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Catechetics

11.04.2007

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# **Augustine and Luther on Catechetics**

**A comparison survey using “Augustine and the Catechumenate” by William Harmless and  
“That I May Be His Own” by Charles Arand**

Catechesis is the formation of the Christian. The teaching of the fundamentals of doctrine is essential to the reforming of life in the Christian. The social contexts of St. Augustine and Martin Luther are quite different. Yet, the content, methods, presentation, usage, and goals of the catechesis of are largely the same. Both catechists can inform our modern practice.

The church of Augustine was under radical change. Christians ceased to be the persecuted minority but began to enjoy privileged status under imperial favor. This forced the church with a difficult link between church and state. There was a flood of new converts, dominated by lower and middle classes. It was challenged by difficult and bitter battles of heresy of the fourth century. This century had many extraordinary Christian thinkers, many trained as rhetoricians. There was an uneasy shift of the church away from the few and pure to the many - a corpus permixtum, as Augustine called it. All these trends posed significant challenges and growing pains for the church of Augustine.

The church of Luther was equally tumultuous. The battle over the heresy of Rome, the Reformation, was in full swing. The church was intermixed inseparably with the state. Many were baptized but unlearned and untaught. The church had been blessed with the Greek text of Erasmus and the scholarly work of the other humanists. The church was growing but was largely dead.

In the midst of these situations, Augustine and Luther sought to bring the life and faith of their churches into conformity of the witness of Scripture. They did this with a variety of methods. They used preaching, they used teaching, and they scrutinized their catechumens.

## **Preaching**

The dominant media for catechetical instruction until Luther was preaching. Christianity from the beginning was delivered through oral proclamation. They were the most effective means of reaching the greatest number of people (until the printing press.) For Augustine, the primary catechesis took the form of sermons and lectures. These were occasionally special instruction. Most often they learned through the liturgies of the Word, and the sermons intended for the whole congregation. Augustine would preach a special sermon "series" during Lent on the

Creed, Lord's Prayer, or the sacraments. This would help in the instruction of the candidates for baptism.

The middle ages featured generally two types of catechetical sermon. The first was a catechetical treatise which was read and listed the text with brief explanations. These reflected the low expectations of catechizing the laity. The second type was written by the priests and offered more detailed explanations. The Lambeth Council of 1281 only mandated these preachings four times a year. (Arand 60-61)

The reformation reflected a preaching revival. Luther's sermons were often printed and read aloud. The content of the Large Catechism is drawn from his preaching from 1517-1529 (the Small Catechism is drawn from the Large.) Luther returned teaching to the preaching office with catechetical sermons throughout the week. Luther did not draw a sharp distinction between preaching and teaching. Both are essential to his proclamation.

## **Teaching**

Although teaching was begun in the pulpit, it continued in the catechisms. They served as manuals of the Christian faith. The catechisms sought to create a higher standard for the training of the young and old in faith. Luther found great inconsistency through the churches. His Large and Small Catechisms were intended to elevate the quality of the teaching.

Augustine's approach required quality catechists. His teaching was based on his own prayer and meditation. It was based on the creeds and the Lord's Prayer. Finally, it was based on Scripture. Luther avoided error by providing two confessional books called catechisms which Lutherans confess are a rightful exposition of Scripture. Its contents are meditations on the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, and the Sacraments just as with Augustine.

Augustine's approach focused more on proper method of interpreting Scriptures. He felt that the Scriptures themselves would speak. The Spirit would guide the exegete through difficult passages by the skill of rhetoric. (See On Christian Doctrine) Luther placed less confidence in the preacher or teacher to properly interpret Scripture but sought to provide a "view of the forest" to lead the catechist from focusing only on favorable or obvious trees. "The Small Catechism does not address all the theological topics of dogmatics. Instead, it sounds certain key themes

that permeate all Lutheran thought and thus provides the starting point for further theological reflection." (Arand 17-18)

Luther did not intend the catechisms to be a compendium of Christian doctrine. The catechisms were meant as formative, like the catechesis of Augustine. Their intent was not to be the final and last word on theology but rather to be the starting point from which the church can dialogue. They are a public confession of faith but are not the only confession (e.g. the remaining Book of Concord.)

