

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER

by

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Part III: Points of Contact

CHAPTER EIGHT

Point of Contact

IF THE teacher is to share the learning process with the pupil, the point of contact between the two is of the greatest importance. Every teaching activity must have some sort of beginning. We must start somewhere. This starting point is in some respects the most important part of the procedure. Success or failure may largely depend upon the approach. If attention and interest are not secured then, it is useless to proceed. We need to be reminded of the old proverb, "Well begun is half done."

Apparent inattention, however, does not necessarily mean a total lack of attention. The boy with the far-away look in his eyes is paying attention - but not to you. One cannot teach either without or against the attention. Such effort is like pulling a car without its motor running, or pulling it with the gear in reverse. Until the teacher has secured the attention of the class, there is no need to go on. "The difference between a trained teacher and a novice," said Edward Leigh Pell, "is never more apparent than in the first five minutes of the lesson hour. The novice looks first at the lesson. The trained teacher looks first at the pupils."

Without attention there can be no learning. Most so-called teaching is merely so much talk. The pupil hears you, but he does not attend to what you are saying. It is not teaching unless the pupil gives attention to the truths you teach. He must not only be conscious of them, but he must focus attention on them and think of them. Unless he carefully lays away the truths in his mental storehouse, there is no learning.

It is not the pupil's fault if a teacher is not commanding his attention. The janitor of Henry Ward Beecher's church asked if he should awaken any members of the congregation who might fall asleep during the sermon. "No," the great preacher replied, "come to the pulpit and wake me up" (Frank G. Coleman, *The Romance of Winning Children*, p. 54).

The teacher must assume responsibility for inattention.

We all like to see a group of soldiers at drill. Their actions are simultaneous and uniform. When a commander says, "Attention!" all heads and eyes are turned to the front. From that moment every movement is made with promptness and precision.

A teacher can get the same attention from his class. It is well to observe how marvelously the Lord Jesus Christ succeeded in making the point of contact. Whether He was dealing with His friends or His enemies, He connected up with their minds.

A striking example is His discussion with the woman at Jacob's well. The teaching situation was difficult. Almost every conceivable obstacle stood in the way. The woman had come for water, not to receive instruction. They were poles apart in the groups they represented. Christ was a Jew, and the woman, a Samaritan - and the two peoples had no dealings with each other. Yet our Lord broke through all these barriers with the simplest, most natural introduction that could be made - a request for a drink of water.

Whatever method the teacher may employ, his first task is to get a point of contact. There are two contacts to be made at the very beginning of the instruction. The first is,

I. CONTACT WITH THE PUPIL

1. Defining attention.

Attention is concentrated consciousness.

Inattention is attention to something different from what is being presented. Briefly, inattention is attention to the wrong thing. When we don't have the attention of our pupils, someone or something does have it. The teacher has competition. Perhaps this competition arises from external distractions - outside sights sounds, interruptions by officers and visitors, or uncomfortable seats, and rooms that have extreme temperatures. Separate classrooms and comfortable and appropriate furniture assist in securing attention.

But the distractions are not all external. The pupil may sit in the class, and to all outward appearances be absorbed in what is going on, and yet be a thousand miles away in thought, as far as getting something out of the lesson. He is mentally absent. The teacher must compete with many absorbing things that so easily crowd out of the pupil's mind the things we should like to have there.

a. Types.

There are several classes of attention, each of which has a variety of degrees of intensity.

(1) Involuntary.

This attention is of the flitting kind, and is obedient to any distractions that may arise. A loud noise, a bright light, a strong contrast of any kind, will occasion involuntary attention. Someone may rap on the door, or enter the room, and attention is diverted. Something conspicuous in the teacher's dress or manner will turn the attention from the instruction to the instructor.

(2) Voluntary.

Attention may be compelled by disciplinary measures, or an appeal to the power of the will of the pupil. We are trying to study and we find our minds wandering. By an act of will we bring ourselves back to our work. We try to distinguish a person's words from the noise of a machine. We seek to pick out the mistakes of punctuation without reference to spelling or style or content.

