

# *The Promise of Catechesis*

by VIRGIL THOMPSON

**I**N 1976 JOHN WESTERHOFF RAISED THE QUESTION: "Will our children have faith?"<sup>1</sup> Westerhoff was neither the first nor the last to raise the question. Believers, from biblical times to the present day, have worried whether they will be successful in transmitting their faith to the next generation. For example, in Deuteronomy 6 it appears that the mothers and fathers as they prepare to enter the promised land were thinking about the matter: "When your son asks . . . then you shall say . . ." (v. 20). The passage continues as a sort of catechetical narrative: "We were Pharaoh's slaves . . . and the Lord brought us out . . . And the Lord commanded . . ." (Deut. 6:21-24). The children are taught what it means to believe and live accordingly, lest they forget their story and identity amidst the "bright lights and big cities," amidst the distractions and new opportunities, of the promised land.

Parents of today share the concern. Particularly as children enter the "promised land" of adolescence, parents wonder, and worry, about it: "Will our children have faith? Or will they forget amidst the distractions and opportunities that life holds for them?" To be quite honest about it, given the current status of catechesis in our church—that is, given the current vitality, or lack of it, of contemporary teaching one finds it difficult to be optimistic. On that basis one cannot but conclude with Luther: "A shameful and insidious plague of security and boredom has overtaken us. Many regard the Catechism as a simple, silly teaching which they can absorb and master at one reading. After reading it once they toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again."<sup>2</sup>

One cannot help but wonder whether the present weakness of our catechesis is at heart a weakness of faith. Do we ourselves fail to teach well—with dedication to and enthusiasm for the classical Lutheran tradition in the faith—because we do not believe that anything will come of the promise which we teach? Robert Jenson, writing about the poor preparation of seminary students, puts it just that way: "Entering seminarians will not be better catechized until the church has more faith."<sup>3</sup>

If at heart the ineffectiveness of our teaching should turn out to be not a problem of method or technique, but a problem of an un-

steady faith, then there is but one thing that can strengthen our teaching. We ourselves must be put back to school in the promise of faith. And that means back to the Bible and Catechism.

As a person considers the question from the standpoint of the biblical and dogmatic tradition of the church the dark pessimism and malaise is overcome with the light of hope ablazing. My purpose in this essay is to "put the light on the stand that it might shine for the entire household." Perhaps in the course of it readers will be encouraged to recover the classical service of catechesis to the children with the passion and dedication which befit it. Perhaps as well in the course of it the essay will have made a contribution toward the matter of establishing what in God's name we are to teach in order that the faith of the children may have a fighting chance.

#### FORMATION OF MEMORY

To begin: it may be taken for granted that the children will forget. The children of Israel forgot. So also the children of the contemporary church will forget. But if so then all the more reason that it should be remembered to them once again, and again. How strange, says Robert McAfee Brown, the people of faith "always seemed to be denying the God who had 'chosen' them. In the pungent language of the King James Version, they 'went a whoring after other gods.'"<sup>4</sup> The language of King James may be a bit too pungent for our sensitivities. But isn't it precisely the strange situation in which we, and our children, continue to find ourselves, whoring after other gods?

If so, then it only means that we qualify for the good news proclaimed by prophet and apostle. Which is to say, odd as it may seem, it is precisely that people, the whore, for whom God fulfills the promise of faith. There is the good news which is to be taught. It is the remarkable oddness of it that must be remembered to the children and to all believers: "Go again and love a woman loved by another man, an adulteress, and love her as I, the Lord, love the Israelites although they resort to other gods and love the raisin-cakes offered to their idols" (Hosea 3:1; NEB). It is, in other words, simply because God loves this people that he chooses them. We are not worthy. But God loves us anyhow, that we may become worthy. We are not faithful. But God is faithful, in order that we may yet become faithful. We may fail God. But God does not fail us. Thus there is hope that we will yet prevail against sin, death and

the power of the devil. Yet we may belong to God, "live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness," as Luther puts it in the Small Catechism.

There is the truth according to the Bible that is to be taught. The truth that is to be burned into the hearts and minds of us and our children, because it is the way, the truth, and the life which opens to us the future. Only by such teaching will there be a future for the next generation of faith.