Martin Luther relied on his Large and Small Catechisms as one of the primary instructional texts of faith. "In the catechism, the church has gathered the fundamental components of Scripture that go to the heart of defining what it means to be a Christian... Luther called the Small Catechism an Enchiridion that is, a handbook or guide on being a Christian." (Arand 27)

## **The Scrutiny or "What does this mean?"**

Augustine's scrutiny of the catechumen moved from the concern over lifestyle and profession of the third century to a concern over motive. "It is certainly helpful to be informed beforehand by those who know [the candidate]: what his disposition of heart might be, what causes might have induced him to come and embrace religious observance. But, if there is no one else from whom we may learn this, we may question the candidate directly." (Harmless 113) Augustine was concerned about the false motives for practicing faith. He found acceptable the motives of fear of God (not political authorities), dreams, and miracles especially of healing. He wished to break down any opportunists. Yet, Augustine was more lenient than most, presuming the best of the candidates. (Harmless 120)

Luther used the rite of Confession and Absolution as a form of Augustinian scrutiny. "For such a confession does not go on only for their recounting of sins, but also one should listen to them concerning whether they understand the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and whatever else the Catechism gives them. For we have come to know quite well how little the common crowd and the youth learn from the sermon, unless they are individually questioned or examined. Where better would one want to do this and where is it more needed than for those who should go to the Sacrament?" (Arand 67) Like the Scrutinies of Augustine, Luther says that

the catechism's "contents represent the minimum of knowledge required of a Christian. Whoever does not possess it should not be reckoned among Christians or admitted to the sacrament, just as a craftsman who does not know the rules and practice of his craft is rejected and considered incompetent." (LC Short Preface, 2)

Both Luther, and Augustine emphasize memorization of the texts of their catechesis. The society is largely an oral one for Augustine. For Luther, illiteracy rates were high. The catechist presents the text, and the catechumen recite it essentially for both. Augustine followed this pattern of traditio (presentation) and redditio (recitation) in his catechesis. Luther did as well and implored the head of the household to do the same (LC Short Preface, 16-17). The children should recite the parts at meals and in the morning and evening. Augustine emphasizes this same need for memorization:

"Receive, my sons, the rule of faith, called the Creed. On receiving it, write it in your heart, and every day recite it among yourselves. Before you fall asleep, before you proceed to anything, gird yourselves with your Creed. No one writes down the Creed just to be read; he stamps it on his soul; lest forgetfulness should lose what diligence had given him. Your book is your memory." (Augustine quoted by Arand 99)

## **Scripture**

The Biblical interpretation of Augustine (and his model Ambrose) is distinguished by three levels of meaning. These were its "natural" or literal meaning, its "moral" meaning for daily life, and its "mystical" meaning pointing toward the mysteries of Christ, the kingdom of God, and his Church. His interpretation was marked by neo-Platonism. His catechesis found in preaching fit these levels of meaning. His explanations of the chief parts of faith utilized these meanings in his instructions to the catechist. His Biblical hermeneutic is born out his understanding of the layers of meaning in Scripture. He communicates this hermeneutic through catechetical materials (On Christian Doctrine, Catechizing the Uninstructed, and Enchiridion on Faith Hope and Love.)

While the Small Catechism is only a summary of central themes of Scripture, it serves as the springboard for exploration of the whole of scripture. It serves as a hermeneutical lens for Biblical interpretation. The lack of hermeneutic had caused many errors of the church of Rome

in Luther's mind. In his catechism, Luther presents the key themes so as to allow Scripture to be interpreted holistically and Christologically. Especially with poorly educated rural priests, this standard for interpretation would help the church of the Reformation return to orthodoxy (as long as it subscribed to this and its other confessions.)

## **Decalogue**

The Decalogue was used as a standard for Christian life by Augustine. "He focused on the twofold command of love for God and for neighbor as the summary of the Decalogue, which he pointed out is the foundation of Christian morality." (Arand 35) By the time of Luther, the church had placed the Decalogue in an inferior position to the Gospel, following Pope Gregory's seven virtues and seven vices. This was a system of social ethics and values drawn from the Gospels, Epistles, and patristic theology. (Arand 36) Despite attempts to remedy the system, the Decalogue remained neglected until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The foundations of Luther's catechisms are the Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. And so the Decalogue had regained prominence by Luther. Luther's treatment shifted from the sixteenth century understanding of it as works of value before God. Luther presented the decalogue as the will of God over and against human devised tradition (against Rome.) Faith became the key to all good works including the fulfillment of the Decalogue.

## **Creed and Lord's Prayer**

Both the Creed and Lord's Prayer were essential in the pre-baptismal rites of the fourth century. The Creed was taught in the weeks leading up to Easter and baptism. The catechumen would receive the Lord's Prayer after their recitation of the Creed. He would recite this after his baptism. This follows the pattern of following orthodoxy (right belief) with eusebia (right worship.) Augustine said, "You have been taught the creed first, so that you may know what to believe and afterwards the prayer, so that you may know whom to call upon. The creed contains what you believe; the prayer, what you are to ask for." (Harmless 287)

The legacy of Augustine's catechesis was not totally missing in the baptismal rites of Luther's day. The confession of creed and prayer was not spoken by the baptized (usually an infant). Instead, parents and godparents would recite these symbols from memory on behalf of the infant.

