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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Catechesis

Editorial

Arthur Paul Boers

In teaching catechism I first found the joy of teaching. Yet catechism was also a source of frustration and questioning. None of the Mennonite materials seemed adequate for all circumstances. I could not rely on a single resource for catechizing all comers: youth raised Mennonite, middle-aged and seniors transferring from other traditions, young unchurched adults newly come to faith, developmentally challenged and mentally ill young people. I often ended up modifying materials or writing my own. It was a lot of work, and it meant that our catechetical process was eclectic, not necessarily closely connected with that of other Mennonite congregations.

In February of this year Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary held a consultation, For the Children's Children: A Conversation about Catechism. (Three articles printed here have been adapted from presentations there by Nelson Kraybill, Dale Shenk, and Mary Lehman Yoder.) It was a lively day, and interest was keen and passionate. Our astonishing attendance of more than a hundred people, not just from Indiana and Michigan but from as far as Ohio, Nebraska, Arkansas, and Manitoba, indicated that I am not the only pastor with concerns about catechism.

In this issue we pursue questions I often asked as a pastor: What might the Bible teach about catechism? What can we learn from the early church and the Anabaptists? Should catechism be affected by age or life-stage?

With this issue of *Vision*, we pursue questions I often asked as a pastor: Are there certain things Mennonites must confess? How did sixteenth-century Anabaptists do catechism? Is catechism important, and if so, why? Can we learn from the early church about how to do catechism? Is catechism—or should it be—affected by age or life-stage? What might the Bible teach about catechism? What is good and what is missing in how we do it? Can

other traditions teach us about training new believers? Do we have reliable Mennonite resources? How do we work with those not raised Mennonite? And on and on.

I am delighted with the excellent articles that address these and a host of other issues. Predictably, not all authors agree with each other, but they do all reinforce the strong conviction that catechetical issues are vital.

One aspect of assembling this issue was disturbing. As I approached authors with assignments, almost everyone invited to submit an article agreed immediately, with one exception. I asked many preachers for a sermon on baptism, or one that encouraged people to consider baptism, or invited people to explore catechism. Preacher after preacher said they had never preached such a sermon and had nothing to offer. I put out an invitation at our catechism consultation, and not one preacher of nine dozen stepped forward! Does our reaction against the way we have seen invitations handled in other settings and in our history prevent us from explicitly inviting people to faith through our preaching? I was pleased when two submissions came through after all. Yet I feel unsettled by the idea that we are not using our pulpits more to invite folks on the journey with Jesus.

Sometimes when I talk with Mennonites, I find confusion, ambivalence, and even anger about baptism. Happily, it does not have to be this way. This past Easter our congregation celebrated the baptism of five committed young people. It was a day of great joy. The youths testified to their faith. Each made a distinct statement, reflecting individuality, but all showed deep theological reflection, biblical insight, and personal commitment to follow the costly way of Jesus.

Those new Christians will remember their baptism celebration with joy. The day's excitement was invitational to those not yet baptized. And the appropriately lengthy service touched more seasoned Christians among us as well. I was not the only one who felt drawn to recommit to Jesus, to remember my baptism, and to be grateful.

Although I knew frustrations when I tried to prepare others for baptism, the consultation, that recent service, and the good work of committed church people in this *Vision* issue hearten me. I trust you will be encouraged, too.

What madness possessed you?
Catechesis for new allegiance

J. Nelson Kraybill

My daughter wanted to be baptized when she was eight years old. "I believe in Jesus," she insisted. Having been baptized too young myself, I urged her to wait until she was old enough to assess the faith understandings of her parents. Eventually baptized at fifteen, she bucked (Old) Mennonite convention and requested immersion. Because it was too cold to baptize outdoors, our congregation rented a tub designed for underwater childbirth. My daughter emerged from the baptismal/birthing tub to be wrapped in a white robe and a new identity.

This story is one example of Mennonites rethinking baptism. In the past century, baptism in our denomination largely has lost the radical political and eschatological significance it had in the early church and the sixteenth century. Renewal of baptism—and of catechesis[1]—will be vital to our denominational future in a world of rapidly increasing religious diversity.

Sacramentum as oath of allegiance

In 298 C.E., a Roman centurion named Marcellus, stationed at Tingis (in modern Morocco), defied the superpower of his day. When his troops were celebrating the "divine" emperor's birthday, Marcellus "rejected these pagan festivities, and after throwing down his soldier's belt [which carried his weapons] in front of the legionary standards . . . he bore witness in a loud voice, 'I am a soldier of Jesus Christ, the eternal king. From now I cease to serve your emperors and I despise the worship of your gods of wood and stone.'"[2] A trial judge interrogated Marcellus: "What madness possessed you to throw down the symbols of your military oath [*sacramentum*] and to say the things you did?" "No madness possesses those who fear the Lord," the soldier replied, ". . . for it is not fitting that a Christian, who fights for Christ his Lord, should fight for the armies of this world."[3] Marcellus was promptly executed.

Marcellus probably was preparing for baptism or already had received it when he was arrested. His offense was that he violated an oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) to the emperor and gave singular allegiance to Jesus Christ. When the word *sacramentum* appears in the Latin Bible, it generally translates the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery). Paul uses *mysterion* to refer to the central confession of Christian faith: that God, through incarnation in Jesus Christ, has ushered in a new era of salvation by winning a cosmic spiritual struggle:[4] "Without any doubt, the mystery[5] of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16).

This kind of confession became, in effect, an oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) taken on the occasion of baptism. It paralleled the oath to the emperor recited by soldiers on enlistment or on the anniversary of the emperor's accession to power.[6] Tertullian (ca. 200 C.E.) understood that the Christian baptismal oath was incompatible with an oath to the emperor: "There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament [*sacramentum*], the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the [military] camp of light and the [military] camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Caesar."[7]

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The Apostle Paul on Christus Victor

The earliest Christian writers who refer to baptism understand the ritual in the context of a cosmic struggle. Although the death of Jesus at first appeared to be the ultimate triumph of evil, believers place their hope of overcoming sin and death in the power of Jesus' resurrection: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).[8]

The prospect of being united in resurrection with Christ has ethical implications: "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies" (Rom. 6:12). Those receiving baptism have power to feed the enemy (12:20), abandon drunkenness and jealousy

(13:13), and otherwise embody God's reign. Someday, by the same power that transforms individual lives, "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21). Baptism is an individual manifestation of the salvation that someday will happen on a cosmic scale—what theologians later called a Christus Victor view of the atonement.[9]

Theologies of atonement

The Christus Victor interpretation of Jesus' death stands in contrast to other theologies of atonement:[10]

Satisfaction (substitutionary) theory. First articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century, the satisfaction theory holds that "the sin of humankind had offended the honor of God and had brought disharmony and injustice into the universe. A debt payment was necessary in order to restore God's honor or to restore justice in the universe. Since humankind owed the debt but could not pay it, Jesus paid the debt by dying in their place."[11] Although such a view of the atonement has New Testament basis, when it stands alone it tilts the meaning of baptism toward personal piety and individual salvation. Baptism in this framework may include a turning away from individual sins such as lust or deceit, but not necessarily conversion from involvement in structural evils such as militarism or racism. This theology of atonement tends to make catechesis little more than asking the candidate to give intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions.

Moral influence theory. Propounded by Abelard of France in the twelfth century, the moral influence understanding of atonement sees Jesus as a lofty example of service and love in one wholly devoted to God. Humans are redeemed by following Jesus, living changed lives, and speaking prophetically against societal sin.

Both the satisfaction theory and the moral influence interpretation of atonement should remain part of Mennonite baptismal preparation. But we must recover Christus Victor theology and a vibrant eschatology to move our framework of baptism beyond mere individualistic piety and human-engineered social agenda.

Baptism as eschatological threshold

Christians did not invent the practice of baptism; the ritual was established in Jewish tradition as initiation for Gentiles who wished to claim the faith of Abraham. Instead of using baptism only for Gentiles converting to Judaism, John prescribed baptism for everyone who accepted the good news. The hallmark of those receiving John's baptism was changed behavior: sharing of food and material possessions, and an end to extortion and greed (Luke 3:10–14). Despite such dramatic transformation, John's baptism paled in comparison to the brilliance that would come with Jesus: "I baptize you with water. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

The fact that Jesus himself was baptized reveals the eschatological significance of the rite. His baptism marks the beginning of transition to the age of new covenant. The heavens are rent, opening a new avenue between God and mortals. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. God speaks to Jesus with words destined for anyone who receives baptism: "You are my son [daughter] . . . ; with you I am well pleased." In receiving baptism, Jesus played the same pioneering role he would have in resurrection: "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22).

Sequence of catechesis and baptism in the early church

The word *catechesis* does not appear in the New Testament, although sometimes a new believer received instruction (Acts 18:24–26). Narratives in Acts, however, suggest that the first baptisms generally happened promptly upon confession of faith, with little Christian instruction. After Peter preached a spirited sermon, three thousand new believers received baptism (Acts 2:41).[12] In most (but not all) baptismal narratives in Acts, however, we can infer that those who accepted the gospel were Jews or "God-fearers," people already schooled in the Hebrew Scriptures and in devout living. Many already were believers in Yahweh who had not yet heard that Jesus was the Christ.[13]

The sequence of catechesis and baptism in generations after the apostolic era apparently was something like the following.[14]

Scrutiny. The candidate, accompanied by a sponsor, meets with teachers of the church. They ask questions about lifestyle, to

determine whether marital status, occupation, and values are consistent with the gospel. Unacceptable professions include gladiator, astrologer, and many others. Those who enlist in the military are rejected, and soldiers already enlisted may not kill.[15]

Instruction, further scrutiny, and exorcism. New believers "hear the word" for up to three years, with attention to lifestyle. Teachers ask whether candidates have honored widows, visited the sick, and "fulfilled all good works."[16] Candidates receive frequent exorcism. Cyprian (d. 258) describes how preparation for baptism involved giving up the banquets, fine clothes, and civic honors of his patrician past.[17]

Baptism. Candidates fast on Friday of Holy Week, and on Saturday kneel for exorcism to expel "every foreign spirit." The bishop breathes on the candidates and "seals" their foreheads, ears, and nostrils with the sign of the cross.[18] They stay awake all Saturday night, listening to readings and instruction. At dawn on Easter Sunday, candidates remove all clothing, receive the anointing of exorcism, and say, "I renounce you, Satan, and all your service." Candidates are baptized three times, giving affirmation to a version of the Apostles' Creed. The new believers receive the Eucharist for the first time.[19]

How then shall we catechize?

If we look to the early church for precedent, we see that the question "What must Mennonites believe to be baptized?" is inadequate. We should also ask "Who must Mennonites become to be baptized?"[20] "We don't speak great things—we *live* them!" wrote a Christian lawyer in second-century Rome.[21] The earliest Anabaptist creedal statements place the accent on behavior.

However, both the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists took it for granted that belief stood at the heart of catechesis and discipleship. The most basic confession of faith for baptism remained "Jesus is Lord." The early church understood this confession as an exclusive statement about Christ in relation to other religions or political entities. Assuming this starting point, Mennonites today might expect the following from baptismal candidates:

1. Knowledge of the salvation metanarrative—at least a cursory understanding of the sweep of salvation history in the Old

and New Testaments. The accent should be on Christus Victor understandings of Jesus confronting and overcoming powers through the cross and resurrection.

2. Acceptance of classic creeds of the early church, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. These summary statements capture the core of Christus Victor understanding.

3. Ability to place themselves within the Christus Victor metanarrative by recognizing their own need for forgiveness through the cross and resurrection.

4. Knowledge of God's faithful acts in the congregation and the denomination they are joining. They should be aware of at least a few such events from the sixteenth century to the present.

5. Exorcism, and evidence of changed life. If the word *exorcism* is unsettling, we can use other terminology. But the practice should be revived in which leaders of the church pray over baptismal candidates, invoking Christus Victor power to break the hold of sin. Demonic power may manifest itself in materialism, militarism, sexism, and other forms of domination or abuse.

6. Commitment to make the body of Christ, the church, the place of primary identity and belonging.

7. Willingness to serve and suffer for Christ. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists spoke of threefold baptism (cf. 1 John 5:7)—by Spirit, water, and blood (suffering). Followers of Jesus make choices that may be costly in family relationships, economics, politics, and social position.

Little if any of the above agenda is appropriate for children; all is impossible for infants. We should stop using baptism as a panacea for prepubescent guilt or as a nice way to affirm children. The church should give tender affirmation to children who confess faith during the affiliative stage of their development, when children seek to please authority figures. But children requesting baptism should be told that baptism involves making commitments about time, money, career, relationships, and responsibility in the church—all of which must be done when they are old enough to begin thinking as adults and count the cost.

How shall we baptize?

