

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
2015 SYMPOSIUM ON THE PASTOR AS TEACHER

Reaction to Paul Prange's Essay
Luther Taught the Children—And So Do We

HIGHLIGHTS

Thank you very much for a reminder of the key role God's servant Martin Luther played in the development of education more generally, and more important, the role he played in promoting an education that is distinctly Christian. We stand on his shoulders. We thank the Lord for the blessing that he continues to be, and we thank the Lord for you as you have brought that to our attention once again.

Your paper covered many different topics, not only evaluating Luther's contributions but also offering general advice which is profitable for Lutheran shepherds to consider. A summary of the key points . . .

- Luther cared about education. As the Holy Spirit has communicated with humankind through words, Luther wanted as many as possible to have direct access to those sacred words.
- The Small Catechism is genius in presenting and summarizing the key teachings of Scripture. It has benefit for the young, yes, but also for all throughout their lives.
- Performance evaluation and professional development is key to keeping an instructor's aptness-to-teach gifts sharp.
- Understanding the unique features of each particular step in human growth and development helps one better instruct particular age groups.
- Involving students in projects can increase interest and permit them to engage material in a way that helps them understand the lifelong purpose for what they are learning.
- Employ technology wherever useful.
- Recognize the desire of many parents to be connected with those who are instructing their children. Recognize also the importance of highlighting the key role parents themselves play in the spiritual training of their children.

- Appreciate and encourage contributions that other trained educators can make to the larger educational purpose of your congregation. Appreciate and articulate confidently the emphasis you as a pastor properly bring to Christian education, the centrality of the gospel in all that we do.

THE SMALL CATECHISM AS DEVOTION

One of Luther's most enduring marks on Lutheran education is his Small Catechism. As you note the genius of the Small Catechism for instruction of both children and adults, you asked us to consider what it would take to have the Small Catechism commonly used in our homes as intended.

The answers to your question are no doubt multiple. Offering some early information about the design of the upcoming new catechism, a cooperative effort of NPH and WLS, can offer an "Amen" to your encouragement that the Small Catechism be woven more deeply into our own devotional fabric and the devotional lives of those we serve.

While the overall structure and design of the catechism will remain most familiar, purposeful adjustments have been made so as to highlight the potential the Small Catechism has for lifelong use. Each of the sub-units within the catechism—for example, "Second Article – Humiliation & Exultation"—begin with an introductory paragraph which seeks to explain why what comes next is relevant and important to the life of a Christian. The substance of the unit which follows continues to employ, generally speaking, a question-and-answer format, though in certain cases where the answer to the question is more transparently self-explanatory based on the passages, answers are omitted. In addition, questions are sometimes prefaced with information that serves a transitional purpose, making it possible to read through a particular sub-unit more as a chapter in a book than as a sequential listing of entries. Finally, every lesson (sub-unit) concludes with a "Connections" section. This is a proactively devotional element, one which begins with a devotional-type paragraph highlighting the relevance to life of a key theme from the unit. A longer Bible section reference—often a Bible story—follows which connects to this theme. Thought questions are offered which promote understanding and application of that Bible section. These questions can be used either in group discussion or for personal reflection.

Following these questions is a short section from Luther or the Lutheran confessions. Hymn stanzas are offered, should a family wish to include singing in their devotional activity.

It is our prayer that these various elements will contribute to the very things our essayist envisions—greater use of the catechism among us, and beyond the age of confirmation.

CATECHISM INSTRUCTION AT THE SEMINARY

The essay directed significant attention to the pastor's role as teacher of youth. The seminary curriculum reflects this emphasis. A good three-quarters of one semester (out of the three semesters during which a seminary student studies Christian education) is dedicated most directly to catechism instruction. What are we teaching our students today when it comes to Catechism methodology (one may notice many similarities to the advice offered in this essay)?

We begin by asking them to look at a body of material and decide what goals they have for that material. We ask them to consider cognitive goals—what are students to learn as far as knowledge goes? We ask them to consider affective goals—what impact does God wish a particular set of truths to have on the human heart? We ask them to consider volitive goals—what life changes are envisioned in connection with a particular portion of Bible teaching?

With goals identified, they craft an overriding purpose for a particular lesson. They identify key points that, when put together, lead one toward that overriding purpose.

With a skeletal structure in place, particular Bible verses are selected. Plans are then made for how their young students can best grapple with the truths of a particular Bible verse or verses. While a sample pattern is followed initially, there is no ultimate insistence on always having a certain number or sequencing of questions. Principles are emphasized—ensure that your students understand the context and meaning of a verse; ensure that questions would strike a seventh or eighth grader as worthwhile, sufficiently challenging, thought-provoking and capable of leading to a better understanding of the truth; strive for flow, with everything moving naturally from one step to the next.

For those of you who have been teaching for many years, what has just been described is no doubt familiar and by now instinctive. What you probably don't want to be as teachers, however, is rigid. You recognize the need for variety, creativity and engagement. You recognize that students learn in different ways. You recognize that being able to organize thoughts in a logical way need not imply that thoughts be communicated only via straight-line logic. Your teaching style has evolved.

In proactive fashion, we encourage our seminarians already now to spread their wings in that regard. After they have mastered a basic functional approach to organizing material, we introduce the technique of learning activities. With learning activities, the instructor crafts a creative exercise which allows for significant additional student participation, often group work, but most important, a very personal engagement in Bible material. Learning activities can serve to elucidate a single Bible verse. Learning activities can also serve to engage a much larger body of material, occupying an entire third or even more of a class, depending on design and purpose.

Seminarians also consider a model for teaching catechism truth based on Bible stories. They learn basic techniques for presenting a story and then using the story as a new way to engage students in what otherwise might have been a more dogmatically arranged presentation of material.

Variety in methodology is presented. Significant hands-on practice offers opportunity to enhance the wisdom that future pastors will employ as they determine how best to communicate God's truth. Continued Spirit-given commitment to communicating the propositional truths of the Scripture remains at the heart of Christian education, which we also rejoice to call Lutheran education.

Paul, thank you for reminding us of the treasure God has entrusted to us and the privilege we have to move forward with that treasure.

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