

THE “STORIED” CATECHISM CLASS  
ON THE USE OF STORYTELLING IN TEACHING CATECHISM

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## ABSTRACT

Everybody loves a good story. It can be a movie that leaves its viewers crying, happy memories of bedtime stories, or a favorite story from the Bible. Good stories do a number of things. They grab a person's attention, involve them in the events, and leave an impression on their listeners long after the initial telling. It is with this in mind that this author reconsiders the use of storytelling in teaching catechism class. He coins the term "storied teaching" to summarize this concept. A "storied" catechism class is where the teacher bases the lesson around one central story with supporting Bible passages. Included topics in the essay range from which stories are suitable to tips on how to use them. By the essay's end, the reader will have the necessary tools and understanding to adopt a "storied" catechism class in their own ministry.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Once upon a time, there were three bears and a little girl...I am Sam. Sam I am...And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree...* When a person hears these timeless words, memories of childhood stories come to mind. Goldilocks' search for the perfect bowl of porridge until the three bears come home. Sam's reluctant love for green eggs and ham. The King James Version's opening verses of Luke chapter two. Stories are an integral part in one's development because their lessons stay with their listeners long after the story is told.

Teachers have long understood the power of stories. They use them to teach others and will continue to use them. But what happens to stories when a student enters secondary education? Imaginative stories are replaced with abstract concepts. Instead of painting an alternate world, teachers explain bullet points. In catechism class, teachers are especially prone to make this switch. Young adolescents are learning the Bible's teachings in greater detail than ever before. It seems intuitive to change the teaching method as well. Instead of learning Bible stories, young adolescents learn how the church has categorized God's teachings over the years. The implied question is that if they did not earlier learn these truths from Bible stories, then why would they now? Its implied answer is that young adolescents ought to learn the Bible's teachings in catechism class using a style similar to how pastors study dogmatics.

There is a question all teachers need to ask—what are the students' goals? It is not simply head knowledge for the final exam. It is a deeper understanding of the subject matter. That in turn influences how the student will view and interact with the world outside of the classroom. Knowing that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west is sufficient for a quiz, but understanding that truth will guide a person's life. They will avoid putting windows in a northern wall if they want the sun's warmth in their house. Knowing how to solve word problems is fine for completing homework, but realizing what that means will improve their problem-solving skills. They will have a better understanding of how to break down a complex issue into smaller manageable parts.

The catechism class operates on the same principle. Knowing that God the Father created a perfect world is enough for Bible trivia, but understanding that will lead to more. Man is responsible for bringing sin into the world—not God. Christ's three-fold office comforts the guilty believer. Jesus Christ continues to act as prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, Jesus tells

the world what he has done so they may have eternal life. As priest, Christ intercedes for believers before God on the basis of his death and resurrection. As king, Christ works all things for the benefit of believers in whom he reigns. Catechism teachers desire that their students put this head knowledge into their hearts. They pray for the Holy Spirit to guide their students' lives. But often there is a chasm between what happens in class and what the students do in their daily lives. The promising catechism student drifts away in the formative high school years. What can catechism teachers do to bridge this chasm between head and heart?

This author considers "storied teaching" to be one instrumental way. "Storied teaching" is when a lesson is presented through stories. These stories can come from many sources—the Bible, real-life, history, imagination, current events, or a person's own life to name a few. Because catechism class is rightly built upon the Bible, "storied teaching" also includes the use of Bible passages. It is this mixture of stories with Bible passages that this author calls "storied teaching." In this essay the author will demonstrate what makes stories powerful, why teachers should consider using them more, and how to teach a "storied" catechism class. Teachers can then channel their students' natural interests with what happens in the story into an effective sticking of God's timeless truths in the students' hearts.

## HOW YOUNG ADOLESCENTS THINK

Stories have educational value in every grade or age level. Given that young adolescents are the typical make-up of catechism classes, this author will focus on them. This primarily includes young adolescents who are in seventh and eighth ranging from twelve to fourteen years of age. Five general principles apply to learning at all ages. They are

- 1) The Best Learning Comes through Self-Activity
- 2) The Motivation of the Student Determines how well that Student will Learn
- 3) The Best Learning Progresses from the Known to the Unknown
- 4) Learning is Often Best Done as a Social Experience
- 5) The Learning Process is an Individual Matter.<sup>1</sup>

The young adolescent stage presents some additional wrinkles to the general principles. Young adolescents become more self-reliant in their desire to be independent. They search for their identity in peer groups or role models instead of parents. Their motivation is similar to an

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<sup>1</sup> David Kuske, *Principles of Christian Education* (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 1995), 18-24.

adult's—a subject's value is evaluated on its usefulness in daily life. Young adolescents are more capable of abstract thought than before. Yet their capacity to understand the abstract is still limited during the seventh and eighth grades. Young adolescents receive some of their best learning as they become more social with groups outside the family unit.<sup>2</sup>

The young adolescent stage is also one of simultaneous paradoxes. While they seek companionship with others, they are searching for their unique identity with constantly fluctuating emotions. This individuality especially shows itself in the literate world. The more literate a learner is, the more individualistic his learning becomes. Students who are literate need less help from parents or teachers. They can figure things out without asking questions which is in itself a form of individualism. They tend to “speak in linear, analytical terms and base their persuasion on propositional arguments extracted from their context.”<sup>3</sup> In short—they act more and more like adults do in terms of learning.

Young adolescents have yet to reach the mental state adults have. Emotions play a large part in their learning and understanding of the world. The age period of adolescence is perhaps the most turbulent stage of a person's development. According to Erikson's theory of cognitive development, *change* is the key word for students ages twelve to eighteen.

Adolescents are caught in the turbulent no-man's land between the dependency of childhood and the interdependence of adulthood. The major questions they seek to answer are “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?” During this time they begin to question the value system, beliefs, and attitudes they received from their parents, because they discover, to their shock, that adults are not always right. The resolution of this stage determines to a great extent the basis for adult personality.<sup>4</sup>

Why then is it the church's practice to place catechism instruction during this turbulent time in their lives? Because there is no better time to dig into God's Word in such detail. As young adolescents question life, society, and the role of faith, what they need above all is the guidance of God's Word. As they experience life's joys and temptations, what else can best equip them besides the catechetical truths? The early adolescent years are important in a person's development. Because of this, catechism teachers have a weighty responsibility. Not only is the

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Gangel and Howard Hendricks, eds., *The Christian's Handbook on Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988), 134.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Jagerson, “Harnessing the Power of Narrative: Literacy and Orality in Christian Education,” *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall, 2014): 261.

<sup>4</sup> William Yount, *Created to Learn* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 51-52.

content of their class important, so is the method. It is the method through which the Holy Spirit will strengthen their faith. It is the manner how the truths in their heads will reach their hearts and influence their actions.

## “STORIED TEACHING” APPEALS TO YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

“Storied teaching” is an excellent option for catechism teachers. Referring back to the five general principles for learning, stories fulfill each one. 1) *The Best Learning Comes through Self-Activity*. If stories are told well, young adolescents will not passively absorb the information. They will actively experience the story and learn from it. 2) *The Motivation of the Student Determines how well that Student will Learn*. Good stories naturally draw their listeners in. What is going to happen next? How will the protagonists get out of danger? Young adolescents cannot help but be motivated to learn the lessons embedded in the story. 3) *The Best Learning Progresses from the Known to the Unknown*. Stories rely on the listener’s knowledge to develop their plots. By starting in the known, they are able to go into the unknown. “Storied teachers” can use a story’s natural progression of known to unknown to help young adolescents learn the catechism’s naturally unknown truths. 4) *Learning is Often Best Done as a Social Experience*. Stories bring people together. As any seasoned storyteller can attest, children and adults naturally quiet down so they can listen to the story. Then they discuss its events as a single group. 5) *The Learning Process is an Individual Matter*.<sup>5</sup> After hearing a story, young adolescents decide what the story means. Given the burgeoning self-identity of young adolescents, they may disagree with their peers about the story’s message. But through it all, young adolescents engage themselves in the learning process.

Stories are especially helpful for young adolescents who are self-conscious or hard on themselves. If teachers present the Bible’s truths with an authoritative tone, they may push their sensitive students away. Students will not want to see how the Bible can give them confidence in their God-given appearance and personality. Stories are an indirect way to teach them about God’s unconditional love for them. They approach precarious situations indirectly while at the same time activating the imagination.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kuske, 18-24.

<sup>6</sup> D. Bruce Seymour, *Creating Stories that Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007), 22.



Suppose a young adolescent girl is despondent because she does not like her appearance. Her teacher realizes this and wants to communicate that what makes her beautiful is not what her peers think—rather it is what God sees in her. If her teacher were to say “Stop getting down on yourself! God calls you his child and does not care how others view you. You should feel good about yourself because God loves you dearly.” Will the despondent girl improve her self-image from this advice? This author thinks not. Even though what her teacher said is scripturally accurate, it was too direct for her sensitivity. Instead of telling her objective facts about God’s love and logical results, her teacher could adopt a “storied” approach.

*There once was a young girl, Rachel, who was a normal looking girl. She did not turn heads when she walked by and therefore doubted herself. However one day an ordinary young man, Andrew, asks if she wants to hang out with him. Rachel cannot help but say “Yes.” She does not regret it because they have the time of their lives. To Rachel’s surprise, Andrew continues to hang out with her and they become good friends. Rachel is perplexed about Andrew’s motives. So she asks him why he continues to hang out with her. Andrew says “You are a cool person and a lot of fun. Why wouldn’t I want to be friends with you?” Rachel then learned that it was not her lackluster looks that mattered—it was her personality.*

From this, the sensitive girl’s teacher could explain “God gave Rachel her personality and made her exactly the way he wanted to. He would not have it any other way. God has done the same with you too. He would not want you any other way.” Will the despondent girl improve her self-image from this advice? This author thinks so. The teacher’s advice is as scripturally accurate as before with the authoritative truths, but it is better received by the sensitive girl because of the indirect natures of stories.

Stories are a natural part of today’s world. The entertainment industry is built upon stories of all kinds. Sport teams tell the stories behind their players and victories. Friends and family catch up by telling stories to each other. Because people are social creatures, stories are a necessary part of their wellbeing. In teaching, stories are particularly important because they open up new worlds. When teachers tell stories, they “invite people to enter a world that may be different from their own, but remarkably similar in many ways.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin D. Espinoza, “Transforming lives through transforming story: exploring the power of narrative teaching in families and congregations,” *Family And Community Ministries* 27 (2014): 102.

Stories do much more than pique a student's interest. According to a study in Spain, "[w]hen we are being told a story...Not only are the language processing parts in our brain activated, **but any other area in our brain that we would use when experiencing the events of the story are too.**"<sup>8</sup> Even in a highly literate country like the USA, stories have a place in postsecondary education. In a 2013 study "it was found that 47.5% [of students from a North America seminary] were more likely to process information in an oral fashion than a literate one. Another 6% were either primarily oral or highly oral in their learning style."<sup>9</sup> The same 2013 study included undergraduate students from a North American university found that "fully 65% had an oral tendency to process information, and another 12% scored in the highly oral category."<sup>10</sup> Here is what those statistics mean. North American college students were fully capable to learn information through the literate methods of reading and writing. Yet despite this finely-honed skill, the majority of them preferred to learn the same information through the oral methods of listening and speaking. If this is true at the seminary and university level, then how much more for the young adolescent whose literate skills are not as strong? It would stand to reason that the large majority of young adolescents would follow the college students. They would prefer to learn in an oral fashion than a literate fashion. Stories fit right in with the preferred oral fashion.

