

# The Challenge of Catechetical Instruction: From the Perspective of Our Teaching Task

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[This essay is part of a series of essays produced by a joint effort involving Dr. Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's Large and Small Catechisms in the spring of 1979. Professor Isch is head of the Education Department of Dr. Martin Luther College.]

When Luther published his Small Catechism he apparently intended it primarily as a home instruction course in religion conducted by the head of the household. Whether this rather simple scheme failed and the Lutheran reformers made the catechism a medium of indoctrination in a growing school system, or whether the Reformers saw the catechism as a useful mode of instruction in both home and school is probably of secondary concern today.<sup>1</sup> In any case, expositions of Luther's Small Catechism multiplied and today the catechism and its exposition is a familiar school textbook for Lutheran children. As a school textbook the catechism becomes a book to be taught as well as lived. How the catechism is to be taught is a question of method and that question has confronted teachers for many years.

A writer in a letter to *Der Lutheraner* in 1858 commented on the revision of the Dieterich catechism adopted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod:

Synod has republished Conrad Dieterich's Small Catechism. We have the book; we have introduced it; my children have it. Now guess what difficulty perplexes me at the moment. Do not laugh at me. What to do with the book I know as little as my pupils. Are the children to learn only the proof passages? What purpose, then, do the questions and answers serve? If they are to learn also the questions and answers, how is this possible? Hardly one or two will accomplish this. Of what use will that be? However, if I am to explain the questions, I hardly know what to explain; everything is so clear and plain. Then again, many things seem to me to be wanting which I found in Spener, or in the Dresden Catechism, or in Huth, etc. There are no terse applications such as one finds scattered in these catechisms. In some places, the matter is brief and condensed, in others it is too much expanded. And how lumbering are some of the answers! In fine, I am disgusted. And when my disgust and perplexity occasionally is great, I am angry at heart because Synod did not publish a different catechism, one elaborated for the needs of our time.<sup>2</sup>

The author, who [wisely] preferred to remain anonymous, probably reflects the concerns and perhaps the frustrations of many teachers who have stood before a class of students with catechism in hand. How best can this "Gem of the Reformation" be made clear and understandable? What can be done to make these words live in the lives of these students? Questions such as these reflect a concern with methods of teaching. On a more basic level, however, they also raise the question of the relevance of method in teaching religion. Those who question the importance of method or its relevance as a point of discussion hold to one or another of two naive assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> For the former viewpoint see, for example, Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Richard Maassel, "A History of the Early Catechisms of the Missouri Synod," MST Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, June 1957, pp 54–55.

## The Importance of Method

The first assumption goes something like this: Methods in teaching (particularly religion) are of little concern. The content—what is taught—is of prime concern to the teacher. Those who hold this assumption point out that the content of religion, the Word of God, is of such importance that the particular manner in which this content is communicated is of minor interest.

As in most naïve assumptions concerning education this one rests on a kernel of truth. The Word, unlike any other content which is taught, does contain a unique power of itself because it is the means by which that divine teacher, the Holy Spirit, enlightens and sanctifies. Education is defined as a change in behavior, including ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, resulting from learning. The Word has the power to effect this change, regardless and, at times, in spite of, the particular manner in which it is communicated or taught. To believe otherwise would be to limit God and the power of His Word.

Those who argue in such terms of the irrelevance of method in religious education, however, are guilty of the fallacy of irrelevant conclusion. Their argument only supports the efficacy of the Word, not the unimportance of method.

Methods are important. Luther wrote his Small Catechism, “a small and simple form,” to correct the “deplorable destitution” which he had observed in a visit of the churches. His catechism is a method of religious training. Jesus, the master teacher, used a number of methods, varying these methods with the needs and characteristics of His students and as the situation warranted. It is necessary to attest to the primacy of the content of religious education. At the same time, to disregard the method of instruction is to deny the natural cognitive and affective powers of the human learner and to make man less than what he is. The debates in secular education of content versus method have been as fruitless as they have been tedious. Religious education does not need an attempted resurrection of these dry bones. This first naïve assumption ought to be put at rest with the conclusion that both content and method are important; practically speaking, one cannot exist without the other and both are necessary parts of religious education.

