



Interpreting Christ to Children in Parish Education

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Gone are the days when religious education was simply a matter of deciding what one believed about Christ and then imparting that knowledge in simple monosyllables to children. Worldwide research in cognitive development, replicating and refining the work of Jean Piaget, has shown that the gradual development of the brain to maturity causes children to think in qualitatively different ways from adults. Therefore, we have had to reconsider ways to interpret Christ to children.

Consider what adults might want to say about Christ. The list of concepts could be extensive, but might well include the following: God incarnate; eternal Son of God; fully God, fully human; not created; active agent in creation; God's Word; revealer of the Father; sinless one; Messiah; Savior; Redeemer; Lord; the one who is to come; Judge. Now, almost none of the notions in this rather arbitrary and incomplete list can be imparted to children, even if one were to spend the energy to express them in "simple" words. The ideas involved require abstract thinking—the kind of thinking that is typical of teenagers and adults whose brains have developed to maturity, but that is not possible for the growing child.

This does not mean that there is nothing that we can teach children about Jesus! But it does place a burden of responsibility on us for carefully selecting the ideas to present to children. And it probably means that, since we will present far fewer ideas than we used to do, we will have more time to do what we ought to have been doing all along—that is, to repeat and review constantly, so that the child does not hear an idea or a story just once but many times. The aim in teaching should be to have the students "overlearn" material—that is, to learn it to the point where it is so well known that it is almost impossible to forget.

I. THE FIRST YEARS

Of Piaget's six stages of cognitive development,¹ three are particularly pertinent to the parish educator who would present Christ to children. They are: the pre-

¹Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (London: University of London, 1968), chapter 1.

operational stage (approximately two to seven years), the concrete thinking stage (approximately seven to eleven or twelve years), and the abstract thinking stage (approximately twelve on through adulthood). Prior to the preoperational stage, most major denominations do not have formal parish education programs for children.

Nevertheless, while parishes may recognize that formal teaching about Christ is not appropriate before about three years of age, most could probably do more work in helping parents

communicate the gospel through relationships and environment during the period from birth until two or three years of age.² Parents can give the child love, care, and security, and they can provide experiences that assure the child that the environment (especially family and home) is trustworthy and stable, and that people are comforting and helpful. Such foundational experiences are usually conveyed to the child without words. Later they will be labelled. And much later still such labels with their rich meaning will be related to Jesus as one who loved, cared, was trustworthy, and so on.

II. THE SENSORIMOTOR STAGE

From two until seven years children are establishing “structures of ordering and assembling that constitute a substructure for the future operations of thought.”³ The child begins to understand him/herself as one object among others, and distinguishes changes of position and results of actions. Prior to age four, thought is preconceptual. It lacks generality and individuality. The child cannot form stable concepts or classes, but reasons from particular to particular. From four to seven years, thought is intuitive. Perceptions rather than logic continue to dominate thought. The child focuses on one part of a problem and ignores the rest (centration) and so cannot relate parts to the whole. He can form classes but cannot deal with class inclusion. He focuses on the state of an object but not on the transformation from one state to another. And his thought lacks reversibility. All of which means that his thinking is very limited. Ronald Goldman⁴ terms even the upper end of this stage “pre-religious” and suggests that teaching should simply enrich general experience and artistic expression, allow for spontaneous worship, and use themes based upon children’s questions.

Only a few concepts of Jesus are suitable for this age level; for example: stories of Jesus that emphasize him as a helpful, friendly, caring person; nativity stories and stories of Jesus as a child; stories of Jesus and his friends long ago.

The preoperational child cannot follow logical arguments or the theological reasoning that leads us to call Jesus Lord, Savior, Son of God, and so on. Nor can the young child relate the Jesus of the stories to an invisible, ever-

²This period includes the first three stages of cognitive development which Piaget terms “the reflex or hereditary stage,” “the stage of the first motor habits and of the first organized percepts” and “the stage of the sensorimotor intelligence.” See *ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1970) 196 and chapter 6. It is puzzling that Goldman is willing for children in worship to use metaphors of Jesus (such as “the light of the world,” p. 99) when he recognizes that the children are not yet ready to study these metaphors.

present Lord. Therefore, speaking of Jesus in the present tense can be confusing for the child.

The death of Jesus is not good news for this age level. The child cannot grasp the abstract concepts involved in atonement. Instead, the child hears the bad news of a kind person suffering—and typically gets upset at the “news.” Nor does resurrection mean much to children under seven since their understanding of death itself is very confused. Easter, therefore, is a time when we are happy and sing songs about Jesus—but just why we do it is not clear to this age level.

Referring to Jesus as God or even praying to Jesus can be confusing for the child. In both

the preoperational and concrete thinking stages, children are able to think only in terms of things which are perceivable in principle through the senses. They conceive of God as having a physical body. Thus, as far as the child is concerned, God and Jesus are two different people, each with a body. When God and Jesus are mentioned interchangeably by adults, or when incarnational language is used, the child is confused and may begin to relate to two quite separate “gods” (a practice that continues logically through the concrete thinking stage and requires some considerable “unteaching” in adolescence or even persists into adulthood).

