

# Early Christian Perspectives on the Catechetical Process

The goal of this paper is to provide a brief overview of findings related to the catechetical practices of early Christianity. This approach was occasioned by the observations that 1). the United States is headed toward a post-Christian reality, where Christianity can no longer be assumed as the dominant force in American culture<sup>1</sup>, and 2). that it would be possible to gain insight from Christians who lived in a pre-Christian environment.<sup>2</sup> This paper is organized around themes and is not meant to be read straight through. Instead, each theme contains a series of lettered or numbered observations designed to help further explore each theme.

## A note about early Christian catechesis

The world of the Roman Empire contained numerous challenges for the early Christians, principally highlighted by a complex system of religions that infused most areas of life. This created a sharp distinction on many cultural and social details. Yet, in spite of the challenges, early Christianity was able to thrive and grow within a culture that was apathetic and even antagonistic toward Christianity. Through the patient process of lifestyle evangelism, new converts were won to the faith and offered the church the opportunity to integrate them into the faith. This process of shaping and forming a new convert is known as catechesis. This process, which began with an initial faith commitment and ultimately culminated in baptism, would often last about 3 years and was designed to introduce a convert to the practices and teachings of Christianity. Although the particulars could change, the general

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<sup>1</sup> This process is known as post-Christianity. It points to the United States becoming an increasingly secular society where traditional Christian beliefs and values are no longer part of the mainstream expectation. Barna Research Group tracks the movement to post-Christianity on a national level and produces a bi-annual synopsis of the most post-Christian cities. See: <https://www.barna.com/research/post-christian-cities-2019/>. In 2015, Barna listed the percentage of Americans defined as post-Christian as 44%. For a description of their metrics and findings, see: <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/>. Unfortunately, this post-Christian movement is often coupled with de-Christianization, a process whereby a person leaves a previous faith-commitment.

<sup>2</sup> The reign of Emperor Constantine (306-337 A.D.) would mark a major turning point for early Christianity. His move to legalize Christianity and his personal adherence to the faith would alter the relationship between Christianity and society and between Christianity and the government. Prior to Constantine, Christianity was a sometimes persecuted religion that was very minor in the expansive Roman Empire. Following his reign, Christianity was on its way to becoming the dominant force (politically and spiritually) in Western society, a position it would generally retain until the contemporary period.

pattern was typically consistent across the different churches. This paper will draw on some early Christian catechetical manuals,<sup>3</sup> early catechists,<sup>4</sup> and the thought of contemporary scholars.<sup>5</sup>

## Conversion was understood as a multi-dimensional process that came out of the free will

The earliest Christians were convinced that conversion could never be the result of coercion or force and insisted that obligatory worship was false worship.<sup>6</sup> Although this posture was, at least, a partial response to religious policies of the Roman Empire, it was embodied in the early approaches to evangelism. The early Christians did not practice evangelism as current Christians would understand, but rather believed that by faithfully living their lives those outside would become attracted to the faith and be patiently wooed to Christianity. One could not be forced to believe and must be patiently drawn to Christianity. Those who didn't convert with eyes wide open would not be able to stand firm under the rigors of being Christian (either because of lifestyle requirements or the pressures from Roman society).

This meant that Christian conversion had to be understood as a multi-dimensional process rather than a momentary declaration. This process required patience and correction as each believer was unique and the engagement of their free will meant that time for a change in thinking, feeling, and action was necessary. Ultimately, they understood that the free will brought the convert into relationship with God and that there was an experience that they had with God. This experience couldn't be forced or placed on a time table, although there were steps for the convert to walk through to make this experience a reality.

**Point of connection: It may be useful for parents to think of conversion as a process rather than just one specific moment.**

## Attraction to the faith could come from many different sources

The early Christians were convinced that faithful living informed by our theology is what attracts converts and children to the faith. With this as a baseline understanding, they did not believe that the same aspects of Christianity were attractive to everyone. Rather, there were multiple tracks by which people were attracted to Christianity. These included:

1. The beauty of the ritual. The mystical sense of connection with the divine was a prominent part of the Eucharist, which also provided the idea that God sacrificed himself in our place. Although the Eucharist was fenced (meaning it was only available to baptized Christians), the ritual was still known by those outside. The symbolism that was present in baptism

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<sup>3</sup> Two principal manuals were considered. The *Apostolic Traditions* is typically credited to a man named Hippolytus, but this has been challenged in the contemporary world. Regardless of authorship the text represents early third century practices in Rome. The text is readily available on-line, including here:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm>. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (the teachings of the Apostles) is devoted to establishing proper order within the church. This text contains details on early Christian practices toward faith development. This text is a more limited in circulation, but is available here:

<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Two of the more prominent catechists would be Tertullian of Carthage (late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) and Origen of Alexandria and later of Caesarea (mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century). Together, they represent both Latin and Greek approaches.

