

# The Disciplers' Model

**S** watched them as they slowly gathered in the conference room. It was time to start another new Sunday School year, and the church had brought me in to stir up the troops. Here were the dedicated ones, the ones who faithfully attended training sessions and planning meetings. But many of them looked as if they were suffering from battle fatigue.

The minister of education led the group in prayer: "Oh Lord, help us to redouble our efforts this year. Forgive us when we fail to serve You as we should. Now, give us open minds to learn how to be effective teachers. Amen."

I stood to speak. As I looked into the eyes of those teachers, all I could see was weariness and futility. What could I say to them that would ignite their enthusiasm for the greatest challenge in the world? What could I say that would overcome their shell-shock and battle fatigue from months and years in the trenches of spiritual warfare? I smiled at the group, and a few smiled back. After a few introductory remarks, I invited them to open their Bibles to Ezekiel 37.

*<sup>1</sup>And the hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and*

*set me in the middle of a valley: it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"*

*I said, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."*

*<sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!' <sup>5</sup>This is what the Sovereign*



*Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup>I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord'.*

*<sup>10</sup>So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and*

*stood up on their feet--a vast army."*

"Do you ever get the feeling at the beginning of a new Sunday School year that you are standing in a place much like Ezekiel? Do you look at your class and see little more than 'dry bones'?" I noticed several heads nod, and a few faces smiled knowingly. "How do we prophesy to the dry bones who sit in our classes? How do we let God put flesh and skin upon them and life in them? How do we teach so that God can raise up an Army among us, to live for Him, and to serve Him? That's what our conference tonight will answer." At that moment, I saw the Spirit of God move among those teachers. Eyes brightened. Bodies leaned slightly forward. Hands picked up pencils and opened notepads. And another journey into the fascinating world of Christ-centered, Bible-based, person-oriented teaching had begun.

. . .

Chapter Zero explained *why I became* so enthusiastic about discipling Bible study. But it is the responses I get from Sunday School teachers – conference after conference -- and from seminary students – semester after semester -- that *continues to excite me* about the Disciplers' Model. The Lord continues to use the Disciplers' Model to renew the hope and commitment of those He has called to teach. That is the real blessing of sharing the Disciplers' Model with others. "Then you will know that I am the Lord'."

But before we examine the answer to 'dry bones' in Bible study, we need to understand the root cause of those dry bones. Just what is the problem?

## **THE PROBLEM IS RITUAL**

The dictionary defines "ritual" as "prescribed

forms of religious worship or practice; observance of prescribed forms in religion" (The New Webster Dictionary of the English Language, 1965, p. 727). A ritualized Bible study, then, is a religious duty imposed from without rather than a spiritual privilege embraced from within. The former is revealed by words like, "The good Christian ought to go to Sunday School!" The latter by the words, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" (Psalm 122:1) The former is 'dry bones,' the latter 'living spirit.' But ritualized Bible study and worship are not new. Ritualized religion grows out of the natural tendency to simplify life.

## **The Advantages of Ritual**

Ritual saves time and mental energy. When I go into a clothing store, I don't spend any time at all deciding whether to steal a suit. I give it no thought at all.

When I sit down in a restaurant and the waitress asks, "Care for a cocktail?", it takes no time at all for me to say "No, thank you." I spend no time wondering whether I should or shouldn't. I spend no emotional energy worrying about it. I give no thought to whether I'm being watched or not.

I made these decisions, as well as many others, long ago. They are part of my lifestyle. I take these actions for granted and my life is less confusing because of it.

## **The Dangers of Ritual**

Even with these advantages, ritual is dangerous because it impairs personal relationships. If I give my wife the impression that I'm taking her for granted, our relationship will suffer. Or when I take a friendship for granted, I may soon lose a friend.

When we ritualize Bible study and worship, the Lord has no active role in them. Ritual closes hearts and minds to the moving of the Spirit of God. The result of taking Him for granted in religious activities is 'dry bones.' The Lord told prophet Isaiah: *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."* (29:13, NIV)

Religious ritual is so natural. It is so subtle. We drift into it without knowing what's happening unless we consciously work against it. But ritual in singing hymns, attending Sunday School, giving money, or visiting prospects closes spiritual channels through which God can transform our lives. We must intentionally invite Him into our studies and into our classrooms.

## Why Have a Model?

A model is an uncomplicated representation of complicated reality. It simplifies complex ideas. A model helps us 'take in the whole' of a problem and think about it in a way that isn't possible without it. It unfolds a mental map for our thinking.

The Disciplers' Model is a simple graphic that has helped me analyze the complexities of Christian teaching for more than fifteen years. You will learn the elements of the Disciplers' Model quickly. But you will be able to use it for the rest of your life to enhance and balance and evaluate your teaching.

## Focus on How-to?

'Dry bones' Bible study is definitely a situation that needs study. But some are tempted to short-circuit the analysis. Some want to

hurry on to the practical how-to's of method and technique. It's a mark, I suppose, of our instant culture. We are action-prone. We want results! But the world of constant doing has little room for contemplation or meditation or "waiting on the Lord." The world of "how?" and "when?" has little room for "why?"

## First, Focus on Why!

But, you say, there is much to be said for aggressiveness and action. It gets the job done! And that's the bottom line.

**Sure, there is a lot to be said  
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But there is danger also --  
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But what is the job? Why are we doing it? Sure, there is a lot to be said for action. But there is danger also like running in the dark. If we neglect the purpose for Bible study, we risk creating a Sunday School that operates in a aimless, mechanical way.

We *may* end up building an organization that runs helter skelter, consuming the time and energy of many people, with little or no regard for spiritual direction or ultimate purpose.

What is the *why?* of our ministry?

### Leaves and Fruit

Jesus saw this in the religious organization of His day. Early in the morning, the Monday of Easter Week, He and the twelve made their way from Bethany to Jerusalem. As they walked along the road, Jesus spotted a fig tree covered with leaves. Since the fig tree produces leaves after bearing fruit, He had every reason to believe He'd find figs on the tree. But when He parted the leaves He found no fruit. The tree was barren. It was a deceiver, a hypocrite, giving the appearance of fruit-bearing when it actually produced nothing but leaves. Later in the day Jesus found the temple organization in the same condition. There were religious leaves in the hustle-bustle of religious activity, but no spiritual fruit. On both the tree and the temple He issued stern condemnations (Mark 11:12-20).

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We can grow leaves on our educational tree without a model to guide us. We can increase attendance, enlist leaders, train teachers, and hold meetings with no more aim than to reinforce the organization. Leaves are important. Trees die without them. But if we want spiritual fruit among the leaves, we need a biblical model to give us direction as

we lead and teach God's people.

### Using the Model to Solve Problems

John was sitting in his study, thumbing through his sermon notes for Sunday one last time before heading out to the hospitals, when the phone buzzed. It was Ethel, a Sunday School teacher for one of the ladies' classes.

"Brother John, I'm so frustrated with my class that I just don't know what to do! You know how hard I work. I've taught that class for years! But I've seen so few results. They refuse to participate or answer questions. They won't study for class during the week! They're not visiting. I'm ready to give it up and let someone else try!"

With a few well-placed questions drawn from the Model, John was able to diagnose Ethel's real problem. He made several suggestions for her to try over the next several weeks. He commended her good work and encouraged her to stay with the class. He listened carefully to her and shared with her. "Let me know how things go these next few weeks," he said as he hung up the phone.

John helped this teacher in several practical ways. He supported her ministry as a teacher. He affirmed her as a child of God. He gave her practical suggestions to help alleviate the problems that were frustrating her. He heard her, and helped her. Things did improve as she tried his suggestions. Her attitude toward the class and her ministry of teaching improved as well. John had a model that helped him analyze the situation and provide concrete help.

### ***THE MODEL'S THE SOLUTION***

My solution to the problem of ritualized

Bible study, as you learned in Chapter Zero, is the Disciplers' Model. The Model grew out of my struggles--both as a Sunday School teacher of adults and as a minister of education training adults to teach. The struggles centered around eliminating "dry bones" in the teaching ministry of the church. The remainder of the chapter defines each of the seven elements and shows how they work together to help believers "live a life worthy of the Lord, and please Him in every way." (Col 1:10, NIV)

## THE LEFT FOUNDATION STONE: The Bible: God's Eternal Word

The left foundation stone of the model represents the Bible. Efforts in Sunday School come and go: high attendance Sundays, re-organization plans, building programs. But unless these efforts produce a clearer understanding of the Bible, with its call to personal commitment to Christ and His Church, all our efforts may produce "wood, hay, and stubble" (1 Cor. 3:12, NIV). For teaching to be rightly called "Christian," it must be built upon the sure foundation of God's Word.

### What is the Bible?

Southern Baptists are serious about the Bible. Leaders have written volumes defending the Scriptures and attacking those who hold views different from their own. Yet the arguments, which often give off more heat than light, usually focus on interpretations of Scripture, and not the nature of Scripture itself. Southern Baptists differ in their interpretations, but all claim to be "People of the Book." As we try to bring order out of the chaos of human attempts to defend the Bible, let's look at what "the Book" says about

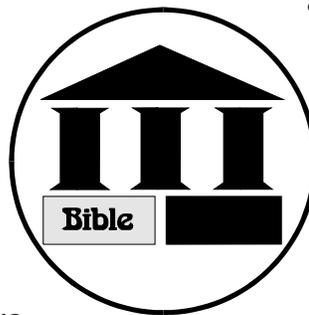
itself.

**Divinely inspired.** "Take a scroll and write on it all the words I [the Lord] have spoken to you" (Jer 36:2). "the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel. . . There the hand of the Lord was upon him" (Ezek 1:3). "the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David" (Acts 1:16). "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). "For the prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Pet 1:21).

**Sacred.** Do not alter Scripture by adding to it or taking away from it. Deut 4:2, 12:32; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:19.

**Powerful in its influence.** "I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes." (Jer 5:14). "Is not my word. . . like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29). "The gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). "Take the. . . sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17). "It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb 4:12).

**Written for a purpose.** "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Cor 10:11). "I write these things. . . so that



you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn 5:13).

**Eternal truth.** "Your Word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens (Ps 119:89). "The word of God stands forever. (Isa 40:8). "My words will never pass away" (Mt 24:35). "But the word of the Lord stands forever" (1 Pe 1:25).

