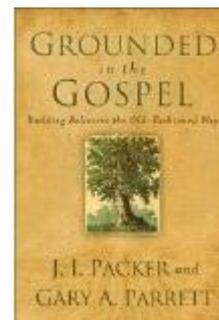


Jl Packer and Gary A Parrett : Grounded in the Gospel – making believers the old-fashioned way

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Notes by Alison Morgan March 2014



Parrett is a seminary professor in the US, Packer an Anglican professor of theology living in Canada. The book presents the case for the renewal of the traditional practice of catechesis.

Introduction

The current climate is to turn away from external authority and to resist instruction, even within the Christian community; for a long time now we have believed that liturgical conformity is what really matters, and that once confirmed, congregants need to learn no more. In group bible studies people are expected to look directly for personal applications rather than to think what the writers are saying about God – we always assume our own reaction is more significant than the realities we are reacting to. So personal guesses and fantasies about God replace the church's dogma as our authority. And then there's the fact we are busy, we have full programmes already.

We only know God through the impact of his works and the input of his Word, made effective by his Spirit; we have to fall into step with him, not vv. And we need to realise that a lot of religious observance goes well with pride and self-will. Christianity is not in essence a moral code or ascetic routine, but a personal relationship with a saviour. Jesus told us to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all he had commanded them – teaching is to be at the heart of church life. See also 2Tim2.2. 'Superficial smatterings of truth, blurry notions about God and godliness, and thoughtlessness about the issues of living .. are all too often the marks of evangelical congregations today.' 16.

Discipleship is the key present day issue, and catechesis the key element of discipleship. It is complementary to Bible study, expository preaching and other formational ministries.

1. Building believers the old-fashioned way

The Catholic Church still offers catechesis; most evangelical churches welcome people and try to get them involved in the ministry of the church in some way – without enquiring about their spiritual condition or understanding of the Christian faith. Catechesis flourished between the C2-5, then foundered; many Christians now had little understanding of what their faith meant. Luther and Calvin sought to restore catechesis, and printed small handbooks of instruction. Subsequent pastors followed suit; but the C20th saw the replacement of trained pastors with untrained lay workers, and catechesis was reduced to the telling of Bible stories. We wish to encourage fellow evangelicals to build believers the old fashioned way. That doesn't mean endlessly reinventing the wheel; CS Lewis said for every book we read by a living author, we should read one by an author who has died. Let's look back at the old models.

Catechesis comes from the Greek verb *katecheo* or teach. It's used in the NT to refer to teaching/instruction. It is, according to Westerhof and Edwards, **'the process by which persons are initiated into the Christian community and its faith, revelation, and vocation; the process by which persons throughout their lifetimes are continually converted and nurtured, transformed and formed, by and in its living tradition.'** The authors offer: 'the church's ministry of grounding and growing God's people in the Gospel and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty, and delight'. 29. There are three types of catechesis: inquirers/seekers, preparation for baptism/confirmation; ongoing teaching and formation. The closest words for catechesis in our vocabulary are disciple and discipleship – but those include other things, like training and mission.

2. Catechesis is a (very!) biblical idea

OT precursors to catechesis

'The heart of the curriculum for the faith training of children, and indeed of all the Israelites, was the *torah*. This beautiful Hebrew term has typically been rendered into English as "law," but this is really an inadequate translation. While "law" captures the authority aspects of the term and concept, *torah* has broader connotations than our English "law." *Torah* comes from a Hebrew root that signifies "shooting" (as in shooting an arrow) or "casting" (as in casting lots). The true connotation of *torah* is more "direction" or "guidance" or "instruction" than mere legislation. In many Jewish translations of the Bible and in biblical commentaries, therefore, it is more typical to see the word rendered "instruction" or "guidance" rather than "law," and it is more common still to see the word simply left untranslated—as "the Torah of the LORD."