The approach that saves confusion and encourages monotheism (but may offend the theology or the piety of some teachers) is to refer to and pray to God as “God” and to reserve the name “Jesus” for the past, historical figure who lived two thousand years ago. Then in adolescence the teacher will help the child to incorporate a new understanding—that the Jesus of whom they have heard is none other than God become human.

It is probable that many teachers feel uncomfortable with either alternative. It may sound as though there is no way to avoid heresy when teaching children! And indeed it may be a matter of acknowledging that there will be theological distortion whichever route we take, and that this is inevitable given the limitations of children’s thinking. We may choose our route on the basis of the approach that results in less confusion and requires less “unlearning” and that is more easily built upon when the child reaches the abstract thinking stage.

In all this, it is important to remind ourselves that faith is not to be identified with cognitive understanding. Certainly cognitive abilities can aid in interpreting and sharing faith and in enriching our understanding of God. But faith is more than cognition. It involves the emotions and indeed the very depth of our selves. Faith is a matter of whole-person commitment. A young child may have limited concepts but strong faith. And the teacher, with all the mature theological understandings at his or her disposal, may learn from the child what faith means.

III. THE CONCRETE THINKING STAGE

From ages seven to eleven years children are in the concrete thinking stage. Their thinking is now reversible and so they can follow simple arguments. Increasingly they are able to generalize and form stable concepts or classes. They are capable of cooperation and of seeing things from the point of view of others.

Moreover, during this period they develop concepts of time, speed, space, quantity, and causation. They also gradually come to the understanding that intentionality is involved in assessing right and wrong. However, their thinking is still limited to those things which can be perceived in principle through the senses.⁵ They continue to supply a physical referent for God because they cannot think of God without it. Usually they conceive of God with a body like that of a human, although some children are quite creative in their conception of God’s appearance, especially if they have been told by adults that “God doesn’t look like us.” Referring to God and Jesus interchangeably continues to confuse the concrete thinking child along the lines mentioned above. In fact, the child can verbalize the problem and argue that two bodies can’t be one and the same! The considerations at the conclusion of the preceding section apply in this stage also.

The concrete thinking child can appreciate more of Jesus’ life on earth, customs of Jesus’ time, and is more able to comprehend Jesus’ journeys and activities. He or she appreciates stories

of Jesus as a hero. If miracle stories are overemphasized there is a danger of the children conceiving of Jesus mainly as a magician.⁶ Therefore, if miracle stories are used, the emphasis should be on the kind of person that Jesus was rather than on the elements that seem “magical” to the child. Understandings of Christ that require abstract thinking—such as incarnation, atonement, Jesus as both human and divine, and so on—are still beyond the child’s comprehension. Yet judging by the abundance of Christological titles and references to Christ’s saving work, both song-book editors and curriculum developers find it particularly difficult to have patience with the cognitive limitations of the child in the upper level of elementary education.

Concrete thinking children can appreciate that Jesus, in a special way, showed and told us what God is like. While much of Jesus’ teaching as recorded in the Gospel accounts is beyond them, some of it can be communicated at the concrete stage. For example, some curricula at about the Grade 4 level begin to deal with the two great commandments of love for God and one’s neighbor.

For this age level, however, Jesus is essentially still the hero, the teacher, and something of the example, in addition to the understandings brought from the preoperational stage and developed further in the concrete stage (such as Jesus who was friendly, kind, helpful, and caring). If titles such as “Savior” are used at this age level, they probably have little meaning—perhaps the equivalent of “hero.” Even the concept of “Messiah” as the one expected by the people of Israel should probably be used sparingly in the later elementary years.

By grade 5 or 6 it is possible to point out that Jesus continued to forgive people who hurt him and refused to hurt them back, even when it meant finally that they killed him. Again, this is not so much a glimmer of atonement as an ultimate example of heroism for the child. But perhaps one might consider it the

⁵Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies*, 62. The “in principle” is important since the items do not have to be physically present for the child to think about them, but simply be capable of having a sensory referent.

⁶Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (New York: Seabury, 1968) 176.

foreshadowing of the question, “Why did Jesus die?” which will be dealt with in adolescence when atonement begins to have meaning.

The concept of death gradually develops throughout the concrete thinking stage, and along with it comes the possibility of appreciating Jesus’ resurrection in a more mature way. For the later elementary child Easter is genuinely good news.

IV. THE ABSTRACT THINKING STAGE

At approximately twelve or so years of age the brain matures to the point where the child can reason in the way that adults do. This last stage of thinking Piaget calls “abstract thinking.” In this stage, the learner can apply principles in theory, construct ideals, understand metaphor, and deal with gross generalizations (such as “eternity”). The learner is no longer bound by concepts that have a sensory referent (“Spirit” now makes sense). Abstract thinking can reason about the future and can deal with contrary-to-fact propositions. The learner can think about her own thoughts, engage in combinatorial logic and utilize a set of symbols for symbols.⁷ In order to engage in mature theological thinking about the person and the work of Christ, it is necessary to

utilize abstract thinking.