### How do You *Use* the Bible?

God's Word is Eternal Truth. Few would argue about the *nature* of Scripture. But how do you *handle* Scripture as you teach? Whether you are effective disciplers depends directly on how you we handle Scripture. Even with the highest regard for Scripture, you may not help your learners grow in the Lord.

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**But even with  
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their learners**

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### "Talk About It."

A popular way to handle Scripture is **to talk about it**. Study the lesson and then tell the class about the Bible passage for the week. I remember spending hours every week preparing to "teach the lesson" on Sunday. I read the assigned passage, studied the accompanying teaching helps, and wrote out several pages of notes: my "lesson." On Sunday I stood behind a podium or at a desk and "taught my lesson." I can remember Sundays when I taught so hard (using sign language with deaf college students) that I liter-

ally sweat through my suits! Yet several days later, members of my class remembered little of what I had worked so hard to teach. How could they become "doers of the Word" if they couldn't remember what the Bible said?!

I was merely talking about the Bible. The study was little more than a history lesson to my students.

Test this yourself. Ask members of your class next Sunday what they remember from last week. Be prepared for a shock! Most of what you said will have been forgotten by Monday! Telling people about the Bible is a good first step, but *discipling* Bible study requires more. There is a better way to help people grow spiritually.

### "Let the Bible Speak!"

The better way to handle Scripture in the classroom -- and the approach I've found to be helpful in really changing learners -- is to let the Bible speak! When I ask thoughtful questions and lead my learners into God's Word for the Answers, I find that they remember what we've studied far better than when I simply give them my own ready-made answers. Further, while learners search for answers in assigned Scripture passages, the Lord can speak to their hearts directly. Insights may have little to do with the questions I ask, but the Lord speaks to learners out of His Word nonetheless -- and when He speaks, learners seldom forget! *Well, I certainly see your point in verse 4, but I noticed something in verse 6 that really hit me...*

The Bible, God's eternal Truth, is the sure foundation of discipling Bible study. Let us unsheath our Swords! **Let the Word speak**, that it may convict and comfort, warn and console, revive and refresh us -- so we might become all He intends and do all He com-

mands. "Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path" (Ps. 119:105, NIV).

## THE RIGHT FOUNDATION STONE: The Needs of People

The right foundation stone in the model represents the *personal needs* of learners in the class. The Bible is not like other so-called holy books that just fell out of the sky. The Bible is the Holy Book written by men who were inspired by God, who hungered for Him, whose deepest needs were met and whose lives were filled by a loving God. Learners discover these riches by applying biblical teachings and experiences to their own needs.

### Jesus Focused on Needs

Jesus taught people the meaning of scripture by focusing it at their point of personal need. Zacchaeus was lonely. Jesus asked to have dinner with him (Lk. 19:10). Jairus grieved at the death of his daughter. Jesus raised her to life (Mk. 5:21ff). Nicodemus the Pharisee sought Jesus' words on the kingdom of God. Jesus gave him specific instructions (Jn. 3).

Jesus did not dine with everyone, nor raise all dead people, nor give special instructions to all. *He met needs in the lives of people -- the leperous, the lame, the deaf, the blind, the lonely and the religious -- and in doing so, taught us about our Father and His Kingdom.* Jesus pointed to soils and light and salt and sheep. He illustrated eternal truths with basic things that were familiar to those who pressed close to hear Him teach. He had no need of attendance prizes or candy or free trips to manipulate interest or enthusiasm. He spoke the Words of Life we all hunger



for! He shared with His learners a caring Father Who wants only the best for them. The Eternal Truth of Scripture became real to the persons He touched. It became "Truth that matters to me!"

### Our Learners Have Needs

We have the same basic, personal needs that Jesus found in the people of His day. Many have rejected the Answers to their needs because Scripture is so often cloaked in religious jargon -- "church talk" -- and dark moralistic tones. Some make the "lesson" more important than their learners. *I wish we had time to discuss your situation, but I have five more verses to cover!* We need to follow the Master's example. Love your learners and teach so they can apply scripture in the nitty-gritty concerns of living.

What the Bible says is unchanging, but how we explain it varies with those we teach. Why? Because our learners have different needs.

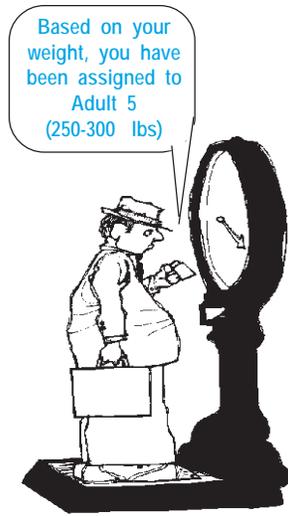
These differing needs are both general and specific.

### General needs

The general needs of learners are factors which most people have in common. An important general need of learners is age-appropriate learning activities. Preschoolers learn differently from children, and children differently from youth. The adult age range spans 60 or more years and involves major life changes. Learners within given age categories experience similar things in life: growing, school, adolescence, marriage, family, home, career, retirement. Similarity of life experiences helps the group focus on relevant Bible teachings.

**Group Adults by Age or Weight?** This is the

main educational reason for age-grading in Sunday School. We have "X" people to put in "Y" spaces. How can we do this to provide the best educational setting for Bible study? I once suggested that, since so many of our members were complaining about **age-grading** that we grade our Sunday School by **weight**. Adult 1 would consist of adults under 110 pounds and Adult 6 would be those over 300. After that, grading by age didn't seem so bad after all!



You will be able to communicate much better with the group you teach if you have a good understanding of the group's general age characteristics.

But there are other general need areas: the need to know the Lord personally, to grow in the Lord, to use his or her gifts in a place of service to others. Every believer needs to pray. Every believer needs fellowship with other believers. These general areas of need guide the discipler as he or she prepares to teach.

### Specific Needs

But there are areas of *specific needs* as well. These needs are unique to individual learners and include such things as personal failures or successes, past tragedies, present struggles, and areas of spiritual drought. There are an amazing number of aches, pains and scars in a Church Family. I learned that years ago when I helped a counselor on our church staff. During the group sharing times, I heard church members share experiences

and tragedies that had twisted them all out of shape. But you would not have known it to look at them on Sunday morning. Until an atmosphere of trust can be established, these areas of need remain hidden.

**Know your learners one by one.** Make a point to know your learners as individuals, as persons. Rejoice with them when they celebrate and empathize with them when they hurt. I found it helpful to keep a notebook of special events, prayer requests and experiences shared in class by learners. I used this notebook to help me plan our Bible studies to address these areas of concern.

### Two Stones in Tension

The model requires a stable, firm foundation if it is to stand. Both foundation stones must bear their share of the burden. If either crumbles, the model falls. If teachers place too much emphasis on the text -- names, dates, places -- and ignore the needs of learners, they tend to teach history lessons. If teachers place too much emphasis on learners and their needs and ignore the text, they tend toward group therapy. Let's look more carefully at these two extremes.

### Unrelated History?

Some people enjoy history, but the Word of God is much more. When teachers are more concerned with "the lesson" than with the Christian walk of their learners, they place too much focus on content. Learners subjected to this kind of imbalance ask "What does this Bible passage have to say to me?" Unrelated to their present needs or concerns or interests? Hmm. *Irrelevant history?* I'll never forget the night a retired judge nailed me over that term. I used the term in a conference with over three hundred teachers of adults who had gathered from across three different associations. As I made my point



...but we can teach so that our learners think it is!

about "history lessons" and "relevancy," he stood to his feet, pointed his finger at me and said, *Young man, I'll have you know that the Word of God is never irrelevant!*

Three hundred pairs of eyes turned toward me to see how I'd respond. I said, "Well, of course you're right," I said. "But if we merely talk about the Bible, if we never help learners see how the Bible can address their own

problems and needs, then they will **think** it's irrelevant. And the result is *dry bones* teaching." To help the lost understand their need for the Lord, and to help believers grow in Him, we must do more than tell Bible stories and teach history. We must make God's Word relevant to the needs and problems of our learners.

### Group Therapy?

On the other hand, members who merely share concerns and needs with each other, without addressing those needs out of scripture, will not grow either. Group therapy is fine in its place, but it isn't Bible study. It doesn't provide Answers to the questions raised. I once overheard two teachers talking in a hallway. One of the teachers had attended my conference on leading discussions and was telling his friend about it. "Oh, I don't have a problem getting a discussion started in my class. We can always talk about football!" There may be discussion, but there will be little growth in the Lord. Some classes consume much of their Bible study time sharing prayer needs. Other classes spend their time catching up on the latest news. Good fellowship. Good sharing. Getting to know each other. But real needs remain untouched. God's Word is not allowed to speak. *Where's the substance?*

### Stay Out of the Ditches!

And so our road has ditches on both sides: unrelated history lessons on the left and group therapy on the right. Taken together,



however, Eternal Truth and Present Needs provide a super highway for discipling Bible study. As you provide a place where the Word of God speaks directly to the real needs of your learners, you establish a personal ministry that is both relevant and eternal.

We have laid the foundation for Bible study that helps people grow in the Lord: God's Eternal Word, and learners' present needs. On this sure foundation, we are ready to erect the three pillars of discipling Bible study: helping people think biblically, helping learners remove masks, and building *koinonia*.

## The Left Pillar: Helping People Think

We began the chapter talking about ritualized Bible study and its deadly effect. Ritual holds us hostage in our religious status quo. We may be comfortable, perhaps, but we are also spiritually dry. Ritualistic Bible study paralyzes the thinking process. The result is members who can only repeat religious clichés and give pat answers to complex problems. Believers mouth memorized prayers: *Lord, be with the sick and afflicted (whoever they may be)*. Respond to hardships with glib phrases: *Well, just praise the Lord anyway! (so long as I don't have to go out of my way to help or anything)*. Or sing hymns and choruses without a thought to what the words mean: *All to Jesus, I surrender. All to Him I freely give (so long as I can do as I please)*.

### What's an 'Ebenezer'?

In my early years of ministry with the deaf, I was preparing to interpret the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." One of the verses begins

*Here I raise my Ebenezer,  
Hither by Thy help I'm come.*

I have enthusiastically sung this song many times, but at that moment I realized that I had no idea what an "Ebenezer" was. A little bit of study uncovered 1 Samuel 7:12:

*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up  
between Mizpah and Shen. He named it  
Ebenezer  
saying, "Thus far has the Lord helped us."*

So I learned that the Ebenezer was a memorial to the Lord, a thanksgiving to God for helping Israel against her enemies. This is exactly what the verse says: *Hither by thy help I'm come*. How did I interpret it in the worship service?

