

Old and New, New and Old

Using Comparison and Contrast in Bible Teaching

by Ronald G. Davis

Struggling to describe or define objects or concepts often elicits comparisons and contrasts. Noting similarities and differences is one way we make sense of our world. Descriptions “draw a line around” they say what is inside and what is not. Definitions “set the limits of” something goes “this far” and no farther.

Comparison/contrast is always worthy of the teacher’s consideration. Relating what students don’t know to what they do know is good teaching. Some texts employ this method, so it’s natural for the teacher to adopt the method when teaching those texts, but the creative teacher will find ways to use comparison and contrast on other types of material as well.

Texts from the epistle to the Hebrews adapt to this style easily. In this epistle we see the important similarities of the Old and New Covenants, but also the overwhelming difference: the absolute superiority of the New. The following text is a perfect example of the comparison/contrast strategy at work in teaching:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God spoke “in the past” when the Old Covenant was in force. He speaks “in these last days” the era of the New Covenant. But now he is speaking not in words but in the Word. In the former days the speaking was of a temporary nature. In these last days the speaking is final: Jesus is God’s last Word.

Using Similarities and Differences

Christianity is distinctively different from all the philosophies and pseudo religions of the world. The Christian has compared truth with lie, fact with theory, morality with pragmatism, evidence with supposition. He has concluded that Christian faith has superior answers to all of life’s hard questions. True disciples persist in applying that same comparison/contrast mind-set to a wide range of circumstances.

Such an approach to teaching and learning offers several possibilities for in-class activity. One is the variety of pen-and-paper activities normally associated with tests and testing, which can call attention to important comparison/contrast elements in a lesson.

Another is the use of tables and charts, which are essentially efforts to show how two or more concepts are alike and how they are different by highlighting shared and nonshared characteristics. A third involves role playing, which enables students to respond to hypothetical situations. This method is useful to emphasize the difference between Christian and non-Christian lifestyles and ways of thinking.

How well does the teacher of adults want his learners to know the Bible and its life-directing truths? The Spirit has spoken: “Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. . . . We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, . . . Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:13-15).

Consider the following possibilities from the choices above and the texts suggested below:

True or False?

Tests generate thinking and demand choices. Thoughtful choice is at the heart of Christian faith. A narrative text such as Luke 24:36-53 lends itself to a test activity. To get learners to focus on the important facts of the text and to generate discussion of relevant issues, even a simple true-false test will work. As an example, take these ten statements taken from the text. The number in parentheses is the verse(s) where the answer to the statement can be found.

- ___ Jesus claimed to fulfill Scripture. (44, true)
- ___ The resurrected Christ had a fully human body. (39, true)
- ___ Doubt is impossible for true believers. (38, false)
- ___ Jesus ate food before his disciples to show them that he was not a spirit. (42, 43, true)
- ___ At his appearance, Jesus fully empowered his disciples. (49, false)
- ___ The disciples were deeply saddened at Jesus’ ascension. (52, false)
- ___ The core elements of the gospel are Jesus’ death and resurrection, and repentance and forgiveness. (46, 47, true)
- ___ The disciples never really worshiped Jesus. (52, false)
- ___ Jesus’ initial words when he appeared to his disciples were, “Why are you not believing?” (36, false)
- ___ Jesus’ final earthly deed was to bless his disciples. (50, 51, true)

Such a test is not designed simply to review and reinforce facts. Ponder the discussion possibilities. Key Christian doctrines—the deity of Christ and his bodily resurrection, for examples—are involved. Consider how the fellowship between Jesus and the disciples offers true encouragement to all who would be his today: he is concerned about our peace of mind; he trusts us to be his witnesses; he provides the joy of worship.

Whatever format you choose, a test can stimulate serious and significant reflection. Comparing truth with falsehood will move your learners toward the goals stated in Ephesians 4:13-15.

Side by Side

One simple but sure way to see the likenesses and the differences between two (or more) items is to hold them up side by side (by side). Tables and charts—whether on paper, chalkboard, or projected media—are designed to provide just such a view. In a vertical column, the items to be compared are named. In horizontal columns, the relevant characteristics are listed. Then the task is a simple: “Does this item have this particular characteristic or not?” Advertisers regularly use such a device to show the superiority of their product over comparable ones. They always highlight the advantages: “With the new Moxie sedan, leather seats are standard; in the Blahmobile, they’re \$650 extra!”

Paul used the same method in his message at Mars’ Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-34). Picture an imaginary chart with two headings: “Greek Gods” and “The Unknown God.” Run through Paul’s checklist as you read his sermon: (1) Made the world; (2) Lives in man-made temples; (3) Needs service from men; (4) Made every nation; (5) Expects men to repent; (6) Will judge the world; (7) Raised one from the dead; (8) Wants fellowship with men; (9) Made by man’s design and skill; (10) Determines history with purpose. Some Athenians saw this comparison and sneered. Some wanted to hear more. A few became believers. The gospel always gets these responses. Thoughtful choices, based on comparison and contrast, will vary, but God always allows people to make their own choices.

Self or Others?

In certain ways Christian thinking and non-Christian thinking are alike. But at one significant point they differ greatly. “To serve or to be served”—that is the question. Christians exist to serve. Non-Christians exist to be served, so they think and act accordingly. The choice is self-centeredness or Christ-centeredness, being selfish or selfless. Jesus made it clear: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Non-Christians are likewise easily spotted: they love themselves.

The adult teacher will always have a desire to emphasize how the individual living under the New Covenant thinks and behaves differently from the ungodly. A lesson based on Matthew 18:1-4; 20:17-28 will provide a good occasion for pursuing that aim.

Role playing is one activity that allows students to experience tough choices without the risks of reality. (If one chooses poorly in a role play, the consequences are irrelevant.) For a lesson on the texts named above, class members might be assigned to be the Christian or non-Christian in each of the following hypothetical situations:

You are driving carefully at the speed limit through a business district in the left lane, anticipating a left turn several blocks away. A car behind you accelerates, passes you on the right honking madly, and swerves dangerously close in front of you.

As you leave the office after dark one evening, on the way to your car you are approached by a dirty, gaunt beggar asking, “Do you have a dollar for something to eat, friend?”

Ask your role players to dramatize and verbalize their responses. Have the group discuss whether the responses chosen reflect what the students would like to do or what they would really do. Through such an activity your learners should be challenged to “grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). What more worthy goal could Christian teachers have for their students?