



Teaching – A Disappearing Art

Introduction

Over the past fifty years, the state and national governments of the United States have gotten more and more involved in the public education systems of America. Laws upon laws, and regulation upon regulation have been enacted to "improve," "reform," and "re-invent" education. And along with all of this regulation has come a fantastic injection of money, millions upon millions of dollars are being spent every year on public education. Yet the results are dismal. More kids graduate from high schools who cannot read than ever before, to say nothing of their skills in math, science and other knowledge essential to intelligent life in a modern society. There could be light at the end of the tunnel, but don't expect it to happen here. The country of New Zealand a few years ago totally reformed its education system by three very simple and commonsense steps. All school administration was replaced by local boards elected by the parents of the children in that school and no one else. All parents were given total freedom to send their children to any school, public or private. All schools, public and private, were given funds based entirely on their enrollment. As a result, all schools in New Zealand have improved, including public schools which now are quite equal to private schools in their ability to educate.

New Zealand, like America, had been in the grasp of the "professional" educators who had adopted the administrative and teaching methods that provided the greatest benefits and control to those in the teachers' union. As a result, millions of children were "left behind," just as they have been here in the United States.

One of the greatest tragedies in the United States in recent years is that churches and religious institutions have more and more adopted the failed teaching methods of the secular school systems around us. While a small minority of Christians have turned to Christian schools and homeschooling to overcome the failure of the public education system, the vast majority of Christians, and even perhaps most Christian schools have simply "bought into" the failed methods and means of public education. The result, of course, has been the most ignorant generation of church members in American history. The vast majority of American "born again" pastors cannot even recite the Ten Commandments, and their listeners are even worse off. According to a recent survey published in *World Magazine*, some seventy-six percent of American Christians believe that we are saved through "faith and works," rather than through "faith alone."

Into this "world of hurt" walks the Reformed Church in the U.S. like sheep among wolves. Seminaries seldom teach biblical principles of learning, even though the ministry of the church is a teaching ministry (Matthew 28:20). Thus pastors, consistory members and Sunday School teachers generally have no way to judge the biblical usefulness of teaching materials, nor to discern which methods truly are effective in teaching the Christian faith. There is no excuse for this ignorance. The Bible itself contains many teaching principles, and Christians for generations have used effective means of teaching the faith through memorization and explanation of Catechisms, and study of Bible History. For example, since we are teaching spiritual truth and spiritual principles, the use of pictures is outlawed by the Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer #98. This article of our Reformed faith declares that pictures are not to be used *"because God will not have His people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of His word."* This answer is based on Habakkuk 2:18-20, which declares that: 1) pictures are *"teachers of lies,"* 2) pictures cannot teach spiritual things, and 3) we are to quiet our imaginations and *"keep silence"* before the Word of God.

The obvious truth of these principles of our creed is seen, for example, in that it is impossible to draw a picture of any of the Ten Commandments. For example, I am allowed to kill you in self defense or war, to take your automobile if I have permission, etc., depending entirely upon my spiritual relationship to the persons and property involved. This is true of every Commandment. The same words may be truth, or a lie, depending on if they are used to describe what is really going on, and I can even sleep with your wife if she and I become widowed, and then marry each other.

Over the years I have gathered the following principles from the Bible and Christian history and have provided them for Sunday school and other teachers in Christian education. I have been urged to publish them more widely, and am happy to do so.

Teaching principles

1. Content drives the process. The purpose of teaching is to impart knowledge and skills so that our students will be able to better serve God. This knowledge includes spiritual truth and historical fact.

If knowledge and skills are not being imparted, we are just killing time. The results in the minds and lives of the students are the values of education.

The purpose of education is to raise the student's skill level, not to bring the level of the teacher down to the student's ignorance. This means that new words and concepts must continually be introduced to students and defined for them.

2. **Discipline:** is orderly behavior. It is necessary for orderly learning.

Mental discipline: being able to focus one's mind on a task in order to accomplish the task efficiently.

Self-discipline: being able to control one's own behavior and mental process, so as to be able to accomplish work efficiently. Self-discipline is learned from parents and teachers by having them provide an orderly situation and requiring us to practice orderly learning.

Teaching discipline: A teacher must center the student's attention on what is being studied, and require that the student progress in knowledge.

Time discipline: using time efficiently requires the setting of certain schedules to accomplish certain tasks. Teachers must set a good example of time discipline in using class time well.

3. **Memorization:** the most efficient method for learning complex ideas and skills. Children are designed by God to be easy memorizers; we must take this design seriously and use it extensively.

Spiritual ideas are communicated through words. Biblical teaching abounds with spiritual ideas which cannot be expressed by pictures or other physical means. Only by learning and understanding the words which express these spiritual ideas can one become a Christian. The average child has a vocabulary of several thousand words by the time he or she is five years old. Adding spiritual ideas to that vocabulary is an essential part of Christian training.

You don't know anything you have not memorized. If you cannot remember it, you don't know it, and you cannot remember it unless you have memorized it. This is true of simple things, it is also true of complex ideas.

Memorizing words is the most efficient method of acquiring knowledge. Words communicate ideas, just as numbers communicate math. If you don't know the numbers you will never be able to do math. If you do not learn the basic concepts and vocabulary of Christianity, you will always be a spiritual cripple.

4. **Repetition:** the human mind retains what it has learned repeatedly. Only those things which are repeated on a regular basis over a period of time really stick in our minds. Material learned one day needs to be re-enforced at later times to make it really a part of our knowledge.
5. **Example:** the teacher must be a good example to the students by learning the material himself or herself. A teacher who expects students to do what the teacher will not do, teaches by actions that the material being learned is not important enough to know.

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