

Catechisms in the Mennonite tradition

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Several years ago I inherited a well-worn blue booklet with a long German title: *Katechismus, oder, Kurze und einfache Unterweisung aus der Heiligen Schrift in Fragen und Antworten für die Jugend* [Catechism, or, Brief and simple instruction from the Holy Scriptures in questions and answers for youth].¹ Before their baptism, many Mennonites in my parents' generation memorized this catechism's two hundred questions and answers. After several months of instruction they were tested on its contents in front of the congregation. In many churches, preachers based sermons on particular sections of the catechism; in some, candidates for baptism also studied the church's confession of faith.

This catechism was a late eighteenth-century instructional manual from West Prussia, called the Elbing catechism because it

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was first published in the city of Elbing (now Elbląg, in northern Poland). Most Mennonite churches in North America no longer use this catechism, and most church leaders today have probably never even seen a copy of it. Today's pastors have a wide range of materials available to them, although the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has come to function as a guide for catechetical instruction in many congregations belonging to Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. Recently the

Mennonite Brethren have also begun to use their *Confession of Faith* as a guide for instructing potential church members.

Whatever the format, church leaders face the daunting task of introducing the basics of Christian faith to people of different ages, coming with varied life experiences and a range of understandings of the faith. Along with the challenge of communicating effectively and establishing an inviting and

nurturing culture in the church, teaching the essentials of the faith presents pastors with a formidable undertaking.

And what would those essentials be? What are the foundational teachings of the church that should constitute the content of catechetical instruction? What are the indispensable elements of the faith that ought to be communicated to the next generation of church members?

In what follows I want to focus briefly on the practice of catechetical instruction in the wider church context, and then examine catechisms in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, especially the Elbing catechism and its indispensable elements. While I am not advocating that church leaders go back to instructing young Christians using two-hundred-year-old instructional manuals, I am convinced that attending to catechisms of the past can help us as we consider the content of catechesis for today.

Catechisms in church history

“The word *catechism* derives from the Greek *Katéchein*, meaning to instruct orally.”² In Christian tradition the term has been used to refer both to the pedagogical process and to the content of that instruction. By the second century, the church devoted much time and energy to catechetical instruction. Unlike the converts we encounter in the New Testament, who were often Jews or “God-fearers” who understood something of the Jewish heritage, second-century converts were ex-pagans and needed an extensive and intensive program of instruction and resocialization. Such a program could take three years; the church in fourth-century Spain had a five-year catechumenate. The mentoring and teaching sometimes happened daily, usually one hour before work, and was often based on a local creed. Many of the early creeds used for instruction had a trinitarian pattern and were forerunners of the Apostles’ Creed. They served as the basis for catechetical lectures, and became the catechumen’s personal confession of faith.³

By the sixth century this rigorous practice had fallen into disuse. Christian instruction now followed rather than preceded baptism, as infant baptism had become the customary rite of Christian initiation. A society that was formally Christian assumed

that everyone knew how to be a believer; the church apparently no longer saw the need to invest much time in basic Christian teaching.⁴

This attitude to catechesis changed in the late Middle Ages. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a new interest in catechetical instruction emerged, tied to the sacrament of penance. Jean de Gerson (1363–1429) composed a vernacular tract to be read by the laity, and a pamphlet for catechetical

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instructors that included expositions of the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, confession, and the “art of dying.”⁵ Historians have characterized the fifteenth century as an age of anxiety, during which the laity felt the need to make a perfect confession.

Catechetical manuals were to prepare penitents for their annual confession; they could expect to be quizzed on the contents of the catechism before making confession to the priest. Because these catechisms were to promote self-examination, they were frequently referred to as *mirrors*. Dietrich Kolde’s “Mirror of a Christian Man,” printed in Cologne in 1470, was the first German catechism, and was “probably the most widely

used Catholic catechism before and during the early years of the Reformation.”⁶

In the Reformation era a new generation of catechisms came into use. They were usually based on the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer, with additional sections on the sacraments and other matters of faith. Many of the first catechisms introduced by the Reformers were not used primarily for confirmation classes, but were intended for teaching all believers the basics of Christian faith. Luther’s Small Catechism, published in May 1529, would eventually have an enormous influence on subsequent catechisms, Catholic and Protestant. It circulated widely and was probably a key reason why Luther’s reform agenda became a successful mass movement. Pastors, city counsels, and school curricula adopted it, and some children learned it by heart. At the same time, attempts by the clergy to

impose values on the masses met with indifference, and even resistance. Luther acknowledged that the catechism was written simply, in a way not everyone found compelling, but he believed that it should be studied by all. In his colorful way he argued that children and adults uninterested in studying the catechism “deserve not only to be refused food but also to be chased out by dogs and pelted with dung.”⁷

