

INTERPRETATION, STUDY & TEACHING

– How to Communicate to Others –

Introduction

- Can anyone teach Bible and doctrine to others?
- Am I the “best teacher” for my class or should I consider myself a “conduit” for my students? (e.g., facilitate the class by using DVDs, etc.)
- How does the pastor do his study so well? Where does he get all that information?
- How can I become a better teacher? What are some proven methods I just follow?

An Illustration

In a recent interview with Dr. John MacArthur, conducted by K. Jones, Dr. MacArthur was asked the question, “How do you prepare your sermons, or conduct research for your books? (In other words, how is preparation for public presentation done?) His response: “I use the same method for personal study that I use for sermon preparation, because the goal is the same: I simply want to know what the Bible means by what it says—accurate interpretation.” Then a follow-up question: “What are some of the methods you have found that make Bible study appealing to a larger community?” His response: “First of all, people always respond to clear teaching. I’m not enthralled with gimmicks and methodology. These things may excite someone for a short time, but learning to mine the meaning from the text is the only thing that will feed and sustain a healthy hunger for God’s Word over the long term. That doesn’t come with any quick-and-easy method. Long-term growth and skill in studying and handling the Word comes over time with diligence and persistence. . . . I also believe that unveiling the historical background and unpacking what is not obvious creates great interest. Giving an overview of a passage and showing how it connects to the rest of Scripture also gives people the big picture of the cohesiveness of the Bible.”¹

How Familiar Are You with the Bible?

This question becomes more important to ask and answer with every new generation of Bible readers, teachers and churchgoers. In the early to mid-twentieth century, such a question would have been answered quickly and with a great deal of certainty. Most people would not only have been familiar with the Bible and its stories and teachings, they would have been living

¹ From the interview, “Unleashing God’s Truth—One Verse at a Time,” in *Bible Study Magazine* 2009, p.10.

in a world permeated by the Bible, its language, and its ideas. The development of technology and the proliferation of information have forced the Bible to compete for a place in our culture. Few of us read or study the Bible outside of a religious context, and the number of Christians who are willing to do even that continues to dwindle. In the process, the Bible has lost its central place even within the walls of the church.

Biblical literacy has become a problem. For the most part, those of us under the age of forty know significantly less about the Bible and its content than do our older counterparts. To a certain extent, this neglect of the Bible parallels our attitude toward Christianity and society as a whole. We search for easy answers and simple solutions. Our lives are so busy and cluttered that anything that demands time and energy to use is pushed to the margins of our existence.²

² One of the best articles, although it that has disturbed me because of its implications, in this area is by John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “The Christian Church in the New Dark Age: Illiteracy, Aliteracy, and the Word of God,” in his *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 89–102.

By way of a brief summation: Stackhouse begins by asserting that a new Dark Age is advancing upon us, and we had better recognize it and deal with it. He describes it as a strange Dark Age, to be sure, for it is very well illuminated. Television screens at home glow all day and much of the night, as do computer screens at work and in our home offices. Instead of the flickering golden candlelight thrown off by medieval tapers, our civilization is lit by the bluish light of the cathode-ray tube. After several pages in which he contrasts the ages past and our age, he asks, “In sum, isn’t this, so to speak, a Bright Age?” He responds that he fears for our society and for the Christian church in our society. He then develops the basis for fear by reference to the fears expressed by three other voices (p. 91): first, is that of Neil Postman (noted for his *Technopoly*, *Conscientious Objections*, and especially *Amusing Ourselves to Death*), who asserts that we are in a time of profound change, especially in technology, and even more particularly in communications technology. This change, unprecedented in history, is changing the way we live — and not necessarily for the better.

The second voice Stackhouse cites is that of a chorus of authors who together wrote *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). They examine the youth culture and warn of changes wrought by the interaction of this culture with the electronic media. One of the most important things they tell us is that our youth get their cues today not primarily from their parents (as parents already know), not primarily from their churches (as everybody already knows) but also not primarily from their peers, at least not in the sense of a local group. Instead, what peer pressure they feel comes in the form of conformity to fashions, tastes, and trends that in fact originate far away from the local peer group: Hollywood, New York, Nashville, and other generators of popular culture.

The last of the three voices of concern for Stackhouse is Sven Birkerts and his collection of essays entitled *The Gutenberg Elegies*. According to Birkerts, we see things today in bits and pieces, with no overarching story or philosophy to make sense of the rush of data we receive. We do not see narrative, story line, plot, continuity. We see a news story, then another one that

If nothing else, the differences between an ancient culture and our modern one demand that we become familiar with both contexts in order to understand and apply the biblical revelation. Some of you may already be very familiar with the ancient world or may know where to find useful information about it that will help you understand the Bible. Others may need to work more diligently in order to make full use of the Bible in study and reading. Your level of biblical literacy is not nearly as important as being honest with yourself about where you stand. What will you need to know or find out in order to read and understand this passage? Do you know where you can go to get this information?

is completely unrelated, and then a commercial that has nothing to do with either.

What is Stackhouse's point? He writes: Indeed the logic of Birkerts, Postman, and company would seem to be that it is better for our minds, given the unpleasant choice, to read a cheap novel (Robert Ludlum, Harold Robins, David Baldacci, etc.) than to watch the same on TV, for even plowing through a novel requires some exercise of intellectual skills and habits of mind.

