The Seven Laws of Teaching, as articulated by John Milton Gregory provide us with one of the best summaries of how to teach well and of how to prepare students to learn effectively for the sake of Christ's Kingdom.

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The Seven Laws of Teaching

Teaching is both an art and a science. It is an art inasmuch as it requires experience, talent, and passion and it is a science inasmuch as it is governed by certain set laws. These “laws of teaching” have been variously identified, explained, and applied but perhaps the greatest example of this is to be found in John Milton Gregory's masterpiece, *The Seven Laws of Teaching*. Gregory was an accomplished teacher and educational expert during the 19th century who taught in every environment from the one room school house to the university. In all of his diverse experience he found that, “Teaching has its natural laws as fixed as the laws of the planets or of growing organisms” (Gregory 1). For the aspiring teacher who is striving to attain mastery of the art and science of teaching Gregory urges the mastery of the laws of teaching first. As he puts it, “To explain the laws of teaching will, therefore, seem the most direct and practical way to instruct teachers in their art” (Gregory xii). Thus, art and science, soul and structure, passion and precision come together in the heart and head and hands of the skilled teacher. However, the lessons to be learned extend far beyond the classroom. The laws which Gregory explains apply to learning in every area of life and in every stage of development and show us how we might not only grow in knowledge, but also in holiness as well. *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, as articulated by John Milton Gregory provide us with one of the best summaries of how to teach well and of how to prepare students to learn effectively for the sake of Christ's Kingdom.

In this paper, we will seek to introduce each of the seven laws of learning as described by John Milton Gregory. Each law will be explained and applied briefly before we step back to see how these laws fit into the bigger picture of education in the Kingdom of God. The seven laws of teaching are: the law of the teacher, the law of the learner, the law of the language, the law of the lesson, the law of the teaching process, the law of the learning process, and the law of review and application. As Gregory puts it, “These [laws] underlie and govern all successful teaching” (Gregory 7).
The first law, the law of the teacher, can be stated thus, “The teacher must know that which he would teach” (Gregory 14). Put another way, knowledge is the foundation of good teaching. If teaching is understood as Gregory defines it, as the communication of experience, then the importance of knowledge (which is really just another name for this experience) becomes evident. One might have a teacher and a student but without knowledge to convey no teaching will take place. This law is a necessary result of the nature of knowledge and truth. As Gregory puts it so powerfully in his book, “The pupil, instead of seeing a fact alone, should see it linked to the great body of truth, in all its fruitful relations. Great principles are discovered amid familiar facts vividly seen, and concepts clearly wrought. The power of illustration [...] comes only out of clear and familiar knowledge” (Gregory 16). It is only this clear grasp of the knowledge to be taught which can open the doors of learning to a teacher's pupils. Children have a remarkable knack for seeing through the inadequacies and excuses of those in authority over them, and too often a lack of understanding and knowledge on the part of the teacher trickles down to affect the students as well.

The application for this is simple; yet demanding. Teachers must know that which they are to teach, and that requires hard work. As Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans put it, “the liberal arts tradition requires that its practitioners learn from those who preceded them in the tradition, those who crafted it by their insight, creativity, and achievements” (Littlejohn & Evans 152). Gregory offers ten “Rules for Teachers” and five examples of violations and mistakes which can help teachers to understand how best to abide by this law. These various points can be summarized this way: teachers must learn before they would teach. Reading, reflection, writing, conversation, debate, preparation, study and plain hard work are the necessary ingredients to any successful lesson. The bar is raised high, but as Gregory puts it, “Let this first fundamental law of teaching be thoroughly obeyed, and our schools will increase in numbers and in usefulness” (Gregory 23).
The second law turns from teacher to pupil and is thus properly called “the law of the learner”. Gregory describes this law with these words, “The learner must attend with interest to the material to be learned” (Gregory 24). Learning is a process which requires two partners, and much relies on the student abiding by this second law of teaching. In the end, no teacher can teach a student all that they will need throughout their lives. This actually helps to focus the work of the teacher as we properly understand our roles. As one teacher put it, “We must seek to inspire our students by using every available means to excite in them a love for learning that will stay with them throughout their lives” (Detweiler). What does an inspired student look like? An inspired student (that is a student who heeds the law of the learner) will be focused and give attention to the lesson as it is presented. However, the law of the learner requires more than merely paying attention. The wise student will take ownership of what he hears and think and talk it through with others as he seeks to become wise.

This law is vital to grasp because it underscores an important point which is too often overlooked in discussions of teaching: the teacher can only do so much. True learning requires work on the part of the student as well as on the part of the teacher. This is far from an easy task. Gregory points out two difficulties with these words, “The two chief hindrances to attention are apathy and distraction” (Gregory 36). The wise student will fight against these temptations as much as they can. However, there is much the teacher can do to help the students in that fight. The goal is to encourage learning while recognizing that we can only offer a beginning; it is the student who must see it through to the end. Gregory summarizes the application of this law well with these words, “The duty of the teacher is essentially not that of a driver or a taskmaster but rather that of a counselor and guide” (Gregory 29).