Anabaptist-Mennonite catechisms

The first Anabaptist catechism was probably one written by Balthasar Hubmaier, a reformer in the Moravian city of Nikolsburg (now Mikulov in the Czech Republic).⁸ Like many catechisms of the Reformation period, Hubmaier’s instructions highlighted the fundamentals of the faith, especially the teachings of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed. Hubmaier believed young people needed to understand the basics of the Christian faith from the perspective of Anabaptist theology. The catechism stood theologically in continuity with the wider Christian tradition, but also emphasized Anabaptist distinctives such as believers baptism and a memorial understanding of the Lord’s Supper. It was probably not in use for long, mainly because Hubmaier’s career as an Anabaptist leader was cut off prematurely. The catechism was produced in 1526, and “early in 1528, Hubmaier was arrested, taken to Vienna, and tried on charges of heresy and sedition. He was tortured and burned at the stake on March 10, 1528, and a few days later his wife was thrown into the Danube with a stone tied around her neck.”⁹ Likely no other catechism emerged among Anabaptists until the seventeenth century.

The Dutch Mennonites were the first to use catechisms on a regular basis, producing more than 140 catechetical texts from 1633 onward.¹⁰ None became dominant, except perhaps Johannes Deknatel’s *Introduction to the Christian Faith* (1746), which was used extensively in the Netherlands and in Germany. Some of the catechisms originating in Germany and West Prussia were also widely used. The *Brief Instruction from the Scriptures* (*Kurtze Unterweisung aus der Schrift*) written in 1690, with thirty-five or thirty-six questions and answers, for instance, was used extensively in Germany and in Pennsylvania. It was often

published with Geerit Roosen's famous *Scriptural Spiritual Conversations* (*Christliches Gemütsgespräch*), a comprehensive statement with 148 questions and answers, written around 1691, first published in 1702.¹¹

Probably the most widely used Mennonite catechism from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries was the Elbing catechism. The Flemish leader Gerhard Wiebe (1725–1796), from Elbing-Ellerwald, and the Frisian leader Heinrich Donner (1735–1804), of the Orlofffelde Mennonite congregation, worked together to produce the catechism.¹² It was published in 1778, although some editions give the date 1783. Mennonites in West Prussia adopted it at the end of the eighteenth century, and for almost two hundred years it was used in Prussia and Russia, except by the Mennonite Brethren, who tended to minimize the importance of instruction before baptism, and preferred to highlight a radical conversion experience as the requirement for membership.¹³

In North America the Elbing catechism was first printed in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in 1824 (for the Mennonites in Waterloo County, Ontario), with reprints to follow in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Ontario, and Manitoba. It was used by the Amish, the Old Mennonites, the General Conference Mennonites, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, and the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and it remains the primary manual of catechetical instruction for Amish and Old Colony Mennonite groups living in North and Latin American contexts, as well for some Mennonite Aussiedler groups now living in Germany. At least three commentaries have been written on the catechism in the last hundred years.¹⁴ Writing in the 1950s, Christian Neff and Harold S. Bender credited the Elbing catechism with promoting theological unity among Mennonites, including adherence to the doctrine of nonresistance.¹⁵ Whether Mennonites have ever displayed doctrinal unity is debatable, but it is probably the case that the Elbing catechism has been used among Mennonites more than any other catechism, confession of faith, or other genre of theological writing. As such it is one of the most important representative texts of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

The indispensable elements of the Elbing catechism

Those who read the Elbing catechism soon discover that its

indispensable elements of the faith do not include a narrowly defined set of principles, but rather encompass the entire Christian story. Perhaps those currently responsible for the content of catechesis should consider this scope. The catechism covers the full range of Christian doctrine and follows three main themes in Christian theology. Part one, on creation, addresses God's attributes and trinitarian nature, the creation of humanity and the angels, and the nature of revelation. Part two outlines the fall of humanity and the consequences of sin. Part three, which deals with redemption, covers in detail God's promise of salvation; the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ; the nature of faith; the Christian life in the church and world; the life of devotion and prayer; and the final destiny of humanity. The catechism in its format and outline resembles other catechetical texts of its time, and in continuity with the catechisms of the Medieval and Reformation churches, includes sections on the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. The Apostles' Creed, while not part of the catechetical text, is included at the end as a separate item.

The catechism reflects the theology of the wider Christian tradition, but also features Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives.¹⁶ Baptism, for instance, is to be administered to those who believe in Jesus Christ and who have personally turned to him in their life. The Lord's Supper is a memorial meal that proclaims the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is also a sign that Christians are in communion with Christ and with each other. The catechism underscores the notion that the Christian life includes loving enemies, avoiding revenge, being willing to suffer, and refusing to swear oaths.