Technology has transformed communication. Each generation has a way they prefer to learn information. Today's young adolescents do not know of life without the internet and its infinite supply of information. How they prefer to learn that information has an effect on a teacher's methodology. In 2012 "Walter Ong coined the term *secondary oral learners* to describe those who are literate but who prefer to learn new information using non-literate (or oral) means because of the effect of technologies such as movies, television, and radio."<sup>11</sup> Ask young adolescents "how would you like to learn about J.R. Tolkien's series *The Lord of the Rings*?" If given the option between reading ~1,000+ pages or watching the extended movies for approximately eleven hours and thirty minutes, the overwhelming majority would choose half a day in front of a television screen.

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Widrich. "The Science of Storytelling: What Listening to a Story Does to our Brains." buffersocial. <https://blog.bufferapp.com/science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains> (30 October 2015). Bold in original quotation.

<sup>9</sup> Jagerson, 270.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 269. Italics in original quotation.

Why is this? Both methods contain the same general content. From a practical point of view, the book should be the winner. They are portable, easily accessible, and allow the reader to imagine the events as they wish. With the movie, the viewer is limited to the actor's portrayal of the character, the movie's budget for special effects, and the director's choice of scenes to include. Nevertheless young adolescents choose the movie option because they are *secondary oral learners*. They prefer to learn new information through oral means even though they are highly literate. It is because of this that

the advance of digital technologies such as the Internet, YouTube, and the smart phone since Ong's publication [three years earlier] would seem to intensify the growth of secondary orality. While it took radio over 35 years to have 50 million users, the World Wide Web took less than 5. MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube took less than half that time.<sup>12</sup>

Young adolescents want stories. Stories are familiar, easy to relate to, and invite the listener into a similar yet different world. Of note for adolescents, stories provide an anchor in their changing world. Young adolescence is already stressful and defined by change. It is during this time of change that young adolescents resort to stories and traditional folklore for stability.<sup>13</sup> Stories provide a safe way to discover truth, meaning, and identity in a world full of newfound questions. Stories are also useful for them "to nurture understanding of others because the complexities of humanity are only reached via the training of the imagination that storytelling fosters."<sup>14</sup>

Scripture is full of stories to help guide the young adolescent's discovery of self.

Kallenberg (2002) suggests that the narrative of Scripture, and specifically the Gospels, provides the paradigm by which to satisfy the concerns of the next generation. Narratives provide a place for individuals to situate their own story in the larger biblical picture. As they identify with the protagonists in God's story and recognize that they are a part of the same story and community of faith with a significant role to play, it compels the necessary transformation in their own lives and gives them a personal testimony so they can go about retelling God's story to others....[Kallenberg] suggests it is the way the next generation will best understand it as well.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jagerson, 269.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Sobol, "Oracy in the New Millennium: Storytelling Revival in America and Bhutan," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 6, no. 1 (January 2010): 69.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Phillips, "Storytelling as Pedagogy," *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* 21, no. 2 (June 2013): iii.

<sup>15</sup> Jagerson, 271.

Young adolescents are continually looking for their unique identity. They will look for role models and ideals to guide them in their search. Many of these role models and ideals can be found in the Bible. They relate to the pompous Pharisees and Sadducees and are cut by Jesus' scathing words. They feel as helpless as the blind, mute, and sick and their joy in Jesus' healing. They ask with Nicodemus "how can someone be born when they are old?...Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"<sup>16</sup> They take God's grace to heart when they hear his answer "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."<sup>17</sup> Scripture provides many stories in which young adolescents can place themselves into. When they do this, the Bible story becomes their own story which they can later retell to the next generation.

Catechism instruction takes place during a person's formative years. The truths they learn in class—how to view authority figures, how to be at peace with God, or how to approach money—will touch their personal life in years to come. Students will most likely have a vague recollection of catechism class due to the subject matter. Catechism teachers can do more to ensure the truths will stick in the student's long-term memory. Aware of young adolescents' want for stories and the ready supply found in Scripture, catechism teachers are wise to choose Bible stories so as to hit the head and the heart so the hand may act accordingly. Young adolescents, who learned from the Bible's positive and negative examples, can refer back to these truths as they leave their family's protection in search of themselves. Young adolescents "must learn that decisions are truly up to them, but that these decisions must be in harmony with God's Word and will, with the welfare and happiness of their fellow men, and with their own good."<sup>18</sup>

## STORIES HELP YOUNG ADOLESCENTS PREPARE FOR ADULTHOOD

The goal for catechism teachers does not end at their students' examinations and confirmations. Their goal is "to teach in such a way that students both learn and employ their knowledge"<sup>19</sup> well into adulthood. Because the truths learned in catechism class guide the

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<sup>16</sup> Jn 3:4. All biblical quotations are from NIV11 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>17</sup> Jn 3:6

<sup>18</sup> William M. Kramer *The Spiritual Growth and Development of the Child* located in John Isch, comp., *Readings in Christian Education* (New Ulm, MN: Print Shop, 1980), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Roberta Hestenes, Howard Hendricks, and Earl Palmer, *Mastering Teaching* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991), 19.

confirmand's future, it is important to find the best methodology. Stories have a privileged place in such a methodology. Teachers have long used stories to illustrate the point they are trying to communicate. In a well taught lesson, the story complements the teacher's methodology. In a poorly taught lesson, the story can often be its only saving grace.

More than once a story is supposed to cover the shameful barrenness or logical confusions of an argument—and experience shows that it succeeds in doing so! The listener forgets the poverty of the point, because he enjoys the story. And his thoughts, perhaps his decisions and actions, let themselves be guided and directed rather by the strong story than by the poor point!<sup>20</sup>

Teachers cannot simply tell a story however they see fit though. Stories that lack logical progression or have no point can be just as confusing as a poorly taught lesson. While the author will later offer specific tips in creating and telling stories, for now he will focus on its correct place in a “storied” methodology.

Stories are more than creative attention getters. They are the student's initial point of contact with the lesson. They are the vehicle through which the brain makes sense of the lesson to be learned. The story is what makes the unknown seem familiar through vicarious experience. If a story is told correctly, the student “will likely produce exponentially more successful outcomes, such as a greater capacity...to grasp meaning.”<sup>21</sup> If the reader will remember the story about Andrew and Rachel used to help a despondent young adolescent girl with her self-image. The reason for its success is due to vicarious experience. Although the names are different and there may not be a real-life Andrew in the despondent girl's life, she is able to vicariously live through Rachel. Rachel's problems become the girl's problems. Rachel's hopelessness is the girl's. Andrew becomes the girl's best friend for the wholesome reason of her good personality. If it were not for vicarious experience, it is likely the story of Andrew and Rachel would be no better than the authoritative advice given to the despondent girl.

Stories do more than help students grasp meaning. According to D. Bruce Seymour, people tend to use stories for six basic reasons. 1) To explain the unusual 2) To teach important things 3) To make things easier to remember 4) To help solve problems 5) To help create identity and community 6) To allow us to share the experiences of others.<sup>22</sup> All six reasons grab

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<sup>20</sup> Markus Barth, “The cowboy in the Sunday School Part 1 an appeal to all Christian educators,” *Religious Education* 57, no. 1 (January 1962): 45.

<sup>21</sup> Jagerson, 262.

<sup>22</sup> Seymour, 24.

the attention of catechism teachers. 1) *To explain the unusual*. Every lesson has information that is unknown and is therefore unusual—especially catechetical truths since they cannot be naturally found in the sinful world. Once the students learn the unusual unknown it becomes the usual known. 2) *To teach important things*. The catechism’s truths are important because they are the building blocks of Christian faith and living. 3) *To make things easier to remember*. What good is something if the student cannot remember it? Anything that helps students remember the lesson is worth considering. 4) *To help solve problems*. Real-life problems are seldom black and white. Due to stories’ grey natures, they are helpful in showing young adolescents how to make a right decision in a sinful grey world. 5) *To help create identity and community*. The young adolescent is preparing to face a new world in high school and adulthood. Their Christian identity will soon become important and tested. 6) *To allow us to share the experiences of others*. Everyone who hears a story experiences it together. Students interact in the learning process along with the teacher. They all vicariously participate in the story’s joys and setbacks together despite their different ages and knowledge level.

The adolescent age group is particularly sensitive about their self-image. As they look for their unique identity, they continually test all previously held knowledge. Puberty hits young adolescents at different times with different rates. Catechism teachers have no choice but to adjust their methods according to their students’ sensitivities. One safe way to do so is with the indirect method of storytelling. In stories, the lesson is hidden beneath the details of the plot. It does not come in the authoritative voice of the teacher which young adolescents are prone to rebel against. Instead stories appeal to their developing cognitive skills so that they may discover the lesson for themselves. When new material is presented in stories, then “[t]ruth is often accepted most easily [because] it is presented indirectly.”<sup>23</sup>

This is especially useful with catechetical truths. God’s Word is unilateral. Those who believe in Jesus as their Savior will be saved; all others will be condemned. There is no way to heaven apart from faith in Christ. When the sinful world clashes with God’s Word, the catechism’s truths rightly sound offensive to the young adolescent. Stories will not be able to do away with all the offensiveness man’s sinful nature responds with. But they can help the presentation. Suppose a teacher were to use this story to explain this unilateral truth of salvation in Jesus alone.

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<sup>23</sup> Seymour, 19.

*There once were three men who wanted to cross a canyon to get to the bountiful fruit trees on the other side. The only way to cross it was over an old wooden bridge with many rotten planks. If they fell off or stepped through a rotten plank, they would fall into the icy cold water below. One of the men decided the bridge was too dangerous to walk on. After judging the distance not to be so much, he thought he could jump it if he had a running start. So he backed up, sprinted to the edge, and jumped. Although he was close to making it, he fell into the icy waters. The second man decided to run over the bridge. He thought that if he went fast enough, maybe the wooden planks would hold up long enough for him to get across. He got halfway until his foot crashed through a rotten board and fell into the freezing water. The third man decided to slowly walk across the bridge. He would test each board's strength before standing on it. Little by little he tested each plank, jumping over the rotten ones and standing on the solid ones. Finally he made it to the other side to collect the precious fruit.*

Catechism teachers could connect this story to the truth that only those who believe in Jesus will get into heaven. The first man completely rejected Jesus and tried to get into heaven by his own actions. Although he tried really hard, it was not enough and he fell into eternal death. The second man knew about Jesus, but he did not trust in him. Because of this, he fell to his eternal death. The third man trusted Jesus and got into heaven. So those who trust in Jesus alone as their Savior from sin will live in heaven after they die.

This author recognizes that every illustration will limp. There will always be the temptation to read too much into a story and allegorize every detail. But this author proposes the reader approach stories the same way they would any of Jesus' parables—look for the singular object which is the point of the story. Unless Jesus otherwise identified every detail in his parables, Christians look for the main point of his parables. This author recommends the same approach with stories in a “storied” catechism class.

