

## THE DETHRONEMENT OF MEMORY IN CHURCH EDUCATION

by MARION SNAPPER

In these classes the first and foremost care of preachers and teachers is to be that the text of the five chapters be memorized fully and unadulterated, not substituting strange words which sometimes falsify the meaning and give the text an opposite meaning. For if that takes place, when they become old they will have difficulty, yes probably find it entirely impossible, to unlearn that which they have learned incorrectly in their youth.<sup>1</sup>

ALTHOUGH ALMOST 360 years have passed since the above directive was issued by the Synod of Dordrecht, its strong influence on the educational programs of churches in the Reformed tradition continues right up to today. A clear example of this influence is found in the fact that a lesson for children is almost never published by the Christian Reformed Church without inclusion of either a Scripture passage or a catechism item, or both, set aside in a little box or in bold print. It is not necessary to say that it is there to be memorized; the user knows what it is there for. It is generally agreed that there would be considerable furor if material were not included for memorization.

This situation is shared by other traditions which consciously live with similar pointed directives out of the Reformation era. In the preface to his "The Small Catechism," Luther says:

In the first place the preacher should take the utmost care to avoid changes or variation in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments, etc. On the contrary, he should adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year. Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form—perhaps with the intention of making improvements—later on. . . . We too, should teach these things to the young and un-

<sup>1</sup> *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode te Dordrecht*. Leiden: D. Donner, 1887(?), p. 28.

learned in such a way that we do not alter a single syllable or recite the catechism differently from year to year . . . following the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise the Roman Catholic Church, with a catechetical tradition which goes back to the Tridentine Catechism, has always placed high value on the memorization of formulas. In its most recent authoritative statement on the subject the church said:

Formulas permit the thoughts of the mind to be expressed accurately, are appropriate for a correct exposition of the faith, and, when committed to memory, help toward the firm possession of truth. Finally, they make it possible for a uniform way of speaking to be used among the faithful.<sup>3</sup>

This tradition of memorization has generally fallen upon hard times. When participating in workshops on teaching in the church one soon learns to expect the big question: "What about memorization?" This is not surprising. I have observed about 150 church school classes during the past five years and have yet to see a memorization program which succeeded in doing what the church fathers at Dordrecht had in mind. For the past fifteen years I have been a member of the Education Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and have been a party to seeing to it that every lesson included something for memorization. We knew we had to honor the Dordrecht directive. At the same time we knew that the memorization program in the classrooms was in shambles.

What has changed in the past three centuries? No doubt more than can be dealt with here. I wish to identify two hypotheses which were very influential in 1620 but which have since lost much of their force.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Church*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Berard L. Marthaler O. F. M. Conv., *Catechetics in Context: Notes and Commentary on the General Catechetical Directory Issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1973, p. 144. Marthaler, in his commentary on the above statement, says: "The conclusion one draws from the Directory's treatment of formulas, though never explicitly stated, indicates that some sort of memorization is in order" (p. 145). He further notes that the whole Directory is permeated with concern for formulas. He says: "The Directory is supported by modern language theory in claiming positive advantages for the use of formulas: accuracy of expression, correctness, concrete symbolization of the truth, and a common idiom within the Christian community" (p. 145).

I call them the "Walking Book" hypothesis and the "Lodestar" hypothesis.

The word hypothesis is used here to mean *an interpretation of a practical situation or condition taken as a ground for action*. An example of this use of the word hypothesis would be as follows:

Hypothesis: Adults can't memorize very well.

Action taken: Focus the memorization program on children and youth.

This example serves also to indicate that a hypothesis may or may not be valid as an interpretation of a practical situation, and that the action taken may or may not be a valid response to the hypothesis.

### I. MEMORIZATION

Before examining the two hypotheses we must define what we mean by memorization. Gagné classifies remembering in terms of the functions it serves in the life of the individual.<sup>4</sup> He identifies three main functions.

1. *Temporary holding*. This is holding something in mind in order to complete some action. In the literature of psychology it is often referred to as the Zeignarik Effect. It is said that Zeignarik was led to perform his experiments through his observation of waitresses in the sidewalk cafes of Berlin. Most of them did not write the customers' orders down but were nevertheless able to remember what each person ordered and what the amount of the bill was. But upon being questioned shortly after the customer had paid, the waitresses were found to have completely forgotten what the customer ordered and how much the bill was.

