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The Teaching Methods of Jesus

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### Abstract

Jesus was the Master Teacher. This was recognized by the great leaders of His day, by His followers, and through the ages by Christians right up to today. If we recognize our calling to teaching, even though we might have been trained via methods courses or have come to our positions because of experience and years of study, what better way to gauge our teaching ability than by finding out how Jesus taught and carrying that over into our classrooms today?

This paper will explore the methods Jesus used to get His message across to the people of His day and to teach His lessons to His disciples. This paper could lead to the development of a required course for student teachers on Jesus' methods of teaching.

*Keywords:* Jesus, teacher, teaching methods, disciples, student teachers

### Introduction

The English word "teacher" originated from an Anglo-Saxon word, *teacan*, which meant to show, or to point out. For those of us who have been called to be teachers, we have become accustomed to pointing things out to students, either verbally, with a pointer stick in the olden days, use of a laser pointer a few years ago, or with the new pointer: PowerPoint.

In the Bible we find the following: In His church some function as apostles, reaching out to new mission territory. Some might have the gift of prophecy to help guide the church. Others have the ability teach. Is everyone a leader? Has everyone be called to prophesy? Do all members know how to teach? No, we don't all have the same gifts. (I Corinthians 12:28-30 Clear Word Version).

From this verse alone, you can see we have aligned with one of the professions God Himself has set-aside: teaching.

In Ephesians we again see our profession singled out as one of the gifts from God. "The gifts He gave were varied. Some were called to be apostles, others to function as prophets, still others to be evangelists, and others to be pastors or teachers" (Ephesians 4:11).

The Gospels are replete with references to Jesus as a teacher. In Mark it states, "Then Jesus left the house and went down to the lake, with crowds of people trailing behind Him. He planned to continue teaching the people there" (Mark 2:13). Jesus' custom is described as "He started teaching them" (Mark 10:1 Clear Word Version). We also find "So He continued teaching in the Temple with the Jewish leaders listening in" (Mark 12:35).

There was a time when Jesus taught in the Temple and people were "listening to every word He said. The next few days Jesus taught openly in the Temple" (Luke 19:47).

With this example and model, and with our particular calling, should we not give serious thought to His methods of teaching and see how we can emulate His approach to teaching in our classrooms? We have various methods classes offered in our teacher education department, from content methods courses such as math, social

studies, English, to Bible methods, and elementary methods. Many have not followed the certified teacher route prior to teaching at the university level; consequently they have been left to their own methods of instruction, essentially finding what works for them. What if Jesus' methods were clearly spelled out for not only these teachers (professors) but for student teachers, current K-12 teachers, parents, and even Sabbath School teachers? Would this make a positive impact? There is no doubt.

The Biblical worldview of teaching is clear; study the Master Teacher's way of instruction, for it is based in scripture which is "inspired and given by God for teaching truth, refuting error, correcting our ways, and helping us live right" (2 Timothy 3:16).

### **Jesus' Methods of Teaching**

We can all remember that special teacher that said or did something that impacted our lives at a particular point and we can fondly look back and see the difference it has made in our lives. Perhaps you have been that person, giving an encouraging word, gently nudging the reluctant student, or showing mercy when justice cried out. Great teachers have come and gone over the ages, men and women who have demonstrated profound knowledge of their subject area.

The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and extensive research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought and opened to view vast fields of knowledge...but there is One who stands higher than they. We can trace the line of the world's teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them (White, 2000, p. 9).

### **Speaking with Authority**

While on earth, Jesus utilized many different teaching methods during his three and a half years of ministry. One approach He used was to speak by His own authority; He spoke with certainty (Zuck, 1995). The Bible states, "The people were amazed at His teaching, for He taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law" (Mark 1:22 New Living Translation). We find ourselves quoting other teachers or experts in our field of study but Jesus did not have to do this. He spoke with His own authority because "all authority on heaven and earth had been given to Him" (Matthew 28:18 Clear Word Version).