The creed and prayer had not fallen into disuse but misuse. They were used as indications of Christian citizenship. The creed would often be read without explanation. (Arand 33) Yet, medieval piety reinforced the creed and prayer's usage for "spiritual warfare" and as an entrance criterion to Easter communion. Luther returned its usage to meditative and meaningful with the catechisms.

## **Other content**

Luther takes an active role in matters of Christian living as with Augustine. He does so by the addition of the Brief Form of Confessions, Daily Prayers, the Table of Duties, and the Marriage and Baptismal booklets. He uses this opportunity to reform the errors of mandatory confession describing it as a "intolerable burden... since people had to make confession even though nothing was more hateful to them" (LC V.a 1-2, Arand 42)

Luther's daily prayers do not come as any surprise, following his training as a monk and its extensive system of prayer. Luther returned this prayer life from the monastic community to the life of the laity. In much the same way, Luther's table of duties moves the formation of a Christian discipline from a strict ascetic life into the lives of the laity. This list is drawn largely from the duties listed in Scripture itself (Titus 2:1-10; Colossians 3:18-41; Ephesians 5:22-6:9; 1 Timothy 2:3-15; 6:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7).

Luther's marriage and baptismal booklets are a continuation of these lay-focused texts. Both were written to remedy the inadequacies of the clergy. There were dramatic differences in practice. Human ceremonies and usages had distorted these rites. Luther's catechism taught the proper place of these rites in the life of the church.

## **Rhetoric**

For the ancients, rhetorical performance and analysis were the standard by which one was measured. Being educated meant you were a trained orator. Augustine's primary presentation of catechesis was oral. He did not have the benefit of print media. He relied on his skill in public speaking to educate. He modified the instruction of Cicero for Christian usage, including narrative, introduction, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion. Of these Augustine emphasized the Biblical narrative. He did not see the narrative as "simply telling a story." Rather

he connected his hearers to salvation history, showing its history as all leading directly to them. Augustine says "for no other reason were all things that we read in the holy Scriptures written before our Lord's coming than to announce his coming and to prefigure the Church to be... Therefore, in the Old Testament the New is concealed, and in the New the Old is revealed." (Harmless, 128) Luther too as an Old Testament professor had an inclusion approach to Scripture. His preaching and teaching bore the same shape as witnessed by his reformation of the use of the Decalogue (see above.)

Augustine's rhetoric and catechesis had many other components that were essential. He connected the past with the present and the future. The past informed the present which is lived in light of the future. His speech was eschatological. It recognized the corruption of the Church on earth (corpus permixtum) but recognized that on the last day the "wheat" would be separated from the "chaff." He emphasized familial images for the church as did Luther. His rhetoric sought to delight, stir the emotions, to motivate to the font, and to highlight the disciplina arcana or the teachings to come after baptism.

For the catechist under Augustine, two principles governed their recital. First, they must show the unity of the two Testaments and the priority of Christianity over the old covenant. Second a hermeneutic of love is to be used to set the narrative because of love for God and for neighbor. All this was typically done impromptu by the catechist. "For Augustine evangelical catechesis was essentially an oral art. It demanded an improvisational touch- attuned to the mood of the moment and to the experience and education of the inquirer. It also demanded respecting the face-to-face dynamic." (Harmless 153)

## **The Printing Press**

Unlike Augustine, Luther could supplement his rhetorical technique with print. His dictated sermons reached a wide audience through this new "mass media." Augustine had to rely on rhetorical skill to catechize. Luther had the print media at his disposal. Rather than "expand" his catechetical materials with catalogues of sins, listings of good works, prayers, and items of extra merit, Luther scraped these materials away and returned to the chief texts, the Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. Because of the printing press, he could expand and amplify these texts instead

with different formats (booklets and posters) and artistic pictures (woodcuts.) This new media allowed the dissemination of his catechism to a large audience.

For Augustine it was simply impractical to copy such a material for all the laity, much less all the clergy of the churches. He did compose a number of books for educating the pastorate (City of God, On Christian Doctrine, On Faith and Works, etc.) These texts were not used for lay education. So Luther's approach to catechesis could and did depart from exclusively liturgical and preached teaching to a supplemental system of lay education via the catechism, offering a one-two-punch of preaching (oral and print) and teaching (catechism.)

