

# Why give them stones?

## Catechesis as imaginative apologetics

A. James Reimer

*“Then [Jesus] began to speak, and taught them, saying . . . ‘Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?’”*

**W**hen our children ask for theological bread, for instruction in the Christian faith, does what the church offers them nourish their spirits and satisfy their hunger?

Catechesis can take a number of forms, as bread does. It may emphasize the content of faith, consisting of teaching carefully formulated statements of faith, in creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Or it may focus on experience, on passing on historical, narrative, biographical, and experiential accounts of the faith. These aspects of catechism are distinct but not mutually exclusive, although in a given period one tends to be dominant,

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at the expense of the other. Using my experience and observations, I will trace the interplay of these two approaches to passing on the faith, and propose a third approach that I believe combines strengths of both, and may offer our children the theological bread they want and need.

In my first encounter with formal doctrinal instruction in the late 1950s, I learned the Elbing catechism.<sup>1</sup> Originally published in Prussia in the late eighteenth century, its purpose was to present to young Mennonites

“the cardinal truths of Christianity in a brief and simple form.”<sup>2</sup> It has been used by many Mennonite groups in the intervening centuries, and has seen numerous printings, some revisions, and several translations into English.

Of particular interest to me personally is the connection of this catechism with the *Kleine Gemeinde* (“small church”), a group that broke with the main Mennonite church in Russia in 1812. One of its founders was my great-great-great-grandfather Klaas Reimer. The group immigrated to North America in the 1870s, and in 1952 in Canada, under the influence of the evangelical movement, renamed itself the Evangelical Mennonite Church. Critics such as Delbert Plett, author of books on *Kleine Gemeinde* history and editor of *Preservings*, want to return the church to its conservative, traditionalist origins. They are correct in their sense that the revivalist influence contributed to increasing individualism and a loss of communal values. This influence also resulted in a loss of objective dogmatic and doctrinal definitions that had been part of Mennonite identity for centuries. What such critics do not acknowledge are the positive effects of evangelicalism, including a renewed appreciation for subjective and experiential elements in religion, and an opening up of the tradition to the larger culture.

In 1940 the *Kleine Gemeinde* had printed a new edition of the Elbing catechism, adding its own twenty-two “Articles of Faith.” Then in the 1950s the ministers of the newly named Evangelical Mennonite Church assigned my great-uncle Rev. P. J. B. Reimer the task of preparing a German-English version of the book. Rev. Reimer, one of the first of his church to graduate from college, was my grade-three schoolteacher in Rosenort, a small, cohesive *Kleine Gemeinde* community in southern Manitoba. It was his edition of the catechism that I and some twenty others learned in preparation for our baptism into the Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

The Bergthalers, a quite different group from the *Kleine Gemeinde*, had also immigrated to Manitoba in 1874–75. My father came from the *Kleine Gemeinde* Reimers, growing up in Steinbach, east of the Red River, in what was known as *Jantsied* (the “other side”). My mother came from *Ditsied* (“this side”), the west side of the river. She was a Zacharias, whose ancestral mother was Maria Nowitzky, a Jew adopted into a Mennonite family in Russia. Mother’s grandfather, Peter Zacharias, had been a minister in the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, and her father, Peter P. Zacharias, was a youth leader and choir director, then editor of a

church periodical, *Leitstern*, and ordained minister in a breakaway group called the Rudnerweide Mennoniten Gemeinde.

In 1959, also under the influence of the evangelical movement, the Rudnerweide group also took a new name: the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church. After ten years of faithful ministry, my grandfather Zacharias was defrocked and excommunicated by this group. He and my grandmother were effectively shunned, allegedly for doctrinal reasons.<sup>3</sup> Manitoba

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poet Patrick Friesen, in his novel *The Shunning*, paints a moving fictional portrait of another Peter who suffered excommunication for his refusal to bow to the authoritarian leadership of a close-knit Mennonite community. Friesen's Peter becomes completely isolated, shunned even by spouse and family, and commits suicide.

The stories of these two Peters illustrate a danger of using doctrinal formulations to maintain the boundaries of close-knit communities. This danger is ever present when religious institutions demand strict adherence to a prescribed list of beliefs as a condition for membership. Yet, for groups

committed to truth, having clearly stated doctrinal conditions for membership is less dangerous than pretending that they have no such prerequisites. Liberalism and evangelicalism are closely related to each other in their emphasis on experiential and practical rather than doctrinal expectations of adherents, yet these traditions are no more tolerant than conservatives or fundamentalists of deviation from their norms, except that their intolerance hides behind the guise of tolerance.

