

70411

MEMORIZATION IN CHURCH EDUCATION

BY J. MARION SNAPPER

A casual examination of the Sunday school and catechetical materials used by evangelical churches indicates that memorization of the Scriptures and in some cases of the confessions of the church is an almost universal expectation of the learners. This expectation is clearly held for children, although uncommonly for adults. My purpose in the discussion which follows is to lay down some guidelines for a memorization program in the church and to discuss selected theological and educational issues raised by these guidelines. I shall first define what I mean by memorization and then address three questions: Why memorize? What should be memorized? How should it be memorized? Some additional related issues will be touched on as well.

I. MEMORIZATION DEFINED.

In a previous article on this subject¹ I employed the term *memorization* in the way it was understood and used by the sixteenth-century Reformers who were largely responsible for the catechetical programs of instruction which followed the Reformation, particularly those embodied in the Heidelberg, Westminster and Luther catechisms. The clear intention of those who described the pedagogy to be used with those catechisms was that they should be memorized word-for-word, precisely as they were written. And they were to be memorized so thoroughly that the learner would be able for the rest of his or her life to recall them with the same precision with which they were learned. The following educational objective illustrates what is meant:

The student shall be able to quote from memory with 100% accuracy the RSV of 1 Corinthians 10:13 so that it will be available to function mediationally for the rest of his or her life.

When I say that something memorized will be available to function mediationally for the rest of the learner's life, I am saying that, whenever

¹Marion Snapper, "The Dethronement of Memory in Church Education," *Calvin Theological Journal* 13 (1978) 38-56.

a person runs into a situation or an idea which must be thoughtfully responded to, if the passage memorized is relevant, it will be available for recall, and the learner will be able to state it word-for-word.

This definition has implicit in it the first guideline which a church should follow if it wants to take memorization seriously: *Either mean your memorization program or abandon the pretense.* Pretense is demoralizing for both teachers and learners. The discussion and guidelines which follow are addressed primarily to those who MEAN their memorization programs, who want done with pretense.

II. WHY MEMORIZE?

The argument for memorization must rest largely on one major assertion: *The Word of God will more effectively accomplish its purpose when it is committed to memory.*

I know of no well-done research which can be cited in support of this assertion. Therefore we must appeal largely to experience, reason and analogy. Because this is so, the reader will likely feel free to add to the evidence or perhaps to detract from it.

First, the very act of memorization carries significance for the learner. To memorize something is to make a rather impressive statement about it because it is such a deliberate and thoughtful investment of time and energy. The amount of material we memorize with planned deliberation is quite limited. There are indeed many things which are learned and retained indefinitely which are not consciously memorized. Included here are most of our working vocabulary and a host of other material, the kind of stuff we pick up by "osmosis."² Out of this whole welter of cultural content we deliberately sort out a relatively small amount of literary material to be deliberately memorized. If, for example, we should favor the memorization of Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot and the multiplication tables but not portions of Scripture, then we would be making a statement: Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot and the multiplication tables are more important to have available for ordering and interpreting life than are the Scriptures.

²"Osmosis" is a figurative way of saying "socialization," "enculturation," "acculturation," terms which describe something of what is recommended in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. Because I mention it only in passing does not mean that it is unimportant. I agree with such writers as John Westerhoff III, Lawrence O. Richards and C. Ellis Nelson, who convincingly argue that the reason our formal programs don't work very well is because we are defeated by the "osmosis" process.

Secondly, there is the authority aspect. In a court of law, an attorney, when appealing to constitutional or case law, seeks to quote with 100% accuracy; it is less than adequate to paraphrase, even though the meaning thus conveyed is the same as if the original text has been quoted. Likewise, it would seem that the authority of Scripture is better served with exact quotations. Many of us have had the experience of being a bit unnerved by a cult member quoting Scripture with 100% accuracy, thereby giving to their teachings a strong note of authority. What principally unnerves us is that very fact; they sound so authoritative even in an abusive use of Scripture.

