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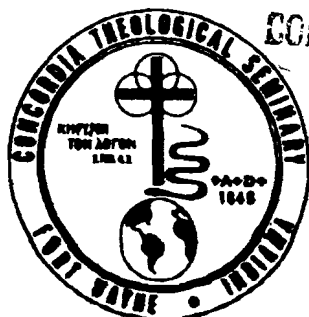
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# Teaching The Christian Faith By Developing a Repertoire of Skills

Anne Jenkins Driessnack

The continuation of religion not only involves maintaining the content of faith, but developing teaching skills to insure that this content is preserved in its integrity. Through a survey of several religious teacher training institutions, I determined that the major emphasis was placed on mastering the content with little or even no attempt to master those skills involved in developing actual teaching skills necessary for effectively communicating that doctrinal content. This discovery led me to apply recently developed methods of secular education to religious instruction. The end result of this research was a doctoral dissertation, *An Instructional Package For Training Teachers of Religion in the Skillful Use of Questions*, submitted to Columbia University Teachers College in 1977. Being totally committed to the doctrinal heritage of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I set as my goal the application of tested methods in education to this faith.

My own background played a significant part in choosing this topic for research. Sunday School, as I remember it, centered in a teacher *lecturing* us with little response expected of the pupils. Some times we were interested in the topic, but more often we were confused or bored and were simply turned off by the entire teaching procedure. Without universalizing my own experience, it is safe to conclude that others suffered in a similar way. Since then, pedagogy has made great strides and these advances have already been applied in the areas of social sciences, reading, literature, applied sciences, and other subjects.

The effective use of questions proved to be the key to good teaching. If the application of questions appropriate for the learners in secular subjects had been so successful, then the same method should be applied in the teaching of religion. This method I attempted and demonstrated. The purpose of questions is eliciting verbal responses from the learner to determine their level of knowledge. Many teachers fail because they are "talking over" the heads of their hearers or "talking down" to them. When the learners do not understand the teacher, they turn him off. When the teacher is too simplistic, the pupils feel their intelligence insulted and the response can

be contempt. Both extremes must be avoided by the successful teacher.

My research in teaching religion involved both children and adults. I was first given a clue to certain teaching difficulties in the preparation of my dissertation<sup>1</sup> for the master's degree, in which I discovered that the second grade school children I tested retained little of what had been read to them by the teacher. Unless questions are asked and asked continually of the pupils, there can be no certainty that they are comprehending anything. This was the result of my first research. The youngsters during the learning period were thinking about their favorite baseball team, lunch, or recess, but they were neither listening nor understanding the materials which they were suppose to learn.

Verbalized responses from the students can aid in correcting this kind of poor teaching situation. A teacher skilled in putting questions to the pupils can adjust to a level of questioning which will benefit them. What is true in the teaching of adolescents is equally true in teaching adults. Both areas are of prime concern for Lutheran pastors who regularly conduct adult Bible classes, adult confirmation and baptism classes, and other groups within the parish. More and more of the pastor's work load is spent in teaching adults without any lessening of his obligations to the youth and confirmation classes.

The lecture method of teaching without the use of questions relies solely on a written or oral examination to determine its effectiveness. After the test has been given, a grade is given and the teacher has no way of determining with certainty whether any complex abstract concepts have been developed in the learners' minds. It is the nature of a written examination to measure the factual level of the pupil and not the abstract level of higher thinking. It must be repeated that what is true of the children in education is just as true of the adults. The solution from moving from the level of just communicating facts to the learner to the level where the learner becomes capable of his own thinking is in the proper application of questions throughout the entire period of instruction. I am in no way suggesting that the factual level is unimportant. Not only is it important but it is *absolutely essential* for Christian learning. Still the next level of putting these facts together in a meaningful relationship must be reached, unless the hearer can do this, doctrine and life remain separated.

Though the pedagogical science of formulating questions for various intellectual levels is quite recent, the method itself has been used by great teachers in all times. This was demonstrated by George Sullivan whose research in the 1960s profiled the techniques of great teachers from Confucius through Thorndike.<sup>2</sup>

The effective use of questions in teaching religion is endorsed for Christians by the large number of questions which Jesus used in teaching His divine doctrine. One does not have to search too long in the Gospels to find Jesus questioning His hearers to bring them to a new level of awareness. For the larger audiences, Jesus used what we know as the lecture method, a procedure common to ancient and modern cultures without any regard to the ideological content. In more intimate settings Jesus used questions, all of which are well known to us. Here are just a few instances: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? (Lk. 2:49)"; "Who do men say that the Son of man is? (Mt. 16:13)." When asked about the great commandment, Jesus answers and then offers His own question about the relationship of Christ to David (Mt. 22:42-4). When confronted by a question from an opponent, Jesus responds skillfully with a question for the opponent which requires him to move to another plateau in his thinking. Jesus' use of questions effectively in silencing His opponents has been the subject of recent New Testament research. Jesus uses the lecture method to convey necessary information about the kingdom, but He uses the question method to bring the believer and the unbeliever to an awareness of his own situation. This is the ultimate goal in preaching and teaching. Certainly Jesus provides for Christian teachers a pedagogical model which can be safely and effectively emulated. It would be difficult to locate any place in the Gospels where Jesus questions a person to determine his level of factual knowledge. All His listeners have the same facts at their disposal but not the same understanding of those facts.

