In the time that follows I will be delivering a 45 minute theological lecture outlining both the didactic and dialogical methods employed by Jesus as a case study in communication theory in a pedagogical attempt to inculcate you with propositional truths that engage your intellectual faculties, stir your emotional affections, and alter your behavior. [Snoring sound] As soon as I said that, probably most of you decided to check out. Essentially what I said was, “For the greater part of the next hour I’m going to teach you certain truths that I think you need to know, so engage your minds, pay attention, and follow along.”

When I put it that way, many of you probably want to say, “C’mon Pastor Nathan! Do you expect people to pay attention for 45 minutes to you preaching about detailed concepts and dumping information on us?” It’s a question that arises out of the culture of our day – a tech savvy, media saturated, relativistic culture dominated by sound bites and ‘blogs’ where the average attention span is the time between commercials. It’s a question that questions the usefulness and importance of teaching, defined as relating specific truths or propositions that must be understood and believed. There’s a negative reaction to that kind of enterprise nowadays – either consciously or unconsciously.

Now to that question I respond, “Where did you learn that – that people won’t or can’t listen to someone teaching them?” Or I might say, “Does that mean you’re stupid?” or “Does that mean that you’ve already learned everything there is to know and don’t need to be taught anything else?” You might think about that last question and say to yourself, “If I answer yes, then that would sound arrogant. But if I answer no, then he will say, ‘Well then maybe there’s something I can teach you.’” So you say, “I don’t think that’s knowable.” And then I respond again with a question, “How do you know that?”

Do you see where I’m going with this? As I look at today’s passage in Luke that relates Jesus’ activity after he arrives in Jerusalem during the last week of his earthly life I see demonstrated for us two things. (1) Jesus taught and people listened – “Every day he was teaching at the temple... [and] all the people hung on his words” (19:47,48). To teach means to impart knowledge/information. If Jesus taught then he must have thought it was an important enterprise that people would benefit from.

(2) The second thing I see here is illustrated in the encounter between Jesus and chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders and it is – Jesus questioned his detractors
and skeptics. Jesus didn’t forsake teaching necessary truth, but he also didn’t normally respond to questions with well reasoned, rational, 14 point treatises logically arranged to answer the inquiry. Have you ever noticed that about Jesus? He responded to questions with questions.

He does this all the time throughout the four Gospels doesn’t he? Most recently in Luke we had a rich ruler ask him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds not with the Four Spiritual Laws or any other classic formulation answering that question directly, but with a question of his own – “Why do you call me good? (18:18-19). “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” This is classic Jesus. I have to think that there’s a lesson in communication in here for us too.

Jesus taught and Jesus questioned. Luke highlights these two things about Jesus here because they explain how Jesus’ fate was sealed and they are a crucial part of the story that’s leading up to the cross, yes, but also because they serve as reminders and examples to those who seek to follow in the way of Jesus concerning how to communicate truth. I believe that these two observations have huge implications for us today, especially in the culture we live in that has an extreme distaste for authoritative teaching and that is increasingly hostile to the Christian message which calls for responses to the endless questioning with piercing questions that cut to the depths of the human soul.

So I’m standing here this afternoon proclaiming and seeking to relate certain truths. And the main thing I wish to communicate to you who are sitting here listening is just this: teaching and questioning are two integral aspects of communicating the Christian message.

Let’s pray… (This is an exciting truth! Help me to communicate it…)

Jesus and Teaching (vv. 47-48)

I’ve already mentioned how the principle and the practice of teaching is not very much in vogue these days. The whole idea that certain trans-cultural, absolute, propositional truths can or need to be taught is extremely unpopular today. It’s naïve to assume that we can know anything with absolute, epistemological certainty today, especially things within the realm of morals or religion or metaphysics. Exclusive, objective truth claims imposed on people authoritatively leave a very sour taste in the mouths of today’s cultural elites and even normal, everyday citizens. Our exaggerated individualism scoffs at the instruction of others. In short, it’s seriously doubted that there is anything that needs to be taught to people and it’s considered presumptuous to assert otherwise. We all must find our own way, forge our own meaning out of life, construct our own reality, learn for ourselves. Books like The Alchemist teach us of “the transforming power of our dreams and the importance of listening to our hearts.”

Now even among those who do not want to go so far, there is widespread uncertainty over whether or not the best way to transmit essential knowledge and beliefs is through reasoned, substantial, oral teaching. Not only are we a fairly literate print culture that disseminates information through the written word, but now we’re experiencing another paradigm shift towards being a visual culture. We communicate
through film and television, largely via narratives/stories rather than straight propositions connected by logic (because of a, b, and c, therefore d is true).

