

Education Brief: Catechism Class Can Be Fun

By David P. Kuske

There are two statements that I as a pastor do not like to hear a child say about my catechism class. One is "Catechism class is boring." The other is "I'm not always able to follow what pastor teaches us in catechism class." Luther was well aware that these are two reactions that children might have to learning the catechism. He often urged pastors to do two things: make catechism class fun ("child's play") and make it simple so that every child can understand.

Obviously a pastor can do much to prevent such statements by making catechism class lively and interesting. He can accomplish this goal, not by playing games, but by doing three things to make the study of doctrine concrete and vivid:

1) Make every Bible passage interesting for the students before questioning them about the passage.

Most Bible passages have two to four parts to them (i.e. two to four verbal ideas). For example, John 3:16 says God *loved* the world / *gave* his Son / whoever *believes* / not *perish* but *have* eternal life. If I am going to question the students about the first part (God loved the world), I want to get them interested in this passage before I question them on that first part. I can do this by paraphrasing one or two of the other parts of the passage in a vivid, concrete way. I could say something like this: "This passage tells us that God did something wonderful for you. He sent his only Son to die for you. He did this so that he would not have to say to you, 'You must suffer in the terrible fire of hell!' but so that instead he could say 'Come and be happy with me forever in heaven!'" Only then, after I have made the passage interesting for the class, would I make the transition to questioning on the passage by saying, "But God didn't do this only for you!" Then would come the specific questions on the passage (see the "waltz step" questions in the following paragraphs).

A pastor can make catechism class questioning simple enough so that even those children with less mental ability are able to follow the development of every doctrinal truth. This can be done by asking questions in a regular pattern so that it is easy for a child to follow the development of each passage in the lesson. A pattern of three questions (a "waltz step" pattern-1,2,3) is one way to do this.

Here's an example of "-waltz step" questioning on a part of John 3:16.

- The first step (question) would be: Look at the first part of this passage. Whom did God love?
- The second step (question) would be: Put that thought (God loved the world) into your own words.
- The third step (question) would be: So according to this passage, who does God want to be saved?

The first step makes sure that every student in class is focused on the words that I want them to think about in this passage. It also is such a basic question (just repeating words of the passage) that even the slowest child in class will be able to answer it. A slow child often thinks that he/she is not smart enough to answer questions. When such children find out they can answer this kind of question, they often begin to feel involved, pay closer attention, and get much more out of each passage.

The second step asks one class member to explain the words which the first question called into focus. This gets everybody in class to think about the meaning of these words and makes sure everybody (including the slowest child) understands the point of these words. Sometimes the paraphrasing of words from the passage which this question requires can be a simple task that a slow child can be asked to do. At other times it may be a good challenge for one of the brighter students in class. In the latter case, the teacher is using the brighter students to help the slower students follow the development.

The third step asks one class member to show how the focus words of this passage relate to the doctrinal truth being developed in this lesson (i.e. that God wants more than just a few people to be saved.) This is often a more difficult mental task since it involves thinking about two questions at the same time (whom God wants to be saved and what this passage says about God). Often this is quite a challenge even for some of the brighter

students in class. But having one of them answer this question makes sure that the doctrinal point is truly understood by all the children.

By using a pattern like this for every passage I not only make sure that all the children follow the development, but it also allows me to involve every child in class, both the slower and the brighter children. Once the children get used to this pattern, the teacher can move through passages quickly and still know that he hasn't lost the children in the development. By repeating this pattern over and over again, the teacher also helps children begin to read their Bibles with understanding. Children get so used to this approach to questioning on a passage that they begin to use it unconsciously whenever they read a Bible passage. Isn't teaching children to read the Bible with understanding also an important outcome we seek from catechism instruction?

After questioning on the passage is completed, the teacher moves on to the following two steps of follow-up.

2) Use a vivid illustration at the end of the questioning on each passage.

Once I have completed the third step of the "waltz step" questions, I want to touch the hearts of the students with the answer to that third question, which is the doctrinal truth developed from this passage. I could do this by expanding on the truth in a vivid way (e.g. "You see, God did not want just you to be saved. He didn't just want people from Milwaukee or Wisconsin to be saved. He didn't just want people from Chicago and California to go to heaven. He wanted people from all over the world to be saved - people from China and India and Africa and South America too!") or by using an illustration to make the truth vivid (e.g. "If a contest I enter says that 100 people will win a prize of \$10,000, I know that my chance of winning a prize is not very good. However, if the contest says that everybody in the world will win \$10,000, I know for sure that I'm going to win a prize. I don't think that there will ever be a contest that offers a valuable gift to everybody in the world, but that is exactly what God did. He sent his Son because he wanted to give life eternal to absolutely everybody.")

Finally,

3) Involve the students in discussing real-Life applications.

I don't lecture the students on how the doctrinal truth applies to their lives. Instead, I involve them in discussing situations that are interesting because they are based on things the students experience in their lives (what they watch on TV, the music they listen to, challenges to their faith that they meet, etc.)

It does take some extra effort to make a catechism lesson both interesting and easy to follow. But the lasting benefit for our students is worth every bit of extra effort this requires. Every passage can be introduced to the children in an interesting way. The development of every passage can be done in a way that assures every child is able to follow. Every doctrinal point that is developed in a catechism lesson can be illustrated in an interesting way. The application of every doctrinal point can be an interesting statement or a life situation for the children to evaluate.

Without the effort to do these things, much of catechism instruction can be both abstract and thus boring and also complex and thus not easy to follow. As teachers, we need to take some simple steps to make sure that neither of these is what a child says about our catechism class.