Introduction

Around the year 200, the Latin apologist and theologian Tertullian of Carthage proclaimed – in a line that has since enchanted scholars of early Christianity – that "Christians are made, not born" (*fiunt non nascuntur Christiani*).[1] Becoming Christian, for Tertullian, was not a matter of bloodlines or family ties but of rigorous moral training, intensive biblical instruction, and socialization into a distinctive countercultural community. Elsewhere, he warns that baptism, the pivotal rite of initiation, should not be administered rashly but with a patient concern to foster mature knowledge of Christ:

> The delay of baptism is more profitable in accordance with each person's character, attitude, and even age. . . . So let them come [to baptism] when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught that to which they are coming. Let them be made Christians when they have become able to know Christ (*fiant christiani cum Christum nosse potuerint*).[2]

For Tertullian, preparation for baptism involved training new Christians in a robust pattern of Christian knowledge (*nosse*), a thoroughgoing process of intellectual, spiritual, and moral formation. It was not to be taken lightly.

Several centuries later, however, it seemed that Christian leaders were taking a different tack. Leading bishops like Augustine of Hippo, for instance, implored non-Christian hearers to hurry to baptism to find

[1] Tertullian, *apol.* 18.4 (CCSL 1:118; FC 10:54).
[2] Tertullian, *bapt.* 18.1, 4, 5 (CCSL 1:293; trans. Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on Baptism* [London: SPCK, 1964], 36–39, alt.).

knowledge of Christ: "Hasten to the font if [you] are in search of enlightenment." "Why do you fear to come?" "Run quickly to grace!"[3] Rather than caution candidates to delay baptism until they were able to know Christ, Christian leaders now seemed to think that baptism itself was the source of divine knowledge.

The formalization of baptismal instruction, what is often now referred to as the catechumenate, was supremely important in early Christianity – arguably the only educational institution unique to Christianity in its first five hundred years.[4] As a formal system for facilitating the process of membership and full initiation, the catechumenate played a major role in the solidification and spread of Christianity. But how should we understand the changing shape of catechesis in these years? How, in other words, do we get from Tertullian's warning to Augustine's plea? At issue in these questions are not simply differing views of baptism or pastoral tactics. We face here perennial Christian questions about the relationship between knowledge, faith, and learning. How does the Christian faith claim to offer true wisdom and virtue? What are the practices that lead to genuine knowledge of God, and how do they lead to spiritual transformation? If faith is a divine gift, can it be taught? Is there a rationale to learning what only comes by grace? Above all, what difference do Christian commitments to understanding Jesus Christ as both divine and human make for Christian modes of knowing?

It might be tempting to overlook the role of theological epistemology in early Christian catechesis. More often, scholars of catechesis have been interested in catechesis to the extent that it provides historical information about the development of creeds, initiation rites, or processes of Christianization. But what opportunities might catechesis afford for reflecting on the way in which knowledge of God is described and taught? I argue in what follows that early Christian catechesis provides a unique window into studying the relationship between knowledge and pedagogy in early Christianity. The catechumenate was a site of formative training for theological cognition – for learning what it means to know and encounter God. And yet precisely what it means to "know God" in these settings is by no means self-explanatory. It requires careful attention to the variations of knowledge-shaping practices across different times and regions. This is not, as will be readily apparent, a work of analytic

[3] Augustine, *en. Ps.* 81.8; *s.* 142.2 app.; *Io. eu. tr.* 44.2.
[4] I discuss the terminology of "catechesis," "catechumen," and "catechumenate" below in the section entitled "A Note on Catechetical Terminology."

philosophy. It is, rather, a historical–theological study of the ancient catechumenate – ranging from the second century to the fifth century in Roman Italy and North Africa – that seeks to illuminate the varieties of ways of knowing incumbent in introductory Christian education. By observing the myriad ways that early Christians taught new believers the fundamentals of the faith, we learn much about the character of Christian knowledge itself.