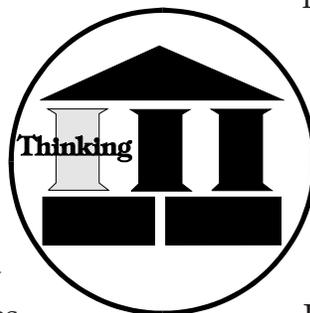
*Here I raise my praise to Jesus,  
Up-til-now You've helped me a lot.*

Well, it doesn't translate well into English, but it conveys meaning.

And that's what had I missed. I had sung that song all my life without ever thinking about what the words meant. Such mindless ritual hinders Christian growth.

### Thinking Supports Growing

If you want to grow in the Lord as you study the Bible, you must think about what it means! If you want to disciple those you teach, then you must help them to think clearly. Not merely parrot your answers, but to weigh evidence, to ask questions, to analyze the answers of others, to confront the status quo with God's Word. The "Thinking Pillar" represents the disciplers' *objective focus* in teaching: helping learners translate the familiar stories and passages of the Bible into principles and standards by which they



can make decisions in everyday situations. How do we teach so that thinking skills are improved?

### Three Stages of Thinking.

Paul gives us a keen insight into the role of thinking in Christian growth when he wrote to the Colossian believers:

*“. . . We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9).*

Here Paul presents us with three components of spiritual growth through using the mind. These are knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

### Knowledge

We commonly use the word knowledge to refer to facts that the learner commits to memory. “To know” something means to be aware of, or to be able to identify something.

**More than information.** “Giving people information” is different from “establishing knowledge.” When you succeed in teaching for knowledge, learners remember what was taught. Many Sunday School teachers deal more with Bible *information* than they do Bible *knowledge*. Information simply doesn't stick until it is actively processed by learners. In my early days of teaching Sunday School, a deaf college student told me “You teach too much -- it goes in one eye and out the other!” Bible facts will be quickly forgotten unless we do more than simply talk through the lesson.

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**Heart knowledge.** But Paul goes beyond the idea of “head knowledge” in this passage. He does not use the more common word for knowledge, *gnosis* [NOsis]. He was writing against the forerunners of the Gnostics [“gnosis people”] who held that, without their secret knowledge, believers could not get to heaven.

The word Paul did use in this passage to convey his meaning of knowledge is *epignosis* (ayPEHGnosis). The word means “knowledge that reaches out and grasps its object and is in turn grasped by its object.” An example might be a baseball fan’s knowledge of baseball. He reaches out to grasp the game, and also is grasped by it. It is a term of intimate relationship, akin to the idea of husband and wife knowing each other intimately. The term includes head knowledge, but moves beyond it into what we might call “heart” knowledge: a knowledge that affects the way we live.

**What does the Bible say?** The beginning point for effective Bible teaching is to convey what the Bible says. Clear interpretation of Bible teachings requires knowledge of Bible persons, terms, places, and events. Without an adequate background in the setting of a given Bible passage, the learner will interpret the words of the Bible in light of his culture and experience. The Baptist Sunday

School Board provides Southern Baptists a veritable treasure chest of background helps in teaching materials. Suggested teaching plans, commentaries, the *Illustrator* magazine for adults, and resource kits provide more information than any teacher can cover in a Sunday School hour. As good as this biblical all-you-can-eat buffet is, problems arise when teachers view this feast as required diet.

***Overemphasis on facts.*** Too much emphasis on background facts can take so much teaching time that we never address the other stages of thinking. "I wish we could discuss your question, but I have three more verses to cover." If you do nothing more than tell facts, you will not help learners to grasp or be grasped by God's Word. You will not establish knowledge. You merely flood your learners with information, and this they soon forget. *In one eye and out the other.*

"But I thought my job is to Cover The Lesson." I hear this so often in Teacher Conferences. By "Cover the Lesson," teachers mean they feel an obligation to tell their class about all the material in the Teacher's Quarterly. No matter what the learner needs. No matter what questions they ask. No matter what problems surface. They believe their job is to "Cover The Lesson."

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God has called us to a more important task

than talking through a Sunday School lesson in front of a group of people. Lead learners beyond biblical information to a closer walk with Christ. Help learners think about the implications of God's Word for daily living. This requires moving learners to understanding.

### ***Understanding***

Learners *understand* when they have organized knowledge into concepts and principles that can be used. When learners understand a Bible passage, they can explain it to others in their own words. They are not limited to repeating verbatim what others say. They have the ability to describe ideas and terms, give examples of what words do and do not mean, and create examples and illustrations to clarify the idea.

Paul knew the Old Testament well. He had studied under the great Jewish philosopher Gamaliel. He was trained in the best Pharisaical schools. He was zealous in his persecution of "liberal" Jews who were following a dead Nazarene carpenter. He demanded that they return to the "Old Time Religion." But when He met the Risen Lord on his way to Damascus, he saw things in a completely new way. During three years in an Arabian desert, he studied the Old Testament with a new perspective. The Book of Romans gives us the result of his thinking. Before, he knew what the Old Testament said; now he understood what it meant in the light of the resurrection of Jesus.

***What Does the Bible Mean?*** Is there a difference between what the Bible *says* and what the Bible *means*? I've had more than a few students who insist that there is no difference: "The Bible says what it means, and it means what it says!" This will always rouse a hardy "Amen!" The only problem is that it isn't necessarily true. The first time I read

Colossians 1:9 ("asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will") I assumed the word "knowledge" meant what I used the word to mean: memorization of facts, or ability to recall. That is not what Paul had in mind when he wrote that statement under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When learners read their own definitions into Bible passages, and then interpret what the Bible "says" accordingly, *they make the Bible reflect their own ideas*. They are not letting the Bible speak to them. I learned the danger of this one night after a deaf revival service in our church. I was talking with a deaf man about the Lord. His heart had been warmed by the message, but he wasn't ready to make a commitment. He wanted to end our discussion of his spiritual condition quickly, so he simply said,

*I can't be saved.*

"Why?" I asked.  
Without hesitation, he said,

*...because I'm deaf.*

"Because you're deaf?! What makes you think that you can't be saved because you're deaf??"

*The Bible says so.*

"Where does the Bible say you can't be saved because you're deaf?"

*Oh, I don't know where exactly.*

*But it says:*

*If you confess with your mouth,*

*"Jesus is Lord," . . .*

*you will be saved.*

*So. . .I'm deaf.*

*I can't confess with my mouth.*

*So, I can't be saved.*

His logic sounded good, though I knew it was wrong. He was really saying, "God made me deaf. He says I can't be saved. It's His fault. So get off my back, preacher."

"But **that's not what that passage means**," I said, wanting to reassure him that he could be saved. But with great finality, he looked me in the eye, and with conviction he said,

*That's what the Bible SAYS!*

**Words or Concepts?** And so I learned in a very practical way that what the Bible seems to say may not always be what the Bible actually means. There is a difference between "words" and "concepts." Knowing words and understanding concepts are two different things.

**What did Jesus say?** Let's take "Love your enemies" as an example. Anyone who has been associated with Sunday School or church for even a short time knows that Jesus said "Love your enemies."

**What did Jesus mean?** J But what did Jesus mean when he said this?

What do I do when I love enemies?

And who are my enemies?

Must I like my enemies?

How will "loving enemies" change the way I live day by day?

I use this familiar phrase each time I present the disciplers' model in conferences. It is amazing to me how much difficulty seasoned Sunday School teachers have with Jesus' concepts in this simple phrase. We often get into quite a discussion about what Jesus meant. This is because answers to these questions involve understanding that love (agape) is "acting toward another in his best interest."

*Agape* does not require emotion or affection toward the one being loved. It is intentional action for another's good. Whose good? My enemies. "Enemy" describes one who is acting against my best interest.

Jesus defined his own words in the passage as He said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). "Agape" means blessing and doing good and praying for. Nothing here about how I feel about them. "My enemy" means those who curse me, and hate me, and use and hurt me. My enemy can be my best friend, my colleague, my wife, or a fellow church member. When people close to me hurt me, I do not feel like loving them. But I am commanded to love. Not to feel warm and fuzzy, but to act in their best interest.

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**Unless Bible teaching  
can move learners  
from isolated words  
to biblical concepts,  
we will see  
little spiritual growth  
in our members.**

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It is far easier to know the words "Love your enemies" than it is to understand their meaning. But until learners clearly understand what Jesus meant, they will not be able to "love their enemies" in the way He intended. Unless Bible teaching can move learners from isolated words to biblical concepts, we will see little spiritual growth in our members.

*"Joy is . . . Joy"*. A seminary student

wrote a lesson plan on the Fruit of the Spirit [Gal 5:20-21]. His purpose was to help class members understand each of the nine Fruit listed by Paul. This is the pattern he followed throughout the plan:

*So what is joy? Joy is wonderful. It is the kind of joy that only comes from God. It is the joy we'll experience in heaven. The joy of the Lord is a real blessing. . . .*

I wrote on his paper, "So, what is joy?" He never explained what joy (or any of the other Fruit) actually means. How do I experience this joy? What is it like? How does it differ from pleasure or fun or even happiness? His learners never got a clue from his teaching. Nice words, fitly spoken. But little in the way of meaning. **We might call this religious talking, but it certainly is not Christian teaching.**

Holiness. Salvation. Prayer. Ministry. Church. Sin. Sacrifice. Faith. Hope. Patience. Anger. What do these and hundreds of other biblical terms mean?

Mercy and Truth. Love and Wrath. Free will and predestination. Holy anger and forgiveness. Grace and conviction. These biblical concepts pull us one way and then another. Only clear understanding of their associated meaning will lead us to proper action. It is my personal conviction that teachers could improve Sunday School teaching ten-fold simply by giving attention to the concepts that are addressed in assigned passages of scripture. It is far better to help learners master a single biblical concept that they will remember for years than it is to tell them 35 facts that they will forget by Tuesday. But even proper understanding isn't sufficient for growing Christians. We have one step yet to take: helping learners grow in wis-

dom.

### *Wisdom.*

Learners become wise as they put into action Jesus' teachings. At least, this is my understanding of Jesus' definition in Matthew 7:24-26.