What does this method look like in your classroom? Students are searching for content knowledge and answers to life's questions as well. There are times when we must say, "I don't know," and help students find the answers. There are other times, particularly when it comes to spiritual truths, that we must not waiver but speak with certainty. We must not be shy when it comes to sharing how God has been a part of our lives or what the biblical teaching is on a particular subject. Can we, like Jesus, return a question with a question? What does the Bible say? Biology teachers, what does the Bible say about creation? This is not an area to introduce uncertainty. Music teachers, what does the Bible say about Satan's skills in this area? Might he use music to get to the souls of our students? Art teachers, can you direct students to Esther 1:6 where we read about white tapestries with blue hangings, a mosaic of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and other costly stones? God has provided beautiful gems for our enjoyment and we must appreciate their value. Consider the laws of physics and the reliability of chemical formulas, which cannot and should not be explained outside the concept of a creator God.

### **Using Object Lessons**

Jesus knew that many of the people of His day who were visual learners. This is still true today. In Christ's Object Lessons (White, 1941) we read, "in His wonderful deeds of healing He had answered their question" (p. 273). Jesus used object lessons to communicate truth to those who would listen. According to the Visual Teaching Alliance (1998), 65% of the population are visual learners. At the high school level, 10% of the students are auditory learners, and 80% of the instruction is delivered orally (University of Illinois Extension, 2009). The 3M Corporation has found that visual aids in the classroom improve learning by up to 400% (3M Corporation, 2001). Can you visualize Jesus washing the disciples' feet? How about sitting with His disciples when a child approached Him and He said it was okay? Or pointing out the widow as she dropped her offering in the plate? Or the big one: calming the storm with just his words?

History teacher, aren't there sufficient artifacts that you could bring into the classroom every day to make your points come alive? How many of your students have seen an actual civil war bullet or an insignia from the Third Reich? Religion teacher, can you check out items or at least take your class to an archeology museum? Do you have Bibles that contain ancient maps or do you use pull-down maps in your classrooms? Bible prophecy and history are coming alive in the Middle East right now and it takes more than just talking about it.

### Use of Repetition

There is a famous saying attributed to teachers: “You are going to do this over and over again until you get it right.” Repetition is essential to new learning, as is relevance and rigor. Jesus utilized these three concepts as He worked not only with His disciples but with folks He met. We see this when He talked about the importance of receiving the kingdom of God like a little child, and when He told the disciples to allow the children to come to Him. In Peter we read about desiring the milk of the word like a child, and in regard to evil, be like infants. His repetitious use of children sends a message to us. It is crucial to our lessons that we identify the essential concepts to be learned and build on them. In teacher education, we talk about accessing prior knowledge and activating prior knowledge. Students need to see the relevance of what they are learning (how it ties in with what they already know), and how it might apply to their future. This can be accomplished through various activation strategies such as two-minute talks, think-pair-share-, talking drawings, the first word (acronym), or THIEVES (title, headings, introduction, every first sentence, visuals and vocabulary, end of chapter questions, summary). Once we point out to students the relevance of the material, we can then increase the rigor.

English teachers, do students need to memorize portions of famous writings, such as this one from *Mere Christianity* that integrates faith and learning: “and out of that hopeless attempt has come all that we call human history-money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery-the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy” (Lewis, 1952, p. 54-55). Is there a content area that is more congruent with repetition, relevance, and rigor than mathematics?

Math teachers, I suspect you will need not only this teaching method of Jesus but a few others as well. Consider this, the laws and absolutes of mathematics are based on the six-day creation event. Mathematical calculations and formulas are crucial to many in their everyday lives. Consequently, teaching students this information would best be done utilizing word problems. Pages of math calculations, known as drill and kill, miss the mark when it comes to relevance. We read earlier that visual learning has a tremendous impact on memory retention and what better way for students to learn mathematical calculations and formulas than when they can visualize the example and see its practicality.