<sup>5</sup> One of the best treatments of early Christian evangelistic and catechetical efforts is Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Baker, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 5.19.11-14. <https://ccel.org/ccel/lactantius/institutes/anf07>.

would also have been common knowledge, presenting a picture of movement into a true life.

2. The treatment of those who were socially disadvantaged. Christians particularly emphasized this aspect within their apologies (defenses of the faith). Although these texts were ostensibly addressed to the Roman emperors, they were mostly internal communication with other Christians and emphasized how Christians lived attractive lives to those outside. The treatment of others, particularly orphans, widows, and the poor were highlighted as a clear mark of distinction with Roman society. Tertullian would insist that the Christian response to the poor was how the community showed its love for one another.<sup>7</sup>
3. The sense of hope and connection that was provided in Christianity was a clear antithesis to Roman religious practices. Romans tended to construct social clubs out of shared interests. These provided a sense of community within the Roman environment but came at a cost, particularly a financial responsibility. Christianity offered a free alternative that was open to anyone who wanted to live as a Christian and did not distinguish based on socio-economic standing or racial identity. For some, this encouraged downward social mobility in order to provide financial support for other members.
4. The specific empowerment of women. The specific role of women within the early Christian liturgy is much debated, although it is clear that there were deaconesses, female presbyters, and, most likely, the occasional bishop. This is in addition to other functions in the order of widows and the later order of virgins. The opportunity to assume positions of leadership and to live free (within specific circumstances) of male domination is often seen as an attractive feature of Christianity for women in the Roman world.
5. Patience in business practices. Early Christianity would encourage businesspeople to conduct their affairs not with solely a financial interest, but rather to conduct their business with an eye toward conversion, even if it cost them income.

**Point of connection: Parents can be encouraged that there is no one part to faith for all people and can, instead, focus on element attractive to their unique child.**

## The on-boarding process

This section discusses the process a person went through from the first point of interest in Christianity to full inclusion in the community following baptism.

1. As a person expresses interest in joining Christianity, there is something of a feeling out process.<sup>8</sup> The convert has to feel they are ready for instruction while a sponsor has to testify to their competence.
  - a. **There might be a connection here with parents who are stressed about their children making an early faith commitment. This identifies that some will take longer than others to be ready.**
2. There follows a time of instruction. The sponsor is at the head of this process but does so in conjunction with the leaders of the community. There are different areas of responsibility: the bishop attends to doctrinal and Biblical instruction (particularly later in the process) while the sponsor helps in the development of habits in life and the removal of incongruent aspects.
  - a. A general principle seems to be correction over rejection.<sup>9</sup> There is an opportunity to set things right rather than an outright rejection. Many treatises were constructed to

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<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.7.

<sup>8</sup> *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.1

<sup>9</sup> *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.9

provide descriptions of what particular aspects of society needed to be rejected. These provided guidance and insight to help new converts on the journey. The goal was to identify difficult areas for correction and improvement.<sup>10</sup> **Within our contemporary context, parents and caregivers might benefit from seeing themselves as a mentor of sponsor who walks next to their child and provides moderate correction on the faith journey.**