This must bring smiles to the faces of catechism alumni. There was that last desperate look at the book followed by the intense concentration as the catechumen tried to keep hold of words, the emphatic movements of lips as another student recited, and finally that moment of release when recitation was completed. The action completed permitted that which was so tenuously held in mind to be dropped. We really should re-name it "the Catechism Effect."

2. *Mediational Use*. Much of the remembering that is necessary within a lesson has "only the function of mediating the learning of something else."<sup>5</sup> A catechism lesson may ask the student to look up three Scrip-

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Gagné, *The Conditions of Learning*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970, pp. 88-93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

ture passages for the purpose of formulating a conclusion. In such a case the content of the Scriptures is used as a means to an end; its function is to mediate the learning of something else.

The clearest statements of mediational use are found in the literature on the "systems approach" to education. Banathy, for example, says that a component (i.e., a book, a text, a passage, a film) or a set of components should be selected on the basis of such criteria as "the potential to accomplish a certain function."<sup>6</sup> Thus, when we use the Bible in a mediational way we say, "Now let's see: I want them to learn to place a certain kind of value on human life, or why Jesus is called Lord—what texts, passages, etc., shall I use?" The objective is some change in behavior, attitude, value, knowledge, or understanding, and the content—including the Bible—is a means to that end. In any event, so far as remembering is concerned, one need only remember the content until the conclusion to be drawn from it is arrived at.

I think that a close scrutiny of published lessons will indicate that in a large number of cases the item selected for the "memory box" was picked out of the content used mediationally as the best item for fulfilling the obligation to Dordrecht—or to Martin Luther, for that matter. Otherwise how can we explain that the box in a published lesson includes such a text for primary children as this one? "And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him" (Mark 2:14). I think that this practice of honoring the Dordrecht directive in this way is a major contributor to the shambles in which many memorization programs find themselves.

Two further observations are in order here. First, the catechism tradition of three centuries has, I think, resulted in the habit of using the Scriptures as a means to an end. Mediationally used to arrive at the catechism answer, the Scripture passages are then forgotten. And the catechism answer is disposed of by the Zeignarik Effect. So nothing is left.

Secondly, the trend, and a good one I think, has been to teach for "changed lives." When a teacher thinks this way there is a tendency to view all content as having temporary mediational use. However, when this thinking and teaching precludes having a memorized passage in-

<sup>6</sup> Bela H. Banathy, *Instructional Systems*. Palo Alto: Fearon Publishers, 1969, p. 65.

cluded in the terminal objective of a lesson or course, then perhaps there is something wrong with our thinking about the *ongoing* relationship between some part of the content-used-ationally and "changing lives." We will return to this point at the conclusion of our analysis of the third function of remembering.

3. *Lifetime Retention*. There are two categories of things which should be remembered all one's life, according to Gagné. First, there are intellectual skills such as how to discriminate, classify, solve certain kinds of problems, and so on. Secondly, there is verifiable information. The adult remembers letters, numerals, words, phrases, passages, and names of objects and observable actions. Beyond these he recalls "higher order" categories and definitions such as sin, guilt, grace, omnivorous, deciduous, justice, and so on.

It is this second category of things that we are referring to when we speak of memorizing in this discussion. It is verbalizable information which is to be remembered all one's life. Further, it is phrases, words, and passages that we are thinking of. More specifically we are thinking of such things as Scripture verses and passages, catechism questions and answers. Gagné's categories are in terms of function, and therefore we are talking about a category of words, phrases, passages, and perhaps "higher order" categories learned word-for-word, with the precision expected by the church fathers at Dordrecht, and which are expected to function in that form for all one's life.

We should also make explicit that this category of remembering calls for *overlearning*, the kind that results in long-term memory, and normally calls for deliberate and planned educational practice. If the tentative findings of brain researchers are valid, we are speaking of long-term memory which involves more permanent change in the brain than does short-term memory. The evidence seems to indicate that short-term memory is mostly electrical whereas long-term memory involves a more permanent chemical change in the brain.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between Lifetime Retention and Mediational Use may be seen in this objective which merges the two uses:

The student will be able to quote from memory with 100% accuracy the RSV of I Corinthians 10:13 so that it will be *available to the student to function mediationally for the rest of his/her life.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Steven Rose, *The Conscious Brain*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, pp. 191-198.