For many of the figures in this study, it was understood that some form of divine power was imparted in baptism – usually described in terms of illumination, enlightenment, or the impartation of wisdom. This spiritual power – whether it be identified with Christ, the Holy Spirit, or all three persons of the Trinity working inseparably – was seen as unlocking new, or newly applicable, cognitive powers that enabled participants to know God in ways previously unavailable. In addition, they viewed this kind of knowledge as more than simply learning new information about God. It was a form of union with God – a kind of knowing that involved a sharing or participation in the object known. But if this kind of knowledge was only possible in baptism, why teach anything before baptism? Why teaching anything at all? What should be explained, and what left unsaid? To anticipate the question ultimately animating this study: What conceptions of God and creation are presupposed in Christian practices of knowledge? And how does understanding Jesus Christ as both God and human affect the way we view Christian knowledge – not only its contents and doctrines but also its habits, practices, and forms? The catechumenate affords a perspicacious lens through which to study these questions.

An epistemological approach to studying catechesis has several merits, but two in particular are worth noting at the outset. First, this approach attempts to move beyond the regnant tendency of prioritizing the fourth-century legalization of Christianity as the primary interpretive paradigm for narrating the history of catechesis.[5] It has become all but axiomatic to describe catechetical changes in the fourth century in terms of Christianity's legalization and prioritization. As the story often goes, in

[5] In doing so, it takes up more recent proposals that question the older scholarly narrative about the impact of Constantine. For two examples of this newer scholarship as it pertains particularly to baptismal instruction, see D. H. Williams, "Constantine, Nicaea, and the 'Fall' of the Church," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (New York: Routledge, 1998), 117–36; and William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 66 n101.

the pre-Constantinian days, when Christianity was a beleaguered minority in the Roman Empire, catechesis was lengthy and arduous; it was heavily biblical, involved a large degree of moral and social formation, and was aimed toward making martyrs. But when Christianity became a legal and then the preferred religious expression in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the purposes of catechesis changed. Now its function was to accommodate a mounting herd of elites who sought the cultural benefits of Christian affiliation but who were not exactly in it to become martyrs. Initiation became more about doctrine and liturgy than biblical or moral formation, and Christian leaders borrowed language from the now defunct mystery cults to heighten the allure. I do not wish to downplay the obviously immense role that Constantine played in early Christianity. The Constantinian dynasty undoubtedly left a lasting mark on the Christian faith, but it did not affect every component in the same way, at the same time, or to the same degree. By observing the interplay of knowledge and pedagogy in early Christian catechesis, we find a more dynamic account of both the continuities and discontinuities that stretch across the pre- and post-Constantinian eras.

Second, this study attempts a different methodological approach to studying the catechumenate than has often been taken. Most studies, as I will outline below, approach catechesis from the perspective of practical theology, liturgical studies, or social history. I have a great appreciation for these disciplines, but I am primarily interested in framing catechesis within the contours of a theological and historical approach that is attentive to the pedagogical shape of catechesis as it emerged within the scope of educational institutions in antiquity. This study is thus primarily occupied with theological questions about the conditions for knowing God and the kinds of practices constitutive of such knowledge, and secondarily with the historical conditions in which such knowledge was formed. One of my aims will be to show how the catechumenate emerged within an existing set of knowledge-shaping traditions and how, as a result, it played an important role in transposing classical education into Christian contexts, even as Christian commitments transformed these traditions in a myriad of ways.

Rowan Williams has famously written that theology as a discipline is "perennially liable to be seduced by the prospect of bypassing the question of how it *learns* its own language."[6] My hope is that this project

[6] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 131 (emphasis original).

offers a picture of early Christian catechesis that helps us remember, quite literally, how early Christian theology learned its own language. What it means to know God is inseparable from the ways in which such knowledge is experienced; medium and message are tightly linked. In studying early Christian catechesis, we observe how knowing God belongs within a set of ecclesial practices in which the meaning of knowledge and faith are found in – and founded upon – Jesus Christ. Advancing from faith to understanding, from belief in God to the knowledge of eternal wisdom, begins and ends with Christ.