We are not suggesting that just any question will attain our teaching goals. Just an abundance of questions is not going to make for better learners or more effective teachers. Here modern educational theorists can help us determine what sort of questions are appropriate for different age groups and for various levels of intellectual development. One knows that one addresses undergraduate college and graduate seminary students differently than children in the Sunday School nursery. Our goal is to measure these differences scientifically so that our teaching methods can be most effective in different situations in conveying the *one* message of salvation.

Benjamin Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago, pioneered in arranging for a proper ordering of questions. This ordering of questioning is called a *taxonomy* in educational jargon.<sup>3</sup> Many public and parochial school teachers active today completed their studies before his ideas were assimilated into the curriculums of teachers colleges. As mentioned above, I took for my goal the application of Bloom's principles in using questions to the sphere of teaching religion. Showing his

taxonomy to be effective in the teaching of religion was the goal in the research for my dissertation.

No research could be tied down simply to the findings of one man. The theories of Piaget<sup>4</sup>, Ausubel<sup>5</sup>, Bloom<sup>6</sup>, Goldman<sup>7</sup>, Taba<sup>8</sup>, as well as those developed at the Far West Laboratory at Berkley<sup>9</sup>, and Syracuse University<sup>10</sup> also were employed.

*The Instructional Package* is composed of three modules. Module I deals extensively with skills in applying the Bloom Taxonomy in teaching religion, including the acquisition of questioning techniques which may be employed within any of the six taxonomic levels. The culminating behavior to the second module is the development of a strategy of questioning representing an effective shifting of thought onto higher levels. Module III discusses readiness for religion. The trainee, having acquired skills in using a taxonomy for teaching religion, must now demonstrate he is familiar with readiness concepts regarding how far up a taxonomy various age groups may be expected to move with understanding.

Though there might be some exceptions, children under twelve simply are not ready for abstract theological thinking. Those who are pushing for earlier confirmation and communion might want to readjust their views in the light of this research. Twelve, thirteen, and fourteen year olds, the confirmation instruction ages in our Lutheran congregations, are just those youth who are first really capable of the abstract thinking necessary to benefit from abstract theological thought. The concepts of real presence, absolution, forgiveness, grace, are examples of abstract theological thought. Children under the age of twelve find such abstract thought meaningless. Bible stories and facts are examples of concrete data. Primary teaching should concentrate here.

If there is a tendency to introduce abstract religious thinking to our children too soon, it is matched by an equally regrettable attitude of using simple fact communication on older youth and adults. Too often the Ten Commandments are taught pedagogically in the same way to seven-year-olds as to fourteen-year-olds. Teenagers are capable of applying Biblical principles to their own lives and should be allowed to do so, and a skilled teacher should lead the student to do this for himself. This is the goal of any Christian pastor or teacher. My research was to help teachers gear their teaching to a variety of audiences through the proper selection of questions.

In the spring of 1976, I field tested my theories at Concordia Theological Seminary, then at Springfield, Illinois. Second year students engaged in field work at neighboring congregations provided the testing ground for my research. The students taped their own Bible class and junior confirmation classes and together we reviewed their techniques. Thus my research in-

volved both children and adults. I discovered that the class ended up questioning the seminary student teacher about material unrelated to the topic. Often it was trivia and obviously nothing to do with the planned lesson. In one case a Bible class on the book of Genesis ended up with questions about Revelation. All this in fifty minutes! Such results are both amusing and pathetic for the teacher. So much wonderful material carefully prepared is lost simply because proper teaching methods were not employed. The seminary student teachers had to learn that they were the ones who were to address questions to their classes and not the reverse. The teacher is to determine the level of the class - and not the reverse! By learning to ask the right kind of questions, the seminary student teachers could correct this educationally deplorable situation. My research shows happily that each of the seminary student teachers involved in the research did learn the proper technique of questioning. They were able to convey the really important Biblical and doctrinal material and still involve their learners. An ancillary finding, which was not an original object of my research, showed that the seminary student teachers had better discipline in the class through this questioning method and had better control of its general direction.

