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Kent Saunders  
*Anderson University*

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## **Using Top Ten Lists to Encourage Faith Integration Discussion in Economics Courses**

by Kent Saunders

### **Abstract**

This article describes the use of top ten lists as a way to break the ice with students and begin a discussion about integrating one's faith into the subject matter of a course. The literature has shown that the use of top ten lists has proven to be an attention-grabbing way of introducing a topic that encourages student participation and incites class discussion. The use of Biblically inspired top ten lists in economics classes was investigated with results similar to those observed in the literature.

### **Introduction**

It has always been important to me, as a Christian educator, to integrate faith into my teaching. I want my students to be able to apply Biblical principles to everything that they learn and then to use them later in life. However, it has been difficult to find ways to do this effectively. One method that I tried and continue to use is to have students read and interpret Biblical passages that are related to the course material. Some students do a great job of researching the Biblical passage and provide great commentary. However, a lot of students simply read their passage, say that the passage speaks for itself, and then sit down. Additionally, I often times have the same students for more than one class and some of the Bible passages overlap. When I get repeat students, I tend to get less excitement and in-depth discussion rather than more excitement and more in-depth discussion.

Students seem to appreciate my attempts to integrate faith into my courses. In end-of-the-course evaluations, about 20% of students list the Bible readings as their favorite part of the class. However, about 10% of students indicate that Bible readings were their least favorite part of the class. In my attempt to be a "critically reflective Teacher" (Brookfield, 1995), I was on the lookout to bring a new technique to my upper level courses to improve my teaching and to increase my students' learning of faith issues. Also, I wanted to add something to supplement my use of Bible passage reading in my introductory courses. In searching for ways to bring a more spirited atmosphere into my classroom, I came across several interesting resources.

### **Literature Review**

"To teach is to engage students in learning" (Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991, p. xiii). In my search for ways to integrate my faith into the course content, I wanted to find a unique and interesting method that would be distinguishable from a typical lecture presentation. I wanted to be engaging and incite active participatory learning. In "Seven

Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” Chickering and Gamson (1987) provide seven principles that distinguish good educational practices in undergraduate education:

1. Encourages contacts between students and faculty (both inside and outside of class).
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students (collaborative instead of competitive).
3. Uses active learning techniques (e.g., challenging discussions).
4. Gives prompt feedback.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning (e.g., provides multiple outlets for students to explain and apply course material.)

Russ Edgerton (2001) introduced the term “pedagogies of engagement,” which encapsulates principles 1, 2, and 3, above. Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, and Johnson (2005) document that pedagogies of engagement (e.g., cooperative and problem-based learning) can help break the “traditional lecture-dominant pattern” (p. 97), disallow student passivity, and improve education.

McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1986), report that discussion is preferable to lecture in terms of motivating students and developing thinking skills. It has been found that discussion allows the class to learn through the contributions of others (Hertenstein, 1991), to develop higher-level cognitive skills (Gilmore & Schall, 1996), and to improve performance and satisfaction (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Additionally, with class discussion, I would be able to explicitly address Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) principles 1, 2, 3 and 7. Thus, I wanted to stimulate discussion of faith-related issues rather than prepare a lecture that would most likely only cover my own faith perspective.

In *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, Christensen et al. (2001) provide several ideas for leading a discussion-oriented course. This book contains multiple faculty perspectives on participation, independent thinking, listening, questioning, and responding. The title of chapter six of this text (“Every Student Teaches and Every Teacher Learns: The Reciprocal Gift of Discussion Teaching”) encompasses the inspiration that led to some of my own changes in the classroom. When it comes to issues of faith and my own understanding of God’s will, I can learn as much from my students as they can from me. When I find ways to stimulate discussion on faith issues, the entire class benefits from everyone’s collective experience. Christensen et al. summarize the benefits of discussion teaching: “A discussion class is a partnership in which students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching, and the privilege of learning together” (p. 16). Finding ways to stimulate discussion can create an atmosphere of learning where students feel free to bring up questions and share their ideas.

### **Application**

Because I taught economics during the fall semester of 2005, I was interested in ways of integrating discussion into these courses. Hansen and Salemi (1998) provide tips for leading discussion in economics courses and provide many useful tips for integrating

discussion into the course plan, selecting discussion material, and preparing questions. Additionally, the “Weekly Review” from *The Wall Street Journal* (2006) can provide email article summaries with discussion questions. However, in my case I was not so much interested in discussing the economic specific source material, but rather, I was interested in starting discussions related to how faith interacts and influences economic decision making.

Surdyk’s article “God’s Economy: Teaching Students Key Biblical Principles” (2002) can be used as the basis for several economics related faith-based discussion themes. Some of the themes and related Biblical passages include “Work and Rest” (p. 97), “Materialism” (p. 98), and “Economic Justice” (p. 97). I use many of the Bible passages listed in Surdyk’s work for my students’ Bible passage readings.