The faith of the children depends, as Walter Brueggeman has argued, upon whether their parents teach to them the gospel—the good news of God's gracious redemption. Brueggemann, turning the question slightly, puts it this way: "Will our faith have children? . . . [It all depends:] Will we be . . . risking enough . . . that God may give us a future that we do not plan or control or contrive? . . . Are we open enough to receive a future from God which will surprise us? It is assumed in evangelical faith that any real future is given us . . . by the mercy of God . . ."<sup>5</sup>

This is the first point—actually the only point. Our purpose in teaching is to instill the expectation that God does for us what we are unwilling and unable to do for ourselves.

Consider, for example, the Exodus in this light: The people looked in the one direction and there was the Red Sea—deep and wide—which lay threateningly between them and the future. From the other direction, "The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea" (Ex. 14:9). Is it difficult to imagine that the question might have crossed the parents' minds: "Will our faith have children?"

Were it up to the Israelites it would have been the end of faith and, as a matter of fact, the end of the children. What chance did the Israelites have in the face of the Egyptian threat? Left to God, however, it was a different story: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him," as Moses and the people sang about the outcome of the story. And that is the remarkable story we have to tell, that it might inspire the faith of the children.

According to the Bible story of it, then, the one thing that is clear, right from the beginning, is that there is always an urgency about teaching the faith. In the Bible the faith is taught as though

if it were not taught there may be no tomorrow. It is taught as though what is at stake is not only tomorrow but also the very children themselves, their faith. This point could never be emphasized too strongly.

Some parents argue that children have to grow up and make their own decisions about these matters. One can entertain a measure of sympathy for the argument, particularly as one imagines the parents' own childhood catechist stuffing the "good news" down their throats. Of course the parents resisted, vowing they would never do that to their children. But the sympathy does not go too far. There is a time to grow up. There is a time to understand that it is a cheap thing to frame the question of teaching the faith as an alternative between "stuffing religion down their throats" and "letting them grow up and make their own decisions." Stuffing it down their throats is not the strategy. But neither is letting them grow up to make their own decisions.

It was, most likely, one of those two strategies that had been applied to Hazel Motes, a character in one of Flannery O'Connor's stories.<sup>6</sup>

Arriving in town and looking to rent a room, and now answering the prospective landlady's query? " 'What do you do?'

"He said he was a preacher.

" 'What church?' she asked.

"He said, 'the Church Without Christ.'

" 'Protestant?' she asked suspiciously, 'or something foreign?'

"He said, 'no mam, it was Protestant . . . I preach the Church Without Christ. I'm member and preacher of that Church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about the church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption.' "

It is a mistake to think that it is anything but urgent. The children, just like the rest of us, have their existence in the heat and warfare of a mighty battle waged between Satan and the Lord Jesus Christ. To decide their destiny, eternally. That is the stake of our teaching. I believe, said St. Paul, that the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). But it must be taught. There is nothing automatic about it. The power is in the gospel, yes. But the gospel must be proclaimed, the power let loose through the telling of it (Rom. 10). Children don't get the faith if parents only sit around with it in their hip pocket. It must be told.

And the telling is never done once and for all. Luther said that baptism is an experience once begun and repeated every day in the life of the believer. It is never done. St. Paul had won the day in Galatia, by the power of the gospel, moving the people from the "Church Without Christ" in to the Church of Christ. But it wasn't the end of it. Soon enough the people had fallen under the sway of those other teachers: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel . . . O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more" (Gal. 1:6, 3:1; 4:8-9)?

And so it was necessary for Paul to convert them again. Necessary to assert, again, the claim, to bring them back under the sway of Christ's power and rule: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

#### RECOVERING THE SMALL CATECHISM

Lutherans should understand how it is. We are heirs to a tradition that was born in a time when the church had neglected the catechetical instruction of believers: "Good heavens," Luther wrote to a friend after he had visited the congregations in his native Saxony, "conditions in the congregations everywhere are pitiable, inasmuch as the peasants learn nothing, know nothing, never pray, do nothing but abuse their liberty, make no confession, receive no communion, as if they had been altogether emancipated from religion."<sup>7</sup> Judging from the conditions which he had encountered in the church Luther could only draw the conclusion that the people of faith were being educationally starved to death. In the preface to the Small Catechism Luther writes: "Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people . . . have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching."<sup>8</sup> Something had to be done. And it was. Luther wrote the Small Catechism. And, he encouraged the congregation: "Keep on reading, teaching, learning, pondering, and meditating, and do not cease until [you]

