

ARTICLE IV.

THE CATECHUMENATE: ITS ACHIEVEMENTS
AND ITS POSSIBILITIES.

BY THE REV. THOMAS CHALMERS.

THE painful conclusion which the spirit of the times appears to have reached with regard to the evangelical church is, that she has been weighed in the balance and been found wanting. Bitter charges and insinuations are found in the daily press, in current popular literature; they are heard from actors on the stage, from political economists and social reformers on the platform; they are the axioms upon which a multitude of new sects are forming, for, if a man wishes to catch the ear of the public for some new theory, he plans to preface the defense of the peculiar principles of his system by a diatribe against the church. And sadder perhaps than all this, these charges constitute the principal justification of the conduct of the vast mass of non-churchgoers. Without wasting time declaiming against the cruel injustice of these accusations, we should set about the simple discharge of our task as the best means of driving our accusers to the wall.

Evangelical Christianity has her opportunity in the times when society is enthralled in moral evil and when the latent moral earnestness of the race needs to be called to the conflict. Evangelical Christianity is the only power that has ever been able to bring this moral earnestness to bear triumphantly on the forces of iniquity. The present age presents us an opportunity similar to that which was seized by the apostolic Christianity of the first three Chris-

tian centuries; by the Protestant Christianity of the sixteenth, and by the Puritan Christianity of the seventeenth.

THE GENESIS OF THE IDEA OF THE CATECHUMENATE.

The natural reply which we would expect the Christian moral earnestness of our race to make to the Prince of evil when he points to the desolation he has wrought on the succeeding generations, and reaches out his hands for the only generation he has not yet touched, is, "The children of the past generations are yours; these children are God's." Here lies the foundation for the idea of the catechumenate. It is the acceptance of Satan's challenge with regard to the youth. It is the earnest and systematic attempt to guarantee to all the children of *our* generation a solemn warning as to the plans of Satan, and an assurance of the counter purposes of God with respect to their souls. It is the method that, at all earnest times in the moral history of the race, the church has relied upon with greatest success. And with a keen sense that the moral evils of our day are great enough to call for the most earnest and humble searching of means by which they may be stayed, we have been led to an old method as a practical plan for social regeneration. And having tried this method, we are convinced that the church has in it a more efficient means for the solution of the purely moral problems that vex society than it has for a generation or more seemed to appreciate.

THE HISTORY OF THE METHOD.

The Greek word *κατηχέω* is used in the New Testament only by Luke and Paul, and is rarely found in classic literature. The ecclesiastical usage of the word *catechize* must therefore have been determined for the ancient church by these two writers. And as the usage of the word by the ancient church was that which the word *catechize* still carries, and as the original word *κατηχῶ* signified also *an*

echoing back, we must conclude that the common meaning of this word before the days of Luke and Paul and during the centuries that have followed them, must determine also the idea they were attempting to express when they employed it. It is safe to infer, therefore, that this word has in the New Testament more of the meaning of our word "catechize" than is to be conveyed by our simple English word "teach." The clear indications are that every intelligent believer in the first years of the Christian church, from the apostles and evangelists down, had his catechumens whom he carried for days or weeks or months through the instruction that led them into the kingdom of God. These courses of instruction varied in length according to the intelligence of the catechist or catechumen. The responsibility of the catechist for the catechumen never ceased until the certainty of Christian truth was impressed upon the latter. Luke appears to have written his two treatises for the confirmation of the faith of Theophilus, and doubtless also of his other catechumens, "that thou mightest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been catechized (*κατηχήθης*)."

Catechetical instruction as the term is used in the early church, and as it is used in this article, involves more than an elementary recitation of short questions and answers on moral and religious themes. It involves the idea of careful, systematic instruction, a reasoning from facts to principles, and a carrying of the instructed step by step to a definite and satisfying conviction of the truth and grandeur of the Christian religion. Such a course of instruction differs from a course of sermons before a popular audience. In catechetical instruction the class does not vary, and the catechist can assure himself at any time that he is not going faster than the reasoning faculties of the catechumens permit them to follow. Intellectual difficulties are thus easily removed, and the conclusions are not vitiated, as is

the case with a sermon when the premises by which a conclusion is reached have been tacitly rejected or misunderstood by a part of the congregation.

Precisely what forms of instruction were used by the individual apostles and first Christian teachers cannot be stated. The earliest extant model of a catechetical work is the "Didache." Athanasius alludes to it as among the books not included in the canon, but "appointed by the fathers to be read by those who are just recently coming to us and wish to be instructed in the word of godliness (*κατηχίσθαι τὸν τῆς εὐσεβείας λόγον*)."