The beauty of the story of the rotten wooden bridge for catechism teachers is not found in the story's details or characters. Its beauty is found in its indirect way of teaching. To quote Jesus' words in John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” is an offensive truth. No one who is a slave to sin wants to hear that message because it excludes them from heaven's joys. If Christians were to only approach unbelievers with that offensive truth, it would be a miracle if they were not chased out of town! But if Christians were to share the above story of the wooden bridge in connection with John 14:6,

unbelievers would be more willing to listen to the offensive truth. Yet through it all, only the Holy Spirit can bring a person to rejoice in John 14:6.

What good is learning if it only remains in the head? Catechism teachers strive for their students to take what they have learned and put it into practice. There are many possible applications with the catechism. A correct understanding of confession, repentance, and absolution will result in the student looking forward to consistent church attendance where they are regularly forgiven by the pastor. There are other applications as well.

Carl Rogers wrote “the only kind of learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered or self-appropriated learning—truth that has been assimilated in experience.”<sup>24</sup> Even if one cannot wholeheartedly agree with Rogers that self-discovery is the only way that truth is assimilated, one can agree that it is an option. Stories fit within this self-discovered/appropriated learning. Although the students may not have lived in Old Testament Israel, they gain some of their experience through stories. Even though they are not parents, they can relate to King David’s and Bathsheba’s sorrow for their infant child’s death. Even though they have not taken forbidden plunder, they can relate to Achan’s sin. This vicarious experience is presented in an indirect way so that their minds may wrestle with it and accomplish Rogers’ self-discovered/appropriated learning. This all leads to stories being the “kind of learning which significantly influences behavior.”<sup>25</sup>

## STORIES SUPPLEMENT THE METHODOLOGY

This author is not so naïve to predict that all teachers will adopt a “storied teaching” methodology solely on the basis of this paper. As great as stories may be to teach new information, they are not a teacher’s only method. It may be wiser to use the more traditional methods of lecture, questions, and directed activities depending on the subject matter and time available.

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling* (Grand Rapids, MI: EmergentYS Books, 2003), 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



In a traditional catechism class, there are six components of every lesson. They are 1) Preparation or Introduction 2) Stated Aim 3) Presentation 4) Penetration 5) Application and 6) Assignment.<sup>26</sup> Albrecht expands on how catechism teachers carry these out..

The introduction consists of a review of the previous lesson, basing the review on the aims, inferences, and application. The presentation and penetration are combined into one step. The instructor bases his stated aim on the material to be covered (three or four questions). The inferences are planned according to the material of the catechism questions. The development of the inferences is based upon Bible stories or Bible passages. The inferences which have been placed on the board are then reviewed, by means of several questions the fulfilled aim will be obtained from the class. Here will follow the application—again a **must**.<sup>27</sup>

Suppose a catechism class is about “the miracle of faith.” In what follows, this author will briefly describe how said class would run using the six traditional steps. 1) *Preparation or Introduction*. The teacher starts class with a review of the previous lesson’s main points about “the Holy Spirit.” He then proceeds with either an introduction from the previous lesson or something else entirely. 2) *Stated Aim*. The catechism teacher puts the overarching question of the lesson on the board which the class will answer “why does the Bible use four picture words to describe the work of the Holy Spirit for us?” 3 and 4) *Presentation and Penetration*. The students examine a handful of Bible passages to answer the *stated aim*. The catechism teacher guides the student’s learning through the use of brief lecture, progressively insightful questions, and brief illustrations or object lessons for each passage. After the students have considered each passage and worked on the lesson’s subpoints, they answer the *stated aim*. 5) *Application*. The students then consider questions like “the sinful world tempts us toward materialism—toward wanting desperately what we cannot afford to have. How, exactly, does the Holy Spirit help us combat this idolatrous sin?” 6) *Assignment*. The catechism teacher has the students consider the lesson’s truths at home by memorizing applicable passages and parts of Luther’s *Small Catechism*. Then the cycle repeats for the following lesson.

These traditional steps are based on experience, common sense, and solid educational philosophy. Catechism teachers must first prepare which doctrines to cover, how to present them, and what the students will do to ingrain them in their memories so as to teach successfully.

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Albrecht, *Methods and Content In Religious Instruction For Pastors and Methods For Presenting The Catechism* (WLS Essay File, 1976), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Bold in original quotation.

“Storied teaching” does not attempt to replace the traditional system described above by Albrecht. “Storied teaching” tweaks it. Albrecht’s six components still occur in “storied teaching.”

Below is a “storied” lesson on “the miracle of faith” using the same six steps. 1) *Preparation or Introduction*. The teacher asks a student to recap the story used to present “the Holy Spirit.” Then he asks a question or two to review the key point of the previous lesson. 2) *Stated Aim*. If the teacher wishes, he can show the class what the key question will be about “the miracle of faith.” If he wishes to teach inductively, he may skip the overarching question altogether. 3) *Presentation*. The teacher tells the story. It could be a Bible story such as Zacchaeus’ conversion in Luke 19, a historical example such as Augustine’s conversion, or an appropriate cultural example. 4) *Penetration*. The teacher asks questions to confirm the student’s understanding of the story and how such conversions would be possible. To tie in scriptural authority to the story’s point, the teacher can include passages such as Acts 11:21, Titus 3:5, or John 3:6 to name a few. It will not be enough to just list the Bible passages and leave them at that. The class reads the passages, connects them to the story, and sees which truths can be seen from the passages in light of the story. 5) *Application*. The “storied teacher” can use the same applications as with a traditional class if he wishes. 6) *Assignment*. Assignments can be similar to a traditional class or include various aspects of the lesson’s story. Then the cycle repeats for the following “storied” catechism class.

If the reader will notice, the most notable difference between the two teaching methods is the presentation. Instead of organizing the class around a handful of passages, the lesson revolves around a single story. Review of the previous lesson is present, application of the truths, assignments, and the presence of Scripture’s eternal truths. If the story is long, more time will have to be spent on it. If it short, the “storied” teacher can help the class see how else the lesson is seen in the Bible or in their lives.

The danger of the traditional method is that the students can easily become passive learners. They memorize voluminous amounts of religious words, but they do not learn what those words mean for themselves. Once examination is over and the young adolescent receives Christ’s body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine for the first time, what happens to that precious information? For many confirmands, it is quickly lost. They vaguely remember the catechetical truths at best. What can catechism teachers do for their forgetful confirmands?

They can hope that the sensory illustrations and thought provoking applications will stick. But if the young adolescents already forgot the core information they spent over half of class on, there is little realistic hope for the illustrations and applications used with them.

### “STORIED TEACHING” IN A WELS CATECHISM CLASS

This is where “storied teaching” comes in to help alleviate concerned catechism teachers. What makes “storied teaching” different from traditional teaching is not simply the presence of stories. Traditional teaching uses stories however spare or short they may be. What makes “storied teaching” different is the prominent use and role of stories. Stories become more than illustrative aids for abstract truths. They are the vehicle in which the truths are presented, taught, and reinforced. “Storied teaching” “is about allowing God’s story to transform our own stories so we can live up to our full potential as people made in the image of God who are conforming into the image of Christ.”<sup>28</sup> One of the goals of catechism class is to equip young adolescents with God’s Word as they prepare to step into adulthood.

How are stories able to make such a difference? “Story-telling is neither a monologue nor a lecture. And when a story has been well told, a child will never forget it again.”<sup>29</sup> This is true not only for the story itself, but for the lessons learned through the story. A story does more than convey information about an event or topic. It “teaches the meaning of the event and provides understanding and wisdom.”<sup>30</sup> It makes teaching successful so that it “not only opens the mind but also stirs the emotions, fires the imagination, [and] galvanizes the will.”<sup>31</sup> But it does more than stir up the student’s heart while enlightening the mind.

Whereas storytelling traditionally meant that a teacher invited students into a narrative, narrative teaching seeks to have both teachers and students tell stories to one another, interacting with the grand narrative of Scripture and allowing this conversation of narratives to lead to growth, maturity, and the transformation of faith.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Espinoza, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Markus Barth, “The cowboy in the Sunday school Part II,” *Religious Education* 57, no. 2 (March 1962): 126.

<sup>30</sup> Seymour, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Hestenes, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Espinoza, 105.

For the purposes of this paper, this author has adopted the term “storied teaching.” A similar concept is “narrative teaching” as seen in the above quote. Given that “narrative teaching” and “storied teaching” are closely related, what is true for one is true for the other. For the reader’s ease though, this author will stick with “storied teaching.”

This is what most sets “storied teaching” apart from traditional teaching. Teachers and students share stories with each other as they learn and further appreciate eternal truths. When students tell their stories, they are actively involved in the learning process. They share their respective experiences as students and teachers ingrain the lesson’s truths into their own selves.

Experience is necessary for long-term learning. Yet in many subjects young adolescents do not have prior experience. They rely on the teacher to give them the experience necessary to learn the truths for their adulthood. While this can be done through worksheets and rote repetition, a story is more effective. “According to Uri Hasson from Princeton, **a story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience.**”<sup>33</sup> How does a story help the student get experience they do not have?

Stories mediate a specific sort of knowledge—experiential knowledge. Stories are powerful because they allow us to participate in situations that are totally apart from our own experience... This experience is obviously vicarious, but even vicarious experience is experience. Experience creates meaning, and meaning provides the potential for personal transformation.<sup>34</sup>

Teachers have long known how important storytelling is. “Storytelling functions as a kind of modeling, as described by cognitive-social learning theory, by offering an example with which the listeners or readers can identify.”<sup>35</sup> Educational giant Piaget stressed the importance of this.

[Piaget] saw the goal of education as creating opportunities for learners to create or discover knowledge, not to increase the amount of knowledge in learners. Overemphasis on instruction—teachers explaining content to learners—keeps learners from “inventing and discovering” understanding on their own.<sup>36</sup>

“Storied teaching” is partly based on Piaget’s educational theory of discovery learning. It can be illustrated with the teacher’s role in the classroom. What Piaget’s theory and “storied

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<sup>33</sup> Widrich. Bold in original quotation.

<sup>34</sup> Seymour, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Johannes Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 384.

<sup>36</sup> Yount, 93.

teaching” does is that it modifies the idea of the teacher as the “sage on the stage.” Instead of the sage-teacher sharing pearls of wisdom for the students to pick up and marvel at, the teacher is the “guide on the side.” The sage-teacher decides to become the guide-teacher because he realizes how dependent the students can become on the sage-teacher. If the only person who can make sense of the facts is the teacher, then what conclusion will the students come to? The conclusion will be that the students need a teacher to tell them what the truth is. Because they have relied on a sage-teacher for all their education, they will not have internalized their lessons. Here is an application with the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment if students rely on their sage-teacher to tell them what the lesson is. Their first thought will not be “it is wrong to hate my neighbor because Jesus tells us so in the Sermon on the Mount.” Rather it will unfortunately be “it is wrong to hate my neighbor because my catechism teacher said so.” If students depend on their teachers for new knowledge, they cannot take the next step in education when they mature. They will not be ready for adulthood where learning happens outside of the classroom and without appointed teachers.

There are opponents to this discovery learning method which Piaget supports. One such opponent said

It is quite impossible for the student to discover for himself any substantial part of the wisdom of his culture, and no philosophy of education really proposes that he should. Great thinkers build on the past, they do not waste their time rediscovering it...It is equally dangerous to forego teaching important facts and principles in order to give the student a chance to discover them for himself.<sup>37</sup>

This critique is rightly understood if discovery learning is taken to its extreme. If students spend all their time discovering basic truths, they will theoretically never reach new heights in education. Each generation will simply relearn the same truths over and over without contributing anything new.

