

The Cost of Making Disciples

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“Christians,” wrote Tertullian in the second century, “are made, not born.” Fortunately, we have a description of how they were “made” from the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*.¹ Exposed to the gospel through lives of committed Christians, inquirers were questioned as to the seriousness of their intentions. Were they willing to change their lives and to renounce occupational patterns that were incompatible with the faith? Or, was the idolatry permeating their culture so pervasive that they were unable “to hear the word”? If these candidates were capable of making lifestyle corrections, they entered the catechumenate. For as long as three years, these members-in-process were led with care and deliberateness into Christian life. The setting for this faith apprenticeship was liturgical rather than academic, with regular patterns of prayer, exorcism, and the laying on of hands.

Hippolytus does not say that this formation culminated in the Great Vigil of Easter, but other sources reveal that this became the time par excellence for Holy Baptism. At the Vigil, candidates were anointed with the oil of exorcism as they renounced Satan and Satan's influence in their lives. An embryonic Apostles' Creed served as the baptismal formula for a three-fold immersion in living water. Following the water bath they were anointed with a chrismed oil of thanksgiving. Eventually, they were led to the assembly for an emotional welcome, where the bishop publicly sealed or confirmed what had happened in the privacy of the baptistry. There the neophytes took part in their first communion, dining on eucharistic bread, wine, water, and a cup of milk and honey as a sign of entering the Promised Land. Later manuscripts reveal examples of post-Easter mystagogy, sermons interpreting the mysteries of their baptismal experience as well as other aspects of Christian faith and life.

While we are unable to gauge how widespread this baptismal practice was in the third century, the account sets forth a pattern that becomes commonplace for nearly four centuries. It is a striking picture of a community taking the time and providing the arena for a deliberate making of new Christians. In these so-called “awe-inspiring rites of Christian initiation,” the old person was ritually drowned to emerge naked from the amniotic waters of baptism. Oiled like newborns, clothed, the Spirit breathed into them, surrounded with prayer and blessing, and fed bread, wine, water, milk, and honey. This process of baptismal formation seems to be a good example of Mircea Eliade's classic definition of initiation as “equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his (sic) ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before initiation; he has become another.”²

Despite biblical and liturgical images of Holy Baptism as a transforming experience, few leaders today expect the kind of radical change identified in that definition, in the Book of Acts, or that account from the third century. We know, however, that baptismal formation is at the heart of making Christian disciples. Our growing awareness of the superficiality of Christian commitment has forced us to scrutinize our present practices so they better express our high theology of Holy Baptism. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the leader of the clandestine Church Training College at Finkenwalde, he pondered how a nation of professing Christians could follow Hitler and subscribe to his principles of National Socialism. He concluded that the Church, his Church, had been dispensing cheap grace without the corollary of calling people to discipleship. In his *Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote:

Do we realize that this cheap grace has turned back upon us like a boomerang? The price we have to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly heard. Where were those truths which impelled the early church to institute the catechumenate, which enabled a strict watch to be kept over the frontier between Church and world, and afforded adequate protection for costly grace? ³

The relevance of that statement for the present is palpable. We minister to communities of nominal Christians. No longer does one become Christian by cultural osmosis. The "Constantinian arrangement" has crumbled. Despite the visibility of the Electronic Church, the numerical success of entertainment evangelism, and all the noise from the Christian Right, the values of this culture are *not* Christian. One wonders how our people, having absorbed a religion of secularity during the week, can come to the Sunday assembly to pledge allegiance to a faith that contradicts and indicts those cultural precepts. It is astounding that no one seems to notice they have entered a war zone with missiles flying back and forth between alien ideologies.