The second naïve assumption on methods in religious education generally follows after the first assumption is grudgingly abandoned. It goes something like this: While methods of teaching may be important, the particular method used is irrelevant. There are no good or bad methods; there are only good or bad teachers. Persons who hold this assumption tend to be found muttering to themselves in methods classes for teaching religion. After graduation they set out to prove their assumption by becoming good or bad teachers with the method of their choice.

An analysis of this assumption is a bit more complex because there is some evidence to support it. Countless children, not to mention multitudes of rats and pigeons, have given of their time and patience in the frustrating and somewhat barren search for the “best” method. The conclusion that seems most likely to stand is that different teaching methods, when properly used, yield similar average results when achievement of knowledge is used as the criterion.<sup>3</sup>

Although research does support this, there are two important points which must be made. First, there are varying degrees of effectiveness within methods. There are “good” and “poor” procedures for lecturing; there are aimless, time-filling discussions and vital, lively, beneficial discussions; and there are effective and ineffective procedures for catechetical instruction. It is possible to conduct effective catechism lessons as lectures provided the teacher is a superior lecturer. The vast majority of teachers, however, lack this quality. Because they lack the ability to stir the emotions by the lecture-only method, the outcome of their method of teaching will be at best only acquisition of knowledge. That outcome of learning raises the second point. When the criteria for effectiveness of a particular method extend beyond knowledge achievement into such areas as the teaching of values and attitudes, application and transfer of what is taught, and student interest and motivation, particular methods do begin to emerge as “more effective” and “less effective.” To assume,

<sup>3</sup> Not all accept this conclusion but enough do to support this. See, for example, David Berliner and N.L. Gage, “The Psychology of Teaching Methods,” in *The Psychology of Teaching Methods*, N.L. Gage, ed. 75th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, 1976.

therefore, that there are no good or bad methods in religious education begs the question: good for what end and bad for what purposes are questions which remain to be answered.

The second naïve assumption about methods in religious education therefore raises more questions than it answers. It is insufficient as a guide (or rather, a nonguide) in determining how best to instruct children in a life of faith and sanctification. To determine this we must examine the purposes of instruction and then see how those purposes are best served in a particular method of teaching.

### **Purposes in Catechism Instruction**

Instruction in the catechism presently takes place almost exclusively in the various expositions of Luther's Small Catechism. These expositions are not easy texts to use in religious education. The question/answer form, undergirded by Scripture passages and references, is a strange and somewhat confusing book to the student; it is unlike anything he has encountered in his other school subjects. Textbooks in the format of the catechism disappeared from American education in the 19th century. The teacher, therefore, has to help the student overcome an unusual content arrangement.

In addition, it is possible that the instructor may need help in understanding the format and content arrangement of the catechism. The format (questions followed by an answer, in turn followed by Scripture references and passages) may leave the impression that this format describes both the importance of each of these items as well as the sequence of teaching. In this mistaken impression of the arrangement of the exposition, the questions and the accompanying answers are of primary importance and the Bible texts are used merely to prove the text of the catechism. This would be a miserable parody of a book whose author continually sought to turn people to the Scriptures alone.

Understanding the format of the catechism is only the first step in teaching the catechism and choosing the method best suited for this teaching. The instructor and the student must also understand the purpose of catechism teaching. Statements of purpose for teaching the catechism usually do not differ greatly from the general purposes of religious education. Such generality may have its value, but it does tend to confuse discussions on the nature and use of the catechism. The following list, a composite of a number of statements regarding the teaching of the catechism, is one effort to delineate the purposes of teaching the catechism.

1. to train the child for a life of personal faith in the Savior so that he longs for the means of grace and through them lays hold of Christ.
2. to provide the child with the sure guide of Scriptures for his life of sanctification.
3. to show the child how to examine himself and apply the law and gospel in his own life.
4. to train the child in an intelligent and personal use of the Scriptures.
5. to expand the child's consciousness of the needs of others for the gospel and to train the child in this work of the church.
6. to provide the child with an understanding of the scriptural basis for the teachings and practices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.
7. to provide the child with a store of memorized material for his own comfort and guidance.