'*Torah* certainly includes the commands of the LORD, but whereas the modern English speaker thinks of law as a binding and restrictive thing, the Hebrew Scriptures portray *torah* as a divine gift that illumines God's path or way (*derek* in Hebrew). There is a path of the wicked that leads to destruction. But the way of the LORD leads to life and blessing. This is the path men and women and communities and nations have been created to walk in. How do we discern that path from among the manifold options presenting themselves to us? We discern God's *derek* by rejecting the counsel of the godless and, instead, by carefully and diligently meditating upon the LORD'S *torah*. The first Psalm clearly makes the case (...). Far from proving restrictive in a negative or oppressive manner, God's gift of *torah* illumines the path upon which we must walk (Ps. 119:105; the more general term for "word"—*dabar*—is used in this instance—"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"—but the entire psalm is plainly a celebration of God's *torah*). Secure in the knowledge of being on God's path, our hearts are set free to run in the way of his commands (Ps. 119:32). The *torah*, which we have called the curriculum for Israel's religious instruction, is not any kind of abstract notion. It is, notably and critically, a behaviour pattern, to be embodied in the lives of teacher and parent as an illustrative model for the young. Indeed, from the same Hebrew root that gives rise to *torah* come words for teacher, *moreh*, and for parent, *horeh*. These persons are to be living guides in the way of the LORD. A key Hebrew verb for teaching—*yarah*—also arises from the same root. To teach, then, involves pointing others to, and leading others in, the way.' 35-36

'For the present, we will add just one final thought about Old Testament precursors to the concept of catechesis. On a broad scale, one might argue that there were three major types of teaching in the Old Testament that are reflected in the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible.' Jews refer to their collected Scriptures as the Tanakh. This word is an acronym built upon the following threefold division:

- Torah—the books of Moses (taught by priests)
- Nevi'im—the Prophets (by prophets)
- Kethuvim—the Writings (by sages)

... The goal of all Jewish education, wrote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschke, is reverent obedience to the LORD. It is not knowledge as abstraction that is sought through faith training. It is, rather, that God's people will actually *walk in the way* of the LORD.' 37 The Hebrew Bible is comprehensive in its concern and range, dealing with all dimensions of human life and experience – catechesis has historically shared this concern.

Katecheo in the NT

Gk verb meaning instruct – adopted as a standard term of the impartation of basic Christian knowledge. Pointers:

Luke 1.3-4 – written so that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been *taught*

Acts 18.25 – he had been *instructed* in the way of the Lord

Gal 6.6 – one who is *taught* the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.

→ 2 Clement 17.1 – we should make it our business to tear men away from idols and to *instruct* them

Related terms which also refer to catechetical content include gospel, faith, teachings, doctrines, traditions:

- Acts 2.42 – the teaching
- Romans 6.17 – the teaching to which you were committed
- 1 Tim 4.6 – good doctrine
- Titus 2.1; 10 – doctrine
- 2 John 9-11 – the teaching
- 2 Thess 2.15 – traditions
- Luke 1.1-2 – things delivered to us
- Acts 16.4-5 – strengthened in the faith
- 2 Peter 2.21 – commandment delivered to them
- 1 Cor 11.2 – traditions delivered to you
- 1 Cor 15.3-5 – I delivered to you...

See examples on p43. It's not just required that the faith be passed on; it must be studied, abided in, obeyed and passed on. **'It is the intentional passing on of the faith, not merely for cognitive apprehension, but for the holistic transformation of individual believers and for the maturing of those believers together as the body of Christ', 42.**

Many of the NT writings themselves are in effect catechetical documents. The gospels are a starting point of instruction. The epistles are important catechistically, but catechesis is not simply reactive. It seeks to lay foundations for growth in maturity of individuals and churches. Romans, Colossians and Ephesians have major catechetical themes (OT fulfilment, Christology, Ecclesiology).

IN both OT and NT parents are told to teach their children. Eph 6.4, Eph 6.1, Col 3.20. Paul exhorts Timothy and Titus to teach – list on p47. They were also to appoint other teachers. Overseers were to be able to teach too, mature men and women were to teach, etc. Catechesis flows directly from the Great Commission.

