

“What does this mean?” Biblical reflections on catechesis

Ben C. Ollenburger

In his *Confessions*, Augustine recalls listening to the sermons of Ambrose. Augustine was not then a Christian. He had come from his home in North Africa to teach rhetoric in Milan, where Ambrose was bishop. Ambrose enjoyed renown as an orator, and Augustine wanted to see if the bishop’s rhetorical skills were worthy of his reputation. So, although Augustine had no interest in, and certainly did not believe, what Ambrose was preaching, he routinely listened to Ambrose’s sermons and marveled at their eloquence—at the beauty of Ambrose’s words.

“Yet,” Augustine confesses, “along with the words, which I loved, there also came into mind the things [ideas] themselves, to which I was indifferent, for I could not separate them. And, while I opened my heart to acknowledge how skillfully he spoke, there also came an awareness of the truths that he spoke—but only by

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degrees” (*Confessions* 5.14.24). Thus Ambrose’s preaching was, for Augustine, a form of evangelism. But, or rather *thus*, I suggest, the example of Ambrose and Augustine also counts as a model of catechesis.

Catechesis, in its most familiar sense, is formal instruction in Christian faith preparatory to baptism. In our churches, catechesis—however it may be conducted, and whether or not the term is used—most often has children or youth as its constituents. Neither they nor the adults who come to catechism are likely to do so with the intellectual sophistication that Augustine brought to his auditing of Ambrose. However, whether young or old, they will bring to catechism something that Augustine lacked at the time: faith. Their faith may be mature, disciplined, and tested, or it may be fresh, untutored, and probing.

But typically, people who enter catechesis will do so *because* of their Christian faith.

They will have come to this faith observing Christians practice it, whether in the home, in church on Sunday mornings, in the workplace, on the streets. They will have heard Christians confess their faith or proclaim it or talk about it. Young people of the church grow toward faith, come to faith, in a variety of ways: hearing parents pray, going to Sunday school, hearing and seeing the Bible read, singing hymns, listening to conversations about faith, observing celebrations of the Lord's Supper, attending funerals and baptisms, listening to sermons. They have been seeing that faith somehow matters, not only on Sunday morning but always. In other words, in everything the church says and does—everything its members and its leaders are and do—the church is engaged in informal catechesis.

Children may not bring to mind, or be able to bring to mind, the “things,” the specific convictions that undergird and surround and penetrate what Christians do and say as Christians and because we are Christians. Like Augustine, they may be indifferent to, or simply unable to grasp, the content, as they observe or participate in the forms. Even so, these *forms* constitute an *informal* evangelical catechesis, whereby hearts may be opened, “by degrees,” to an awareness of the truth that these forms speak. Using these “faith-based,” faith-enacting—perhaps faith-constituting—patterns and modes of action and speech, the whole church is always engaged, whether well or poorly, in informal catechesis.

Catechesis in the Old Testament

The Bible, of course, does not mention catechesis, let alone prescribe its form. However, the Bible does describe informal catechesis. The first instance occurs in the book of Exodus, as Israel prepares for the Exodus. Central in this preparation is the Passover, for which Moses gives instructions in Exodus 12:21–27; these follow God's own instructions in Exodus 12:1–14. We need not rehearse the details of those instructions here, but we should note that the Passover involved a ritual meal, including specific ingredients and actions performed in and with it. The initial Passover meal was, of course, in preparation for the Exodus from

Egypt.¹ The meal itself was also to be a commandment—an ordinance—and a perpetual one: it was to be observed, not just on that one evening in Egypt, but annually, when God had brought Israel into the land.²

The components of Passover, including the odd ingredients of the meal and the actions performed in association with it, do not have transparent or self-evident meaning. Moreover, the instructions Moses gives envision a future time when the Exodus is an event long in the past and Passover has become, not a preparation, but a memorial (Exod. 12:25). In that future time, children will ask, “What does this mean [to you]?” or “What do you mean by this?”

Before proceeding, we may pause to note the source and the object of this question. Children are its source: they are the ones who ask, and they ask to be instructed. Provoking their question is the observance itself. First, the observance consists of regularly repeated actions, including verbal ones, and of objects that resemble but depart from the ordinary. It revolves around a meal, but not at all an ordinary one. The ritual observance, taking place only once each year, at the same time every year, marks an extraordinary time. These departures from the ordinary provoke the children’s question.