3. The time of instruction lasted for up to 3 years. This time was flexible and allowed for more advanced students to move quickly through the process but also allowed for hiccups and set-backs. It was not about a specific amount of time but rather about the patient development of character.
4. The instructional responsibilities of the church representative mainly focused on ethical and doctrinal components. These were brought to the front and explained. These were specifically tied to actions that the church encouraged catechumens to participate in or refrain from. For example, we care for the poor not only because we are commanded to or because it is the right thing to do, but because they are made in the image of God and thus their life matters to God and to us.
5. The focus of instruction was often mostly ethical in nature. They focused a great deal on purity (sexual and other aspects) because of the influence of Roman culture. They focused on shaping practices and explaining the rationale and theology behind the practices.
  - a. Particular habits within the church that might be misconstrued were slowly introduced. An example would be the kiss of peace that was practiced within the community. Within the Roman environment, kissing had significant sexual connotations. The kiss of peace was appropriated from the culture but was easily misunderstood by those unfamiliar with or new to Christianity. Once the catechumen had more clearly broken from their old life then they were permitted to participate.
6. Following the time of instruction, the catechumens were moved toward the end of the process. There was significant focus on there being an end point of the apprenticeship and a time to move forward with full membership. There was an end in sight but the journey was necessary.
  - a. The length of the process gave the new believer time to enculturate the faith into their lives
    - i. Repetition of ideas and principles. There wasn't the assumption that the new believer caught everything the first time or that everything was applied and lived out appropriately. Instead, there was a continual circling back to key themes and ideas.
    - ii. Continual examination of life. Looking for evidence of growth, change, and consistency.
    - iii. There is a continual emphasis on the lived experience of compassionate ministry
      1. Live soberly (i.e., in control of yourself, not given to going off the deep end)
      2. Honor widows (i.e., the vulnerable within their society)
      3. Visit the sick
      4. Active in well-doing. This seems to be a general category but could include things like burying the dead, feeding the hungry, helping the poor.

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<sup>10</sup> See especially, Tertullian, *On Idolatry* in which he identifies many common Roman practices as being suspect for idolatry.

5. These lived experiences were grounded in the doctrine of the church and ran counter to the culture. This doesn't mean that the Romans never did these things but they were part of the engrained Christian habit and were done for different reasons. Roman generosity tended to be on an individual level whereas the Christians wanted to move beyond that to a cultural shift within their community.
  6. This focus allowed the catechumens to have active engagement with the mission of the church. The mission didn't wait for them to be baptized or to clearly articulate points of doctrine. Although not yet a full member of the community, they were active in the work of the church. This would create habits that inform the rest of the Christian life. This forward looking element was designed to set them up for future success and for continued adherence to the faith.
- iv. Throughout the process, there appear to have been markers at various developmental stages. There were physical tokens to symbolize their advancement as a Christian and provided a physical reminder of their choice. Given the lengthy nature of catechesis, this would help encourage as they went.
 

**Point of connection: The giving of physical mementos to mark key places of development on the journey can help children internalize and remember their faith commitment.**
  - v. Catechumens are intentionally moved to integrate into the ritual of the church. There was a significant amount of explaining that would take place so that they could be aware of what was occurring. They not only explained what was happening, but why it was happening. They were connected to the rhythm and symbols through their participation.
  - vi. Another distinct point of connection occurred prior to the first communion. Although there aren't many details, the newly baptized were encourage to bring something unique with them, probably some type of physical memento to remember the experience. These distinct, physical points of connection seem to be a continual emphasis.
  - vii. The final examination (featured an exam of how they were living as well as containing required responses to the creeds which centered on key points of doctrine) was attended and supported by the entire leadership of the church. This created a broader connection with the in-coming members.
    1. Multiple times they are anointed with oil. This seems to function as a symbol of conclusion and a symbol of sealing.
  - b. At the end of the process, the catechumen is now a full member. The apprenticeship is concluded and they are fully integrated. They are seen as kneeling with the others for prayer and are permitted to give the kiss of peace to others.

## Patience

One of the key aspects of the approach to evangelism and catechesis of earliest Christianity was patience. Multiple treatises were written by major figures on the topic, including the so-called founder of Latin Christianity, Tertullian, whose treatise (short book) is handily titled *On Patience*. In this approach the early Christians valued patience as the key to the spread of the faith and to the successful on-boarding of new Christians. The patient approach valued the following principles:

1. The change of habit takes time. Early Christians recognized that converts from the Roman religious systems were walking into a brand new environment. The inculturation of the Christian life would not happen overnight, but would take patient, intentional, and repeated activities. Tertullian would state, "Christians are made, not born."<sup>11</sup> Actions that eventually are spontaneous are the result of intentional, formed action.
2. There was recognition that repetition and correction would be necessary. There was a continual checking in process to assure that new converts were both living and understanding their faith.
3. The principle of patience led to flexibility. Each new convert was viewed as an individual. The catechumenate was viewed as an apprenticeship in the faith. The goal in the formation of the new Christian was not to follow a timeline but rather to serve as a training ground for character. Thus, the program for each new Christian was adjusted as they matured in their faith. Although 3 years in the catechumen process is the standard expectation, this could be shortened or lengthened as development necessitated. As the catechumen moved from basic principles to more advanced concepts, this flexibility allowed for an approach that valued the inculturation of belief and action. Flexibility was also present in the liturgy and the participation of the new convert. The focus was on participating to one's ability, thus making faith authentic while staying within the broad structure of the worship of the church.
4. There was a clear sense that formation was gradual and a step by step reality. They focused on keeping teachings and actions connected and straight-forward and increasing the depth as time progressed. They wanted to move the catechumen forward at appropriate times rather than prescribed times.
5. The sense of patience allowed for a measured freedom for the catechumen. They were free from the worries of cultic (worship) precision at the start of the journey as the early Christians realized precision (in worship, in practice, and in theology) came about through time and practice. This does not mean that errors were ignored, but instead they were patiently and repetitively explained.
6. The patient approach allowed the early Christians to provide a broad structure with flexibility. The broad structure allowed for soundness in faith and flexibility allowed the convert to do things to their own ability. In this way, certain key element of doctrine could be emphasized (often called the diaphora or essentials) but spread out at different times as the convert demonstrated a potential aptitude for the material. The goal was for basic doctrinal familiarity that is developed over time and integrated with the liturgy and behavior.

## Actions lead to understanding; live your way into a new understanding

The early Christians had a deep sense that actions and beliefs are connected. The beliefs of the community, particularly about the person and work of Jesus drove them in specific directions when it came to their treatment of neighbors, their society, and the world around them (physical and spiritual). Because of this, their focus was on actions over words in two arenas:

1. As the point of emphasis for evangelism strategies. They believed that most came to Christianity because of what they witnessed other Christians doing rather than words that were spoken (more in terms of preaching here). Actions opened the doors of the heart so that it would be accepting of the words that were spoken later.

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<sup>11</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 18.4. The full set of Tertullian's works may be found here: <https://www.ccel.org/fathers>. They are found in volumes 3 and 4 in the Ante-Nicene Fathers series. Note, these translations are from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and will be a bit clunky for modern readers. A Google search will lead to more updated translations of his books on an individual basis.

2. As the point of emphasis in catechesis. Catechumens were mainly evaluated by their actions over their doctrinal precision. This does not mean that doctrine was not a part of the catechetical journey, only that actions were measurable and demonstrated the change that was taking place. They assumed that belief was what drove the actions of believers. The discussion of why they did what they did was a distinctive although somewhat chronologically later aspect of catechesis. This should not be taken as an indication of a reticence to use words but an understanding of when and where to use them.

Key aspects of the formation of action within the new believer:

1. Teaching and living are seen as going hand in hand. The creation of life experiences was believed to root the faith in the life of the new believers.
2. The early Christians were straight-forward in providing explanations to new believers:
  - a. Key Biblical passages were focused on. The emphasis was on memorization (not necessarily exact wording but more in terms of the sense of a passage) and attendance at church (principally) to hear commentary on the passage. In this way, new believers are given a vision of a new reality and a way to live it out.
  - b. A broad Biblical understanding and emphasis was not present in the literature. The distinct focus was on passages about care for the poor and the teachings of Jesus. The broad knowledge of Scripture was attended to later in their post-baptismal journey. Additionally, there was a sense that certain passages needed to be eased into.
3. Care for the poor was a commitment made in the catechetical journey which was re-enforced during baptism. This led to two outcomes:
  - a. Simplifying life through downward mobility.
  - b. Creating a lifelong set of intrinsic habits. These are patiently developed through the formation of recurring activities
4. One of the overarching goals was to bring doctrine and theology into harmony by providing opportunities to put the teachings of the church into practice. The activities were not just dumped on the new converts, but they were brought in alongside those in the church who are already putting things into practice. **This was seen as a key part of the sponsorship/apprenticeship model**
5. The initial goal was not to change the way that the new converts thought about things. Rather, they thought the new believer should live their way into a new kind of thinking. In this way, actions came first and are then re-enforced by the teaching ministry of the church
6. There was a definitive progression in how their teaching and actions matched up. They would move toward more advanced ideas as they progressed in the life of being a Christian.
7. Explanations at each stage were seen as essential. People were not only told what ought to be done but also why it ought to be done.

Key aspects in the formation of thought in new believers:

1. Key Biblical passages are introduced, explained, and memorized. There was not, however, a broad Biblical engagement. Much of this would occur after baptism. The Biblical passages were distinctly connected to the activities that the early Christians wanted to see present in the lives of believers.
2. They distinguished between diaphora (the essentials) and adiaphora (the negotiables). Both appear to be discussed but not everything was done at once. This created a sense of continuity on main points of teaching while providing some freedom on other less clear aspects of the faith.