Sustained discourses (like what I’m doing right now) that contain propositional truths no matter how neatly they’re packaged or how cleverly they’re crafted are a thing of the past. Give me relationships. Give me experiences. Give me mystery. Give me stories. Just don’t give me information that must be assented to and submitted to. That’s boring. That’s stifling. That won’t hold my attention. Some vague truths set to music – that I can handle. A two hour movie – riveting. But dim the lights at my 1:00 class on the History of Western Civilization and start to lecture to me about the Constantinian synthesis between church and state and I’m asleep.

The way this has played out in the church is seen most noticeably in the demise of the sermon. I read with deep jealousy the story of one Puritan pastor in the 16th century “whose apology for preaching all of two hours was once greeted… with the cry from the congregation For God’s Sake Sir Go on, go on.” Slowly but surely the sermon has been trimmed in length, morphed into inspirational pep talks, filled with humor, stories, and anecdotes, until all that remains is at best a 20 minute talk about how to feel good about yourself. Doctrine is a dirty word, sin is antiquated. There has been as Al Mohler notes a “marginalization of the pulpit” that says, “after all, it is an important piece of furniture in the sanctuary and someone ought to use it for something.”

Today however many “churches” have gotten rid of the pulpit altogether. In its place is a couch or a bar stool from which somebody shares their thoughts or leads a discussion during corporate worship on Sundays. From my reading and experiences I have every reason to believe that my parents’ church is not very rare in modern evangelicalism. One time when we visited the whole sermon consisted of the pastor and another man sitting on two stools while the pastor interviewed the other person. On other occasions it’s been a topical how-to talk punctuated by movie clips. And the people love it… it’s very entertaining. But there is very little teaching taking place. The people are largely biblically and theologically ignorant. As John Stott notes, “Sermonettes make Christianettes.”

Our culture has a low teaching threshold and it has crept into churches as well. Does today’s text have anything to say on this matter? Well, we notice that Jesus was very intent on teaching – “Every day he was teaching at the temple” (v. 47), “all the people hung on his words” (v. 48), “one day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel…” (v. 1). He is communicating authoritative truth to large crowds of people at one time.

Jesus saw this as an important part of his mission. We must be careful not to see Jesus as just or even primarily a teacher (as many are fond of doing). His primary objective as we’ve seen is to die as a substitutionary atonement for sin. However, he had a substantial ministry as an itinerant teacher. Remember the Sermon on the Mount, the private tutoring sessions with his disciples, the many extended discourses found in John’s Gospel? Jesus taught, many times in parables (often interpreting the meaning of the parable later), but many times he taught in a very straightforward manner. Jesus came and spoke the Father’s words to people (cf. Jn. 12:49).

Now some might say, “Well, that was Jesus, he could teach authoritatively but we shouldn’t pretend to do the same.” But Jesus sent his disciples out with his authority to preach in his name (Lk. 9:1-2) and his last commandment to his disciples before his
ascension was to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-10). Jesus expected his followers to carry on his tradition and God inspired the apostle’s to give an authoritative teaching that interpreted Jesus’ death and applied it to the new covenant people. So we have a fairly substantial body of authoritative, inspired, apostolic teaching in the New Testament.

Some others might still say, “Well, that was culturally bound. That was a cultural that was used to teachers and sermons and the like. But our culture is different.” But again, Jesus gave a Great Commission that was to be binding until the “end of the age” that commanded his disciples to teach. Also, the rest of the NT assumes the importance of this activity. In Acts 5:21 we see the apostle’s imitating Jesus and teaching in the temple. So Jesus taught and his apostle’s taught. Then we read that the churches that formed “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and [also] to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul expects the churches popping up in the Greco-Roman world to hold to his authoritative teachings (i.e. 1Cor. 4:17; 11:2).

In 1 Timothy 4:11 we see Paul commanding his emissary, Timothy, to teach the truths Paul has proclaimed. What he heard from Paul, he was to keep as the pattern of sound teaching (2 Timothy 1:13). What’s more, the things Timothy heard Paul teach while he accompanied him on his missionary journeys he was to entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). So there’s an authoritative teaching given by Jesus and the apostle’s which is expected to be passed on as the gospel spread.

The primary responsibility for this was given to the elders appointed in each church. They were to guard the flock from false teaching (Acts 20:28ff) and they were expected to be able to teach (1Tim. 3:2; 2Tim. 2:24). Titus 1:9 declares that an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” The Bible sets up a church structure that emphasized the need to teach “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

That means that still today there is a dire need for teaching – instructing people in the great truths and doctrines of our faith. That responsibility falls primarily on the elders of the church – Derick, Hobin, and myself. We are charged with the task to teach. The primary way this is carried out is through the pulpit ministry, but it happens via other methods too. But in other ways everyone is charged with this task (Colossians 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom”).