An interesting technique was needed in order to stimulate discussion in the classroom. Arbaugh (2000) advocates the use of technology, Internet course software, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and email for outside-of-class threaded discussions. However, I wanted to create an in-class discussion. Becker’s “Top Ten Lists in Finance Class” (1993) describes the use of top ten lists to stimulate student discussion. Becker uses top ten lists to liven up the class on early Monday mornings and to introduce new finance-specific course material. The use of top ten lists is a good technique to create “critical moments” (Palmer, 1993) when students can see the big picture ideas in a fun and inviting way. I was immediately interested in the use of top ten lists and believed that my students would be also.

Eventually a light bulb went on in my head—the use of top ten lists abounds. For example, “The Late Show with David Letterman” (2006) uses top ten lists to create viewer interest. Becker (1993) uses top ten lists to stimulate discussion on finance topics, Rossman and Chance (1999) use top ten lists to summarize pedagogical methods, and J. John has begun “just10” ministry based on the “Ten Commandments—God’s Top Ten” (Philo Trust, 2006). If these top ten lists were successful in their applications, why couldn’t I use Biblically inspired top ten lists to create interest and encourage faith discussion in my classes?

#### *Example 1: Top Ten Titles for Christ*

After I came to this realization, I looked at a poster on my wall titled “Names of Christ” from [inspirationart.com](http://inspirationart.com) and decided that I could create a top ten list based on this poster for use in my class. Table 1 below presents my “Top Ten Titles for Christ”:

**Table 1**  
*The Top Ten Titles for Christ*

	Title	Scripture Reference
10	Advocate	I John 2:1
9	Teacher	John 3:2
8	Mediator	I Timothy 2:5
7	Wonderful Counselor	Isaiah 9:6
6	Savior	John 4:42
5	Servant	Matthew 12:18
4	Bread of Life	John 6:35
3	Light of the World	John 8:12
2	Good Shepherd	John 10:11
1	The Way, and the Truth, and the Life	John 14:6

The list in Table 1 can be useful in introducing students to leadership topics and the organizational structure of the firm. In addition, this list can be used to connect faith into the course content. Part of the reason I enjoy teaching at a Christian liberal arts college is that I am free to integrate my faith perspective into the course content. When I actively do so, a more complete discussion can develop and the potential for deeper learning can take place. Some discussion questions that might come up after reviewing this list include the following:

1. Which title is most meaningful to you?
2. What type of leader do you seek to be?
3. Is anyone willing to give an example of when Christ served in one of these roles in your life?

I have enjoyed using top ten lists in my classes and have been somewhat successful in creating my own top ten lists. There are several sources for lists of 10 that relate to Christian faith, for example, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17 and “Anyway, The Paradoxical Commandments” (Keith, 2005). [BibleGateway.Com](http://www.biblegateway.com) (2006) can be used to search passages related to specific terms and ideas (e.g., money, greed). Lists can be inspired from just about anything.

I have used the top ten lists in my classes in the following manner. Using a large type font and either an overhead transparency or PowerPoint slide, I start the class by uncovering one item at a time and have the students read the listed items. I go down the list from ten to one and provide commentary on each item. After going through the entire list, I ask the class a series of course-related, follow-up questions. These questions are impromptu and vary depending on the list and the daily subject matter. Generally, if I go through the list and ask questions with enthusiasm, the class is happy to share their views and experiences.

The amount of time spent discussing a list can take anywhere from five minutes to an entire 50-minute class period depending on the list. Due to time constraints and depth

of discussion, it might be necessary to cover only one item per class for 10 classes and then have a summary discussion at the conclusion of the list. However, I prefer to cover the entire list in one class period.

*Example 2: Top Ten Proverbs on Economic Justice*

Table 2 presents a top ten list concerning Proverbs and the subject of economic justice. Following that is a sample of the types of comments and discussion that might develop in relation to this list (Saunders, 2005).

**Table 2**  
*Top Ten Proverbs on Economic Justice*

	Proverb (The NIV Study Bible, 1985)	Scripture Reference
10	A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.	Proverbs 11:25
9	He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.	Proverbs 14:31
8	He who mocks the poor shows contempt for the Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.	Proverbs 17:5
7	He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.	Proverbs 19:17
6	If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.	Proverbs 21:13
5	A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.	Proverbs 22:9
4	Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court,	Proverbs 22:22
3	The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.	Proverbs 29:7
2	Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.	Proverbs 31:8
1	Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.	Proverbs 31:9

*Introductory comment.* The *NIV Study Bible* (1985) describes proverbs as “short, compact statements that express truth about human behavior” (p. 943). Economic justice relates to actions that help to provide food, shelter, or employment for someone other than one’s self. The following proverbs taken from *The NIV Study Bible* (1985) can help answer questions such as: How does God want us to use and care for His resources? What responsibilities do we have in using our wealth? And now, drum roll please; here are the top ten proverbs on economic justice. (Each proverb should be read in order from

ten to one with the following comments and/or questions after each, and time should be given for discussion following the comments.)

*Proverb ten.* Even if the payback from generosity is not immediate, at the very least it is a way to store up treasure in heaven.

