A persistent search
Calling new believers to faithfulness

Dale Shenk

Earlier in our history, Mennonites called new Christians to courageous rejection of certain cultural norms as an initial stage in the formation of Christian character in a differentiated community. Now a call to courageous rejection of a non-Christian lifestyle is confusing to typical North American Mennonite young people. They do not see obvious evidence of such courage on the part of adult Christians in their congregations and communities. Older Christians may have internal clarity about their faith, but the outward expressions are not typically ones of sacrifice. Pastors, teachers, and parents face the challenge of explaining to young people the meaning of courageous nonconformity as we are negotiating a shift from being a sociologically distinct community to being a more subtly differentiated one. We need new images and approaches.

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If young people do not have the experience of a clearly defined Christian community, what do they have? In my experience as father, teacher, and pastor, youth have questions. They have questions of direction, meaning, and companionship. They have questions of life and death, truth and falsehood. Now, catechism must begin with these basic questions of the human race rather than with initiation into a distinct Christian community. Always present in human experience, these questions will provide an opening for conversations about all that God has to offer and all that God calls us to.

We can begin with questions because we believe that God created the world. This act of creation, including the forming of

human beings in the image of God, means that God is revealed to us through the created order. Further, we believe that in the act of creation and through continuing acts of revelation, including the incarnation, God is making known the truth about who we are and who we are created to be. Therefore we accept the questions and challenges that arise through human experience as hints of God's presence with us and purpose for us.

Our approach to catechism is fundamentally changed when we allow the presence of God through our experience of creation, Jesus, and the church to guide the process. Catechism becomes a place to engage in a quest to discover what we are created to be, not a place to offer a countercultural alternative that we have fought to discover and define. The image of God in humanity is certainly obscured by sin. It may be only dimly visible, but it pulls us to become who we are created to be. The process of becoming will mean courage and sacrifice, as hard practice and intense discussion lead to richer experiences in music, athletics, and relationships. From their beginnings, gifted musicians and athletes have within them the seeds of greatness, which grow to fruition through learning and practice. If we are each created in the image of God, a persistent search will lead us to God.

The recognition that God is already present in the individual's searching helps us recover the meaning of believers baptism. When Mennonites were a community set apart, baptism could be a decision to join the group, perhaps to please the grandparents, which did not necessarily result in a changed life. If we want new believers to experience the presence of God personally and authentically, and if we assume that God is already in the midst of their experience, then we can challenge them to seek God with passion and persistence. We can trust that they will find God in this search. When young people begin to discover the depth and authenticity in Jesus Christ's answers to the deepest questions of their lives, they are ready to begin the journey toward baptism.

The basic questions of human life may be articulated in a variety of ways. I have found three ways of formulating these questions helpful in my interactions with young people. Together we explore where they are going, how they are going, and with whom they are going. In my experience these questions invite deeper conversation about life and deeper encounters with God.

Where am I going?

Most young adults are already asking the question "Where am I going?" They wonder about college, vocation, marriage. They are excited about the possibilities and terrified that they might make the wrong choices. Their confusion can be attributed to a vague awareness that what appear to be surface decisions reflect deeper themes and perspectives. "Where am I going?" signifies a search for meaning.

Victor Frankl was interned in a concentration camp during World War 2. Afterward he wrote that "the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of camp influences alone."[1] Convinced that our search for meaning is the primary motivation in our lives,[2] Frankl noted that even in the camp situation of extreme duress, issues of direction and purpose were determinative. If the search for meaning is humanity's primary motivation, and if we are created by God, this search is the path to God.

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During a high school Bible class I introduced a question from William Willimon: "Will the way you answer life's questions be true or false?" I invited students to consider the truth and the falsity in their answers from the vantage point of retirement and then death. "Where are you going to be in sixty years?" "Will it be a place of truth or falsehood?" The possibility that at the end of their lives they would experience an ultimate responsibility for the choices they were making left them in a stunned silence. One student commented, "I am frightened and liberated. I am frightened because I realize the depth of my personal responsibility. But I am liberated to genuinely choose for myself." This responsibility, when offered gently in a safe context, can be a rich gift. When we invite young people to consider the question of where they are and where they are going, we may begin a simple conversation about next summer or next year, but it can soon become a discussion of God's call in their lives.