The title of the "Didache" would indicate that it was expressly prepared as a catechetical work for the Gentiles (*τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*). And as it was written only a little over ninety years after the crucifixion, almost within the span of a lifetime from Calvary, we are permitted to conclude that it furnishes us a fair model of the training the catechumens received from the first generation of Christian teachers—from those who had seen and known our Lord. The "Apostolical Constitutions" reproduce and amplify the "Didache," and present a new outline of catechetical instruction, which became the generally accepted model for such training during the succeeding centuries. The catechumenate grew out of the awful conflict that was waged in the dying Roman Empire between sin and holiness. Its purpose was not to prepare candidates for baptism, as it has been superficially defined, but to warn men from moral and eternal damnation, and to lead them into the way of life. The first words of the "Didache" strike the keynote of all catechetical effort, "There are two ways, one of life and the other of death, and there is a great difference between them."¹ The catechumenate was the mightiest engine of the early church against the frightful moral cor-

¹ Ὁδοὶ δύο εἰσὶ, μία τῆς ζωῆς καὶ μία τοῦ θανάτου, διαφορά δὲ πολλὴ μεταξὺ τῶν δύο ὁδῶν.

ruption of the day. The triumphs of the church were not won by liturgy, sacrament, or sermon. At the close of the great persecutions, when the church arose each time in new power, it was the catechumenate that closed her door in the face of the morally insincere. The classes of the catechist were thronged, and a faint impression of the tremendous moral earnestness with which the catechumen was handled, and the telling blows that were delivered against the vices of the age, can be formed from a reading of the patristic literature. It is a historic fact that the catechumenate was the chief agency by which the Christianity of the first centuries made itself what Lecky calls "the most powerful moral lever that has ever been applied to the affairs of man." Whatever may be the intrinsic worth of the catechetical method, it is certainly an impressive coincidence, that the age in which the church achieved the greatest results in transforming society was also the age in which this method was universally esteemed and employed. During the Middle Ages catechetical instruction was almost entirely abandoned, and the social life of people and clergy became frightfully depraved. Efforts were made by the evangelistic labors of the preaching orders to regenerate society. These movements resulted in the formation of rare types of Christian virtue, but not in any general arrest of vice. There was no systematic attempt to lift the masses of the people out of their moral degradation.

The second great age of the catechumenate is that of the Reformation. It is the immediate method that the Reformation used to root out moral evil, and to implant its religious principles. It wasted no time seeking other methods. The church visitation in Saxony revealed to the German reformers the deplorable condition of the people. The immediate, and as Schaff says "the richest, fruit of the Saxon visitation was the catechisms of Luther, intend-

ed as a remedy for the evils of ignorance and irreligion," and the success of the method is shown by the actual social regeneration which followed, by the multitude of other Protestant catechisms written at the time, and by the fact that Luther's Small Catechism and two or three others of the sixteenth century have not been abandoned to this day. The restoration of the catechumenate in the days of the Reformation grew out of the eternal, God-given moral earnestness of the race, and was in no way dependent on the previous history of the method. It was the desperate determination to begin over again with the children that Satan had not yet touched. As Luther expressed it, with characteristic vigor, "If the older ones are so inclined, they may ever go to the Devil, but where the youth go neglected and uninstructed, there is the blame with the authorities."¹

Calvin's Great Catechism, written in 1536, grew out of his appreciation of the needs of the dissolute French city of Geneva, and it wrought results similar to those accomplished by Luther in Saxony.

Calvin championed the restoration of the catechumenate. "If this discipline," says he, referring to catechetical instruction, "were observed in the present day, it would certainly sharpen the inactivity of some parents, who carelessly neglect the instruction of their children as a thing in which they have no concern, but which, in that case, they could not omit without public disgrace; there would be more harmony of faith among Christian people . . . some would not be so easily carried away with novel and strange tenets."

No more determined and stubborn attempt was ever made to embody an idea than that which resulted in root-

¹ "Wollen die Alten ja nicht, mögen sie immer zum Teufel hinfahren. Aber wo die Jugend versäumet und unierzogen bleibt, da ist die Schuld der Obrigkeit."

ing the catechumenate in the soil of Scotland, and in no other nation has it shown more striking evidence of the power to bring moral and religious order out of chaos. From 1560, when the First Book of Discipline was adopted, till towards the close of the seventeenth century, the most persistent attempts were made by the General Assembly, against great odds, to establish a systematic parochial catechumenate. Year after year through one whole century they ceased not to insist that "catechizing be constantly observed in every kirk." In 1639 the Assembly, "considering that the long-awaited-for fruits of the gospel so mercifully planted and preserved in this land, and the reformation of ourselves and our families so solemnly vowed to God of late in our covenant, cannot take effect except the knowledge and worship of God be carried from the pulpit to every family within each parish," appointed that "every minister, besides his paines on the Lord's day, shall have weekly catechizing of some part of the paroch." In 1648 the General Assembly ordained, as one of the "remedies of the grievous and common sins of the land," that "ministers catechize one day in every week," and that "young persons be catechized from the time they are capable of instruction." The following year it ordained that ministers shall be put on trial, every half-year at least, as to their faithfulness in catechizing; and if the Presbytery "shall find any of their number negligent therein, they shall admonish for the first fault, and if after such admonition they shall not amend, the Presbytery for the second fault shall rebuke them sharply, and if after such rebuke they do not yet amend they shall be suspended." The invigorating effect of this one hundred years' campaign on the intellectual character of the people may be understood by King James's slur at Hampton Court Conference, when he said that "in Scotland every son of a good woman thought himself competent to write a catechism." The