We could reap greater value from the baptism ritual by paying attention to all five senses as avenues for transformation. Having

leaned heavily in the past on verbal communication in worship, we can now also explore a spectrum of sensory symbols.

We could start by restoring mystery to the *sacramentum* of baptism. Anabaptists have made much of baptism being "just" symbol. Hans Hut insisted that water baptism is "not the true reality by which [one] is made righteous, but is only a sign, a covenant, a likeness, and a memorial of one's dedication, which [sign] reminds one daily to expect the true baptism."[22] This approach shades over into dualism, making water baptism almost superfluous. We need a more integrated understanding of ritual. Humans have no way to talk about God except by symbol, and good symbols participate in the reality they represent.

We might decide to baptize at dawn on Resurrection Sunday or even at midnight Saturday night. We could pass candidates through the waters, seal their foreheads with the sign of the cross, clothe them in white robes, and give a taste of milk and honey symbolizing the Promised Land. Perhaps it is too much to expect that candidates will remove all clothing! The early Christians apparently undressed for baptism in near-darkness, and not before the whole congregation.

Preparation for baptism could include exorcism, and the church might expect special outpouring of the Holy Spirit during baptism. The divine words "you are beloved" should reverberate throughout the ceremony, setting a tone for nurturing relationships within the congregation.

Each generation the church must refine and adapt catechetical resources.[23] Let us seek to recover the rich theological, ethical, and political significance of baptism. It signals full embrace of our future in the reign of God.

Notes

[1] I use *catechesis* to describe a process and *catechism* to mean a document.
[2] Herbert Musurillo, comp., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1972), 251.
[3] Ibid., 253.
[4] Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 9; Col. 1:26–27.
[5] *mysterion/sacramentum.*
[6] For discussion of oaths in the Roman army, see John Helgeland, "Roman Army Religion," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung,* Part 2, *Principat,* 16.2, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978): 1470–1505; see especially 1479.
[7] Tertullian *De idolatria* 19,2.

[8] Both Eph. 2:5–6 and Col. 2:12–13 understand being raised with Christ as a *present* reality.
[9] For recent discussion of Christus Victor atonement theory, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 12–98.
[10] For treatment of atonement theories, see John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottdale, Pa.; Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Pr., 1986).
[11] Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement,* 16.
[12] Note that the immediate agenda after baptism is economic redistribution (Acts 2:44–45). Others who promptly received baptism on confession of faith were Simon and fellow Samaritans (8:9–13), an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–39), Saul (9:10–19), Cornelius and fellow Gentiles (10:44–48), Lydia (16:11–15), a Philippian jailor (16:25–34), Crispus and others from the synagogue at Corinth (18:5–8), and Ephesians who had received John's baptism (19:1–7).
[13] Pontius makes this observation in the third century (*Vita Cypriani* 3). Cited by Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 26.
[14] This is my summary of the teaching in *The Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 200, Rome). See Kreider, *Change of Conversion,* 21–32; Paul F. Bradshaw, et al., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary,* Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 2002), 82–135; and Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt,* Message of the Fathers of the Church, vol. 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1992).
[15] *Apostolic Tradition* 15–16.
[16] Ibid., 17–19.
[17] *Ad Donatum* 3; see Kreider, *Change of Conversion,* 7–9.
[18] See Rev. 7:3.
[19] *Apostolic Tradition* 20–21.
[20] I was asked to address the question "What must Mennonites believe to be baptized?" at the catechism consultation for which this piece was originally prepared.
[21] Minucius Felix *Octavius* 31.7, 38.6.
[22] Hans Hut, "The Mystery of Baptism," in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources,* ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1980), 170.
[23] A useful resource in the Mennonite Church is Jane Hoober Peifer and John Stahl-Wert, *Welcoming New Christians: A Guide for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life Pr; Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1995).

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A towel and water
Rethinking my catechism

Matthew Tschetter

Five teenagers knelt before the expectant congregation. Our pastor uttered the baptismal prayer and poured icy water on each of the others and finally on me. I shivered, and wondered: Was the Spirit descending, or was I going into hypothermic shock? An embarrassed seventeen year old, I waited for the precious towel the others used to dry off the excess water. It never came.

The ritual of baptism is to be the culminating event for catechumens, integrally related to their catechism, an initiation into the body of believers. As I have struggled in my faith journey, I have looked back on my catechism with ambivalence. I have doubted the validity of my decision to be baptized and wondered about my attitude. William Harmless writes, "The catechumenate is not a school but an initiation; the school has some students who learn a lesson; initiation has some disciples that discover a life."[1] My catechism experience resembled the former more than the latter. I had to learn the material, take a written exam and then an oral one—making a public profession of my faith. In a matter of weeks I went from being a child of the church to being an adult believer baptized into a new life in Christ. Why didn't I feel different? Had I missed my Damascas Road encounter? My catechism seemed to be just another event in the faith community, like vacation Bible school or a potluck meal.

In pre-Constantinian times, candidates for baptism prepared for three years. Now Mennonites offer instruction for perhaps four months. Churches are quick to sprinkle water on the bowed heads of their youth. Asked "Does your church let you choose when you go through catechism and baptism?" a college student responded, "I have a choice when I turn sixteen." Our youth may succumb to peer pressure or even bribery, unless they want to become poster children for youthful rebellion. My catechism felt forced, as if I had to hurry to get my name into the membership book.

Reflecting on my catechism and on the history of the church, I have come to believe that conversion is a prerequisite for a baptism that has integrity. Our post-Christendom society offers many alternatives. How are we going to transform complacent attitudes and lifestyles into ones that are transformed and Christ-like? If, as Denis Janz proposes, catechisms "are windows through which one can view the lay religious consciousness of an age,"[2] what do our catechisms say about our consciousness? What do we want them to reflect about our core convictions and identity?

To restore meaning to catechism and baptism, I recommend that our churches subject our catechetical traditions and patterns to careful critique, and incorporate deeper understandings of catechetical practice and baptismal ritual. Expect the whole community to enter into the process of catechism. Restructure mentoring relationships so that candidate and member walk together on the journey of instruction and learning. Reorient attitudes and expectations so they focus less on membership and more on conversion and discipleship.[3] Plan for the preparations to culminate in an Easter vigil service that recovers the meaning and passion of this initiation rite for the whole community. And keep striving to maintain openness to conversation about conversion, catechism, and baptism.

If catechisms "are windows through which one can view the lay religious consciousness of an age," what do our catechisms say about us?

As I consider my catechism, I realize that I did what I thought was right. How many in your congregation have also doubted their decision? Perhaps my recommendations can help us look beyond the surface of the rituals of catechism and baptism into the hearts of seekers. Perhaps then we will be prepared to accompany them on the journey to Jesus.

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Notes

[1] *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1995), 17.
[2] *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Pr., 1982), 4.
[3] See Robert E. Webber, *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2001).

The road to the future runs through the past
Reviving an ancient faith journey

Robert E. Webber

Churches in North America are feeling the effects of vast cultural changes. With increasing secularization, the concept of a Christianized society has undergone a long, slow, hard death, and Christians live amid principalities and powers in an increasingly alien culture. Postmodernism asserts that no single metanarrative can speak to an understanding of the world, and the resulting relativism of belief and practice surrounds us. Since 9/11, an awareness of personal vulnerability has opened many to spirituality, mostly of a New Age variety. The church's future depends on its ability to come to terms with these changes in our postmodern, secular-but-still-spiritual society, while bearing witness to its conviction that it has an authentic spirituality and a unique story, a true interpretation of existence.

The church's future depends on its ability to come to terms with changes in our postmodern, secular-but-still-spiritual society, while bearing witness to its conviction that it has an authentic spirituality and a true story.

In this climate of change and challenge, several models or forms of church coexist. Some churches, shaped by their response to World War 2, continue to serve the idea of a Christianized society. Their approach to ministry is that of caretakers. Pastors keep the machinery going. These churches practice mass evangelism. Worship is sermon-driven. Spirituality is keeping the rules. Education is the accumulation of knowledge. Youth work is program after program. Some of these traditional churches flourish, but many are in decline.

Other churches have been shaped by the revolution of the 1960s. They are innovative, follow the business model, and use slick marketing. Their pastors are their CEOs. Worship is primarily music-driven—half an hour of contemporary song followed by a sermon. Spirituality focuses on the therapeutic,

stressing that a Christian can live the good life. Evangelism is seeker-oriented. Education is Christianity 101. Youth work happens around retreats. This pragmatic model has challenged the established church. Using church growth principles these megachurches flourished in the '80s and '90s. Now their future is uncertain.

Newer churches bump up against the relativism of postmodernity. They embrace a missional self-understanding. Their approach to ministry is shaped by the servanthood of Jesus. Worship moves toward the ancient emphasis on Word and Table. Spirituality also seeks to revive older traditions. Evangelism is a journey into faith and discipleship. Education focuses not on the accumulation of facts but on spiritual formation. Youth work concentrates on prayer, Bible study, and social concerns. Twenty-somethings predominate in the emerging church; these start-up groups are featured on web-sites.

These emerging churches seek to work with cultural change. Seeing the impact of globalization, they strive to be multicultural and multigenerational. Breaking with an evolutionary philosophy of history, they affirm that the road to the future runs through the past. Questioning the religious rationalism of the Enlightenment and its impact on forms of ministry, these churches embrace mystery. Repudiating the isolation of individualism, they seek the experience of Christian community. Recognizing the effects of technological change, they foster an interactive approach to Christian faith, worship, and formation.

The church must replace superficial evangelism with a discipleship that forms new believers and incorporates them fully into the life of the church.

The journey to Jesus

Because I am convinced that the church must replace superficial evangelism with a discipleship that forms new believers and incorporates them fully into the life of the church, I have adapted a third-century model of evangelism and Christian formation into a process called Journey to Jesus.[1] I assume that our culture is primarily pagan, that Christian witness in this context cannot take for granted that people understand the Christian faith. The spiritual path I have laid out happens in the church and is especially connected to worship. Like the early church pattern, it

includes a time to evangelize, then to disciple, then to spiritually form, and finally to assimilate into the church. It is based on a study of biblical texts that deal with Christian formation, and it includes life-changing rituals in which participants renounce evil and embrace the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

This process assumes, as the early church did, that we live among the principalities and powers. It teaches that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has overcome the powers of evil and will at the end of history rescue creation from the clutches of evil. As envisioned by Isaiah and in the revelation to John, Christ's shalom will rest over the entire created order. In the meantime, in its worship and in its way of life, the church is called to witness to the overthrow of the powers. The church is therefore the womb in which new Christians are conceived, birthed, and guided into a lifelong relationship with God. The process is a long obedience in the same direction.

The four stages of the process use the language of *seeker, hearer, kneeler,* and *faithful,* all terms used in the early church. I believe the church best marks this process of birth and growth and maturation with rituals. I have adapted the rituals to fit the believers tradition of faith formation. However, I have maintained the sequence of the early church, which practiced adult baptism as the culmination of the process.

Evangelize the seeker. The first step in the journey to Jesus is to bring a person to the place of initial conversion. Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that early Christianity grew largely because of conversions that took place in the context of immediate social networks of family, friendship, working relationships, and neighborhood witness.[2] The statistics of the American Church Growth Institute testify to the ongoing power of this relational approach to bringing people to faith. Seventy-nine percent of people the institute surveyed came to faith through interaction with a friend or relative.[3] One-on-one mentoring relationships can provide opportunity to talk about Gospel stories presenting who Jesus is, what he did, and how his death and resurrection are the source for transforming life. Mentors may bring seekers to church, where the hospitality of God's people and the proclamation of Christ in worship intensify their interest in faith.

When seekers are ready to follow Jesus, they make a public confession of faith, which includes a rite of renunciation of the powers of evil and affirmation of allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

Disciple the hearer. At the 1999 International Consultation on Discipleship in Eastbourne, England, more than 450 Christian leaders from around the world met to address the problem of conversions that fail. They bemoaned the fact that the church seems to be a mile wide but an inch deep. They urged congregations to develop ways to disciple new Christians. The second step in the journey to Jesus helps new converts learn what it means to be a disciple: what does it mean to be the church; what does it mean to be at worship; how does one pray with Scripture?

At the end of this stage, when new Christians are ready, they celebrate the rite of covenant. As in the early church, this rite is a commitment to proceed to baptism. Candidates step forward to reaffirm faith in Christ by writing their names in the book of the covenant. The whole community looks on and celebrates by singing "Alleluia" as each candidate's name is recorded.

Spiritually form the kneeler. For the next six weeks, the candidate—now known as a kneeler—prepares for baptism by learning how to deal with the principalities and powers. To live in baptism is to identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian answer to the powers is to live in our baptism, daily dying to sin and rising to the new life of the Spirit which is in Christ. During this period, candidates learn the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Through these primary sources, one learns the content of belief and to whom and how to pray.

