

2015 Symposium

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Reaction to Rev. Daniel Habben's Essay, "St. Augustine Taught the Catechumens and So Do We"

The ability to teach is a necessary prerequisite for being a pastor. In 1 Timothy 3:2 one of the descriptions of the overseer is that he be "διδασκτικόν", which Liddell-Scott-Jones defines as "apt at teaching." Paul repeats this admonition in the lesser known 2 Timothy 2:24, which reads, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful."¹ Again the Greek is "διδασκτικόν". This "apt to teach" thing is crucial!

But then we ask the good Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" and it gets sticky, doesn't it? Is the best teacher the one who can deliver loads of quality information? Is the best teacher the one who can move the hearts of his students? Is the best teacher the one whose students put into action what has been learned? Is the best teacher a "guide on the side" or a "sage on the stage" or both? Is it all of this and more?

And so, what a challenging assignment was giving to Pastor Habben, to guide us through the maze of adult education! And Pastor Habben did us a great service in writing such a practical paper.

There is much to appreciate in the paper. Here are some points which particularly struck me:

- Pastor Habben's balanced approach. While he often quoted or referenced Scripture which urged us to put the Word into practice, he also referenced Scripture which urged us to simply grow in knowledge. Both are valid! He touched on both the value and pitfalls of various teaching approaches, such as lecture, question and answer, etc. While he encouraged us to try new things and suggested ways to do so, sometimes even strongly (cf. the next bullet point), he didn't demand.
- Pastor Habben was unapologetic about his views. For example, on page 5 Pastor Habben writes, "Still, you should have a clear purpose for your lesson." He could have said, "It might be wise for you to have a clear purpose for a lesson." He could have said, "Having a clear purpose for your Bible studies could be valuable." Pastor Habben chose to say, "... you should..." implying that he sees having a clear purpose as a *vital* component in preparing (adult) Bible studies. And just so we're clear, there is no Bible passage which

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (2 Ti 2:24). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

demands that; we're in the realm of freedom, doing our best to exercise wisdom. You can disagree with Pastor Habben if you wish. I appreciated Pastor Habben's willingness to speak forthrightly.

- Pastor Habben was willing to share his own challenges. For example, on page 8 he shared that in his own Bible study sessions he often fails to give people a chance to practice what they've learned, because of time constraints, even though he made clear that he sees putting the Word into practice as one of the most important points for which the adult Bible teacher ought to strive. How many of us have felt the awful bondage of the ticking clock as we attempt to teach! How heartening to hear from an expert that he too struggles with this!
- Pastor Habben eschewed (!) pre-chew Charlie. (Who of us will forget that video?!) More importantly, we'll remember the point he made: to allow our learners to experience the joy of chewing on God's Word for themselves. And Pastor Habben practiced what he preached. He not only told us; he illustrated it for us as he presented the paper in a way that allowed us to actively participate, to munch on the ideas for ourselves.
- Pastor Habben made use of teaching ideas which he learned from others, and both referenced the people from whom he'd learned the idea and thanked them for it. What a great example! None of us are too old (or too young) to keep learning from others! If the wheel has been invented, use the wheel! (And perhaps even give credit to that person, if that makes sense.)
- Examples, examples, examples.

There are a couple of segments worthy either of further comment or of clarification.

- On page 12, Pastor Habben speaks of dialogic learning. To make clear, DL is built on knowledge, either knowledge which is already there from previous study or life-experience, or on knowledge which the learners have just acquired. So, in the dialogue, it's not simply the learners sharing their opinions. Rather, they're dialoguing with one another on the basis of knowledge. And of course, we'll be rooted in the Word, as that is the power of God for salvation. And so a proper use of dialogue is discussion based upon truths of the Word. An example: "Read Ephesians 1. In groups of four, list the top three truths from that chapter which you would want to be reminded of if you were on your deathbed." As the group dialogues with each other, each person's understanding of the chapter will be broadened as each person brings a different perspective based on previous Biblical knowledge and life-experience. But the dialogue is rooted in the truths of the chapter itself.
- On page 24 Pastor Habben briefly discusses Constructivism, and does a nice job of warning us against Constructivism's negatives. However, similar to the word "evangelical," the term "constructivism" gets used in a variety of ways. When some people talk about constructivism, they assert that there is no objective truth, that the learner has the right to "construct" whatever (s)he wants, and that's regardless of the content of what's being taught. That's highly objectionable, and Pastor Habben correctly warned us against that. However, sometimes the term is used this way: "the learner takes the new information which he's just learned, compares it to his prior knowledge, and

from that constructs an updated understanding.” That can be just fine. So, be careful to neither embrace nor shun a “constructivist” idea out of hand; it depends on what sort of “constructivist” idea it is!

- “A Good Fit for BIC?” Pastor Habben’s encouragements are all well taken. Yes, you’re generally teaching adults in Bible Instruction Class, and so adult learning methods are appropriate, such as the use of open questions, pair-and-share, placing a problem in front of them which needs a solution, etc. However, much of what makes adult learning work is built on the assumption that the adults have a reservoir of knowledge and/or experiences from which to draw. You may find in the BIC setting that because of the paucity of Bible knowledge, you’ll have to do more lecturing. Yes, they have the life-experience, but they likely don’t have the Biblical knowledge to make proper sense out of the life experience. (That may/will change as you get deeper into the course.) Secondly, because of the amount of material which needs to be covered in each lesson, you may have little time for using break-out groups, discovery learning, etc. (That ticking clock!) Please don’t understand that – as Pastor Habben put it – to be your free pass to be Pre-chew Charlie. But, also please don’t walk away with a load of guilt if you aren’t able to use adult educational methods as fully as you might like in the BIC setting. Do what is wise so that the Word of God can be taught with excellence.

In wrapping up, I again want to thank Pastor Habben for his work. He’s given us many examples to draw upon and in his appendices there is a wealth of excellent material for further contemplation. I would leave you with the same urging as Pastor Habben did on page 27, quoting Augustine:

Do not grow complacent with what you are. Where you have become pleased with yourself, there you get stuck. If you say ‘That’s enough,’ you are finished. Always add something more. Keep on walking. Always forge ahead.

May God grant us energy to keep forging ahead, to keep growing, to keep improving, that many more may come to know His Word more fully through our teaching.

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