These distinctives are understood in the larger context of the redemption story that begins in the Old Testament and continues with Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Salvation is appropriated through repentance, conversion, and regeneration. Regeneration means that believers are not only justified by faith, but sanctified and made righteous. This experience of redemption becomes the context for understanding the Christian life, participating in the Christian community, and living responsibly in the context of the family, the church, and the world. Christian ethics, therefore, is not simply a matter of the human will, but

flows from a life that has been profoundly changed through the creative power of God, the salvific work of Christ, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

The Elbing catechism reflects a worldview and hermeneutical naïveté that may limit its appeal for twenty-first-century believers.

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It selects Bible verses uncritically and uses them as proof texts to support doctrinal positions. Yet there is more to the catechism than is immediately obvious, and the fact that it does not withstand the scrutiny of people in the grip of relativism may not be all bad. In the final analysis it is engaged in a legitimate task of providing a comprehensive and systematic account of the essential ingredients

of the Christian faith. Like all catechisms, it operates on the boundary between theological sophistication and lay piety, in order to communicate the faith to potential and actual members. Are our methods better? Perhaps after two hundred years, the Elbing catechism can teach us something.

Conclusion

As commentators on our culture have observed, we no longer live in a context where basic Christian teachings influence our daily vocabulary. The Christian world of the past is now quickly vanishing, its remnants dissolving under the still discernible forces of the Enlightenment, as well as the more recent influences of relativism and globalization. Perhaps in such a context we need more than ever to give attention to catechesis.

Such attention will include considering how to invite those who are asking faith questions for the first time, and it will include reflecting on how we can best communicate the faith in an increasingly diverse church and world. Such reflection should lead us to consider our theology and to examine what we consider fundamental. What are the essentials of the faith that need to be conveyed to those considering the Christian walk? What should we expect of those seeking baptism and church membership, and of those who are currently church members?

Notes

¹ Newton, Kans.: Mennonite Publication Office, 1914/1956.

² *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, s.v. “Catechisms.”

³ See Alan Kreider, “Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus’ Teaching in Early Christianity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72 (January 1998): 5–30; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2^d edition (New York: David McKay Co., 1960); John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3^d edition (Atlanta: John Knox Pr., 1962).

⁴ Alan Kreider has noted this “withering of catechism” in his article “Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus’ Teaching,” 29.

⁵ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, s.v. “Catechisms.”

⁶ Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Pr., 1982), 8.

⁷ Martin Luther, Preface to the “Larger Catechism,” quoted in Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms*, 15.

⁸ The text of the catechism can be found in Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms*, 133–78. It has been translated most recently in the Classics of the Radical Reformation Series. See H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Pr. 1989), 339–65.

⁹ Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms*, 13.

¹⁰ *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 1, s.v. “Catechism.”

¹¹ Michael Driedger has made important discoveries about the historical context of these catechisms. See Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), 43–4; Michael Driedger, “Research Note: The Extant Writings of Geeritt Roosen (1612–1711),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74 (January 2000): 159–69.

¹² *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 2, s.v. “Donner, Heinrich.”

¹³ *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 1, s.v. “Catechism.” Mennonite Brethren today, however, use a variety of catechetical manuals, including their *Confession of Faith*, which was adopted in 1999. One of their first instruction books was Mennonite Brethren Church Board of Christian Literature, *A Manual for Church Membership Classes* (Fresno, Calif.: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1968).

¹⁴ C. H. Wedel, *Meditationen zu den Fragen und Antworten unseres Katechismus* (Newton, Kans., Der Verfasser, 1910); D. H. Epp, *Kurze Erklärungen u. Erläuterungen zum “Katechismus der christlichen, taufgesinnten Gemeinden, so Mennoniten genannt werden”* (Jekatherinoslaw: A. Schultze, 1896, 1898; Rosthern, Sask.: Dietrich H. Epp, 1941); J. Wichert, *Kurzgefasste Handreichung in unser Glaubenslehre mit Erklärungen zu den Fragen und Antworten des Mennonitischen Katechismus* (Virgil, Ont.: Niagara Pr., 1959).

¹⁵ *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 1, s.v. “Catechism.”

¹⁶ The extent to which the Elbing catechism was influenced by Protestantism, especially with respect to original sin and the consequences of the fall, is briefly addressed by Robert Friedmann (see *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature* [1949; reprint Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1998], 135–6). Here further research and analysis would be fruitful. In my view Friedmann exaggerates the influence of Protestantism, and does not seriously take into account the theological anthropology of Anabaptists such as Melchior Hoffman, Menno Simons, and Dirk Philips, who also emphasized the fallen human condition.

About the author

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