The ritual that follows this instruction is baptism, the rite *par excellence* of conversion. In this rite one renounces the powers of evil and submits to a new identity, is baptized into Christ to live on in the pattern of death and resurrection.

Assimilate the faithful. When the converted have been baptized, what remains of their initial discipleship journey is incorporation into the full life of the church. A seven-week study of biblical passages is geared to helping new members discover their calling

to work, to the care of creation, to the poor and needy. They also discover their gifts and offer them to the life of the church.

This stage has no one-time rite of passage. Instead the rite of communion offers continuous nourishment. At the Table, God meets believers again and again to confirm their faith in truth and to nourish them with the body and blood of Christ. The initial journey to Jesus has been completed. Converts are ready to be involved in the church, continuing to grow even as they now mentor others in the faith.

Concluding thoughts

The six-month process I have summarized may begin and end at any time, but some may find it meaningful to order it around the Christian year. On Pentecost Sunday, commission the evangelists of your community to make a connection with one person in their social network, and begin the conversation described in part one. On the first Sunday of Advent, celebrate the rite of conversion. Then lead new converts through the next stage during Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. On the first Sunday of Lent, celebrate the rite of covenant. During Lent, introduce new converts to the discipline of spirituality summarized in part three. Baptize them at the great Easter vigil on Saturday night of Holy Week, or in the Easter Sunday service. During the seven weeks of Easter assimilate new converts into the full life of the church.

The journey to Jesus model is not a quick fix. Getting started may require a small group of committed people who go through the process themselves, and then begin to invite unchurched people into it, until it expands to include the whole church and those beyond it in the process of discipleship. This paradigm is new, but it draws on early church resources, because we too live in a world that is pagan. This model has the potential to revolutionize the twenty-first-century church, as it did the church of the Roman world almost two thousand years ago.

Notes

[1] For a more detailed explanation of this process, read Robert E. Webber, *The Journey to Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2001); and *Ancient-Future Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bks., 2003). Booklets to guide each of the four stages—*Follow Me! Be My Disciple! Walk in the Spirit!* and *Find Your Gift!*—are available for use by mentors or in small groups. A video training workshop, *The Journey to Jesus Video,* is also available. These resources can be ordered on-line at: www.ancientfutureworship.com. Questions

and comments may be directed to rwebber@northern.seminary.edu.

[2] *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1996).

[3] The remainder came to faith through a pastor (6 percent); Sunday school (5 percent); walk-ins (3 percent); outreach programs (3 percent); special needs (2 percent); visitation (1 percent); crusades (0.5 percent).

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"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 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.

In everything the church says and does—everything its members and its leaders are and do—the church is engaged in informal 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 *in*formal 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 *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)

Israel's entire way of life—its very ethos, including its rituals—was to be (informally) catechetical in nature, corporately articulating the wholehearted and single-minded love of the one God (Deut. 6:5).

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

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Catechisms in the Mennonite tradition

Karl Koop

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 was first published in the city of Elbing (now Elblag, 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.

Teaching the essentials of the faith presents pastors with a formidable undertaking. Attending to catechisms of the past can help us as we consider the content of catechesis for today.

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 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]

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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 Orlofferfelde 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. 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.

Catechisms operate on the boundary between theological sophistication and lay piety, in order to communicate the faith to potential and actual adherents.

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*, 2d 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*, 3d 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* (Scottdale, 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. Schultse, 1896, 1898; Rosthern, Sask.: Dietrich H. Epp, 1941); J. Wichert, *Kurzgefasste Handreichung in unser Glaubenslehre mit Erklaerungen 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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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?'"*

When 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, 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.

If we are to give our youth 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.

In my first encounter with formal doctrinal instruction in the late 1950s, I learned the Elbing catechism.[1] 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."[2] 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.[3] Manitoba 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.

Despite the dangers of using doctrinal formulations to maintain boundaries, for groups committed to truth, having clearly stated doctrinal conditions for membership is less dangerous than pretending that they have no such prerequisites.

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.[4] 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.[5] 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.

Christian educators confront this challenge: 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.

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[6] 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.[7] 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 disenchanted, 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*.[8] 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,

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.

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.

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

[1] 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.

[2] 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).

[3] 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.

[4] 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.

[5] Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Pr., 1982), 131–76.
[6] 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.
[7] 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 Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 2003). [See review in this issue, pages 91–92—Ed.]
[8] *Apologetics* is defense of the faith.

About the author

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How do we invite youth to baptism? And when?

Mary Lehman Yoder

In college our education class studied Jean Piaget's theories of cognitive development. We visited the lab kindergarten to observe a reenactment of a classic Piaget experiment which demonstrates that for children at this "pre-operational" stage, reality is what it appears to be in the moment. One by one, the five-year-olds watched as the experimenter poured what was obviously the same amount of colored water into each of two transparent containers, one tall and narrow, the other short and squat. When asked which beaker contained more water, each confidently declared that the tall, thin beaker held more: at this stage they all lacked the cognitive ability to abstract from what was before their eyes to the previous image of quantities of water that looked—and were—the same.

Understanding stages of faith development is foundational for the way I approach catechism and baptism. *What* we teach should be closely related to *when* we teach it.

A few years later, as a seminary student, I studied James Fowler's theories of faith development, and John Westerhoff's work,[1] which builds on Fowler's stages. I learned that given the right conditions, children's faith develops in predictable ways, moving along with their emotional and intellectual growth through several stages. Since then I have become a parent and a pastor. Like the lab kindergarten, my congregation and my home have given me ample opportunity to observe the truth of these developmental theories.

Understanding stages of faith development is foundational for the way I approach catechism and baptism. To call a twelve year old to the costly path of discipleship makes no more sense to me than to expect a five year old to perceive that the containers hold the same amount of water. *What* we teach should be closely related to *when* we teach it. The confession of faith we expect should vary with baptismal candidates' age and stage of faith.

Christian faith in four dimensions

In catechism classes I teach that being a Christian involves four dimensions—believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing.[2]

Believing includes the confession that Jesus is Lord and the declaration that God has come to us uniquely in Jesus Christ. This dimension is reflected in Jesus' announcement that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14–15). In this dimension is Paul and Silas's response to the Philippian jailer who asked what he must do to be saved: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31). Along the way to believing one might well engage in an examination of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, or struggle with theories of the atonement and understandings of Christ's divine and human natures. As we consider believing, we do well to sing "My hope is built on nothing less" (*Hymnal: A Worship Book [HWB]* 343).

The second dimension is ***behaving,*** faith in action. The writer of 1 John is emphatic about the need for right behavior: "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (3:18). Work with this dimension includes dealing with what our tradition has called nonconformity to the world. I talk with the youth in catechism class about telling the truth, giving up gossip, and rejecting the party scene. We explore nonregistration,[3] simplicity, a life of service. I commend a clear sexual ethic and intentional patterns of stewarding money. As we consider behaving, we do well to sing "I bind my heart this tide" (*HWB* 411).

Belonging is the third aspect of faith that we consider. To be a Christian is to belong to an alternative community, the body of Christ, and to stand against our culture's rampant individualism: a solitary Christian is a contradiction in terms. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's body metaphor describes the organic way Christians belong together and need each other. And 1 Peter 2:9–10 eloquently testifies to the centrality of the corporate dimension of Christian life: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." As we consider belonging, we do well to sing "Heart with loving heart united" (*HWB* 420).

A fourth aspect of Christian faith is ***experiencing***. Experiencing is the profound sense that we are known and loved by one who

reminds us, "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:16). Experiencing may be the Spirit's nudge to raise a hand, or head down the aisle. We may speak in tongues, follow the guiding light within, hear the voice of Jesus in our inner ear. As we gaze up into a starry night and ponder the wonder of the cosmos, we may feel drawn to our creator. The swell of congregational song catches some of us up into a powerful anticipation of the heavenly choir. I teach that regularly practicing spiritual disciplines, individually and corporately, opens us to the experience of faith. The Psalms give voice to some of our most profound experiences; Psalm 139 in particular names the intimacy of being completely known. As we consider experiencing, we do well to sing "Lord, I am fondly, earnestly longing" (*HWB* 514) or "My life flows on" (*HWB* 580).

A developmental approach to catechism recognizes that at the different stages, more or less weight falls on each of these four dimensions of faith. A lively faith will stretch and expand throughout one's lifetime. Also, as we move to more mature stages of faith, the earlier stages remain in us, and we may revisit them along the way.

Four stages of faith development

The first of John Westerhoff's stages of faith development is ***received faith.*** The Anabaptists held that infants do not need baptism for forgiveness of sin; they are innocent, sheltered under the wings of God. To say that young children do not need baptism is not to say that they do not have faith. Believing and behaving are beyond them, but they are capable of belonging and experiencing. Through the mysterious grace of the Holy Spirit and the love of their parents and others, they receive the gift of faith. Our task is to surround them with unconditional love and to create boundaries for their safety and growth. They then begin to experience God's love for them and to trust that God's people—at home and at church—cherish and nurture them. We observe parent-child dedication rituals as a sign of the faith we trust will continue to grow in them.

If the needs of children in the stage of received faith have been met, they begin to develop ***affiliative faith***. They begin to take hold of what is being given to them. At best they exhibit a

wonderful sense of belonging. Hearing the stories of Jesus, children at this stage may declare their love for Jesus, for their friends at church, for a cherished Sunday school teacher. Witnessing baptism, they may say, "I love Jesus. Why can't I be baptized?" We should affirm their positive identification. Many congregations have discovered the importance of a strong junior youth group in this stage of faith development, to deepen a sense of belonging. Some congregations provide rituals that recognize the growing faith of these children.

Primary and preadolescent children may begin to use the language of believing, but at this stage they are identifying with what others believe. One of my colleagues overheard someone asking his grade-school child what he wanted most in the world. The pastor's child responded, "I want a Sony PlayStation and world peace." His second wish contrasts with the first in reflecting the child's identification with what matters to his parents.

Grade-school children can develop a strong sense about right and wrong behaving, displayed in a capacity to assert loudly, "That's not fair!" Children at this age can and should be taught rules for fair fighting and creative conflict management, but they are hardly ready to declare their commitment to the nonviolent way of the cross Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. They can and should be taught about telling the truth, but they are rarely able to grasp the implications of the Schleitheim confession's teaching on refusing to take oaths. There is nothing *wrong* with children at this stage, but they lack the tools to grasp and reflect on the deeper meanings of believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing.

I prefer not to baptize children at this stage, but I have done so a time or two, and I believe one can make a case for it. Baptism is one way to honor a growing and genuine faith, and many Mennonite congregations, with good intentions, do baptize children in this stage (approximately ages ten to fourteen). "Thank goodness," the parents and grandparents sigh. "At least he's baptized. Perhaps that will insulate him from all the stormy times in adolescence." But we do our children and our Lord a grave disservice if we indicate to a thirteen year old that she has now done the main thing required to be a Christian, that she just needs to keep coming to church and reading her Bible. Baptism is

about heading in a direction; it is not about arriving at a destination. We need to tell our preadolescents who are receiving baptism, "We expect that you are on the verge of some major questions. We are grateful for the affirmations you are making and your sense that you belong with Jesus and with his church. We pray that your growing faith will serve as an anchor for you, but we want to give you a lot of rope during the next years. We trust the Spirit to keep you connected, and we are committed to doing our part also, to receive your questions, struggles, and doubts as an honest and important part of your faith journey."

Too many of our youth who were baptized in the affiliative stage were then burdened with guilt when they hit the next stage. As they developed a capacity for abstract thinking, their earlier beliefs seemed inadequate or naïve. Unable to find space in the church for their questions, they wrote off their baptisms as irrelevant and misguided, as meaningless rituals. How sad!

Too many youth who were baptized in the affiliative stage were burdened with guilt when they hit the next stage. Unable to find space in the church for their questions, they wrote off their baptisms as meaningless.

If the needs of affiliative faith have been met, sometime in adolescence children move into the stage of ***searching faith***. Westerhoff writes that this stage has three characteristics. The first is the action of *doubt* or *critical judgment*. "In order to move from an understanding of faith that belongs to the community to an understanding of faith that is our own, we need to doubt and question that faith" (96). No longer content to let belonging carry them along, children at this stage undertake the hard work of figuring out what they believe and how they will behave.

When my first-born was baptized late in her senior year of high school, my youngest, then a sixth grader, thought it was so neat. "I just love our church and the way we do things here. How long do you have to wait to get baptized?" Two years later, she came to me with great angst. "We were talking about creation and evolution in science. Do you really believe the universe came into existence the way it says God did it in the Bible? I'm not even sure *what* I believe about God." Internally I trembled slightly as I witnessed her shift from affiliative to searching faith, but my wiser

self could respond, "What great questions you are asking!" We talked about scientific truth and spiritual Truth, about how the meaning and purpose of Bible stories differs from that of theories in a science textbook. My daughter brightened up, "This is good. I'll talk to Maria. She's having a lot of questions, too." As Westerhoff writes, "The despairs and doubts of the searching soul need to be affirmed," and children at this stage "need to join others in the intellectual quest for understanding" (96–7).