Thirdly, and closely related to the authority aspect, is the way the nature of dialogue is affected by the direct quotation of Scripture. The following statement is a summary of what many persons have told me:³

When counseling with other people or when witnessing to others, I feel much more effective when I can let the Bible speak for itself—directly. It seems to me that then the other person senses that he or she is not confronted with my ideas or my interpretation of the Bible, but with the very Word of God, that the dialogue is first of all with God and not between us; I am there only to interpret and testify to it. This is equally true for my own self-counsel. When I know word-for-word what God says, I feel less that I am talking to myself and more that I am dialoguing with God. "Songs in the night" written by God are better than those written by men. In summary, I believe that the Holy Spirit works more effectively when I am able to quote Scripture with accuracy.

Fourthly—and for this there is abundant evidence—the more certainly something is fixed in mind and memory the more likely it is that it will be used. This, it seems to me, is a most compelling argument for memorization. It should be noted, however, that this is an argument from research statistics which, if they are valid, are always prefaced with, "All other things being equal. . . ." That is to say, memorization by *itself* insures

³In the absence of reliable research data I have over the years questioned people who are memorizers of the Scriptures. They were all adults and the majority of them had been involved in some form of rather formal effort such as Navigators or an evangelism training program. Interestingly, many of them did not credit their growing-up experience with memorization programs for giving them the material they had memorized. But they did credit it for aiding them as adults to be more efficient memorizers. Apparently they had "learned to learn" how to memorize.

nothing except a greater likelihood of recall and use. And the devil, I am told, is pretty good at it.

Finally, there is the appeal to Scripture itself. Although nowhere in Scriptures is it explicitly stated that it must be memorized word-for-word, it is quite impossible to believe that the pious Israelites and the early Christians did not know a great deal of the Scriptures by heart. The common understanding of the frequent passages concerning laying things in the heart and hiding them in the heart, is that they were memorized (cf. Deut. 30:14; Ps. 119:11; 37:31).⁴ As I indicated in my previous article, the notion that one could separate the Truth from persons' minds and hearts and store it in books is a relatively recent one.

III. WHAT SHOULD BE MEMORIZED?

No simple answer that is universally applicable can be given to this question. We should rather view the matter as a target with concentric circles. In the center must be placed that which we think is the central purpose or concept of the Scriptures, that which draws all else to it. For example, ". . . these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). And to know Jesus in this manner is to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves—which is the whole of the Law and the Prophets (cf. 1 John 3, 4). In the first concentric circle we should place material most vitally related to these central concepts. And so on in the succeeding circles.

A. Basic Criteria.

Following are a number of criteria which may be applied. They are not listed in order of importance, though one might be minded to place more weight on one criterion than on another. The greater the number of these criteria which a Scripture passage or a confessional statement satisfies the higher its priority in a program of memorization.

1. That which is memorized should have stood the test of time. This criterion is an appeal to the history and experience of the church over the centuries. Most obviously this points to the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. These form the heart of all the

⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms: Volume Fourth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 409.

great catechisms of the Reformation. Further, it is helpful to note the Scripture references attached to these items in the catechism(s), collate them, and see which passages are referred to most frequently. Close to the top will be parts of Romans 8, Ephesians 2:8-10 and Matthew 28:18-20.

2. That which is memorized should be for the learner *meaningful learning of meaningful material*.⁵

Meaningful learning. It is of subjective import to the learner at the time it is memorized. It can be significantly related by the learner to his or her concerns, questions, needs, goals and so on.

Meaningful material. It is of objective value, whether or not the learner perceives it as such. All that is necessary here is that those who are mature in both understanding and experience can demonstrate that the material to be learned is indeed meaningful material for understanding and living the life of faith.

These criteria eliminate much of the Scriptures so far as memorization is concerned. At least it puts large portions of it far down the list for most of us. However, it should be noted in this context that much of what is eliminated is narrative. Later in my discussion I shall examine how that material relates to a memorization program.