Looking back at my catechetical experience, I realize that the Elbing catechism was a benign and effective form of theological education, not only of youth and baptismal candidates but of whole congregations. This article is not the place for a thorough analysis of the method or content of the catechism, which shaped the theology of many generations of North German, Prussian, Russian, Canadian, and American Mennonites. A few

observations on formal and material aspects of the confession will suffice.

**Formally**, my early catechetical experience appears to be in continuity with the form that such instruction took through most of Christian history, in several ways. First, it used a dialogical approach, a form of teaching present in the earliest Christian community, where the Greek word *katecheo* meant “to teach by mouth.” In fact, oral instruction was the primary mode of learning up to the early modern period, when the printing press was invented.<sup>4</sup> The Elbing catechism, following this method, covers the essentials of Christian belief and practice in its approximately two hundred brief questions and answers.

Second, the Elbing catechism relies on memorization by lay people, as did such instruction from the classical through the Medieval and Reformation periods, and well into modern times. In our large congregation, between Easter and Pentecost the candidates for baptism sat in the front pews. The ministers asked us questions, one by one, and we were expected to give correct answers in German or English. Last minute cramming sometimes led to embarrassing moments when we miscalculated about the question we would be asked. Preaching on those Sundays dealt with one of the topics for the day; members had an opportunity to review the whole range of Christian beliefs every year during this season.

Third, Protestant Reformation and the Tridentine (Catholic) catechisms followed a more or less standard form, including treatments of the Apostles’ Creed, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and prayer. Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier’s Christian Catechism of 1527 also generally fits this format.<sup>5</sup> The Elbing catechism similarly dealt with the major subject matter of the Apostles’ Creed (without specifically mentioning it), and included a discussion of the Ten Commandments, a series of questions on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and a section on the life and conduct of the believer.

**Materially**, the theology of the Elbing catechism holds several surprises for “modern” historicist and “postmodern” anticreedal Mennonites. First, God—not human beings or time as history—is the beginning and end of all things. The first question asks what our chief aim in life should be, and the answer is: “To live in God’s

fellowship, enjoy His favor, and obtain eternal happiness hereafter.” The second and third questions introduce the notion of the kingdom of God, understood not exclusively in historical terms but also as a quality of spiritual existence: “At the present time it is within all the believers; and its essential qualities are righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; in its fullness it is the coming universal kingdom of righteousness under Christ.” The answer to the last question of the catechism, “What lesson have we . . . to learn from all this?” is “We should learn . . . that heaven and earth shall pass away . . . and [that we ought to] always be ready to meet the Lord with joy, and to remain with Him unto all eternity.” In short, time and history will end; we come from God and go back to God.

Second, affirmation of the trinitarian nature of God pervades the catechism. It is present explicitly in many answers. Early on we read that the God who created all things is “the one God . . . , Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” This affirmation is repeated in various ways. Trinitarianism is also present implicitly. While the catechism has a high Christology, it does not give the second person of the Trinity attention at the expense of the other two. It even incorporates a kind of natural theology, affirming that we can know of God’s existence through nature and the conscience, as well as through the testimony of Scripture.

Third, the catechism betrays no trace of Pelagian anthropology and soteriology: human beings, although created in the divine image, have fallen away from God and cannot save themselves by good works. Forgiveness comes by the grace of God, and redemption through the death of Christ on our behalf. Salvation is ours only through faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior, and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The catechism does not, however, give undue attention to the atoning work of Christ on the cross. It gives space to Jesus’ life and teachings, miracles, resurrection, and threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. It also includes a strong view of divine grace, combined with high regard for a holy and obedient life. The catechism commends love of enemies and nonretaliation, patience in suffering, subjection to governmental authorities, and not swearing oaths. It includes guidance for domestic life, church discipline, and prayer.

Beginning in the 1960s, a more historical, narrative, and experiential approach replaced the Elbing catechism approach to preparation for baptism among Mennonites. The classical language was seen as archaic and rigid, not adequately reflecting the struggles, questions, and doubts with which young people were wrestling. I had been privileged to experience catechism in the framework of a cohesive community which limited the impact of individualism, and whose members shared a set of values and assumptions. Beginning in the 1960s, however, in part because of the influence of evangelicalism and liberalism, objective authorities and standards of faith gave way to subjective ones. New religious languages—historical, narrative, therapeutic, and political—replaced the language of doctrine. Pastors began to meet privately with baptismal candidates, rather than publicly before the congregation. One of the losses was literacy in systematic theology.

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After several decades of social activism and little interest in doctrine, in the past two decades the Mennonite church has seen a renewed interest in doctrinal language. The positive response to *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) is but one example. This confession's emergence is perhaps the best example of how Mennonites do systematic theological thinking. A broad range of people— theologians, clergy, and others—helped draft articles. The committee charged with producing the confession

circulated its work widely, and welcomed responses from the church. The result is a carefully worded document that attempts to express faithfully the core Christian beliefs in language that is understandable, while reflecting the broad spectrum of theological orientation in the Mennonite community.