The third law of teaching is “the law of the language” and is stated thus, “The language used in teaching must be common to teacher and learner” (Gregory 42). The explanation (as well as the
application) of this law flows out of the nature and purpose of language. Language is the instrument of thought, the vehicle of thought, and the storehouse of our knowledge. As Gregory puts it, “Ideas become incarnate in words; they take form in language, and stand ready to be studied and known, to be marshaled into the mechanism of intelligible thought” (Gregory 46). As Gregory points out elsewhere, this does not mean that a talkative teacher is necessarily a good one (often the opposite case is true). Rather, he is suggesting an intentional use of language, one that reaches students where they are at and elevates them to be better people than they were before.

Gregory has several practical suggestions of how to apply this law. Indeed, as he puts it, “Out of our Law of Language, thus defined and explained, flow some of the most useful rules for teaching” (Gregory 51). Virtually all of these suggestions center on the child's knowledge and understanding of what is being taught. In line with this end, Gregory urges teachers to be familiar with the language of their students and to teaching in as simple and straightforward a manner as is possible. In order to do this effectively a teacher must encourage their students to talk freely and to state back (in their own words) what has been taught. Not only does it help the student to articulate and express himself, it also helps the teacher to know where they need to make clarifying points or simplify the material.

The fourth law is the law of the Lesson. As Gregory defines it, “This then is the Law of the Lesson: The truth to be taught must be learned through truth already known” (Gregory 58). This takes us immediately into new territory; up until this point we have dealt with the teacher (in the first law), with the student (in the second law), and with the means of communication between them (in the third law). However with the fourth law we come to, as Gregory puts it, ”the very heart of the work of the teacher, the condition and instrument, as well as the culmination and the fruit, of all the rest” (Gregory 57). This law is naturally derived from the nature of the mind and the nature of human knowledge. As
Gregory puts it, “It must be remembered that knowledge is not a mass of simple, independent facts; it is made up of the experience of the race crystallized and organized in the form of facts together with their laws and relations” (Gregory 61). Thus, everything new which is taught must be connected to something old that is already known by the students.

Gregory goes on at length unpacking the philosophy behind this law but with this general explanation before us we can now turn to the application of it. A prerequisite for applying this law is to convey the information to be learned in a way that excites the vital interest of the hearers. This means more than just stating something emphatically, rather it speaks of showing the connection between what is taught in the classroom and what is lived in the world. As Gregory puts it, “In passing knowledge on to others the more closely we can approximate real, vital situations, the better will be our teaching” (Gregory 68). In light of these things the wise teacher will seek to understand what the students already know and build from there. By asking questions, using practical examples, and easily understood metaphors, analogies, and comparisons the teacher can help to teach students not only the knowledge in front of them, but also the art of thinking as well.

The fifth law, the law of the teaching process, moves from the fairly concrete topics of the previous laws (dealing with the teacher, the learner, the language, and the lesson) to, “study these in action, and to observe the conduct of the teacher and the pupil” (Gregory 73). This action has to do, not with the character or qualifications of the teacher (or student) but rather with the conduct or function of them. Gregory defines the fifth law this way, “Excite and direct the self-activities of the pupil, and as a rule tell him nothing that he can learn himself” (Gregory 74). This law, and particularly the latter part of it, might seem strange (or even wrong) to many readers, but Gregory goes on to explain. The driving heart behind this law is the necessity of making students think. As Gregory explains, “The actual work
of the teacher consists of the awakening and setting in action the mind of the pupil, the arousing of his self-activities” (Gregory. 74). Why then are we not to tell the student “nothing that he can learn for himself”? Gregory explains it this way, “True teaching, then, is not that which gives knowledge, but that which stimulates pupils to gain it. One might say that he teaches best who teaches least; or that he teaches best whose pupils learn most without being taught directly” (Gregory 77). This statement finds validation in our own experience. We know from experience that the things which we had to learn ourselves are the things that stick with us. Having to work for knowledge and skill is precisely what makes it both valuable and valued.

So how then is this law to be applied? First, the wise teacher will start with the simplest points rather than jumping into the complexities of his subject. At every turn, the teacher will seek to excite both the mental and the moral character of his pupils. One of the key ways in which this is to be done is through questioning. Indeed, Gregory goes so far as to say that, “The object or the event that excites no question will provoke no thought. Questioning is not, therefore, merely one of the devices of teaching, it is really the whole of teaching” (Gregory 90). The goal, in Gregory's phrase, is to produce “students of life”, men and women who know what their minds are for and who use them to explore and create in the world that God has made. Good teaching not only answers questions but excites new ones as well; pushing student and teacher alike to delve deeper into that which is true, good, and beautiful.