The reader may substitute other items for I Cor. 10:13. In any case this little objective captures quite well just what we mean in this article by memorization, and what the general purpose of such memorization is to be in functional terms.

We may now return to a consideration of the two hypotheses whose declining influence has contributed to the demise of memorization as a significant and effective part of church education.

## II. THE WALKING BOOK HYPOTHESIS

For most of mankind's history there were no books as we know them today. It was not until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century that reading materials began to become widely available. One of the first books for children was the *Enschude ABeCeDarium*, a tiny volume published in the fifteenth century by the Roman Catholic Church. It contained the alphabet, the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo, and two prayers. Nila Banton Smith quotes this description of the book:

They were to be the first books placed in the hands of the child and to contain all that it was necessary for him to know, to enable him to understand the rudiments of the Christian religion and to join in the services of the Church and even to serve at Mass, or, as it is called, "to help a priest sing."<sup>8</sup>

There were not nearly enough books to go around, so each child was expected to memorize the contents and be able to recite them orally. In effect, each child was expected to become a "walking book," able to participate in the oral activities of the church, and to be a repository—as a book is—of the rudiments of the Christian religion.

The history of the teaching of reading may also be read as the history of the demise of the Walking Book hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> The principal reason carrels were put in medieval libraries was because people tended to

<sup>8</sup> Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1965, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Before writing the obituary on the Walking Book hypothesis, I feel compelled to say a redeeming word for the ancients who have mockery heaped upon them by modern educationists. The following axioms make little sense today: "The material is first to be committed to memory and then an attempt at understanding is taken." "Learn first, then understand." The ancients were sensible, however, in a milieu without books. By reading novels of Chaim Potok (e.g., *The Chosen*; *The Promise*), one gets a feel for the great effort on understanding.

read out loud. The reader was, quite literally, a "talking book." It was a common practice to memorize with the proper cantillation for the text, and it is therefore understandable that the word *carrel* has the same root as the word *carol*—an old round dance with singing. It is only in the twentieth century that reading teachers have succeeded in getting people to stop reading out loud.

Through most of the nineteenth century a child learned to read so that he or she could read orally. Typical rules for those who wanted to learn to read orally really well included the following:

Try to read as if you were telling a story to your mother or talking with some of your playmates. *Reading is talking from a book* . . . . If you learn these rules and attend to them, I think you will soon read very prettily, and be able to read books aloud to your parents and friends at home.<sup>10</sup>

Right up to the twentieth century the reader was considered to be someone who is "talking from a book," or if you please, a "walking book." This approach came to a rather rapid end during the first quarter of our century with the transition from oral to silent reading. Francis Parker, a major figure in the transition, argued that many of the grossest errors in teaching reading spring from "confounding the two processes of attention and expression. Reading in itself is not expression any more than observation or hearing—Language is expression."<sup>11</sup>

Here is the fateful split so far as the demise of the Walking Book hypothesis is concerned. No longer is a person expected to internalize verbatim and then give oral expression to the contents of a book. Rather, the book and its content is to be viewed as another object to be perceived with understanding eyes and mind. The purpose of going to a book now is to *glean* from it. We are to read for *meaning*, and then, if we are responsible, we will use what we learn in a mediational way.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Francis W. Parker, *Talks on Pedagogics*. Chicago: Kellogg, 1894, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note the parallel between the shift from reading for retention and recitation to reading for meaning, and the shift from a virtually one-Bible-version (King James) era to a multiple version/translation/paraphrase era. Beginning with the English Revised Version completed in 1885, a modern Bible dictionary will typically list between fifteen and twenty versions, paraphrases and translations which have appeared since then. Without the shift to reading for meaning I doubt that there could have been the widespread acceptance of the use of multiple versions in the teaching ministry of the church. There can be little

Observance of this fateful split was in part what stimulated Marshall McLuhan's writings. He quotes J. C. Carrothers:

When words are written they become, of course, a part of the visual world. Like most of the elements of the visual world they become static things and lose, as such, the dynamism which is so characteristic of the auditory world in general and of the spoken word in particular. They lose much of the personal element, in the sense that the heard word is most commonly directed at oneself, whereas the seen word most commonly is not, and can be read or not as the whim dictates.<sup>13</sup>