In the West the prevailing culture no longer appeals to the Church when it makes individual, societal, or ethical decisions. Being a good member of society no longer means being a good Christian. Indeed, being a good Christian may set one over against the culture at crucial points. In this highly secularized society, Christian initiation will not be characterized by motifs of growth but by motifs of decision! Becoming a Christian today will separate rather than imbed one in the culture. This sense of dissonance between Christian faith and the culture has compelled the Church in the Third World as well as in areas of the post-Christian West to reinvent the catechumenate. Our present situation is similar to that of the early church in that Christian Baptism has become a border rite between Church and non-Church.⁴

This may be a kairoic moment as we seek a new expression of initiatory rites and practices that will result in a more serious, committed discipleship. If the recovery of catechumenal ministry and a more robust expression of Holy Baptism are to become priorities for the Church today, what will it cost us? If baptismal renewal holds rich promises for a revitalized Church and its ministry, *what will be the cost of making disciples?*

In the first place, it may cost us our usual definition of Baptism water bath with Trinitarian formula. From the Acts of the Apostles, we know that making Christians involved a repertoire of experiences: proclamation of the Gospel, repentance, water bath and the gift of the Holy Spirit. While Luke does not report a definitive ritual pattern, these elements seem to be present in the narrative. We also can presume that conversion to Christ involved one's affirmation of faith as well as being welcomed to the community and its holy meal. After centuries of disintegration, our present rites contain these components in the liturgy of Holy Baptism.

Can the catechumenal preparation of adults for Baptism be part of that ecological system? If such formation is a process wrapped around proclamation, renunciation, and confession of faith, then it is integral to our definition of Baptism. Although no recognizable catechumenate is described in the New Testament, it is probably true that conversion was not as instantaneous as would be implied by the Acts of the Apostles. Luke wants to emphasize the immediacy of the in-breaking reign of God, and so he collapses into short time frames what may have taken months or years. Any convert to the New Testament Church was taking a momentous step that spelled social disadvantage if not persecution. One would count the cost of being baptized. With justification we assume the baptism of adults often involved a period of preparation and faith apprenticeship.

Making Christians will force us to reexamine our definition of grace. Was Bonhoeffer correct in charging that being Lutheran meant having a correct doctrine of justification and leaving discipleship to legalists, Calvinists, and enthusiasts? "Lutherans," he wrote, "have been guilty of dethroning God with their doctrine of grace alone."⁵ According to Bonhoeffer, whenever Luther spoke of grace, he always meant it was costly. It cost God the life of the Son. It cost Luther his life as a monk. When Luther's ". . . followers took up this doctrine and repeated it word for word. . . they left out its invariable corollary, the obligation of discipleship." In our day, the debate over catechumenal ministry may well hinge on the definition of grace that can embrace the concepts of preparation, conversion, and commitment. It is not some new form of Pelagianism or a denial of God's grace to expect significant signs of Christian life and faith before the ritual climax in Holy Baptism. We have been too digital in our mantra of "grace then discipleship," "faith then works." These themes embrace and interpenetrate each other. The hope of those working to restore a Lutheran version of catechumenal ministry is the ability to say "catechumenate and grace" in the same breath without any sense of contradiction.

In pastoral practice, Lutherans have pointed to infant baptism as a prime example of God's unmerited grace. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). For some, being Lutheran has meant defending infant baptism over against the Anabaptists and others who denied a quick baptismal fix for the problem of original sin. Even though the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*⁶ as well as budding catechumenal ministries in Episcopal and Lutheran circles do not reject the practice of infant baptism, recovery of the catechumenate has reminded us that adult baptism was the norm, not the exception in the early Church. This growing emphasis on adult baptism will be perceived by some as threat and will uncover layers of molding polemic on the old controversy between infant and believers' Baptism.

Other factors force us to analyze infant Baptism and our ministry to adults. Demographic studies show huge numbers of unbaptized adults in our society and many more Christians in name only. They await our witness and Christ's call to discipleship. The problems with our present practice are manifold. There is little realistic hope that great numbers of those baptized as infants will become committed Christian disciples as adults. The publication of new literature on the work of godparents will not change the fact that "godparent" is an honorary title with little more expectation than that such people will Hallmark Card them at significant times of passage. Nor do today's young people feel they must abide by promises made on their behalf by parents or friends. Most of our congregations do not provide an adequate arena for the "growth in grace" expected by our rites. The transitory nature of our people, denominational switching and the sagging commitment to such programs as Sunday School mean that our children grow up like their parents—illiterate in the faith. As we become communities of nominal Christians, infant baptism has become more and more indefensible.