The requirement that the learning be meaningful for the student raises the question of readiness, of the developmental level of the learner. However, this requirement does not mean that a passage must be understood in all of its depth or dimensions at the time it is committed to memory. For example, a child of eight can adequately enough understand Luke 19:10 ("For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.") to warrant committing it to memory. The notion of being lost and then found can be made powerfully meaningful to a young child. Later on, the idea of being lost in sin can be developed. And much later, the person may learn why Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of man." In a mature Christology this is indeed a weighty concept. But for the child it is adequate to understand the term as referring to Jesus.

The minimum requirement should be that the learner can "translate" the passage.⁶ That is, the learner can put it in other words of his or her

⁵David P. Ausubel, *Readings in School Learning* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), pp. 253-258. I am indebted to Ausubel for these terms and their definitions.

⁶B. S. Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (New York: David McKay, 1956). Bloom's taxonomy offers levels or categories for

own which quite accurately capture that dimension of the passage's meaning which is understandable to the learner at his time of life. Luke 19:10 might be translated by an eight-year-old as saying, "Jesus came to look for people who are in bad trouble."

This requirement of meaningful learning can be sustained on pragmatic grounds. In most cases, what is meaningless is not long remembered. And there is no time to waste in church education. The more meaning something has the easier and longer it will be retained. Our own experience tells us this clearly. Adults generally refuse to learn meaningless material, yet some of them insist that children should do so.

This insistence is usually supported by the argument that ages nine through twelve are the golden years for rote memorization and that people later lose much of this ability. The first part of the argument—that children ages nine to twelve memorize easily—has truth to it.⁷ That is the period of life sandwiched between learning to read and puberty, a relatively tranquil time during which children may memorize with enthusiasm, especially if the activity has a game-like quality. But it is a myth that the ability to memorize diminishes as age advances beyond these years. If it does diminish, it is not for developmental reasons. It is only that, as with other human capacities, it is commonly lost through disuse.⁸

Perhaps the most devastating effect of the above argument on the teaching ministry of the church is that it reinforces the "school model" in our thinking about education in the church. That model is built around such ideas as graduation, diplomas and award stars. When youngsters reach the point of professing their faith in Jesus Christ and announce

classifying educational objectives. The first level is the simple ability to reproduce something, to parrot. The second level is comprehension, for which the ability to "translate," i.e., to put into other words, is a simple test.

⁷David Elkind, *A Sympathetic Understanding of the Child: Birth to Sixteen* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1974). Elkind says that the ten-year-old "prefers to soak up information rather than to integrate or to digest it" (pp. 136-137).

⁸Andrew S. Dibner, "The Psychology of Normal Aging," *Understanding Aging: a Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. by Marian G. Spencer and Caroline J. Darr (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1975), pp. 67-90. In summarizing the research on memorizing, Dibner says that the major difference that comes with aging is that older persons seem to have more need for meaning. That is, it would be harder for them to memorize nonsense syllables than it is for children. There is a bit of decrease in short-term memory, but long-term memory diminishes little if at all.

thereby that they are ready to assume full responsibilities in the church, then—Happy Days!!—they no longer have to attend church school. They have graduated! No more memorization. They may now join that adult world which generally no longer has to memorize.⁹

If the good, meaningful material is going to be memorized as meaningful learning, then we must recognize that a good church program will require equal participation by the adults. I am quite convinced that the most serious obstacle to a good memorization program in the church is that, generally speaking, adults neither memorize Scriptures or confessions, nor do they much quote what they do know. If this is true, we are sending a clear signal to our children and youth. And it cuts the ground out from under the argument which goes something like this: Memorize it now; some day you will be glad. Some day you will understand it and use it even though you don't understand it now.

The Navigators, with their emphasis on discipling, provide a good example of how a memorization program may be done with adults.¹⁰ Their approach is topical. The first kit is designed for new converts. But as believers advance, they memorize sets of Scripture passages which deal with specific areas of doctrine or life; it may be for use in evangelism, in parenting, in talking with Mormons, or for some other specifically defined purpose.

3. The material which is to be memorized should be functional material. It should have instrumental value for living the life of faith.