experience of the catechumenate in Scotland is repeated only on a smaller scale in the early history of New England. "In Massachusetts," says Palfrey, "the first step taken by the central government in respect to education was a request that the elders would make a catechism for the instruction of youth in the grounds of religion."

In our advocacy of a restoration of the systematic catechumenate, we are often met by the objection that it is aping the Roman Catholics. As a matter of historic fact, it seems hardly necessary to state that the restoration of the catechetical method in the Roman Catholic Church follows the rise of Jesuitism, and was a shrewd application of lessons learned from the Protestant enemies, and was the mightiest means by which ground lost by the Roman Catholics was regained to them. The great Roman Catechism prepared by decree of the Council of Trent, and apparently modeled after Luther's, follows the Heidelberg Catechism by three years, Calvin's by thirty years, and Luther's by thirty-seven years. Abbé Fleury, the Roman Catholic historian, in his "Catechisme Historique," referring to the ignorance in his own day, describes it as not in any way comparable to that which reigned for two hundred years before Loyola and his Jesuit disciples *restored the custom of catechizing the young* in the Roman Catholic Church.¹

We now turn to the moral condition of our own civilization; and without any feeling of pessimism we must pronounce it, for the most part, sad. Commercial selfishness was never more heartless than it is to-day. Political dishonesty has not been diminishing during recent years, and the onslaught on the honor of sex has been terrific. Not only have we the vast institutionalized system of prostitu-

¹"et quelque ignorance qui reste parmi les Chrétiens, elle n'est pas comparable à celle qui régnoit il y a deux cents ans avant que saint Ignace et ses disciples eussent rappelé la coutume de catechiser les enfants."

tion, which, if we had made the progress that was made in the first three Christian centuries, would have been long since utterly rooted out of our Christian civilization,—but we have the intimation of new and more ruinous forms of prostitution, the moral contribution of unnatural industrial conditions to our social life. Of the great institutions of our day—the theater, the daily press, the saloon, the ball-room, the church—we may venture to say that all but the church are rather accelerating than retarding this moral degradation, and the efforts of the church to stay it are not systematically vigorous. The present attack on marriage and sexual fidelity is only a degree less powerful than that which laid the Roman Empire in ruins, and I do not think we will claim that the ecclesiastical insistence on sexual fidelity employs anything like the same measure of energy to-day that it did in the early church. The resistance is not equal to the onslaught, and the social order still stands like a film, against which the pressure of the atmosphere is increasing on one side while a vacuum is forming on the other. There is no despair in this pessimism, if so it seems. More than once has the church shown herself too mighty for the cohorts of Satan, and her usable power was never greater than to-day. Though her enemies may seem to be increasing, there is yet no institution that holds as she does the destiny of society in her hands. The hope of the world is in the church, but not in the church that slumbers on the battle-field. “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old.”

OUR PORT HURON EXPERIENCE.

About three years ago, by the transpiration of events which we cannot here mention, we learned in detail of the well-organized methods by which young men are debauch-

ed, and girls are procured to perpetuate an iniquitous traffic. With a feeling of unutterable sorrow and wrath we awoke and swore ourselves no rest until we had slain the dragon in Port Huron. The Ministers' Union led. A powerful civic federation was formed. The Mayor made appointments on the Police Commission which blocked our extreme measures of extermination. The frightened traffic retired into temporary seclusion, with the assurance of withdrawal from the city. The wave of righteous wrath passed over, and the movement became a matter of local history, leaving beneficent effects, warning many a young man from the pit of destruction, diminishing the demand for the traffic in the city, but failing in its ultimate purpose. We withdrew from the heart-sickening conflict to the citadel of the church of God with a new sense of her sacred mission, a new appreciation of her redeeming history, a new awe of her might, and a new hope in the promise that the gates of hell should not prevail against her. In our battle with Satan we had had experiences with editors in their sanctums, with civic officials in the city hall, with politicians in the city council, with timid merchants in their stores, and lawyers in their offices, and the more we saw of all this the more we loved the church. Our first thought was for the children yet unstained. We determined to be frank with them, and not leave them to learn the lessons of evil from the agents of evil, but to warn them of evil from the sacred ramparts of the church at a safe distance, and under the instruction of a pastor who loved them, and who was aware of the perils that awaited them. In short, we determined that connection with the parish of the First Congregational Church would be a guarantee to every family that the children of that family would be given a systematic course of sound moral and religious training. A search for a text-book led us to an examination of

THE HISTORIC CATECHISMS.