3. The waxing and waning of catechesis

Consequences of an uncatechized church are becoming apparent – biblical and theological illiteracy even among evangelicals; we have failed to pass on an orthodox form of faith that can withstand the onslaught of secularism – our young people know nothing about their own faith except how they should feel about it.

Catechesis in history:

1. Early Christian centuries – as numbers grew, it became a formal system led by pastors/bishops, and moved from homes to church buildings. Stages:

1. Enquirers – would be presented by a sponsor and interviewed by a bishop/pastor. Their lives would be looked at, and they would be given an introduction to faith.
2. Catechumens – hearers of the Word. They attend worship and participate in fellowship and instruction. They do not receive communion. They hear the word and put it into practice in their lives. When ready, sponsors again present them to church leaders for admission to the final stage.
3. Competenti: Baptism preparation – often timed for Lent, leading to baptism at Easter. They ('competenti') sat together during the liturgy and were prayed for daily, including exorcism. They learned the Creed (never written down) and the spiritual meaning of baptism.
4. Neophytes: After baptism they were neophytes, wore new white robes for 8 days and were admitted to the Lord's supper. Catechism continued – explanation of the mystery of the sacraments (mystagogy).

Principles – spiritual readiness and ongoing development was taken very seriously; catechesis was undertaken at set times in set places; full inclusion in the church happened only gradually.

2. Reformation

As numbers grew, liturgy developed, sustained catechesis was gradually abandoned, to be renewed only during the Reformation. Their slogan 'sola scriptura' didn't mean nothing else, it meant that scripture is the basis for *everything* else – everything must be judged by scripture. The printing press made possible the production of large numbers of printed catechisms – Luther's Small Catechism saw over 100K copies printed in the 40 years after its publication. It was centred round the 10 Commandments, the Creed, the LP and the sacraments. This is a traditional approach – eg Didache begins by saying there are two ways, the way of life and the way of death (cp Matt 7.13-14; Ps 1.6). Augustine's Enchiridion said instruction should be given in faith, hope and love (Creed, LP, commandments to love God&neighbour). Or, heads, hearts, hands; cognition, affection, behaviour. US Catholic conference of bishops: 'the scope of catechetical content is cognitive, experiential and behavioral.'

Calvin published his Geneva Catechism in 1545, following Luther's Q&A format. Same 3 foundations: Decalogue, Creed, LP. The problem with printed catechisms was they led to rote learning, which was not the idea!

3. Puritans

Richard Baxter in Kidderminster mid 17th century catechised whole families using the Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1 hour per week, leading to great life changes in both individuals and the whole community – he turned the parish upside down. [HMS Bounty]

After that catechism waned due to 3 factors:

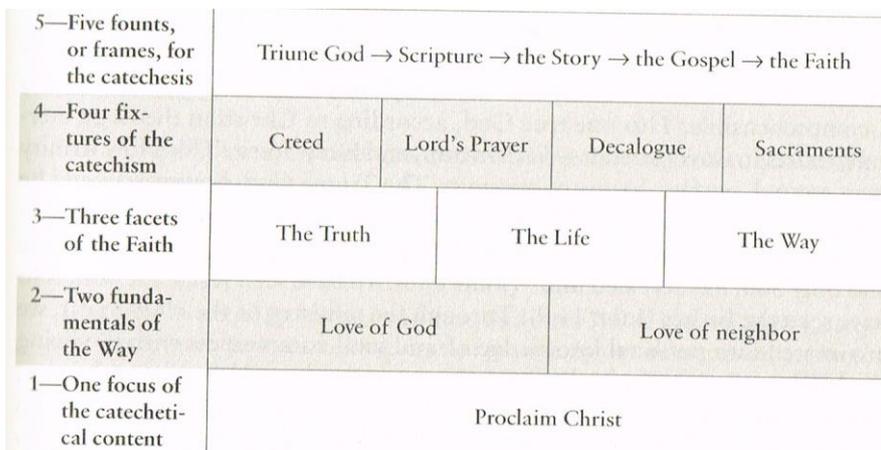
- The tag sola scriptura changed from meaning no authority over the bible to no authority except the bible
- The godliness of the individual rather than the glory of god in the church became the primary focus
- Bible study was seen as more important than tradition

Eventually even the teaching from the Bible turned into the teaching of Bible stories.