H. Clay Trumbull tells of a young man who applied to a dry goods jobber for a position as salesman. "Can you sell the goods?" was the merchant's first question. "I can sell the goods to any man who really wants to buy," was the qualified rejoinder. "Oh, nonsense!" said the merchant, "Anybody can sell goods to a man who really wants to buy. I want salesmen who can sell goods to men who don't want to buy (Trumbull, *Teaching and Teachers*, p. 139).

It is comparatively easy to teach those who really want to be taught; to hold the attention of those who are determined to be attentive, but there is a real problem in getting and holding the attention of students whose thoughts are flying in every direction save that of the lesson of the day. For the teacher to attempt to force attention is futile. Banging a ruler on the table, or slamming a book down hard, or vigorously ringing a bell, or clapping hands, will summon a pupil from his far-away thoughts. The teacher may elevate his voice, and exhort the pupil, "Pay attention now!" "Look right at me!" "Listen to me!" This forced attention is only temporary. The more a teacher resorts to pounding on a table or raising his voice, the less effective these means become.

(3) Non-voluntary.

Pupils learn most readily when they are so "absorbed" in their study as to be oblivious to what is going on around them. A visitor called one day on the musician, Edvard Grieg. Mrs. Grieg duly notified him to come downstairs. He replied, "Yes." As he did not come down, he was reminded several times that a man was in the parlor waiting to see him. Twelve o'clock came and went. At three o'clock it was found necessary to go up and forcibly persuade him to take something to eat. He was so absorbed in a new composition that he scarcely noticed even this interruption. It is this kind of attention that has brought about most of the world's progress in the arts and sciences.

b. Scope.

The range of attention is limited to a very small field - seldom more than six objects at a time, usually not more than one. The intensity of the attention is lessened as the scope is increased. This experiment can be tried in any class. Put five words on the board. Let them remain there for five seconds before erasing them. Then let every member of the class write into his notebook all he can remember. Next, write ten words and let them remain for five seconds before erasing. Again have the class reproduce what can be remembered. Finally, permit the class to see twenty-five words for five seconds and then record their impressions. It will be found that while nearly all of them remember the five words, less than half of them can reproduce the ten words, and less than one-fifth of them the twenty-five words.

c. Duration.

The attention fluctuates.

No matter how fascinating the story, or how interesting the conversation, it is impossible for anyone to keep the attention on it all the time. The longest stretch of attention recorded in a psychological laboratory is said to be twenty-four seconds. The average is about five or six seconds.

2. Gaining attention.

The average boy, as he comes to class, is not thinking of what will be taught. His mind is elsewhere. Indeed, he may be so intent on some other thing which monopolizes his attention that the lesson may be approached with protest, if not with prejudice. How then may a right attitude on the part of the pupil be secured?

a. Vary the approach.

A class should never be greeted, or a lesson commenced, twice in exactly the same way. Variety of method of approach is bound to gain attention. Sometimes the teacher will apply to the eye-gate. At other times something unusual will be said. It is only when we habitually follow the same formula of expression that we fail at the outset to gain attention. A certain minister, one Sunday morning, instead of announcing his text as usual, leaned over his pulpit and said, "My friends, I am going to ask you a plain question; but it is a question that not one of you can answer. In fact, it is a question that I can't answer myself. If an angel from Heaven came down here now and I should ask him this question, he couldn't answer it," By that time the preacher had the attention of the entire congregation. Then came the question, which was thus made a sermon in itself: "**What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?**" (Trumbull, op. cit., p. 142).

Variety in approach secures immediate attention.

The interest in a large class of men was explained by one of the members, "The teacher always keeps us guessing. We never know what he is going to do. He never does the same thing twice in the same way. Every Sunday we know that we are going to get something good, but we do not know what it is." This teacher understood human nature very well, and he was willing to make such preparation that he could maintain the interest of his class from week to week.

b. Arouse curiosity.

Many expert teachers realize the value, pedagogically, of the trait which we call curiosity. This characteristic is especially marked in younger children, but older people have also been known to be curious. This propensity to discover things is used to advantage by the teacher who plans some surprise to be introduced in his lesson.

Dr. A. H. McKinney tells of one primary teacher who always had an object picture, or something else, with which to surprise her pupils. However, it was always kept concealed until the psychological time for its release.

