

Education and Catechesis in the Ancient Church – What We Can Learn from It

How did the early church retain its gospel content? What were their methods? How rigorous was their approach? This talk examines vital evidence for the way Christians learned and passed on their message, and it offers lessons for today.

John Dickson’s story is eclectic. Starting out as a professional singer-songwriter, he now works as an author, speaker, historian, and media presenter. He was the Founding Director of the Centre for Public Christianity (2007-17). He has published over 20 books, two of which became television documentaries, with a third, *For the Love of God: How the Church is Better and Worse Than You Ever Imagined*, released in Australian cinemas in June 2018. John has held a variety of teaching and research positions before moving to Wheaton College, including in the Ancient History Department at Macquarie University (2002-2015), the Hebrew, Jewish, and Biblical Studies Department at Sydney University (2011-2021), Ridley College Melbourne (2019-2022), and the Faculty of Classics at the University of Oxford (2015-2023). A busy public speaker, he lives in Wheaton, Illinois, with his wife Elizabeth and the youngest of their three children.

INTRODUCTION: the expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries

SCHOLAR	% CHRISTIANS	NO. OF CHRISTIANS
Gibbon	5%	3 million
von Harnack	6.5%	4 million
MacMullen	8.3%	5 million
Goodenough	10%	6 million
Fox	4.5%	2.7 million
H. A. Drake	8.5%	5.1 million
Stark	10%	6 million
Ehrman	4%	2.5 million
AVERAGE ESTIMATE	7.3% (of Roman pop.)	4.4 million (of 60m pop.)

Number/percentage of Christians the Roman Empire (60 million pop.) by AD 300

1. CATECHESIS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Roman social historian Edwin Judge (of Macquarie University): “The Christian faith as Paul expounds it belongs with the doctrines of the philosophical schools rather than with the esoteric rituals of the mystery religions ... The religious *activities* of the Christian societies, the *organisation* and *conduct* of the cult, are only of minor concern ... The view that must have been commonly taken [by outsiders looking on] is that of a school of disciples under the instruction of a rabbi, or a devout sect committed to the study and preservation of the law, or finally of a society formed to attend upon the teaching of a travelling preacher.” E. A. Judge, “Scholastic Community” part 2, p.135-36, *Journal of Religious History* 1.3.

See also, Claire S. Smith, *Pauline Communities as “Scholastic Communities”*: A Study of the Vocabulary of “Teaching” in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. WUNT II, 335. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012.

John Dickson, "Teaching as traditioning in 1 Tim 2:12: an historical observation" (111-121), in *The Gender Conversation*. Morling College Press, 2018.

Paul's Last Supper tradition, 1 Cor 11:23-26; Paul's Passion tradition, 1 Cor 15:3-5

Luke 1:1-4; Matt 28:16-20

2. HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME (CIRCA AD 200)

One lecture a week before the church service for three years, or approximately 144 hours.

The trinitarian content of catechism:

"When each of them to be baptized has gone down into the water, the one baptizing shall lay hands on each of them, asking, "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?" And the one being baptized shall answer, "I believe." He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand upon each of their heads. Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?" When each has answered, "I believe," he shall baptize a second time. Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?" Then each being baptized shall answer, "I believe." And thus let him baptize the third time. Afterward, when they have come up out of the water, they shall be anointed by the elder with the Oil of Thanksgiving, saying, "I anoint you with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ." Then, drying themselves, they shall dress and afterwards gather in the church." (The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, §21)

3. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE (CIRCA AD 250)

Strong emphasis on ethical themes

Cyprian, *Treatise 12, Third Book, To Quirinus*.

4. APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS (CIRCA AD 250)

Apostolic Constitutions 7.39-41. Let him, therefore, who is to be taught the truth in regard to piety be instructed before his baptism in the knowledge of the unbegotten God, in the understanding of His only begotten Son, in the assured acknowledgment of the Holy Ghost. Let him learn the order of the several parts of the creation, the series of providence, the different dispensations of Your laws. Let him be instructed why the world was made, and why man was appointed to be a citizen therein; let him also know his own nature, of what sort it is; let him be taught how God punished the wicked ... And after the thanksgiving, let the teacher instruct him in the doctrines concerning our Lord's incarnation, and in those concerning His passion, and resurrection from the dead, and assumption ... And when it remains that the catechumen is to be baptized, let him learn

