and gentleness, in those who ... genuinely accepted the gospel about God and Christ and the judgment to come.¹¹

So a more accurate translation of the process for contemporary purposes might be “prayer saturation.” In other words, twice per week Theophilus would be the beneficiary of focused prayer by one who knew him well. Specific areas of Theophilus’ moral weakness and spiritual failure would be saturated in prayer and God’s deliverance would be sought for those layers at work within Theophilus that were beyond his immediate control.

Third, to the mentoring relations and prayer saturation were added periodic “scrutinies” or guided discernment sessions with the catechist. The catechist led the convert through this diagnostic process, one on one, in order to provide spiritual direction and determine specific needs for transformation. For instance, Theophilus might emerge from his first scrutiny with a commitment to notice early signs as he began slipping toward anger. He might then learn to step out of the process before anger seized control. Subsequent scrutinies might lead Theophilus to focused decisions to practice forgiveness more readily or to guard his tongue against hasty speech, depending on his spiritual and moral state of development at the time.

The Liturgy of the Catechumens

During the catechetical process, Theophilus and his fellow catechumens gathered each Sunday with the church. They attended the first phase of the service known as the “liturgy of the catechumens.” Through attending the liturgy, Theophilus too was formed by the songs and prayers of the church. He heard a homily with the rest of the congregation. However, there were certain elements of the service for which Theophilus was not yet prepared and could not attend. Catechumens were dismissed from the service prior to the holy kiss, the recital of the Creed, the communal praying of the Lord’s Prayer, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper or any Baptism. These elements were concealed under what scholars refer to as the “discipline of secrecy” in the ancient church.

¹¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.67.

As we consider all that was involved in “stage one” of the catechetical process, we should note that this stage typically lasted two or three years, but chronology was not the decisive factor. We have several examples of catechumens in the early church that progressed more rapidly and were baptized earlier. The key factor was spiritual development, not the period of time intervening. So we should not imagine the protracted period as a time in which baptism was denied. Rather, the church was making provision for guiding persons through the full temporal process typically required for a complete conversion. Prodigious, quick conversions are easy to accommodate. Wise guidance for the typical conversion process requires more forethought and care.

Stage Two: Competency, the Lenten Preparation for Baptism

(40 DAYS IN DURATION)

After two years of mentoring, Theophilus was approaching a settled trust in Jesus and commitment to Jesus’ way of life. Possidius and Chrestus, seeing Theophilus’ growth, encouraged him to join those petitioning for baptism.

The solemn ceremony, which marked formal enrollment among the “petitioners,” occurred each year at Epiphany (January 6). At this time the bishop counseled potential “petitioners” to count the cost of full allegiance, issued warnings of the consequences of ill-intentioned initiation, and provided descriptions of the spiritual benefits of a fully committed life with God.¹² Catechumens, like Theophilus, who sought baptism at the coming Easter, placed their names into a basket in the bishop’s presence as the congregation chants Psalm 42, “As the deer longs for flowing streams....” Chrestus too must be present as Theophilus’ sponsor. The bishop’s scrutiny, which followed, directed questions to them both concerning Theophilus’ manner of life. When the bishop was satisfied of Theophilus’ sincere intentions, he was formally enrolled among the “petitioners” (*competentes*) and entered the stage of “competency”.

¹² For an example of this type of homily see the Procatechesis in Cyril and F. L. Cross, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments : The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

The Lenten fast began the day after enrollment and continued until Easter. Theophilus was healthy enough to sustain a rather rigorous deprivation. Through this time of competency, he was expected to abstain from wine, meat, bathing, public entertainment, and the marriage bed. Some petitioners with weaker constitutions were allowed to include a little wine or meat for health's sake. But all engaged, as they were able, in a manifestation of repentance for sins from which they would be cleansed in baptism. During this repentance, they might even dress in coarse goatskin garb and walk barefoot.

Theophilus was now expected to participate in a daily regime of liturgy, instruction and exorcism. Petitioners gathered at six each morning for a program that lasted about three hours; this was primarily a time for testing. Scrutinies became more frequent. Theophilus was exorcised or saturated in prayer on a daily basis. Each time he came for instruction, hands were imposed upon Theophilus and the power of Christ invoked over him. The residual pockets of disorder within him were named and Satan was commanded to depart.

For the first four weeks, the content of instruction reviewed what was covered in the previous two years. So the history of God's deeds and moral exhortation still occupied center stage.¹³ On the Saturday fifteen days before Easter, however, the focus shifted. In a ceremony known as the *traditio symboli*, the creed was "handed over" to Theophilus and the petitioners. Theophilus was led through a process of memorizing the creed, for it could not be written down lest it fall into the hands of unbelievers. Over the next week, Chrestus helped Theophilus to memorize it completely. Eight days later, on the following Saturday, Theophilus was asked to "hand back" the creed in a formal recitation known as the *redditio symboli*. The daily instruction of the intervening week focused on expounding the creed article by article.

¹³ See, e.g., Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs : Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). and Chrysostom John and Paul W. Harkins, *Baptismal Instructions, Ancient Christian Writers the Works of the Fathers in Translation*, (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963).

