

What Can Be Done to Make Our Children Active Church Members?

By Joel C. Gerlach

Introduction: Why this topic?

Recently I had an extended conversation with one of our pastors whose congregation had just resolved to call a youth minister. We were discussing the job description that the congregation had prepared to include with the call. The pastor told me that part of the rationale behind the congregation's decision to call a youth minister was the fact that a survey had revealed the startling statistic that in that congregation, 70% of the confirmands become inactive by the time they reach their 18th birthday.

That certainly is cause for Christian concern, especially since that congregation's experience is not an isolated one. In an attempt to compare its experience with that of others, the congregation learned that the percentage of inactive young people in several sister congregations was similar to its own, varying between 60 and 70%.

Probably most if not all of our congregations have cause for similar concern. The percentage may not be as high in your church, but whatever it is, it is too high. A 1% loss was reason enough for Jesus to grieve and to leave "the ninety and nine" to seek "that which is gone astray." (Mt 18:12) The Agenda Committee for this conference has requested this paper on the strength of the conviction that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So they have posed the question: What can be done to make our children active church members? My first thoughts about that theme suggested that this ought to be a purely practical paper, with one part advising you to do this, another part urging you to do that—in other words, a how-to approach in five easy lessons. Further reflection, however, convinced me that such an approach would not really be practical. We would end up dealing with symptoms rather than causes, and that would not really contribute anything to a solution to the problem that concerns us.

No single, simple cause of the problem of inactivity exists. Rather the causes are manifold and complex. The continuing secularization of our society is certainly one important factor. But that is nothing new. God's people have always lived and served their Lord in secularistic, materialistic societies hostile to their faith. I am convinced that one of the chief causes can be found within our educational system, either in a failure to understand clearly the Scriptural objective of Christian teaching together with the proper goals, or in a failure to understand and apply the implications of the objective and the goals. So we propose to answer our theme question by stating and defining the Scriptural objective and the Scriptural goals of Christian teaching. Then we will add some practical suggestions about how we can help our children to be more active members of Christ's church.

Before we proceed any farther, we ought to define what we mean by an active church member so that is not taken for granted. We think of an active church member, not so much in terms of a person who is actively involved in church organizations and activities, but rather in terms of one who lives in the constant awareness that as a new man in Christ, he is Christ's man to the world. An active member is one who is an open channel or conduit of the Savior's love to the world. He is more a part of a vital organism than of a thriving organization.

I. The Scriptural *Objective* of Christian Teaching

The mission of Christ's church is a teaching mission. In the familiar words of the great commission, our Lord authorized His disciples to "make disciples" of all nations. The discipling of the nations in turn involves two activities, one an action to *bring* men to faith in the Savior, —"baptizing them," the other an action intended to enable God's people to *live* the life of faith, i.e. to be active church members —"teaching them to observe all things."

We teach for the purpose of making disciples who endeavor to keep everything Jesus has commanded. Jesus' choice of words is significant. We teach others not merely to know, but to keep, that is, to watch carefully, or to observe all that he has taught us.

Time limitations do not allow us at this point to make a study of the words used in Scripture for teaching, learning, and knowing. Such a study however makes it obvious that teaching as our Lord conceives of it is not merely a matter of processing Bible facts from one mind to another. Cognition is not the whole or even the primary objective of Christian teaching. It is equally clear that the words for knowing do not imply merely an activity of the intellect and nothing more. When for example Moses says "Adam knew his wife," he is speaking about an experiential knowing. The Greek terms in the N.T. suggest a similar kind of knowing. The word for knowing a person (οἶδα, Mk 1:34; Jn 1:26; Ac 3:16) may also mean to be intimately acquainted (Mt 26:72; Mk 14:71; 2 Co 5:16) or even to be able (Mt 7:11; 1 Ti 3:5).

The disciples of Jesus also came to know their teacher experientially. That was the objective Jesus had in mind when he chose the twelve, "that they might *be with him*," Mark says (3:14). What a seemingly insignificant remark, but what a profound insight it gives us. Jesus' purpose was not to enable them to know what he knew, but to enable them to become like him. "The disciple is not above his master; but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master" Lk 6:40. The NASB makes the point of Jesus' words even more clear. "A pupil, . . . after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher." Reflect on those words for a moment in connection with our theme.

Those words help us understand exactly what Jesus had in mind as his objective. As their teacher he spent three years in close and intimate association with the twelve in order to transform them from what they were into what he was. He was their model, their pattern. "I have given you an example that ye should follow in MY steps," He told them after he had washed their feet. Jesus called his disciples to be *with him* because they needed to see the concepts he taught them in action in his own life. What they *saw* was no less important than what they *heard* because what they *did* was no less important than what they *knew*.