## **Liturgy and Hymnody**

Another means of catechesis used by Luther was the liturgies and hymnody of the church. The church in Wittenberg would use the catechism as his preaching subject four times a year for two weeks each on weekdays by 1533. Lutheran hymnody provided a link between worship and teaching. Luther's catechetical hymns were part of the liturgical practice of the church but also taught fundamental doctrines found in the Small Catechism. Many of these hymns are still in use today hymns including "We All Believe in One True God" on the Creed and "O Lord, We Praise Thee" on the Lord's Supper.

## **Sacramental Instruction**

Baptismal instruction was the core of the fourth century catechesis. The catechesis had this purpose in mind, to compel the compententes to the font where he would become an infantes. The nature and understanding of the font came later. Augustine continued the practice of the mystagogical catechesis of the third century. This was catechesis on the sacraments that occurred after baptism. It wove together gestures and words of the liturgies of the Easter vigil, scriptural themes and images, and analogies drew from nature or local culture. (Harmless 71) Only after receiving the sacraments did the catechumenate learn their meanings.

Luther felt that sacramental instruction has been neglected. (LC VI, 1) The sacramental discussion had an overemphasis on confession with baptism receiving the least attention. Luther moved baptism back to the center of the Christian's whole life. Confession became the way in which a Christian lives out his baptismal life. While the Sacrament of the Altar was regularly

celebrated, it was often the subject of pilgrimages and devotions but not received by laypeople. Luther refocused attention to its place in the lives of the baptized through catechetical instruction.

## **Meditation**

The Small Catechism was used as prayerbook and devotional materials of laity, as parents and children. Luther himself used the Small Catechism as a lifelong resource for prayer. Luther would pray each petition of the Lord's Prayer with a brief meditation and petition from his life. (Arand 69) For Augustine, the devotional materials were the Psalms and other Scripture. He meditated upon them as preparation for his extemporaneous preaching.

## **Conversion**

For both Augustine and Luther, to receive instruction was to confess to be a Christian. For Augustine, catechesis was begun before Baptism. For Luther, most catechesis occurred after baptism. This represented two different and yet similar realities. While Augustine's context was approaching a majority population as Christians, most of his baptisms occurred in adulthood. For Luther, the medieval church had long since instituted infant baptism as the norm. The church had strong ties to popular government. Baptism was considered a rite initiating citizenship (since the time of Constantine.) Luther focused his catechesis on teaching these baptized as they grew.

## **Formation**

Augustine sought to change or convert the heart and mind of the compententes. Once converted, they would be born again as infantes. Now that their hearts and minds were formed, they could continue their instruction in the Sacraments (mystagogical catechesis).

Luther too used the catechisms to form the Christian life in heart and mind. This formation encompasses Augustine's whole method, including basic instruction, creedal, prayer, and finally on the sacraments.

Rather than compelling them to faith for conversion, Luther's catechesis enterprise for the baptized fit into Augustine's last stage, the mystagogical catechesis. Using the words of Augustine, "be what you see, receive what you are." (Harmless 319) Luther's catechetical work

focused on not conversion, but rather formation of the converted. The catechism gives the form of living of the baptized as witnessed by Scripture (Matthew 16:16-23; Romans 12:2; Col 3:2; Philippians 2). This is formation from the font to the grave.

## **Reformation**

It must be noted that Luther's renewed catechesis from its medieval errors to something that more closely resembled the practice for the third and fourth century, notably Augustine. Luther's catechisms served a critical role in reforming the church. Education of the laity in matters of faith was essential for them to recognize the errors of the church of Rome. While Luther's primary motivation was the salvation of the world, he recognized that Christian faith without teaching could in no way reform the errors of his day. The catechism was the link for the church of reformation to the church catholic.

## **Conclusion**

Augustine and Luther both focused on the education of the laity. For Augustine this is natural outgrowth of a relatively young Christian church. For Luther this is a reformation from the clericalism which plagued the medieval church. These two dramatically different cultural contexts had a large bearing on the shape and form of their catechesis. While the timing and delivery methods varied, both Augustine and Luther relied on the Holy Spirit working *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *solo gratia*. Their goal was to present Scripture faithfully, compel the catechumen to faith or strengthen faith, and that they would do so only by the grace of God working through his catechist.

The focus of both Augustine and Luther on the methods of preaching, teaching, scrutinizing the catechumen are useful focuses for the church today. Their emphasis on the chief symbols of faith, that is, Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer, is essential to our faithful teaching. Proper use of rhetoric and the medias available is a feature of both catechists. Finally, the focus on catechesis as formation of the believer and not merely rote knowledge should remain in the mind of the modern catechist. While different, the focuses of Augustine and Luther are as useful today as they were in their own times.

## **Bibliography**

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