“Teacher, what have you in your bag today?” was a question with which she was frequently greeted. To this she had a ready answer, which tended to whet the curiosity of the questioner, who soon spread the news through the room “Teacher has something fine to show us today.”

On the Sunday when she wished to impress the fact that evil companions lead those associated with them into evil, she had a fine red apple in her bag. For some time the children had no idea of what was coming. At the proper moment, the teacher produced the apple and began to talk about it, dwelling particularly on its form and beauty. Her pupils were all alive with interest when she turned to a spot that had been covered and showed them that it was bruised. It took but a little effort to get the children to imagine how the effects of that bruise would spread, and the beautiful apple soon become a mass of decay. But the gist of what she wished to teach was understood, for this skilled instructor had made use of the God-given trait of curiosity in such a way that she had led on step by step until her little ones fully comprehended the point she endeavored to make (McKinney, *Practical Pedagogy in the Sunday School*, p. 62).

At one time, Dr. John H. Vincent (originator, with Lewis Miller, of Chautauqua Movement) in talking to a group of teachers, took a piece of chalk between his thumb and finger and turned with it toward the blackboard on the platform in the sight of his class.

“Just look here!” he said, holding the chalk near the board. Every eye in the room was intent upon him. “That is all!” he said, as he dropped his hand at his side and turned back to the class. “I only wanted your attention” (Trumbull, *op. cit.*, p. 144).

Hold up a curio before your class, and hear the inevitable question, “What is that?” Attention will follow curiosity as surely as the day follows night. Sometimes merely the expression, “Once upon a time,” and the children are in readiness for a story. Sometimes a well-directed question will awaken curiosity. Ask your class, “What is the fifteenth book in the Old Testament?” and watch them begin to count (Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 99).

c. Appeal to the individual.

Jesus knew how to gain the attention of His hearers. With great skill He won the curious publican, Zaccheus, who had climbed up a sycamore tree that he might see the Master as He passed that way. Jesus looked up and saw Zaccheus - establishing a point of contact with his look of sincerity and interest. This point was strengthened when the Master directly addressed Zaccheus, and then was made permanent by His saying, “**Make haste and come down, for today I must abide in thy house.**”

3. Sustaining attention It is one thing to gain attention, and quite another to sustain it. Sometimes it is well to have

a. Change of procedure.

How is it possible for boys and girls to get so much enjoyment out of a session of the Daily Vacation Bible School, which lasts so much longer than the Sunday school hour?

The frequent change that we find in the program is what makes it so interesting. For the most part, these programs are much more carefully prepared and executed, and lack the monotony of the Sunday school period.

Perhaps one of the best contributions the Daily Vacation Bible school has made to the church is that it has provided some splendid suggestions for gaining and sustaining the attention of boys and girls.

The story is told of Spurgeon, the peerless preacher, that on occasion when he was preaching, on a warm Sunday afternoon, he noticed that some of his hearers were nodding. He stopped his discourse and cried, "Fire, fire, fire!" Immediately his audience was all attention, and those who had been slumbering looked around as if to inquire, "Where is the fire?" Anticipating this question, the preacher said, "The fire is in hell for such sleepy sinners as you are."

Experienced teachers use different means for wooing wandering attention. They walk rapidly across the platform, or make quick gestures, or otherwise suddenly introduce new motion. Sometimes merely a prolonged pause will awaken the wanderer to inquire why the monotony of instruction has ceased.

Jesus knew how to hold as well as awaken the attention of His hearers. The impression one obtains on reading the Gospels is that He had even better attention at the close of His discourses than at the beginning. The same means that Jesus used to win attention was also used to hold attention. He used great variety of form and imagery in His messages, and changed from one subject to another as the occasion demanded. In the Sermon on the Mount, the picture changes with nearly every verse.

b. Arousing interest.

Non-voluntary attention is based on interest. Artificial means may be employed for gaining and holding attention, but the attention that can be produced by the least effort is based upon interest. The reason that baseball and football and fishing and dolls are so absorbing to boys and girls is that they appeal to something vital in their nature. They satisfy a need, which cannot be denied or disregarded. The Sunday school teacher may attempt to compete with them and fail, but if he can make games work for him instead of against him he will succeed.

In brief, the only way to get and hold the attention of boys and girls is by making the work of the Sunday school class of vital interest to them. An interested class is an attentive class.