Jesus came, he said, that men might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. Those words suggest the proper focus of Christian education, —life, abundant life. Christian teachers teach to make disciples. That is just another way of saying that they teach to transform. They teach to promote likeness to Christ. They teach in order to model the divine Model for their pupils. They teach so that their pupils might experience more and more completely the abundant life Jesus came to share with them.

Christian pupils then are persons in whom through regeneration new capacities and possibilities have been created which are to be nurtured until they are experienced as Christ-like realities. That is our objective. Disciple, transformation, association, likeness, —those are the key words when defining the objective of Christian teaching. The teacher is as much a model as an information processor. The learner is more an imitator than a sponge.

II. The Scriptural Goals of Christian Teaching

To accomplish any task successfully, not only must we be absolutely clear about our objective, we must be equally clear in our thinking about goals. Goals are the steps we take in the direction of the attainment of our ultimate objective. To disciple people is a process. It involves people whose lives are undergoing a constant transformation as they grow in likeness to their Lord. Thus teachers are change agents. We are as much interested in what our students do as we are in what they know. Obviously then we must teach both for cognitive as well as affective outcomes. These are the twin goals of Christian teaching. These goals are as Scripturally determined, as they are psychologically sound.

We have explored this truth in the light of Scripture in some detail in previous teacher's conference papers as well as in the columns of the *Lutheran Educator*. So we will not repeat the exposition of it here. Let me just remind you that the Word of God as he inspired it and revealed it to the world is adapted uniquely and appropriately to the human mind as God created it. God addresses himself in the Word to the intellect; he

moves our emotions; and he bends the will. He gets us to say, “I will run the way of thy commandments,” by “enlarging our hearts,” (Ps 119:32). He enlarges our hearts by making facts known to us about his Son and our salvation (that’s cognitive), and by embracing us with his love so that we love and serve him in response (that’s affective). He does this through those who speak and act on his behalf, —through teachers like ourselves.

In terms of teaching outcomes then, the goals of Christian teaching are twofold, cognitive and affective. It hardly needs saying that our work in the classroom is done for a cognitive outcome. We *are* there to process information, to help students *know* in the narrow sense, to transmit facts from books or from our heads to the mind of the learner. Content, particularly Biblical content, is important. Intellectual activity must characterize all Christian teaching. There is no new life a part from knowing God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, as our Lord unequivocally states. We are committed as Lutheran Christians to a belief system with its creeds and confessions drawn from the Word of God. That necessitates teaching for cognitive outcomes. Jesus did that; so did the prophets and the apostles; so must we. We cannot train disciples to make disciples without enabling them to communicate Bible truths verbally to others.

The story of Pentecost reminds us of that fact. The chief work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus reminds us, is to testify of Jesus by promoting knowledge of the person and work of the Savior. Peter’s Pentecost sermon does exactly that. He reviewed the facts of the Savior’s life, death and resurrection. He pointed up God’s purpose in what had happened. He presented the testimony of David in support of his claims. He taught for a cognitive outcome.

But the outcome that day was more than cognitive. People who heard Peter were “pricked in their heart,” (that’s affective), “and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” That’s affective too. Both emotion and will were affected by the facts Peter presented so persuasively. The sermon ought not to be divorced from the remarkable context in which it was presented. That incident provides a pattern for all Christian preaching and teaching. The Scriptural objective demands the twin goals of cognitive and affective outcomes.

Teaching for an affective outcome is teaching which aims beyond the intellect at the emotion so that the two acting together influence the Christian’s will. It is teaching which moves God’s people to want to grow and helps them to know how in specific ways. It is teaching which helps them to translate faith into life, teaching which stimulates the process of transformation into the likeness of Jesus. It is teaching that is never satisfied merely with programming facts into computer like minds so that the possessors of such minds qualify as orthodox Christians.

Peter’s Pentecost sermon is but one example of that kind of teaching. The epistles of Paul offer another example. The doctrinal/practical format that characterizes them, Romans and Galatians for example suggests that Paul was keenly aware of the importance of teaching for both cognitive and affective outcomes. The apostle James too expresses a genuine concern about Christians who apparently are not affected by what they know. He would certainly agree that all Christian teaching should be done with an affective outcome in mind.