3. They saw a clear connect between the theology that was taught and the actions that were taken. "There is theology behind our morality."<sup>12</sup> For Tertullian, theology was what distinguished similar actions. In his context, he argued against a group known as the Marcionites who practiced similar behaviors but for different reasons. For example, they had strict ascetical practices because they believed the world was created by a substandard, secondary god who eventually became jealous of humanity. Ascetic practices removed the Marcionite from that god's oversight and allowed the Alien God (depicted as a stranger who blundered into the earth) to save a human from this world. For Tertullian, although the Marcionites practiced a similar morality, it did not impart any spiritual benefit.
4. Part of the explanations moved beyond theological rationale and dealt with the worship of the community. There was a drive to explain the rituals of the church prior to participation. This would build a sense of excitement and anticipation.

## Catechetical process and early Christian habits

There was a distinct set of habits that early Christianity walked through in order to create a formative environment for Christians and new converts.

1. There was an emphasis placed on meeting together. The early Christian community became a club or an association which would work together and walk through life together. While there were a number of other social clubs within the Roman context, these were mostly exclusionary and membership could be quite costly. The early church was an open and inclusive environment which offered avenues of participation regardless of standing in society. It should be noted that inclusive does not mean that there were not standards or expectations present for members of the community.
  - a. As most early Christians (conservatively 90%) were illiterate, the meetings were places for them to hear Scripture and hear the discussion on the meaning and implications of Scripture.
  - b. This would also provide an environment for the discussion of cultural and social activities. Early Christianity saw a need for discernment in activities. How does the activity inform your habits and what ethos is being enculturated?
2. Physical, symbolic actions are explained and encouraged
  - a. Arms raised in prayer because of confidence
  - b. Sign of the cross = confidence in future perfection
  - c. Kiss of peace = love of Christ being shared
3. They emphasized that patience in development is an avenue of our praise for God. Rather than failure creating a road block it became an opportunity to praise God for progress that had been made. By patiently and slowly developing, early Christians understood they were worshipping God by not making the changes on their own.
4. They found value in eating together. In order for a person to be considered a candidate for the catechumenate, they needed to have a sponsor who recommended them for the process. This sponsor continued to bear responsibility as the process proceeded, particularly for the aspects of morality and action. Part of the integration of the catechumen included their presence at community meals.
  - a. Early Christianity seems to have originally had entire feasts that surrounded the Eucharistic celebration. As the church grew, the Eucharist was separated and only permitted to the baptized. The community would, however, continue to meet for meals together.

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<sup>12</sup> *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.9



5. The memorization of key texts was an integral habit that was formed. These texts generally dealt with ethical and moral issues, particularly with the treatment of the marginalized in society. Part of the concept was that these texts re-enforced the Christian ethos and actions. As they talked about and memorized the texts, they had opportunities to participate in what the text recommended.
  - a. A broad Biblical engagement would come later after the catechumens were baptized and had been a part of the church. They viewed this as a more advanced topic
  - b. They focused on discussing the big narrative of Scripture and their place within it. The life and teachings of Jesus also featured prominently.
  - c. Sample texts: Sermon on the Mount, Isa. 2:2-4
6. A developed habit was found in visiting the poor, sick, and prisoners. Collections were taken and supply closets were established. This impetus was theologically rooted in the conviction that all people matter.
7. The early Christians didn't shy away from talking about sex. Sexual relations were prevalent in the Roman context and the Roman understanding and practice differed markedly from that of Christianity. Celibacy and faithfulness were not a typical part of the Roman expectation and boys were expected to be sexually active early in their teens. The Christian call to celibacy outside of marriage and faithfulness to spouse made them stand out as unique within the Roman environment. This topic was a recurring theme in the catechetical formation process.
8. The maintenance of truthfulness was another aspect of Christian habit. They believed that the Christian should always tell the truth regardless of personal consequences. This didn't mean that they always volunteered the truth or answered questions put to them, but in their oral and written communication, truth was the expectation.
9. The continual practice of disciplines rooted in patience. Christians refrained from any sense of retaliation, particularly in business and personal dealings. Killing was not permitted for early Christians, which also precluded becoming or remaining a part of the military. Types of entertainment were also limited for the early Christians, including blood sports and other popular venues that supported the worship of Roman gods or popularized a lack of morality.
10. Willing to take a long view for the sake of patience. This included willingness to lose in the here and now in order for a future spiritual victory to be achieved.

