

IT IS A SIN
TO MAKE
THE GOSPEL BORING
TO OUR CONFIRMANDS

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"The full presentation of the Scriptural doctrine of Christ, over against multiform error, is best served by retaining the old division into three sections. We treat (I) of the Theanthropic Person of Christ, (II) of the states of Christ, since Scripture teaches that Christ in His human nature appeared in a twofold state, the 'morphe doulou' and the 'morphe theou' (Phil. 2:6 ff; Luke 24:26), and (III) of the office of Christ, since it is necessary to show again and again that Christ not only taught the Law and exemplified it in His life, but also became the Redeemer of man by taking upon Himself both man's obligation to keep the Law (Gal. 4:4-5) and man's punishment for his transgression of the Law (Gal. 3:13)." (Christian Doctrine, Vol. II, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, pp 55-56)

If you had just presented the above statement to a group of twelve and thirteen year old students in a confirmation class, they would probably be scratching their heads or else they would have turned you off, thinking how boring and dry.

How many times, when we step before a confirmation class, do we make the good news of Jesus our Savior dull and uninteresting? How often do we look upon the teaching of catechism class as a necessary evil? Have you ever finished a class wondering why the students seemed so restless, why they were so uninterested in hearing the wonderful truths of God's Word? Is it possible that at times we make the Gospel boring to our confirmands? Have we as teachers of the truth fallen into the same old monotonous ways of presenting the Gospel? Do we help our students to see how the truths we teach apply to their daily lives right now? Or has our confirmation instruction become something which is totally divorced from everyday life and is the mere imparting and spouting back of certain memorized facts and phrases? Our Lord Jesus has given us the command to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19-20a) He does not merely tell us to impart knowledge and facts, but to lead our students to obey, that is, to observe, to keep, to fulfill, to pay attention to, everything that He has commanded us.

The title for this paper is IT IS A SIN TO MAKE THE GOSPEL BORING TO OUR CONFIRMANDS. As teachers, we have the ability to make even the exciting truths of God's Word dull, uninteresting, irrelevant and boring. As teachers we are communicators. God has called us to communicate the saving truths of His Word to others. One area in which our congregations have called us to communicate these truths is in confirmation instruction. This paper will examine (I) the student with whom we are communicating in an instruction class and then take a look at (II) the teacher and the means that God has given the teacher to share the Word of Life.

I THE STUDENT

The young people that we have in our confirmation classes are going through some dramatic changes in their lives. As teachers we ought to be aware of what these changes are and how they are affecting our students. The youths we have in confirmation classes are experiencing A) physical changes, B) social awareness and maturity, C) intellectual changes and D) emotional changes (Junior High Ministry, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

Our confirmands are experiencing physical changes. They are going through puberty. They are no longer children, but neither are they adults. It is a very awkward and uncertain time for them. Many physical changes are happening to them - development of breasts, growth of pubic hair, change in voice, rapid growth. All of this can be very unsettling and disturbing to a seventh or eighth grader.

Another change which is taking place among our confirmands is a greater social awareness. Friends become very important and so does the feeling of belonging. It is at this time that young people are also striving for independence and to establish their own identity. Peer pressure also plays an important factor in their lives at this time.

Intellectual changes are taking place in our students at the same time as they are changing physically and becoming more socially aware. During adolescence students are able to deal with abstractions, to reason about the future, to relate relationships, to do more complex thinking.

This fact is important as we teach. Our students have the ability to think and reason. Simple "yes - no" questions, the simple memorization and recitation of facts bores students who are now experiencing these intellectual changes. At this time young people also begin to question much of what they have been taught.

While all this is going on, a young confirmand is also going through emotional development. You may see a young person have extreme switches in mood from the beginning of a class period to the end. You will see very intense emotions. This is all coinciding with the rest of the changes which are taking place physically, socially and intellectually.

Why is it necessary to spend this time talking about the student? The previous information, although a series of generalizations, helps to give us some ideas where our students are at and the drastic and dramatic changes that are taking place in their lives at this time.

When we as pastors minister to a person we need to know something about their background, where they are at and what is happening to them. Likewise, as teachers we need to know our students. The previous generalizations give us some hints, but we need to get to know our students individually for each is a special creation of God with specific interests, fears, joys and problems. This knowledge should help us to better apply the truths that we are teaching them from God's Word.

II THE TEACHER

As pastors instructing youths in the truths of God's Word, what is to be our chief goal? Our Lord Jesus sets the goal for us "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Mt 28:20a) In confirmation class we are making disciples for the Lord through the process of teaching them to obey everything that God has commanded us. The Apostle Peter also speaks of the growth that all Christians need. He writes, "Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." (2 Peter 2:2-3) As Christian teachers we are here to aid our young people and help them to grow up in their salvation.