*Proverb nine.* If we are not careful, we can convince ourselves that it is all right when we take advantage of others. We might start to believe that we alone have earned what we have when, in reality, all we have is a gift from God. How easy it is to forget that we are all children of God and deserving of kindness, and respect.

*Proverb eight.* We can take no joy in the misfortunes of others. We should not make fun of people, and we should not assume we are superior when disaster does not affect us directly.

*Proverb seven.* Sometimes we justify not being kind to the poor because we feel that they will not use our kindness for what we deem appropriate. However, when we are kind to the poor, we are helping our Lord. Jesus said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40, *The NIV Bible*, 1985).

*Proverb six.* I will confess that I do not read most of the mail I get soliciting donations. I do not want to know of the need of others. I am busy, and I have other plans for the resources under my stewardship. I need to change my ways if I expect to get help when I need it.

*Proverb five.* How often do we help to the point where it reduces our own sustenance? It is important to be aware of the needs of others, but we also need to act on this awareness.

*Proverb four.* The American justice system is the envy of the world. However, has it become too costly for the poor to seek justice? Has it become too costly for the needy to defend themselves? Do we sometimes exploit those who have no realistic recourse against our exploitation?

*Proverb three.* Are we a righteous people? How often have I heard “it’s not my problem”? Are we concerned about justice for the less fortunate? How often do we assume that by looking out only for ourselves we indirectly benefit others? How much time do we spend thinking about our own concerns compared to the concerns of others?

*Proverb two.* Nothing seems to inspire people more than when they have been wronged by someone else. How often are we inspired to speak up and seek justice for those who do not have the power to speak for themselves?

And now, the number one proverb on economic justice: “Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9, *The NIV Study Bible*, 1985).

*Proverb one.* Now I realize that the number one proverb is no more and no less important than any of the other proverbs. There is no way I could reorder this list to build to a crescendo where the number one proverb is obviously the pinnacle of economic justice. Additionally, I have probably omitted some other important proverbs. That being said, consider the following discussion questions:

1. Which proverb is the most relevant to your life today?
2. Do you ever feel that you are being exploited?
3. Do you ever feel that you are exploiting someone else?
4. How we can become a more just society?

## Conclusion

McKeachie et al. (1986) found that discussion is preferable to lecture in terms of motivating students and developing thinking skills. Hertenstein (1991) finds that discussion allows the class to learn through the contributions of others. Gilmore and Schall (1996) find that discussion develops higher-level cognitive skills, and Bonwell and Eison (1991) find that discussion leads to improved student performance and satisfaction. Stimulating class discussion explicitly addresses several of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles for good teaching practice and Edgerton's (2001) "pedagogies of engagement." The use of top ten lists provides a stimulating way to integrate faith discussion into classes in order to improve student interest and, ultimately, learning. A discussion-oriented classroom environment allows students to seek answers to their own questions and to share their experience with others. When faith issues can be integrated into the course content, students can be provided with a more complete picture of how the world works, how God wants the world to work, and how we, as Christians, can make better decisions.

I have used the top ten lists presented in this paper over the course of the 2005 fall semester and in subsequent courses. I plan to continue to use top ten lists in my courses. When students were asked in an anonymous end-of-course evaluation whether they would recommend more, fewer, or the same number of top ten lists for future classes, 21 out of 50 (42%) recommended more, two (4%) recommended fewer, and 27 (54%) recommended the same.

To investigate further, I asked my principles of economics students to answer the following multiple choice question related to the top ten proverbs on economic justice on the final exam: "Which of the following was one of the top ten proverbs on economic justice?" Students selected from three incorrect proverbs and one correct proverb. None of the 63 students missed that question; whereas, typically, about 25% of students miss any given multiple choice question in my classes. This led me to conclude that as a result of the top ten lists and subsequent discussions, students retained the concepts. However, much more empirical evidence is needed in order to show that learning has taken place as a result of these lists.

The literature as presented here supports the use of top ten lists to implement discussion in the classroom. I have presented an application that uses Biblically inspired, faith-based top ten lists are applicable to a wide variety of classroom subjects and disciplines. All that is needed is creativity and a desire to increase student participation. The use of top ten lists promotes an interactive classroom environment where students are encouraged to participate. Top ten lists allow for creative and fun ways to introduce new material. This technique can serve as a supplement to lecture-based classes or can be used as a starting point for more in-depth classroom discussion, all with the goal of increasing student interest and participation that, in turn, have been shown in the literature to improve student learning.



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*Professor Kent Saunders teaches finance and economics in the Falls School of Business at Anderson University. He earned his Ph.D. in Applied Economics from Clemson University in 1995 and has taught at Cumberland University and Le Moyne College. Dr. Saunders has over 15 refereed publications in the areas of financial derivatives, financial education, and economic education. He is a member of the American Economic Association and the Financial Education Association, and he serves as the editor of the Christian Business Academy Review, a publication of the Christian Business Faculty Association. He can be reached at [ktsaunders@anderson.edu](mailto:ktsaunders@anderson.edu).*