Critics like these help define what “storied teaching” is. As the “guide on the side,” the teacher directs the students’ activities. If the conclusions they reach are false, the teacher is there to correct them as the “sage on the stage.” If their conclusions are correct, the teacher continues to act as the guide and ushers in new activities so the students can continue to discover new truths.

What makes “storied teaching” a right mixture of Piaget’s educational theory and his critics is twofold. 1) From Piaget, its emphasis is on the student’s activity, initiative, and

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<sup>37</sup> Yount, 200.

solutions. 2) From his critics, the teacher leads the students to new knowledge and checks their progress from going in the wrong direction. How would this be seen in catechism class? In a traditional catechism class, students may focus on memorizing paragraphs of words which need further explaining. In order to understand what those words mean, they must spend hours explaining them. As is sadly often the case, the class does not have enough time to fully understand the full content. What ends up happening is that their knowledge base is a mile wide but an inch deep. In a “storied” catechism class, it is so “that students would learn fewer facts...but would gain a deeper understanding of the subject which could well continue beyond the classroom.”<sup>38</sup> While “storied” students may not have a knowledge base a mile wide, it will be deeper than an inch.

Why is “storied teaching” attractive for the catechism class? What students learn in catechism has life-long applications. To forget their catechetical knowledge is to endanger their faith. Christian education is more than the two years of catechism. Christian education “is an instruction which begins in infancy and continues through childhood and adolescence, through young adulthood and middle age to old age.”<sup>39</sup> Catechism classes are an important part in a person’s life-long Christian education. If “storied teaching” will help students remember catechetical truths better than traditional teaching, then teachers owe it to their students to at least consider it.

“Storied teaching” in catechism class is one way to show young adolescents their righteous identity before God. “Narrative identity theory, in short, posits that identity is composed of the stories we remember and choose to tell about ourselves.”<sup>40</sup> If catechism students identify themselves into God’s larger narrative, they are much more likely to remember and act on their Christian identity during adulthood. As they form their new habits lasting into adulthood, they continue this cycle of rejoicing in their Christian identity. Catechism teachers can rest assured that “storied teaching” is an excellent option for communicating catechism truths to young adolescents. “Storied teaching” is about “trusting Scripture for both the message and the medium of the message.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Yount, 199.

<sup>39</sup> Kuske, 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Espinoza, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Hestenes, 32.

## TIPS TO PREPARE A “STORIED” CATECHISM CLASS

Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* is a weighty book to teach because its importance and amount. In the 1998 Revised Edition of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, there are 376 expositional questions, 381 pages of information, and regular diagrams. Catechism teachers have to plan well how best to cover this dense book in only two years.

What are catechism teachers to do with all this information? Even with the most gifted classes, it is improbable to cover every question and supporting passage. Catechism teachers should not approach the catechism as a textbook. It is a reference book for young adolescents to use in class and later in life. Professor Emeritus David Kuske edited the 1998 Revised Edition which is currently used (as of 2016) in many WELS churches. He points out “that the catechism exposition was written so that it might serve as a doctrinal reference book for adults as well as a teaching tool for the instruction of children.”<sup>42</sup> The expositional parts of the catechism are the hundreds of questions and answers. These are not original with Luther and as such they change from author to author. Catechism class is not the capstone of a Christian’s education. Confirmation is not graduation in the sense that a child is done learning about God’s Word. Catechism is a single part of the larger Christian education a person undergoes their entire life.

When using “storied teaching” in catechism, the young adolescents may not cover the same quantity of material they would in a traditional catechism class. The purpose of catechism class is not so young adolescents can rattle off paragraphs of information and list dozens of supporting passages. Its purpose is concerned about the quality of the information learned. The 1998 *Revised Small Catechism* is not intended to be memorized in its entirety. Catechism teachers will need to have a realistic expectation of the amount of material to cover in a particular class. If the lesson is about the Ten Commandments, the teacher can use a “storied” approach by reviewing the story of how Moses received them on Mt. Sinai among others. If the catechism teacher is covering the Lord’s Prayer, then a traditional method may be more appropriate. But if catechism teachers adopt “storied teaching,” some points must be considered.

“Storied teaching” is all about its story. This author will later explain how to find good stories. For now, the focus is on its presentation. There are some general suggestions how to present a story. Catechism teachers and students must enter the story’s world. It is not enough to

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<sup>42</sup> Kuske, 3-4.

dryly read the words. If catechism teachers wish to captivate the young adolescent's future, they must tell the story with emotion. "A good story teller shows himself to be under the great events he recounts. He invites his listeners to be amazed as he is amazed. He stimulates them to draw their own conclusions."<sup>43</sup> If the teacher is not sold on the story, then why would the students? As teachers tell the story, they must convey the speakers' emotions and the gravity of the story's events. The extent this can be done depends on the teacher's ability and the makeup of the students.

The stories do not have to be extremely fictitious like *Lord of the Rings* or science-fiction. It can be as familiar as a Bible story from Sunday school or a current event. If anything, it is better for the story to be based in reality. Kuske writes about young adolescents that

the imagination is changing at this age. It is still vivid, but because of the child's increased experience in life, imagination is tied more and more to reality. A pastor or teacher who uses fairy tale illustrations or who makes applications which do not seem to be real life situations will be considered somewhat weird by students of this age group.<sup>44</sup>

While choosing an exotic setting like that of *Lord of the Rings* or *Chronicles of Narnia* may grab the student's attention, it may do the opposite of the teacher's goal. If students fixate on the fictitious details so that the lesson's truth is lost, then the story has failed its purpose. By choosing a realistic story, the "storied teacher" stimulates the student's developing imagination.

A story that is well presented and chosen can only help the young adolescent. It breaks up the monotony of the school day, makes learning more enjoyable for everyone because it is interactive, and mimics popular culture's love for immersive stories. Buffo lists four key advantages stories have in the classroom.

- 1) Getting the students attention, as well as, focusing on the lesson at hand.
- 2) Setting a platform for students to interact and comment on their thoughts about the story.
- 3) Providing a stronger connection in the classroom, with you and fellow students.
- 4) Giving students who normally do not participate in class, the opportunity to share their own personal experiences in relation to the stories shared.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Barth, *The Cowboy I*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> Kuske, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Sal Buffo. "The Power of Storytelling in the College Classroom." Faculty Focus.

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/power-storytelling-college-classroom/> (30 October 2015).



One general truth remains—the story must be simple. Widrich writes “when we think of stories, it is often easy to convince ourselves that they have to be complex and detailed to be interesting. The truth is however, that the simpler a story, the more likely it will stick.”<sup>46</sup> To best understand this, consider Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-35.

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a simple story. Jesus could have given more details, but did not for the reason Widrich pointed out—“**the simple story is more successful than the complicated one.**”<sup>47</sup> To demonstrate how a simple story is better than a complicated story, this author speculates below how a “storied teacher” may retell the same parable with too many details.

*There once was a Jewish man who was in Jerusalem. He had a cousin in Jericho who had a high fever. By the time his family in Jericho was able to tell him about the deathly fever, it had been a couple of days. This Jewish man was close to his cousin and was worried about him. He wanted to know how he was doing and to see if he could help. But they did not have cell phones yet and he was too poor to rent a horse. So he closed up his shop, packed just enough to get him there, and took the shortcut to Jericho. He knew the shortcut was frequented by robbers and heard stories of muggings happening on this road. But he was in a hurry to see how his cousin was doing. If he were to take the safe route to Jericho, it would take an extra day. By that time, the cousin could have already died from the fever. So against his better judgment, the Jewish man took the shortcut so he could get to Jericho by supertime. He was a mile or so out from Jerusalem when he stopped to take a drink of water....*

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<sup>46</sup> Widrich.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Bold is in the original quotation.

How many times have Jesus' parables been retold with superfluous details like that? The above speculation could be the setting for a book and short movie! Yes it captures the imagination and puts the reader in the historical context of first century Israel. Yes it gives a possible explanation why the Jerusalem man took the dangerous shortcut to Jericho. But it does not add any educational value to the parable of the Good Samaritan. If catechism teachers were to give all that extra information the student would soon be lost. Rather than learn who their neighbor is, their minds instead completely wander away.

When it comes to presenting a story, its value is found in its simplicity. In general, less is more. When "storied teachers" present the parable of the Good Samaritan, they would do well to closely follow what Jesus said. They can emphasize certain parts with tone of voice and body language or explain some confusing words. But to add all the extra background information is not necessary to learn the story's truth. If anything, it is bad teaching. Not only does the superfluous information distract the students, it is an implied insult to the Bible. If God the Holy Spirit saw it fit to leave out details, then "storied teachers" are wise to do likewise. To fill in the missing details without scriptural evidence may imply to the students that God forgot to tell the entire story. Common sense will have to be the judge between what is explaining the story and what is adding to the story. If "storied teachers" believe there are key details that the students need to know, it may be better to share them before telling the story. This way the students clearly know what is background information and what is God's story.

The list of advice of how to tell a story well is endless. It can be learned from experience, research, or watching master storytellers. This author will not spend pages giving such advice. There are plenty of books and articles written by others about that subject. But suffice it to say that storytelling is an art that must be learned. Master storytellers are not born experts. They were rookies at one time who had to learn their craft. If the reader wishes to adopt "storied teaching" for catechism class, they need to be a storyteller. As with any skill, getting started is always the hardest part. With practice, a novice storyteller can become skilled enough to capture the attention of young adolescents. While this is difficult, "storied" catechism teachers must continue to practice so as to improve this essential skill.

## THE BIBLE IS RIPE FOR “STORIED TEACHING”

The Bible spans the spectrum of literary genres. History comes alive in books like Genesis, the Kings, and Acts. Instructional manuals are given in books like Leviticus and the Corinthians. Doctrinal summaries are found in books like Deuteronomy and Romans. Poetry rivaling that of Shakespeare is penned in Psalms, Song of Songs, and parts of the Gospels. Mysterious visions are prophesied in Daniel, Zephaniah, and Revelation. While the Bible is full of distinct literary genres there is one central unit—the story of Jesus Christ. What happens in the Old Testament generally points ahead to his saving work. What happens in the New Testament generally tells what Christ did and how Christians can show their thanks.

Even within the seemingly boring books of the Bible the authors continue to tell stories.<sup>48</sup> Take the book of Leviticus. At first glance, it seems Moses only records rules and regulations for God’s people. But those oft-skipped over details describe the daily life of Old Testament Israel. The Israelites devoted their lives to these words. Second of all, take the book of Psalms. Each of those songs has a historical setting and unique purpose. Behind each psalm is a story that gives a candid view of life at that time. Psalm 51 takes place after David confessed his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and Psalm 18 when God delivered David from his enemies. Last of all, take the book of Romans. The Apostle Paul tells few recognizable stories in its sixteen chapters. But this is for a reason. Paul communicates his message using crafted summaries, familiar illustrations, and pointed applications. Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to have a clear understanding of the gospel before he established a base for westward missionary operations. When the reader looks at the Bible in this way, he concludes that “THE BIBLE is a story book.”<sup>49</sup> Every book of the Bible enlightens the modern reader of the author’s original time and situation. Sometimes it is clear and sometimes it has to be deduced. But its readers cannot help but feel they are a part of the authors’ original settings.

