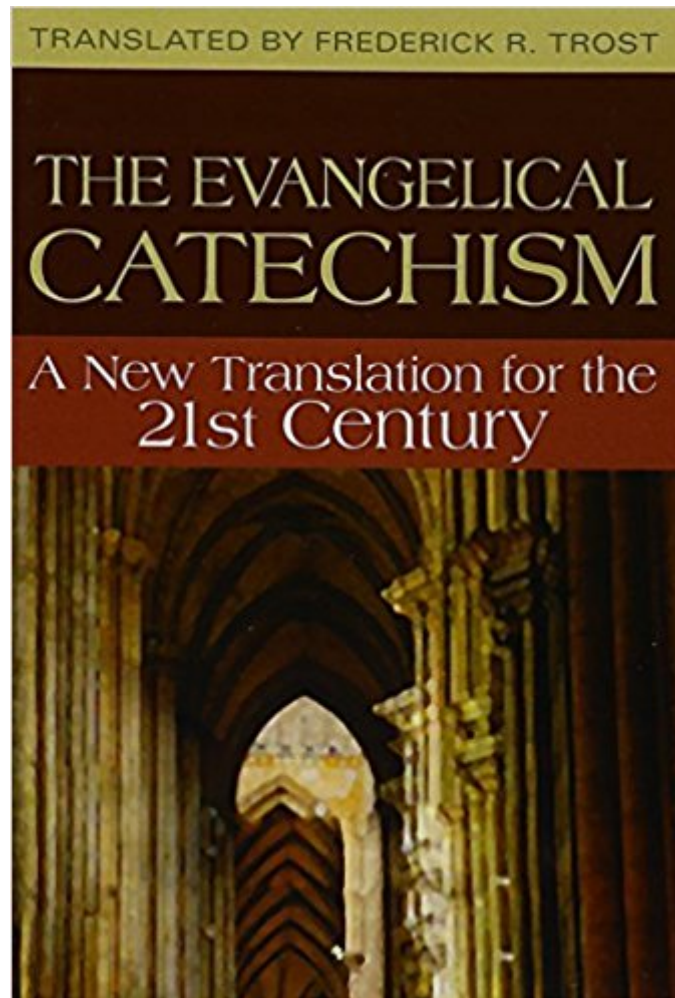




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The Evangelical Catechism: A New Translation For The 21st Century



Synopsis

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The great theologian of the early Church, St. Augustine, once remarked that "each one of us, from earliest childhood, has had to learn our own language by constantly hearing it spoken," going on to say that this simple fact reminds us "not to be too proud to learn what has to be learned with the help of other people." And, once we have learned the wisdom others have to teach us, it is our responsibility to pass along this wisdom to others--just as we once received it from others. This is the heart of what catechesis, or "teaching by word of mouth," is all about. It is a transmission, a passing along of wisdom from one to the next. Dr. Fred Trost understands from the long arc of his remarkable career in ministry. His new translation of THE EVANGELICAL CATECHISM "for the twenty-first century," as the title puts it, continues this work for a wider public. His introduction alone is worth the price of this little gem of a book: here, Trost voices "a summons to faithfulness," suggesting in brief overview the nature of catechesis and its history from the period of earliest Christianity through the witness of the 16th century Protestant Reformers and later evangelists of the so-called "Evangelical Synod." The latter came as immigrants to this country in the mid-19th century, discovering this country as a vast land with great need for the work of building Christian

communities and attending to the needs of this "new world." Much was at stake for these leaders, as Trost reminds us. They knew that the heart of faith lay in the foundational commitment of God's love toward us. They recognized that this love calls each of us to acts of compassion for the world, and and to the courageous proclamation of God's gracious action toward all humankind in deed as in word. Trost reminds us that these Christians understood the church not as a "community of doctrine," but rather as "a community of love." He reminds us that our "confession" of faith, like theirs, is one we discover not merely in "knowing" something about God, but in "doing" our faith in works of love. But Trost is clear, as these witnesses were, that "knowing" the faith matters, that faith is not an opinion or a feeling, not a "notion" flitting about in the mind but one rooted deeply in the drama of human knowledge. Just as St. Augustine reminds us that we depend upon others to "learn" language, so we rely on others to learn the "grammar" of faith and the vocabulary of belief. Trost's translation of this catechism is masterful, appropriately updated in ways consistent with the intentions of its original framers. His masterful introduction is worth reading as a call to "bearing witness" to the faith in its own right: page by page, Trost reminds us that this faith is only "old" to those who know nothing of the God who goes before us in this age, and becomes "new" as we allow its wisdom to help us face our world with courage and conviction. Trost reminds us that theological understanding is a vocation for all Christians, one rooted in the joyful and serious conversation about faith that moves from one generation to the next. He is convinced--and convinces us in his marvelous way of introducing this historical Catechism--that such a teaching tool as this "presents us not so much with a nostalgic look backward, but with a challenge to embrace the faith entrusted to the communion of saints as we face the world today and tomorrow." Facing the world in its present travails, and doing so with faith strong enough to trust that God's ancient promises are new in each generation, is what this catechism is all about. And this, according to Trost, is the mark of true discipleship. This is a book to read and study with a confirmation class or adult reading group. It will be an encouragement to those clergy who have forgotten the joy of theological study, or neglected its call under other pressures in their ministry. "The Evangelical Catechism" does not offer the "last" word in this journey of inquiry, exploration, wrestling, and discovery. But as a "first" word, it is one that will open doors and windows into scripture and the church's ongoing witness. It is a little book that promises much more than one might expect from so slender a volume: those who "take and read" it, who study it with others, will find their faith illumined, their hope strengthened, and their love of a life committed to the gospel's call to peace-in-justice encouraged. They will find this a word that opens such inquiry into a larger horizon of conversation, one passed through the generations--including ours, for the next. Who, after all, could tire from

hearing such words as these, declared with clarity and conviction: "What is grace? Grace is the wondrous, unmerited kindness of God toward us and the whole creation. God does not allow our heartbreak to endure or the misery of sin to have the last word. Instead, GOD TAKES THE WORLD BY SURPRISE, drawing near to us in infinite mercy, embracing sinful humanity and the very least among us with unbounded love and astonishing humility." Christians often fail at grasping this--or, being grasped by it. All the more reason to have a book like Trost's new version of this catechism close to hand. We can never be reminded often enough of the "old" truth of grace, one that is new in every moment for those who open their hearts to its coming. When we begin to learn this, and as we remember it from day to day, we find ourselves overtaken by this surprise, and embraced by this wonder. And, when we do, we discover the truth of this ancient "grammar" of faith, in our joys and trials. We might even find courage to become people of this Word, those willing to embody Jesus' presence as the way, the truth, and the life among us. We might find that this is a Word that stands against us in our indifference, but one that is always for us in our doubt and despair, and for the world that God so loves. Such a word is one we need in this generation weary of cliched religion and cynical leadership. Who knows what new reformer might rise up in the strength of this call to learn and teach the faith in and for this world of beauty and travail? St. Augustine once heard the words, "Take and read!" uttered in a garden by a voice he could not identify. I could not but hear echoes of this as I first read Trost's call, in his introduction, to do just this with this Catechism: take it up, read it, talk about it, and, most of all, let it invite us to receive and embody the compassionate ways of God--for us and for all those looking to us to learn the "language" of faith.

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