What skills? The skill of hearing an author's voice and making sense of it. The skill of decoding words on a page and creating a world in your mind. The skill of stopping and considering and evaluating what one reads and then moving on (p. 98).

What habits? The habit of sitting still and carefully submitting to an author's direction, at an author's pace. The habit of shutting out the rest of the world and slipping into what Birkerts calls "deep time," the suspended consciousness of what we call the absorbed reader. The habit of engaging the author with critical attention (p. 98).

Stackhouse then asserts that in some ways, our modern connections through the media help us to see our world better. We know more about other lands and peoples than we did in the past, through instantaneous, long-range communication. But in some ways we are worse off: we know less about ourselves, and particularly our histories, than we did even a generation ago. We have no sense of place and time, no standpoint from which to consider the variety of alternative values, ideas, traditions, and habits of others. We don't know who we are, so we have trouble understanding anyone else (p. 99).

He then bemoans that, first, many of us do not, in fact, read much or often. Second, there is reading and there is reading and there is reading, and we tend to read only at the first two levels (p. 99). The third level is deep reading, reading that does not just "use" a book but converses with it, treating it with respect as a companion. This is the reading that shapes minds and souls, reading that is truly of and in the spirit. Poetry requires this kind of reading, so does drama, essays, novels, and above all, he says, Scripture requires it: it is *this* reading that is vanishing all around us (p. 100).

He writes: "People don't read, and we forget how to read well or never learn. Indeed, one of the most shocking examples of this phenomenon can be furnished immediately in any group of Christians. Produce a paragraph of Scripture . . . , and ask each person to articulate just the main point of that paragraph in one sentence. Then stand back and watch the chaos. People cannot read with discipline, with attention, with submission to the text. They read for use or for entertainment ("Here's what I think is interesting" or "Here's what it means to me") but not for real engagement with another mind ("Here's what it says—and now I'll have to think about it.") (p. 100)

Putting It All Together

“How do I put it all together? What is a good study plan for me as a teacher?” My recommendation is an *inductive Bible study* method. “Inductive” means reasoning from the specific to the general, from the parts to the whole. It is the opposite of deductive reasoning, which is moving from the general to the specific. We will recommend a four-step method.

I. OBSERVATION – What do I see?

This involves reading the text over and over. As you do so, ask specific questions.

- Who is the writer?
- To whom is he writing?
- To and from where is he writing?
- What is the situation or occasion?
- When did it occur?
- What historical/cultural factors might have a bearing on understanding the passage?

Keep in mind that there are several “gaps” you will have to hurdle: language, culture and geography. (Often, if you use a good study Bible, such as *The Ryrie Study Bible*, or *The MacArthur Study Bible*, or *The ESV Study Bible*, etc. many of the above questions are answered.)

II. INTERPRETATION – What does it mean?

When doing interpretation, begin by doing your own work. There are certain study tools you can use (dictionaries, word study books, etc.), but don’t resort to commentaries at this point. Dig in and determine what the passage means *to you* as you do the following:

- A. Underline key words and phrases and define them in terms of the context—what the passage is saying.
- B. Paraphrase (put into your own words) each verse or section of the passage. Try putting the basic thought conveyed in a passage or paragraph into one sentence. (Similarly, when the pastor is constructing a sermon, this is referred to as determining the “big idea,” or working to develop the *proposition* of the sermon.)
- C. List the divine truths and principles in the verse, paragraph or passage. Ask:
 - Is there a command God has given?
 - Is there an example to follow?
 - Is there some sin to avoid?
 - Is there a warning against false teaching of any kind?
 - Is there a basic doctrinal truth about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, etc.?
 - Is there a promise from God to individual Christians, Israel, the church?

- D. Cross reference as many truths or principles as possible. Do you find these same truths taught in other parts of Scripture? (Try to list two or three, but do not let yourself get bogged down listing six, seven, or twenty.)

III. EVALUATION – What do others say?

- A. Here is where you get some outside help by stopping to check what commentators and other scholars have said about the passage or doctrine under study. Go back through the passage again to see what divine truths or principles are emphasized by the commentaries you have available to you.
- B. You may find that you will modify your own understandings or conclusions, but do not think you have to agree with every commentator. Make them prove themselves.

IV. APPLICATION – What should I do? (How should I respond?)

- A. Here is where you, as a teacher, must put yourself into the lives of your students. You must wrestle with how to make the passage relevant for *your/their* life. Ask:
- What does the Lord want you to start doing?
 - What does the Lord want you to stop doing?
 - What should you be doing more often?
- B. Keep in mind that application of Bible truth does not have to be profound, or a life-or-death kind of thing. You/they can apply God’s Word right at home—every morning, throughout the day. You can apply it at church, work, in the neighborhood, on the job—anywhere you have relationships.
- C. Biblical teaching, or doctrine, is basic. Once we determine what a passage means, the really final and crucial questions for the teacher are: So what? What are you going to do about it? How do you use it in your own life? (2 Tim.3:16-17)
- D. Your goal is to help your student understand “Why?” and “How?” That’s where the rebuking, correcting and training come in. As Scripture rebukes us, it reveals our sin and shows us how and why we should change. The next step is correcting our course, changing our path, developing new habits. It all adds up to being trained in the Word—disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt.28:19-20; Col. 3:15-17).