The more uses to which a passage can be put the more value it has for memorization. The Scriptures claim for themselves to be instrumental Truth (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17; 2 Cor. 10:3-5). This should be equally true for creedal and confessional statements, which are summaries of biblical teachings. The following list of functions are based on clear or implied claims which the Scriptures make for themselves:

a. Instrumental for counseling, admonishing, comforting, and for helping people with problems, choices and the like.

b. Instrumental for helping people make sense out of the experiences of their lives, for giving meaning and purpose to life.

⁹In various forms this critique is made by most analysts of church education. Cf. Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

¹⁰Cf. *Navigators Topical Memory System: Guidebook 1* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, n.d.).

c. Instrumental for helping people witness, evangelize and engage in what may be called lay apologetics, that is, defending the faith in areas where lay persons find this necessary.

d. Instrumental for holding together the structure of faith-knowledge. Here we are looking at the cornerstone statements, the pegs to hang things on. This function is grounded in the fact that humankind does try to put knowledge and understanding together into coherent wholes. Systematic theologians will always be with us.

At the top of our list would be passages which have multiple uses. Perhaps the most obvious example is Romans 8:28 ("We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose"). It serves at least three of the above functions.

B. Hermeneutics and the Story.

Utilization of criteria such as those above has some effects which must be noted. The way we utilize a thing surely says a great deal about what we take the thing to be. We hang pictures on walls and put carpets on floors—deliberately—so we can look at the one and walk on the other. We utilize them in such a way that they will be most likely to perform their primary functions. The same thing is surely true of the Bible. The way we utilize it is probably the most existentially truthful statement we can make about what we take it to be.

It is important, therefore, to note what kind of biblical material is selected for memorization by using the above criteria. Almost all—if not all—of it will be of the nature of didactic statements dealing with doctrinal, moral or ethical questions, with principles to help in making decisions, and the like. And surely this is right; these are ways in which Scripture itself says it should be used. But what of all that biblical content that is thereby left out? When one limits memorization to the propositional content of the Bible, the historical-thematic, the redemptive-historical content, is in danger of being left out. We must therefore be concerned about this reductionist effect which certain kinds of memorization programs may have on the full revelation we have received in the Word.

Sidney Greidanus, in his concern that the principle of *Sola Scriptura* function consistently in hermeneutics and homiletics, quotes B. Holwerda:

The Bible does not contain many histories but *one* history—the one

history of God's constantly advancing revelation, the one history of God's ever progressing redemptive work. And the various persons named in the Bible have all received their own peculiar place in this one history and have their peculiar meaning for this history. We must, therefore, try to understand all the accounts in their relation with each other, in their coherence with the center of redemptive history, Jesus Christ.¹¹

Greidanus' concern is for preaching, but the issues he raises are also implicated in teaching. The use of Scripture which is implicit in such a memorization program as has been sketched above seems often to be in tension with this redemptive-historical approach. This may be seen in the frequent distinction between a "Sunday School" and a "Catechism" curriculum. The former is seen as predominantly evangelistic and largely devoted to telling Bible stories, while the latter is seen as being heavily doctrinal and/or confessional. On the cover of a book written to help parents teach the Child's Catechism (Westminster) to their children, it is said of the author:

Because of her own experience, Mrs. Horton has been especially burdened to teach sound doctrine to children, rather than just telling Bible stories with no depth of practical application. It is her conviction that the catechism program is one of the best channels through which children may be taught the fundamental doctrines of the Bible and thus protected from straying into error in later years.¹²

My purpose is not to set these two emphases over against each other. Rather it is to seek balance and integration. After writing two articles on memorization in church education I am now tempted to write one on storytelling. It is a serious mistake, I think, to view storytelling as a soft-headed activity hardly worthy of a catechetical program.

The Bible tells the story of redemption as it unfolds in history. It is the one story told in many stories, all of them holding together in Jesus Christ. This fact introduces us to a significantly different concern for

¹¹Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970), pp. 41-42.