In antiquity before there were books, it was quite possible for people to think of ideas as existing separate from persons, or to think of verbal thought as separable from action. McLuhan notes that we in the Western world were baffled by the fact that many in Soviet Russia pleaded guilty during the purge trials of the 1930's even though they had done nothing more than deviate in their thinking. This was not an unnatural thing to do in a society which was at that time predominantly oral society. People were still "walking books." McLuhan observes that until phonetic writing split apart thought and action, "there was no alternative but to hold all men responsible for their thoughts as much as their actions."<sup>14</sup>

Swedish theologian Gerhardsson summarizes the demise of the Walking Book hypothesis and the consequent "dethronement of memory":

It takes time for the book to become an independent form of expression, and not merely an aid to memory. It takes time to desert the principle that the material of knowledge and texts are dead things if they are not imprinted on the memory and function there. In the tradition of western culture it is only in our own day that the memory has been *effectively* unloaded into books. Not until our own day have we learned to accept a form of education which to a

---

doubt that multiple versions hastened the demise of the Walking Book hypothesis in the church. This raises a hermeneutic question which is not really faced in this discussion: What about the relationship of the Truth to the word-for-word memorization of a *particular* English translation of the original statement of that Truth?

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

great extent consists of being able to find the material which is required in the right books, without needing to carry it all in the memory. Not until our day has the pedagogical revolution taken place which has been called "the dethronement of memory."<sup>15</sup>

Gerhardsson's book is a study of the relationship between memory (oral tradition) and the preservation of the text of the Bible. In that regard we must content ourselves here with the observation that the generations from Moses to John Calvin lived largely by the Walking Book hypothesis. Marvin R. Wilson says of the Hebrew father that he served as a living and dynamic communicator of divine truth. "A Bible could not be substituted for him. There were no Bibles. He was a 'living Bible.'"<sup>16</sup>

But those days are gone and I think it safe to say that the problems we have with memorization are greatly exacerbated by the demise of the Walking Book hypothesis. The old hypothesis goes something like this:

*The old hypothesis:* The Truth (although they say it is written somewhere) is preserved by God's people who have memorized it word-for-word and who transmit and teach it orally word-for-word to the next generation.

*Action taken:* Elaborate memorization programs to ensure that the Truth will be preserved.

The contemporary hypothesis goes something like this:

*Today's hypothesis:* The Truth can be separated from persons, stored in books, and be readily available for future generations.

*Action taken:* Teach people to read, understand, interpret, and apply. Then let them glean the Truth from the depositories.

<sup>15</sup> Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961, p. 123. Gerhardsson took the phrase "the dethronement of memory" from N. Morris' book, *The Jewish School* (London, 1937).

<sup>16</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, "The Jewish Concept of Learning: a Christian Appreciation," *Christian Scholar's Review*, V (1976), p. 359. William Barclay says that the Jews were not "the people of the book" because "each individual one of them possessed the book, but because the book was the container of the law of life which was inserted into their minds, and graven upon their hearts by oral teaching." He quotes Robertson Smith as saying: "The ideal of instruction is oral teaching, and the worthiest shrine of truths that must not die is the memory and heart of the faithful disciple" (*Educational Ideals in the Ancient World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974, pp. 23-24.)

### III. EVALUATION OF THE WALKING BOOK HYPOTHESIS

Quite apart from the fact that the Walking Book hypothesis does not carry much weight any more, we must evaluate its validity, considering the possibility that the advent of books and universal literacy has had some adverse effects. As a matter of fact, I think that if we are to argue for a renewed effort at memorization in our educational programs we must argue, in some form, for the Walking Book hypothesis. I think that there are three principal arguments which can be made for it.

1. *The Prison Camp Hypothesis.* This one has been around for a long time, having its roots in the pre-Gutenberg era when indeed there was the possibility that all written accounts and records could easily have been destroyed or lost. At least this possibility was a very real one in the minds of the people. Lewis Joseph Sherrill quotes the following from a Midrash commentary on Exodus 34:27. The scene is Sinai and God is talking to Moses about the Law:

After he had learned it from God, he told him to teach it to Israel. Moses said, "Lord of the Universe! Shall I write it for them?" God replied, "I do not wish to give it to them in writing because I foresee a time when the heathen will have dominion over them and take it away from them, and they will be despised by idol-worshippers; only the Bible will I give them in writing; but the Mishnah, Talmud, and Haggadah I will give them orally, so that when the idolators enslave them, they will remain distinct from them. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

One hears this argument quite frequently, but I think for most people it is about as realistic as arguing for obesity in anticipation of landing in a Vietnamese prison camp; it is simply too far removed from the realities of life.