Catechism should hold baptismal candidates accountable for their answers to the question "Where am I going?" They may be ready to examine their short-term decisions. We must help them

recognize the deeper implications of their answers. We can also help youth anticipate ways life will bring additional questions and possibilities. If candidates for baptism do not address the basic question of the direction of their lives, they are not authentically choosing to be baptized, and the ritual will be devoid of significance.

How am I going?

"How am I going?" may be youth's most common question and the one given least reflection. Every day brings choices about how we get where we are going, with good and bad options, right and wrong methods. We constantly choose one way over another. As with the search for direction, the choice of path may have significance that young adults may not recognize. With their limited experience and education, they may not see the range of possibilities before them or the implications of the choices they confront. Nor do they necessarily see the limitations of the answers our culture provides.

Here the church offers the biblical witness as a rich gift in the process of discerning right and wrong, good and evil. The Scriptures collect wisdom and tell stories of people who asked ultimate questions about life's meaning and found answers. One question that guided the canonization process was "Is this writing edifying for the Christian life?" If we trust the Spirit-led discernment of those involved, we will see the biblical text as a useful response to the questions we are asking rather than as a dogmatic book of rules.

The Bible also offers insight about poor choices. Throughout the biblical narrative the people of God struggled with the reality of sin. They experienced the pain and anguish of sin's consequences, as well as the healing and forgiveness that follow repentance. Young people too often experience the Bible as something God imposes on us. When we teach them about the history of the biblical stories and the process by which the Scriptures have come to us, we invite their participation in the unfolding revelation of God. When young people recognize that Jesus' treatment of women is relevant to the question "How should a guy treat a girl?" the text becomes not an imposition but a gift. A catechism class that offers opportunity to celebrate the

Scriptures as a companion on their quest for the best way to go will provide new believers with rich resources that our society lacks.

Who am I going with?

The question "Who am I going with?" addresses the human search for relationship. Internet chat rooms, the breakfast crowd at the diner, even the thousands of people who attend sports events are indications of hunger for companionship on the journey of life.

Historically Anabaptists and Mennonites defined the boundaries of their communities. They were clear about who was out, and about what you needed to do to be in. What was sometimes missing was a positive sense of why they were together.

John Roth helps us think about community when he encourages us to consider hospitality as a core value for our communal life. "Be prepared to engage the 'other' in a posture of open embrace, interrupt our plans on behalf of others, take a risk of friendship, and consider perspectives that are different."[3] The act of hospitality poses a question and an invitation. Those who invite others into the fellowship of the home and the table embed a possible answer in their asking of the question "Who are you going with?" The question is more powerful because an answer may already be present in the asking.

Catechism must become a place where new believers are invited to reflect about their traveling companions. It must also become a place where strangers are welcomed. Catechism must be in itself a gathering where acceptance of questions creates the kind of community on the way that young people are looking for.

Conclusion

Asking these basic questions may bring difficulties. Socrates was killed not because of the content of his speeches but because he taught his students to ask hard questions. Perhaps Jesus was killed because of the questions his life raised. A catechism oriented around these questions may be threatening to those who want young adults to have the confident answers of mature adults. Those who want a formulaic approach to catechesis may be upset if pastors and teachers give youth room to question. But formulas do not prepare new believers to face life's questions.

At the other end of the spectrum are those whose embrace of questions cultivates cynicism and skepticism among young adults. When we ask questions without trust that God will lead us toward answers, we deny God's presence in creation and in us as creatures made in God's image. Skepticism does not prepare new believers to witness the healing power of Jesus in a broken world.

A catechism that centers on questions may feel tentative and uncertain. But where else can we begin? We are no longer a community with clear boundaries. What remains is a community of human beings who are asking questions. These questions of direction, meaning, and companionship are the questions of our youth. They are our questions. They are the questions of the whole human race. They point us toward God. The shared life that emerges among a group of people who ask these questions—of themselves, of each other, and of the world around them—will be distinctive. But this community's nonconformity comes in the midst of the search, not at its beginning.

Notes

[1] *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1992), 75.
[2] Ibid., 105.
[3] *Choosing against War: A Christian View* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Bks., 2002), 121.

About the author

Dale Shenk served as a pastor for ten years and now teaches Bible at Bethany Christian Schools, Goshen, Indiana.