¹²Mrs. Frank C. Horton, *How to Teach the Catechism to Children* (Carrollton, MS: Christian Education Committee, Covenant Presbytery, PCA, 1979). This book was written to help parents teach the catechism (Westminster) to their children, a unique effort so far as I know—and a commendable one.

what should be memorized. The devout man of God in ancient Israel knew two things by heart; he knew the Story and he knew the Law, and the two were not to be separated. A one-sentence summary of the redemption history of Israel provides the introduction to and the context in which the Law finds its place and meaning. These elements are repeatedly juxtaposed throughout the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 78; Hosea 11).

The Reformed fathers at the great Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) understood this. Included in the advice given, as the charter documents for catechetics in the Reformed tradition were formulated, is the following:

Unfamiliar or obscure words in the text which are not at once clear to the children should as much as possible be clearly explained. So, for example, in order that the children may understand the meaning of the First Commandment, they must be taught about the Egyptian bondage and deliverance—the history as set forth in Exodus must be explained to them. So also in the Fourth Commandment the word Sabbath must be explained and the history of Creation briefly related.¹³

My concern that storytelling not suffer at the hands of a memorization program is based on two considerations. First, the Story itself is a unique vehicle of God's redemptive revelation and is vitally related to grounding persons firmly in the faith—as vital as the propositional content.¹⁴ Reflection on an analogous situation will help to make this point.

Whom would you rather have as a companion in the heat of battle when the temptation to flee is the greatest, a person who has learned the Constitution by heart or a person who has grown up hearing the great stories of his country, of the Pilgrims, of George Washington at Valley Forge, of "the rockets' red glare" and "bombs bursting in air" which "gave proof through the night that our flag was still there"? For myself, I should not want to choose. I would like someone who knew both.

Secondly, when we lift biblical material out of its historical context—out of its original place in the Story—we are in danger of engaging in

¹³*Acta of handelingen der National Synode te Dordrecht* (Leiden, Netherlands: D. Donner, n.d.), p. 27 (Vijftiende Zitting).

¹⁴As I have suggested, the place of the Story and storytelling in church education is deserving of a separate discussion. A provocative book to begin with is Robert P. Roth, *Story and Reality: an Essay on Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

what some call "moralizing."¹⁵ Most simply, it is a misuse of Scripture, lifting of it out of its biblical and historical context, restricting its meaning, or even changing its intent.

Memorization programs are replete with examples of such distortion. I have high regard for the Topical Memory System (TMS) of the Navigators, but some of their material is marred by the misuse of Scripture. A recent TMS page in the *Navlog* offered about 100 texts on the topic, "Relationship to the Body."¹⁶ One subset of texts on that page was headed "To Opposite Sex," and under it were listed several principles, this one among them: "Wait for God to act." Two prooftexts are offered for memorization, of which the first is: "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him" (Isaiah 30:18). A casual reading of the context of this beautiful verse indicates that it is one of those magnificent statements addressed to Israel, admonishing the people of God to wait on the Lord and not to rely on Egypt for their deliverance.

The second text says: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it pleases" (Song of Songs 8:4). According to the author's interpretation of this text, it is made to say that in bodily relationships with the opposite sex one ought to "wait for God to act" before taking any action. Regardless of whether one interprets this passage allegorically or literally, it is difficult to see how it addresses the author's point.

If the above uses were no more than passing references made in a sermon, it would be bad enough. But they are recommended for *memorization*, to be stored in the heart so that they are available for the Spirit in addressing an appropriate word from God to us at the propitious time.

What I am discussing, of course, is the hermeneutic question as it relates to memorization. A sound hermeneutics in teaching requires that the Scriptures memorized must be firmly rooted in two places in the redemption story. First, they must be firmly rooted in the Story as found in the Bible. And then they must be firmly rooted in the story of our lives

¹⁵Gordon Spykman, "Moralism Revisited," and Edwin Walhout, "Pre-Defining the Moral Choice," *Christian Educator's Journal* 10 (1970) 9-15.

¹⁶Ruth Holmsten, "Scripture Memory Verses About Discipleship," *Navlog* (January, 1979), p. 5. This regular feature page is entitled, "Basics: Scripture Memory."