2. *The Medicine Chest or Ever-Present Teacher Hypothesis.* This one is appealed to by the Navigators in the introduction to their topical memory system where they describe what the course will do for a person. First, "you can experience God's perfect peace by writing His Word on your heart and keeping your mind fixed on Him." Secondly, God's Word hidden in the heart is the Sword of the Spirit, available to do battle against sin and Satan. "Memorized Scripture is in a sense like

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Joseph Sherrill, *The Rise of Christian Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1954, p. 62.

medicine; it will help meet specific needs in your life. . . . Memorizing Scripture can also be considered stocking the pantry of your heart."<sup>18</sup>

The point here is not that you might be separated from the written Word by imprisonment, but that memorization ensures that one is *never* separate from that Word; it is always present and available for reflection and guidance as a precise and sure Word from God. This is akin to the oft-repeated admonitions in the Old Testament to hide the Word in our hearts (cf. Deut. 6:6-8; 11:18-23, Ps. 37:31; 119:11, Prov. 3:3).

John Calvin in his commentary on Psalm 119:11 says:

Here we are informed that we are well fortified against the stratagems of Satan when God's law is deeply seated in our hearts. For unless it has a fast and firm hold there, we will readily fall into sin. Among scholars, those whose knowledge is confined to books, if they have not the book always before them, readily discover their ignorance; in like manner, if we do not imbibe the doctrine of God, and are well acquainted with it, Satan will easily surprise and entangle us in his meshes. Our true safeguard, then, lies not in a slender knowledge of his law, or in a careless perusal of it, but in hiding it deeply in our hearts.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of titles for this hypothesis was deliberate. On the one hand, there is always the danger of abusing the Scriptures, of using texts out of context as little formulas to overcome the ills of the day or to solve the perplexing moral issues we confront. However, I do not think that this danger invalidates the argument. We could just as well have taken the name from Calvin's concluding sentence on Psalm 119:11 where he says that people are "destitute of all right judgment, except as far as they have God as their teacher."<sup>20</sup> His point is that the Word hidden in the heart is the ever-present teacher. Much more should be said about right use, but we shall reserve that for later.

3. *The Living Epistle Hypothesis*. Emphasis in the Prison Camp and Ever-Present Teacher hypotheses was principally on the *intrapersonal*. The Living Epistle hypothesis, although it does have an intrapersonal aspect, is primarily concerned with *interpersonal* communication. The

<sup>18</sup> *Navigators Topical Memory System: Guidebook 1*. Colorado Springs: Navpress, n.d., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms: Volume Fourth*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949, p. 409.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

essence of this hypothesis is that effectiveness in communicating the Truth is enhanced when the communicator knows the content by heart.

An interesting example of this is found in the writings of the early church fathers. The canon had not yet been fixed and a primary concern of that day was to ascertain the Word of God, especially with regard to the life and teachings of Jesus. A passage of Papias states that he was accustomed to "search the words of the elders: what Andrew or what Peter had said. . ."; he then adds that he relied less in principle upon the "written word" (*ta ex ton biblion*) than upon "that which came from the living and abiding (human) voice (*ta para Zoses Phones kai menouses*)."<sup>21</sup>

In a more famous passage Irenaeus recalls the great blessing he received from sitting at the feet of Polycarp, who in turn had sat at the feet of the apostle John. "I listened to this then, because of the grace of God which was given me, carefully, copying it down, not on paper, but in my heart."<sup>22</sup> When we read of this passionate desire to learn the very words of Jesus and to commit them to memory, we are led to ask, as did Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, why Jesus, so far as we know, never wrote anything. Why did he choose to rely on the memory of the disciples and others? Part of the answer may be found, of course, in the fact that people were accomplished memorizers. But this is hardly an adequate explanation.

Thomas Aquinas offers three reasons. First, he observes that it was fitting for Christ not to put his teaching into writing because of his dignity as the most excellent teacher. One would therefore expect him to use the most excellent method, "one which would impress his teaching upon the hearts of his hearers."<sup>23</sup> Thomas notes that, even among the Gentiles, Pythagoras and Socrates chose to write nothing, and probably for much the same reason. Thus, concludes Thomas Aquinas, in the time of Christ the oral transmission of words of truth was considered a superior method to the written transmission.