Unfortunately, when teaching young adolescents in the parish, teachers all too often try to force them to run theologically when they are only able to toddle. Although the brain cells mature sufficiently at about twelve years of age, the capacity to think abstractly is only that—a capacity. It takes several years of practice before the adolescent becomes proficient in this new kind of thinking and operates easily with the most complex concepts. The beginning abstract thinker, like the toddler, is slow and shaky at first and needs encouragement, guidance, and practice. Furthermore, the adolescent has usually acquired during childhood many confused and distorted theological perceptions that need to be unlearned before more adequate understandings can replace them.

Mere brain cell maturation does not ensure good Christology! The teacher's role is crucial. In teaching about Christ to adolescents the following points may be helpful.

The child will learn more easily if the teacher deals first with those understandings of Jesus that the child already knows and then moves on to the less familiar material. In this process, distorted or incorrect ideas need to be dealt with in order that more adequate understandings may replace them.

Some abstract concepts need to be taught before certain concepts about Christ make sense. For example, “sin” must be grasped before the learner can deal with Jesus the sinless one or Jesus' triumph over sin on the Cross. Step by step, concept by concept, the procedure is slow but pays off in the end.

In teaching early teens it is helpful to avoid as much jargon as possible and to carefully explain and regularly review those jargon terms that cannot be avoided—such as “Savior” and “Redeemer.”

Since adolescents enjoy practicing the use of metaphor, they will be motivated to deal with metaphors that Jesus used of himself—for example, the Good Shepherd, the Door, or the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

⁷See David Elkind, *Children and Adolescents* (New York: Oxford University, 1974) 100.

The more complex Christological concepts probably will not make sense to the student until fourteen or fifteen years of age or even beyond. For example, a good grasp of abstract thinking is required before incarnation can be dealt with or before students begin to grasp an understanding of the second person of the Trinity. Atonement is a difficult concept also and at first students will appreciate just one image (or “theory”) presented to them. Later, one or two more images can be taught. Not until about sixteen years or beyond will the students be able to deal with several different images or theories and see helpful insights in each.

Eschatology often interests students at about Grade 10 or 11. Their interest in Christ as Judge or Christ's second coming is often sparked by reading or hearing about views of groups which interpret the Book of Revelation literally. While they can ask complex questions, they find eschatology involves hard work in thinking, and they need to proceed slowly with plenty of review.

Needless to say, it will probably be late adolescence before students can wrestle with phrases such as “of one substance with the Father” or “the ubiquity of the body”!

V. THE CURRICULUM DILEMMA

Just how much impact has educational research had upon presenting Christ to children in the parish? A quick glance at a variety of religious education curricula for children produces a startling array of concepts about Christ. Not uncommon are themes such as “Jesus died for me” or “Jesus my Savior” or “Jesus my ever-present friend” even at young age levels. Of course some curricula seem to be designed very carefully to introduce theological concepts at appropriate age levels. But most still err on presenting too much too soon.

It would be very easy to place all of the responsibility for content upon the producers of curricula. And there is no doubt that they must share in the responsibility. But they are often faced with a dilemma. Materials designed for children’s classes clearly must appeal to the adult buyer and user. The problem in designing curriculum is often how to reconcile the results of research and also the demands of the user. To move too quickly from what the user expects confuses and upsets him or her.

The curriculum content issue must therefore be dealt with on two fronts. First, there is the matter of the teacher’s (user’s) expectations—which brings us to the vast need for intensive local teacher training. Then there is the matter of making our wants known to the producers of curricula—indicating that we are ready to present concepts in away that accords with the learner’s development. Both of these issues are the responsibility of those of us who use curricula or who lead or guide curriculum users.

The matter of teacher training is crucial. Unfortunately, the gap between research and the general church school teacher tends to widen as research progresses. In many cases churches rely on busy volunteers who have little or no training for their teaching task. While national and regional staff (synod, district, etc.) can provide a number of workshops, the intensive and ongoing training must occur at the local parish level. And the training cannot be simply limited to teaching methods. The matter of content, and when to teach it, must also be ad-

dressed. A psychologist or professional educator can help church school administrators and teachers appreciate the way in which children’s thinking develops. The minister or theologically-trained lay professional can add the theological dimension, and can also reassure teachers that they do not need to impart every last doctrinal point to young believers (a much-needed pastoral word that many well-meaning teachers need to hear). Busy ministers and professionals naturally resist one more demand on their time. But adequate teacher education cannot occur unless the developmental aspects are related to the doctrinal points.

Thus, a somewhat formidable task still lies ahead in curriculum development and in teacher education. It is imperative that we forge ahead in both of these areas in order that we may more adequately interpret Christ to children in parish education.