—and that is essentially what we were saying in our discussion of "meaningful learning of meaningful material."

In view of this, we must add one more category in answer to the question, what should be memorized? *The story of the mighty acts of God should be "memorized."* This is a somewhat different kind of memorization. Stories are not generally repeated verbatim as are texts. What is and has always been important to the storyteller is fidelity to that historical content which is essential to the story's meaning.¹⁷ In this context I appreciate the contributions made by the *Bethel Bible Series* and *Walk Through the Bible Ministries*.¹⁸ People who as adults have been through such programs often testify that for the first time they have a good grasp of the "one Story told in many stories."

C. Hermeneutics and Retrieval Systems.

There remains yet one consideration in regard to what should be memorized. It relates to the fourth category of instrumentally valuable texts (II, A, 3, d, above), namely those useful as pegs or cornerstones for the structure of faith-knowledge, sometimes referred to as prooftexts for doctrines. This function has essentially the same danger in it as do those texts which are used in a moralizing way. Both are susceptible to a reduction or distortion of what the text says. In the one case it is, "Bible texts: A pill for every ill." In the other case it is: "Bible texts: You can fit 'em all in my system."

The latter case is most readily perceived in a theological system which

¹⁷The history of memorization—of texts, stories, and orations—has a long and fascinating history. Cf. Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Walter J. Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Yates' monumental work describes the incredibly elaborate mnemonic devices employed by the ancients. It is from such sources that Jerry Lucas (the ex-basketball star) developed his mnemonically-based programs for memorizing the Scriptures (White's Creek, TN: Memory Press, Inc.).

¹⁸The Bethel Series, Box 5305, Madison, WI 53705. Walk Through the Bible Ministries, Inc., 603 Peachtree Street, N.E., Atlanta GA 30308. The Bethel Series is notable for its use of pictures to enhance memorization. Walk Through the Bible is unique in that it seeks to enhance memorization by combining motions with telling the story, and assigning geographic places around the room (e.g., "Egypt is over there in that corner. . ."). His experience with this ministry inspired Barry Huddleston to write *The Acrostic Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978). He outlines the Bible using acrostics, something the New Testament scholar Dr. William Hendriksen has done for years.

differs from one's own. I, for example, see it with great clarity in the dispensationalist system of the Scofield Bible. Once one has the dispensationalist scaffolding in place, it is quite a marvel to see how every text gets interpreted to accommodate the system, and not only Scripture texts but contemporary events as well. It seems that every time a Russian soldier takes a step it is toward Armageddon. And—no doubt—a dispensationalist sees a covenant theologian as doing the same thing.

When I was a catechumen, my teachers and textbooks put before me scores of texts to be memorized in relation to the doctrines and confessions being taught. As a consequence of that pattern of teaching, the great bulk of what I had tried to memorize went into a file drawer in my head labeled "Doctrines."¹⁹ I was thirty-three years old when, for the first time, I was compelled under instruction to commit to memory Scripture passages specifically for use in dealing with other persons. I had to open up a new file drawer in my head labeled "For Dealing with Other Persons." My old King James Bible still has glued in the back my crib notes which I could peek at when talking with another person. The occasion for this was my volunteering to be a counselor with a Billy Graham Crusade.

The most revealing thing about that experience—at least to me—was the fact that the texts memorized were in most cases the same texts I had previously memorized (more or less) in relation to doctrines. But my retrieval system simply did not work to bring them to mind in dialoguing with other persons about their personal faith life. The reverse would probably be true as well. That is, if someone had memorized texts for use in dealing with people, then that person would find that those texts would not come to mind when engaging in a purely theological discussion. We have here the old issue of "doctrine versus life" as it appears in the context of memorization.