A searching faith is also characterized by *experimentation*. At this stage people explore alternatives to earlier understandings and test their own tradition by learning about others. Through this process they are able to reach convictions that are their own. One bright young man in our congregation declared himself an atheist early in his high school years. He was not defiant or angry; he just wanted to be honest: the notion of God didn't seem to work for him any more. He began reading about Eastern religions. We felt some anxiety for him, but I wasn't completely surprised when he responded to the invitation to join the exploring baptism class a couple years later.

Searching faith also "embodies the need to *commit* our lives to persons and causes." People in this stage "sometimes appear fickle, giving their lives to one ideology after another, sometimes in rapid succession and on occasion in contradiction." Westerhoff says we learn commitment by committing to things: "How can we know what it means to give our life away until we have learned how to do it?" (97).

When our youth and young adults are in this stage of their faith development, do we make space for them? Do we tell them, "Ask questions here"? Or do we communicate that we all have it together, that we all believe the same things and behave alike, that we all belong, that we all experience our faith in the same ways? Westerhoff observes that because many adults in the church have not experienced an environment that encouraged searching faith, they may be frightened or disturbed by adolescents who are enlarging their affiliative faith to include searching faith. If we do not welcome their questions, these youth may leave the church during this stage, and some will never return.

Exploring baptism with youth in the searching stage takes careful listening, honest feedback, and thoughtful discernment. At

the end of our classes, participants write a faith statement. It may be an honest statement about what they are able to claim now; it may become part of what they say to the congregation when they are baptized. Our young "atheist" presented his carefully prepared statement. After making several orthodox affirmations, he concluded, "I am in the Buddha and the Buddha is in me." I suggested that he might want to read the Christian mystics, that he didn't need to leave his faith tradition in order to claim a deep spirituality. Months later he requested baptism. He'd undergone some remarkable growth, and we proceeded to baptize him. His affirmation of faith, one of the most profound I have witnessed among our youth, is standing him in good stead.

Questions and commitment are not mutually exclusive. If you sense that the Spirit is drawing you and you are responding with an answering faith in the midst of your questions, baptism can be an authentic expression of your searching faith.

If, as I have noted, a lively faith stretches and expands throughout our lives, we can make the case for baptizing youth in the searching, exploring stage of faith. I remind our youth that they need not wait to be baptized until *all* their questions are answered; I still have questions. Questions and commitment are not mutually exclusive. I tell young people, if you are churning around in your questions and not seriously looking for direction, then baptism is not the next step for you. If your search is happening within the body of Christ, if you trust that God's Word is a guide and authority for your life, if you sense that the Spirit is drawing you and you are responding with an answering faith in the midst of your questions, baptism can be an authentic expression of your searching faith.

In their late teens, our congregation's youth in the searching stage often have more assurance about the behaving aspect of faith and less about believing or experiencing. Sometimes, for example, they are deeply committed to the nonviolent way of Jesus, but lack clarity about who Jesus is. Is that OK? Perhaps we can proceed with a faith statement as simple as: "God exists. God loves us. God showed his love for us in Jesus. Faith is living as if the above is true without knowing it for sure."

When the needs of searching faith have been met, we may expand into ***owned faith*** (98). If what preceded this stage was

serious struggle, owned faith may appear as a great illumination or enlightenment. Or it may emerge slowly, quietly, as the self now centered in Christ Jesus becomes more solid. People with an owned faith are willing to stand up for the faith they have come to claim *and* be claimed by. A hymn that expresses this stage of faith development is "I sought the Lord" (*HWB* 506). An owned faith lives in all four dimensions, and one's believing, behaving, belonging, and experiencing are all understood as responses to the gracious call of God in Christ Jesus. An owned faith is lived in the dynamic tension that acknowledges, "I choose this faith, yet I know also that I was chosen."

I take great joy in baptizing folks at this stage. Many have done their inner work and are also finding direction about their work in the world. They are clear about a faith that is their own, which at the same time joins them to others.

We will need creativity and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to adapt what we teach and when we teach it to the needs of the children and youth who come to us. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15–16).

Notes

[1] John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Pr., 1976).

[2] To the best of my knowledge, this framework has evolved from the work of Charles Glock and has been modified in conversation with J. R. Burkholder. Alan Kreider works with a similar framework; see "The Journey of Conversion," chap. 3 in *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 21–2.

[3] In the U.S., all eighteen-year-old males are required by law to register with the Selective Service System. The law makes no provision for registering as a conscientious objector.

About the author

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What's stopping you?
Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:25–39)

Jim Loepp Thiessen

The stereotype of us preachers is that we are bold as blazes in our lives of faith, as confident in our witness as Billy Graham; if we appear otherwise, it's because we haven't had the chance. I believe with all my heart that I am to share my faith with others, I read books on the subject, and I talk with people who are good at it, but the sad truth is, when it comes to sharing my faith, I'm a bit of a coward. I don't usually confess it, but talking about my faith with others often frightens me. This reticence makes me a good Canadian, perhaps even a good Mennonite, but sometimes it leaves me with a sense that I've failed.

In spite of my fears and failings, I regularly pray for opportunity to share my faith. Every now and then the Spirit nudges me, as directly as Philip was nudged in the story in Acts 8. I don't always listen. Five years ago, I walked into a restroom at McDonald's and saw the back of a man in a red-checked flannel coat. Out of the blue, inside me, a voice said, "Tell him that Rebecca loves him." I had been asking God to speak to me, but I was so astounded, so bewildered, that I ignored the nudge. Many times I have wondered, "Was that God's voice I heard at the golden arches?"

On a frosty February day a year ago, our family was going through an exhibit at the zoo when the same voice said, "Tell her that her baby is going to be all right." I thought, "What baby?" and snapped my head around to see a very pregnant woman walk into the room, looking sad. I hate to say it, but I ignored the Spirit's nudge to speak peace to a woman who seemed in turmoil.

Then there was Bob, a total stranger I met at a conference. I felt God murmur to me that in Bob's life there was a man named Walter who was important to God. That time I heeded God's whisper. Bob's eyes got wide and moist as he told me he had had a falling out at church with Walter. Walter had been on his heart a lot lately. My word invited him to finish the reconciliation he had

begun earlier. I can still see Bob, tears in his eyes, waving for his wife to come over so he could tell her about this word.

One day as I was praying with a colleague, the Spirit kept whispering a phrase into my spirit. I said it to him, and the words brought him release. He had been dealing with fears about reentering ministry after many years away, fears related to a conflict he had had. The Spirit's words enabled him to move ahead, to receive God's invitation. Now he happily pastors a congregation.

Sometimes I have responded to the Spirit's nudges, and sometimes I have hesitated. What grabs my attention about the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is Philip's complete willingness to listen when the Spirit speaks. An angel says, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," and Philip immediately gets up and goes.

The story is set up so perfectly that it may provoke our skepticism. A man from the Ethiopian high court is traveling by chariot to Jerusalem to worship God. Not one to suffer from motion sickness, he is reading his Bible on the way. He doesn't understand part of his reading from Isaiah. Philip comes along and hears the Spirit say, "Go over to this chariot and join it." He proceeds to hop on the chariot, and he uses the Ethiopian's questions to proclaim God's story in Jesus. The man decides, on the spot, to receive baptism with some water that happens to be beside the road. It's too neat, too easy. The story grips me, though, because it is so easy, because the Holy One has set up the whole thing, and all Philip and the Ethiopian do is respond to the Spirit's work.

The first responder in the story is Philip. He is aligning himself with God's activity, and following through. He is missional even before that word wandered into our vocabulary. A few years ago I made up my mind to respond to the Spirit's nudging when I felt it with regard to folks from my church. If people were on my mind, I called them. I was amazed to see how often my call coincided with a significant moment. "Today is the anniversary of my wife's death," one man told me through tears. Another time I had a strong urge to pray for a couple from my church. I finally phoned them and learned that the house where they were staying had been struck by lightning, throwing the husband in the air as he

worked in the garage. God's longing for us to be God's presence for others means that God does speak to us about others, and to them through us. Philip, bless his heart, had the courage to respond to what he heard. Without Philip's "yes," the Ethiopian would not have heard the good news about Jesus.

The eunuch also says "yes." He has the courage to go deeper. He is not settled with things as they are and wants to know more. Bless his heart for wanting that knowledge. The Bible isn't always easy to understand, and this court official, knowledgeable about finances, has the guts to ask about things of the Spirit. For his part, Philip has a presence that invites further conversation. Several times a year, I run an ALPHA course, an introduction to Christian faith. The "A" of ALPHA stands for "ask anything": the course creates a safe space for asking questions. Brian McClaren, in his book on sharing faith in a postmodern world, says the problem with many of us Christians is that others don't perceive us as safe to talk with about issues of faith. People are dying to talk about spiritual things but fear we will pounce on them if they speak honestly.[1] Philip is safe. He starts with the man's questions and proceeds from there.

Baptism is our faith response to the work of Jesus in our lives, to an invitation from God to live in grace, the grace of not being ready, not being all put together, not being perfect.

The eunuch also has the courage to respond to what he has learned. As he hears the rest of the story, he feels the impulse to be baptized. Here the Spirit is also leading. Baptism is his response to the new work of Christ in his life. Was he ready, within minutes of hearing the good news on a bumpy chariot? In the first conversation I had with a friend after my baptism, he told me he was not ready to take the same step. An eighteen year old, I told him, "None of us feels quite ready." Baptism is our faith response to the work of Jesus in our lives, to an invitation from God to live in grace, the grace of not being ready, not being all put together, not being perfect. The Ethiopian demonstrates dramatic faith; he is willing to respond to the opportunity the water presents.

Was the eunuch too impulsive? Was Philip too eager to baptize? Was the eunuch really ready for baptism? He hadn't even had catechism classes! How much of the Christian story did he know after a brief chariot ride? The story doesn't tell us.

I recently heard of Mennonite colleagues who, after a baptism at their church, felt the urge to invite people who wanted to respond to the invitation of Jesus by being baptized on the spot. Several responded. If we believe baptism is a response to God's initiative in our lives, is a spontaneous invitation appropriate? Early in its history, the church established a three-year process to prepare catechumens for baptism. Fortunately, the Ethiopian got dunked before the church raised the bar!

What is the right time for baptism? This story invites us into more spontaneity than we may be ready for. In my early teens I asked my dad about getting baptized, because my cousins were all doing it. My father, sensing that I wasn't ready, encouraged me to wait a bit. Later I was glad for his advice. A colleague says, "Baptism for those who have not experienced a relationship with Jesus only inoculates them against real Christianity." I agree. Sometimes when I work with catechumens, I sense that they are doing the right things for the wrong reasons, because of friends or parental pressure. I don't presume to judge, but I look for the yearning the Ethiopian experienced as he heard the story of Jesus.

This story doesn't answer all our questions. It doesn't tell us the "how long" of instruction, or the "when" of baptism. But it invites us to risk: to risk sharing our faith with others, and to trust that the Spirit of God is longing for us to do so. For those of us on the journey, the story invites us to risk going deeper to find out more. And when the dust settles after the chariot ride, it invites us to move ahead with the work of God in our lives, through baptism.

When you feel the Spirit's nudge, what is stopping you from taking a risk to respond by sharing the hope within you? If the Ethiopian had the courage to dig deeper in his faith, what is stopping you from doing the same? And if the Ethiopian had the guts to ask for baptism before he had it all together, what is stopping you from receiving baptism?

Note

[1] Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism As Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen preached this sermon at Shantz Mennonite Church, Baden, Ontario, where he and his wife, Ingrid, are pastors. Jim also serves as a missional formation staff person for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

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.

If we want new believers to experience the presence of God 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.

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.

If the search for meaning is humanity's primary motivation, and if we are created by God, this search is the path to God.

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.

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Faith Friends
A catechism story

Gwen Gustafson-Zook

Imagine a congregation made up—in about equal proportions—of middle income ethnic Mennonites, lower income folks from various theological traditions, and college students and young adults, most of whom grew up in Mennonite homes. In this congregation folks who have graduated from seminary sit side by side with folks who quit school after eighth grade. Some people have read the Bible all the way through more times than they can tell you, and some have never read a whole chapter of any book. Some know all the acronyms of the Mennonite world, and others mistake MMN[1] for M&Ms. There are those whose vast experience dealing with social systems should qualify them for some kind of degree, and those who know nothing of AFDC,[2] Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC,[3] Section 8 housing assistance, and SSI.[4]

Faith Mennonite Church is such a congregation. The worlds of the people who attend this congregation are very different. The fact that they are church together is a wonder-filled and beautiful thing. And this diverse mix makes for some interesting challenges.

Faith Friends have bridged cultural differences. More important, the approach has allowed seekers to be met where they are, nurtured in their life and faith, and empowered to affirm their commitment to Jesus and to the church.

