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CHALLENGES TO TEACHING THE FAITH AS A COMPONENT OF MISSION STRATEGY

by Terry Cripe

As a response to Dr. Arand's paper, "Teaching the Faith as a Component of Mission Strategy," President Cripe details how pastors, teachers and parents can best carry out the all-important task of passing on the faith through imparting, receiving and applying that which is found in Luther's Catechism.

THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME to respond to Dr. Arand's fine paper on teaching the faith as a component of mission strategy. I would like to focus on the word "teaching" in the theme, "Teaching the Faith as a Component of Mission Strategy" in my response. President Harrison has reported the diminishing number of children who remain in the church after they have been confirmed, which indicates that when it comes to handing on the faith to the next generation, we have some challenges to overcome. I want to raise them using an acronym whose letters you know from a different context: IRA. Imparting the faith, Receiving the faith and Applying the faith.

Imparting the faith requires those who are apt to teach. If parents have found themselves inadequate, pastors have not been the best equipped teachers either. When I was in seminary, I had one course in parish education. I did not learn how to teach anything from that one course, except why the then new *Mission: Life* curriculum was deeply flawed. From the number of conversations I have had over the years, I have learned that many pastors would rather have a boil lanced than teach seventh and eighth graders the catechism. We have rationalized that it must be the age; we should teach them when they are in 10th or 11th grade instead. We have said it must be because the children are distracted by a plethora of after-school activities, Saturday sporting events or the onrush of hormones. Or else it is that they are raised by uncommitted parents. We have convinced ourselves that divorced fam-

ilies are the culprit. We have tried Concordia Publishing House (CPH) materials, Australian curricula, Don Ginkle or Abdon workbooks and who knows who else. Perhaps we have tried to write suitable materials ourselves when, like the fabled princess and the pea, we couldn't get comfortable with anyone else's materials.

Finally, in a fit of desperation, we have even tried to rationalize the children's boredom by comforting ourselves with the theology of the cross. If the children find learning the catechism challenging or exciting, the pastor must be doing something wrong. The children are supposed to suffer through it, an attitude often reinforced by parental remembrances of their own catechism experiences. Teachers in school systems are sometimes visited by the principal to evaluate how they teach in the classroom. If we believe that teaching the faith is an essential piece of

mission strategy, perhaps those who are trained to teach, those who have proven themselves to be good educators, ought to sit in on the confirmation class and evaluate how we pastors teach. Our current dropout rate post-confirmation demands it. As for catechizing adults, if we have located the "fault" in the teen years with their attendant handicaps, then surely we would do better passing on the

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faith to adults! But can that happen when the instruction consists of three one-hour meetings on a Sunday evening? How many pastors have observed that once adults completed the so-called "adult information course," their attendance at church fell off, just like their teenage counterparts' did? The truth is, whether one is an adult, a teen or an elementary student, you know when you are sitting

in the presence of a master teacher. Nobody has to drag you or threaten you to attend. It's not just that they teach well. It is that the student learns and the faith is imparted.

Receiving the faith presents challenges related to culture. As Dr. Arand notes, Luther's culture was an oral culture. Oral cultures are largely illiterate and without formal education. Truths are received and passed on through memorization. From one perspective, Luther was right to call the church a "mouth house." But for the Church to be an effective mouth house, it must also be an effective "ear house." In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, author Neil Postman recounts an interesting fact about the Lincoln-Douglas debates.¹ Douglas would speak for an hour or more, Lincoln would speak for the same amount of time and rebuttals from both men followed. The crowd would disperse for lunch and then return. When it came time for question-and-answer from the crowd, the nature of their questions indicated that the audience had followed the content of the debates quite closely. Consider the length of the sermons that Walther and his contemporaries preached during the same period of our nation's history. Let today's average preacher try to speak past 15 minutes, and he will see that we are no longer a culture of primary orality. The popularity of PowerPoint shows that our culture is far more visual. Curiously, most PowerPoints contain not pictures, but printed words. Lots of them. But that only gives an important clue to the limits of orality in our day: What the ear hears must be reinforced by what the eye sees. If hearers are no longer able to retain what they hear over time, neither do speakers use the rhetorical techniques that could make receiving easier. Members of a primary oral culture impart and receive truths through the spoken word in a dialog fashion that also relies upon memorization. We had a fairly easy time of memorizing as long as the public schools required it — some Shakespeare, the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Long before the advent of

iPods and the like, memorization dropped out of favor in the schools. So, many pastors cut back on what they required to be memorized. When schools weren't teaching students *how* to memorize texts, pastors lost an important ally. And yet, as recently as this week, an article urging Americans to memorize the Gettysburg Address was published in *USA Today*. "Memorizing is internalizing," Ken Burns, the man behind this push, asserted. That is an important truth with which we would do well to wrestle

