

Continuing education

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

Easter is upon us. The dogwoods, fruit trees and azaleas are dazzling our eyes. My students and I are reading texts by Theodore of Mopsuestia. All this has set me to ruminating on new birth and nurture in the Christian life.

When I was growing up, Easter was more about the necessity of believing that the bodily resurrection of Jesus took place than about what it might mean for the believer. I am glad that in recent years Christians have worked hard on Christian initiation, especially for adults, and many have seen Easter as a time for baptism. In many churches, the time before baptism is devoted to significant training in Christian life and faith. Yet, if I can base my judgment on what lay folks seem to want, as well as on what seminary students seem to know about Christian tradition, scripture and possible ways to read it, it appears that much more needs to be said and done about Christian formation.

As I reread Theodore of Mopsuestia's homilies on the Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed, both of which were shared with adult catechumens of the early church at the time of their baptism, I can't help comparing the theological assumptions of the early church to modern assumptions.

First, many people today seem to think either that the truth of scripture has to be clear and literal ("God said it, I believe it, that settles it"), or that everything is just my opinion against yours. Early Christians held neither opinion. They took it for granted that Christianity's truths were not self-evident in this fallen world. They generally assumed that no one could simply hear or read the Bible and understand it as it should be understood.

Scripture is indeed the word of God, they believed, but not a private word heard without meditation nor a word revealed individually to each Christian for her or his private use. For them, the Bible is the book of the church. Wrongly heard, its meaning can seem ambiguous, open to a variety of conflicting interpretations. It can even be misleading.

New Christians in community, therefore, had to be taught the basic principles for reading scripture as well as the proper interpretation of key passages. The same was true for understanding the meaning of the major doctrines of the church that are summed up in the creed.

A second problem my students and other Christians have is seeing that theology, worship and spirituality and ethics must be inseparable from one another if any of them are to be real.

Here again our ancestors offer some help. For the early church, “learning Christianity” was not a matter of sitting down with a few textbooks and memorizing key concepts. Rather, the ancient teachers took for granted the Platonic and Stoic notion that reality, our minds and our bodies are related to each other in such a way that “like [can only be] known by like.”

For Christians who wish to know God, the image of God in which we are created gives us a starting point. Still, because of the ubiquitous presence of sin, the passions and death in human life, that image has been damaged. This means that if human beings are actually to know God and not just have self-induced—or demon-induced—subjective religious experiences, they must first be trained to live, think and feel in ways that correspond to who God is. Their very lives, lived within the Christian community that formed them, will then act as the lenses for more truly seeing God around them, in each other and in themselves.

Practically speaking, therefore, prospective Christians once learned to assume the deep unity of doctrine and practice, love of God and love of neighbor. Do I want to know what it means to speak of God as forgiving, just, merciful or magnanimous? Then I study scripture and the tradition to learn about and think through these qualities as best I can. At the same time, I must understand that what I seek isn’t just a matter of right thinking. I must, over the long period of time it takes to develop these virtues in community and in myself, actually work at, pray for and practice forgiveness, mercy, justice and magnanimity.

This gets us to the third point. In the South we still suffer the burden of believing that a Christian becomes a Christian all at once. Did you become a Christian and join the church last week? Then you must fully love God and your neighbor as yourself *right now*. It is hard to take formation and growth in the Christian life seriously if you think in such all-or-nothing terms. It is also hard not to be demoralized or

hypocritical a lot of the time.

The early church took the opposite approach: it thought that though people may have an experience of God that seems to turn their lives around, Christian formation is the shaping of the deepest Christian self. This is not something that happens all at once. Learning to love God and neighbor with our whole hearts, minds, strength and souls does not take place in a single instant of revelation. Entered into through baptism, sustained by grace and by participation in the Eucharist, such transformation is a lifetime's work, done in community with much thought, much wrestling with scripture and the tradition.

This is good news: by being given a lifetime to do it, we can be honest about our struggles and patient with ourselves and others.