Faith is a small congregation. But to look at its membership rolls, one would think it is much smaller than it really is. Membership is currently around thirty-five. Average attendance is around seventy. One reason for the discrepancy between membership and attendance has to do with difficulty we have had in designing membership classes appropriate to the mix of people who attend Faith. First is the logistical problem of finding a time when everyone interested can meet. Scheduling is complicated by transportation problems, lack of telephones,

erratic work schedules, and the crises that accompany poverty. Second, while some find reading a book about Anabaptist history stimulating, others experience reading requirements as a barrier to membership. And there are issues of group process: while some find engaging in group discussion enjoyable and thought-provoking, others experience the same group as intimidating, threatening, or boring. So how can a congregation like Faith help prepare people for membership?

Six months ago, with a growing list of people wanting to explore membership at Faith, the congregation's leaders decided to take a step away from the traditional membership class. We call our new approach Faith Friends. Each person who wants to prepare for membership is assigned a partner—an elder or another member of the congregation. Partners serve as spiritual friends—Faith Friends—to help those seeking membership prepare to join the church, and then to walk with them through the first year of membership. Faith Friends agree to get together as often and as long as they need to in order to process five areas related to our life as followers of Jesus and participants in the church.

Salvation and the work of Jesus. The first area invites the Faith Friends to ask the question "What difference does Jesus make?" They talk about who Jesus was historically and who Jesus is in the present. Faith Friends are encouraged to share from their experience of meeting Jesus and of growing in awareness of Jesus' presence in their lives. Bible study together can be meaningful at this stage in the exploration. For those not inclined to read, parts of the video series *Turning toward Jesus* can help raise questions and generate meaningful discussion.[5]

Anabaptist history. The second area asks Faith Friends to pool their knowledge of Anabaptist history. They explore early Anabaptists' commitment to following Christ in life, their practice of believers baptism, their interest in recovering early church models for their life together, and their emphasis on holding fast to Jesus' teachings—including those on nonviolence. All Faith Friends are encouraged to take a trip through Menno-Hof, a Mennonite Anabaptist interpretive center in Shipshewana, Indiana, and to discuss that experience together. The movie *The Radicals* can also serve as a beginning point for conversation and for understanding parts of the early Anabaptist movement.

Mennonites today. From Anabaptist history, Faith Friends move naturally to the third topic for discussion: Mennonites today. They discuss the central tenets of Mennonite faith, perhaps using *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, or the youth guide to the confession. They also talk about current realities in the Mennonite world. *The Mennonite* and *Mennonite Weekly Review* are good sources of such information. Friends may also discuss how the Mennonite Church in our area is structured. At a minimum, they look at how our church body relates to our conferences and to the broader church. Some find the video *Our Family Can Be Your Family* helpful.[6]

Daily Christian living. The fourth area for discussion has to do with daily Christian living. Faith Friends are invited to entertain the question, "What does it mean for me to live as a follower of Jesus?" Faith Friends are asked to discuss how they nurture their relationship with God, how they tend to the inward journey. They are also asked to discuss how they express their faith in their daily life, how they tend to the outward journey. Faith Friends may choose to explore spiritual disciplines together. They may work together on projects in the church or local community. They may prepare soup or wash dishes for our weekly congregational meal. Working side by side, they get to know each other better and express their faith through service to the community.

Familiarity with the Faith congregation. Finally we ask that friends talk together about our congregation. Some may choose to attend our annual meeting on "Who we are at Faith." There we share stories of our history and explain where the congregation has come from. We also talk about diversity: because we are convinced that our diversity is a gift from God, we are committed to finding ways to hear each person's voice, to overcoming the barriers that separate us, and to honoring each person as a child of God irrespective of abilities and disabilities.

When both partners feel that their discussions are complete, a pastor works with them to arrange a time for the candidate to join the church. On these occasions, Faith Friends stand before the worshiping community together. Mentors gives testimony to the faith of candidates for membership. Then candidates tell us a bit about their faith journey. The pastor asks candidates the questions from the *Minister's Manual* for situations in which simple wording

is required: Do you believe that Jesus loves you? Do you believe that Jesus forgives you of all your sins? Do you love Jesus and want to live by his teachings? Do you want to be a member of this church?[7]

We recognize that this preparation is not exhaustive. But it gives us a place to start. The process requires ample trust. It also provides an opportunity for those who have been members longer to revisit their own faith commitments and to grow by interacting with those whose life and faith experiences may be significantly different from their own.

Has it worked? Since we initiated this process six months ago, we have welcomed into membership an average of one person a month. We consistently receive requests for a Faith Friend from folks who have participated in the life of the congregation for a while but who have not yet joined the church. Those who have served as Faith Friends have volunteered to do it again. Faith Friends have bridged generational, economic, and educational differences. Most important, the approach has allowed those seeking membership to be met where they are, nurtured in their life and faith, and empowered to take the next step of publicly affirming their commitment to Jesus and to the body of believers at Faith. And that has been very good.

Notes

[1] Mennonite Mission Network.
[2] Aid to Families with Dependent Children.
[3] Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
[4] Supplemental Security Income disability programs.
[5] *Turning toward Jesus*, available from Mennonite Media, is a video curriculum for new and growing believers, developed out of research conducted among pastors who have taught such classes in urban settings. The four-video series includes three sections and sixteen video-based lessons and personal testimonies. The boxed set is accompanied by a 123-page leader's book and reproducible student sheets.
[6] *Our Family Can Be Your Family: Mennonites and What We Believe* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Mennonite Board of Missions Media Ministries, 1989).
[7] John D. Rempel, *Minister's Manual* (Newton, Kan.; Winnipeg, Man.: Scottdale, Pa.; Waterloo, Ont.: Faith & Life Pr.; Herald Pr., 1998), 52.

About the author

Gwen Gustafson-Zook makes her home in Goshen, Indiana, with her husband, Les, and her children, Si and Sadie. Pastoring, parenting, and making music give her energy and meaning in life.

Let's have a party!
A baptismal sermon, with some reflections

Gareth Brandt

A baptismal sermon

Luke 15 records three parables, about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Each parable ends with a party: the shepherd's friends rejoice in his recovered sheep; the woman who finds her coin invites her neighbors in to share her happiness; and when the son returns, his father orders up the best clothes and finest meat, and the dancing begins.

But what if the shepherd had invited his neighbors and then lectured them on how to avoid losing sheep? What if the woman who found the lost coin had warned her friends about being careless with money? Suppose the father had greeted his prodigal son with "I told you you'd be back. If you had listened to me, you would have saved us all a lot of agony. I hope you've learned your lesson. If you plan to live in this household, you'll have to abide by the rules. Now hop to it. There's work to be done around here." These responses may seem reasonable, but according to Jesus' stories, our Sovereign has a different character, and things are otherwise in the commonwealth of God.

Today twelve people are publicly announcing their repentance and their commitment to Jesus. The angels must be going wild! And if they are partying, we on earth should reflect heaven's revelry. Today we too celebrate that what was lost is found, that those who could be squandering their inheritance in the world have instead chosen to come home to the family of God.

You may find the idea of parties offensive—all that eating, drinking, dancing. So did the Pharisees. In fact, their straitlaced response to Jesus is what elicited this series of parables. Jesus had gained a reputation as a party animal, and these good religious people accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. These parables respond directly to their criticism. Jesus reminds them, in effect, that the kingdom of God is a party![1]

"Just wait a minute here," you say. "What about the practical and ethical side of living out the Christian life? Life is not just one big party." No, it isn't, but there is a time to celebrate. The Christian life involves a serious commitment to daily discipleship, but we are meant to live it in a spirit of joy and freedom. When a woman anointed Jesus with a jar of expensive perfume, her extravagance offended some. Jesus honored it. He didn't deny the importance of care for the poor and good stewardship, but he also made time to pause in worship and adoration. And today is such a time. In the midst of daily struggles and worldwide suffering, we need interludes of celebration to bring relief and restore joy. We will have time again to preach and teach, serve and work, but today is a day to party.

This party is for everyone. All are invited and included, without discrimination: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Each one baptized today is different from the others, but all are baptized into one body. Categories are irrelevant at a Christian party. Everyone gets to participate.

Baptism expresses an individual commitment and displays outwardly the inner transformation that has been taking place in the lives of these people before us. Baptism also joins each one to the partying people of God. It is the rite of initiation into a new family, into a new relationship with others. Paul Pierson writes, "Jesus did not come to save disembodied souls or merely to form a conglomeration of redeemed individuals, each primarily concerned with their own salvation and needs."[2] He came to form a new humanity whose pattern of life is described in the New Testament. This new humanity is called the church.

The church is not perfect. It is made up of imperfect people. But that is part of its beauty. The twelve of you are a motley crew, as were the original twelve disciples. You have different personalities, ages, and backgrounds, and yet you are making the same commitment to live in the way of Jesus and to join yourself with each other and this congregation. In your uniqueness you are invited and accepted here. Together we are like parts of the body, all different, with different functions, but working together as one.

Today the twelve of you are publicly identifying yourself with this body, this new humanity, this faith community and spiritual family. We are gathered as a community of friends, neighbors, and

relatives to rejoice with you in your new commitments. And be assured that the party down here is only an echo of what's going on up there. Today we taste just a bit of what we will someday enjoy in the presence of God and the angels, forever.

We welcome you with the love of Jesus. His love binds us together and makes us one. It brings healing and hope to the world and glory to God. May the party here today spill over into your lives every day as you bring joy and love to the places and people on your path. Amen.

Reflections on baptism in postmodern experience

Baptism as a sign of belonging. Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes' maxim, "I think; therefore I am," trumpets modernism's emphasis on the individual. Evangelical theology has often followed the lead of this individualistic philosophy by emphasizing a me-and-Jesus view of the Christian life. Modernity's individualism has left young people growing up in a postmodern milieu with an awareness of their profound disconnectedness from others.

Mennonite theology and practice of community scratch where postmodern youth are itching. For them, identity comes from belonging, and baptism is about a new identity in a new community.

Emerging generations, raised in a fragmenting culture, have a deep need for a sense of rootedness, of belonging in a community.[3] They yearn for meaningful relationships and significant human connections. The lyrics of a top rock hit of 2003 illustrate this desire:

> *I want to heal*
> *I want to feel like I'm close to something real*
> *I want to find something I've wanted all along*
> *Somewhere I belong*[4]

Postmodernism has alerted us anew to the value of community. Many youth feel alienated and lost. "I belong; therefore I am" is a truer statement of meaningful identity today.

Baptism should invite youth into a community of belonging. I believe that Anabaptist/Mennonite theology and practice scratch where the emerging generations are itching. Since the sixteenth

century, Mennonites have valued a theology and practice of community. We have seen water baptism as crucial in establishing the visible body of Christ on earth, as marking a public commitment to the church as well as to God.[5] A recent study conference on baptism and church membership asked whether baptism and church membership should be separated.[6] Absolutely not! This question would have been inconceivable to Paul and the early church.[7] Belonging was an essential part of early church catechetical practice.[8] For postmodern youth, identity comes from belonging, and baptism is about a new identity in a new community of belonging.

The local church can offer a physically and spiritually safe place of connection for which alienated postmodern youth are longing. Baptism is the initiation rite into a new family, into a new relationship with others, into a new community of belonging. When youth and young adults are baptized, they become part of a unique intergenerational community that looks out for them. This care is especially meaningful for young people who do not have biological family ties in a congregation. It gives them "somewhere to belong." The best way to help youth grow in their faith is to facilitate their membership in a community of faith through the sign of baptism. It is a symbol of covenant in two inseparable dimensions: a mysterious vertical dimension and an earthy, practical, tangible, horizontal dimension.

Baptism as a party. Experience is also high on the list of postmodern cultural values. For something to be true—authentic and real—spiritually, it must be experienced bodily and emotionally as well as intellectually. "Truth happens."[9] The ritual of baptism should be an experience of celebration and inclusion. It is a party. The symbol, the ritual, although not seen as magically or mechanistically efficacious, is imbued with significance and emotion.

Emerging generations, steeped in postmodern culture, place high value on religious symbols of various kinds, seeing significance, sacredness, and power in them. They display a trend toward more liturgical and symbolic forms of worship. Symbols, rituals, icons, movements, smells, and other sensory experiences are all part of this experiential encounter with the transcendent.

Ancient forms of worship such as the labyrinth, lectio divina, and the use of icons and incense are being rediscovered by the younger generation.[10] Clothing, fashion, and bodily adornments including tattoos, body piercing, and jewelry have had a decidedly religious quality of late.[11] Young postmodern scholar Tom Beaudoin calls them *sacramentals* and explains that bodily adornment can be a source of religious meaning. He notes that youth are preoccupied with bodily rituals and symbols "partly because religious institutions today are unable to provide for deeply marking, profoundly experiential encounters."[12]

For something to be authentic spiritually, postmodern young people must experience it bodily and emotionally. Symbols, rituals, and sensory experiences are part of their encounter with the transcendent.