The sixth law of teaching is the law of the learning process. Once more we shift from a discussion of the teacher to that of the student. Gregory defines the law in these words, “The pupil must reproduce in his own mind the truth to be learned” (Gregory 97). As was covered in the previous law, the focus of education is the development and excitement of the students to learning. True learning requires not just a teacher to share information, but a student with an active mind who is ready to receive it. Indeed,
Gregory argues that, “The work of education, contrary to common understanding, is much more the work of the pupil than of the teacher” (Gregory 97). In our modern world where education is seen as a right to be mandated rather than a privilege to be enjoyed it is easy for teacher and student alike to assume that the student should feel nothing but a begrudging sense of apathy towards academic endeavors. However, this should be far from the case (however accurately it might describe the feelings of most American students). Gregory describes the proper attitude of the student this way, “His aim should be to become an independent searcher in the fields of knowledge, not merely a passive learner at the hands of others” (Gregory 98). Mature independence is the goal; and the law of the learning process is one of the means.

The application of this rule touches on the responsibilities of both teachers and students. On the part of the teacher, he must continually press his students to ask “why?” to push them beyond their level of knowledge and to excite in them a desire for growth and understanding. Push him to explain what he believes and why he believes it. Encourage them in their own studies and encourage them to both ask and answer questions on their own. The teacher will, of course, act as a guide to steer students in fruitful paths but the student must do the walking. Students must imbibe a deep respect and thirst for the truth and teachers should encourage original thought (and original presentation of that thought) amongst their students.

The seventh, and final, law of teaching is the law of review and application. Not surprisingly, this final law flows from, and complements, every law which has come before. However, as Gregory points out, “difficult work yet remains, perhaps the most difficult. All that has been accomplished lies hidden in the minds of the pupils, and lies there as a potency rather than as a possession” (Gregory 107). How then does a teacher help their students to realize this potential and possess this knowledge as their own?
This, of course, is where the law of review and application comes into play. Gregory defines the law this way, “The completion, text and confirmation of the work of teaching must be made by review and application” (Gregory 108). While many teachers (and perhaps many students as well!) might look on review as a waste of valuable time or a task that is frustrating and fruitless, the truth is quite the opposite. It must be remembered (as Gregory points out) that review is not just repetition. True review aims to perfect, confirm, and render ready and useful; knowledge. This is a high task, and is a vital part of teaching.

If review is more than just repetition, how is this law to be applied? Review moves beyond mere repetition (although still makes use of it) by connecting the material covered to new applications and fresh ideas. Building on the law of the learning process (discussed earlier) a good teacher will push students to articulate and explain what has already been discussed. As Gregory puts it, “The art of the teacher, in this work, lies in the stating of questions which shall properly make use of the material to be reviewed” (Gregory 116). Review should take place at regular points and should build naturally on the material taught. Rather than having a last minute effort of reviewing everything covered, it is wiser to have periodic reviews that cover smaller bits of material while connecting back to what has already been taught and reviewed. Gregory sums up the application of this final law well when he says, “The law of review in its full force and philosophy requires that there shall be fresh vision – a clear rethinking and reusing of the material which has been learned, which shall be related to the first study as the finishing touches of the artists to his first sketches” (Gregory 120).

What then, does all of this have to do with the kingdom of Christ and the education of the Christian? It is the contention of this paper that there are at least two ways in which these laws can prepare students to learn effectively for the sake of Christ's Kingdom. The first is by developing a lifestyle of learning,
and the second is by cultivating a love for God. These will each now be considered in turn. First, the seven laws of teaching develop a lifestyle of learning. The Christian life is built on the idea that God is at work in and through his people. That is why, when Paul wrote to churches, he expressed concern for more than just their status (i.e. saved or not saved) but also expected believers to be growing. Colossians 1:9 is a wonderful example of this attitude, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”. Gregory's Seven Laws, extend beyond the classroom to encompass all of life and provide not only teachers, but preachers and laymen alike a wonderful path towards growth in knowledge and understanding. This strikes at the core of the biblical message. As question three of the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man”. The Christian faith is much more than just knowledge or understanding, but these are still inseparable parts of it.

This brings us to the second, and most important, way in which these laws can prepare students to learn effectively for the sake of Christ's kingdom; by cultivating a love for God. It is interesting to note that Gregory's book was originally written for Sunday School teachers. Gregory's purpose is to help believers understand the nature of teaching and learning, and in so doing to better understand how we are to know the Scriptures and the God who gave them. Following the example of Paul in his Epistles, we are to follow our theology with doxology, giving praise to the God who has authored the very laws we have outlined. The goal of teaching is to inspire students to love knowledge and to seek wisdom. By understanding and applying these laws we can not only teach more effectively, but also encourage students in the Christian life. As one writer put it, “The Christian faith must be both well and wisely taught and well and truly learned” (Packer and Parrett 17). This is our task, and we must rise to the challenge.
Works Cited