But we must remember that we don’t teach our own ideas; we have no authority in ourselves. We always teach the Bible, the inspired, apostolic witness to the truth. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

That’s how we can have people hang on our every word. Jesus “taught as one who had authority” (Mt. 7:29) unlike any other because he spoke the very words of God (Jn. 14:24). Therefore, he could teach and “all the people hung on his words” (v. 48). Likewise, if we teach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of Scripture it will ring true in people’s ears and hold audiences captive. I’ve found this to be true. At
one time I was involved in the telephone ministry for the Billy Graham crusades. When the crusade was televised and the phone number was displayed one of the places the calls were routed to was the fourth floor of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. I’d have people calling with all kinds of problems and issues and I made it my policy that I tried to just speak as much as possible the very words of Scripture that applied to their situation. And it was like I was speaking the sweet words of God to people, BECAUSE I WAS! And they listened!

In our preaching here we don’t come up with an idea and then preach it. We simply preach through Scripture and we try our very best to explain and unpack and apply what the inspired author intended to our situation today. It’s heavy on truth. It can get close to an hour straight. But I try not to just dump information. We believe that preaching should be what the great expository preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones called “logic on fire.” When that’s happening, I believe that those who are true believers will be eating up the solid meat of God’s truth and growing on it.

Jesus is teaching the masses in Jerusalem at the temple. His disciples are there taking mental notes furiously on his ethical and theological teaching, but they’re also observing how he relates the message of God to the people of the time. He teaches truth. For this reason, no matter how unpopular it becomes, this church will not shrink from teaching biblical truth. Our first core value is biblical teaching and we state very clearly that “biblical teaching is the most important part of our church. The Bible is the book of Truth that will keep us in line with God’s ways and wisdom.” So expect to continue to see the sermon as the center-point of the week where the Bible is taught. Expect to continue to see the Immanuel Institute being plugged and growing. The truth needs to be taught so that the people of God can grow and there can be a voice for truth to the unbelieving world around us.

Jesus and Questioning (vv. 1-8)

Now Jesus taught and many listened attentively to the profound truths he was uttering, but not everyone was interested – “But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him” (v. 47b). One day when confronted with Jesus’ authoritative teaching in the temple courts they came up to him with a question. It wasn’t a genuine question. They weren’t genuinely interested in following Jesus or learning about his claims. They were resentful of him, outraged by his truth claims. “‘Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,’ they said. ‘Who gave you this authority?’” (v. 2). It’s interesting how much of what we find in the first century cultural milieu looks very similar to what’s commonly called ‘post-modernism’ today, isn’t it?

“What makes you think you have the right to make such bold truth claims and teach them to others and impose them on us?” That’s essentially what they’re exclaiming. Now Jesus could have answered with – “In my pre-incarnate state I existed as the third person of the ontological Trinity and in the incarnation due to the hypostatic union I became fully human while remaining fully divine. Therefore I speak with the authority of God himself.” He could have said that and it would have been perfectly true. And they would have all said, “Pssshyah, right! You expect us to buy that?”

Instead, Jesus, as Scripture records is his custom, answers a question with a question. “He replied, ‘I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John’s baptism – was it
from heaven, or from men?’ They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Why didn’t you believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.’ So they answered, ‘We don’t know where it was from.’ Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things’” (vv. 3-8). What’s going on here? Is Jesus evading the question? Is he just trying to avoid the issue? Is he just being annoying? No, I don’t think so.

Jesus is utilizing a very ingenious response that takes himself off of the defensive and probes into the hearts of his interlocutors. He’s very much in control. He recognizes that the question is just a smokescreen for an attack and he deflects the arrow and turns it back on his attackers. They’re most likely not going to listen to reason. They aren’t open to being persuaded by logic, yet. They need to be disarmed and made to think. So Jesus doesn’t flatter them with a straight-up answer that will be dismissed out of hand. He poses them with a question that seeks to get down to an underlying issue. It’s a bit of rhetorical judo.

Now I had noticed this about Jesus before, but I always just thought it was a peculiar quirk of Jesus’. I never thought that he was emulating a tactic that I should seek to employ, that is until I read an outstanding book called Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did by Randy Newman. I highly recommend this book because it opened my eyes to the fact that there was a method behind Jesus’ madness that it is the golden key to engaging our culture today – ask questions!

Anybody can do that! We as a church and as individual Christians must be relentless in our proclamation of truth to ourselves and within earshot of the world around us/in places where unbelievers will be guaranteed to hear. Many will be attracted by the pleasant ring of truth, but many more will become incensed by the claim Jesus makes on their lives and react with cutting questions. We don’t have to have all the answers, because answers aren’t necessarily what they’re looking for. There are deeper heart issues involved.