In the formation of habits, early Christianity believed that catechetics and worship worked together to form the habitus of the community. There was a distinct effort to make sure these were harmonized

Teaching and learning activities were often paired. They held that believers needed the opportunity to live out what they had been taught.

Habits that were discussed

1. Sexual purity
2. Affection for everyone
3. Sharing of resources
4. Truth-telling
5. Avoidance of anger
6. Prayer and fasting together

Early Christian worship venues appear to consider providing liminal spaces. A liminal space is seen as bringing together both sides of a boundary. Liminality provided a physical, transitional space from the

old to the new life which contained representative imagery of the Christian journey. A common motif was the Biblical account of the Exodus. These physical markers could go along with have physical mementos of the faith journey.

What becomes spontaneous action is really intentional habits. These are developed through example and instruction.

Alert to places of idolatry in life and practice

The memorization of Biblical texts was understood as putting the concepts into the heart. While they wanted precision in the memorization, it was precision within reason. The important part was understanding the concept that the passage was trying to get across.

Watch the lives of Christians who are admired. This provides an example to imitate.

The practice of repeated symbolic actions

## The process of Origen, considered one of the greatest catechetical instructors

Start off with the basics

These are correlated with explanations. As morals are patiently corrected, the rationale behind the moral is explained

Slowly add in spiritual disciplines

Work through basic points of theology

Speak simply. Although a gifted orator, Origen found value in providing simple explanations at the introductory level and only moving deeper as the catechumens were ready.

Admit to what you don't know. Although generally regarded as one of the brightest individuals of his day, Origen held to the importance of intellectual humility

Share your struggles with the text and the Christian life. This sense of vulnerability was seen as an important aspects for the teacher.

## A clear understanding of culture vs. religion was necessary

The clear divide between Roman culture and the Christian religion meant that early Christians needed to demarcate aspects of Roman culture and practices against Christian expectations. This did not mean that all aspects of Roman culture were rejected, but that not everything from the converts previous life could port over to Christianity. The response to the Roman culture took on many aspects:

1. The Christians felt the need to sort through inherited beliefs and practices. This was done with the intention of disentangling them from life in Christ. Old ways of thinking and practicing had to, at times, be done away with in order to conform to a life in Christ. To this end, the early Christians often focused on occupations that would be incompatible with the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, ways of thinking about the gods had to be dealt with so that a proper conception of God could become a reality for the new believers. Some aspects of Greco-Roman philosophy were seen as compatible with Christianity while other aspects of a more mythological approach had to be done away with.

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<sup>13</sup> See esp. *Apostolic Traditions* 16.9 and Tertullian, *On Idolatry*.

2. They realized that culture can receive a 'yes' or a 'no'. They realized that the Roman culture had a broad impact on how they lived and thought and that this impact was not entirely negative or positive. It did need to be met with discernment regarding the application of culture within the Christian landscape. In this instance, the church leadership was often seen as responsible for guiding the discernment process
3. There was a sense that the response to culture needed to be regional. Activities in particular regions may carry a heavy cultural implication which is lacking in other regions, meaning that what is prohibited in one area may be acceptable in other areas. While this did not apply to more universal aspects, it did come to the surface on multiple issues. On these issues, the early Christians generally strived to practice a reasonable charity. The general view seemed to be that the apostles held unanimity on doctrine and universal matters of discipline (in part the OT moral precepts) and in territories allowed for local decisions to be made.
4. There seemed to be unanimity on the following proposal but disagreement on how to implement it: The church must be indigenous and remain pilgrim. The people of the church had to live in this world and figure out how to navigate it in responsible ways while remaining true to the idea that they are citizens of another kingdom and must live in concert with its requirements. One example was business practices. Christians sought to conduct their business affairs with honesty, preferring to be taken advantage of rather than to break their word.
5. They sought to categorize their theological dispositions. It was necessary to discern if the things they held to be true and proper were just cultural mores or the product of true religion. When things were determined as particularly cultural, there was typically a robust explanation that was supplied.
  - a. **This would have a significant impact in the current Christian context. Are our activities and beliefs simply a part of being a good citizen and not necessarily in harmony with the faith or are they the product of a genuine interaction with the faith?**

## Catechesis content

In general, the content seemed to focus on only a few things with the goal of establishing a solid understanding and application. While certain topics and behaviors were delayed until the catechumen became more advanced, this should not indicate that they were unimportant, only that the catechumen was not ready yet.