The power of the Bible comes from God the Holy Spirit. When catechism teachers tell Bible stories, they use the Holy Spirit’s powerful tools to strengthen faith. Christian education will rightly include Bible stories because of this.<sup>50</sup> But an important point must be remembered about Bible stories. They are not like any story found in the entertainment industry. God’s stories

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<sup>48</sup> Barth, *The Cowboy I*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Paul Matthews Van Buren, “Christian education *post mortum dei*,” *Religious Education*, 60 (January 1960): 7.

are true and tell people about God’s love and power. No matter how offensive or fantastic they may be, they are true. Bible stories ought to be respected for this single fact. When catechism teachers use Bible stories in “storied teaching,” they should convey this respect to their students. Bible stories are more than creative illustrations. They are demonstrations of God’s grace.

The Bible often uses a storytelling presentation. There are exceptions like the book of Romans or others noted earlier. But by large, “the dominant method used by the prophetic and apostolic writers is to speak of God and man in the form of narration.”<sup>51</sup> In keeping with their contemporary culture and instructional methods,

the primary way authors of narrative texts convey meaning is not through abstract propositions but by using the literary conventions of narrative to illustrate truth. The lifelikeness of the story allows the audience to experience truth on an affective and cognitive level as the story unfolds. As the story develops over narrative time, the audience is meant to deeply identify with the characters (including the character of God), their choices, and the consequences of those choices in the midst of the competing needs and desires that arise in the complexities of life. The author’s intended meaning is discovered as the problem of the story reaches its climax and finds resolution in comedy or tragedy.<sup>52</sup>

When catechism teachers use Bible stories, they already employ the above mentioned progression of logic. While uninformed teachers will unknowingly use stories with this purpose, it is helpful to understand how stories teach so as to maximize their potential. After teachers know how stories communicate educational truths, they can stress the correct elements in the story. Instead of focusing on background details that are little more than window dressing, teachers will focus on building up the story’s climax and closing out with its resolution.

Consider again the parable of the Good Samaritan. Uninformed teachers may retell the parable with the superfluous imaginative detail given before. Informed teachers will instead focus their student’s attention on the Samaritan’s surprising kindness. They will ask clarifying questions that probe why the Samaritan was so different. They will help the students learn that their neighbor is anybody in the world.

Martin Luther saw the Bible as an interweaving set of stories. Kolb calls this a *metanarrative*—“a master narrative that makes sense of incorporated specific stories.”<sup>53</sup> From Luther’s understanding, this metanarrative is God’s unfolding plan for mankind. It is summed up

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<sup>51</sup> Barth, *The Cowboy I*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Jagerson, 263-264.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), ix.

in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The light from this central story shines into every aspect of the Bible and gives it direction. The detailed laws of the Old Testament did more than separate God's people from the unbelieving nations around them. They constantly reminded the Israelites of their need for an everlasting sacrifice. The variety of songs in Psalms highlights God's power, mercy, love, and knowledge over all things. The blessed future in heaven the apostles write about is possible only by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians read Bible stories and see God's hand guiding the course of human events in their lives. Luther believed that Bible stories "reveal something of the larger story of God's creation and preservation of his world."<sup>54</sup> As Christians live every day in the Holy Spirit's joys, there is nothing else they could want. As catechism teachers who are training up the next generation, there is nothing else they can want but to connect their students with God's larger plan of salvation whenever possible.

#### WHERE TO FIND SUBTLY POWERFUL STORIES

If stories are so important, then where can catechism teachers find them? There is no one database of all the best stories. The Bible is one source among many. Sometimes it happens that the students already know a Bible story so well that they are immediately turned off at the mention of it. If this happens, catechism teachers may be better off finding a secular or a lesser known Bible story. Some examples could be the end of a siege in 2 Kings 7:3-20 or the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12:38-45. Sometimes a Bible story could have multiple lessons. In this case catechism teachers may want to find a different story for the sake of variety.

No matter which story is picked, it should be subtly powerful. Seymour writes that "the most powerful stories are often ones in which the point is not stated at all. These stories are seeds, planted in our minds, which may grow into insight."<sup>55</sup> Take the parable of the Good Samaritan again. Jesus did not spell out who is a neighbor. He told the parable, asked the expert-in-the-law for his answer, and applied the correct answer. But if Jesus finished the parable saying "the Samaritan was a good neighbor because he showed genuine love to everyone." Would the truth of the parable change? No. But would the impact of the lesson change? This author thinks so. The expert-in-the-law would not have had any chance to think for himself. Instead of actively

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<sup>54</sup> Kolb, x.

<sup>55</sup> Seymour, 47.

thinking, he would be passively receiving. The definition of a good neighbor would not have come from the expert's-in-the-law internal reasoning. It would have come from Jesus' foreign ideas foisted upon him. When stories are subtly powerful, they have the potential "of inspiring believers to understand, embrace, and live their faith with conviction and faithfulness."<sup>56</sup>

Fables are another type of story. Seymour defines them as "stories about animals behaving like people."<sup>57</sup> For the purposes of this paper, this author categorizes as a fable any story that has the principal characters as talking animals regardless if humans are present. Fables have largely fallen out of style for adults in mainstream American. They are mostly found in children's entertainment. Yet fables have an advantage over parables.

In Western culture, fables often provide a way to communicate a particularly sensitive lesson. Somehow, a story about animals provides a bit more emotional distance than a story about people, and that distance may allow the hearer to more easily accept the point being made.<sup>58</sup>

The audience puts down their guard with fables because animals are not people. Although written in 1952, Ronald Dahl's *Charlotte's Web* continues to capture hearts of all ages. People identify with the spider, Charlotte, as she goes to great lengths to save the pig, Wilbur, from an untimely death. If the same plot were told with humans instead, it would be reserved for high school English class to learn what macabre dramas are! Another example is George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*. *Animal Farm* reaches through to people and gives a critical approach of socialism. If the same topic were to be presented with people, most people would judge it according to their preconceived political views. Those in favor of capitalism would rally to the horse, Boxer, and vilify the evil pigs. Those in favor of socialism would throw *Animal Farm* into the trash and decry its bigoted views. But by being a fable, *Charlotte's Web* and *Animal Farm* reach through to students and show them something new. If potentially offensive secular truths can be successfully taught through fables, how much more would the Bible's truths gain an unbiased hearing? It is not this author's intent to discredit the Holy Spirit's work of converting hearts. But fables at least package the information in a way that students will listen to with an open mind. If young adolescents think they are too mature for fables, catechism teachers always have the option of using regular stories.

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<sup>56</sup> Hosffman Ospino, "Unveiling the human and the divine: the revelatory power of popular religiosity narratives in Christian education," *Religious Education* 102, no. 3 (2007): 337.

<sup>57</sup> Seymour, 56.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

History is another source for stories replete

with illustrations, and portrays, as it were, before our eyes what the words convey to the ear. We there see how the good and the wise have lived, and how they have been rewarded; and also how the wicked and the ignorant have done, and how they have been punished.<sup>59</sup>

History is the story of mankind. Is it full of men and women who went through similar challenges and searches for identity which young adolescents today go through. For the Christian, history is more than stories from the past. It is a record of God's faithful love and fulfilled promises despite all the challenges. "Luther looked upon history, not simply as a source of illustration for moral and philosophic truth...but also as a portrayal of God's wonderful dealings with men and a leading source of human knowledge."<sup>60</sup> While Bible history easily ties into this, secular history can make the same point.

There are many positive and negative examples. One positive example is that of Mozart. Born in 1756, he was blessed with immense musical talent. He applied himself to his musical talents to become one of the great composers of classical music of all time. Many have wondered what else he would have gone on to do if he had not died at the tender age of thirty-five. Through Mozart, God blessed all people by giving new inspiration for countless musicians. One negative example is Oscar Pistorius. This six-time gold medalist in the Paralympic Games was the first amputee runner to compete in Summer Olympics. From his debut in the 2012 Summer Olympics on, this South African athlete was a household name and poster boy for overcoming adversity. All that changed in September 2014 when he was convicted for murdering his girlfriend. Through Pistorius, God showed all people that sin will ruin all lives regardless of their standing on Earth. In either example "storied" teachers have many other potential lessons.

Catechism teachers need to be careful when picking stories. Whether it comes from history, popular culture, sports, or current events, the goal is to be subtly powerful. If there are superfluous details which distract the young adolescents, delete them if possible. The point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is nearly destroyed if this author's creative speculation is included. If there is inappropriate material catechism teachers may find it wise to pick a different story entirely. As memorable as the incestuous details between Lot and his daughters<sup>61</sup> may be,

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<sup>59</sup> F. V. N. Painter, *Luther on Education* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1889), 156.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>61</sup> Ge 19:30-38.

there are many better Bible stories teachers can use to teach young adolescents to trust in God. If a story promotes anti-Christian values, then again perhaps it is better to choose something else. This applies especially to young adolescents. If teachers use an excerpt from secular fiction which they would not recommend in its entirety, then they may better off avoiding it entirely.<sup>62</sup> Young adolescents are curious and naturally drawn to taboo. If a class were to include a clip from Monty Python's 1979 movie *Life of Brian*, the young adolescents would be sure to investigate it more and see how it blatantly mocks Christianity. Catechism teachers will have many more headaches from concerned parents over a poorly chosen story than from an endless search for a wise story. There is an exception to this rule. If catechism teachers wish to give an example of what to stay away from, it may be wiser to show the issue from its ugly sinful side. It could range from how unbelievers persecute Christianity or an example of sinful degeneracy in people. But even with this, catechism teachers best use their judgment.

What can teachers do if no such story can be found? They can look in the newspaper and keep clippings of promising stories. They can read popular blogs and books. They can learn how to sift through the Internet. If these all fail, there is also the option to write a story. By no means is this easy. Few initially thrive at it and the only way to improve is to practice. But if teachers can develop this skill, they are that much freer to find a subtly powerful story. This author will not delve into details of how to write good stories. He will leave the reader with four general steps.<sup>63</sup> 1) Start by deciding what spiritual truth your parable will communicate. 2) Decide on a problem situation around which your story will communicate. 3) Limit your characters. 4) Talk your story before you write it. If the reader is interested in more about this, consult with other resources that specialize in this.

Catechism class is different than any other school subject—it can only be found in the Bible. The catechetical truths likewise are only found in the Bible. Because its knowledge cannot be found in nature, the materials used in catechism must reveal it.<sup>64</sup> Special care must be taken in choosing the stories. If the young adolescent does not learn a truth in catechism, they may likely never cover it again in the same dogmatic detail. When else do Christians learn the *Enchiridion*

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<sup>62</sup> Marlene LeFever, *Creative Teaching Methods* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing, 1985), 202.

<sup>63</sup> LeFever, 215.

<sup>64</sup> John Isch, *The Generation to Come* (New Ulm, MN: Print Shop, 1990), 23.



in great detail than in catechism? Perhaps in an occasional Bible study, but that is about it. “We need, therefore, to consider carefully when we select materials or when we decide on method.”<sup>65</sup>

Just because a story is well-known does not bar it from instructional use. Consider the battle of Gettysburg. With a little prodding, nearly every student who has learned about the Civil War recognizes the name Gettysburg. It was the furthest north the Confederates fought during the war. Thousands of young men lost their lives in a few days. General Robert E. Lee learned that his boys were not invincible. Military strategists discovered that technological improvements in firearms had rendered the full-frontal assault an obsolete tactic. President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address and secured his reelection. If one were to dig into American history, they would find more long-lasting effects from this pivotal battle. Numerous applications for students can be made from this one battle so long ago.