How then can we get our classes interested?

To answer this question, we must go back to our study of the personality. We remember that it is one thing for the teacher to reach the intellect, and quite another to reach the personality. While the provision of knowledge would be an intellectual attainment, only the creation of interest would affect the personality. Here the personality of the teacher becomes an important factor, and the teacher-pupil relationship the supreme means of arousing and sustaining interest.

If Jesus showed great skill in awakening and holding the attention and interest of His disciples, it was in no small measure due to the fact that He knew how to establish a point of contact with His hearers. Whether He was speaking with His friends, or addressing His enemies, He knew the place where their minds as well as their interests were.

Note how successful Jesus was in awakening interest in the minds and hearts of His disciples. Very early in His ministry, Peter, James and John, and other disciples, forsook all and followed Him. Wherever our Lord went, He was accompanied by the disciples. Even when the prospect of success was becoming dim, Thomas exclaimed, “**Let us also go, that we may die with him**” (John 11:16). At another time, Peter declared, in the face of the most discouraging circumstances, that though all men should forsake the Lord, yet he would remain loyal. The interest of the disciples was so great that, with one exception, they all remained loyal to the last.

II. APPERCEPTION

Two of the most important principles of pedagogy have to do with interest and apperception.

- Interest, which we have found to be such an important element in gaining and sustaining attention, looks forward. The student's desire to learn is interest.
- Apperception, which we are now about to consider, looks backward. When he connects new knowledge with what he already possesses we have apperception.

We have stated that attention is secured by appealing to the pupil's interest. Now the teacher has the responsibility of showing why he has sought that interest. The teacher knows the truth he desires the pupil to know, but the pupil does not know it yet. It is, therefore, necessary for the teacher to make clear to the pupil what he is attempting to teach. It is not now a question for the teacher, whether the truth he would teach is the most important truth in the world. It is enough that it is the truth he is now trying to teach. But this new truth cannot be grasped by the pupil except in the light of his past experiences. This process then of acquiring new ideas by the aid of knowledge already acquired, is called apperception.

There should exist a perfect harmony between interest and apperception. The learner is not simply interested, but he is interested in something. That something is a part of the pupil's little world which he has picked out from the great world about him.

“It is the object of parents and teachers,” says Professor O. M. Norlie, “to enrich his world of experience and interest” (Norlie, *An Elementary Christian Psychology*, p. 200).

The law of interest has a twofold value. We become interested in the things to which we give attention, and we give attention to the things in which we are interested. Apperception, we have already noted, looks backward. We interpret the present in the light of our past experiences; This is not only one of the basic laws of pedagogy, but its practice makes learning easier and quicker. Not that there is any easy road to learning, but there is a natural process which greatly accelerates the progress of acquisition, just as it is better to follow a highway than to stumble along through brush or over broken ground.

Through apperception we use knowledge already acquired as a sort of bridge to new realms of information. The old knowledge explains the new, and it in turn is often enriched and illuminated by it.

The new lesson must make a

1. Contact with familiar scenes.

Have you ever traveled along a new road? Perhaps you have then observed a great many objects that are familiar scenes along most roads, but now your attention is arrested. That farmhouse looks familiar. You have either been along that road before, or that house is very similar to one you have seen before. Now you are all attention, looking for other objects you might recognize. The attraction of the familiar has taken hold of your attention.

The mind has a tendency to welcome the familiar and to shrink from what it cannot recognize. A new idea presented to the mind is like a person entering a room full of people. If he is an entire stranger, he and everyone else present feels a sense of embarrassment, and he is ill at ease. However, if he discovers one person in the room with whom he is acquainted, he feels much more at home.

Likewise when a new idea comes into the mind, if it can find some close relationship with other ideas in the mind, then the new idea feels at home. But if the new idea has no connection with the knowledge already acquired, there is a feeling of strangeness, and it is either treated with indifference or rejected entirely.

The first step in the teaching process, then, is to prepare the mind of the pupil by bringing into his consciousness ideas which are related to those contained in the lesson. In so doing, the first advance is made upon the memory.