In our church special attention is given to Martin Luther as a great pedagogue. His questioning strategy is outlined in *Luther on Education*.<sup>11</sup> The great reformer not only wanted the students to repeat the truth, but to understand and apply it to their lives. The *Small Catechism* is after all a series of answers to questions, the most important of which is the familiar "What does this mean?"

The seminarians who were involved with me in this research remarked that they would not only use the questioning technique in teaching their youth and adult classes, but even more importantly in their sermons. The rhetorical question is hardly a modern invention, but could spruce up many sermons in which the listener feels he is being lectured. Examination of the data from the tapes showed that the seminarian teachers not only used more questions, but used abstract questions, the type so essential in the teaching of religion. The research with the seminarian providing the teaching situations to test the principles proved successful even though they were originally unfamiliar with such educational shop talk as modules, one to one feedback aspects, behaviorally, stated objectives, and the self-pacing concepting. The seminarian response was positive and without their cooperation my research would not have been possible. Because of this cooperation, the final product, *An Instructional Package for Training Teachers of Religion in the Skillful Use of Questions* was dedicated to Concordia

Theological Seminary and especially those second year students of 1975-1976 academic year.

This research in the effective use of appropriate questions shows that there is a need for religion curriculum revision. I am speaking specifically to the situation in the Missouri Synod, though I am sure that similar needs could be shown in other church bodies. Not only do teachers lack the proper questioning skills so necessary for effective teaching, but I have found that the materials now in use constantly use theological vocabulary beyond the student's level of intellectual development. Abstract theological vocabulary simply should not be used with children under eleven. Reading specialists are revising vocabulary for children in secular fields and the same revision is required in religious materials for children. Even St. Paul distinguishes between the knowledge of a child and that of an adult (1 Cor. 13:11). Where abstract concepts are used, they must be repeated with frequent explanation. Any new curricula adopted by the church should be thoroughly field tested and then revised according to the findings before a final distribution to our congregations and schools. This is no Trojan horse to bring in new doctrine, but an effective method in involving teachers in the faith once delivered to the saints.

Since submitting my research to Columbia Teachers' College, I have been able to test these methods with other groups. The faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, now at Fort Wayne, went through the same basic procedures as were used with their second year students the year before. The testing consisted of taping actual classroom lectures. The results were reviewed with each professor. A chart showing the level of questioning was made for each instructor. The method was also used in a summer course at Concordia Teachers College, River Forest. A faculty group there also went through the same procedures and the theology department asked for an introductory lecture on the method.

The second year student at the seminary are still being trained in this method with the hope that they will give it further use during their vicarage year.

Many of the supervisory pastors of these students engaged in this program are voluntarily going through the program to improve their teaching skills. Concordia Theological Seminary in the 1978 summer session will conduct an institute in which these methods will be presented. The institute is open to all pastors and will be conducted on the Fort Wayne campus.<sup>12</sup> My research began with some seminary students I personally believe that the results can benefit all our pastors. My fervent hope is that these principles may be shared with as many as possible.

## FOOTNOTES

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3. Benjamin S. Bloom, "Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives," *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay, 1956.
4. Jean Piaget, "The Attainment of Invariants and Reversible Operations in the Development of Thinking." *Readings in Human Development*. Edited by Harold W. Bernard and Wesley C. Huckius, translated and revised by Marianne L. Simmel. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968. pp. 136-49.
5. David Paul Ausubel, *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*. New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, Inc., 1968. pp. 129-30, 133, 148, 153, 161, 208.
6. Benjamin S. Bloom, J. Thomas Hastings and George F. Madaus, Condensed Version of the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives," *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1971. pp. 271-273.
7. Ronald Goldman, *Readiness For Religion*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1965. p. 115.
8. Hilda Taba and Freeman Elzey, "Teaching Strategies and Thought Processes," *Teachers College Record*, LXV (New York: Columbia University, 1964) p. 528.
9. Meredith D. Gall, Barbara Dunning and Rita Weathersby, *Minicourse-9 Higher Cognitive Questioning* (Beverly Hills: Far West Laboratory for Ed. Research and Development, 1971) pp. 9, 10.
10. The Syracuse University School of Education, *A Catalog of Concepts in the Pedagogical Domain of Teacher Education*, Multi-State Consortium on PBE and Leadership Training Institute for Protocol Materials (St. Louis: Graduate Institute of Education, Washington University, 1974).
11. Martin Luther, *Luther on Education*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, translated by F.V.N. Painter, 1889. pp. 152, 153, 154, 167.
12. Editor's Note: Dr. Driessack is referring to the special Bible Class Conference scheduled on the seminary campus for June 4-9 during the 1978 summer session. She is scheduled to present the method in more detail.

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