### **Story Telling**

Do you know that God loves you so much that if you turn your back on Him, if you choose to live a sin-filled life, that if you have a change of heart, He will welcome you back? This is a wonderful truth but is there anything memorable about it? The preacher Andy Stanley says that “memorable is portable.” So how did Jesus make truths memorable? He turned them into stories. Luke states “Jesus told them a story to teach them...” (Luke 18:1). While the word “prodigal” does not appear in the Bible, it is a word that represents wasteful living, as well as careless and imprudent spending. This biblical truth of 35 words is reduced to three words: The Prodigal Son. When someone says this phrase, we all know the implications and the applications.

Each of us has stories to tell our students of God’s intervention in our lives. Can these stories be the launching point of our lessons, or perhaps a point along the way, or could they be used as closure, wrapping up the lesson? Sometimes teachers can be so intent on covering the materials prepared for the lesson that they miss the importance of this teaching method of Jesus, to take a moment to encapsulate the lesson or one or more of the essential learning points, in a story. Teachers must beware that stories are intended to “shed light on spiritual truths. Through His short stories Jesus did not entertain; He educated” (Zuck, 1995, p 314). From His stories, Jesus related to His listeners using everyday examples, referencing, for instance, fig trees, mustard seeds, fish, weddings, coinage, and the workforce.

### **Teachable Moments**

Jesus utilized the teachable moment like no other before Him or since. During one of Jesus’ lessons, He was interrupted by an expert in the law and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus simply said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... you should love and value your neighbor as much as you love and value yourself” (Matthew 22: 37-39), a Bible truth of 30 words. Jesus used two teaching methods—storytelling and a teachable moment—to illustrate and summarize this truth into three words: The Good Samaritan. These three words bring to memory an example of what it takes to be a good neighbor and shows an example of love.

There has been a strong emphasis of late on the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus, how this supersedes our ability to keep the law, or the need for getting our life in order before Jesus will accept us.

Martha knew how to take care of visitors to her home. She was skilled at hospitality, which is an important and valuable talent. When sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet during a visit to her house, Martha was upset and brought it to Jesus' attention. He took this moment to teach a lesson, rather than send Mary back to work with Martha. He emphasized the importance of a relationship with Him.

There is a wonderful example in the Old Testament that illustrates teachable moments. This goes beyond the classroom and shows the mindset one needs to be ready for teachable moments. In Deuteronomy we read "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, New International Version).

### **Sayings and Word Pictures**

Howard Hendricks of the Dallas Theological Seminary has a saying he is known for: "He dropped his watermelon!" (Zuck, 1995, p. 183). He could have simply said "he messed up bad," but instead utilized a word picture that says it all. Jesus loved to use sayings when He taught. Do you think when Jesus said, "Don't throw your pearls to pigs" (Matthew 7:6) that people remembered that and quoted it a few times since? Have you ever said; "that's the blind leading the blind", a variation of a saying of Jesus from Luke? Our psychology students and education students tend to study a lot of notable figures who are known for their sayings. Individuals such as Freud (1953) "What does a woman want," John Dewey (1897) "Education, therefore, a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (p. 78), and most recently Arne Duncan (2011), "The vast majority who drop out of high school drop-out not because it's too hard but because it's too easy," make statements that tend to drive the concepts in their field of expertise.

In Zinke's Faith-Science Issues: An Epistemological Perspective, he lists the following quote: "Leave the impression upon the mind that the Bible and the Bible alone, is our rule of faith, and that the sayings and doings of men are not to be a criterion for our doctrines or actions" (White, 2002, p. 84). While Zinke identifies this statement with the authority of the Bible, it certainly applies as a statement worthy of memorization and will most likely drive the concepts of all the teaching methods of Jesus.

Jesus used sayings for three reasons: “to capture His hearer’s attention, to encourage them to reflect on what He said, and to help them remember His words” (Zuck, 1995, p.184). In content areas where there is a strong flow of thought away from God (psychology) or a removal of God in certain settings (education), these professors must take extra effort to bring their classroom discussions and sayings back around to God and His voices on earth, to center their students, and to remember that “the Bible and the Bible alone is to be our creed, and sole bond of union; all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God’s Word is infallible” (White, 2006, p. 416).