have taught the devil to death, and have become more learned than God himself and all his saints . . . Think not that you are freed from the care of your household when you say: Oh, if they are unwilling to go to catechism instruction, why should I force them? . . . If the children refuse to study then they should be refused food . . . if the servants complain, slam the door on them."<sup>9</sup> Pastors and parents who refuse to learn and teach the Catechism, Luther contended, "deserve not only to be refused food but also to be chased out by dogs and pelted with dung."<sup>10</sup> The measures proposed by Luther may seem to us rather extreme, even ridiculously so. But at least they demonstrate that Luther was not fooling with it. He considered the Word of God to be the one and only basis for being "rooted, built up, and established in the faith." The Catechism was in his mind the evangelical imagination in the life of the church. It was the means of moving the believer into the Scriptures with evangelical expectation. That is, the Catechism articulates on the basis of the biblical witness the message that is the good news from God.

The Catechism, in other words, can be understood as the church saying to the individual believer: "I have been studying the Bible. Let me tell you what good news you may expect to find in this book." In this sense catechesis is rightly understood as indoctrination to the dogma of the church.

Today, "indoctrination" and "dogma" suffer unfortunate connotation. In the contemporary mind they have come to be synonymous with barren and boring, compulsory and constraining. Lutheran teachers on the "cutting edge" of educational theory and praxis are averse to the words, and seek to excise them from the church's vocabulary of religious education.

In place of the classical service of catechesis as indoctrination to the dogma of the church and introduction to the discipline of theological reflection, one hears of the pastor who ushers his confirmation class into the darkened sanctuary, instructs the students to close their eyes, and get in touch with their spirituality. While such a silly approach to teaching the faith may be an isolated incidence, the aversion to catechesis as indoctrination to dogma, which lies behind it, is not isolated. This understanding of catechesis is now widely abandoned throughout the church. In this sense the church seems intent upon chasing the epistemological train which has just left the station and wrecked a few miles down the track.<sup>11</sup> It may only serve to explain the church's current failure to successfully inculcate even

the most rudimentary familiarity with the fundamentals of the faith.

In this light one is compelled to ask, just what is it that is so objectionable about indoctrination to dogma and introduction to the discipline of theological reflection. Is the aversion but further evidence of human willful rebellion against God? Is it merely sinful assertion of the human desire to be in charge and in the center? Whatever the explanation, it does appear what the result is, the church ends up cultivating an educational program in which human spiritual seeking and speculation again replace the Word of God. When that happens the outcome should surprise no one. Luther has already demonstrated that there is no Christian faith at the end of speculation. If there is to be promise of faith it depends upon the recovery of the classical service of catechesis.

Through catechesis parents, pastors, and teachers seek to instill in the student proper expectations regarding what constitutes the good news of the Christian faith. Apprised of the proper expectations the student is then prepared to make out from the biblical and historic tradition of the church the good news which animates the faith of the believer.

Lutherans have insisted that the chief dogma of the church, the teaching by which the truth of God opens to the believer, is the dogma of justification by faith. This dogma prepares the believer to appreciate how God deals with us. God does not deal with us on the basis of what we have or have not so far become under our own steam, but God deals with us according to the promise of what we shall yet become in the love of Christ.

#### EVANGELICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Consider, for instance, in the light of this dogma, the story in Genesis 15, a story of special interest in the light of our question. According to the report of the passage God has arrived on the scene to reassure Abraham of protection and prosperity: "Fear not, Abram; I am your shield. . . Your reward will be very great" (Gen. 15:1b). To which Abraham answers in effect, "That's great; but fear and want are not exactly my problem. My problem is that I have no son. What is the good of protection and prosperity? What I want to know, will our faith have children" (Gen. 15:2-3)?

According to David Buttrick,<sup>12</sup> God answers the question of Abraham by saying: "Abram if you will step out under the night

sky there is something that I want to show you. See those stars; count them, if you can (this last part thrown in to keep Abram in his place, no doubt). Pretty impressive, all those stars. So shall your descendants be." And there is more. There is the promise of the land in which the many descendants will dwell.