...everyone who hears these words of mine and *puts them into practice* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

...everyone who hears these words of mine and *does not put them into practice* is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

**Put Into Practice.** The clear distinction between "wise" and "foolish" in Jesus' definition is the term **put into practice**. Wisdom relates more to what we do than what we know. More to lifestyle than to schooling or position or diplomas. As we learn what the Bible says, understand what the Bible means, and then strive, labor, battle to live in its light, the result is wisdom. Doing the Word! Not hearing only.

**Do What the Bible Commands.** Let's pick up "Love your enemies" again. Your learners know the words. They understand the concepts. Now the question is, *Do they go out and love those who are enemies?* If they don't, then Sunday School is little more than an academic exercise. "The foolish man hears but does not put into practice."

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**The Lord Himself teaches  
when  
learners live  
by biblical truths.**

---

People hurt, disappoint and frustrate us. This is a normal part of life. How do we respond? In anger? With retribution? If we let Jesus teach us how, if we respond in their best interest, then we "love" (agape) them. If our real-life responses follow this biblical pattern, we demonstrate biblical wisdom.

### **Growth is an Upward Spiral**

Knowing, understanding, and doing carry us upward toward spiritual maturity. Learners discover what the Bible says (knowledge). They process this knowledge in order to clarify Bible concepts (understanding). As they use these biblical concepts to make decisions (wisdom), they grow spiritually. As they grow in wisdom, they learn more about what the Bible says (more knowledge), which in turn allows them to deepen concepts, and so on throughout life.

Christians "take on the mind of Christ" as they spiral upward through knowledge, understanding and wisdom; I spiral upward in Christ. Paul writes to believers, "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2, NIV).

How do we transform our minds? Paul has already told us:

know what the Bible says,  
understand what it means, and  
live it out  
at home, at work and at church.

**Why Study?** The purpose of this growth, says Paul, is not just to know a lot about the Bible, but to **live biblically**.

"...we pray this in order that you may *live a life worthy of the Lord*, and may *please him* in every way: *bearing*

*fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge [epignosis] of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might" (v. 10, NIV).*

This is the left pillar of the Disciplers' Model. Teach in a way that helps people think biblically, in and out of class. Over time, learners will develop lives "worthy of the Lord." Lives pleasing to God. Fruitful and Strong. Why? Because they know what the Bible says, understands what it means, and does as it commands.

## THE RIGHT PILLAR: Helping People Unmask

Ritual does not limit its cancer to the *thinking* of Christians. It also saps the ability of Christians to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15, NIV). The right pillar in the Model symbolizes the subjective focus in teaching. It addresses the emotional aspects of Christian growth and maturity. Spiritual growth results in an emotional life that is balanced and controlled. Teaching which disciplines students helps them use their emotions appropriately.

### The Smiley-Face Mask

Sunday morning can be a real test of patience. Get the family up and dressed and fed. Off to church late. Strained emotions cause children to fuss and fight, and parents to overreact. By the time the family arrives at church, everyone is angry! But as they make their way to their separate classes, they wear a smiley-face mask.

Or Teenager has a drug problem, but Mom and Dad are afraid to share their anguish with their Sunday School class. "What would people think?!" And so they keep their smiley-face masks firmly in place.

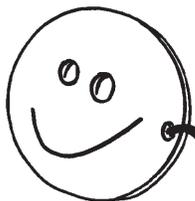


Young married couple in seminary have an infant which requires a special formula. The formula takes most of their food budget, but they don't tell anyone. They're literally starving because they know "God will take care of them." Behind their smiley-face masks lurks hunger and fear.

Or Unemployed can't find a job, but he keeps this to himself because someone might think him a failure. Or Rising Executive gets a surprise promotion, but he keeps it to himself because someone might think him conceited. Religious masks. Hidden hearts. Real problems. Dry bones.

### Jesus Wore No Mask

Jesus was **real** in the way He reacted emotionally to life. He wore no smiley-face mask. He dealt with the world realistically. He was not a dark-hearted prophet of doom, nor a light-hearted Pollyanna. He met life as it was and responded appropriately to the events of His life. When his good friend Lazarus died, Jesus didn't grin and shout "Praise the Lord Anyway!" He wept (Jn. 11:35). When his disciples were exhausted by the press of the crowds and their ministry, Jesus didn't try to pump them up with false enthusiasm. He led them to a place of rest and recuperation (Mk. 6:31). Even when dying on the cross, He arranged for His mother to be cared for (Jn. 19:26).



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**When Lazarus died,  
Jesus didn't grin and shout  
"Praise the Lord anyway!"**

**He wept.**

---

Jesus wore no pious mask to hide his inner feelings. Nor did he gush frothy feelings for all to see. He was not controlled by His emotions, nor did He repress them. He owned them and used them to manage life's circumstances. He directed them into tangible expressions of love and concern for others.

### Emotional Freedom

Two key qualities distinguish classrooms where masks can be removed and the real discovered from those where learners play it safe and silent. These qualities are class openness and a personal willingness to share.

#### *Openness.*

Students learn more in a safe, caring atmosphere than they do in a cool and indifferent one. They learn more, and they learn better, when group members trust and accept each other. Masks cannot be removed unless there is an atmosphere of openness in the classroom. The teacher has the most control over how warm and accepting the class atmosphere is. I heard of a professor who would begin classes each semester by informing his students: "I am not here to entertain your ignorance. You are here to learn from me. So, please do not interrupt my lectures with your questions." What level of openness do you think existed in his classrooms? Is this Christian teaching?

Learners can sense the degree of openness in a group just by observing it in action. Is class conversation spontaneous, or is it dominated by the teacher? Does the teacher welcome class questions, or act as if they are distracting interruptions? Are personal experiences shared in class? Is there opportunity for learners to suggest applications of the Bible study, or does the teacher make the application?

Jesus met the woman at the well and changed her life forever. But He had to open a channel to her before He could teach. He did this by talking first about her major interest: water. He opened Himself to her, a Samaritan woman. Remember, respectable Jewish men simply did not talk with women or Samaritans, and especially not Samaritan women! But He bridged the gap, with her interest, so that He could teach her. She became open to **His words**. He told her of the Messiah, the Thirst Quencher, the Water of Life. She then became open to **Him**, and learned from Him, and finally followed Him.

I've seen a Sunday School teacher kill any chance for openness in a class by saying, "I wish we had time to discuss your questions on this, but I have so much to cover this morning!" Translated, this means, "Please sit quietly while I tell you what I studied last week." Dry bones. We develop openness in learners by being open to learners.

#### *Willingness to share.*

Think about two classes which meet in neighboring rooms. In the first, the learners respond to the teacher's occasional questions with awkward silence. Members keep their ideas and opinions to themselves. They do not answer questions. They wait on the teacher to answer them. Learners do not interact with the teacher or each other. Discus-

sion dies quickly.

In the second class, learners respond quickly to questions from the teacher or other learners. Ideas and opinions flow freely throughout the hour. Learners eagerly share with the teacher and each other.

These two classes have very different trust levels. A willingness to share with others is a strong indication of trust -- subjective strength -- in the class. But classes differ in the degree of openness because they have been *taught to respond the way they do*.

How do teachers weaken trust and openness in the class? Here are some possibilities:

- Embarrassing learners.
- Letting a few talkers dominate classtime
- Lecturing too much
- Treating learners' questions as "interruptions"
- Standing behind a podium or desk to teach
- Seating learners in rows facing the teacher.
- Responding harshly to questions or comments.

Any of these actions will impair learners' willingness to share, and will eventually drive people away from the class. Disciplers reinforce the willingness to share in class by gently drawing into the discussion those learners who seldom participate. "Margaret, we've not heard from you this morning. What has meant the most to you?" They also carefully restrain those who talk too much in class. "Thanks for your response, Jack. Someone else?"

## Removing Emotional Barriers

Eventually, as openness grows, you will have to deal with some real problems in the lives of your learners. You will be confronted by hang-ups, bad experiences, problems, and misunderstandings that keep them from coming to the Lord, or growing in the Lord. This is part of dealing with the real in life rather than playing church games. Do not shun this side of teaching. It is absolutely necessary if we are to move beyond 'dry bones' to 'living spirit.'

No matter how well you explain what the Bible means, the message will not be received until these emotional blocks can be removed. "How do you tell a hungry man about the Bread of Life?" "How do you share the Father's love with an orphan child?" These lines from the hymn "People to People" underscore the importance of the subjective side of teaching.

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**Folks who sit in our classes  
have hang-ups  
which keep them from  
trusting, growing, giving,  
serving, receiving.  
It is the subjective side of the  
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that will touch them.  
Not doctrine, not logic, not  
words.  
But the gentle touch  
of caring  
and listening and loving.**

---

My paternal grandmother would not listen to the Gospel because years before a priest told her that if a baby died (Her baby?) with-

out being baptized, it could not go to heaven. I remember as a five-year-old hearing Gramma Yount say to my mom, "If your God can send a little baby to hell, then I want no part of Him!" My mom tried to clear away the debris and share her faith, but Gramma's mind was bolted from the inside. Folks who sit in our classes have hang-ups which keep them from trusting, growing, giving, serving, receiving. It is the subjective side of the model that will touch them. Not doctrine, not logic, not words. But the gentle touch of caring, of listening, of loving.

### *Stonewalling Steve.*

Steve, a college student at Gallaudet College, came to our Bible study class because his girl friend made him. If he wanted to date her, then he had to attend Sunday School. When he came into the class the first morning, he sat in the back of the room facing a side wall. For the entire hour he sat facing that dull, boring wall. And since he was deaf, he heard not one thing I said -- with his ears or with his eyes. He was an angry young man. You could see it in his defiant eyes and his unkempt clothes.

Week after week he came, because he had to. And week after week he sat facing the wall. Regardless, the members of the class began to reach out to him. They would greet him on campus, ask him about his classes, invite him out with the gang. He began to warm to the group.

One week I noticed him turn slightly in his chair so that he could see out of the corner of his eye what I was saying. Week by week he watched a little closer and a little longer, a little more openly. Then one morning it happened. With defiance in his eyes and anger in his trembling hands, he barked back at me, "You don't really believe Jesus can help

anyone, do you?!" He sat back, stunned at his own outburst, fearful, I think, of how I would respond. I smiled at him and said, "Good question. Let's see." I turned to the class of deaf students and asked them, "How has Jesus helped you?" Several in turn shared personal testimonies of what Jesus had done for them. I shared what Jesus had done for me. "Whatever your need, He'll help you if you'll let Him."