Purposes 3, 6, and 7 form the basis of what has come to be a common goal of catechetical instruction, preparation for confirmation and acceptance as a communicant member of the congregation. There are both a strength and a weakness in these three commonly understood purposes.

The Lutheran church does not need to apologize for seeking to educate knowledgeable Christians or, for that matter, knowledgeable Lutheran Christians. If our young people are to testify to the faith that is within them, they must know that faith and its basis. If they are to revere and hold fast to the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, they must know those teachings. They must also know why we confess and practice those teachings, they must be able to speak in their own words about those teachings, and they must acknowledge those practices as scriptural. In this sense, there is also value and place for the polemical aspects

of the exposition where various false teachings are examined and refuted. This may turn out to be chauvinistic and contrary to an evangelical spirit, but we have no choice but to risk the endeavor if we are to remain true to what God enjoins of us.

The Lutheran church also uses catechetical instruction as preparation for communion in the sense that the child learns to understand the blessings of this sacrament and to examine himself. While there is debate whether the best time for a child to become a communicant member is at the time of confirmation and debate on whether there are better ways than catechism instruction to prepare a child for communion, the present practice of the church makes this purpose an important one for teaching the catechism.

There are also dangers in too great a concern with these three purposes for teaching the catechism. These purposes, particularly 6 and 7, emphasize the doctrinal content of the catechism. Because these objectives are relatively easy to teach, because these objectives can become the concerns of examinations, questions, and exercises, they may become the substance of catechism instruction. The criticisms that are sometimes heard of catechism classes, that they are deadly boring, that they are so much rote learning, that they are unrelated to life, that they are abstract and incomprehensible can, in part, be explained by an overemphasis of some objectives of catechism instruction to the exclusion of others.

To achieve a balance among these purposes for teaching the catechism, the teacher must be aware of not only the doctrinal purposes described above but also those purposes which relate to the child's life of faith. Being aware is only part of effective teaching of the catechism. The teacher must also carefully choose and use a method which will enable him to meet all the purposes in catechism instruction.

### **The Method of Catechism Teaching**

The method currently being suggested for use in teaching the catechism is based on the revised exposition to the catechism published by our synod in 1956, although the form of the method predates this revision. A new catechism currently being prepared for 5th and 6th grades will make use of a somewhat different method. Work is also under way on a revision of the present catechism. This revision may provide a format which follows the suggested teaching procedures rather than the present arrangement. Basically and briefly, the method used in the present exposition is this: The teacher introduces the material to be taught by reviewing previous lessons in the catechism or Bible history, or he begins by discussing experiences or situations which serve to lead the children into the new lesson. After giving the students the purpose of the lesson, the teacher proceeds to lead the students to an understanding of the catechism statements and to show that these statements are based on Scripture. The teacher does this by directing the students to the Scripture references and the passages. The questions and answers printed in the exposition are used only after the truths have been developed from the study of the Scriptures and these questions and answers then serve to organize and review what has already been taught. Finally, the teacher is to show the children or lead them to discover what these truths mean in their own lives. In some cases, the teacher also organizes the lesson into statements called inferences which connect the various parts of the lesson to one central truth.

This method stresses the scriptural basis of the catechism as well as a careful and thorough understanding of the catechism. The method does leave some questions unanswered: Is this the best way to teach the catechism to persons who have little or no background in Scriptures? Probably not. Ought or can the catechism exposition be "covered" in one year of instruction with this method? Unlikely. How does a teacher divide the exposition into easily handled lessons? There is no good answer, but see Hagedorn for one suggestion.<sup>4</sup> At what age level is this method and this form of exposition best used? Probably not below the seventh grade.

Despite these and other questions, the method described above does provide a systematic approach to teaching the catechism. Methods, like manuals for Bible history teaching, are not intended to restrict the wonderful and creative teaching that some believe occurs only when the suggested method is not used. Methods

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<sup>4</sup> Fred. Hagedorn, *Catechizations*, mimeographed, n.d.

are to help students understand where this wonderful and creative teaching is going and to lead the children to appreciate and live what is being taught. The method described above can do this, particularly if the instructor seeks to make his teaching the kind that is personal and that is eager to involve the students.