This endeavor illustrates exactly the challenge for Christian educators: how to find a language that does not water down the classical Christian truths and yet manages to communicate effectively to a whole generation that was raised without doctrines. I am convinced that our young people want theological bread—even meat—not stones. The Elbing catechism and the

Dordrecht confession<sup>6</sup> as they stand (without interpretation) will not satisfy them. To offer our children doctrinal language without the enlivening power of imagination is to give them stones. Giving them only the subjective language of experience will also fail to nourish them. If we are to preserve the Christian tradition, handing it on to our youth, we will need to use imagination, but our imagination must be disciplined by the categories of classical theology.<sup>7</sup> If we are to give food that satisfies, we will need to enter the imagination of the ancient world and mine it for the Christian answers to the profoundest questions that children and young people ask.

Almost beyond comprehension is the idea that vast galaxies could be the result of a big bang 15 billion years ago, the explosion of a compressed piece of energy mass no larger than a baseball, holding within itself the DNA of the universe. And yet we encounter something analogous every time a tiny seed grows into a towering tree, or a sperm and egg into a human being. Energy transforms into matter, matter into energy. We live in an enchanted cosmos, in which the world visible to the naked eye is but a small part of a larger world of energy and spirit.

Children and young people need no convincing that the world is enchanted, that invisible things are as real as visible ones. The astronomical sales of Harry Potter books and the mass appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* movies witness to the preoccupation of our age with the fantastical and supranatural. Youth have always been open to the world of the spirit. It is we older, wizened, jaded people, heirs to the Enlightenment, who have trouble with angels and demons. How can we—who have accepted the Enlightenment's divorce of religion from science, faith from reason, who live in a world that seems disenchanting, demythologized, and demystified—exploit the natural youthful propensity for the surreal, the hunger of our age for the spiritual?

Effective catechesis, the passing on of the faith that we have received, requires an imaginative reappropriation of the language of faith that is both faithful to the tradition and open to the age in which we live. I call this *creative apologetics*.<sup>8</sup> We need not so much a rational defense of belief but an illumination of the great affirmations of the Christian faith: God, the world, human beings,

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moral freedom and responsibility, the end of time and history, resurrection in this life and in the age to come. I have seen my children, seekers in church membership classes, and university students from many different religious and nonreligious backgrounds yearning to be challenged to think seriously about the big questions of origins, ends, freedom, moral integrity.

When I say we need illumination, I mean an opening of the eyes. I mean mining all the resources at our disposal, including the vulnerabilities and spiritual hungers of our age, to lift the shadows of disbelief and wrong belief. I mean removing the obstacles to faith

in order to make an encounter with the divine possible. For faith is above all a personal encounter with God, an encounter that is not at our disposal but comes as a gift of grace.

Too often the obstacles and blindnesses are based on misinterpretations of the past. Sometimes they are legitimate protests against the false pretensions and dishonesties of previous generations. Frequently, we perceive an incompatibility between traditional answers and contemporary scientific and moral challenges. Here the Holy Spirit of truth (which is also the Spirit of Christ) can lead us beyond the past letter of the law—biblical literalism and doctrinal sterility—to new insights.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Koop, “Catechisms in the Mennonite Tradition,” in this issue, pages 28–35, for more information on the content of the Elbing catechism and the history of its use among Mennonite groups.

<sup>2</sup> From the foreword to *Catechism, or, A Brief Instruction for Young People from the Holy Scriptures: In the Form of Questions and Answers*, German-English ed. including the Articles of Faith of the Evangelical Mennonite Church (Kleine Gemeinde) of Canada (Altona, Man.: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1970s I visited my grandfather and recorded his version of the events leading to his dismissal; my account of these conversations appears in a family publication, “Memoirs of Peter P. Zacharias,” 1–26. My grandfather was a gentle man, and according to him, personality differences with authoritarian church leaders figured as much as doctrinal differences in determining his fate.

<sup>4</sup> For a helpful survey of the history of catechesis and catechisms, see these articles in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): “Catechesis” and “Catechism,” by Klaus Wegenast, 360–5; “Catechismus Romanus,” by Johannes Schilling, 365–6; and “Catechist,” by Eckart Schwerin, 366–7.



<sup>5</sup> Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Pr., 1982), 131–76.

<sup>6</sup> Adopted April 21, 1632, at Dordrecht, the Netherlands, this confession was widely used for generations among Mennonites in France, the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere.

<sup>7</sup> I have tried to address the need for language that communicates classical Christian truths imaginatively in *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, Ont., and Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 2003). [See review in this issue, pages 91–92—Ed.]

<sup>8</sup> *Apologetics* is defense of the faith.

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