After class, Steve stayed behind. He wanted to talk some more. He told me about his life, of being deaf. He told of hearing parents who would not learn sign language, nor make any attempt to talk with him. His drinking began around age 8. By age 10 he was an alcoholic.

Now, at 19, the doctor had given him 2 years to live unless he stopped drinking. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he looked at me with haunting, searching eyes -- no longer defiant -- and asked, "Can Jesus *really* help me?"

I assured him He could and told him how he could know the Lord personally and walk with Him day by day. He prayed the sinners' prayer and asked Jesus into his heart. When he looked up at me again, there was no doubt what had happened. Those defiant, then searching, eyes were now radiant with joy! His whole face shouted hope. He made his profession public in the worship service and was baptized that night. The next week he came to church, not with a scowl as before, but with an award-winning smile. His hair was combed, his face shaven, his clothes pressed. His self-image had certainly changed for the better!

### *How about Your Steves?*

Steve's hang-up was his deafness: God had made him deaf. Why should he open his life

to Him? But learners in your class may have personal hurts, secret burdens, or twisted hang-ups that keep them from coming to the Lord or sharing with the class, or growing in the Lord. It is the subjective side of teaching -- openness, sharing, modelling -- that will make the difference in these situations.

### Emotional Growth

What causes the majority of problems in a church? Is it doctrine? Is it worship style? No. Most conflicts and disputes within a fellowship come from symptoms of emotional immaturity: rash comments, fickle conduct, irritability, fear, anxiety, short temper. The subjective focus of the Model reduces the effects of these destructive traits as learners develop love for and trust in one another.

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There is a positive effect as well. An open and accepting atmosphere in the classroom *strengthens positive emotional traits* in learners as they accept themselves and others more honestly. These positive traits include such things as working well with others, managing impulses, expressing good feelings without embarrassment, refraining from worry, and accepting constructive criticism.

We see the emotional transformation Jesus brings to life as we study the Gadarene demoniac. The demons who possessed him pulled his mind in a thousand different directions. He abused himself and others. Then Jesus came and replaced the turmoil and confusion with wholeness. And when the townspeople found him, he was "sitting there, dressed and in his right mind." (Mk 5:1-20). Jesus can also bring emotional wholeness out of our chaos of uncontrolled feelings, if we will let Him. Oh, how we need a strong dose of emotional growth in our churches!

### The Teacher as Model

Subjective learning is more *caught from* the teacher than *taught by* the teacher. *Who I am* as a teacher registers more deeply with my learners than *what I say*. Teachers who are open in the class teach openness. Those who display reverence for God's Word teach reverence. Those who cooperate with department leaders and staff ministers teach cooperation. These teachers have a double influence: their actions reinforce the words they speak, the concepts they explain, and the truths they share.

### *Talk the Walk?*

Then there are teachers who talk commitment but neglect worship service attendance or complain about stewardship sermons. There are teachers who talk cooperation but avoid opportunities to cooperate. There are teachers who talk outreach but never visit, or talk ministry but never minister, or talk missions but never give or go. They defuse their own teaching. They produce confusion. They weaken church efforts to reach out. They produce dry bones.

Paul wrote to Timothy and reminded him of the subjective learning he had experienced.

He said, "You saw my endurance and love and patience as I met all those persecutions and difficulties. . .you know how the Lord brought me safely through them all" (2 Tim. 3:10-11). The knowledge of Timothy came through personal, first-hand observation. Timothy saw Paul go through them and learned from what he saw. Paul was Timothy's model.

### *Walk the Talk!*

We have no choice about being a model. People who know us will be influenced for better or worse by our lifestyle. We put "our brand" of Christianity on display every day. Without any fanfare or conscious effort, the basic values, attitudes, prejudices and convictions we hold most dear flow into the lives of those we teach. The stronger the bond of rapport and love, the stronger the influence. Whether our values are positive or negative, destructive or constructive, godly or ungodly, the process marches on. As teachers, we are models. What we do as models is ours to decide.

## Balance Left and Right Pillars

The left and right pillars work together to support the structure. Both are necessary. But keeping a proper balance between the two is not easy. We tend to drift toward one side of the model or the other.

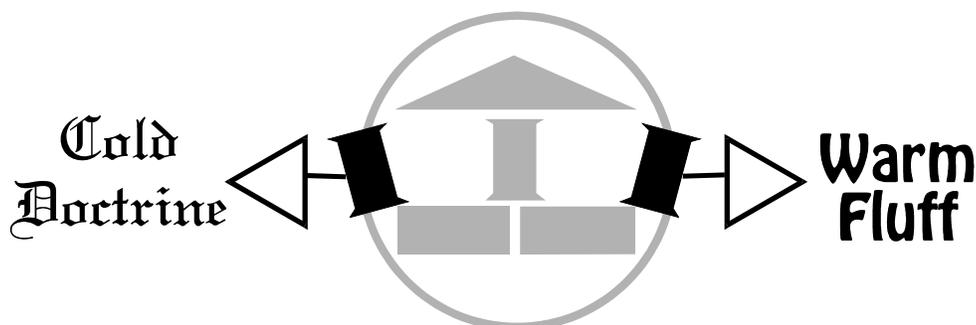


**"If you'd get right with God, you'd agree with me!"**

**This isn't teaching.  
It's religious browbeating.**

### Cold, Callous Dogmatism?

When the teacher places too much emphasis on the objective side of the model and neglects the subjective, Bible study becomes dogmatic. Neglect of the subjective in teaching produces a cold, callous dogma that has little sympathy or concern for the feelings of others. I recently heard of a Sunday School teacher who addressed his class on the subject of tithing as follows: "I have heard that some of you men do not tithe. I just want



you to know that I can scarcely imagine how a person who does not tithe can be a Christian." My pastor friend, a long-time tither -- he's in his 80's!--, explained his distress by saying, "It almost made me want to stop tithing!" As we move further and further to the left from the balanced model, we cease to think altogether. "I know what I believe, and if you'd get right with God, you'd agree with me!" This is not teaching. It is religious brow-beating.

Jesus warned against this error. His followers are to be "as little children" (Mt. 18:3). That is, they are to hold the Father in awe and wonder, and completely trust and depend on Him. Calling fire down from heaven on those who disagree with us is not Jesus' solution to problems (Lk 9:54-56).

### Warm Fluff?

When the teacher places too much emphasis on the subjective side of the model and neglects the objective, Bible study becomes a touchy-feely emotional roller coaster. The best term I know to describe it is "fluff."

Neglect of the objective focus in teaching results in a Bible study that is little more than cotton candy. It may taste good for a moment, but it is soon gone and leaves nothing of substance behind. Immature believers throughout history, like the Ephesian Christians, have been tossed back and forth by changing doctrines of smooth-talking charismatic leaders who use deceitful methods to entrap them in their schemes (Eph. 4:14). Jesus warned us of these wolves in sheep's clothing. How do we escape from them? They sound so sincere! They sing so well! They make me feel good! They use the same words I do! Be very careful. Freedom comes by knowing the Truth, becoming "wise as serpents" (Jn. 8:32, Mt. 10:16).

### Left and Right

It is not a matter of being childlike or wise, but *childlike and wise*. Not cynically wise, nor callously wise, but lovingly wise. Not childishly trusting, nor naively trusting, but realistically trusting. Paul captures this objective-subjective tension when he writes "speaking the truth. . .in love, we must grow up in every way to Christ" (Eph. 4:15). We



are not to speak the truth so harshly that it “breaks the reeds” or “quenches the flax” of faith. Nor are we to “love” others so sentimentally that we lose our integrity, in the name of graciousness, by winking at sin. We are to speak the truth in a loving manner. We are to love others with integrity. The writer of Proverbs said the same thing this way: Bind truth and mercy as an ornament around your neck (Prov. 3:3). Not truth or mercy, but **truth-mercy**. In this tension, we find favor with both God and mankind (Prov. 3:4).

### Wind and String

A kite cannot fly unless it is, first, firmly anchored to the ground by way of string, and, second, lifted by a prevailing wind.

If I let go of the string, the kite falls.

Or, if the wind stops blowing, the kite falls. Spiritual soaring requires the firm anchor of God’s Word and the lift of the Wind of God’s Spirit in my personal life. Objective and subjective. Thinking and feeling. Rational and emotional.



### Thinking and Feeling Questions.

We can control whether our learners respond objectively or subjectively by the kind of questions we ask. If we ask an objective question, we lead learners into the Bible to find an objective answer. If we ask a subjective question, we lead learners into themselves for experiences, opinions, and feelings.

For example, a **good thinking question** in a study of John 3 might be “What did Nicodemus ask Jesus?” This question has a correct answer that can be discovered from the text. Learners read the text in light of the question to build their understanding of the passage.

A **good subjective question** on the same passage might be, “If you had been Nicodemus, what would you have asked

Jesus?” There is no right or wrong answer to this question. You are asking learners how they would respond in this situation. I once asked this question of a group of adult Sunday School teachers at an afternoon training session. One elderly woman responded, “I don’t know. I wouldn’t have been there because I don’t go out at night!” I learned nothing about her understanding of John 3, but I learned something about this teacher. This was why she didn’t attend teachers’ meetings. So I began sending her a copy of the teachers’ handouts I prepared each week. Three years later, on my last night at Columbia Baptist church before leaving to teach at Southwestern, I preached a farewell sermon. This dear lady attended our evening services and the reception in order to thank me for helping her teach her class through the notes I’d sent her. But I would not have known her need, and would not have been able to help her, had I not asked that subjective question!

The Thinking Pillar stands on the Bible. Objective, thought-provoking questions drive learners into the Word for God’s Answers. The Feeling Pillar stands on Needs. Subjective, open-ended questions permit learners to remove their masks and share themselves with the class. Both are necessary, but it is essential that teachers master the difference between the two kinds of questions.