There is a fear that some stories may be too well-known for them to be of educational value. Even if a student knows what happens in a story does not make it useless. The story of Cain and Abel is well-known. Cain killed his younger brother Abel in cold blood because Cain got angry that God favored Abel’s offerings given in willful thanksgiving. Besides obvious ties to the Fifth Commandment, there are other lessons that can be taught. What makes an offering favorable to God? Why did God give Cain a chance to repent before condemning him? Which sins do people need to watch out which Cain fell prey to? These questions are the tip of the iceberg for potential “storied” lessons.

If catechism teachers were to use the subtly powerful story of Cain and Abel, where would they put it in the course curriculum? How would they tell the story so as to capture the characters, environment, and emotions? What questions would they craft to hit the heads and hearts of their students? What applications would they give so the young adolescents put their new knowledge to work? The answers to these questions will vary from teacher to teacher. They will depend on the students’ unique skills and weaknesses. But no matter what the answers are catechism teachers are not restricted from using well-known Bible stories. In fact it may be that they are well-known because they are subtly powerful.

There are general characteristics of subtly powerful stories. Lists vary but Seymour gives one concise list.<sup>66</sup> 1) Short 2) Simple 3) Clear 4) Apply to the senses 5) Coherent—stick to the

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Seymour, 41-42.

story's rules even if they are fictitious—and 6) Pointed. The reader will see these six principles in the story of Cain and Abel. 1) It is short—altogether it is 16 verses long. 2) It is simple—Cain kills Abel because of jealous anger. 3) It is clear—Cain kills Abel and does not repent. 4) It applies to the senses—the reader can smell the sacrifices, feel Cain's jealousy, and picture the bloody field. 5) It is coherent—Cain does not use any advanced technology or outlandish setting. 6) It is pointed—Cain acted on his sin and killed Abel. These six principles can be seen in many Bible stories. What makes any Bible story powerful though is not because it follows these six characteristics. It is because God gave these stories to instruct his children and the Holy Spirit works through God's Word.

No matter how well a story follows the above six points, what best makes a story subtly powerful is the element of surprise. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is the Samaritan's loving heart. With Cain and Abel, it is either Cain's murder or his refusal to repent. Even if a Bible story is well-known, the teacher can tell it so that the student is captured in its events.<sup>67</sup> When all this happens, the student is then best prepared to learn the unknown knowledge that catechism gives.

One of the most central ways to include the student in “storied teaching” is to keep the element of surprise. Teachers ought to tell the story as a story before they connect it to the lesson's objectives.

The key to a good experiential story is allowing subtle, seamless clues to reinforce the main idea or theme of your story. Through subtlety, participants are allowed to find personal meaning in the story. When we give them the answers, we violate the process by taking the thinking, imagination, and creative control from others. This often shuts them off because it violates trust. It also takes away from the mystery and surprise that a story and experience can provide.<sup>68</sup>

## TRANSITIONING FROM TRADITIONAL TEACHING TO “STORIED TEACHING”

“Storied teaching” is not simply for the sake of change. Change is not inherently good; sometimes it can make the current situation worse. When catechism teachers change their methodology, they need to first consider the students. “The method must serve the content, never

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<sup>67</sup> Barth, *The Cowboy* 2, 125.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, 112-113.

vice versa.”<sup>69</sup> What students need more than anything is the correct content in the best possible presentation. When conducting a “storied” catechism class, teachers can be tempted to put more preparation or emphasis on the presentation over the content. Instead of focusing on the right truths, they focus on the most imaginative way to tell the story. While there may be a place for such dramatic storytelling, it must not overshadow the point of the story. Young adolescents come to catechism class to learn the Bible’s truths—not for pure entertainment. No matter what the method is it “must remain in the background so that the message of the Word is clear.”<sup>70</sup> It should also “*provide for and encourage the participation and the involvement of the students.*”<sup>71</sup>

Where there are young adolescents, there will be catechism classes. Each class will differ from another due to a number of factors—personalities, number of students, place of learning, and which day of the week to name a few. But as long as a pastor teaches the class, there is a commonality. It is the training they received at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. For decades, WELS pastors have been trained in the “waltz methodology” proposed by Professor Emeritus David Kuske. Because this is the one commonality in nearly every catechism class, this author will focus on how to prepare “storied teaching” from Kuske’s methodology.

Kuske’s methodology is rightly nicknamed the “waltz method” for its one-two-three progression in class. It gets its name from the one-two-three dance step known as the waltz. For an example of the “waltz method,” refer to an earlier quotation from Martin Albrecht’s essay *Methods and Content In Religious Instruction For Pastors and Methods For Presenting The Catechism*.

What “storied teaching” proposes is a reworking of Kuske’s “waltz method.” The preparation for class is similar; the presentation is not. The catechism class will not be structured around a handful of Bible passages supported with short illustrations. Instead a single large story will provide the structure supported with the supporting Bible passages.

In terms of preparation, not much is different. In order to conduct a class using the “waltz method,” catechism teachers must plan. They plan which doctrines to cover, what the students’ goals are, and how to briefly review the previous lesson. They research the appropriate passages, devise applications, and decide what the homework is. In order to conduct a “storied” catechism class, much of the same work has to be done. The biggest difference is that rather than plan how

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<sup>69</sup> Isch, *The Generation*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. Italics in original quotation.

to flesh out a handful of passages, they plan how to present a single story. Instead of finding numerous illustrations that encapsulate the passage's truth, they find the connections between the story and the supporting passages.

To help with their preparation, “storied teachers” may find it helpful to learn how early rabbinical parables were organized. They were organized into five steps—1) illustrand 2) introductory formula 3) parable proper 4) application and 5) scriptural quotation.<sup>72</sup> The *illustrand* was the point to be covered. The *introductory formula* was the transition question to the parable. The *parable proper* was the story to be told. The *application* was the lesson. The *scriptural quotation* was the Bible reference.

How would the parable of the Good Samaritan look in such a formula? The author pictures it like this. Illustrand—the identity of a neighbor. Introductory formula—who is a neighbor? Parable proper—the words which Jesus spoke. Application—a neighbor is any person without any exception. Scriptural quotation—Luke 10:25-37.

Using such a formula may help “storied teachers.” It organizes their thoughts, makes it clear what the story's purpose is, and gives the scriptural proof for their point. Catechism teachers may find it useful to use such an organization in their preparation. This author has an example of a “storied” lesson in the appendix that loosely follows this organization.

Teaching and storytelling are both a science and an art. “Storied teaching” is a combination of the two fields. If “storied teachers” struggle as storytellers—such as unable to pick and tell stories well—they will struggle as teachers because they have lost the class. If they struggle as teachers—such as unable to show and connect the truths to the story—they will struggle as storytellers because the stories will seem to have no purpose. “Storied teaching” is not a mindless way to teach catechism. But neither is the “waltz method.” To do either well is both a science and an art which one must practice. As with anything the beginning is the hardest.

Freestyle skaters may look to people on the rink side as if they were born in their skates, but no one doubts the hours of practice that fill every week. Good teaching doesn't just happen, either. Teachers need to put in their time: developing spiritual discipline, knowledge of the age level, and understanding the teaching process and the rules governing interpersonal relationships.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Seymour, 61.

<sup>73</sup> LeFever, 18.

## SUPPLEMENT THE STORY WITH PASSAGES

“Storied teaching” does not only have stories. It must also include supporting Bible passages to supplement it. One of storytelling’s strengths of is that it “has the capacity to activate plurality of possible meanings that multiplies significance, yet resists closure.”<sup>74</sup> It is the plurality of meanings that teachers must watch. The plurality of meanings activates the students’ minds, but also leaves it open to incorrect conclusions. Because the catechism deals with eternal truths, false conclusions can affect the student’s eternal salvation. The story of Cain and Abel illustrates this. People could wrongly conclude that murder is only wrong if the murderer is caught. They could infer that God only likes animal sacrifices. They could assume that God is okay with murder provided the murderer repents. There are many other false conclusions out there that could endanger a person’s faith. Teachers are wise to use clarifying passages from other parts of the Bible to guard against this danger.

“Storied teachers” must distinguish between what is prescriptive and what is descriptive. Something is prescriptive when it is an unchanging spiritual truth. Something that is descriptive, on the other hand, is an example of the prescriptive truth in life. In general, Bible passages tend to be prescriptive and stories tend to be descriptive. One example of this is the promise that the Messiah would come from Abraham’s descendants in Genesis 17:19. Numerous passages in the Bible<sup>75</sup> refer to this promise in various descriptive stories. One descriptive story that shows God preserving Abraham’s descendants is the story of Esther. Because of the beauty, faith, and personality God gave her, the Israelite nation was spared during their time in exile. If Haman had succeeded in eradicating the Jews from Babylon, God’s promise to Abraham would have been broken humanly speaking. Another example is the prescriptive truth in 1 Peter 5:8. Peter aptly describes the Devil as a prowling lion looking for someone to devour. The prescriptive truth is that Satan is always looking for ways to shipwreck people’s faith. Descriptive stories of this abound from Jesus’ temptations in the desert to Job’s horrific sufferings.

A historical example of confusing prescriptive with descriptive happened at the Peasants’ War in 1525. The German peasants were not happy with the nobles. Thomas Müntzer, one of the leaders of the Reformation, led the peasants in a bloody revolt against the nobles. Although they

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<sup>74</sup> Louise Philips, “Storytelling as Pedagogy.” *Literacy Learning* 21, no. 2 (June 2013): ii.

<sup>75</sup> Ps 132:11; Mic 7:20; Lk 1:55; Gal 3:16.

faced impossible odds, they were encouraged by the descriptive stories of Abram's victory over the four kings in Genesis 14 and David's battle with the Syrians in 2 Samuel 8. The nobles soon put the peasants and Müntzer to the sword in what would be a historical blight upon Luther's life. In commenting on the Peasant's War, Luther said "the examples of the saints and of the children of God must not be understood as something to imitate and as rule except when they follow the rule laid down in the Word."<sup>76</sup> In other words, it may save your life to know what is prescriptive and what is descriptive.

Catechism teachers need to supplement "storied teaching" with clear doctrinal passages. In the first place, it follows Luther's advice from above. Only a foolish reader would conclude what in the Bible is prescriptive or descriptive without looking at the rest of Scripture. God's Word is a book of order written by a single author. There are no *non sequiturs* in the Bible. To assume that Abraham's immense riches are prescriptive for all Christians is opposite Paul's life devoid of the world's comforts. Both of their lives are descriptive, not prescriptive. To assume that Christians will conquer every opponent like when Joshua led Israel into Canaan is opposite Jesus' prescriptive truth in John 16:33b "in this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

In the second place, supplementing prescriptive passages illustrates the Bible's unity. Critical scholars believe Christianity is a progressive religion. They say that it evolved from polytheistic worship into a singular cultural identity for the Jews. They believe that the early church made a religious figure out of a historical man named Jesus. They propose that when the monks copied the Bible, they added their own ideas in an attempt to manipulate people's minds. When catechism teachers supplement prescriptive passages into "storied teaching," they show how the Bible is not written by numerous authors with different agendas. There is the one author—God. He recorded his message through the pens of many writers. After "storied teachers" present the Great Commission, they can use passages like Mark 7:4 to show how the word *baptize* means more than immersion. They can use passages like 1 Peter 3:21 to show how baptism saves people from their sins. After presenting the creation of Adam and Eve in connection with a lesson on marriage, "storied teachers" can use passages like Matthew 19:4-6 to emphasize the sanctity of marriage and disapproval for divorce.