Stage Three: Enlightenment in Rite and Word
(Holy Week and the Easter Octave)

On Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter), Holy Week began with another rite of “handing over” (*traditio orationis dominicae*). Here Theophilus was first introduced to the Lord’s Prayer. As he memorized the words of the Lord’s Prayer, Theophilus was learning the words that would be his birth-right. Following his emergence from the waters of baptism on Easter morning, he would join others in calling upon “Our Father” for the first time. Again, the instruction of the final week commenced with a focus on expounding the meaning of the petitions within this prayer.

Holy Week also involved special worship services, most lasting about three hours, in which special readings, prayers, and songs were given voice. On Wednesday the didactic focus shifted from the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer to meditation upon the passion of Christ.

On Thursday the petitioners received a brief respite. In honor of the Lord’s Last Supper, Theophilus and his co-petitioners were allowed to enjoy a bath and to break their fast for a special evening meal. As Jesus did in John’s Gospel, the bishop now washed the feet of those gathered.

Good Friday was devoted to commemoration of Christ’s crucifixion. Theophilus and the petitioners gathered with the faithful. Through the final three days, all fasted together, faithful and petitioner alike. On this day, Theophilus heard the entirety of Matthew’s passion narrative read and the bishop preached on the significance of Jesus’ death.

Saturday Vigil began with the lamp lighting as the church gathers at sunset in the *Martyrium*, which housed the remains of those killed for their witness to Christ. Amid reminders of the costly witness borne by local brothers and sisters past, Theophilus joined the church in a nightlong prayer punctuated by a series of readings, songs, and sermons.

At cockcrow, Theophilus’ two-year conversion process reached its climax.¹⁴ The baptismal ceremony begins at first light with the consecration of

¹⁴ The definitive examination of all known witnesses to baptism in the first five centuries is Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009). One might also profitably consult Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian*

the baptismal waters. While chanting Psalm 42, Theophilus and the other petitioners were led down to the water.

At the water's edge, Theophilus removed his penitential garb of goat-skin. He stood upon it naked and faced West. The bishop asks, "Theophilus, do you renounce Satan and all his pomp and temptations?" Theophilus replied, "I do renounce Satan," whereupon the bishop hissed in his face and demanded Satan to depart Christ's property forever. The hiss was called "exsufflation" and, if directed toward a statue of the emperor, was considered a treasonous act. A deacon now grasped Theophilus' shoulders and turned his body to face East. The bishop then asked, "Theophilus, do you give yourself to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who set creation in motion and before whom all things tremble?" Theophilus responded, "I do, and may Christ grant me to perform all his will without blame."

With this pledge of allegiance to Christ, Theophilus was led into the water. Waste deep in water, Theophilus was asked, "Do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth?" When Theophilus said, "I believe," strong hands grasped his head and shoulders and plunged him beneath the water. A moment later Theophilus rose. Again he was asked, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, born of the virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead, buried and raised again for our sins?" Again, upon his confession, Theophilus was plunged and held beneath the waters. When Theophilus rose, the final question greeted him: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets, overshadowed the virgin Mary, indwells the church, and by whom our bodies will be resurrected on the last day?" Theophilus assented and a third time the waters received him with a splash.

On the other side of the baptistery, Theophilus' head was doused in oil and the sign of the cross marked upon his forehead. The "chrismation" represented the gift of the Holy Spirit just received in immersion. Someone draped a new, white garment around Theophilus' shoulders and he was lead to join

Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation, Rev. and expanded ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007); Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd., 2006); Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough,: St. Paul Publications, 1972).

the other newly baptized “infants”. When all were gathered before the church, the “infants” exercised their birthright and called upon “Our Father in the heavens.” They then received the Lord’s Supper for the first time with the faithful. At their first celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the “infants” were given a cup of mixed milk and honey symbolizing both their infant status (for this was typical baby food of the day) and their entrance into the life, of which the “land flowing with milk and honey” was an Old Testament type.

Over the course of the Easter Octave (the eight days from Easter through the following Sunday), the “infants” would continue to wear their white robes and return daily to receive the Lord’s Supper and teaching. The teaching during this week¹⁵ was called “mystagogy.” In terms of content, mystagogical orations expounded upon the significance and symbolism of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and other aspects of the church’s liturgy as they reflected again scriptural images. The “infants” were welcomed into the company of the faithful and shared in the full worship service, including the holy kiss, the Lord’s Supper, praying the Lord’s Prayer, and confessing the creed.

Each of these experiences was new to Theophilus. Though he had pieced together some fragmentary expectations, he had never witnessed any of these rites. He needed explanations to reap the full spiritual benefits of participation in worship. At this point, Theophilus learned that the waters into which he had been plunged stand in continuity with those waters over which the Spirit of God hovered “in the beginning.” The waters by which the earth was cleansed in Noah’s day and the waters, by which God delivered his people from the evil of Pharaoh’s army, also rippled through Theophilus’ understanding. But above all, Theophilus learned that in the waters of baptism he and his fellow catechumens had become members of the one body of Christ.