How does this valuing of symbols and sensual experiences relate to Mennonite understandings of baptism? Can baptism be a deeply marking, profoundly experiential encounter? Should it be? To move in this direction seems to challenge our tradition's rejection of the belief that the church's rites are sacramentally transformative. But in saying that baptism is a mere outward symbol of an inner reality, do we divide too sharply the symbol from its meaning? To deny any connection removes significance from the rite.

Baptism is an important experiential ritual. Michele Hershberger notes that rituals are "important because they are participatory. Youth know, on the one level, that the water used in baptism is just that—water. But unlike their modern counterparts, Postmoderns sense that, in the act of baptism, something does happen that is mysterious and scientifically unexplainable. And without needing to dissect or analyze this mystery, they long to experience it."[13]

Baptism should be a significant marking experience along the journey of discipleship. The baptism ritual ought to be "more than just a five-minute addendum to the sermon."[14] It should be a memorable and joyous occasion.

Baptism as part of a longer journey of discipleship. The baptismal event should be seen as a marker on a longer and sometimes difficult journey of faithfulness. Discipleship is a

lifelong pilgrimage. "We are not converted only once in our lives, but many times; and this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ."[15] The church must not communicate that the faith journey is somehow completed by baptism and church membership.[16]

In the modern corporate western world we wanted everything to be neatly packaged and prescribed, so we created separate packages for conversion and discipleship, with baptism in between. The chronological model (evangelize, convert, baptize, disciple) is a reflection of this modern predilection toward linear simplicity. But the separation between conversion and discipleship is artificial, and postmoderns will be suspicious of anything that seeks to define or package the spiritual and the mysterious. "In a postmodern world, the process of making disciples must be seen as more holistic, or at least less quantifiable and more organic."[17] Evangelism is not a call to a one-time decision of faith but an invitation into a community of journeyers who are daily letting Christ take them in new directions of faithfulness.[18] Baptism doesn't close a deal; it is a marker on the journey.

Evangelism is not a call to a one-time decision of faith but an invitation into a community of journeyers who are daily letting Christ take them in new directions of faithfulness. Baptism doesn't close a deal; it is a marker on the journey.

Christian formational experiences, whatever labels we give them, are not stand-alone events but part of a process of inward and outward change. Both the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists understood this reality and emphasized the importance of a change in behavior as well as change of belief and belonging.[19] In the early church, demanding formational activities before and after the ritual of baptism were vital parts of the transformational process. The early church doubtless performed its rituals with care, but leaders wrote relatively little about the value of experience.[20] They emphasized transformed living, as did the Anabaptists.[21] The danger in overemphasizing the moment-in-time celebratory experience of baptism is that we will have a church of baptized people who remain socially and ethically unchanged.

Conclusion

Baptism celebrates belonging in the Christian faith community, a community that is a visible alternative to the prevailing social order. Tony Campolo makes the case for *party* as a new word to describe the kingdom of God, *shalom*, and jubilee, biblical concepts which the average reader or listener may not understand.[22] If *party* is used as a metaphor, not only for the occasion of baptism, but for the infectious and ongoing life of the church, then it may well be an appropriate and inviting image for emerging generations in the postmodern era. "Let's have a party!" is then an invitation not only to a baptismal celebration but also to a continually transforming individual and congregational life.

Notes

[1] Anthony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).
[2] Paul E. Pierson, *Themes from Acts* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Bks., 1982), 39.
[3] This need to belong has been documented in many articles and books, including Kenda Creasy Dean, "The Sacrament of One Another: Fidelity through Holy Friendship," in *The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000): 15–32; Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998); Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Cultivating Authentic Community, Creating Holistic Connections* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2001), chap. 3; Dawson McAllister, *Saving the Millennial Generation: New Ways to Reach the Kids You Care about in These Uncertain Times* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), chap. 7; and L. David Overholt and James Penner, *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation: Strategies for Youth Workers* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2002), chap. 2.
[4] Chester Bennington and Mike Shinoda, "Somewhere I Belong," *Meteora*, Linkin Park (Warner Brothers, 2003).
[5] See Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener, Ont., and Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1981), chap. 5, 8; C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Pr., 1999), 25–6.
[6] The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches held a study conference in Winnipeg, Man., 22–24 May 2003. One of the main questions for discussion was whether baptism and church membership should be separated.
[7] Jon Isaak, "Baptism among the Early Christians," paper presented to Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Winnipeg, Man., 22–24 May 2003, 9; http://www.mbconf.ca/believe/studyconf/isaak.en.html.
[8] Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 22.
[9] Kenda Creasy Dean, "X-Files and Unknown Gods: The Search for Truth with Postmodern Adolescents," *American Baptist Quarterly* 19 (March 2000): 11.
[10] The plethora of youth and young adult ministry resources being published in this vein recently is evidence of this rediscovery. Some examples include Steven L. Case, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer: Contemplative and Celebratory Prayers and Worship*

Services for Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2002); Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2003); Jonny Baker and Steve Collins, *The Prayer Path: A Christ-Centered Labyrinth Experience* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, Inc., 2001); Amy Simpson, *Diving Deep: Experiencing Jesus through Spiritual Disciplines* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, Inc., 2001). See also James Martin, "Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions," *America* 188 (3 March 2003), 8–14; and Daniel M. Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership* 20 (Spring 1999): 38.

[11] Kevin Heinrichs, "Tattoos No Longer Taboo?" *Christianity Today* 43 (24 May 1999), 17; "Tattoos As Evangelical Chic," *Christian Century* 115 (23–30 December 1998), 1240–1; and Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spirituality of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Pubs., 1998), 75–80, 100–1.

[12] Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith,* 77–8.

[13] Michele Hershberger, "The Baptism Ritual in a Postmodern World," *Direction* 31 (Fall 2002): 143.

[14] Ibid., 145.

[15] Thomas Merton, quoted in Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping: Youth and the Experience of Faith* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Pr., 1987), 27.

[16] Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping,* 67.

[17] Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry,*155.

[18] Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping,* 27; and Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry,*133.

[19] Kreider, *Change of Conversion,* 21–2.

[20] Ibid., 103.

[21] In modern times this emphasis was articulated best in Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1944). An excellent recent publication is J. Nelson Kraybill's *On the Pilgrims' Way: Conversations on Christian Discipleship* (Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Pr., 1999).

[22] Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party,* 21.

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Studying the faith with Cuban church leaders

Titus Guenther

How does the Christian church pass on the faith to those born into the church and to newcomers? It is one thing to face this challenge when the church has an established tradition and the means to build and run schools to train leaders. It is quite another when churches are new and materially poor and face restrictions on their religious activities, as in Cuba. They are often forced to seek help from sister churches abroad in order to equip their leaders.

How does the Evangelical Missionary Church in Cuba pass on the faith? Above all, through dynamic testimony in word and life. But its pastors also seek tools that can help them interpret the Bible in a way that will unify the IEM's growing number of congregations.

While the Cuban churches may be poor and challenged in some areas, they are rich in others. Their vitality is not unlike that of the early church (cf. Acts 2:47b). The legally recognized Methodist church of Cuba, for example, in 2001 reported a great revival and doubling of its membership during the previous two years. Many North Atlantic churches, in contrast, are in decline or barely holding onto their numbers.

But vitality and growth are not limited to the twenty-four denominations of the Cuban Council of Churches which enjoy legal standing. A similar Christian dynamism is found in the Iglesia Evangélica Misionera (IEM or Evangelical Missionary Church) of Cuba, still without legal recognition in 2002. During a seminar with the pastors of this church, our five-person Mennonite Church Canada delegation witnessed their vitality.

Many adherents of the IEM left older churches, usually Baptist or Pentecostal, because they were not allowed adequate participation in congregational life, either as active lay people or as women leaders. Although initially a "non-incorporated" church, the IEM is now actively seeking legal standing, which in

Cuba is no simple matter. A church qualifies only if it has international church connections, its own confession of faith, and its own constitution and bylaws.

Our four-day workshop with eighteen IEM pastors was held January 8–11, 2002, in Havana. Many could only afford the trip from their homes in eastern Cuba thanks to the generosity of a fellow pastor with an old Toyota jeep. The group was mixed in terms of race, gender, and education; ages varied from single young adults to grandparents. Present from Winnipeg, Manitoba, were Robert J. (Jack) Suderman and I, who co-led the sessions, and Irene Suderman, Karen Loewen Guenther, and Arthur Driedger. The sessions focused on the Spanish translation of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*,[1] which Jack had given the pastors at a workshop in October 2000.

The IEM has a longer history in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, but began in Cuba only in 1997. The pastors are each responsible for one or more congregations, including new outposts. Their goal is astoundingly simple: they strive to double their church membership every year. They are almost on track: beginning with 88 members in 1997, the IEM at the time of our visit boasted 1,115 members, and its leaders projected it would reach 2,500 in 2002.[2]

Our sessions took place in a Catholic retreat center, rented for the occasion with assistance from Mennonite Church Canada. Simple but delicious meals were served at the center, and the pastors were housed there. We met in the living room of what had been a private home. We had no chalkboard or flipchart paper, and no overhead projector. Jack and I had prepared some printed handouts and brought some pens and notebooks to hand out.

The enthusiastic participation of those present at the study sessions more than made up for the scarcity of writing materials. We were not allowed to sing or conduct formal worship services, because the retreat center was not a designated place of worship, and the communist state restricts these activities to such places. This restriction proved to be a challenge; our daily opening devotionals had to be limited to Scripture reading, reflection, and prayer. During the breaks, the pastors could not always suppress the urge to make music with guitar and voice, and the owners of the center had to remind them to keep it down.

We started the workshop by showing the rootedness of the Christian confession in the life and ministry of Jesus and the early church. Asked what challenges they commonly encounter, the pastors mentioned that their congregations suffer from sectarianism; believers often do not live what they preach; many separate body and soul; many believe in a prosperity gospel; and congregations have problems with individualism, competition, and rivalry. The pastors asserted that the Bible offers them valuable tools to deal with these issues.

Together we examined the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* for doctrines that might speak to their concerns. The Cubans worked in small groups and reflected on whether various articles could provide guidance in dealing with their churches' challenges. We invited small groups to dramatize their interpretations of articles of the confession, such as the one on church discipline. This approach led to animated discussion and elicited good questions about the purpose and nature of church discipline in the light of the "rule of Christ" in Matthew 18.

When asked whether the convictions expressed in the confession are in agreement with their church's teaching and practice, the leaders said they did not have a formal confession. But they said they might adopt it for their church, if Mennonites did not mind.[3] Andrés Olivares, director of the group, noted that "this book has become the primary text for our pastors. It is profound, it is biblical, it helps us in our search to shape a biblical theology that has integrity."[4]

In one session we examined how Christian teaching is passed on through the church's music. The group analyzed the theological content of some of the popular choruses their congregations sing. Many are Scripture passages set to music, which provide biblical edification. Others seemed to contain questionable lyrics: "I have a dagger of gold" is an upbeat song that describes in vivid detail how the Christian does battle with Satan, brutally killing him and sending him to the grave. The song finishes exultantly, "This is one funeral I am not going to miss." One pastor noted that his congregation had removed all choruses that focus on the devil. The group talked about whether a chorus describing the Holy Spirit as a "white dove" might have racist overtones.[5]

We spent evenings viewing brief Spanish-language videos on Mennonite Central Committee's diverse programs around the world, the Restorative Justice Ministry in North America, SEMILLA's basic theology courses in Central America, the Indian-Mennonite Mission-Settlement Program in Paraguay, and the multifaceted work of the Methodist Church of Chile, including its public witness during the Pinochet years. The participants were delighted, because the films gave them a window on how churches in other parts of the world live, and how these groups face many of the issues the IEM faces in Cuba. We left several videos with them.

The informal times after classes and during meals were more than breaks. The Cuban leaders asked questions of clarification, shared stories of how they came to faith, how they came to perform faith healings, and how God had heard their prayers and provided for them and their families amid their material poverty.

As a side benefit, this workshop provided the pastors with the opportunity to learn to know each other better. They do not have the chance to get together often, because they have not had churchwide conferences and travel is costly. Most of them earn only about $10 (U.S.) a month—not enough to supplement the government food ration, much less to travel to conferences. Most of them cannot dream of acquiring a car, but instead hope to someday have a mountain bike (which in Cuba costs about $110 [U.S.]—eleven months' wages!). According to Eliseo Salomon, who is giving up his career as a medical doctor in order to be a pastor, bicycles would enable pastors to do evangelistic outreach over a greater area.

It was a joy to work with these committed church leaders, who could have so much to complain about, but instead show much joy and warm hospitality. Several pastors talked about pursuing theological training but would need financial assistance to do so. The leaders expressed interest in running workshops annually, in order to build lasting connections between the IEM and MC Canada.