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<sup>76</sup> Kolb, 34.

In the third place, including prescriptive passages give stories their power. Stories are continually fighting for young adolescents' attention. The entertainment industry spends billions of dollars to reach this age group with the best story. Peers exchange stories as they develop relationships. If catechism class is simply story time, then the Bible truths are little more than wholesome entertainment. Students may remember the story and its moral, but what of it if the lesson has no authority?

This is self-evident when teachers use secular stories. Whether it is told on the TV, in the cafeteria, or in catechism class, secular stories do not have authority. They are simply stories. Even with Bible stories, which should inherently have authority because they come from God's Word, the risk is still there. Take the Bible story *The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace* from Daniel chapter three. This story is full of sense-provoking details, relatable characters, and memorable lessons. The catechism teacher uses the story to teach that God will protect his children from all danger if it is his will. Come test time, will the students remember the gist of the story? Of course. Will the students remember the lesson tied to the story? This author is confident they will. But will the students still trust in God's protection even if their lives are not at stake? This author is doubtful. Because the teacher did not pull in prescriptive passages that show how God's protection includes minor persecutions, young adolescents may infer that God will only intervene if the stakes are life-threatening. They could even doubt their faith if they think that their faith must be so strong before God will act on the behalf.

But once *The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace* is supplemented with the Bible's prescriptive passages about God's protection, the students learn the comforting lesson—God can protect his children from any evil no matter what the size. The prescriptive passages will bring the story's lesson to the next level. Some examples include Nahum 1:7 “the Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” or Psalm 34:19 “the righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.” If the student is troubled that Satan may outsmart God's protection, the teacher can mention 2 Thessalonians 3:3 “but the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.” The Lord will protect his children for all their life as an aged Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:18 “the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.” Once these and similar passages are supplemented with the telling of *The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace*, the lesson reaches a new level. God's protection is not just for royal officials in a faraway

kingdom a long time ago; it is not only for the worst of persecutions. God's protection is for all his children for all time against every evil threat.

“Storied teachers” can also use the same story to teach a related truth—God may allow his children to pass away because of persecution. Psalm 34:19 shows that God will deliver his children from trouble. Sometimes that deliverance may be death so that the believer may escape all future troubles on Earth and have eternal rest in heaven. Paul has this understanding in recently quoted 2 Timothy 4:18. Paul rests his confidence that God will bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom through the persecuted death Nero likely gave him. While the deliverance God gave to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was an exception to his usual method—keeping in mind what Luther wrote in the earlier quotation—the principle from that extraordinary event is true for all believers. If the Lord had permitted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to burn to their death in the fiery furnace, he would still be delivering them by bringing them into heaven. By supplementing stories with prescriptive passages, “storied teachers” can: 1) safeguard the story's lesson 2) give the descriptive story its proper prescriptive power and 3) show how God has always protected his children.

Before “storied teachers” jump into the prescriptive passages, they should have taught the students that lesson from the story first. The story is the student's initial presentation of the catechism's truth with which they make connections in their memory. After the story's point has been shown, “storied teachers” then bring in the supporting passages. If the process is reversed or if the passages are brought in too early, then the students may fall into a “proof passage mentality.” This is when passages are made to say more than what they actually do. While this author is sure that catechism teachers will make sure their conclusions come from appropriate passages, the students may still feel they are in a “proof passage mentality” class. When this happens, the young adolescent is much more likely to view the lesson's truths to be “this is what my teacher says” instead of “this is what the Bible says.” By presenting the story first—allowing the student to see its point—and then bringing in the prescriptive passages, the “storied teacher” appeals to the students' use of reason while keeping the story at the forefront. Reason's presence does not necessitate that the students will believe it through the Holy Spirit. But reason does make a student think about the truths which increase the chances for students to believe and remember the lesson.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Isch, *The Generation*, 122-123.



## TIPS TO FIND THESE ESSENTIAL PASSAGES

The parents' help is essential for any catechetical truths to remain with a student. Luther believed that "when parents or guardians will not take the trouble through themselves or others [to help the children learn], there no catechetical instruction can ever be successful."<sup>78</sup> As catechism teachers pick their stories and passages, they need to keep the parents in mind. If catechism teachers choose a story which parents connect to the lesson, then they can help teach their children. But if the stories are so cryptic that only the catechism teacher can decode the connection, where does that leave the parents? They are as lost as the young adolescents. While the author will not further discuss various ways how catechism teachers can include the parents, the reader is encouraged to ponder this.

Catechism teachers have many resources to choose their material from. There is Scripture of course, but to know which parts to go to can be daunting. For the sake of the parents and the teachers' time, catechism teachers are encouraged to use the catechism. It is the handbook for teachers and students and guides their Christian faith and life.

History has proven how valuable Luther's *Small Catechism* is. It has stood the test of time after nearly 500 years. Luther was not the first person to write a catechism. Centuries before Luther lived the medieval churches had produced their own. But believers come back to Luther's *Small Catechism* and continue to write new expositions from the material. It is timeless for four reasons. First, Luther's *Small Catechism* is evangelical throughout all its points. It thoroughly breathes the gospel and seeks to proclaim Christ's saving work wherever it can. Second, Luther avoids the polemics of his time. There is a time and place to refute false teachers. But instead the catechism focuses on the truth and allows teachers to bring in polemics as they see fit. Third, Luther writes in a personal tone. When students read Luther's "what does this mean?" it appears as something the students could have written themselves. Fourth, Luther is a master wordsmith. While more apparent in the original German, the catechism's translators have carried this poetic quality where possible. Not only does this make it easier to memorize, but also to internalize the comforting truths. By using the catechism as the primary resource to find prescriptive passages

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<sup>78</sup> Painter, 153.

and applicable Bible stories, catechism teachers build on the sure foundation Luther designed long ago.<sup>79</sup>

Yet catechism teachers are not restricted to Luther's 1998 *Revised Small Catechism* for passages and stories. Many times it does not give any stories. It may happen that passages which are not listed in the catechism are clearer. While the Catechism is a great place to start, it is not the only place. If there are striking recent events or a popular book or movie, catechism teachers are encouraged to use their discerning reason in evaluating their use. Catechism teachers are free to present the story how they wish. They can tell it as the bards of old. They can tell it as they would around a campfire. They can read a written script or watch a short video. The possibilities are endless.

## CONCLUSION

Why does the Christian church retell Jesus' life every year from Advent to Pentecost? It is not simply to entertain people. It is so that the story of Jesus may permeate in the lives of Christians.<sup>80</sup> Catechism teachers have a great joy and responsibility to their students to show how Christ's story transforms their story. In so doing, they teach their students on many levels. On the physical level, they grow in knowledge of God's saving grace. On the spiritual level, they increase their love for their Savior through the work of the Holy Spirit. On the heavenly level, they are confident they will see heaven with their own eyes because of the truths learned in catechism. This important duty is the crowning mercy for all catechism teachers.<sup>81</sup>

Without a doubt, catechism is an important step in a young adolescent's Christian life. The methods used in catechism class are equally important. "Storied teaching" is one option for this important class. By presenting the truths in stories and supplementing them with Bible passages, "storied teaching" reaches young adolescents in new ways. It is indirect so as not to sound preachy. By the very nature of the catechetical truths, this is a danger. Its truths are already divisive and foreign to the sinful world. With the indirect approach of timeless truths that "storied teaching" offers, students are more likely to grant them a hearing. "Storied teaching" intrigues the students so they are more involved in the learning process. The more involved

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<sup>79</sup> Isch, *The Generation*, 107-108.

<sup>80</sup> Ven, 386.

<sup>81</sup> Isch, *Readings in*, 29.

students are in their learning the more likely they will remember the lesson. “Storied teaching” compels students to discover the truth for themselves. Stories, by their nature, challenge the listener to make sense of them. It is better if students discover the story’s truth for themselves than for a teacher to force it in.

This author does not predict that “storied teaching” will replace the traditional catechism class everywhere. Given the catechism teacher’s skills, the classroom’s setting, and the particular lesson, it may be better to have a traditional catechism class. It may be impractical to ask veteran catechism teachers to add another task to their overflowing lists of duties. But “storied teaching” is an excellent option for catechism teachers to consider as they strive to show young adolescents what it means to be a child of God. With the steps listed above and the examples in the appendix, catechism teachers can transition to a “storied teaching” method by shuffling how they already prepare for class. With these changes, students will remember God’s truths by telling the stories they heard in their “storied” catechism class.

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## APPENDIX

A “storied” lesson on the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment is included in the appendix. Given that this is a new method, nearly all the work is original from the author. However the discerning reader will notice connections with the traditional format and the rabbinical organization for parables. The reader is also invited to look at the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment in the *Teacher’s Guide* which is included in the bibliography. This author made extensive use of it in the selection and purpose for most of the Bible passages. This author also added a secular story at the end which could be used in place of Exodus 2:11-15.

### “STORIED” LESSON ON THE 5<sup>TH</sup> COMMANDMENT

- 1) Topic – 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment
- 2) Story – Moses Murders an Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-15)
- 3) Application – It is a sin to harm my neighbor or wish evil on him.
- 4) Goals
  - a. Head – To summarize what the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment entails and the story associated with it.
  - b. Heart – To appreciate the gift of life as much as God does.
  - c. Hand – To preserve my neighbor’s life and actively ask God to help me conquer hateful thoughts.

#### *Overview of the “Storied” Classroom*

- 1) Review the Previous Lesson
  - a. What was the story associated with the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment?
    - i. What happened in the story?
  - b. Who is willing to recite for the class the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment which you memorized?
  - c. Any questions about last time’s class?
- 2) Introduce Today’s Lesson

- a. Today we will be looking at the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment and how that is something we have to watch out for every day.
- b. We will be looking at a part of Moses' life before he leads the Israelites out during the Exodus. To remember who Moses is, what can you tell me about Moses' birth? Why was it so special?
  - i. Pharaoh said that only Hebrew girls would be allowed to live. Moses should have been killed right after he was born.
  - ii. When Moses' mother was not able to hide Moses anymore, she placed him in a basket to float down the Nile.
  - iii. Pharaoh's daughter saw baby Moses in the basket and adopted him.
  - iv. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's family home.

### 3) Present the Story

- a. With the students' Bibles closed, the teacher tells the story of when Moses murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew.
  - i. If possible, the teacher can include pictures or sounds that fit the story. It also is advised they tell the story without having to look down too much. During the story, students are asked not to interrupt with questions. There will be time afterwards for questions. Below is an example.