### THE CENTER PILLAR: Helping People Relate

Ask a minister of education what he believes to be the central function of the church and he will likely say it is to “equip the saints for works of service.” Ask a minister of music and he might say “to worship God through

praise." An evangelist? "To win the lost." A missionary? "To carry the Gospel to those of another language or culture." A pastor? He might say any of the above. But when we look at these tasks, what is the central focus of them all? Is it not relationship? When Jesus was challenged to name the Greatest Commandment, He condensed all of the Law and the Prophets into two statements of relationship:

*Love the Lord your God  
with all your heart, soul, and mind  
and (the second is similarly important)  
Love your neighbor  
as you love yourself. (Mt 22:37,39)*

### Vertical Relationship

Our relationship with the Father ("Love the Lord your God") begins with faith in Christ and empowers all we do. Spiritual power for worship and service, praise and thanksgiving, repentance and renewal come through this vital link with the Lord. We will consider this vertical dimension of spiritual power in more detail when we discuss the role of Holy Spirit as teacher. For now, let's focus on the horizontal relationships among believers.

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## People with People with Jesus in the Middle

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### Horizontal Relationship

The relationships with others ("Love your neighbor") involve missions, evangelism, equipping, ministering, and befriending. The central focus of "church" is to establish and strengthen relationships. This is why "help-

ing people relate" stands as the central pillar of the Disciplers' Model.

The relative (reLAYtive) focus emphasizes the growth of relationships among believers. This social dimension of spiritual growth happens as we worship God through Bible study, share our joys and concerns with fellow members and reach out to the unchurched. Our lives become joined together. "People with people with Jesus in the middle" as a friend of mine once said. We build "community," the "Body of Christ," the "Church Family."

### *Fellowship or Koinonia?*

We sometimes use the word "fellowship" to express this social dimension of faith. But "fellowship" in a Sunday School context can mean little more than coffee and doughnuts. *Let's have about ten minutes of fellowship and then we'll go to our classes.*

The New Testament term **koinonia** expresses far more than shallow socializing. The word means fellowship in the sense of togetherness or partnership in mission. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Ac 2:42)

*Koinonia* means to give aid or relief. "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." (He 13:16)

### *A Supporting Family of Faith*

Growing Christians are tied to other believers. We are bound together. The binding together of individuals into Family happens as learners share with others around the Word of God. We remove our masks and share ideas and understandings, joys and hurts, triumphs and failures, happy times

and sad. Not with gushing emotions, but realistically. Not with cold intellectual detachment, but with warm regard for others. As we do this, we build a network of relationships, a Family, which sustains us through life's good times and bad. The Family strengthens us to live and work and minister in our world.

### *Masks on the Fringe*

How sad to see people live on the fringe of the church. They come to services from time to time, but never plunge into the Family Life. They keep up appearances, but never build bridges. They have no group where masks can be laid aside and the real discussed.

What happens to them when tragedy strikes? What do they do when faced with death, or a serious illness, or divorce? They search in vain for "the church" and for "God" and wonder why neither can be flipped on like their CableVision. The *koinonia* of Scripture and of the Church grows over time. There are no shortcuts.

### *Social Garments*

Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae and warned them about characteristics which could either hurt or help their community of faith. He listed hurtful characteristics that Christians should remove from their lives, much as someone would take off dirty clothing: **anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language** (3:8, NIV). **Anger** is an outburst of temper toward another. **Rage** is a long-standing evil temper toward another, and can be thought of as settled anger or hatred. **Malice** is wishing harm toward another. **Slander** is hurting another's reputation through gossip. **Filthy language** is unclean talk or abusive speech, akin to browbeating.

Paul then lists helpful characteristics that Christians should develop in their lives, much as someone would dress themselves with clean clothes: **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience** (3:12, NIV). **Compassion** is the heart-felt desire to help another who is in need. **Kindness** is responding to another's need with specific action. **Humility** is a proper mental attitude toward others. Humble people think about themselves correctly. They do not think too highly of themselves (*No one can do this as well as I can!*), nor do they think too lowly of themselves (*I can't do anything for the Lord. I have no gifts.*). **Gentleness** grows out of the proper mental attitude of humility. Gentle people help others succeed without feeling superior to them. They praise others who succeed without feeling inferior to them. **Patience** means restraining oneself in the face of injury or insult from another.

Why would a clean person want to wear dirty garments? We have been washed from our sins. Now we should remove from our lives the "dirty garments" which belong to our former life and clothe ourselves in the spotless Spiritual Garments that builds Christian community. But how do we do this? What is the mechanism that allows us to become socially mature and build *koinonia* with others?

### *The Secret of Changing Garments*

We find the answer in Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. In the last verses of John 11 we read, *Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."* (Jn. 11:43-44, NIV)

Who gave Lazarus new life? (Jesus). Who

removed the old grave clothes of Lazarus and set him free? (His friends) .

Who gives us eternal life? (Jesus). Who removes our old grave clothes, our "old garments," and sets us free? (Our brothers and sisters in Christ). Each of the characteristics listed by Paul is *social*. We cannot grow spiritually without brothers and sisters in Christ. We take off the old and put on the new *as we learn and live and work with others*. Jesus established the Church to reach the world. But an integral part of the mission of the Church is to help change the world, to change the way people treat each other. The Church is a Living Laboratory of human relationships.

### *Raw Materials of Growth*

I used to wonder why churches suffered so much turmoil. If we are commanded to love one another, why do we find so much contention and fighting? But the irritations, conflicts and confrontations that occur to some degree in every congregation of believers are a normal part of Christian growth -- the social dimension! They are an essential part of the growth of koinonia, of relationship, of Family. Why? Because church members are people with varying backgrounds, cultures, languages, and interests called into one Family of faith because of a mutual love for Jesus. Our conflicts are part of the process of becoming "one Family in Him." These social dilemmas and people problems are the raw materials of Christian character and community. God works in and through these human situations to grow us into the image of His Son, for "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28, NIV).

### *Rough Rocks - Precious Stones*

My parents used to live near in Tampa, Florida. On one of our visits there, my wife and I walked down a beach that faced the western Gulf. Waves rolled in, first kicking up and then laying down the smooth wet sand. As we walked along the water's edge, we noticed hundreds of pretty black stones. They were so smooth and beautiful. As we walked around the beach into a small bay, we noticed that the sand was littered with rough, dull rocks. They were the same type of rock, but without the pounding surf and the grinding sand they lacked the crucial ingredients that could change a rough rock into a precious stone.

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When believers remain aloof--on the fringe of church life--when they neglect their gifts, refuse to join brothers and sisters in ministry, they forfeit their opportunity to experience God's presence and care when they. They are like the stones in the bay, undisturbed, and unchanging. On the other hand, when believers learn to share with others, to serve with gladness, to use their God-given gifts for the good of the Family, they experience deep satisfaction and fulfillment. Their only way to learn from Jesus is to pull with Him in the comfortable yoke He offers (Mt. 11:28-30). As they trust Him for strength and

guidance, they are able to tackle larger tasks with confidence. The work brings frustration, as well as joy, but it is this bitter-sweet mix that matures us. Those who tackle new tasks, face new challenges, and experience the greatness of service become "polished stones" -- and prized possessions of the Family.

### *Flip Sides of Relationship*

So we find in the relative focus two aspects: one is positive, the other negative. We find the **positive aspect** of relationships in the growing koinonia of the Church Family. Getting to know and learning to love brothers and sisters in Christ. Building a network of authentic relationships which give real support to life in good times and bad.

We find the **negative aspect** of relationship in the grinding of differing human personalities on each other within a congregation. It is "putting up with" unlikeable brothers and sisters in the Family ("forbear one another", Col. 3:13). It is struggling with fellow members on a committee. It is wrestling with difficult and divisive issues (and people) in a business meeting. These two aspects of relationship mature us. We cannot substitute this process with television or radio personalities.

### *Sunday School the best place*

The best place in the Church to develop these required relational skills is in the Sunday School class: a small group of caring persons, who give and receive, who comment and listen, who minister and are ministered to. Here members learn to share ideas and experiences openly. Here learners come to know each other and trust each other as persons of worth. Here believers pray for each other and support one another. In this kind of class, members have opportunities to re-

ceive from others in this small intimate group, learners gain confidence and encouragement to share the Good News with others.

Jesus prayed for this kind of relational network in the Upper Room:

*I pray also for those who will believe in me through [the eleven disciples'] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn. 17:20-23, NIV)* This spiritual unity develops in believers as they gather in small groups to study the Bible, to share with each other, to affirm each other, to minister to one another.

### Summary of the Pillars

So we have three pillars: the objective, the subjective, and the relative. Erected upon the sure foundation of eternal Truth and the needs of learners, these pillars support the capstone of discipling Bible study.

## THE CAPSTONE: Helping People Grow

The term "church growth" is used predominantly to mean **numerical** growth. Numerical growth is the increase in the number of members of local congregations. This growth may result from the conversion of children of church members who are won to Christ through the consistent witness of their own parents. Or from the conversion of lost persons through direct witness and ministry. Or from transfer of membership, in which church members of one congregation move their membership to another.

Sunday School is the major channel for numerical growth in our churches. We have high attendance Sundays, enrollment plans, visitation programs. But unless the Sunday School produces committed “doers of the Word,” we may be producing “wood, hay, and stubble” with our numbers.

### Kinds of Church Growth

There is a difference between expanding a religious organization and growing the Kingdom. Let's look at some other kinds of church growth.

#### *Organic growth*

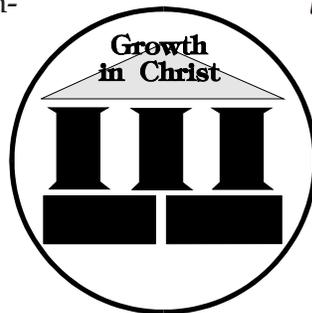
Organic growth concentrates on internal structure. It is the growth of relationships among leaders, the training of new leaders, the restructuring of organizations for better efficiency. Organic growth helps departments and committees and deacon bodies work more smoothly.

#### *Incarnational growth*

Incarnational growth concentrates on growing in Christlikeness. It enables the Church to influence its culture, to make a difference in its community in Jesus' name. This type of growth is seen when a congregation ministers to the needs of groups and individuals in the surrounding community.