It is all pretty fantastic; clearly, it is a bit more than Abraham's imagination can wrap itself around: "O Lord God, how can I know if it is true?" Abraham asks (Gen. 15:8). Buttrick says that the question is not the sign of Abraham's doubt. Previously in the narrative his faith has been praised (Gen. 15:6). Yes, but couldn't it also be the case that Abraham was pretty much like we are? Couldn't it be that there was to Abraham's faith a dark underside of unbelief? When Abraham went to bed he did not have pleasant dreams of his grandchildren frolicking in the sweet land of milk and honey. But it was a nightmare—dread and darkness. He could not see any prospect of the promise being fulfilled, or faith being rewarded. Is it possible that for Abraham the crisis arose precisely at the point where it arises for us, at the point of actually trusting the promise? If so, then God's Word to Abraham will be of interest to us as well.

"Obviously," says Buttrick, "the promise of land and descendants will not be too exhilarating to moderns—nowadays we have fertility clinics and real estate brokers."<sup>13</sup> But here is the thing which is of interest. Abraham "is met by a God who is free; God is not limited by what may seem utterly improbable or even laughable (Gen. 18:12–15), to us."<sup>14</sup>

Given their circumstances it was of course ridiculous for Abraham and Sarah to be preparing the nursery, when they should have been making preparations for moving into the nursing home. According to the law of nature, according to the law of common sense, according to the law of human experience the promise of God was absolutely laughable. And that did not escape them. You recall that when the news of an heir was broken to them, "Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?' (Gen. 17:17) . . . [And] Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' " (Gen. 18:12).

The laughter was not inappropriate. What, after all, were the odds? Yes, they had heard the promise of God. But the law hurled in the face of it denunciation: "You are too old and too barren. There is not going to be any heir." The promise of God introduces



some pretty funny notions into the Bible's story of faith. And those notions govern the way in which the story turns out. By the end of it Abraham and Sarah are made believers. For them the promise overcame the law. Faith overcame doubt.

#### FORMATION OF EVANGELICAL IMAGINATION

Our job as teachers of faith is to get those funny notions into the imaginations of the children, so that they too may live by the remarkable faith of old Abraham and Sarah. "Abraham, to use the happy phrase of Erasmus, united two contraries; that is to say, he 'hoped in things despaired of.' He had utter confidence in a God who creates fresh possibilities for the faithful where all ordinary human possibilities have been exhausted. This unconditional trust in the promise of God, a trust which flew in the teeth of the accumulated contrary evidence, became the basis on which God acknowledged Abraham as a righteous man."<sup>15</sup>

This is the claim of Genesis 15. Nothing less. "God is not handing Abraham a little 'buck-me-up' assurance for his downcast soul. God is declaring that the divine purpose will be and, what's more,"<sup>16</sup> Abram will be in on the ground floor of it.

That is not merely the power of Pollyannaish thinking. There are going to be problems, not the least of which is Abraham's dread and darkness. For God, delivering the heir is no problem. Getting the people redeemed out of Egypt, likewise. The big item is overcoming Abraham's dread and darkness which is the nightmare of faith.

We suffer the apparent unbelief of the children and we wonder. We see the door swing shut as the children make their exit, as though confirmation meant graduation from the church. The children suffer all the distractions and contradictions which erode the assurance of faith. And we wonder: Will our children have faith? Will our faith have children? There is the dread and darkness of Abraham. We know about it. And I don't imagine that we really needed the Bible to tell us that it is our nightmare.

But there is also the promise of God. For that we do need the Bible story. Our imaginations are not big enough to think it up. But schooled in the Catechism, indoctrinated to the chief dogma of the church, the imagination is opened wide to hear the good news of it as it is taught by the Bible: "Our God is a great improviser when it comes to keeping promises."<sup>17</sup>

Luther explains the meaning for faith: Living by faith, according to the dogma of justification, means to “outwit the denunciations hurled at me by the law with the promises of God in the gospel . . . I must grasp underneath the ‘no’ which the law of God addresses to me the deeply hidden ‘yes’ which the gospel of God speaks to me.”<sup>18</sup> That is what happened to Abraham and Sarah as they stood peeking around the tent door with their question: Will our faith have children? For them God’s promise outwitted God’s law. And the child, “Laughter” (which is, as you will recall, what the name Isaac means) was born. God was having the last laugh. In other words, sin (unbelief and despair), death, and the power of the devil are not the final word in our lives, no matter how much they might like to have it. The last word in this as in all things belongs to God. And God’s Word is the good news of the gospel overruling the law for the love of us. That was and is the point of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