### **Catechism Teaching as Personal Teaching**

A method used in teaching the catechism ought, first of all, to be a personal activity. Teaching is personal when it reflects the belief and life of the teacher. The teacher's enthusiasm, his preparation, his familiarity with Scripture, his own storehouse of memorized material, his concern for thoroughness, his life in and out of the classroom, his concern for students, tell his students in a more powerful way at times than his words that what he is teaching has meaning in and for his own life. As teachers of the Word we cannot do the Spirit's work for Him, but we certainly can hinder the effectiveness of that work. If students doze off during a catechism class, they may be reflecting what the teacher did when he prepared the lesson. Teaching is personal when the teacher is personally involved in what he teaches.

Teaching is also personal when it is personal to the student: when he understands what is taught and sees that it applies to his life. Teaching which does not come down to the child's level of comprehension and which does not touch his interests and concerns is impersonal teaching. Nathan illustrated this personal teaching when after relating an easily understood story about lambs and neighbors, he said to David, "Thou art the man!" Christ talked to individuals about things they understood—the blowing wind, the water in a well—and showed what these meant in their lives. Luther is very personal in his explanations, particularly in the Creed, where he consistently uses the first person singular. Teaching is personal when the teacher uses "I" and "you" as well as "we."

Teaching is also personal (in what might appear to be a contradiction to the above) when this teaching occurs within a context of Christian fellowship. Catechism instruction would be less effective if it would be carried out in an individualized setting where the pupils work independently at their own pace.<sup>5</sup> Nor would catechism instruction be as effective if the primary means of instruction would be exercise sheets, workbooks, or selfstudy guides. We must realize that the catechism exposition is a book to be *taught*. Concerns about simplifying the present text are certainly valid, but catechism instruction must come alive in the classroom with a group of students taught by a teacher who explains, simplifies, and helps students apply what they learn. This does not imply that private study of the Scripture is of no value or ought not to be encouraged and taught (see purpose 4). The child, and particularly the adolescent, also needs to speak and to share and to hear others speak and share the truths of Scripture that are being learned. The influence of the peer group, in this case a wholesome influence, is a powerful means of education. The confession of faith that Johnny makes in class and the deeds of love that Mary is willing to share need to be heard by the others in that class. The context of Christian education—the place and fellowship where that education occurs—is a critical part of that education. Catechism instruction is best carried out in a class of students who are willing to confess, share, and practice with each other their growing faith.

### **Catechism Teaching as Involvement**

The method of teaching the catechism must also provide for the involvement of the student. This is a commonplace, almost trite, observation for teaching of any kind. It would be a rare teacher who would disavow the value of pupil participation in learning. There are, however, various levels of student involvement in a catechism lesson. At the most basic level, students are encouraged and directed to respond to questions. Certainly the format of the method of teaching the catechism described above almost compels the instructor to use questions in his teaching, but that level of involvement is barely adequate. The goal of catechism instruction is more than a mental acquisition of scripturally based statements of truth, as important as those statements are.

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<sup>5</sup> An example of such individualized materials for religious education would be the *Accelerated Christian Education Program*.

Those who teach the catechism must also encourage a deeper and more personal student involvement than is typically found in a recitation or question/answer format. A deeper involvement can come when the recitation becomes a discussion. A discussion, as contrasted to a recitation, involves a group of students who are communicating interactively, that is, not only from student to teacher but also from student to student. In a discussion, the student is learning by speaking, observing, and listening. Discussions aid students in analyzing a problem and seeing new applications. Discussions may motivate students to learn by providing them with an opportunity to satisfy the need to talk and to interact with their peers. The teacher in a discussion becomes more of a guide than an instructor (although the two are not easily distinguished).