PATRISTIC CATECHESIS AND LATE ANTIQUE LEARNING

Historical studies of catechesis and the catechumenate have mostly proceeded along three lines of inquiry. First are those that study catechesis as a species of practical theology. This approach emerged primarily in the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, with the development of practical theology as a distinct discipline, and it was taken up anew in Roman Catholic circles in the early to mid twentieth century, leading up to Vatican II in the 1960s and the eventual promulgation of the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults in the 1970s.[7] More recently, especially in North America, scholars have turned to patristic catechesis to gain insight into Christian mission in the so-called post-Christendom era. Surveys of patristic catechesis by Michel Dujarier, Alan Kreider, and Everett Ferguson, for example, are especially interested in the ways that catechesis developed in light of the Constantinian era, with an eye toward the

[7] As this approach intersected with New Testament studies, an important impetus was the search for a New Testament "catechism," such as proposed by Alfred Seeberg in *Der Katechismus der Urchristenheit* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903). For a concise historiography of German scholarship, see Matthieu Pignot, *The Catechumenate in Late Antique Africa (4th–6th Centuries): Augustine of Hippo, His Contemporaries and Early Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 10–11. And for a more detailed study of New Testament scholarship related to catechesis, see Benjamin Edsall, "*Kerygma*, Catechesis, and Other Things We Used to Find: Twentieth-Century Research on Early Christian Teaching since Alfred Seeberg (1903)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 3 (2012): 410–41. For key works in Roman Catholic catechetics from this period, see Josef Jungmann, *Die Frohbotschaft und unsere Glaubensverkundigung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1936); Jean Daniélou, with Regine du Charlat, *La catéchèse aux premiers siècles: Ecole de la Foi* (Paris: Fayard-Mame, 1968); André Turck, *Évangélisation et catéchèse aux deux premiers siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962); Turck, "Aux origines de catéchuménat," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 48 (1964): 20–31.

implications that might be drawn for contemporary Christian mission.[8] Even in more strictly historical studies, interest in the effects of Christianity's legalization on catechesis has been hardly marginal.[9] A second line of inquiry occurs within the field of liturgical and ritual studies. Many fine works by scholars like Aidan Kavanaugh, Maxwell Johnson, Paul Bradshaw, Edward Yarnold, Juliette Day, Thomas Finn, Victor Saxer, Alistair Stewart, and others have explored the way catechetical instruction is enfolded within the rituals of Christian initiation.[10] This scholarship sees catechesis as one part of a more general interest in tracing the historical origins of Christian rituals. Finally, a third line of inquiry attends to the catechumenate's role in the social history of Christianity. Influenced by the work of Peter Brown and other historians

[8] Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries* (New York: William H. Sadlier Inc., 1979); Everett Ferguson, "Catechesis and Initiation," in *The Early Church at Work and Worship*, vol. 2: *Catechesis, Baptism, Eschatology, and Martyrdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 18–51; Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

[9] See, for example, Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Histoire du catéchuménat dans l'église ancienne*, trans. F. Lhoest, N. Mojaisky, and A.-M. Gueit (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007); Andy Alexis-Baker, "*Ad Quirinum* Book Three and Cyprian's Catechumenate," *JECS* 17, no. 3 (2009): 357–80; Andrew Louth, "*Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*: Conversion, Community, and Christian Identity in Late Antiquity," in *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark*, ed. Carol Harrison, Caroline Humfress, and Isabella Sandwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109–18; Alden Bass, "Fifth-Century Donatist Catechesis: An Introduction to the Vienna Sermon Collection ONB M. Lat. 4147" (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 2014).