After our visit to Cuba, Andrés Olivares sent this evaluation to Christian Witness Council: "This workshop has been key. As pastors, we feel edified, comforted, and capacitated. Thank you for the gift of your Confession of Faith, which we have studied

and [which] allows us to deepen our understanding of biblical truth. Please express our profound gratitude to your Council for this valuable work in our emerging church. We trust that these workshop experiences at this level can continue."[6]

How do churches like the IEM pass on the faith? Above all, through their dynamic testimony in word and life. But these pastors feel the need for additional tools that can help them interpret the Bible for their situation in a way that will unify their church's growing number of congregations. Clearly, a dialogical partnership could greatly benefit both their denomination and ours.

Notes

[1] Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1995.
[2] See "Canadian Church Strengthens Its Cuban Connections," *Canadian Mennonite* (11 February 2002), 14.
[3] During their subsequent visit with these pastors in 2003, Sudermans learned that IEM had in fact adopted the Mennonite confession as their own, with certain adaptations.
[4] "Canadian Church Strengthens Its Cuban Connections," 14.
[5] Ezekiel and Marta, black pastors, related with sadness questions they faced while in seminary in Cuba: "'Is it true,' Ezekiel was asked, 'that the black race is cursed by God, sent to Africa to suffer, and is outside the grace of God?' This, they said, is the formal position of the seminary Ezekiel is attending" (ibid.).
[6] Ibid. After we returned from Cuba, one university student, who had heard overwhelmingly positive reports about the workshops, was moved to write me a letter about how difficult it is to be a Christian student in a secular setting. She also admonished North American students to value the privilege of being able to study in a Christian university.

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Spiritual Exercises for strengthening faith

Ruth Boehm

The village of Gindiri, Nigeria, where I live, has two major political leaders, a local area chief and an overall chief. One is Muslim and the other is Christian. Tensions between Muslims and Christians are high at times. When asked recently what villagers can do to increase the peace, both chiefs responded that Muslim leaders need to teach their people to be good Muslims, and Christian leaders need to teach their people to be good Christians: if people are faithful to God, the violence will cease.

How do Christian leaders help people become better Christians? In sixteenth-century Spain, Ignatius of Loyola developed an aid for deepening faith, a series of meditations he called *Spiritual Exercises*. Still in use today, the exercises lead the believer through an intense period—originally thirty days—of prayer and reflection.[1] Retreatants begin with a time of preparation in which they learn a variety of methods of prayer, above all seeking to know how much the God who created them loves them. After this period of preparation, the exercises are divided into four weeks, each with a unique focus: sin and repentance, the call to follow Jesus, the call to suffer with Jesus, the resurrection. Each "week" may last a month or more, as participants experience the particular gift of God in that area before moving on to the next emphasis.

The Spiritual Exercises invite us to know God's deep love for us, to confess our sins, to hear the call to follow Jesus Christ, to undergo testing in adversity, and to walk freely in the joy of the resurrection.

Daily prayer time begins with a prayer for a gift, or grace, that is sought. In the period of preparation, for example, one prays: "I desire and choose only what helps me toward the end for which I am created." Scripture is central to each daily time of prayer, and one learns ways of praying with Scripture. One may use the same passage of Scripture for several days. The goal is not merely to

read the passage and understand it with one's mind, but to reflect on the passage until one experiences God speaking through it.

This process of meditation on Scripture and one's experience is intended for those who want to know God more deeply and hear anew the call to follow Christ. It can be used directly by individuals, indirectly by pastors for congregations, and as one of many tools for those preparing for church leadership roles. Because many people now are unable to set aside time for a month-long retreat, the exercises have been adapted so people with busy lives can follow the process over a period of months. Participants may meet weekly for half an hour with a spiritual director for accountability, encouragement, and instruction on aspects of prayer. Reporting addresses not so much the details of what happened each day in prayer, but how one is experiencing the gifts of grace. Spiritual directors aid directees in making connections between the "grace that is desired" and the experiences of their everyday lives.

I was first introduced to *The Spiritual Exercises* in the early 1990s through the Take and Receive Series.[2] I used the books for my personal prayer time. A few years later I spent ten months using the exercises and meeting weekly with a spiritual director. During this intense and rewarding time I experienced anew the call to ministry. The emphases and the methods of prayer changed the way I approach preaching and pastoral care. Still later, in 1999–2000, in St. Ignatius parish in Winnipeg, Manitoba, under the supervision of John English, I participated in a process of learning how to lead others through the exercises.[3] As I was learning to lead I reentered the process and again was profoundly moved in my encounters with Jesus Christ.

Why would twenty-first-century Christians use spiritual practices with roots in the sixteenth century? Why would Mennonites explore this approach to deepening faith that is rooted in Catholicism? Perhaps because like Anabaptism, which originated in northern Europe in the same century, the reform movement that began with St. Ignatius in southern Europe also sought to increase believers' faithfulness in following Jesus, to integrate faith and practice, belief with living.

I believe these spiritual exercises have relevance for Mennonites in three specific ways. First, they constitute a spiritual

formation process that is congruent with some core Mennonite beliefs. Second, they are valuable for individuals in their personal spiritual growth. Third, this process could begin to set a framework for a Mennonite spiritual formation process.

Congruence with Mennonite beliefs

Four emphases of *The Spiritual Exercises* are congruent with central Anabaptist/Mennonite themes: focus on Jesus, yieldedness to God, the call to discipleship, and the use of Scripture.

One of Menno Simons's favorite verses was 1 Corinthians 3:11: "For no one can lay any other foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." *The Spiritual Exercises* also highlight the life and ministry of Jesus. Ignatius sought to know Jesus, and to experience his call personally, as an adult. "Jesus was the way to God for Ignatius."[4] If one spends ten months using *The Spiritual Exercises*, six will be spent praying directly with Scripture texts from the life and ministry of Jesus.

The Anabaptists advocated *Gelassenheit*, a decision of the will to give up control to the Spirit of God. For them, yieldedness entailed a total commitment to Christ and to the body of Christ on earth; they believed that "spiritual 'yielding' should be made visible in a 'yielding' of possession of material things."[5] Yieldedness was also important to Ignatius, who held that "our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me."[6]

The text of the early Anabaptist hymn "Who now would follow Christ" (1564) captures the Anabaptists' stress on discipleship, the call to follow Christ even to death. In their view, discipleship involved following Christ even if one must forsake family. It was also expressed in sharing economic resources.[7] The second week of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* emphasizes the call to follow Jesus. The starting points for prayer are Gospel texts in which Jesus calls his disciples to follow him. Each person prays for this grace: "I ask Jesus our Lord that I might not be deaf to his call in my life and that I might be ready and willing to do what he wants."[8] One seeks to follow Jesus' call, unencumbered by desire for anything or anyone else.

The Reformation emphasized the importance of reading and understanding the Scriptures. The Anabaptists believed that

ordinary people who had received the Holy Spirit could interpret Scripture as reliably as did the learned doctors of the church.[9] Although the exercises as originally conceived by Ignatius included only minimal use of Scripture, modifications since Vatican II include carefully chosen Scripture passages as guides for prayer. As I have been taught the exercises, Scripture is central in all prayer times.

Some differences between Mennonite and Roman Catholic beliefs may need to be addressed in the process of doing of the exercises, including the role of Mary as an intercessor in prayer, the role of the saints, the importance of penance, and the use of body position in prayer. Areas in which Mennonites could add to the Ignatian model are in using music in prayer, and in seeking the active leading of the Holy Spirit.

A valuable tool for individual spiritual growth

The Spiritual Exercises are an excellent tool for prayer and spiritual growth. Who should be encouraged to use them? The process is for those who want their faith to grow. It involves commitment of time, willingness to be open to God, readiness to risk and to try new ways of praying. Candidates should know what the exercises are about and be prepared to work spiritually and emotionally. Those who are experiencing trauma or depression may not have the stamina to participate fully; director and participant need to exercise good judgment about the right time to do the exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius could be offered to seminary students as part of their discernment about ministry. The weeks of preparation focus on the love of God, and the knowledge and acceptance of the self as a creature created by God. Knowing God loves you unconditionally is imperative as a starting point for ministry. The first week, on sin, provides opportunity for being accountable for sinfulness, and for healing and reconciliation. The second week is praying with the life and ministry of Jesus and making a decision about how to follow him. The third and fourth weeks test and confirm the call to ministry. This process could be helpful for students preparing for ministry or regrouping in the midst of ministry.

Although individuals do the exercises, the process is not experienced in isolation. The spiritual director is an important

link to the broader faith community. The call to follow Jesus is lived out in the context of a community.

Church leaders familiar with the exercises could apply the principles of the process in working with a congregation. For example, in the prayers of the church, pastors could articulate ways their congregations desire to grow in faith. Often we offer praise, confess sins, and ask for what we need. Less frequently do prayers ask for spiritual growth. Reflecting on how God has helped us grow more into the likeness of Christ or in our desire to follow him can help members consider their growth as individuals and as a group.

A Mennonite spiritual formation process?

Whenever we set out to write a new catechism or baptismal preparation manual we need to consider our goals. What are we trying to grow? Christians? What does a mature Mennonite Christian act like? What is a church leader trying to accomplish when given the task of helping form "good Christians"? What are the tools and guidelines to be used in the process? Is agreement with all the contents of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* the mark of a mature Christian?

As a church, we have given attention to faith formation in home, church, church school, small groups, and through service. We know that individuals and households are to take responsibility to study the Bible, pray, care for their bodies and the earth. What is our Mennonite understanding of youth and adult faith formation in the congregation? How do we continue to help each other nurture our faith? Can we identify signposts along the way that will aid us as brothers and sisters and as church leaders in guiding people in their spiritual growth?

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are potentially a valuable tool for use by individuals and congregations as we seek to deepen our faith. What could we glean from this process and use in the Mennonite church? Might these exercises help us articulate a Mennonite process of spiritual formation? They include some practical skills in prayer and use of Scripture, accountability, and connection to the broader community. They invite us to know God's deep love for us, to confess our sins, to hear the call to follow Jesus Christ, to undergo testing in adversity, and to walk

freely in the joy of the resurrection. As Christian leaders in the global church, let us use these tools as we respond to the challenge to teach our people to be more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. May God help us.

Notes

[1] David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2000), 8–29, offers insights into the world view and social structure of St. Ignatius's time, as well as information about the images he used.
[2] Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and Marie Schwan's Take and Receive Series, published by St. Mary's Press of Winona, Minn., includes these books: *Love, Forgiveness, Birth, Surrender,* and *Freedom.* It uses modern language and transforms a thirty-day exercise into a thirty-week program.
[3] See John J. English, *Spiritual Freedom—From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Pr., 1995).
[4] Lonsdale, *Eyes to See,* 35.
[5] C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Pr., 1999), 40.
[6] David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 27. According to the Principle and Foundation with which Ignatius begins the first week of the exercises, "For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest, desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for the use to the end for which we are created."
[7] The Hutterites have had a common purse for centuries, and Augsburg Anabaptists were punished for their mutual aid; see "Anabaptist Women Leaders in Augsburg," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers,* ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Pr., 1996), 82–105.
[8] Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship,* 83.
[9] Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed,* 12–13.

About the author

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Book review

Ann Weber Becker

God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life, by Michele Hershberger. Scottdale, Pa.: Faith & Life Resources, 2003.

Wherever you find yourself on your own journey, as a seasoned leader or a new disciple, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life,* by Michele Hershberger, will be a welcome resource to take along. Intended as a resource for those considering baptism in a Mennonite church, *God's Story, Our Story* is a masterful introduction to Christian faith and life, poised to serve catechetical experiences and other settings of faith development.

A narrative approach guides both the content and the development of this book. Its nine chapters trace the most compelling themes in our understanding of the story of God's relationship with the world from an Anabaptist perspective. Salvation, sin, judgment, grace, discipleship, and justice are all here, but not as disembodied abstractions. Each concept grows out of the story of real people and real events, beginning "in the beginning," wandering with the Israelites, embracing the impact of Jesus, and percolating through the early church era. As the story presses on through the centuries, it focuses on the plot line leading to Anabaptist beginnings, and stretches forward to the present and beyond.

The development of the book was also guided by a narrative approach. As God's story is recited, the stories of Michele and six other disciples are woven into the fabric of the narrative. These people met often during the writing of the book, and their contributions shaped the telling of the story. While I quibble with the publishers' claim that this kind of collaborative approach is unique to this book, I am delighted to see the collaboration documented in a fresh way. The voices of Mike, Rosella, Josh, Luke, Tara, and Mary (ranging in age from thirteen to eighty-

three) are quoted in sidebar sections throughout. Their insights, questions, and affirmations add vigour and contemporary relevance to the old, old story.

