

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
2015 Symposium

Reaction to Pastor Aaron Mueller's Essay
Jesus Taught the Word of Truth—And So Do We

Let me start out by thanking you, Pastor Mueller, for your work in getting this Symposium on the Pastor as Teacher off to a great start by placing before us the perfect model for teaching: Jesus, the master teacher. You provided much food for thought by laying before us Jesus' aptness to teach and the variety of methods he used in teaching.

I've often heard it said (and said it myself) that a pastor needs to love people, love God's Word and love sharing God's Word with people. That probably best expresses what needs to be there for a man to desire the pastoral office. You rightly point out that in order to actually serve in the pastoral office a man needs to be "apt to teach." To paraphrase your definition, "apt to teach" involves knowing people, knowing God's Word and knowing how to communicate God's Word to people. I appreciate the way you expressed the need for continued growth in all three aspects of this aptness.

The goal of aptness is the clear communication of the Word to the soul of the listener. That communication fails where growth in the Word turns stagnant and the Word isn't mined to bring *new* treasures as well as old. Communication additionally falters when our desire plateaus for people in general or age groups with whom we no longer try to relate. The result will invariably be that the distance increases between pastor and parishioner, shepherd and sheep, because our teaching isn't reaching the heart. (p. 3)

You continued returning to this basic definition of "apt to teach" throughout your essay and gave admonition and encouragement to us to continue our growth in knowing people, knowing the Word and knowing how to improve our communication of the Word.

To that end, you led us into the mystery of Christology as you helped us see Jesus as our model for aptness to teach. The way you explored the truths of Christ's divine and human natures, his state of humiliation and the communication of attributes applied to Jesus' upbringing and preparation to be a teacher was fascinating. The way you expressed these aspects of Christology was thought-provoking. To cite just one example: "The Teacher who knows human nature by both his perfect creation and consequent fallen curse must now learn it anew from life

experience. The Master who parsed tongues at the tower of Babel must now master languages, and do so in order to master the Word” (p. 6). The paradox of our Savior’s person is clearly held in tension in your discussion.

While you admittedly speculate a little regarding Jesus’ growth during his thirty years before he began his public ministry, you make some applications (and admonitions) that deserve highlighting. While speaking about the background in carpentry, you note:

He framed God’s theology in parables and illustrations to reach the people within their own context. Never once do we hear a childhood story from his lips, a glorious vicar styled story, or especially a story about past sin (if that were possible) in his methods. He didn’t speak to his own end and for his own benefit, but to the benefit and godly end of the listener. With the methods he chooses (and recorded for us in Scripture), he speaks with full consideration to *how is this truth best conveyed for my neighbor*. He doesn’t speak from the standpoint of his own earthly experiences but to the experiences of those in his audience. (p. 9; author’s emphasis)

There is no questioning the importance and value of good illustrations and stories to drive home a point to our students. Jesus himself used illustrations and stories from nature and everyday life. While we may not fully know the reason we have no record of Jesus telling a childhood story, it is most appropriate to recognize that we need to choose our own illustrations carefully. Are we elevating ourselves and our experiences or redirecting people to the truths of Christ? Do we run the risk of our teaching (and preaching as well) becoming a string of funny stories akin to a stand-up comedy routine? What time is left for leading your students into the treasures of the Word?

A couple of pages later, you make a related point.

While you and I may have all the *sedes* passages memorized for our confirmation classes (as did Jesus) so that theological preparation is no longer a necessity, is our presentation of them diminishing by the years, because our *carpentry-esque* illustrations are further removed and lacking connectivity to the kids? Our 7th and 8th grader’s ages and spiritual needs always stay the same, but their experiences change. And we become further removed from both their age and experiences. Do we work to understand the various vocations of God’s people to better utilize law and gospel and develop a lesson? Home visits are more relevant and essential than ever! (p. 11)

Since Jesus is perfect, the stories he employed never get outdated. In fact, the divine genius of Scripture is that our thinking is stimulated every time we read it. But do we find ourselves

referring to movies from the 1980s, athletes from the 1990s, and issues from the 2000s when we're teaching catechism class in 2015? Do we stay with the standard applications we've used since we graduated from the seminary? The importance of continued growth in knowing people and knowing how to communicate to people is emphasized again.

Perhaps most helpful for the practical work of our teaching is the way you place before us a smorgasbord of methods employed by Jesus. As you review each method, you provide a helpful application for our own teaching. The list of questions to ask while preparing a Bible class (or sermon) is worth taping to the computer monitor (p. 16). Your discussion of Jesus' different types of questioning and the way he listened to questioners point to the importance of thorough preparation (p. 20-23). Jesus' thoughtful and careful approach to confrontation is especially needed as a model in our day of cell phone cameras and handheld recording devices (p. 23-24). You demonstrate how Jesus understood the importance of active learning and activity to learn (p. 24-25). The list of questions regarding a whole host of various methods Jesus employed (p. 26-27) will get us thinking as we tackle these portions of the Gospels in sermons and Bible classes. Throughout your essay, you even model for us ways these methods play out in communicating the Word (e.g., the introductory story about the inept FBI men [p. 1]; the wounded bird story and the way you used it [p. 17-19]; the extended cement truck illustration in the conclusion [p. 27-28]).

But there's a lesson to keep before us in the various methods Jesus used in his teaching.

Jesus championed such assorted methodology for the benefit of his neighbor in the learning environment. That's exactly what was needed to emphasize God's grace. Such diverse methodology proves there is no single silver bullet method for us as we teach people. As we continue to grow in the Word and get to know the people around us, these methods of Jesus are there for our contemplation. They are there for our stimulation. They are also there for our apt adaptation and emulation. (p. 27)

We all bring different gifts and experiences to the classroom as pastoral educators. Those we are teaching—whether children or adults—are unique and varied individuals with a variety of learning styles and experiences. The same powerful Word is taught for the same reason: to save souls. But how that teaching takes places—that is where there is room for variety and growth.

And that's where your conclusion was especially valuable. In a vivid way, the law convicted us of our less than best efforts in teaching. "Doesn't love for neighbor lead us to strive to grow in aptness? If we cement ourselves into ruts, predictability, clichés, creative-less lessons, constant sports illustrations, egoistic stories or ones that no longer relate, use of various *-ism* ending words for the law sections in our speaking—our teaching is suffering. So are the people we're trying to serve. And if we're going to be honest, so are we" (p. 28). Then the gospel of our Master Teacher was brought to bear on us to forgive us, to encourage us, and to strengthen us for our calling as teachers of his holy Word. "What miraculous teaching God has given even to those who teach! He hammered his carpenter son to the woodwork of the cross for us. By the active and passive obedience of this teacher, Christ Jesus, even our teaching sins he covers. Let your soul drown daily in repentance and constantly be renewed and revolve around your justification" (p. 28). Thank you, Pastor Mueller, for your instruction in our Savior's teaching so we continue to be apt to teach his Word.

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