### **Get Their Attention**

“We all must be on the same page”. “I need everyone’s attention”. “All eyes on me”. These phrases are commonly heard in today’s classroom. Are there other more effective ways to get students’ attention so teachers can get their essential learning points across to students? Many a good lesson has fallen on deaf ears because the teacher has not taken the time to capture the imagination of his or her students at the beginning of the lesson. One of Jesus’ methods of teaching was to intentionally get peoples’ attention, either by shocking them with a statement, or using humor, enigmas, or aphorisms, for the expressed purpose of planting these thoughts for future reaping, “refusing to be forgotten, even when the mind would willingly forget” (Zinke, 2004, p. 208).

We all realize that Jesus was not speaking literally when He said people had logs in their eyes, but we all know what He meant. Some have taken His hyperbole literally, particularly in Matthew where He states:

If there is anything that keeps leading you into sin, you need to get rid of it, even if it’s as valuable to you as one of your eyes. It’s better to go without an eye than to go on sinning and lose eternal life. Even if you had to lose your right hand, it would be better to lose it here than to lose out on heaven later. (Matthew 5: 29-30 Clear Word Version).

A literal interpretation of these verses does little to remove sin from a person’s life. Hands and eyes are not needed in order for a person to sin. This statement then and now still presents the shock factor and draws the attention to the spiritual truth that “there is no sin in life worth perishing over” (Zuck, 1995, p.196). Nursing students will be faced with many shocking scenarios when it comes to patient issues. In their discussions with patients, it would serve them well to go beyond the obvious plan of treatment and consider the contributing

factors that brought the patient to them initially, such as diet or lifestyle issues, and create a treatment plan that will prevent the reoccurrence of the condition. Professors can assist this path of treatment with outrageous statements much like the television shock doc known as Dr. House. A six-year old was brought in with stomach pains but the mother was adamant about unnecessary surgery, dismissed Dr. House's prognosis, which lead him to state, "Sorry, didn't know you wanted your kid dead. Although for a couple of G's, I can still make it happen." The university is where thinking takes place and what better content area is there for thoughtful steps than in nursing, because in many cases, it *is* brain surgery.

### **Humor**

Zuck (1995) emphasizes the importance of humor in teaching by making a point that although it is not usually mentioned as a characteristic of good teaching, he quotes former teacher of the year for Arizona, Margo Stone, who said that "Good teachers are teachers that know their field, have a sense of caring and compassion, and a sense of humor (p. 204). There are many examples of Jesus' use of humor and wit to get his point across. Jesus said what father would give his son a stone to eat, or a snake instead of fish, or when he asks for scrambled eggs, his father gives him a scorpion. I can almost hear Him saying, "C'mon man." Jesus had a great dialogue with the woman from Canaan whose daughter was demon possessed. They went back and forth, tit for tat, and I can imagine a smile on His face when she said, "even the puppies eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 7:28 International Standard Version). In other words, she was saying she wanted a little benefit from Him and would even eat the crumbs off His table.

Humor will work very well in all classes and perhaps the physical education teachers can start their classes like Hans and Franz who want to "pump you up!" I could see humorous exercise quotes around their classrooms which can lead to discussions and can also support the essential points of the lesson. Quotes such as "whenever I feel the need to exercise, I lie down until it goes away," or "I believe every human has a finite amount of heartbeats. I don't intent to waste any of mine running around doing exercises." This use of humor also supports the shock approach to teaching. It gets the students' attention and gets them thinking. However, "the Lord's humor was never entertainment for entertainment's sake. He never told jokes merely to evoke hilarity. His humor

was always purposeful” (Zuck, 1995, p.204). I would caution and encourage all teachers to use humor to support their lesson points.