God has set the goal for us. He has also given us a perfect example of teaching in the ministry of Jesus Christ. As you examine our Lord's teaching techniques, you will note that "1) Jesus taught with clarity. He used parables and practical illustrations to present His message clearly. 2) Jesus taught with authority. He spoke as the representative of God. 3) Jesus taught with variety. Our Lord used almost every imaginable type of teaching technique to facilitate the process of communication. He was a master in the art of maintaining interest." (Understanding Teaching, Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Teacher Training Association, p. 12)

Before we consider the various methods that the Lord has given us to teach our youth, we would like to briefly review the seven laws of teaching set forth by John Milton Gregory in his classic book on teaching.

1. The Law of the Teacher

The teacher must know that which he would teach.

(The Seven Laws of Teaching,
Ann Arbor, MI: Baker Book
House, p. 14)

As teachers we need to be thoroughly acquainted with our lesson; able to explain, prove and illustrate the principles we are teaching. In addition we need to be able to apply it to the lives of our students. "Interaction and immediate relevancy are key factors in teaching young people." (Understanding Teaching, Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Teacher Training Association, p. 17)

Our students need to see the relevancy of God's Word to their life situations here and now. That is why it is so important to develop good practical applications in our lessons which apply directly to our young people's lives.

2. The Law of the Learner

The learner must attend with interest to the material to be learned.

(The Seven Laws of Teaching,
Ann Arbor, MI: Baker Book
House, p. 24)

To assist the learner to pay attention, the teacher should not

begin the class until the attention of the class has been secured. The teacher should not assume that he will have the attention of his students merely because he is teaching. He will need to tailor his presentation to his learners. He should attempt to kindle and maintain the interest of the student through the use of variety in his presentations, illustrations and practical applications.

3. The Law of Language

The language used in teaching must be common to teacher and learner.

(Ibid. p. 42)

In teaching religious truths it is very easy to use terms which our young people do not understand. The teacher cannot assume his students know the terms he is using. He needs to explain them.

4. The Law of the Lesson

The truth to be taught must be learned through the truth already known.

(Ibid. p. 58)

In teaching confirmation instructions the teacher needs to proceed from known Bible history accounts to the principle to be learned. It is a good idea to learn what your students already know about the subject you are to be teaching.

5. The Law of the Teaching Process

Excite and direct self-activities of the pupil, and as a rule tell him nothing that he can learn himself.

(Ibid. p. 74)

We are working with a generation of young people who have become accustomed to having everything told to them and handed to them. To think and to explore and search requires work. Having been raised with television and all the other modern communication devices, students are not quick to try and find things out for themselves. As a result, we as teachers need to carefully plan and prepare our lessons to challenge our students to find things out for themselves, to become discoverers.

6. The Law of the Learning Process

The pupil must reproduce in his own mind the truth to be learned.

(Ibid. p. 97)

As teachers we are to help our students assimilate the material and be able to put it into their own words. Gregory makes a very interesting comment in this section. He writes, "...true learning is not memorization and repetition of the words and ideas of the teacher." (Ibid. p. 97) Here is an area where we as teachers must be careful for we often are content with the student spouting back at us our words and ideas, rather than encouraging them to make these truths their own and put them into their own words. The student needs to see that each particular lesson has a practical application in his own personal life. For example: In the first article where we learn that God watches over and protects us, the student should be able to cite examples from his own life which illustrate this truth.

7. The Law of Review and Application

The completion, test and confirmation of the work of teaching must be made by review and application.

(Ibid. pp 108-8)

Review and application are not just going back over and spitting back what the teacher said. It is taking the principles learned, stating them and then applying them to different situations.

As teachers these seven laws are very practical for us and help us in seeing how the learning process works, and the different approaches that we as teachers can use in communicating the Gospel with our confirmands.

This brings us then to the various methods that we as teachers can employ in our confirmation classes. We can categorize the methods into five basic categories; 1) Teacher to pupil communication - lecture, story telling, demonstration. 2) Pupil to teacher communication - recitation, reports, testing. 3) Teacher with pupil communication - class discussions, question and answer. 4) Group Activity - panels, debates, discussion groups, buzz groups. 5) Non-classroom activity - advanced studying at home, field trips, research, projects. (Understanding Teaching, Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Teacher Training Association, p. 29)

We will briefly consider each of these five categories and the different techniques in each of them, noting their strengths and weaknesses.

TEACHER TO PUPIL COMMUNICATION

Within this category we have lecturing, story telling and demonstrations

The strengths of all three of these techniques are that you can cover a considerable amount of material in a minimum amount of time and you are able to work with larger groups of students.

The difficulties and weaknesses in this area are that lecturing, story telling and demonstrations can become boring. They also stifle the initiative and creativity of the students.