Similarly, Theophilus learned that the bread and cup not only referred to a sacrificial action in the past, they also symbolized a sacrifice yet intended—namely, the sacrifice that the church seeks to become. Theophilus now communed with Christ as he took the bread, but he also meditates upon how

¹⁵ The timing of the mystagogical orations (explanations of the sacraments) varied from place to place in the ancient church. However, two practices prevailed. Mystagogical orations were delivered either during Holy Week preceding baptism on Easter, or during the Easter Octave on the days immediately following baptism.

he and this community were called to be an extension of Christ's sacrificial life in the world.

Thus the mystagogical orations provided a pivotal orientation for Theophilus' solidifying conversion. At the Easter Octave, the "infants" wore their white robes for the last time before melding in with the faithful at large. But they were exhorted to keep their lives evermore as clean within as the robes were without. The conversion process had reached its ritual conclusion, but the life of Christian maturation had just begun. The extensive, and at times exhausting, process of the early Christian catechumenate constituted a sound beginning for a life of spiritual growth.

Suggested Retrieval for Our Day

Not every aspect of the above catechetical and baptismal process is worth reproducing in our day. Let us harbor no fantasies that replicating every aspect of the early Church's catechetical process would be either possible or beneficial today. The "discipline of secrecy," for instance, is forever a thing of the past. That is probably a good thing. Religious institutions in our day have not used secrecy well.

Retrieval is not the same thing as a reproduction. What we must seek are appropriate analogues for our own day. Nonetheless, a few aspects of the ancient catechumenate seem particularly important to retrieve in some form for our own day.

First, an extensive mentored process of moral and spiritual formation on the beginning of a person's interaction with the church would foster a more complete conversion, which in turn would enable sound processes of Christian maturation over time. And the basic, twofold content of teaching as a reframing of the self within the story of God's deeds and guidance into the Christian moral life cannot be improved upon. For those who come to faith and are immersed more quickly, the same program would foster maturation in Christ.

To be clear, I am not advocating *denying* baptism to a person at any stage. The point of developing a longer catechetical program is to accommodate the actual length of real life conversions. Under prodigious circumstances like the Ethiopian Eunuch or the Philippian Jailer, where conversion takes

hold very quickly, we should never withhold the water based on an abstract timetable. To be fair to the ancients, this also was true of the patristic model.

However, most persons I have worked with take years to come to full faith commitment. This has been my own experience in mission. From conversations with other missionaries and ministers across Europe, it matches their experience of evangelism over the last couple decades.

A qualitative study of actual converts conducted by the British Bible Society in the 1990s came to this conclusion. “The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.”¹⁶ It may be in our cultural environment that a process slightly longer, not shorter, than the early Christian catechumenate will be needed.

So I am in favor of having a general catechetical program ready to walk with people for several years until full conversion and immersion occur. However, I am also in favor of immersing persons at whatever pace they actually find themselves turning toward Christ and ready to join him in baptism, whether that in actuality takes a few days or several years. If baptism comes at one month, then much of that program would still be worthwhile for the early maturation process beyond baptism.

Second, the sponsorship-mentoring model is essential and should be fostered today. Conversion, at whatever pace, is a disorienting and potentially isolating experience. Finding non-coercive ways to ensure that a more experienced follower of Christ accompanies the convert on his or her spiritual journey would be a merciful and helpful act of the church. Of course, the church must take special care to ensure that sponsorship never degenerate into a manipulative or authoritarian relation of control. Such would certainly be damaging and our own history supplies cautionary tales sufficient to warn. Nonetheless, the lack of accompaniment along the journey of conversion brings its own perils and we would do well to supply, with chastened hearts, the support needed.

¹⁶ John British Finney and Society Foreign Bible, *Finding Faith Today* (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), p. 25.

Third, exorcism played a stronger role than we often think in the conversion process. Since the term miscommunicates today, we should dispense with the term without abandoning the substance. As an analogue, I suggest the development, training and extensive utilization of “prayer saturation teams” within our congregations as part of the regular catechetical process.

Fourth, I would advocate a shift in teaching about baptism from a singular focus on the “necessity” of baptism, to an equal emphasis upon the meaning and significance of baptism. Such a focus would better prepare persons for receiving the transformative blessings that baptism was meant to bestow. However, to be truly effective in solidifying conversion, this shift in teaching about baptism, must be mirrored in our manner of bestowing baptism.

To be clear, I would advocate making the baptismal service constitute the whole of our worship on Sundays in which a baptism is to be performed. In other words, baptism should never be a speedy, perfunctory add-on to the end of our worship service. Properly developed, a full baptismal service beautifully preaches the gospel in deed, accompanying words, and congregational song. Periodic baptismal services, wherein the whole worship service is devoted first to explaining, elaborating, and performing baptism and then culminates in a corporate sharing of the Lord’s Supper should become the norm. This practice would both enrich the church’s worship and, by the very time devoted, emphasize the church’s care for her newly birthed brothers and sisters in Christ.

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