### **From My Experiences**

There is something about experience that lends credibility to a teacher’s lesson. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray (the Lord’s prayer), He prayed for the little children when they were brought to Him, He prayed with Peter, James, and John, and He prayed alone. He also taught His disciples to love sinners and He demonstrated what that looked like by eating with them. I have sat in many classrooms and listened to professors expound on textbook information with little personal interjection of experiences that would support the textbook. Today’s students want to hear first-hand examples, to draw closer to their professors, and to relate to them as regular human beings, not cold, text-quoting academicians with little experience in the real world. “In all true teaching the personal element is essential...teachers are dealing with things real, and they should speak of them with all the force and enthusiasm that a knowledge of their reality and importance can inspire” (White, 2000, p. 141-142 ).

Consider the experiences that our world language professors could bring to their lessons to make them not only memorable, but invigorating and inspirational. Multi-lingual individuals have a richness about them that goes beyond book knowledge and goes deeply into cultural experiences that will captivate the learner. In addition, our outdoor program professors bring to class, through their experiences and their numerous certifications, a wealth of practical information that will help students add tools to their toolbox of life.

### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience. This teaching method is not new, although it is becoming a popular approach in education early in this current century. Aristotle said, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” In Christ’s Object Lessons, we read that “Words are of no value unless they are accompanied with appropriate deeds” (White, 1941, p. 272). Tolbert (1999) summarizes Jesus’ approach to experiential learning in that He gave instructions and called them to do it. Not only did He teach His disciples what to do, He sent them out and asked them to come back with their success reports.

There is a high school in Washington, D.C. called the School Without Walls. The premise is that students will come to school on Mondays, capture the focus of the week from their content area teachers, and spend the rest of the week in various locations around the city that will support and satisfy the demands of the curriculum. Teachers support students in the creation of their experiences and empower them to live out their lessons in the public arena. What better model of learning, what more effective teaching method could be found, especially for our professors, particularly in counseling and social work. These students, upon graduation, will be dealing with social issues, personal crises, and human relationships as part of their everyday activities and must go well-equipped. This means learning from professors who share their professional experiences in the classroom setting. It means having opportunities to interact in the community and getting constructive feedback from their professors and site supervisors. It's basic, we don't just tell our students what to do. We help provide the settings in which they can practice their skills.

### **Questions-Questions-Questions**

But today's students tend to want their teachers and professors to simply tell them the answer to their questions. It's been said that the university is where the church thinks, yet it is in this very setting that we find this trend. In 1911, DeGarmo wrote,

In the skillful use of the question more than anything else lies the fine art of teaching; for in such use we have the guide to clear and vivid ideas, the quick spur to imagination, the stimulus to thought, the incentive to action (p. 179).

"Skillful teachers work at using questions effectively" (Zuck, 1995, p. 235). There are times when we as teachers are anxious to give the answer to every question posed to us. But a question is more than an opportunity for a response. (Zuck, 1995, p.241) has listed 15 purposes for questions. When students ask us a question, it is usually for information or facts. On the contrary, when we as teachers ask questions, it should be for a greater purpose. Bloom's Taxonomy, a hierarchy distinguishing the fundamental questions in education, ought to be the standard against which we measure our questions posed to students. It is easy to get comfortable at the lowest level of questioning, that being knowledge recall. But just as Jesus' questions caused His hearers to think deeply, so must ours. We must take our students from knowledge to comprehension, followed by application and analysis,

then synthesis and evaluation, all this done by the appropriate phrasing of our questions. What better approach to learning a world language than following Bloom's Taxonomy? Students learn new words, gain an understanding of their origin/meaning, apply what they have learned, analyze generalizations of the applications, construct and edit sentences, and evaluate the written and spoken word.