What is important to recognize is that *all* the data which we learn or memorize gets deposited in some kind of file system in our minds and takes on at least some of its meaning from the structure of the filing system. For most of the history of memorization the file system was the most important thing. Peter Ramus, for example, equated memorization

¹⁹My use of the file drawer metaphor is done advisedly. Cognitive learning theory uses other terms such as "mental set," "mapping," which means essentially the same thing. Cf. David R. Olson, "On Conceptual Strategies," *Studies in Cognitive Growth*, Jerome Bruner *et al* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), pp. 135-153.

with his dialectic. In his study of Ramism, Walter J. Ong concludes that the real reason why Ramus could dispense with memory is that "his whole scheme of arts, based on a topically conceived logic, is a system of 'local memory.' Memory is everywhere, its 'places or rooms' being the mental space which Ramus' arts all fill."²⁰

Though Ramus' sixteenth-century place logic is quite passé today, his point that "memory is everywhere" is quite contemporary. A perusal of textbooks in educational psychology indicates that very few of them have specific and positive discussions of memorization. Where it is listed, the reader is most often led to some cautionary remarks about meaningless rote learning or is referred to a discussion of something akin to "Structure and Meaning in Learning."²¹

This position vis-a-vis memorization is essentially the same as that taken by some theologians who are less than enthusiastic about programs of Scripture memorization. They apparently would prefer to have the specific data of Scripture find its place in their coherent system of theology even though the precise wording of that Scriptural data is lost or blurred. For them the risk of doctrinal eisegesis ("You can list 'em all in my system") is preferred to the risk of a moralizing eisegesis ("A pill for every ill").

In summary, a good program of memorization must always be aware that it sails between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, there is the hazard of moralizing reductionism and, on the other hand, of doctrinal reductionism, with both of them neglecting the Story. Memorization shares with a total educational program the age-old problem of how knowledge should be organized for learning. Shall it be problem (life)-centered or shall it be organized according to the structure of the academic disciplines, theology included? Both the integrity of the Scriptures and of good educational practice are at stake here. We are looking at what I think is the central theological and educational issue in a

²⁰Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 228.

²¹Cf. J. M. Stephens and E. D. Evans, *Development and Classroom Learning: an Introduction to Education Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973). The authors, in discussing retention, conclude: "The steps that enhance meaning and insight (Chapter 7) are the surest guarantee of more permanent learning" (p. 310). There is no discussion of memorization as we are dealing with it here; the reader is simply referred to Chapter 7, entitled, "Structure and Meaning in Learning."

memorization program. In the discussion which follows on the how of memorization, I shall reckon with this issue.

IV. HOW SHALL IT BE MEMORIZED?

In this section I shall refrain from explicit references to the preceding, trusting that the reader will be able to make the connections between my previous discussion and what follows. The guidelines which follow are divided into two sections: first, those which address broader curricular concerns, and secondly, those which address more specific strategies and methods.

A. Curriculum Guidelines.

1. The corpus of material which is selected for memorization—both scriptural and confessional—shall be clearly identified, especially that part which is for the children and youth. A good case can be made for collating it and publishing it under separate cover. Serious consideration should be given to inclusion of the broad outline of the Story in the form in which it should be “memorized.”

2. The material identified shall *not* be taught as a separate item in the curriculum. Rather, it shall be integrated throughout the curriculum, from childhood through adulthood. Developmentally viewed, that integration should generally be in the following sequence of emphases:

For children: integrated with the Story and with their life stories.

For youth: integrated with the Story, with their life stories and with the confessional/doctrinal structures of faith-knowledge.²²

For youth and adults: all of the above, but adding the topical discipling approach as illustrated in the Navigator material. Evangelism training programs, *Bethel Bible*

²²Throughout this paper I have used the terms doctrines/teachings, and faith/confessional-knowledge. They do not mean the same thing. I know that professors of systematic theology tend to lean toward teaching doctrines, and that teachers of the church's creeds and confessions tend to lean toward teaching faith-knowledge. A sharp line of distinction eludes me. Arnold De Graaf has ventured this definition of faith-knowledge: “Our knowledge of God and of ourselves is characterized by the intercourse between God and man, and is of a practical nature. In other words, it is knowledge gained through actual believing, through our fellowship with God; it is faith-knowledge. [It is]... experiential, practical knowledge which incites to action....” (*The Educational Ministry of the Church* [Craig Press, 1968], pp. 51, 142.)