[10] Among many works one could cite, see Aidan Kavanaugh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978); Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Gospel and the Catechumenate in the Third Century," *JTS* n.s. 50, no. 1 (1999): 143–52; Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006); Thomas M. Finn, "Ritual Process and the Survival of Early Christianity: A Study of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 69–89; Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); Victor Saxer, *Les rites de l'initiation chrétienne du IIe au VIe siècle. Esquisse historique et signification d'après leurs principaux témoins* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1988); Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "Catechumenate and Contra-Culture: The Social Process of Catechumenate in Third-Century Africa and Its Development," *SVTQ* 47 no. 3–4 (2003): 289–306; Juliette Day, *The Baptismal Liturgy of Jerusalem: 4th and 5th Century Evidence in Jerusalem, Egypt and Syria* (London: Routledge, 2008).

of late antiquity, these approaches study the catechumenate primarily as it relates to the emergence of a Christian society from the Roman Empire.[11]

My own approach emerges within a different line of inquiry, which attends to the role of institutions and ecclesial practices in early Christianity.[12] Christoph Markschies's *Christian Theology and Its Institutions* is a useful point of departure here.[13] Adapting the notion of "institution" originally developed by Adolph von Harnack, Markschies theorizes institutions as "social arrangements that outwardly and inwardly effectively suggest and bring into force stability and duration."[14] In such arrangements, "the action-guiding and communication-directing foundations of an order are also always symbolically brought to expression."[15] Markschies calls attention here to the dynamics of how social arrangements shape action and attitudes, especially through symbolic representation. These structures provide durability and coherence for communities and serve as "the social basis for the spread of new ideas."[16] Thus conceived, institutions provide the basis for agreement or disagreement across geographical and temporal intervals, and hence the possibility of a "group consciousness" and shared identity.[17] While Markschies does not deploy this concept for analyzing catechesis, his approach has been taken up recently by Benjamin Edsall in a study of the reception of the apostle Paul in the catechumenate.[18]

[11] Daniel Schwartz, *Paideia and Cult: Christian Initiation in Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013); David Vopřada, *Quodvultdeus: A Bishop Forming Christians in Vandal Africa: A Contextual Analysis of the Pre-baptismal Sermons Attributed to Quodvultdeus of Carthage* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Pignot, *Catechumenate in Late Antique Africa*.

[12] For a sampling of work in this area, see Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler and Marvin Döbler, eds., *Religious Education in Pre-Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Peter Gemeinhardt, Lieve Van Hoof, and Peter Van Nuffelen, eds., *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity: Reflections, Social Contexts and Genres* (London: Routledge, 2016); Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman, eds., *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017); Lewis Ayres and H. Clifton Ward, eds., *The Rise of the Early Christian Intellectual* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

[13] Christoph Markschies, *Christian Theology and Its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology*, trans. Wayne Coppins (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

[14] Markschies, *Christian Theology*, 20.

[15] Markschies, *Christian Theology*, 20–21.

[16] Markschies, *Christian Theology*, 24.

[17] Markschies, *Christian Theology*, 24.

[18] Benjamin Edsall, *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Initiation: History and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

I follow Edsall in using this institutional framework to situate early Christian catechesis, though my focus is on a different set of questions and figures.

EPISTEMOLOGY, PEDAGOGY, AND WAYS OF KNOWING

A word needs to be said about my use of the language of epistemology. In the wake of Descartes and Kant, epistemology has primarily come to denote the study of knowledge as a theoretical construct concerning how certain beliefs are justified. Key questions include, for example, whether justified knowledge depends on a set of more basic beliefs (foundationalism) or whether it occurs within a web of coherent (but equally foundational) beliefs (coherentism). As a subcategory, epistemology of religion asks whether or to what extent an individual is justified in believing in God or some religious tenet. Does one have sufficient or appropriate evidence to warrant such belief (evidentialism) or does faith operate independently of reason (fideism)? Here, considerations of faith and reason – what they are and how they are related – are paramount, as are adjudications over the proper criteria for believing in God or some other religious tenet.