Jesus used many words, later identified by Bloom, that are essential to spiritual growth. Throughout scripture, the red-letter edition of the Bible brings out these words that even today, lead His listeners to greater truths and also self-inspection of widely held beliefs. Those words of Jesus are captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Words of Jesus and Words of Bloom

Jesus	Whose picture?	What parent would do that?	How much more will He clothe you?	The speck in his eye, the log in yours?	Who do you say I am?	What does it profit a man?
Bloom (revised)	Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating
Bloom	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation

When it comes to asking questions, it's all about the words we use, the verbs selected. One might think that the business professors would focus mostly on the beginning levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. But I would challenge these professors to regularly take their lectures and lessons, if they are not doing so already, to the levels of synthesis and evaluation. In the business world, leaders are looking for new plans and procedures as a result of looking for alternative solutions. Action verbs such as collect, combine, devise, formulate, and generate could drive the questions in this area of study. Taking it one step further, students could be asked to make and defend their decisions based on evidences, either within or outside the organization. Great action verbs here could include appraise, conclude, evaluate, and explain, predict, and value.

Upon review of the questions Jesus asked, it appears He utilized a hierarchy of action verbs when posing His questions. When He asked, "Whose picture is this" (Matthew 22:20, Clear Word Version), He was tapping into their knowledge (remembrance). When Jesus said, "What parent would give his son a rock when he asks for a piece of bread" (Matthew 7:9), He was using comprehension (understanding). "If that is how God clothes the grass of the field ... how much more will He clothe you, you of little faith" (Luke 12:28, New International Version), was a great use of applying knowledge to actual situations. A great question of analysis by using contrast and comparison

is when He asked, “Why are you so eager to take the speck out of his eye when you still have a piece of wood in your own” (Matthew 7:4, Clear Word Version). Another example is when He asked the Pharisees, “If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?” (Matthew 12:26, New International Version). He collected their beliefs and rearranged them through questioning. An excellent evaluation question posed to His disciples was, “But what about you? Who do you say I am” (Mark 8:29). In Matthew we find Jesus helping His disciples create their future in their minds as He laid out what it takes to be a disciple. He states, “What value is there in gaining the whole world and losing your own soul” (Matthew 16:26 Clear Word Version)? As an integral part of each lesson, I would encourage teachers to carefully develop 2-3 crucial questions of increasing rigor that will challenge students, engage them, and lead them to the essential lesson points identified as important for learning.

What can we learn from Jesus about asking questions? Zuck (1995) lists the following suggestions that we might follow in our classrooms: ask questions that challenge, that are clear, specific and brief, ask a variety of questions, use Bloom’s Taxonomy, and ask questions in an atmosphere of acceptance and respect. White (1941) states that when Jesus asked questions, “He watched the faces of His hearers, marked the lighting up of the countenance, the quick responsive glance, which told the truth had reached the soul; and there vibrated in His heart the answering chord of sympathetic joy” (p. 141). Tolbert (1999) reported that Jesus asked many questions that brought His listeners to the conclusions He had hoped. We can see from Jesus’ example alone, that questions are a very powerful method of teaching. The use of a good question can not only stimulate the thinking process, it can lead to the discovery of truth. DeGarmo (1911) said, “To question well is to teach well” (p. 179).

### **Conclusion**

The teaching methods of Jesus identified in this paper are methods that can be utilized and duplicated in every classroom, from Sabbath School to the university. From Table 2, we can see how each content area professor/teacher is able to adopt a certain teaching method of Jesus that perhaps best suits his/her area.

Table 2: Jesus’ Methods of Teaching Applied to Content Areas

Jesus’ Method of Teaching	Content Areas
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Speaking with Authority	Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Music, Art
Using Object Lessons	History, Religion
Use of Repetition	English, Mathematics, Education
Story Telling	Journalism
Teachable Moments	All content areas
Sayings and Word Pictures	Psychology
Get Their Attention	Nursing
Humor	Physical Education
From My Experiences	World Languages, Outdoor Leadership/Education
Experiential Learning	Counseling, Social Work
Questions-Questions-Questions	Business, World Languages

Even though specific content areas were identified as being best suited for a particular method, I would encourage all teachers to follow His example and use one or more of His methods in every classroom session. It's clear: speak with authority, use visual props, incorporate repetition, tell great stories, look for teachable moments, find appropriate sayings, get your students' attention, bring in humor, speak from experience, provide hands-on experiences, and utilize good questions. These were His methods. Now let us follow His command, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19 American King James Version).

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