Almost twenty years ago at this institute, Eugene Brand described a parish approach built upon these new realities. He said that the rites of initiation could:

. . . be administered to infants born to parents actively involved in the life of the Christian community, if those parents so desired. If their preference were to delay the rites, no spirit of censure would be attached to that decision. The rites would also be administered according to the more primitive pattern: to those drawn into the community by the Gospel. For such candidates an intensive period of formation and instruction would precede baptism. For all candidates the community would assume the responsibility of continuing nurture. I use the word "nurture" instead of "education" deliberately, for the process I envision would not have as its primary goal the acquiring of knowledge, not even biblical knowledge. It would rather consist of reflection on the life lived in community and the necessary and obvious implications of that life for ministry.⁷

Theologically, if we allow infant baptism, then we also must allow infant communion. Baptism welcomes us to Christian life with all of its

privileges and responsibilities—including participation in the Eucharist. For pastoral reasons, in that 1990 address, Eugene Brand did not feel the time was right to be an advocate for infant communion. We rejoice that the ELCA now has moved beyond the controversy of that time to approve the possibility of infant communion. *The Use of the Means of Grace* recognizes the movement in a growing number of congregations to lower the age of communion. This statement of sacramental practices permits the communion of infants at the time of their baptism. As they mature, they may continue to commune or may wait until they eat and drink and “. . . start to respond to the gift of Christ in the Supper. No other conditions or regulations interfere with this natural, familial development.”

The cost of making disciples may force us to deal once more with Confirmation. We now know that Confirmation is a historic anomaly and that it originally was a component of the baptismal rite. Because of his high regard for Holy Baptism, Luther rejected Confirmation as a sacramental supplement to Holy Baptism. Thanks to the careful study of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation⁸ in the 1960s, we know the history of interpretation and misinterpretation of this rite and ministry in Lutheran circles. Most of us have experienced the frustration of this puberty rite and the contradictory result of granting full membership and graduating from church obligations at the same time. Despite these and other significant pedagogical difficulties, the flywheel still spins. Confirmation continues to be our most visible initiatory experience. Publishing houses try to redeem this ministry with pages of new materials. There are seminary electives and church commissions that end up dithering on the subject and solving nothing.

The most serious flaw in the Confirmation syndrome may be the perpetuation of a model of the church structured for maintenance, not mission. In the early centuries, the Church was structured for making disciples. The roles of bishops, presbyters, deacons, catechists, and sponsors were defined by their involvement in Christian initiation. Part of each Sunday's liturgy was devoted to Christians-in-the-making. The liturgical year evolved as an ordered attempt to express the needs of evangelization and the catechumenal process. The community lovingly accompanied the catechumens as they journeyed toward the dramatic experience of Easter Baptism. As a catechumenal parish moves from models of maintenance to mission, the present shape of congregational life will be changed.

Taking Baptism seriously will cost congregations the way they have kept Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. The recovery of the Triduum with the Easter Vigil as the paschal center of the liturgical year was the first impulse of the modern liturgical movement. The LBW introduced to Lutherans in North America liturgical traditions both ancient and ecumenical. Still our congregations and their leaders are *laissez faire* when it comes to morphing local practices into larger liturgical realities. Lent needs to remember its original purpose as a time of intensive preparation for Easter Baptisms. A small but

valuable exercise would be to rewrite the Ash Wednesday exhortation to remind the faithful that Holy Baptism is the *raison d'être* for Lent. The primary symbols of the Easter Cycle are not lilies, choir cantatas, or sermons on the Seven Last Words of Christ. Signs of the season are candidates for Baptism, their parents, and sponsors as well as those preparing for reaffirmation of their faith. Rather than searching for special themes and special effects, we should look to these persons who we liturgically enroll as candidates for Baptism, surrounding them every Sunday with blessing prayers. Use of Series A during Lent will focus on the baptismal implications of narratives such as the woman at the well, the blind man who sees, and the raising of Lazarus. The theme of baptismal readiness and renewal should be the subject of Lenten scrutinies, of sermon and song as well. The great Fifty Days could again be great if the time is spent reflecting on the meaning of the faith and our mission to the world.