I think a lot of people are deterred from sharing their faith publicly because they fear they may get stumped. “The Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But they may respond, “The Bible! How can you believe the Bible is true?” Standard methods of evangelism and apologetics pack people full of answers to pull out in such instances – “We have over 5,000 manuscripts of the NT dating sometimes to within 50 years of its composition. The closest thing we have to that in antiquity is a meager 650 Greek manuscripts of Homer’s Iliad dating at the earliest to 1,000 years after its composition.”

Such facts are helpful and sometimes compelling but most of us can’t remember them and even if we do it usually won’t convince someone in such a situation. Instead, try answering the question with a question – “The Bible! How can you believe the Bible is true?” “What do you think of the Bible? …Have you ever read the Bible?” Randy Newman writes:

More and more we should hold back our answer, and with a question, pave the way to receptivity. When your coworker asks in an accusatory tone, “Why do you still believe in God in light of people’s dying of
AIDS?” ask him, “How do you explain so many deaths?” Or when your cousin asks, “Why are you so narrow-minded as to believe that all Buddhists are going to hell?” ask her, “Have you become a Buddhist?” or “Have you studied Buddhism enough to become convinced that its adherents are worthy of heaven?” or “What have you found about Buddhism that impresses you so?” Those questions might be a better way to respond than to indignantly quote, “No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 16:6 NASB).8

Here are some other mock conversations that he writes in his book. “So, I suppose you think all those sincere followers of other religions are going to hell!” “Do you believe in hell?” “No. I don’t believe in hell. I think it’s ridiculous.” “Well, then why are you asking me such a ridiculous question?” Suppose someone else chimes in, “Well, I do believe in hell. Do you think everyone who disagrees with you is going there?” “Do you think anyone goes there? Is Hitler in hell?” “Of course, Hitler’s in hell.” “How do you think God decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? Does he grade on a curve?” From there an interesting discussion about God’s holiness, people’s sinfulness, and Jesus’ atoning work can ensue.9

Are you beginning to see how this is vastly different from countering every objection to Christianity with a pat answer? You’re taken off the defensive. You can go on the offensive and poke around inside other people’s hearts. Maybe you’ll hit a nerve that will cause them to think for once about the gospel. You can even adapt this method to instances when a question hasn’t been asked, but you respond with a question of your own. For example, when people offer, “I think all religions are the same,” you could respond, “Really? How about that religion that led people to kill themselves when they saw the Hale-Bop comet?” When someone says, “I think all people are basically good,” you could respond, “Really? Does that include Osama Bin Laden? Or the boys who killed their classmates at Columbine High School?”10

You can even get really good at this and just start probing without invitation. When you gather at the water cooler on Monday and hear your coworkers talking about what they did over the weekend you can say, “Jim, why do you do that to yourself? Is that fun?” Or if you see your coworker always grumbling and complaining you could say, “Why are you like this, Michelle? Are you happy with life? Why? What are you basing your happiness on?” Go for the jugular with questions. That’s how the Master engaged people and went after their motives and their heart. Give it a try and see what happens. Start asking penetrating questions.

Conclusion

Jesus was a teacher and he founded a religion that is based on certain truths that need to be taught and comprehended. No matter how averse our culture becomes to the concept of truth or how disinterested in serious biblical teaching we must remain committed to this necessary enterprise. Are you personally? Do you prepare yourself for the sermon on Sundays and see it as just as important for your spiritual life as eating dinner is to your physical life? Have you thought about participating in the Immanuel Institute? Are you interested in going deeper in your grasp of the Bible and theology? If you’re not, then something’s wrong.
And are you seeking to know the truth so you can teach it yourself in the ways that God has called you to and so that you can confront the culture with biblical truth at the appropriate time? Another one of our core values as a church is outreach. We say we seek to “build relationships that engage people in every way to not remain satisfied with their understanding of self, life and the world and ultimately point them to the mercy that is available in Christ alone.” Are you seeking to do that? One of the best ways to do that, the way Jesus most often did it, was to question. Let’s ask questions of our world. Let’s expose the emptiness and meaninglessness and incoherence of every other way of making sense out of life and let’s point people to the one true source of joy – Jesus Christ.

Teaching and questioning are two integral aspects of communicating the Christian message. May Immanuel Baptist Church hold them both up high.

Benediction
May God make you all avid learners so that you can become competent teachers (cf. Heb. 5:11ff) and may he give you the ability to question.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday afternoon, April 10, 2005. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. The vision of Immanuel Baptist Church is to transform sinners into a holy people who find fulfillment for their hunger for beauty, meaning, and eternal satisfaction in the glory of Christ alone.

End notes:

7 For example, see Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977), 128 pages; and Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 403 pages. These are two books that I appreciate and recommend regularly to non-believers. They reinforce the Christian’s faith while demonstrating the extreme plausibility of the Christian religion and have been used greatly by God to bring converts to Christ.
8 Newman, 31.
9 Ibid., 28.
10 Ibid., 58.