

My church, Rachel's church: "Jesus means church for me"

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

Every spring when our church confirms members of our confirmation class, I reflect on my own experience of joining the church. I don't think we called it confirmation back then—that was something the Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans did. We Presbyterians simply joined the church when we arrived at seventh grade. The point was to be able to take communion. I recall communion Sundays as boring; there was that long silence during which the elements were distributed up and down the pews, with nothing for a child to do but watch the plates of bread squares and tiny glasses of grape juice pass by me. The best part was when my mother allowed me to finish off the grape juice in her cup.

In seventh grade I joined "communicants' class." Seven of us gathered in the minister's study on a weekday after school for six weeks. We memorized as much of the Westminster Shorter Catechism as we could, knowing that at the end of the process the elders of the church would test us. The minister would read the questions and we'd repeat the answers over and over until we could say them in unison. There are 107 questions and answers. I'm not sure we ever got to number 107, and I don't remember ever talking about the meaning of what we were memorizing.

Then the church elders (literally elderly men) examined us. They sat in a front pew and asked the catechism questions, and we stood before them and recited, as best we could, the answers. I wondered if anyone ever failed this test.

During Holy Week we attended a preparatory service and then, on Maundy Thursday, we sat together as a class and received communion for the first time. I expected the earth to move and was a little disappointed when it didn't.

The catechisms were created as teaching tools to convey the content of the Westminster Confession of Faith, written and approved by Parliament in 1647 during that brief moment when England was Presbyterian. Until the 20th century,

Westminster was the theological foundation of Presbyterianism. The idea is that one becomes a Christian on the basis of what one knows about God, Jesus, the Trinity, the doctrines of justification, redemption and sanctification.

Happily, we no longer think like that. Faith is more likely to be defined as following Jesus and becoming part of his people than as having memorized ideas about him. We stopped force-feeding the 17th-century Calvinism of the catechism and learned to take seriously what we know about how adolescents learn and mature and turn into adults. Today Presbyterians welcome baptized children to the Lord's table.

I thought about all of that as I laid my hands on the heads of members of this year's confirmation class, particularly when I came to my granddaughter, Rachel. I don't think Rachel could have memorized enough of the catechism to pass the test in the old days. Rachel has Down syndrome and is part of a group of young persons who talked a lot together during the year, served meals to the homeless, stayed overnight in a homeless shelter and experienced church as a place of service and celebration in Jesus' name. They each wrote a statement of faith, and they brought tears to my eyes when I read them, particularly Rachel's. "Jesus means church for me," she wrote. "Church is faith. I feel church all the time. I go to church to learn about God, to worship, and to be thankful for Jesus."