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when coming at the task of passing on the faith to the next generation. Despite no longer being a primary oral culture, there is one part of our culture that is still heavily oral (or should I say "aural"): music. I see countless teens and college-aged folks walking around with ear buds connected to an iPod or its equivalent. Skillful use of repetition, rhythm and rhyme — the three "R's"

of oral transmission — virtually guarantee that lyrics will be implanted in the memory. Several years ago, I purchased a CD of two vinyl LPs I listened to last when I was in high school. To my surprise, I could sing along with just about every one of the 22 songs on that CD without missing a word. There have been sporadic stabs at setting the catechism to music in our history, but so far, nothing has stuck for a multitude of reasons. And yet the potential help in receiving the faith could be tremendous were this able to be done successfully, especially when one considers how much of today's music is really rhythmic rhyming speech.

My final concern has to do with Applying the faith. Dr. Arand lays out the structure and order of the catechism in a marvelous way. I wish someone had done that for me years ago. But a clue about why that didn't happen can be found in a TED talk by James Flynn entitled, "Why Our IQ Levels Are Higher Than Our Grandparents."² In that talk, he notes that the score of 70, which those of the earlier part of the previous century achieved on the IQ test would, by our standards, classify them as having developmental disabilities. Conversely, the 130 that

¹ Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 40-44.

² James Flynn. "Why Our IQ Levels Are Higher Than Our Grandparents." http://www.ted.com/talks/james_flynn_why_our_iq_levels_are_higher_than_our_grandparents.html

many score today would be categorized as gifted by their standards. Why the difference? The areas of the test where huge advancement has been made are the areas requiring abstract thought. In the early 20th century, Alexander Luria did research among the people of his day to discover their capacity for abstract thought and their ability to classify things. For instance, he asked one man, “What do a fish and a crow have in common?” The man replied, “Nothing. You can eat a fish but you can’t eat a crow. One swims, the other flies.” Luria replied, “But aren’t both animals?” “No,” the man replied. “One is a fish and the other a bird.” He said to another man, “There are no camels in Germany. Hamburg is a city in Germany. Are there any camels in Hamburg?” The man replied, “Well, if it’s large enough, there ought to be camels there. If there aren’t any, perhaps the town is too small.” To a third interviewee, Luria said, “The North Pole is covered with snow. Wherever groundcover is white, there the bears are white. What color are the bears at the North Pole?” The man replied, “Such a thing is to be settled by testimony. If a wise man came from the North Pole and told me the bears are white, I might believe him. But every bear I’ve seen has been either brown or black.” Another interviewee complained, “How can we solve problems that aren’t real? None of these is real.”

The 1910 proficiency test given to students in Ohio tested for answers to concrete questions such as, “Name the state capitols.” Today, those questions are largely abstract, such as, “Why is the largest city of a state rarely its capitol?” During the years of racial tension, during the course of a conversation with his parents and grandparents, Dr. Flynn asked, “What if you woke up black one morning?” “That is the dumbest thing you’ve ever said,” came the reply. “Nobody has ever awoke to find themselves black.” In 1910, only 3 percent of the workforce was employed in a job that was cognitively demanding. Today it stands at 35 percent.

Now where I am headed with this is that the transmission of the faith in our circles has been largely concerned with the concrete. That is what gets taught

in oral cultures where the catechism began. It is the place where one must begin. But to navigate daily life as a Christian, one must be able to imagine him or herself in a variety of “what-if” situations and be able to apply the concrete he or she has learned. A personal incident: When studying at Princeton Seminary, I nearly failed the midterm exam on the Gospel of Mark. The professor was mystified because I had done well in class participation. I explained to him, “At Springfield, our exams asked only true/false, fill in the blank, and multiple choice questions.” His test, all essay questions, assumed we had mastered the cognitive requirements, so it consisted only of questions that made us use the cognitive base to tease out and develop the themes present in Mark’s Gospel.

The title “Adult Information Class” betrays this same intent to transmit facts. When Dr. Arand observed that the Table of Duties is the most neglected area of the catechism, he testified to our tendency to focus on the concrete facts and let thinking about how it might apply to vocation slide. His further notice that Luther omits certain topics from the catechism — such as justification, the two natures of Christ and the like — puts Luther’s catechism in sharp contrast to the doctrinal tour-de-force of the so-called “Schwan catechism.” But teach-

ing how to struggle with the abstract “what-if” questions is equally important if the Christian faith is to be transmitted to the next generation as more than a series of facts one needs to remember in order to pass through the pearly gates unscathed or as a series of propositions to which one must assent in order to become a member of a congregation. Dr. Arand’s paper helps us focus on the catechism as enchiridion, a handbook for daily living. In a culture that thrives on relationships, developing one in which the faith can be imparted, received and applied will be a blessing for our future.

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