There are now over 39,000 denominations in the world! No unified or standard approach remains.

4. Sources and resources for catechetical ministry

Long and detailed suggestions for a modern catechesis, trying to fit together a number of different structures and approaches.



The basics are that he is Father, Son and Spirit; that he speaks to us through scripture; that we are part of a big redemptive story; that the gospel is the key to that story; that we are to teach each other what that means for our lives in practice.

‘Our God is a speaking God who has used particular Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words, arranged in sentences and paragraphs in documents of canonical status, to open his mind to us and tell us things’ 79.

Story is a good approach in postmodern culture . The church year enables us to tell it and remind us of our places in it. Most of the classic catechisms are based on Decalogue, Creed, LP and Sacraments. The first three of these correspond to the Way, the Truth and the Life.

5. The Gospel as of First Importance

1 Cor 15:3-5. The gospel has always been at the heart of its proclamation. Paul resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). We never move on *from* the gospel; we move on *in* it.

Biblical summaries of the gospel p 97-98.

- "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).
- "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).
- "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).
- "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).
- "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).
- "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).
- "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures . . . he was buried.... The third day he rose again from the dead, according to the Scriptures . . . and he appeared" (1 Cor. 15:3-6). Paul writes that this is the Gospel "I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this Gospel you are saved" (1 Cor. 15:1-2). In outlining it here, Paul asserts that "what I received I passed on to you as of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3).
- "God was in Christ, reconciling the world 60' himself, not counting men's trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19).
- "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).
- "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my Gospel" (2 Tim. 2:8).
- "[He] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).
- "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb:9:28).
- "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).
- "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).
- "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

NB Frances said ‘let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds’ (Rule ch17) – often paraphrased as ‘preach the gospel, use words when necessary’. Words are *always* necessary; we are called on to *testify*.

6. Three Facets of the Faith

Thomas à Kempis: ‘Without the way, there is no going; without the truth, there is no knowing; without the life, there is no living.’

Paul to Timothy and Titus talks about sound doctrine which leads to a way of sound living – 1 Tim 1 and Titus 2.

Way truth and life → Decalogue creed and LP → ethics, theology and prayer.

‘In the New Testament as well we find a number of passages and ideas that affirm the comprehensiveness of concern we have argued for above. The first letter of the apostle John provides us with a particularly helpful example. John notes that there are several witnesses that testify as to whether or not a person truly knows God, has been born of God, and is a child of God. There is, first, a **theological** test. Those who know God believe that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22), the Son of God (1 John 4:15; 5:5, 10) who has come in the flesh, being sent by the Father to make propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:2, 9-10). There is, second, a **moral** test —only those who do what is right (1 John 3:6-10a), especially by loving fellow believers (1 John 3:10; 4:7-8, 16, 19-21), are born of God. There is also, third, the **witness of the Spirit** within our hearts (1 John 3:24; 4:13), the Spirit who anoints us so that we may discern, hear, and heed the truth (1 John 2:20; 4:6).

We remember also that Paul in his pastoral epistles is especially concerned that Timothy and Titus give proper attention to both sound doctrine and to the lifestyle in which believers must walk. To Timothy he writes, "Watch your life and your teaching. In doing so, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). He instructs Titus to teach leaders both to heed "sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9) and to walk in the pattern of life that "is in accord with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

Jesus himself also modeled for us this comprehensiveness of concern in his teaching ministry. He testified to the Truth (John 3:31-32; 18:37) and in his own person and work incarnated the Truth for us, perfectly revealing the invisible God (John 1:14, 18; 14:9). Jesus invited men and women into a vital relationship with the transcendent God and offered Life in and through that relationship (John 5:21; 7:37-38; 10:10; 17:3). And he taught much about the Way of God in which we must walk—the Way of loving both God and neighbor. More than offering instruction at this point, he himself perfectly walked this Way, leaving us an example to follow (Mark 10:45; John 13:15, 34-35). We see in him, in other words, the threefold office of Christ our Prophet, Priest, and King—all evident even in the days of his earthly life.’ 126