Second, families are to provide the answer. This follows, because Passover is a family ritual, not a corporate or communal affair, although all of Israel’s families celebrate it simultaneously. However, families are not left to their own imaginations or interpretations in providing an answer. The answer is itself prescribed, as in a catechism.

Third, then, the answer as prescribed in Exodus 13:14–15 (cf. 12:26–27) does not explain the elements of the ritual or of the meal, but rather gives the rationale—the meaning—of both: “By strength of hand [by divine power] the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. . . .” There follows reference to the tenth, decisive, and most horrifying plague. We may safely assume that this brief answer is a sketchy reference to the whole story of the Exodus, including the stories leading up to it (i.e., Genesis and the earlier chapters of Exodus). Indeed, the very question—“What does this mean?”—is itself part of the ritual. In other words, Moses (or God!) does not simply suspect that

children may come to pose this question; rather, the question constitutes an appropriate, expected, and prescribed element of the Passover ritual. Children need to be taught to ask it. The ritual of Passover does not just happen.

Deuteronomy also expects that children will ask a question: “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the statutes, and the decrees, and the ordinances that the LORD [YHWH] our God has commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . .’” (Deut. 6:20–21). The question, and the answer that follows it, do not form part of a ritual. Rather, the question arises, as if spontaneously, out of informed awareness that a certain body of instruction (*torah*) bears unique and definitive significance. The answer that follows grounds this significance first in the saving actions of God. It then explains that God’s gracious actions on Israel’s behalf, along with promises accompanying them, place Israel under an obligation of exclusive fidelity to the God who performed those actions and made those promises: “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4). The “statutes, and the decrees, and the ordinances” guard this fidelity.

The children’s question in Deuteronomy 6:20 also exhibits three other features: awareness that this body of teaching, this

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torah, derives ultimately from God; acknowledgement of God’s name, YHWH; and identification with the community whose God [“our God”] YHWH is. In other words, the question arises from nascent faith. This faith was itself nurtured by intentional practices of instruction. The “words” Moses conveyed to Israel were to be impressed upon, taught, recited to the children (Deut. 6:1–7). But beyond any formal instruction or recitation for the direct benefit of children, these same words were to be the subject of attention and conversation everywhere and all the time

(Deut. 6:6–9), and they were to be embodied in every dimension of Israel’s life (6:24–25). “Israel’s entire way of life,” then—its very ethos, including its rituals—was itself to be (informally)

catechetical in nature, corporately articulating the wholehearted and single-minded love of the one God (6:5).³

Exodus 12–13 describes a kind of informal catechesis through ritual practice. Deuteronomy 6 describes informal catechesis as embedded in Israel’s quotidian life. Both refer foundationally to a narrative of divine initiative by which YHWH and Israel are identified—not exhaustively but irreducibly—in relation to each other and to the world. In Exodus 12, that narrative serves to institute the Passover ritual and establish its meaning, while the ritual’s performance serves to spread the narrative. In Deuteronomy 6, that narrative serves as the basis of YHWH’s imperatives and their embodiment in Israel’s life; it is also the basis of judgment, never utterly final, on Israel’s life.

To *narrative*, in these instances, we may add the term *confession*. Indeed, a narrated confession both sustains and includes within itself the commands and ethos and rituals that together define, judge, and by prescribed routine interrupt, Israel’s life. Each of them—the narrated confession, the imperatives and the ethos, the rituals, and even a pile of stones by the Jordan—is sufficiently definitive and uncommon to provoke the question, on the lips of children or sojourners, “What does this mean?” (Josh. 4:6, 21). The question, as the answers to it suggest, arises not just from curiosity but from faith: from an awareness of the truth that these words and actions and signs together speak.