Secondly, Thomas gives us his insight as to why the oral transmission is to be considered. Noting John's observation that if all were written down which Jesus did and said, all the books would not contain them, he says that this is not to be construed as a problem of space but of the

<sup>21</sup> Gerhardsson, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, Q. 42, A. 4.

capacity of the readers. That is to say, a book is simply inadequate to contain what Jesus *really* said and did. In order to really understand the words and deeds of Jesus, one must receive his teaching from witnesses who had memorized it and then subsequently lived it out, especially through and beyond the events of His death, resurrection, and of Pentecost. Thomas says, "But if Christ had put his teaching into writing, men would judge his teaching to be of no greater profundity than that which the writing could contain."<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, he observes of Wisdom that "she has dispatched her maid-servants with invitations to the city's heights" (Prov. 9:3). Thomas concludes that Christ's teaching, which is "the law of the spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2) had to be "written, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tables, but on the tablets of fleshly hearts" (II Cor. 3:3).

In our day this Living Epistle hypothesis is experiencing increasing validity. McLuhan's writings have focused largely on an analysis of how today the "medium is the message." Television in particular has returned us to being accustomed to receiving our messages in an audio-tactile context. The Walking Book hypothesis may have been done in by the printing press, but the Living Epistle hypothesis is being enlivened with the help of television.

David Riesman has observed that books have a way of putting distance between people. "The book, like an invisible monitor, helps liberate the reader from his group and its emotions and allows the contemplation of alternative responses."<sup>25</sup> He goes on to point out that historians have made familiar the role of the printed Bible in encouraging dissident sects to challenge the authority of the Roman Church. That church had good instincts for preserving institutional unity when it largely limited the laity to being "walking books" which contained the Pater Noster, the Credo, and the Ave Maria. I think that today we are recovering an appreciation of the power of the liturgy, especially when the people of God recite in unison from memory. Loneliness exists today in epidemic proportions, and I think that something significant happens when a group recites something together which they all know by heart. The act itself is a profound form of interpersonal communication.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> David Riesman, "Books: Gunpowder of the Mind," *Atlantic Monthly*, CC (1957), p. 124.

As teachers in the church we may reflect on what kind of scenario would ensue if we came to class without any books other than the Bible, and then proceeded to teach the Heidelberg Catechism. The content brought to class would be that which the instructor knows by heart. This should be contrasted with the common scenario in which there is the teacher, the student, and between them the document for study. I am certain that the students would have quite a different estimate of the content of the Catechism in such a situation. Professor Loetscher taught me church history at Princeton Seminary. My sharpest recollection is of his prayers, which were those of a man who knew the Psalms by heart.

Evangelistic and personal witnessing training programs almost invariably include required memorization work. The "sure Word" quoted with chapter and verse and spoken by a living witness seems more effective in most situations than the "Well, I think. . ." or "the Bible teaches that. . ." kinds of talk. Surely there are significant exceptions to this, but generally I think it is true.

Although the dethronement of memory is quite complete and the Walking Book hypothesis is quite dead, the Ever-Present Teacher and the Living Epistle hypotheses are increasing in influence, and I think this may be a good time to thoroughly revamp our memorization programs in the church. But before setting out to do that we must consider our second hypothesis which once was influential but is now in trouble.

#### IV. THE LODESTAR HYPOTHESIS

When the church fathers at Dordrecht made their pronouncements on memorization, one of the conditions taken as ground for their action was the Lodestar hypothesis. A lodestar is "something that serves as a guide or on which attention is fixed." The metaphor, then, is the heavens filled with galaxies, each of them being a blur of billions of spots of light. But scattered on the face of the heavens are some distinctly bright stars. The celestial navigator learns them well, for they serve to guide him across the faceless oceans, and if used well will bring him unerringly into his port of destination.

In the century following the Reformation, the church and school were able to identify the verbal lodestars which every learner was expected to commit to memory. One has only to look at the elegant little catechisms for children which were written in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries to realize the simplicity and clarity of their perception of the lodestars of their day.

Now because all our teaching is but mere trifling unless withal we be careful to instruct children in the grounds of true religion, let them be sure to get the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.<sup>26</sup>

So spoke a leading educator in seventeenth century England. In a sacred society one had only to identify himself as Christian, know the three "books" mentioned above, and add to them a few items which would distinguish him from Roman Catholics (if he was Protestant), and perhaps one or two items to differentiate among Lutherans and Reformed. Then maybe one more item with reference to the Anabaptists. But that was pretty much it. A confession is a statement of one's identity, and they knew who they were.