*(Start off with picture of the pyramids to capture an Egyptian atmosphere. If possible and/or wanted, include a background soundscape of blowing sand or wind) After Moses grew up in Pharaoh's house, he went out to where his people were. Although he grew in an Egyptian house, Moses knew he was different from the people he grew up with. (Proceed to next picture of two people who are racially different from each other. Ideally between an Egyptian and a Hebrew) He was a Hebrew, one of the descendants of Abraham who came to Egypt when Joseph was alive 400 some years earlier.*

*When Moses saw his people out in the fields, they were hard at work making bricks for Pharaoh's massive buildings. (Proceed to next picture of brickmaking) Moses felt bad for his Hebrew brothers and sisters who had to work in the sun all day. He had it much easier growing up in Pharaoh's household. While he was looking at them, he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrews. (Transition to picture of two men fighting each other. If the teacher wants, have the two men be of different racial backgrounds) Moses got angry and decided to kill the*

*Egyptian. After the fight, Moses looked around to make sure no one was nearby. When he saw that no one was around, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. (Proceed to next picture of a makeshift grave in the sand)*

*Moses thought he got away with it. The next day, Moses came back to see his Hebrew people at work. He was surprised when he saw two of them fighting each other! (Go back to picture of the two men fighting again. If the teacher wants, he can use a picture of two racially-similar men) Moses rushed down to the fight, broke it up, and found out what was going on. (Go to picture of three men aggressively arguing with each other) He asked the one in the wrong, “Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?” In response the Hebrew man said, “What makes you so high and mighty to be our judge? Are you going to kill us just as you did with the Egyptian yesterday?” Moses thought, “How did they find out I killed the Egyptian? What if they told the other Hebrews? What if they told Pharaoh!? If Pharaoh finds out, he is going to call for my head!”*

*It did not take long for Pharaoh to hear about Moses’ murder. When he did, he sent out orders to kill Moses. (Go to picture of a ruler sending out an order with authority) But Moses caught wind of Pharaoh’s order and ran away. (Cut to picture of a man running away with few possessions) He went to the faraway land of Midian where he knew he would be safe. (End with picture that summarizes the story or some other fitting picture. Make sure these words are visible “Moses Murders an Egyptian Exodus 2:11-15”)*

#### 4) Reinforce the Story

- a. Have the students retell the story through answers to the teacher’s questions.
  - i. Who did Moses go to see at the beginning of the story?
    1. His fellow Hebrews at work.
  - ii. What did Moses see that upset him?
    1. An Egyptian beating a Hebrew.
  - iii. What did he do about it?
    1. He waited till no one was around and murdered the Egyptian. He tried to hide his tracks by burying him in the sand.
  - iv. What did he see the next day he went out?
    1. Two Hebrews were fighting each other.
  - v. What surprised Moses?



1. The Hebrew men knew about Moses' murder.
  - vi. What was Moses afraid of?
    1. That Pharaoh would hear of it and try to kill him.
  - vii. What did Moses end up doing?
    1. He fled to Midian to save his life.
  - b. Have the students open their Bibles to Exodus 2:11-15. Read the account from God's Word.
- 5) Connect the Story to the Lesson Through Bible Passages
- a. This is possibly the most important part of the class. In this section, the teacher guides the students to achieve the three goals listed at the start. This is done through the use of question and answer from the story, other passages, and drawing the connection between the other passages with the story. Below are some examples.
  - b. What was the problem of the story? If there was one thing Moses could have done differently to save himself a lot of trouble, what would it be?
    - i. Killing the Egyptian. Even if Moses did successfully hide the body, there would have been investigations. Even if they did not get back to Moses, it would have caused some trouble for the Hebrew community.
  - c. There was a lot more going on that was wrong than a murdered Egyptian. Open up to Genesis 2:7.
    - i. After reading it, ask the students "Who created mankind? How much does God care about the life of humans? Why is that?"
      1. After teaching the point that God created life and cares about our lives, ask "What do you think God thought about Moses' murder?"
  - d. Next open up to Deuteronomy 32:39. Ask "Who alone has the right to end a person's life? How did Moses break that?"
  - e. Continue with Matthew 5:21,22. "What new thought does Jesus add to the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment? How is hate like murder? When did Moses first break the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment?"
  - f. Next read from 2 Corinthians 6:1,2. "What makes this present time so important?" Teach the concept of *time of grace* and what it means. "How did Moses affect the

Egyptian's *time of grace*? How might Moses have hindered the truth of the other Hebrews in God? How did Moses put his *time of grace* in danger?"

- g. Lastly, read 1 Thessalonians 5:14,15. "What are all the commands given to Christians to do as they seek to honor God? How can we "do what is good for each other and everyone else" in light of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment? How could Moses have kept the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment and still seek justice for the Hebrew who was being beaten by the Egyptian?"
- 6) Apply the Lesson to the Students' Heads, Hearts, and Hands
- a. At this point, the teacher can use the applications provided by the *Teacher's Guide* among others.
    - i. Agree or disagree: Smoking cigarettes or eating too much is just like committing suicide.
      - 1. Such smoking and eating may not actually lead to the immediate death of the person as suicide does. But in many cases smoking and eating too much are harmful to the body. If that is the case, such actions are sins against God's precious gift of life just as suicide is.
    - ii. Agree or disagree: Watching a TV show with murder and hate as part of the story is a sin.
      - 1. It is a temptation to sin if the TV show glorifies murder and hate instead of presenting them as something bad. Then sin is being glorified. A Christian knows those things are sin, not something to be glorified or even treated lightly.
  - b. If a real-life story can be found, the teacher is welcome to use it and write up application questions on it.
    - i. Some examples that grab this author's attention that are applicable to the young adolescents would be the 1999 shooting at Columbine.
    - ii. A story could be used that shows how a murder does not mean a person is barred from heaven. The story of Jeffrey Dahmer's conversion before his death illustrates this. Or biblical examples like Joshua or the Apostle Paul.

- c. It may be beneficial for the teacher to include the *What Does This Mean?* from the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment so the students learn how the words they memorize are true. If the teacher finds it useful, they could intersperse the Bible passages with excerpts to break up the class.
- d. This lesson is most likely too long to do in a single session. How a teacher may decide to break it up will depend on their own situation.

7) Prepare for Next Time

- a. Memorize the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment and *What Does This Mean*.
- b. Summarize the story associated with the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment.
- c. Explain how the story either upholds or breaks the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment and the *What Does This Mean*.

8) Alternate Story in Place of Exodus 2:11-15

- a. High school student Jared with anger issues

*(No visual aids are used in this story. This way the students can imagine the details for themselves and keep their attention on the “storied” teacher.) Jared had known about his anger issues for a few years now. He first became aware of it four years ago when his younger sister Lizzy accidentally broke his favorite videogame. Jared had received it on his birthday and it had made his day. All of his friends wanted to come over to play it and Jared had met some cool people playing it online. But one day Lizzy was in a rush to leave the house. In her hurry, she accidentally stepped on the game’s disc and heard a loud crunch. She looked down, saw the shimmering shattered pieces, and knew that Jared was going to be mad. Lizzy swept it all up in hopes of covering her tracks.*

*It did not take long for Jared to find out the truth. And when he did, he lost it. He found Lizzy in her room and stormed in. Jared was mad. Lizzy could clearly see it in his eyes and hear it in his loud voice. What happened next, nobody knew. Lizzy refused to talk about it and Jared could not seem to remember. All their parents heard was Jared’s yelling, Lizzy’s crying, and a loud noise from her bedroom. By the time the parents ran up to Lizzy’s room, she had a black eye forming and Jared was getting ready to backhand her across the face. The parents separated the siblings from each other and before long things cooled down again.*

*It was after that incident Jared saw the counselor for the first time. It was awkward and embarrassing, but he had no choice but to go. It was from his counselor that Jared learned he*

*had anger issues. He learned some techniques to help deal with it and to prevent more sad situations like that with his sister Lizzy. He used those techniques and understanding of his anger issues to avoid another situation for years. His family forgave him for hitting Lizzy and they worked together to help Jared.*

*Jared was now a sophomore in high school. He still saw his counselor on a somewhat regular basis, but he had not done anything as bad as when he gave Lizzy a black eye since then. One evening he got a haircut from his mother and she decided to play a little joke. She left a tuft of hair on the back of his head that Jared did not know about. The following school day, people kept talking about Jared behind his back and laughing at him. No one told him about his tuft of hair until Chuck the bully came around. Chuck had always given Jared a hard time. Because of this, Jared did not care for Chuck at all nor did Chuck for Jared. Chuck showed this by not holding anything back. He drew everyone's attention to Jared's tuft of hair and led them in picking on him. Jared could feel his face was turning red, his hands were trembling, and his eyes had tunnel vision. He tried to remove himself to a quiet place, he tried counting to ten, and he tried all of his anger techniques. But there was no place he could go to cool down.*

*It was then Jared's mind became lucid. He knew what he had to do to control his anger—stop Chuck. With everyone watching Chuck berate Jared, Jared tackled Chuck to the ground. He climbed on top of Chuck and began to pound his jaw. Jared thought "if I can get him to stop talking, then he'll stop making fun of me. Then everyone will stop looking at me!" And so Jared punched him once, twice, three times in the jaw. Jared heard Chuck moan something. It was Chuck moaning in pain, but Jared's anger-filled mind did not hear it that way. What Jared heard was yet another taunt. So Jared redoubled his efforts to stop Chuck. His aim grew worse and Jared was hitting Chuck all over his face. Although the teachers came in under a minute, the damage was done. Chuck's face was barely recognizable by then and Jared's knuckles were ripped open. Finally his mind was beginning to come back to reality. As they pulled Jared off Chuck, Jared looked down at his bloody hands and wondered whose blood it was.*

- 1) What happens to Chuck is purposefully ambiguous for two reasons.
  - a. Because this story is suggested to be used with the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the teacher can explore the possibility that Chuck was beaten to death.

- b. Because the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment also includes people harming others, Chuck does not have to die. He can survive the encounter and recover with few long-lasting effects. This allows the teacher to explore the topic of harming other people.
- 2) What happens to Jared is purposefully ambiguous for two reasons.
- a. The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment covers hateful thoughts and Jared could well have hatred in his heart against Chuck after this. This would allow the teacher to explore that point.
  - b. It is never okay to hurt another person. Chuck may have deserved some punishment for his bullying over the years. But that does not excuse either of their actions. There is also the matter of the parents' reactions to this incident. These all would allow the teacher to address the point that human reasons do not supersede God's justice.
- 3) Considerations on how to tell the story
- a. The reader will note that this author encourages that no visual aids are used in this story. Storytelling does not rely on visual aids. It relies on the content of the story and will invoke the student's imagination regardless if visual aids are present or not.
    - i. The lack of visual aids also gives a different atmosphere to the classroom that the teacher may want for the sake of variety or personal preference.
  - b. The details between Chuck's and Jared's fight are evocative and may not be for everyone. Given that the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment literally deals with bloody matters, this author can see why such grisly details would be included in the story. But if the teacher or the students are uncomfortable with the details, then the story should be softened. The point of the story is to present the lesson's truth and provide a point of comparison with the prescriptive Bible passages, not to shock and awe.
- 4) How to proceed in the "storied" methodology
- a. As with Moses' story from Exodus 2:11-15, the "storied" teacher would ask basic comprehension questions to check the student's understanding of Jared's story.

- b. After the teacher is sure the students know what happened in the story, he continues with the prescriptive Bible passages. This is done to show the lesson's overall truth—the sin of hurting another—is eternal and drawn from God's Word.
  - i. As with Exodus 2:11-15, the teacher is encouraged to periodically compare the Bible passages with Jared's story to drive the lesson home.