Methods involving discussion may sound fine in theory but to implement them may pose some difficulties. Discussions, to be effective in catechism instruction, must be based on a common and fairly well-understood basis of knowledge, in this case, a knowledge of Scripture. Without this basis, discussions, at best, are rambling and inconclusive; at worst, they wander into situation ethics and majority-vote morality. Catechism instruction, as it was described in the method above and as it is found in our religion course of study, does follow from a study of Scripture. Particularly where there is a Christian day school, the children have had several years of learning in Bible history before they begin catechism instruction. While there certainly are exceptions to this, particularly (but not necessarily) in catechism classes where the children have not attended a Christian day school, teachers of the catechism ought to be able to assume a fairly good foundation of Scripture on the part of the students in their classes. This foundation, together with the teacher's guidance, should provide a basis for a profitable and wholesome use of discussions.

A second difficulty in using discussion involves those classes which refuse to engage in discussion. The students are quite content to respond to direct questions, to recite when called upon, and perhaps to volunteer a hesitant "yes" or "no." Beyond that, they sit mute. It is a common observation that one of the reasons teachers talk as much as they do is that they are afraid no one else will. If students will not contribute or respond in a discussion, it may well be that they are unfamiliar with this new role of a learner. The last time they had such an opportunity was back in those heady days of kindergarten. Then, too, a discussion involves a certain amount of openness and risk. An adolescent does not take easily to that risk. Contributing a personal experience or reacting to a teacher's or fellow student's comment may bring a teacher's rebuke or, worse, the laughter of his classmates. Adolescents are frequently too self-conscious to readily share their private and deepest feelings before the tribunal of teacher and classmates. It is often much easier to give the memorized answer and not to become personally involved. A teacher, therefore, has to be aware of the risk the adolescent is taking when he engages in a discussion and the teacher must minimize that risk.

Then there are those students for whom a discussion provides the opportunity to be obnoxious and contentious. Admittedly, there are instances when an adolescent who appears obnoxious and contentious really is so. To believe otherwise would be naïve, but adolescents, as well as children, often make contentious or provocative statements more as a way of ascertaining the reactions of others than as statements of belief. The adolescent who espouses the use of marijuana may be compared to the five-year-old who tries out the new four-letter word he heard on the playground. By observing the reactions of those to whom he speaks, he learns their attitudes to what he has said. More importantly, he learns something about himself by the response he receives and the way that response is made. The contentious student in a religion class may be the best learner as well as the greatest challenge to a teacher's skill in leading discussions. At least, he adds some spice to a class and may even become the object lesson whereby his peers are furthered in the grace of Christian admonition.

The suggestion is sometimes made that adolescents, or more accurately preadolescents in 7th and 8th grade, are not capable of such a mature method of learning. Children of this age level, the argument goes, have insufficient mental and emotional maturity to engage in meaningful discussions about their faith and life and how Scripture applies to that faith and life. If that is true, then we are in trouble. Considering the distressing number of young people for whom catechism instruction is their last formal experience with religious education, if these young people are unable to speak of their life of faith among their fellow believers, when will they develop the ability to speak before the unbeliever? Certainly that ability and conviction will, by God's

grace, grow throughout their lives. If we believe in the value of training (in contrast to just instruction), we must be ready to use a method which fosters and develops the ability to confess and testify and live.

There is one further level of pupil involvement which should be considered in teaching the catechism. This level of involvement extends the in-class teaching of the truths of Scripture to out-of-class activities in using the truths in the daily lives of the students. Because the goals of teaching religion are affective as well as cognitive, this type of involvement seeks to meet the affective goals by encouraging and providing opportunities for students to do the things they learn. A frequent observation is that the world today is an adult world where young people have little chance or incentive to become involved. It would be a sad commentary if that observation would apply to the life of faith of the Christian young person. There certainly are times and situations where young people can have chances for evangelism work or Christian service. When classroom instruction is thus integrated with life's activities, the child is led "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."<sup>6</sup>

Teaching the catechism is a challenging task, more difficult in many ways than teaching Bible history or hymnology. The point of a method in teaching the catechism is not necessarily to make this task easier. Rather it is to make the child's learning more meaningful, personal, and involved. If that is done, then Luther's goal in writing the catechism will be met.

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Gerlach, "What Can be Done to Make our Children Active Church Members?" mimeographed, n.d., p. 7.