Today one does not know where to begin. Shall we seek to distinguish ourselves from forty-seven varieties of Protestantism? How about the cults, the sects and the Eastern religions, with the occult thrown in? What of the contemporary isms—secularism, materialism, scientism, and so on? The media expose us to the full gamut. At one sitting in front of the television we may listen to a faith healer, a Baptist, a Roman Catholic, and a Possibility Thinking Reformed preacher. Sooner or later the talk shows and interviews will fill in all the blanks.

With all of these pressing for attention, one finds himself in a tradition which dictates that three sessions (classes or sermons) are to be devoted to the Lord's Supper. A synodical study committee of the Christian Reformed Church has worked for six years under a mandate to "consider how the faith can be confessed in contemporary ways, whether the churches find an augmented confession necessary, and in which areas such a new confession should speak."<sup>27</sup> The tangible results of this six-year effort is a set of new translations of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. When these have been completed, the committee is scheduled to be dismissed with thanks.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Smith is quoting Charles A. Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching School*. London: J. T. Crook, 1660, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Acts of Synod 1977 of the Christian Reformed Church*. Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1977, p. 653.

<sup>28</sup> I do not mean to derogate the work of the committee. Later in this discussion I speak about the conditions necessary for writing a new confession.

The point of this is that we lack confidence to answer the question: "Which knowledge is of most worth?" What should be taught and learned for lifetime retention? Which are the lodestars? Unable to answer, we hurl thousands of "lodestars" into the curricular heavens. As nearly as I can estimate, the Christian Reformed Church curriculum of the 1960's required about thirty times as much memorization of children up to their twelfth year as was required by John Calvin in the Geneva Catechism. That does not include what might have been expected in addition in a church curriculum which had two tracks, catechism and Sunday School,<sup>29</sup> or what might have been expected in a Christian school attended by those children. It would not surprise me if the total memorization expected was fifty times as much as was expected by the fathers at Dordrecht.

I think it fair to conclude that the Lodestar hypothesis is not functioning well these days as a ground for action.

#### V. EVALUATION OF THE LODESTAR HYPOTHESIS

There are two questions which we must ask about this hypothesis. First, from an educational point of view, is it good practice to focus heavily on a relatively few Lodestars? Secondly, what are the conditions necessary for their identification and for their functioning as Lodestars?

To the first question, I think we may reply with a qualified yes, providing this practice is understood in the sense that Whitehead gives to it:

In training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must be aware of what I will call "inert ideas"—that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations. . . . We enunciate two educational commandments. "Do not teach too many subjects," and again, "What you teach, teach thoroughly. . . . Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child's education be few and important, and let them be thrown into every combination possible. The child should make them his own, and should understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his actual life . . . ideas which are not utilized are positively harmful. By utilizing an idea, I mean relating it to that stream compounded of sense per-

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Church Education in the Christian Reformed Church*. Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1974.



ceptions, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities, adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life. . . . This is not an easy doctrine to apply, but a very hard one. It contains within itself the problem of keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert, which is the central problem of all education.<sup>30</sup>

Whitehead clearly does not mean that we teach *less*, but that we teach more thoroughly what we do teach, not through mere repetition, but through using those key concepts on which we focus in every possible relationship. To be good educational practice, then, Lodestars must function as Lodestars, as crucial reference points of life. They must function with regularity to interpret life, to give guidance, to make sense out of our experience, and the like. In short, they should be powerfully formative. Henri J. M. Nouwen recounts an excerpt from a little story and then comments on it:

A little boy was watching a sculptor at work. For weeks this sculptor kept chipping away at a big block of marble. After a few weeks he had created a beautiful marble lion. The little boy was amazed and said: "Mister how did you know there was a lion in that rock?"

Long before he knows the marble, the sculptor has to know the lion. He has to know the lion "by heart" to see him in the rock . . . . When he knows an angel by heart . . . a demon . . . God . . . he will see (it) in the marble. The great question for the sculptor therefore is "What do you know by heart?"<sup>31</sup>

A caveat must be introduced at this point. John H. Leith, commenting on the role of the creeds in the church, notes that there was an element in the Reformed tradition which believed that "flexibility and lack of precise language were in fact desirable as they allowed for creative theological work."<sup>32</sup> He notes that Heinrich Bullinger and others were hesitant to commit themselves to some single creedal statement.