#### *Maturational growth*

Maturational growth concentrates on the believer's personal growth in Christ. It results from a process of knowing, understanding, and doing the Word of God; of removing masks of pretense, and building Family with other believers. **The capstone of the model represents this process of growing in the Lord, of becoming like Christ.**



### Paul's Treatise on Growth

Paul's treatise on Church Growth in Ephesians Chapter 4 focuses on this maturational theme:

*It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ **may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things **grow up into him who is the Head**, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, **grows and builds itself up in love**, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:11-16, NIV).*

### The Purpose of Growth

Paul says the purpose of this maturational growth is “works of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ” (v. 12, NIV). These “works of service” -- taking on the yoke of Christ in various ministries -- is the result of maturational growth, which comes from understanding the Written Word, experiencing the Living Word, and becoming part of a Ministering Body. Service is the end, the three pillars are the means. These “means” equip the saints for changing the world. They produce the “being” that must precede effective “doing” in the Kingdom.

You see, God comforts us, not merely to

make us comfortable, but to make us comforters. God forgives us, not merely to enable us to live free of guilt, but to make us forgivers. God gives gifts to us, not merely to create gifted individuals, but to make us givers. "Make me a channel of blessing today." This is the road to maturity.

Maturation growth cannot be demanded, coerced, forced, rushed, or programmed by calendar. We can explain Truth, but it must become "Truth-that-matters-to-me" before our learners can grow.

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---

Our model is Jesus. He does not force His yoke on us, but invites us to take it (Mt. 11:29). He does not break down the door of our hearts, but patiently knocks, waiting for us to open to Him (Rev. 3:20). He did not come to condemn, berate or humiliate us, but to save us (Jn. 3:17). Yet, we are tempted to use harsh methods to "force people" to work and serve "for their own good." This approach will ultimately produce dry bones because it is not God's way.

### How Do You Measure This Growth?

The major reason we depend heavily on numerical growth is its ease of measure. Counting heads is easy. More heads is better than fewer heads. But how can I know if my class is maturing? How do I measure that?

#### Paul's Spiritual Yardstick

Paul gives us a "spiritual yardstick" in his letter to the Galatians. This passage gives

two lists of traits. One contains traits that should decrease in Christians over time. These "works of the flesh" include "immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (5:19-20, NIV).

The second list contains traits that should increase in Christians over time. These "fruit of the Spirit" include "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (5:22-23, NIV).

Some works of the flesh vanish when we come to know the Lord. Others, like envy and ambition, plague us every time we get our eyes off the Master and wrap ourselves up in "personal success." The **power and dominion** of this fleshly nature was destroyed when we were saved. We are a "new creation" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17, NIV). But the **practice** of fleshly ways is destroyed over time as we grow in Christ. The fruit is produced by the Spirit as we open ourselves to Him and give Him freedom. The **power** to bear this fruit, to grow these traits, was received when we were saved. But the actual bearing of the **fruit** occurs throughout our lives as we grow in Christ.

Disciplers focus, then, on providing a learning environment that will encourage the decrease of fleshly behaviors and the increase of godly behaviors. If your class shows little joy in their salvation, encourage more spontaneity and sharing of what the Lord has done in class. If your class is fragmented into cliques, each small part demanding its own way, plan learning experiences that develop relationships among the members. The pillars of thinking, feeling, and relating -- anchored on the Bible and the particular needs

of learners in the class -- culminate in a discipling process which reduces the fleshly and increases the heavenly.

**Maturity Not Size.** Look back at the Ephesians passage. Notice that Paul's emphasis was not church size, but church maturity. He established churches all over the Roman Empire that almost emptied the pagan temples. Numerical growth was in Paul's day, as it is in ours, a sign of a healthy church. The Great Commission of our Lord was taken seriously by Christians who risked imprisonment and death to share their faith. "As you go, make disciples. As you go, baptize. As you go, teach." It was the command to make sharing the Good News a natural part of our lifestyle. This lifestyle develops, as we have seen, over a lifetime of maturing in the Lord.

Some say, "I know God is pleased with our spiritual growth *because we are growing numerically.*" They have cause and effect backwards. They preach numerical growth in hopes of producing church health. See, IF we have the numbers, THEN we must be spiritually healthy. In Old Testament times, many believed that rich people were good because "wealth is a blessing from God." IF rich, then GOOD. This was wrong theology then, and it's wrong theology now. There are times I think we have lost our minds over "ten more next Sunday." It is a Golden Calf. Leaves without Fruit. Crowds without Family. Organization but not the Body. An aggregation but not a congregation.

So focus on spiritual growth by teaching God's people how to live biblically. Numerical growth may well follow -- all things being equal. But making numbers primary will lead you into all sorts of sin.

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**More Isn't Always Better.** Common sense says "more is better." Businesses want more sales. Lawyers and doctors want more clients. CEOs want more profits. Churches want more members. But if we apply the "more is better" logic to Jesus' ministry, we will be disappointed. The numbers were high when He healed the sick and fed the hungry during His second year. The numbers declined in the third year as He began to preach Kingdom discipleship: loving enemies, serving others, turning cheeks, submission to authority. He was doing exactly what the Father showed Him to do (Jn 5:19), yet the number of people following Him continued to fall. He really knew what He was saying when He taught that the road is narrow, and few really find it (Mt. 7:14).

As a minister to the deaf, I found my church group built around games and fun and entertainment. As we began to train teachers and improve Bible study and focus the ministry, several families stopped coming. Our numbers suffered. The pastor had taken a risk to call a part-time minister for the deaf group, and now Sunday School attendance was declining? But within the year, new leaders began to function. The ministry focused on the Lord and His Word. Friends and co-workers began to be reached. We not only

grew back to our former size, but we were much healthier besides.

**'How Many?' Can Be Dangerous.** One of the favorite questions asked around churches is *howmanyjahave?* A new Sunday School class meets for the first time. *Howmanyjahave?* A new discipleship training class starts. *Howmanyjahave?* A new mission begins in the community. *Howmanyjahave?* It's the first thing many think to ask. But we need to be careful about "how many?" David was obsessed with finding out how many warriors he had in Israel. He commanded that a census be done. The result was that 70,000 Israelites died by plague because the Lord God was so displeased with his desire to know "how many?" (I Chr. 21). An overemphasis on "How many?" can lead us into all kinds of mischief.

**Size is Irrelevant.** Of course, there's nothing sacred in "smallness" either. Paul's kind of church growth underscores the fact that size is irrelevant. Paul preached church health, and the result was numerical growth. Therefore, my efforts at numerical growth are misguided if my goal is to increase the size of my church. We find spiritual maturity in both large and small congregations. We find spiritual immaturity in both large and small congregations. Size is irrelevant to spiritual health. As ministers of the Gospel, let's focus on spiritual health, on *growing up into Him Who is the Head, even Christ.*

**Reaching Not Resting.** Does this mean that programs of witnessing and visitation and outreach are wrong? No. **Being satisfied** with our present membership and ignoring the lost around us **is unscriptural.** One primary reason for our existence as a church is to break into the lost community surrounding us and draw individuals to Christ

(Ac. 1:9; Mt. 28:19-20; et al). This is part of the relative focus of the disciplers' model. The believer who is concerned for the lost and works to win them to Christ is reflecting the Father Who "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rm. 8:32, NIV).

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**BUT...**

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We tend the flock,  
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Secondly, numerical growth was a **central characteristic** of the New Testament churches. This growth resulted from revival and renewal (Ac. 2:41), spontaneous witnessing (11:19-21), organized teaching (11:22-26; 12:24); and planned efforts (19:10,20) until the Church had "turned the world upside down" (17:6, NIV). Jesus' command was clear: "Go, baptize, and teach."



Make no mistake about what I am saying here. I **want** the church to grow. I **work** to improve reaching and teaching. I keep and study attendance records. But the **abuse of God's flock** through guilt and manipulation for the sake of reaching strangers is **also unscriptural**. Jesus' command was clear: "Feed my sheep." We tend the flock, care for the lambs, provide nourishment, and God brings the increase.

### So What's the Problem?

The problem is emphasis. If we feed the flock, nurture their faith, open the Word of God to them, guide them into works of service that fit their God-given abilities, and lead them to see the need of lost people for Christ, we will see numerical growth. This is healthy. It builds the Body both spiritually and numerically. If we focus on building up the size of the church through attendance gimmicks and promotional fads, we may see a short-term numerical increase, but it will ultimately collapse. It abuses the Body and may even cause declining attendance!

This illustration below shows both emphases. If we focus on ministries that grow the church *spiritually*, we will see numerical

growth as God brings the increase. Numerical growth causes growth in finances, and building and staff needs. If we focus on "getting the numbers up," we may well lead our congregations to work in their own strength rather than the Lord's. We may lead them away from surrendered service toward self-centered sufficiency. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain" (Psalm 127:1, NIV).

### Weight Loss

The spring before I came to seminary, my brother-in-law and I began a race to lose weight. Our plan was to lose 30 pounds in four months. We set our goals and weigh-in times. We began applying the principles of weight loss: reduce calorie intake and increase physical exercise. All went well through the first weigh-in. I applied the principles consistently and lost weight. I had no problems.

During the second weight loss period I failed to keep my food intake down and I was irresponsible with my exercise. On the day before our second weigh-in, I stepped on the scales and saw that I was 5 pounds over my goal! This required drastic action! I ate nothing but fruit all day Friday. I ran my 5.2 mile course Friday night. I ate no breakfast, but drank a cup of black coffee. I went to a Church Council meeting that morning, had another cup of coffee. I literally vibrated in my chair from the effects of caffeine. I ate no lunch, but mowed our front and back lawns. Even though it was 94 degrees and humid, I drank no water. Since Steve was late in arriving, I decided to run the 5.2 miles again -- just for good measure. He and his wife finally arrived about 3:00 p.m. and we weighed. I had lost 7 pounds! I had won! I beat his weight loss! I was a success! Or was

I?

We sat down to dinner: grilled spare ribs, potato salad, orange salad, corn on the cob, yeast rolls, and, of course, diet soda. For dessert we had home-made ice cream and cookies.

The next morning I woke up after a night of tossing and turning. When I stepped on the scales I found that I weighed exactly what I'd weighed Friday morning. I had reached my numeric goal on Saturday afternoon, but I ultimately paid the price of abusing my body. I was lethargic. I had difficulty thinking. I was irritable. I couldn't run three blocks. And my goal? My purpose for it all? Even that was lost. My "weight loss" of Saturday afternoon was a phantom -- gone by Sunday morning.