A careful study of the historic catechisms reveals characteristics which may have been virtues once, but would be serious defects to-day. In the Westminster Shorter Catechism one is conscious that the task on hand is the development and support of a system of doctrine. It reflects throughout the doctrinal conflicts of the time. For instance, the decrees of God appear for treatment as early as the seventh question. From Questions Eight to Twelve there is a treatment of the abstract distinctions between God's works of creation and his works of providence—unimportant from an ethical point of view. The doctrinal statements concerning sin, from Question Thirteen on, are more metaphysical than moral, and are chiefly concerned in connecting the significance of sin with the disobedience of our first parents. Sin is so handled that one can hardly avoid suspecting that the aim has been to lead up to the doctrine of election in the twentieth question. And yet the Shorter Catechism is a classic, and no truer, more comforting, or more uplifting statement of the purpose of existence could be conceived than the answer to the first question.

The serious omissions of Luther's Small Catechism are its principal defects. It contains no definition or even mention of many such important doctrines as justification by faith and the atonement, and it contains no doctrine of the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism is better planned than either of the two just mentioned, and it is peculiarly rich in the evangelical affectionateness of its expressions. It begins, where such a manual ought to begin, with a treatment of the sense of human need. Catechetical instruction should not begin with definitions of God or the Holy Scriptures or the Trinity. The natural mind has no interest in such

matters until it is led to it by a consideration of the spiritual needs of the human soul and the moral perils that surround it. Such considerations lead the natural man to God. But a genuine defect in the Heidelberg Catechism is that the moral law, the Decalogue, instead of coming in in the first division, where it might serve to emphasize the sense of our moral shortcomings, and act as the schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, is introduced in the third division, where thankfulness for redemption already obtained is presented as the motive for obeying it. The doctrines of redemption in the second part lead up to the law in the third.

The defect with many recently written manuals is that they aim only at clearness and succinctness of theological statement in summarizing the heads and propositions of apologetic science, but are unsuitable for the purposes of the practical catechumenate.

The catechism which our times need should contain the strongest possible statements on sin and virtue, should embody the longing of the age for social righteousness and justice. It should carry on every page, with the keen abhorrence of sin and wrong and heartlessness, the unction of triumphant faith in the eternal God and his eternal church. It should make a free use of the best the past can give us,—not living in the past, but using it as a flashlight on the future.

THE CATECHISM CLASSES.

Two years ago our church adopted a catechism that had been specially prepared, and voted that every child in the parish should some time, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, pass through the pastor's hands in a definite course of instruction based on this book. Thus we had the sanction and authority of the church, and were compelled to go ahead, whether we wanted to or not. Attendance on these classes is not left to the option of the child. We don't be-

seech the children to come. We have thought it best to assume that there yet lingers some such notion as parental authority, and this gives us a chance to draw it out. Even where parents are not members or even attendants of the church, we leave the whole responsibility with them; we tell them when the classes are to be organized, and ask them to see that their children are present. And it has already served to bring a large number of such parents into the parish *esprit de corps* and into regular church attendance. In a church-membership of seven hundred we have about sixty children between twelve and fifteen, and over fifty have presented themselves for enrollment in our catechism classes. Our difficulty now is to keep the classes down to proper size, and we have had to adhere rigidly to the rule not to admit any over fifteen or under twelve. The rate of attendance in these classes is but slightly lower than the rate of attendance in the public schools. One of our rules is that the children shall also attend church on Sunday morning. These two classes have resulted in an average increase in our Sunday congregations of thirty-two. If we can come into close touch with fifty new boys and girls in Port Huron every year, and add a good proportion of that number to the regular churchgoers, we shall feel that we hold the key to the situation. At the end of another five years there will be between two hundred and two hundred and fifty of the young people of the city who will have passed through our instruction in morality and religion, and over whom we shall have won an influence that will guarantee at all times an access to their souls. This is why we have not turned this work over to the Sunday-school. "The time is short," and we must take it by the forelock. Two hours a week in such work will be a great time-saver for any pastor.

In conclusion, let me say that this method is not offered as a sure remedy for all the social ills of the age, but if it

will do again what it has done, it is worth determined and systematic application. And we firmly believe that for the neglect of this definite pastoral catechumenate there are souls this hour being dragged to ruin and the grave. A weeping, sin-stricken civilization is weighing us in the balance; the day of summing up is approaching, and the thieves and harlots will be our judges.