Of course, if the pupil has been studying the lesson before coming to class, he already has some ideas concerning it, and others are easily added. But suppose, as is often the case, he has not studied the lesson. In planning her approach the teacher must fall back upon her knowledge of the pupil and what he is likely to be thinking about. This knowledge she acquires by studying the pupil's home life, his school life, his recreations, his companionships, and his reading. The more the teacher knows about these, the easier it will be to find the point of contact with the pupil's present knowledge.

2. Contrast by association.

Apperception includes, in large degree, the matter of contrast - contrasting the new with the old.

If the teacher wishes to explain the destruction wrought by the Deluge, he may begin by reminding his class of some flood that has taken place near their home. If he wishes to impress upon their minds how fast sin grew on earth, he may recall some epidemic that spread sickness and death throughout the community.

To give pupils some conception of the Temple, he may begin by comparing it with their church building. These old and familiar concepts pave the way and form the foundation for receiving, understanding, and assimilating the new. If we neglect to do this, the new concepts will remain altogether strange and foreign to the class. The children may be able to repeat what the teacher has told, but they will not understand it nor make it their own. Without observing the law of apperception, we can reach neither the personality nor the mentality.

Our Lord made frequent use in His teaching of this law of contrasts. The parable of the sower is based upon familiar scenes in the minds of His audience. It has been suggested that when Jesus spoke this parable on the shore of the Lake of Galilee, He could direct the eyes of His audience to a farmer sowing grain on the hillside. His reference to the wind, in His talk with Nicodemus, to the bread after the feeding of the five thousand, to the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, were all rooted in familiar scenes and experiences in the minds of the people whom He taught.

The address of Paul in the synagogue of Antioch is another good example of the use of this law. Paul did not begin his address by telling about Jesus. The Jews in his audience were deeply prejudiced on that subject, and the Gentiles had probably never heard of the Messiah. So Paul begins by recalling to the minds of the Jews, some of the facts of their national history, as far down as the time of David. Here he found a point of contact, in the promise of God to David, and declared to his attentive audience, "Of this man's seed hath God . . . raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus." Then he tells the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection, and proclaims the remission of sins through Christ's name (Acts 13:16-41).

3. Attract through participation.

Boys and girls love to do things. By appealing to this interest, a splendid contact can be made for the presentation of unfamiliar truth.

Frank G. Coleman tells of an occasion when he brought an entire department in the Sunday school into active participation in his teaching on the Tabernacle. He had the group go outdoors, measure actual distances, and then form a living outline of the Tabernacle and its chief features (Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 102).

Certainly the child learning to dress himself would never have mastered the lesson had he simply sat and listened. He learned through doing - the way in which nearly all out-of-school learning naturally occurs.

"Is it not strange," says Professor Gaines S. Dobbins, "that in the classroom we should have overlooked so often this basic principle and depended instead on learning by listening?" (Dobbins, *The Improvement of Teaching in the Sunday School*, p. 138).

If we study the Gospels, we shall be impressed with the frequency with which Jesus encouraged participation on the part of His disciples.

The pedagogical school of the Lord Jesus Christ is most clearly exhibited in the many instances where He caused His disciples to participate in their own instruction. The learning process became a mutual sharing of interest. There was activity with interest and interest with activity.

He did only that which the disciples were unable to do.

At the beginning of His ministry, He entrusted to His disciples the work of baptizing converts to His cause (John 4:2). He sent forth the twelve disciples to go into all the cities of the land, to proclaim the message of repentance and the imminent coming of the kingdom (Matthew 10:5-7). Our Lord gave to the twelve, and then to the seventy, suggestions as to how their problems might be solved, but left the details in their own hands to work out as best they could.

QUESTIONS

1. How does a trained teacher differ from a novice in making a point of contact?
2. How did our Lord make a point of contact with the woman at Jacob's well?
3. What is meant by attention?
4. Name three types of attention.
5. What is meant by non-voluntary attention?
6. What is meant by the scope and duration of attention? How can it be tested?
7. Give three suggestions for gaining attention.
8. How can curiosity be aroused to secure attention?
9. In what two ways can attention be sustained?
10. Why is interest the key to non-voluntary attention?
11. Distinguish between interest and apperception.
12. In what three ways can we observe the law of apperception?
13. Show how our Lord and Paul made use of the law of apperception.
14. How did our Lord encourage participation on the part of His disciples?

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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