In rewriting the script for parish life, our spaces need to better express the centrality of Holy Baptism. When we enter our liturgical spaces, we should recognize them as baptismal as well as preaching and eucharistic halls. The place of Baptism should be primal signs of birth, cleansing, death, and new life. The sight and sound of living water may prompt worshippers to remember the multivalent meanings of water in scripture and nature. A stranger to such a space should be able to ascertain something of the significance of Baptism in the life of that community. As the baptism of adults becomes more commonplace, the construction of baptismal pools for immersion will become the rule rather than the exception.

In a catechumenal parish, the baptismal preparation of adults will not be the work of one frazzled pastor, but of the entire congregation. Through synod or conference or groups such as the North American Association on the Catechumenate,⁹ we will need to train a core of leaders for this ministry. As the title of one book puts it, *The Catechumenate Needs Everybody*¹⁰—especially catechumenal director, catechists, and sponsors. In the final analysis, the congregation itself is the primary minister of all the rites and stages of the catechumenate. The goal of a catechumenal ministry is not only to revitalize initiates, but the whole community. As the rites of baptismal formation reveal to candidates what it means to be Christian, they call the whole community to new commitment.

Crucial to the catechumenate are celebratory rites that help to define an otherwise ambiguous process. Like road signs, these are peak moments when the community ritually marks the journey of the catechumens. Instead of an educational curriculum or administrative program, this ministry follows a liturgical outline. The liturgical year and personal readiness determine the timeline for this ministry. The primary locus of experience is the worshiping assembly rather than the classroom. The liturgy or Word and Sacrament become the essential *locus theologicus* for making and remaking Christians. Due to this liturgical focus, pastors and other congregational leaders will need to rise to new levels of ritual competence and resourcefulness.

Some believe that Hippolytus' description of baptismal formation in the third century was a proposal to the church of that day rather an established fact of congregational life. For us as well, the recovery of catechumenal ministry may be more proposal than reality, but that vision is vital. It may lead us to entertain alternative possibilities in our pastoral work. Even if we do not adopt the complete overlay of the RCIA or new Lutheran versions of the catechumenate,¹¹ the ideas and principles can invigorate standing programs and affect the way we make disciples. To move in this direction is to take a fateful step, one that will cost us present approaches to evangelism, worship, and education. But it is worth the cost, if the work restores the church to the primary business of serving the world by making committed disciples.

notes

¹ See either Geoffrey J. Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*. Bramcote: Grove Books Limited, 1987 or Lucien Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1967.

² Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. New York: Harper, 1958.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949:45.

⁴ See Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments; Baptismal Meanings*. New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987:31.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. 44-45.

⁶ Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.

⁷ Daniel Brockopp, Brian Helge, David G. Truemper, editors. *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers No. 1*. Valparaiso: Institute of Liturgical Studies, 1981:121.

⁸ See Frank W. Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968.

⁹ Contact The North American Association of the Catechumenate, 211 N Monroe Street, Tallahassee FL 32301 or The North American Forum on the Catechumenate, 5510 Columbia Pike, Suite 310, Arlington VA 22204. NAAC is a young organization begun by Lutherans and Episcopalians. NAFC has a largely Roman Catholic constituency and offers extensive workshops and institutes. Both strive to minister to the wider ecumenical community.

¹⁰ James A. Wilde, *A Catechumenate Needs Everybody*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.

¹¹ Since this address in 1995, Augsburg Publishing House, in concert with the Office of Worship, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has published the following catechumenal resources: *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Catechetical Guide* and *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997. A second phase of resources on the catechumenate is planned in the near future.