### Theological points

1. The person and work of Jesus
  - a. Divinity and humanity
  - b. Atonement (making reconciliation with God possible)
    - i. Multiple images: freedom from death, tread on the devil (militant), bringer of light, presence in Eucharist
2. Eucharist is connected with the filling of the Spirit
  - a. The Eucharist invites us into the unity of the Trinity
  - b. The Eucharist connects with the on-going work of the Holy Spirit
3. Creedal. There were early Rules of Faith and prototypes of the creeds that were used. These emphasized major aspects of theology and were seen as the summary of Scripture.
  - a. Few early texts encouraged the broad reading of Scripture; this was seen as a task for the more mature believers. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* encourages the reading of select books of Scripture for those who were literate, although this seems more about the avoidance of pagan literature

rather than the development of Scripture reading as a spiritual discipline. They are encouraged to read the Kings and prophets are predictive of the Gospel and the Gospels as the fulfillment. This option was only available to the wealthy and educated

- i. There are instructions on how to read the Bible well. In general, the reader is told to look for a simple thematic reading to start with. The Law was a particular point of discussion, with Christians told to follow the morals but not the rituals or cleanliness rules as Christians are free from those.
  - b. What we have as the final clause of the creed was shortened in the early practices. Features: Holy Spirit, Holy Church, Resurrection of the flesh
4. Liturgical
- a. The community leader is responsible for explaining what occurs in the liturgy, especially those elements that are symbolic.
    - i. For example, they would partake of milk and honey which were connected with the promised land and pointed toward our promised land of heaven.
  - b. The liturgy led to a commission to do good works. New members are engaged with the mission of the church.

#### Ethical points

1. Sex and marriage
  - a. They didn't shy away from talking about these, but provided the rationale for the Christian approach; esp. contrary to the Roman world
  - b. The options appear to have been get married or abstain. This was one of the defining elements of the early Christians within their culture
2. Universal vs. local
  - a. Some ethical behaviors were seen as a response to a local situation and therefore not universally applicable or always chronologically in force. Other behaviors were seen as universally binding for all Christians
  - b. While giving instructions, options for completion were often given. Not everyone helps the poor in exactly the same way.
3. Aspects directly related to their culture were often explained
  - a. In the instructions to slaves, they are told to please their master so that God isn't blasphemed. As the principle tool of evangelism was lifestyle rather than oracular communication, this suggests that their concern was how an individual's faith touches other. There is also a hierarchy of principles that seems to be in play.
4. There is a sense of mutual responsibility. In *Didascalia Apostolorum*, men and women are responsible for each other in the way they dress. They are told to live apart from the standards of society and told to dress in a way that does not create lust in the other.

#### Theology and morality were connected

Most early catechetical instructions contained a list of acceptable professions and those that need to be refrained from. Many of the entries are culturally attuned and speak to the early Christian fear of idolatry – purposeful or incidental.

- a. Straight up rejection of those incompatible with the Christian ethos (sexual in nature, violent in nature, idolatrous in nature)
- b. Others were more subtly connected with practices that are against the Christian ethos. These are often explained in the texts.
- c. *Apostolic Traditions* (16:25) contains a significant clarification at the end of its list, noting that if anything was omitted it could be added by the Holy Spirit. This indicates a reactive element for adding and possibly subtracting elements from the list. This seems to add a place for the shifting mores of culture as well as flexibility for engaging with Roman culture.
  - i. The Holy Spirit is key in this discernment project and allows for both flexibility and rigidity.
  - ii. These are considered as pre-requisites for the entry to the catechumenate
- d. The bishops prayers connected theology and practice as the catechumens are commissioned to baptism
  - i. The regeneration of the Holy Spirit is particularly highlighted.
    - 1. Remission of sins
    - 2. Clean, new life
  - ii. They are commissioned with a formal ceremony
  - iii. The topic of the Trinity is broached with distinctions between the persons being made.
    - 1. In this, they take an aspect where there is probable confusion and doubt and integrate it throughout the liturgy.
    - 2. There is flexibility and charity for those who provide a different explanation, so long as it does not depart from established standards. Separation from the diaphora was considered an outside group