what concerns the renunciation of the devil, and the joining himself with Christ ... And after his renunciation let him in his consociation say: And I associate myself to Christ, and believe, and am baptized into one unbegotten Being, the only true God Almighty, the Father of Christ, the Creator and Maker of all things, from whom are all things; and into the Lord Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, the First-born of the whole creation, who before the ages was begotten by the good pleasure of the Father, by whom all things were made, both those in heaven and those on earth, visible and invisible; who in the last days descended from heaven, and took flesh, and was born of the holy Virgin Mary, and did converse holily according to the laws of His God and Father, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died for us, and rose again from the dead after His passion the third day, and ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and again is to come at the end of the world with glory to judge the quick and the dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end. And I am baptized into the Holy Ghost, that is, the Comforter, who wrought in all the saints from the beginning of the world, but was afterwards sent to the apostles by the Father, according to the promise of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ; and after the apostles, to all those that believe in the Holy Catholic Church; into the resurrection of the flesh, and into the remission of sins, and into the kingdom of heaven, and into the life of the world to come. And after this vow, he comes to the anointing with oil.

5. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (mid AD 300s)

Three hours of lessons each day, six days a week, for the seven weeks leading up to Easter, or approximately 126 hours.

The eyewitness testimony of Egeria: "They are all taught during those forty days, that is, from the first hour to the third hour, because catechesis is done for three hours. The dismissal from the catechesis having been done at the third hour, the bishop is immediately led from there with hymns to the Anastasis (i.e., the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) and the dismissal takes place at the third hour; and so they are taught for three hours a day for seven weeks, for in the eighth week, what is called Great Week, there is no time for them to be taught." *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* 46, trans. George E. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1970), 124.)

L. P. McCauly (trans.), *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*. Vol.1. The Catholic University of America Press, 1969.

The three purposes of catechesis

5.1. To convert the catechumens

"Disciples/students of the New Testament, sharers in the mysteries of Christ-as yet by calling only, but presently by grace as well—"make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit,"² that you may become a subject of joy for the citizens of heaven. For if there is joy "over one sinner who repents", according to the gospel, how much more will the salvation of so many souls gladden the blessed saints? You have entered upon a good and glorious course: run the holy race in good earnest. Eager for your redemption, the Only-begotten Son of God is present among us; He says: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."⁴ Clothed as you

are in the rough garments of your offenses and "held fast in the meshes of your own sins/' 5 listen to the prophet's voice saying: "Wash yourselves clean! Put away the misdeeds of your souls from before my eyes/' 6 that the angelic choir may chant over you: "Happy they whose faults are taken away, whose sins are covered." 7 Guard unquenched in your hands the torches of faith you have just lighted, that He who of old here on all-holy Golgotha opened up Paradise to the robber because of his faith, may grant you grace to sing the bridal song." (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* lecture 1.1-7)

5.2. To help converts "give an answer" to their pagan and Jewish neighbors

"Be faithful in your attendance of the catechizing. Even though we protract our discourse, do not let your mind yield to distraction. You are taking up arms against the enemy. You are taking up arms against heresies, against the Jews, against the Samaritans, against the Gentiles. Your enemies are many: take plenty of ammunition; you have targets in plenty. You must learn how to shoot down the Greek and do battle with heretic, Jew, and Samaritan. Your weapons are sharp, and sharpest of all is "the sword of the Spirit." But your own right hand must strike with a holy resolution, to fight the fight of the Lord, if you would conquer the opposing powers and make yourself proof against every stratagem of heresy." (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 10)

Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures*, 12.27-31 has a long section about how to defend the Virgin Birth to Greek objections and then to Jewish objections.

5.3. To lay down the structures of the faith

"Study what you are told and guard it forever. Do not confuse the pre-baptismal instructions with the ordinary sermons. Excellent and reliable as those are, still, if we neglect their lessons today, we can learn them tomorrow. But the systematic instruction about the laver ('bath') of regeneration—if that be neglected today, when shall the loss be made good? Imagine it is the season for planting trees: unless we dig, and dig deep, when can the tree be planted aright that has once been planted amiss? Or 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. No: stone must be laid upon stone in regular sequence, and corner follow corner, jutting edges must be planed away: and so the perfect structure rises. I bring you as it were the stones of knowledge; you must be instructed in the doctrine of the living God, of the Judgment, of Christ, of the Resurrection. Many things have to be said in order, which are now being touched upon at random but will then be brought together into harmonious system. Unless you achieve this unity of design, holding the beginning and the sequel in your mind together, the builder may do his best, but your house will be a ruin." (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 11)

CONCLUSION: from catechism to the Christian liberal arts

Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335-395), *The Great Catechism*

Augustine (AD 354-430), *On Catechising the Uninstructed*, and *On Christian Teaching*.