Strengths and affirmations

A fine example of the wisdom of a narrative approach may be found in the chapter that explores the coming of the Holy Spirit and the "new creation" experienced by the post-resurrection faith community. After unpacking what she means by *salvation*, the author turns to the biblical stories of Paul, Nathaniel, and Peter. She deals respectfully with Paul's dramatic Damascus road experience, Nathaniel's thoughtful decision, and Peter's inconsistencies. Then Luke Hartman steps in to relate the story of his public commitment. While in hindsight he wishes some things had been different, he understands the experience as a beginning: eventually, he tells us, "my faith came along and I got real with God" (99). This example illustrates the response group's willingness to disclose their own journeys. The result is an effective—sometimes riveting—juxtaposition of enduring biblical narrative and fresh contemporary story.

Any honest grappling with vibrant faith stories will inevitably mean confronting paradox. Instead of ignoring paradox, *God's Story, Our Story* embraces it. Readers are guided through seemingly contradictory statements such as "God is a mystery . . . yet we know God through Jesus," and "God is all-powerful and yet gives people free choice" (19). Instead of offering unsatisfying explanations for why the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 differ, the author acknowledges and celebrates this diversity: "One image of God, one creation story, can't contain all there is. God is both close-up and personal, far off and beyond knowing" (18).

Any honest grappling with vibrant faith stories will inevitably mean confronting paradox. Instead of ignoring paradox, *God's Story, Our Story* embraces it.

The notion that Christian faith and growth are necessarily entwined is another helpful assumption. One of the final chapters offers an overview of spiritual disciplines that nourish Christian life: prayer, Bible study, community worship, service, simplicity, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, confession, and

forgiveness. A "growth paradigm" is embedded in the book through the range of ages of those who shaped it. Three of the six members of the response group are teenagers, one is in his twenties, another in his thirties, and the sixth in her eighties. Eighty-three-year-old Rosella encourages a younger friend by saying, "I'm an old woman and I'm still in the wilderness sometimes" (46).

As this intergenerational group met week after week, they must have known serious moments together as well as lighthearted ones; the book documents both. The humour that spills over into the text lends a refreshing spirit without trivialising the content. Truth often sparkles through humor, as when Tara's comment leads into chapter three: "Okay, we're at the Promised Land. Can we go home now?" (45).

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of this resource is the way it distills complex themes into simple nuggets. The three chapters dealing with the Old Testament are especially notable in this regard. Making sense of material spanning more than a thousand years is a daunting task for a new student of the Bible, however motivated. Touching on themes such as how God deals with the problem of sin, how judgment and grace are related, and what *shalom* means for responding to armed conflict and economics, the author shows how the "wilderness people" learned to love and follow God. In her preface, Hershberger expresses appreciation for colleague and mentor Marion Bontrager; *God's Story, Our Story* undoubtedly draws on wisdom gleaned from his biblical literature class at Hesston College.

Issues for leaders to consider

While making complex themes intelligible is a laudable undertaking, one runs the risk of oversimplifying. Hershberger claims that Jesus' combining of omnipotence and obedient love (even to the point of death) is unique to Christian faith; I suspect that bright young people will be amused to see this claim to uniqueness, however valid, supported solely by a reference from Christian Scripture. More distressing to me is a jab at the science classroom made early in the book, in a discussion of differing views of creation. Beliefs and theories about the world's origins vary, but proponents of differing views do not divide neatly into

camps: theologians vs. scientists. I witness my sons' probing insights into scientific disciplines and faith, and I am grateful to see that at present they experience no difficulty in holding the two together. I do not want the church to give them the impression that they need to make a choice.

Isolating the above examples magnifies them unfairly, but they illustrate a larger concern. Leaders who use a resource that excels in simplifying big ideas will need insight to interpret and add nuance to the distillation. Indeed, leaders will do well to remember that printed materials, however excellent, are only resources to guide and assist them. Other factors may also significantly shape the experience of catechism, including time and place of meeting, the format of your time together, your own restedness, and the spiritual support of others for these meetings.

Leaders who use a resource that excels in simplifying big ideas will need insight to interpret and add nuance to the distillation.

Catechetical musings

In recent years, educators have welcomed a fresh approach to understanding how we learn. The work of Howard Gardner and others has identified at least eight distinct ways that we know what we know.[1] These "intelligences" coalesce into unique combinations for each of us, and affect how we acquire knowledge. Verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical are the two intelligences usually favoured in formal education. Most faith exploration settings also seem to favour these, as well as intrapersonal intelligence, an awareness of the inner self and spiritual realities. Significantly, *God's Story, Our Story* models the exploration of interpersonal intelligence by documenting the interaction of the group that worked with Michele.

But this approach accounts for only half of Gardner's intelligences. What about visual-spatial (graphic representation, finding your way in space), kinesthetic-tactile (mind-body connection, coordination), musical-rhythmic (sensitivity to sounds, structure of music/rhythm), and the naturalist intelligences (communing with nature, growing things)? Does Christian faith touch our minds and souls at all these locations? If so, why not structure our catechetical gateways in ways that are

mindful of the full, glorious spectrum of experience? Do we rely on "getting the thinking right" out of habit, or do we have compelling reasons to focus on this way of knowing?

What is the next step in the journey for catechetical resources committed to walking alongside young people in a postmodern context? Are left-brain intellectual abstractions of faith that get the thinking right essential to embracing Christian faith? Or will other emphases also be valued highly? Will leaders and disciples be drawn deeper into the mysteries of paradox, the diversity of multicultural perspectives, and the imprecision of symbolic expression of truth?

Summing up

I finish where I began, with a wholehearted recommendation of *God's Story, Our Story* to any who seek guidance in leading others in the exploration of Christian faith. Its usefulness includes but is not limited to formal catechism classes.

New parents will find this book valuable for their own nurture as they rise to the challenge of articulating the Christian story in a simple, coherent way with their children. (But please, don't read it aloud with young children; other resources are better for that.) Why not include a copy in the Faith Chest for new parents, if your congregation has such a tradition? Indeed, any disciple who has not had opportunity to take a biblical literature course, and any who would appreciate a refresher course, will be well served by reading through *God's Story, Our Story*.

> *Tara:* *Well? Is this it?*
> *Mary:* *We went through the Story, so now what?*
> *Luke:* *The Story is still going on in our lives. . . .* (154)

Sometimes simple truths are the most profound.

Notes

[1] *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Bks., 1983).

About the reviewer

Ann Weber Becker is ordained in the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada, and is a teacher and freelance writer/musician. She is author of *Faith for the Journey: Youth Explore the Confession of Faith* (Newton, Kan.: Faith & Life Pr., 1997), and executive producer of the *Songs to Live By* recordings (Newton, Kan.: Faith & Life Pr., 1999, 2000).

Book review

Gayle Gerber Koontz

The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief, by A. James Reimer. Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2003.

Faith is more like the dynamics of playing Scrabble than like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, James Reimer proposes in a brief new book for adults in the church. While structure, luck, skill, and intelligence are involved in both games, in Scrabble a new design emerges with every playing, and players are dependent on each other's moves while remaining independent and free.

The Scrabble metaphor illumines Reimer's description of biblical interpretation and theological reflection as the "eternal word becoming flesh and flesh becoming word," an ongoing process of a "divine weaving together of many truths and ways of speaking" which will be finished only at the end of time (8). And the metaphor guides his succinct, lively exploration of traditional Christian beliefs throughout the book.

It takes enormous discipline for a theologian aware of the complexities surrounding major issues in Christian faith to write only three pages on each. Reimer has done so with care and theological excellence.

The Dogmatic Imagination, clearly written and quickly read, attempts to bring basic Christian doctrines back to life for educated adults in the church. Short chapters deal with the role of Scripture, personal experience, and the Holy Spirit in Christian thought; with the language of God as father; with Jesus, creation, the fall, God's providence, salvation, baptism, prayer, Jesus' love ethic, sexuality, God's judgment, and life everlasting. While this list may seem like a catechism for new believers, the book is directed toward Mennonites who have been members of the church for some time. However, the book may have value for initiating intellectually-oriented seekers and could also be useful to those returning to the church after absenting themselves for a while.

I first read *The Dogmatic Imagination* while in Guatemala, a setting that accented the Canadian, middle-class character of Reimer's writing. Many Canadian and U.S. Mennonites will connect with a theological work sprinkled with illustrations from North Atlantic politics, philosophy, arts, and life. But the fact that the book appeals to such readers may mean that it is not suitable for Christians from quite different cultural or economic settings.

While a strength of Reimer's book is his ability to draw striking links between his cultural context and Christian theology, he is perhaps not always adequately critical of his own cultural biases. For example, as irritating as Reimer may find "Jesus wejus" phrases, "(as in 'Jesus we jus[t] ask you to . . . ')," this style of prayer is not always connected with a "gimme gimme" theology as Reimer implies when he describes it as "a kind of groveling plea for one more thing from a busy deity" (61). Blanket criticism of a style of piety reflects and reinforces social prejudice in the church, rather than assisting us with appropriate theological discrimination.

The topics Reimer explores are critical ones for thoughtful Christians in North America. It takes enormous discipline for a theologian aware of the complexities surrounding major issues in Christian faith to write only three pages on each. Reimer has done so engagingly and pointedly, with care and theological excellence.

I would like to see some chapters strengthened. For example, in the sexuality chapter it would be helpful to distinguish *sexuality*, *sex*, and *sexual intercourse*, and to include more positive biblical attitudes toward sexuality. But in this work as a whole, Reimer has surely offered the church a gift to enrich theological conversation in a variety of congregational settings.

In his chapter on Jesus, Reimer uses the image of a symphony orchestra. He likens God to a conductor, concertmaster, and composer of a set score, and we are instrumentalists. But this image undermines the Scrabble metaphor with which Reimer began. Perhaps we should compare theological reflection to a jazz or bluegrass session instead. Perhaps God is more like a dynamic melody which we receive and recognize and upon which we improvise, as does Reimer, in this book, to the glory of God.

About the reviewer

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Book review

Arthur Paul Boers

Reading Is Believing: The Christian Faith through Literature and Film, by David S. Cunningham. Grand Rapids: Brazos Pr., 2002.

When my father—who was not a Mennonite—died, many Mennonite ministers came to his funeral to support me, a Mennonite pastor. Afterward several remarked appreciatively on the congregation's recitation from memory of the Apostles' Creed. With the grave open and ready to receive my father's coffin, I found it moving to confess with others gathered there that we believe in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." The confession was the more meaningful because in the church in which I grew up we so often repeated this brief summary of our faith, and because we knew that it had come down to us through the millennia from ancient believers.

The Apostles' Creed, being short, has *short*comings! But brevity is also a gift: the creed is accessible and easy to memorize, while evoking a narrative that goes from God's creation to Christ's future return. The church calendar expands the creed; following the church year ensures that vital aspects and truths of our faith story are revisited at least annually. How much richer and more nourishing this pattern is than devoting Sunday morning services to themes such as gifts, mutual aid, church history, or stewardship.

What a joy that David S. Cunningham, professor of theology and ethics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, has written a winsome book, *Reading Is Believing,* on the Apostles' Creed. He introduces the creed with notes on its origins and its primary purposes: it summarizes essential narratives of our faith; it is a resource for study and conversation; and it establishes a goal that encourages us as we try to live into those narratives in our worship and life. Originally used in catechism and baptism, the creed's phrases were transposed to address questions to candidates.

Cunningham divides the book into chapters that pair a phrase of the creed with a work of fiction or a film that highlights an aspect of that particular profession. We are treated to brilliant reflections on Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, David James Duncan's *The Brothers K*, William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*, and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Cunningham defends this approach articulately, and his juxtapositions of creedal statements and literary works effectively deepen our appreciation of both.

Working through the creed phrase by phrase is a good discipline. Along the way, we reflect deeply on the Trinity, eternal life, suffering, the communion of saints, eschatology, and the resurrection of the body, among others. Cunningham is not shy about naming the creed's confessions that are problematic these days, "the most remote from our ordinary experience of the contemporary world." He also shows how the creed is explicitly countercultural. And he deals with questions and criticisms Anabaptists raise: Why, for example, does the creed say so little about Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings?

The book is not perfect. Sometimes Cunningham does not focus on the part of the creed I would most like to explore: for example, he reflects on God as almighty but says little about God as creator. That said, *Reading Is Believing* would be excellent for study with a committed Sunday school class or book group. Reading the novels and short stories and seeing the films would make the study even more memorable and fun.

I appreciated Cunningham's conclusion that the creeds are not so much laundry lists of statements about the Christian faith; "In fact, they are really much more like *prayers*. When we say them, we are not merely announcing what we think or describing the state in which we find ourselves; we are also asking God for help and guidance in living into the faith that the creeds attempt to articulate" (235).

About the reviewer

Arthur Paul Boers teaches pastoral theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and is author of several books, including *The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Pr., 2003).