The cognitive and affective goals of Christian teaching are both incorporated by Paul into a familiar exhortation he addressed to young Timothy, words we regularly hear at an installation service. In the familiar words of the KJV, the exhortation reads, “Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine.” The NIV translates, “Watch your life and doctrine closely.” Doctrine or truth and the exemplification of truth always go hand in hand. Living the truth and telling the truth are twin goals for a Christian teacher. We tell it for a cognitive purpose, we live it for an affective purpose. That’s why Paul encourages Timothy to “set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” Paul had done just that for Timothy. He reminded Timothy, “You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings.” Timothy was to be as open to others as Paul was to Timothy in order to make apparent the harmony between life and doctrine. Christian teachers express visibly with their lives the reality of the concepts expressed in the Word. It is not enough to help people know what the teacher knows. Christian teaching must help learners become what their teacher is. That is teaching for cognitive and affective goals.

Do you see anything unusual in Paul's exhortation to Timothy to "watch your life and doctrine closely?" We would almost expect him to say it the other way around, "Watch your doctrine and life closely." Perhaps that is Paul's way of reminding us that a life which does not reinforce what we teach is self-defeating. James makes that clear too in his exposition of the relationship between faith and works. Faith without works is not saving faith, and works without faith are not Christian works. They are not expressive of thankful love, nor are they reflective of the indwelling Christ.

So the teacher who sees himself merely or ever primarily as a transmitter who programs and processes Bible information as truth, will cripple the learners he is endeavoring to teach. And if by the time they reach their 18th birthday, they have become inactive in the church, the teacher who asks why might do well to ask if part of the reason is to be found in the fact that his emphasis on a cognitive goal overshadowed and obscured a corresponding and necessary emphasis on an affective goal.

What can be done to make our children active church members? We can reexamine our teaching to determine whether or not we are consciously teaching for an affective outcome.

I would like to offer the generalization at this point that in our system we tend to overstress cognitive outcomes at the expense of affective ones. This overstress is consistent with a tendency to teach justification at the expense of sanctification. Simplistically, we sometimes assume that if we take care of teaching justification, the Holy Spirit will take care of producing sanctification. Symptoms of this overstress are both numerous and obvious, and if necessary we can offer examples in the discussion of this paper.

There are both historical and pedagogical reasons for the particular approach that characterizes our teaching. I have proposed a number of historical reasons in a previous teacher's conference paper. I intend to limit myself now to one pedagogical reason, one that is adapted from *A Theology of Christian Education*, by Lawrence Richards (Zondervan, 1975, Chapter 6, p 60ff).

According to Richards, "We have not maintained a balanced, whole-person focus in our educational ministries. We have not designed our educational ministry to link in a holistic way all that Christian faith means to the learner." That calls for an explanation.

When we think of personality, we surely include more in the term than just a person's beliefs. Attitudes, emotions, the way a person understands and relates to other people, his behavior, his values, his conception of himself, —all are part of his personality. The point of significance for us is the fact that in our culture we have picked out one element and have attached special priority to it, namely symptoms of belief. Our educational emphases seem to derive from the notion that if we change belief, we change the entire personality. We also appear to operate with the notion that all that is required to change belief is new information. That idea is, of course, at the heart of Plato's ethics. "If a man knows the good, he will unfailingly choose the good."

Recent research by behavioral scientists in the area of learning theory discredits the age-old theory that connects doing with knowing, and attitude with belief. Current theory holds that *use* of a concept is more significant in the development of an attitude than a formally learned idea. In other words, "when an idea about an object has been informally learned through situations in which the concept has been applied, that idea has a more direct impact on attitude." (Richards, p 61). That's another way of expressing the old idea that truth is caught rather than taught. The new theory also links the various dimensions of personality, viz. beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Visualize if you will those three parts of personality at the points of a triangle (see transparency), beliefs at the top, attitudes and behaviors at the other two points. Normally the three are in a balanced relationship with each other. Learning theory says that when a change occurs in the equilibrium of the system, learning takes place. Therefore, cause a change to occur and growth or learning is produced.

Richards says "our educational or change strategy relies on intervention at one point in the system," in the cognitive. He continues, "But the assumption that attack on a single system element will produce desired change is *not* reasonable nor certain. There are too many intervening variables. There are too many ways to modify the impact of isolated changes.

“For instance,” Richards says, “let’s suppose we are trying to touch the whole person through his beliefs. It would seem because the systems are linked, that we would change the whole person by changing his beliefs (see transparency). But this is not necessarily so. There are a number of ways the person can handle new information to isolate it from the system.” We all know Christians whose Sunday confession apparently does not affect Monday’s conduct, or Christians who resist change because they tell themselves their faith isn’t strong enough yet to try the challenge of something new, be it increased giving, witnessing or whatever. Or to put it in terms of our theme, we all know young Christians who become inactive and drop out.