For Jesus the promise of God outwitted the law of God. Think of God in the garden with Jesus who is lost in the prayer. And Jesus “began,” as Mark reports it, “to be greatly distressed and troubled . . . ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death . . . if . . . possible, [he prayed that] the hour might pass from him . . . Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt’ ” (14:33–36). Is it impossible to imagine that the question had occurred to God himself, “Will my son have faith?” And then there at the cross as Jesus is mocked, condemned, cursed, denounced, rejected, and finally killed by the law, is it so difficult to imagine that God is thinking of the question, “Will my faith have a Son?”

But God answered the questions with one fell swoop. He raised Jesus up from the dead. The promise of God had outwitted the law of God. And not just for Jesus, but for all children of faith. Jesus, the first fruit of the new creation.

### THE PROMISE OF CATECHESIS

It is this gospel that we seek to teach to the children. We seek to enlist them in the glad proclamation of it. To trust it. Make it known. And stand back and see the new world that it will create.

The promise of Jesus is that the good news of it will work its way into the imagination of our children. We need not worry about it. But in the promise we may teach what we have been given.

Will our children have faith? Will our faith have children? You cannot force people to believe, any more than you can get the daisies to grow by pulling on them, as one of my teachers used to impress upon us. You cannot hover over the children, anxiously, seeking to control how it is going to work out for them. Here is the thing which must first get home to us if we are to have any catechetical commerce with our children. We need not panic in the face of what appear to us as dead ends. We need not fall apart when we encounter “no” written big over our future and the future of our children. We may resist the anxious inclination to take everything under our own management. It is tempting. Satan comes waving seductively to us: You Lutherans have got to come up with something a bit more sexy (like spiritual meditation and new-age religion) than that old Bible and Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther if you want to keep your children in faith. But we may resist. We may trust the story, as it is told, to make believers, children included. But to tell the story we must know the story. For starters, we must know it well enough to recognize the way Satan works against us and the way God works for us.

Will our children have faith? Will our faith have children? The answer of the Bible is put in the verse of Isaiah: “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear . . . For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married . . . Enlarge the place of your tent . . . For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities” (Isa. 54:1-3). There is the promise of catechesis, according to which every reason for discouragement is transformed into the occasion of teaching by faith and hope the good news of God’s odd and remarkable ways.

Of course it makes no sense. But only to those who exercise an evangelical imagination, only to those who have been indoctrinated to the chief dogma of the church. To them by faith. Because God has made the promise we may teach the children in confidence that there will be a future and them in it, “rooted, built up, and established in the faith, just as [they] were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

## NOTES

1. John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
2. *Book of Concord*, trans. and ed., Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 359. Hereafter cited as BC.
3. Robert Jenson, "On Seminaries in Long Retrospect," *dialog* 28 (Spring 1989): 91.
4. Robert McAfee Brown, *The Significance of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 35.
5. Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 92-3.
6. See Flannery O'Connor, "Wise Blood," in *3 By Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Signet Classics, 1983), 55.
7. Quoted in F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 67.
8. BC, 338.
9. *Ibid.*, 361.
10. *Ibid.*, 360.
11. See Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) for an examination of modern assumptions about the dynamics of communication, teaching, and public discourse. Booth seeks to restore confidence and competence to the endeavor of engaging others in the discussion of faith and values. See Thomas Molnar, *The Pagan Temptation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), who argues that Christians have abandoned their own myths and symbols only to seek meaning in pagan myth and in the new occult. See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) who argues that it was the very attempt of religious leaders who sought to fit God comfortably into the modern world who have made belief in God superfluous. The accumulative effect of works like these is to suggest that it is the very epistemological options (education as values clarification, catechesis as spiritual discovery, etc.) embraced in place of catechesis as indoctrination which actually contribute to, and even foster, unbelief.
12. David Buttrick, "Genesis 15:1-18," *Interpretation* 42/4 (October 1988): 393.
13. *Ibid.*, 395.
14. *Ibid.*
15. David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 33.
16. Buttrick, "Genesis," 396.
17. *Ibid.*, 397.
18. Steinmetz, *Luther*, 30.



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