Arthur Cochrane, in his review of the history of sixteenth century Reformed confessions, distinguishes between the Reformed and the Lutheran

<sup>30</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*. New York: New American Library of World Literature, Mentor Paperback, 6th printing, 1955 (Macmillan, 1929), pp. 13-17.

<sup>31</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, "What do you Know by Heart?" *Sojourner* (August, 1977), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

traditions in that the Reformed churches were never able to agree on a *single* creedal statement as were the Lutherans. He concludes that

any collection of Reformed Confessions must serve the purpose of illustrating the variety and diversity of Reformed Confessions, depending upon the time, place, and circumstances in which they arose, rather than of demonstrating their complete uniformity. A collection of Reformed Confessions will attest the freedom with which many particular Churches have confessed Jesus Christ quite independently of the others. Anything like a universal Confession imposed on all congregations and Churches is foreign to the genius of Reformed Churches. Although Reformed Churches are concerned about union and ecumenical relations with other Churches, they do not wish this to be achieved at the expense of the particularity of a Church's confession.<sup>33</sup>

It is fascinating to read the Reformed confessions and note the combination of commitment to the Truth as taught in the Scriptures with openness to some flexibility of wording in their confessional statements. Bullinger and Judae recommended the following to be included in the introduction to the First Helvetic Confession of 1536:

For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than the Holy Scriptures. Therefore whoever concurs in this Confession, even though he has employed a different terminology from that of our Confession, is in agreement with us. For we are to be concerned about the matter itself and the truth and not about words. We therefore grant to anyone the freedom to use the terminology which he believes is most suitable for his church. . . .<sup>34</sup>

This seems to be a largely forgotten element in the Reformed tradition; the insistence, for example, that Geneva could not write a confession for Amsterdam, nor could Amsterdam write one for the Scottish Kirk. A Reformed confession must always have that concreteness and relevance which comes from the circumstances of time and place where the confession is to be made. The caveat with regard to memorization is in regard to this aspect of confessions: How does one fix formulas for memorization without locking in the Truth in such manner that it loses its capacity to function as a dynamic Lodestar?

<sup>33</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966, pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Apparently this concern was present at the Synod of Dordrecht. Edward Masselink notes that the Synod never got around to adopting an official compendium of the Heidelberg Catechism, which is a *teaching* tool as distinguished from a doctrinal standard. He offers some explanation for this fact, but concludes that underneath all that went on, there was a deeper reason. It seems that during the time which elapsed, fears developed that "if synod gave too much official sanction to a compendium, this might come to be regarded as another official doctrinal standard alongside the catechism itself."<sup>35</sup>

I think this distinction is important. There are doctrinal standards and there are teaching instruments. The latter are given a freedom of wording and expression not accorded to the former, allowing for the Scriptures to continue to *form* the Church's concrete confessions. So the problem, once again, is to allow for the "foreward movement" of the Word in history while identifying Lodestars which should be committed to memory, word-for-word.

Our second concern in evaluating the Lodestar hypothesis was for identifying them and determining the conditions under which Lodestars can function as Lodestars. This is a large question and the discussion must be brief. We might as well ask, "How does one bring about an age of faith?" A synod or an individual could sit down and compose the most magnificent set of Lodestars, but they would not function as Lodestars unless there was a community of faith which perceived them as giving expression to its faith as it was trying to confess Christ to the very concrete world around them. Leith observes that "Theology is the servant of the community. The *lex orandi* in no small measure determines the *lex credendi*. The great doctrines of the Church were affirmed in worship and experience before they were written on paper or authorized by councils."<sup>36</sup>

This suggests that the most urgent item on the agenda of those who yearn for the good old days when there were clearcut Lodestars which were memorized and retained for life is to do whatever they can to get the community of faith busy in mission, in making its confession to the world and to itself. I suspect that mission and evangelism have a lot more to do with memorization than we commonly think.

<sup>35</sup> Edward J. Masselink, *The Heidelberg Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964, pp. 107-108.

<sup>36</sup> Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

## VI. EPILOGUE AND PROLOGUE

In this discussion I have generally refrained from treating the more concrete and practical aspects of memorization as part of the teaching ministry of the church. In a subsequent discussion I hope to address them, drawing from the above discussion what is instructive for the direction we may take with regard to the role of memorization in the teaching ministry of the church.