According to Richards, “Intervention at a single point is more likely to lead to isolation of taught beliefs (head knowledge) from the operating beliefs (heart knowledge) which actually function with other system elements in daily life. “ (parentheses mine)

The solution is to change one’s strategy from intervention at one point in the system to intervention at all points in the system at the same time. To the extent that we fail to do so, to that extent we will continue to content ourselves with teaching primarily for cognitive outcomes—and reap the consequences. We may invent all kinds of activist programs to make our children active church members, but unless we give serious consideration to an effective change strategy consistent with the Scriptures, the programs we employ are not likely to produce a solution to the problem of inactive church members.

III. Practical Considerations

Now that we have endeavored to isolate, identify, and analyze one underlying cause of the inactivity problem, it is time to consider the theme question from a practical side, recalling the point Richards makes about intervention. We might ask, how does one intervene at all points of the system at the same time? Let me offer you a summary of his answer to that question, and then I will add some practical considerations of my own.

According to Richards,

The twin concepts of “being with” (recall what we said about Jesus and his disciples) and modeling are of vital significance to Christian education. We must be ready to abandon our dependence on precedents established in a secular educational system which is not concerned with *likeness* but with information, and to design a unique educational process rooted in Scripture’s concern for the nurture of life. In that new design the roles of teacher and of learner must be harmonized with need for a model, who through shared learning experiences can “make disciples.”

Biblical concepts. . . will be perceived by growing children as those concepts exist in his social environment. If Bible truths are treated by us as beliefs to be accepted intellectually but without affective or conative (decisional) meaning, then the child will tend to perceive and integrate these concepts into his growing personality in the same way. No wonder the Bible insists, These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise,’ (Dt 6:6,7 RSV). Scripture must be communicated as a lived and livable reality. Its truths must be communicated by those who have integrated them into their personalities and who, in the shared experiences of life, talk the Word and words of God with their children. The critical location for Bible teaching is not the classroom but rather the household; the walk the sitting together on the porch, the snuggling into the warmth of bed, the joy of rising to a new day. It is in life itself, where Bible truths are to have meaning for us as whole persons, that their communication must center.

And this kind of learning is rooted, not in ‘education,’ but in the socialization process. (i.e. a child learns God’s truth in much the same way he learns to talk etc.)

This then is the major problem with even ‘good’ classroom Christian education. If that is all we have, we are going to be communicating truths in such a way that their import must be distorted. If that is all we have, we are in our method of teaching going to shout to children that the Bible is an academic book; that the theological and moral truths it communicates are unreal as far as living is concerned. My concern for Christian education is that we will continue in our approach to teaching to isolate what is to be lived truth from, life, and thus fail to communicate it in that context of shared experiences in which its whole person meaning can be seen and shared by a model in whom God himself does live.

Does this mean there is no place for a classroom teaching of the Bible to children? Not necessarily. But it does mean that the role we give the classroom must (1) be clearly understood to be a part, not the whole, of what we are doing in children’s ministry; (2) to be integrated with the whole so that it supports and is supported by what is happening elsewhere; and (3) be designed so that teacher and learner roles, the way concepts are communicated, etc., actually do fit in our total approach, and contribute to the socialization process. (Richards, pp 193,194).

So much for Richards. Before we conclude, there are three practical points which each of you can pursue with a view toward helping your children to be and remain active church members.

First of all, realize that you are called not only to mouth, but also to model your Savior’s truth and life to your children. Not just what you say in the classroom, but also what you do in and out of the classroom teaches your students and influences them. Paul put it this way, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You also show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.” (2 Co 3:2-3 NIV)

Ask yourself therefore what kind of an image you project to your pupils. What do your moods say to them? Does your service as Christian teacher come through as a chore or as a privilege? When Friday’s blahs afflict you, do they also afflict your students through you? Or do you draw on the infinite reservoir of God’s strength to rise above your feelings and frustrations because you are determined not to misrepresent Jesus to them. As Christians we have every reason to “rejoice in the Lord always.” We can even “glory in our infirmities.” We can display an indomitable spirit of boundless enthusiasm and optimism. I’m not advocating that you wear a 24-hour Robert Schuller type plastic smile. But we can demonstrate that being Christians does not put us in shackles or straightjackets. We can disabuse people of the dreadful notion that, as C.S. Lewis puts it, God is a kind of mean old man who is always looking over the shoulder of little boys to put a stop to it when he sees them having any fun. It is fun to be God’s child. It is exciting to be a Christian. Excitement is a contagious, an affectitious thing. And if our young people catch something of that excitement from those of us in whom it lives and thrives, they won’t be so inclined to be dropouts when the decision is theirs to make.