Catechesis in the New Testament

In the New Testament, not surprisingly, matters are formally the same and materially different. Gerd Theissen has described the formation of early Christianity as the “building of a semiotic cathedral.” This Christian “sign system,” Theissen argues, consisted of a narrated confession and theology (“myth and history,” in Theissen’s terms); “a prescriptive sign language consisting of imperatives and evaluations; and a ritual sign language consisting of the primitive Christian sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.”⁴ As was true of the Old Testament examples on which they drew and which help constitute them, these components of the Christian sign system—including a Christian ethos—were mutually sustaining and interdependent (e.g., Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Cor. 11:17–34; Eph. 4:1–16). Further,

these components and the texts and practices they include, individually and especially in their wholeness (as a cathedral), perform informal catechesis.

Theissen's semiotic or sign metaphor is apt, because learning the faith may be compared with acquiring a language.⁵ Each of us acquired our first language (in a particular dialect), not through formal instruction in its vocabulary and grammar, but informally by immersion in some community of native speakers. Elementary education in some places used to be called "grammar school." Formal catechesis is also, at least, grammar school. It is at least instruction in the vocabulary and grammar of Christian faith, however archaic and technical that vocabulary and its grammar may seem. In formal catechesis preparatory to baptism and the first celebration of the Lord's Supper, the question "What does this mean?" is asked, not *by* but *of*, the catechumen. The point is neither pedantic nor academic; it concerns at least the capable use of the church's language in the moral and liturgical activities and practices, and articulate convictions, which are a measure of the church's faithfulness. Hence the Anabaptist-Mennonite conviction regarding baptism, not of children who may seriously and from their faith *ask* "What does this mean?" but of those prepared to *answer* with their lives.

Conclusion

A debate goes on in the literature between those who conceive catechesis as an opportunity for, or as consisting in, personal exploration, and others who advocate a more traditional or classical view of doctrinal instruction and examination.⁶ Catechesis must surely include self-exploration and reflection on experience and identity, if the whole embodied person is brought to the waters of baptism. But surely the self undergoes transformation, conversion, by way of knowing God, whom to know is to love—and only then to know oneself, as loved by God.⁷ This was Augustine's unexpected experience with Ambrose. It should be the aim of catechesis.

In this light, catechesis amounts to more than acquiring a language. It is initiation into a beautiful and profound and saving *mystery* (Rom. 16:25). Stewardship of God's *mysteries*—the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19), of Christ (Col. 4:3), of the faith

(1 Tim. 3:9)—is an apostolic ministry of Christ’s servants (1 Cor. 4:1). Catechesis is a ministry through which the church exercises this stewardship, stewardship of this manifold mystery, by way of initiating catechumens into it.

Catechesis is instruction in the grammar of Christian faith. But it amounts to more than acquiring a language. It is also initiation into a beautiful and profound and saving mystery.

Informally, and then formally, the church prepares catechumens for baptism and the central liturgical mystery given to the church, the Lord’s Supper. Perhaps nowhere do personal identity and doctrine, knowledge of God and love of God, cohere more perfectly than in that mystery. In it, narrated confession going back as far as creation, ritual extending back as far as Passover, commandments

reaching as far back as Deuteronomy, and signs as palpable as the Jordan’s stones, are retrieved, incorporated, and exceeded. All are part of the mystery, and of the hope, that inspire catechesis.

“What does this mean?” is a question, an enduring catechetical question, by which the church lives, in cruciform fidelity and joy.

Notes

¹ The Hebrew term for Passover is *pesach*, from the verb *pasach*, which means, naturally enough, “to pass over” (Exod. 12:27). In Greek, *pesach* became *pascha*, from which we get “paschal.” The Greek term has associations with suffering or “passion” (Luke 22:15).

² The term *sacramentum* (“sacrament”) does not occur in the Bible (in Latin) before Daniel, where it means “mystery.”

³ Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Pubn. Society, 1996), 76.

⁴ *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 1999), 121.

⁵ Ben C. Ollenburger, “Mennonite Theology: A Conversation around the Creeds,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992): 57–89.

⁶ Maureen Gallagher, *The Art of Catechesis: What You Need to Be, Know and Do* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Pr., 1998); Richard Robert Osmer, “Restructuring Confirmation,” *Theology Today* 49 (1992): 46–67.

⁷ Ellen T. Charry, “To What End Knowledge? The Academic Captivity of Theology,” in *Theology in the Service of the Church*, ed. Wallace M. Alston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 73–87.

About the author

Ben C. Ollenburger is professor of biblical theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.