The Way, the Truth, the Life

The Way:

A way to god

- John 14.1-5, 6
- John 10.7,9 (gate)
- Heb 10.19-20 a new and living way
- Eph 2.18, access to the Father through the cross
- John 12.32 I will draw all people to myself

A way of living

- Ps 1
- Deut 30.11-20 the choice
- Ps 25.4, 7-10 the says of the Lord
- Jer 6.16 the ancient paths, the good way
- Ps 119.1-16, 32 walking in the way of Torah
- Ps 32.8, Isaiah 30.21 under the guidance of teachers
- Deut 6.5, Lev 19.18 → Mark 12.28-31 the way is love
- Matt 7.13-14 two roads, life and destruction

The life:

- "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4).
- "That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).
- "The water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14).
- "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (5:21).
- "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (7:38).
- "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (10:10). • "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).
- "This is life eternal, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (17:3).
- "That you may have life in his name" (20:31).
- "God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13).

The Truth

- John 14.6
- Col 2.2-3 in him are hidden the treasures of wisdom and knowledge
- Heb 1.1-3 has disclosed himself in his son
- John 1.14 full of grace and truth
- 2 Cor 4.6 the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ

7. Forward in the faith of the gospel

Spurgeon said children should learn the words of the catechism by heart, so that the words will be understood better as years pass. It fills the cupboard of their souls.

8. Drawing Lines and choosing sides

Good catechesis helps believers distinguish primary doctrines from those that may be considered secondary or tertiary. Authors suggest thinking of catechetical content as having 4 layers:

1. Christian consensus – the fundamentals of the faith, believed everywhere – the gospel, the story, the truth, the life, the way
2. Evangelical essentials – the things which distinguish evangelicals from Catholic/Orthodox believers
3. Denominational distinctive
4. Congregational commitments

‘A young person growing up today has their worldview and values powerfully shaped by forces from all fronts. There is the constant influence of all sorts of media, the values inculcation that the schools and educational leaders have devoted themselves to, the political forces that legislate and enforce ever-shifting understandings of morality, the relentless worldview shaping that is driven by forces of advertising and marketing, and much more. The potency of such formative forces is enhanced by the fact that catechumens live among peers who are shaped continually by, and are often deeply committed to, these same things.’ 162.

9. Moving in and moving on

'The *Truth* concerns the sound doctrine that accords with the Gospel. The *Way* concerns that manner of conduct in the world that conforms to the sound doctrine. The *Life* concerns the life-giving power inherent in the Gospel that liberates us from our bondage to sin and enables us to begin walking in the Way.' 167.

We do not change a culture by analyzing it, critiquing it, withdrawing from it, or simply setting up alternatives to it. We change culture when we create new culture (Andy Crouch).

'Have we imposed unreasonably low expectations on our people and then lamented when they *lived down* to our expectations?' 175

Various possible frameworks are suggested.

10. Championing catechesis in contemporary congregations

'Catechesis is the church's ministry of grounding and growing God's people in the Gospel and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty and delight.' 182. Doctrine, devotion and duty correspond to the Truth, the Life, the Way.

The principal aims of catechesis are confession, conversation and conformity.

We must resist the temptation to reduce what must be whole person engagement to something more narrow - we must stimulate the mind, warm the heart and engage the hands.

Singing hymns is a key catechetical exercise – a longstanding feature of catechesis. Luther said spiritual songs bring the word of God among the people in the form of music. Paul told the Ephesians to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Reformation catechism was redolent of the school room; by the end of the C17th it had largely vanished. The catechism included in the 1662 book of common prayer was for the confirmation of children, and the assumption grew that adults needed nothing further. We still generally take this for granted.

TE Torrance: 'Christianity does not set out to answer man's questions. If it did it would only give him what he already desires to know and has secretly determined how he will know it. Christianity is above all the question the truth puts to man at every point in his life, so that it teaches him to ask the right, the true questions about himself.'