I had taken my eyes off my real purpose, which was to burn fat off my body. I had concentrated on the numbers of my bathroom scale. I had misused the principles. The result was abuse of my body. I didn't burn off much fat on that Friday and Saturday. What I did was drive 7 pounds of water out of my body. The numbers on the scale didn't know the difference, but I did!

The same can be said for paying too much attention to Sunday School attendance records. If we focus on the principles of good teaching and effective reaching, starting new classes, providing space, contacting prospects, and enlisting new workers, we will grow. If we focus on "ten more next Sunday," we may forget our real purpose and abuse the Body in the process.

### Statistics

The main reason I was called to teach at Southwestern was to provide support for

the research efforts of the seminary. My major role is to teach courses in research design and statistical analysis in the School of Religious Education. The purpose of research is to collect data in a way that produces numbers that have specific meaning, and to analyze those numbers with appropriate tests to provide valid interpretation. Both parts must be carefully designed. Otherwise the results of statistical analysis are meaningless.

Sunday School attendance figures are useful in pinpointing potential problems in an organization. But numbers mean nothing in isolation. Meaning requires an **interpretation of the numbers**.

For example, *decreasing numbers are not always bad*. When Columbia Baptist Church moved from one to two Sunday Schools, we experienced a decline in attendance for two years. But during that two years **good things** were happening: leaders were enlisted and trained, departments and classes built "Family", space was reallocated. In the middle of the second year, the pastor began to get anxious. We had been showing declining attendance for 18 months. He had been very patient. Yet at that very time the momentum of the two Sunday Schools was increasing. By the end of the third year we saw a consistent increase in attendance. We moved over the 1,000 mark. In 1986 the church started a third Sunday School and averaged about 1,500.

Further, *increasing numbers are not necessarily good*. One year I received a call from our associational minister of education. I had not reported any enrollment under the category "Adults Away" on our annual associational report. He explained that this category included any college students or mili-



**Western Shepherd**  
**"Drive the Sheep"**



**Eastern Shepherd**  
**"Lead the Sheep"**

tary personnel who had not moved their membership. We had not reported anyone in this category for at least three years. I went back through the records and found that 174 fit in this category. Since they had not been reported previously, they were considered "new members." We won honors that year in the association for largest enrollment increase, both in numbers and percentage gain. It was legal. It certainly helped the association's numbers. But the numbers did not really mean what they appeared to say.

### Eastern and Western Shepherds

It is the misuse of church growth principles for a short-term numerical end that causes dry bones. Misusing the principles to "get the numbers up!" Ministers are shepherds of their flocks (I Pet. 5:2). But some have taken on the model of the **Western shepherd**, who moves behind the flock, and, with the help of sheep dogs, drives them where he wants them to go. We need to recapture the model of the **Eastern shepherd** who walked toward water and green pasture, followed by his sheep who knew his voice and trusted him.

A discipling Sunday School is more than a religious organization set up to transmit bits of Bible information while we "get the numbers up." *It is the church reaching out and transforming lives, in Christ, through study of His Word. In the process of doing this, our numbers do increase!* As persons are drawn graciously, lovingly, carefully to the Christ of the Cross and the Empty Tomb, they receive new life. Their celebration carries them back to friends and family with the Good News of life in Christ. Numbers increase as a result, a byproduct, of our discipling efforts. This is the capstone of our model.

### THE CIRCLE Holy Spirit as Discipler

The final element in the model is the circle which represents the surrounding and indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit of God. We have spoken of the "dry bones" of Sunday Schools that have become mired down in routine. It is Holy Spirit Who breathes life into dry bones. How do I allow Holy Spirit to teach my class? What do I do to open up

the spiritual communication lines? How can I become a "channel of His blessing" to my class? Prayer, priority and position are the three essentials which determine how I answer each of these questions.

## Prayer

If I want the Lord to have a part in my Sunday School class, I must ask Him to take part. Remember the Lord's words to the Laodecian church?

I stand at the door and knock.  
If anyone hears my voice  
and open the door,  
I will come in and eat with him,  
and he with me.  
Rev 3:30, NIV

Here the Lord has been shut out of the church, but He beckons to individuals in the church who desire fellowship with Him. The presence of the Lord is not automatic. We must ask Him, invite Him, welcome Him into our classes.

Pray for the members of your class by name. As you think of each one, we pray for their life situations, their problems, their needs. Pray that they might have experiences during the week that will point them to the scripture passage to be studied Sunday. Pray that they will be ready to study Sunday morning.

Pray for insights into the assigned Bible passage. Pray that you will be open to personal experiences that relate to scriptural truths. That the Lord Himself will teach you as you prepare during the week.

Pray for guidance in selecting learning ac-

tivities as you develop the lesson plan. This prayerful preparation insures that Sunday morning Bible study is a joint effort between you and Holy Spirit.

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**The presence of the Lord  
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## Priority

The proper priority for Christians is to "seek first the Kingdom of God." Still, a major problem in Sunday School work is the notion of "turf." By "turf," I mean the personal kingdoms that are built in classes or departments "in the name of the Lord." Church members begin teaching out of pure motives to reach and help people. But somewhere along the line, the class becomes "mine." At promotion time the "turf" teacher fights to hold on to "his" members.

Suggest that one of the members would make an excellent teacher in another age group, and you will get a similar response: "Don't you touch him! He's one of my most faithful!" Well, excuse me. Who do you want me to get as a teacher -- someone who never attends? Turf teachers have their priorities wrong. They are not cooperative. They just want their classes left alone. Such arrogance grieves Holy Spirit and impairs the spiritual growth of the class.



Disciplers, however, work in support of department and division goals. They see their work as part of the larger work of God. If a request is made that will help the overall Sunday School, disciplers do all they can to support that decision. They "model the role" of cooperation for their members. They are positive in their support for the "big picture." Disciplers see promotion as a way to send "missionaries" to the next department. If some of their members are sought for teaching positions, they see this as a confirmation of their role as disciplers. Disciplers are mature enough to forgo "turf" as they maintain the proper priority of "Seek ye first the Kingdom . . . ."

## Position

From the world's view, the most powerful position is at the top. Rank Hath Its Privilege. The higher the position, the more power one has to control others. It's not supposed to be that way with Christians. We talk so much about servanthood and sacrifice. But the desire for power affects anyone who isn't consciously surrendered to the Lord.

As a teacher, or a director, or minister of education, or pastor, or denominational employee, are you primarily leader or servant? If the Spirit is leading you, you are first a servant. The influence of spiritual leadership comes from your ability to serve others effectively. Jesus said it this way: *Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all*" (Mk. 10:43-44, NIV).

How do disciplers serve? They sacrifice their own time and talent and energy to create a learning environment that proclaims the Word of God and meets the rational, emotional, and relational needs of people. They

sacrifice their own teaching time to allow others to share. They serve department directors by contributing to planning meetings. They give up their own "rights" from time to time in order to enhance teamwork in the department. They support the Sunday School staff by participating in training meetings, learning from and sharing with others.

Disciplers are served, in turn, by their members who relieve some of the teaching burden from time to time. They are served by their department directors who provide support for their teaching through administration of the department: literature, equipment, and planning. They are served by Sunday School staff who provide support in the way of long range planning, age-group cooperation, and budgeting. This mutual cooperation and service builds a spirit of teamwork throughout the Sunday School.

## Spiritual Triad

These aspects of spiritual teaching -- prayer, priority, and position -- rise directly out of our dependence on and submission to the Holy Spirit. Programs come and go, plans succeed and fail, gimmicks for "10 more next Sunday" thrive and fade. But through all of this runs the Golden Thread of God's work: the drawing, winning, and maturing of people in Christ. This holy work proceeds only with surrendered disciplers.

Fasten your eyes on this Golden Thread and find true success. Ours is a higher calling than transmitting religious facts. We are called to make disciples (Mt. 28:19) and to "prepare God's people for works of service. . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13,

NIV). This is an awesome task! But we need not fear the challenge.

Have I not commanded you?  
Be strong and courageous.  
Do not be terrified;  
do not be discouraged,  
for the Lord your God will be with you  
wherever you go.”  
Joshua 1:9, NIV

## QUESTIONS TO AID PLANNING

While teaching plans cannot cover every element of the model every Sunday, every element can be used over a period of a few weeks. The following questions can be used to set appropriate goals for teaching as you plan.

### The Word of God

- How am I allowing “the Bible to speak” in this session?
- Am I merely talking about the Bible?
- How will my learners use their Bibles in this study?
- Am I doing anything that makes light of scripture or the Lord?
- Do I handle the Bible with reverence? Do I teach it as if it is my Guide, my Authority, my Lamp?

### The Needs of People

- How well do I know each person in my class/department?
- What are their specific needs that relate to this passage?
- How does this study help meet those needs?
- Do the learning activities I’ve chosen fit the way my members learn best?

### Objective Focus

- How am I leading members **to think** during this study?
- What activities am I using that will stimulate

mental struggle?

- How am I encouraging members to study during the week?
- How am I increasing member desire for self-discovery and action?

### Subjective Focus

- How am I encouraging learners to share opinions, experiences, and feelings in class?
- What opportunities do members have to share themselves in class?
- Am I open to my learners? Am I living the truths I teach?

### Relative Focus

- How am I encouraging interaction among learners?
- How am I helping to build bridges between members?
- How am I helping learners to reach out to unsaved family, friends, and co-workers?
- What kinds of small-group activities have I planned?
- What opportunities are there for ministry among members?

### Growth in Christ

- How is my class/department growing spiritually?
- What goals have I set for spiritual growth for the year?
- What opportunities am I providing for growth outside of class?
- Am I demonstrating the blessings of spiritual growth by the way I live and work?

### The Holy Spirit

- How am I preparing spiritually to teach?
- Have I done all I can to prepare well while depending on Holy Spirit to guide my preparation?
- Have I prayed for the learners individually? For the session?
- How willing am I to cooperate with Sunday School leaders in order to increase harmony and build a spirit of “team work”?
- How dependent am I on the Holy Spirit as Discippler?

These questions (and many others that can be drawn from the model) pinpoint areas of “dry bones.” They allow us to apply biblical remedies and bring showers of blessing to our Sunday School classes. We can help them move from merely transmitting facts to transforming lives. But there will be **problems in this process** of retraining. There are what may seem irresistible forces and immovable objects standing in the way of discipling Bible study. **How do we move from where we are to where we want to be? How do we do all of this in the limited amount of time we have?**

It is to these questions we now turn our attention.