In short, be an inspiration for your pupils. And if I hear you asking, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Co 2:16), I can tell you that we all are. For “our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament.” If you share Paul’s faith, then you also share his conviction, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Secondly, as a teacher you can also help your children to think consciously about the Christian life as a life of full time service to the Lord, a useful, meaningful, purposeful, rewarding life of service. Or to put it in Paul’s words, you can help them to a fuller awareness of the fact that all of life is something a Christian continuously offers up to God as a living sacrifice in an ongoing liturgy, (Ro 12:1). Many of our people, in my judgment, do not think of the ordinary affairs of everyday life as opportunities God gives for serving him. Consequently, to be active in church means to do something special like ushering or teaching Sunday school. Where is the real appreciation of the fact that Luther liked to emphasize, viz, that the Christian housewife who plies her broom is doing as noble a work as the bishop who preaches the word?

We can train our children to think that way, —to think consciously about the events of the day as opportunities for service to God. To illustrate, I periodically assigned pupils in catechism class the task of

writing a paragraph in which they were to recount a witness opportunity which the Lord gave to them, and how they either met it or failed to do so. The first time the assignment was given to a class, it was evident that what I was asking for did not register. After several attempts, it became evident that the exercise was helping students to think about their experiences in a different light. It helped to activate them.

In the book *Pulpit Speech*, Jay Adams treats this same idea from a preaching rather than a teaching viewpoint. In a chapter entitled Preaching to Motivate, Adams says. “The problem in conservative (and particularly in Reformed) churches is that while preachers do instruct and do convince people, they do not know how to move them to action. Often this is the result of improper closing. Congregations may become concerned, even anxious to do something about a problem, yet they do not know *what* or *how* to go about doing it. Sermons often are not specific enough. Instead of urging a believer to pray, why not urge him to come to prayer meeting Wednesday night and pray for . . . (then spell out several specific needs)? Instead of merely saying, “Study your Bible,” why not also make Bible study guides available in the vestibule.” (p 90) Adams’ point applies with equal validity to teaching.

A third practical consideration, —a teacher can also be aware of the advantage to a congregation of long range planning. The General Board for Home Missions has incorporated a scheme for such planning into its Home Missions Handbook. District Boards provide mission congregations with a five-year-plan form. The form requires a mission congregation to define its objective as a church and to spell the intermediate goals that will help the congregation to achieve that objective. The form includes service categories, membership growth, evangelism effort, adult confirmations, enrollments in Sunday school, Bible class, day school, plus areas of Christian giving. A separate part of the form is headed “New Projects.”

Obviously any congregation that hopes to reach its annual goals will have to plan its work and enlist its members for service. The General Board endorses such management by objective policies because they have proven their value. Congregations that carefully and realistically plan what they are going to try to accomplish are not merely congregations of passive Sunday churchgoers. They tend to be active congregations, congregations that enlist their members in ongoing service. If your congregation does not operate in that fashion, you could use your influence to encourage that it be done. You may find as other churches have that the plan helps Christians to be active church members in a useful and rewarding way.

But you may be thinking, that’s well and good for adults, but the theme of this paper has to do with children. How do you apply the same idea to them?

In a summer quarter course offered two years ago at the Seminary, Pastor Robert Voss, the instructor, discussed this very question with members of his youth ministry class. What meaningful roles can our young people play in congregational life? The input from the class was most interesting. Pastor Voss’ own list of roles included the following: evangelism, canvass and follow-up, vacation Bible school assistance, Sunday school help, stewardship for youth program, sermons for shut-ins, work for aged and handicapped members, transportation for the aged and infirm, maintenance of church property, church advertising such as leaflets, hangers, bulletin board, ushering, baby sitting for worshipers or for membership class enrollees.

Calvary Lutheran School in Thiensville offers 7th and 8th graders the opportunity to assist once a week at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service. Students visit with elderly residents and help them to get to the midweek chapel service. As a parent of one of the children who participated, I can testify that the opportunity to serve in that manner has helped to teach the joy of serving others even though senile people sometimes scold the person who wants to be friendly and helpful. Most of our schools are close enough to rest homes so that other children could be given similar opportunities. What can we do to make our children active church members? We can examine our own teaching goals to determine whether or not we are teaching effectively for an affective purpose. That in my estimation is the crucial first step. Then we can train children to be active by providing the opportunity to serve. That won’t eliminate the problem of inactive young people, but with God’s favor and grace, it will alleviate it.