Increasingly, though, there is a recognition that epistemology of religion must attend not only to questions of belief, warrant, and justification but also to the social and experiential structures of knowledge.[19] Herein lies the import of historical studies of knowledge, where one finds greater attention to issues of embodied practices, rhetorical discourses, and the social conditions entailed in the ordering of knowledge. Historical studies of knowledge are especially attuned to the differences between ancient and modern conceptions of knowledge and the contextualized nature of the questions historical figures are asking.[20] In recent work on "ordering knowledge" in antiquity, one finds a great deal of interest, in a broadly Foucauldian idiom, about the ways in which knowledge is constructed

[19] See, e.g., the approach laid out in William Abraham and Frederick Aquino, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[20] This impulse can be observed in Lloyd P. Gerson's study of ancient epistemology, in which he argues that ancient epistemology is less a hermeneutical or subjective state of mind but something more like a state of being. See his *Ancient Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

and textualized within particular sociopolitical arrangements.[21] In a much different register, theologians like Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley have led a cadre of scholars to study the spiritual senses traditions in Christian history as an inroad into theological epistemology.[22] Other scholars working at the edges of theology, biblical studies, and philosophy have variously explored how Christian commitments shape the character of Christian knowledge.[23] In certain corners of patristic studies, there has been an effort to understand the formation of theological doctrine within epistemological categories. Scholars, for example, find Augustine concerned not simply with formulating propositions about God but also with guiding readers in a set of cognitive and spiritual exercises that facilitate the Christian's participation into the divine life.[24] In these ways and more, historical and theological studies can provide unique contributions to the field of theological epistemology.

My task in this book is to tease out the relationship between epistemology and pedagogy in early Christian catechesis. Helpful here is Luigi Gioia's use of the category of epistemology to analyze Augustine's

[21] Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh, eds., *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Catherine Chin and Moulie Vidas, eds., *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[22] Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Coakley's work in particular develops insights from the Christian mystical tradition and feminist epistemology to address issues of religious epistemology in dialogue with the reformed epistemology of Nicholas Wolterstorff and the epistemology of divine perception in William Alston. See Sarah Coakley, "Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Ávila," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312.

[23] From the perspective of systematic theology, see Reinhard Hütter's articulation of church practices as constitutive of theological knowledge: "The Knowledge of the Triune God: Practice, Doctrine, and Theology," in *Bound to Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 43–55. In biblical studies, see Craig Keener's articulation of the role of pneumatology in epistemology: *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). From a philosophical perspective, the work of Esther Lightcap Meek has sought to articulate a "covenant epistemology," which draws on the philosophy of Michael Polanyi within a biblical idiom in which knowing is understood as interpersonal, relational, and transformational. See Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

[24] Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's 'De Trinitate'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

trinitarian theology. Augustine, he argues, "does not embark on an explicit reflection on the conditions of knowledge of God, but aims at introducing his reader into the *practice* of this knowledge and then, only retrospectively, determines its conditions not critically but theologically or, rather, from a theologically ruled critical point of view."[25] This vision of the relationship between knowledge and theological practice is, I hope to show, especially applicable to early Christian catechesis. An understanding of what it means to know God is inseparable from how one actually comes to know God – or, at least, how one is taught to know God – especially when the object of knowledge is not a mere object among other objects but the transcendent source of human knowledge. By theological epistemology, I will still mean, generally, the conditions of knowledge, whether that be knowledge of God, the world, or oneself, though I am especially concerned with Christian knowledge of God and its attendant beliefs and practices. The language of practice and pedagogy designates the instructional means by which one arrives at knowledge, though it owes more to Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelian conception of practices rather than contemporary pedagogy theory.[26] In this parlance, practice is not the counterpoint to doctrine or theory – the practice of fasting, say, as opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, I am construing catechesis itself as a practice of cognitive training, one that entails a conglomeration of beliefs, practices, and social relationships that organize and structure Christian knowledge.

The relationship between epistemology and pedagogy was a key point of contention in Greek and Roman antiquity. In the wake of the Socratic and sophist debates about the orientation and ends of knowledge, philosophical and rhetorical schools took up these issues anew, as did early Christianity more generally and catechesis in particular. I will return, briefly, to the ways in which ancient philosophers approached issues of knowledge and pedagogy in Chapter 1. In the chapters thereafter, I sketch

[25] Gioia, *Theological Epistemology*, 3 (emphasis original).

[26] See his much-cited definition from *After Virtue*: "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.