Series or its equivalent and studies of the creeds are appropriate adult contexts for memorization. They should also (re-) learn what their children learn.

3. The distribution of the material shall show that the adults are expected to be as much involved in memorization as are the children and youth, though it will of course be more voluntary and topical.

4. An analysis of the curriculum in which the memorized materials are integrated will demonstrate that each passage is dealt with in a hermeneutically responsible way. This likely will require that most if not all of them will recur in the curriculum.

B. Methodology Guidelines.

1. The content of the passages shall be taught in such a way that the memorization is meaningful learning of meaningful material. This means that each difficult word shall be explained and the structure of the whole passage shall be made evident so that each learner shall be able to “translate” it into other words that say essentially the same thing. Visual representation is helpful:

Wages - Sin - Death

Gift - God - Life (Rom. 6:23).

2. Memorized passages should be repeatedly reviewed, not as dull drill, but by throwing them into every legitimate relationship and combination possible. The questions should be varied. If possible, the passage should be brought into relationship with the Story, with the various functions listed earlier and with confessional/doctrinal truths.

Following are thirteen ways in which Matthew 28:18-20 could be reviewed:

Which text tells us that:

Jesus has all authority and power?

Jesus is with us all the time?

Jesus instituted the sacrament of baptism?

We should engage in evangelism? teaching?

Where is the text found: “All authority...”?

Give a Scripture text on which the Heidelberg Catechism (in part) bases the following:

Q-31 Jesus “guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.”

Q-47 Jesus “in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit... is not absent from us for a moment.”

Q-50 Jesus is seated at the right hand of God to show that "the Father rules all things through him."

Q-53 The Holy Spirit is given so that by true faith I can share in Christ (who) "remains with me forever."

Tell the story surrounding Matthew 28:18-20.

Role playing exercise: Respond to the following statements by another person, using a Scripture text:

"I feel that Jesus is not with me all the time. . . ."

"I am scared to stand up for Jesus. . . ."

Such repetition not only reinforces learning; it also serves to guard against reductionism. The importance of this varied pattern of repetition may be illustrated with a minor statistic. I have asked over one hundred adults, communicant members of the church, almost all nurtured on the Heidelberg Catechism, all high school graduates: To what question in the Catechism is this the answer?

Because—not with gold or silver, but
with his precious blood. . .

He has set us free from sin and from the
tyranny of the devil, and has bought us
body and soul to be his very own.

One person knew the answer: "Why do you call him 'our Lord'?" This is as absurd as asking one hundred American citizens "To what question is July 4, 1776, the answer?" and to find that only one knows the answer.

3. Memorized passages should be recited in various contexts.

a. Include them as a regular part of the classroom liturgy, perhaps at a time in the classroom liturgy when students are asked to share a memorized passage which was particularly meaningful to them during the week.

b. Put the passages on small cards (widely available at stationery or office supply stores). The Navigator material may be examined for ideas about putting the topic or other cues on the back of each card. Encourage families to use the cards for family devotions, each person drawing one, reading it and saying something about it. Quiz fellow family members.

4. Teachers should be models, always able to quote from memory—before the students—what they expect their students to have learned.

5. Memorization activities should, as far as possible, have a "fun and games" quality. It is fun to master the Scriptures and confessions and then to use what is memorized. There are many activities available.

Elmer Towns lists twenty-two²³, a few of them similar to those mentioned above.

Hopefully the reader will be able to add to this list of suggestions and guidelines. The first problem which emerges is probably this: How can this be done if there is barely time for what we do now? The first answer is that we must have much more involvement by the home. Secondly, we should not try to teach too much but to teach more thoroughly what we do teach; limit the corpus of material to be memorized by children and youth. Thirdly, let no one graduate from the memorization program; all church members have a lifetime in which to do it, and that will have to be enough.

²³Elmer Towns, *The Successful Sunday School and Teachers Guidebook* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1976), pp. 318-324.