It is interesting to note that a majority of our training at Northwestern and the Seminary was through the lecture method. Most often people use those things which were used with them because this is all they have experienced. Lecturing can be a fine tool but it has its weaknesses and difficulties. In Dale's Cone of Learning, the use of just words - verbal symbols - is the least effective tool in learning. (Dale's Cone of Learning - Edgar Dale - Professor of Education, Ohio State University) We know that from experience. We learned more about preaching by actually doing it, then by listening to someone tell us how to do it in a homiletics class.

PUPIL TO TEACHER COMMUNICATION

Under this category we have such methods as memorization and recitation, reports and testing.

The strengths of these techniques are that the students actually become involved in the learning process; the teacher is able to gain understanding of the pupil's level of knowledge, achievement and comprehension. The use of testing can become a tool which leads to self-discipline.

There are weaknesses in these methods. Again, we have only one-way communication. In addition, it can be easy for some students to memorize and recite without any comprehension of what they have memorized. In the area of testing there is much time spent by the teacher in preparation, administration and grading of the tests.

Tests can also cause negative reactions on the part of students.

TEACHER WITH PUPIL COMMUNICATION

The two most common methods in this type of communicating are class discussion and questions and answers. "This ~~is~~ the opinion of a large portion of professional educators is the best approach for the teaching-learning process. It is an approach which involves teacher and pupil in a mutual quest for truth." (Ibid. p. 29)

The strengths of classroom discussion are that it awakes interest in a subject and guides the thinking of the students. A teacher is also able to gain insight into a student's progress. In the use of questions and answers the teacher is able to focus in on and develop a particular lesson point. Another great plus for questioning is that it can be used with almost every other teaching method.

There are certain weaknesses in both these methods that we need to be aware of. In discussions the teacher will need to be able to think spontaneously and also have a good background on the subject being discussed. Also, there is the danger in discussions to wander off and away from the subject. In the question and answer method the weakness is choosing the appropriate questions. We need to develop questions which are not answered with a simple yes or no, or with one or two words. Our questions need to challenge our students to think and to apply the principles we are teaching.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Within this area there are a wide range of activities that a teacher could employ. There are debates, panels, buzz groups, discussion groups and drama.

The strengths of these methods are an active involvement in the learning process and the student is being led to think and assimilate the material to be learned. Also, in the use of panels and debates the students need to prepare and think about the subject. These methods also create interest. Group projects often lead the student to see that the principles he is learning actually apply to real life situations.

The weaknesses in the use of group projects are that they require a great deal of flexibility on the part of the teacher and there is the need for time for preparation.

NON-CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Methods in this area are advanced study at home, research projects and reports, creative writing.

There are some great advantages in these methods. In research projects the teacher is able to work individually with a student. The writing of a report and the public presentation of it helps the student to retain more. Just as my research and preparation for this paper has helped me to learn much about the learning process, teaching methods and teenagers, so our confirmands learn and retain much through individual research.

Creative writing allows the student to use his God given talents and also provides the teacher with information on the student's progress and ability.

The greatest drawback to these methods is time and resources.

THE USE OF AUDIO-VISUALS

"The teacher who uses as many of the sensory gates as possible will be most likely to communicate effectively to his students." (Ibid. p. 51) We are living in the computer age. Our students have been exposed to all types of audio and visual methods of communicating. As teachers we need to make use of these tools in effectively communicating the Gospel.

In the area of audio-aids we can make use of tapes and records. In visual aids there are paintings, drawings, film strips, chalk boards and bulletin boards. In audio-visuals there are motion pictures, video tapes and closed circuit television.

Our young people are being raised with these technological advances in communication and we as teachers should be using them as we communicate more effectively the truths of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

As pastors teaching confirmands we are communicating to them the most important truths that they will need for this life and for the life to come. Fortunately, the power to change their hearts and to cause them to grow does not lie with us but with the Word of Life which we are communicating. However, we can put obstacles in the way

of that Word. Through poor teaching and communicating methods we are able to make the Gospel boring and uninteresting to our confirmands.

"A recent survey of teenagers who have dropped out of church has shown that one of the precipitating causes was their failure to see any connection between what the church taught and their everyday lives."

(Ibid. p. 24) As teachers we need to help our students see that the Biblical truths we are communicating have value and practical application in their lives. "The teacher should never take for granted that a pupil understands how to apply the principles of the Bible to his life. The teaching of such understanding and application is the responsibility of the teacher and assumes, of course, that the teacher has first learned to let Scripture work itself out in his own life." (Ibid. p. 25)

Our Lord has called us to be His witnesses in this world. He did not call us to convert people or change them. Only He can do that. But He entrusts us with His Word, the means to change people, and says, "Be my witnesses." As teachers we need to continually evaluate our witnessing (teaching) methods to our confirmands. We need to vary our methods and use a variety of techniques as did our Lord Jesus in his teaching ministry.

God help us so that we do not make the Gospel boring to our confirmands.

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