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ARCHIVES

# Various Methods of Teaching the Bible Class

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EDITORIAL NOTE.—The writer of this paper is Counselor for the Texas District Board of Parish Education. The present paper was delivered at the Texas All-State Pastors' and Teachers' Conference held in Austin, Tex., the week after Easter. We publish it as delivered, confident that many readers will welcome this brief, practical, and sound treatment of an important subject.

PERMIT me to introduce Peter the Hermit to you. Peter is quite philosophical today and is about to utter a profound truth. Says Peter: "One reason some folks don't get nowhere is because they weren't going nowhere when they started."

We are quite sure Peter didn't have Bible class teachers in mind when he flattened his philosophical nail, but just in case the shoe fits, let's put it on. It might, and it might not, pinch. This is not only a story; it is a mixed metaphor.

Peter's statement reminds us of the prankster who said that when Columbus left Spain, he didn't know where he was going; when he reached America, he didn't know where he was; and when he returned to Spain, he wasn't sure where he had been.

The purpose of our academic voyage is to sail the seas of teaching methods, drop anchor now and then to sound the depths of various methods, and do a little fishing around for your ideas on "how to teach the Bible Class."

A *method* for teaching the Bible class is not a magical "open sesame" to the treasures of learning. Method is the way the teacher *and the class* work to achieve the objectives of a course of study. There is nothing magical about a method. A job needs to be done, and the way one goes about doing it is the *method*.

When one discusses method in relation to *teaching the Bible*, it is good for us to take off our pedagogical shoes, for we are standing on holy ground. The Bible is no ordinary book, no human compendium of the wisdom of the ages. When we study the Bible, we should study the Bible as we study no other book, because the Bible is what no other book is. It is the Word of God and presents the Gospel, "the incorruptible seed, which liveth and abideth for-

ever." While it is important that the teaching of the Bible be done in a lively manner, it does not depend upon the teacher to give it life, for it is the life-giving Word in its essence.

We want to devote a second paragraph to the unique character of the Scripture in its relation to method. There are certain "laws of learning" that are essential for us to know as teachers. There are definitions of "teaching" and "learning" that are worthy of repetition and contemplation. There are boners aplenty that we can make in our methodology which will make every outstanding educator for the past twenty-five centuries turn over in his grave and rattle. But the Word of our God is the Word of Him who has established all manner of laws in nature *and* in learning, and His Word can *transcend* these laws. We do not want to proceed in reckless abandon to flout the laws of sound teaching and good learning, but we want to remember our place. We are the oracles of God when we are teaching the Bible. We need to be careful that we do not let "the tricks of the trade" become an obsession and the Bible another source of subject material.

## I

### WHAT IS TEACHING AND WHAT IS LEARNING?

*Teaching* is helping people learn. In a sense there is no teaching unless there is learning. Someone has defined teaching as a "developing emotional situation, with two minds sharing one thought." It is directing the learner to discover something for himself. Mere telling may not at all be teaching. Teaching is not pouring in or blasting forth.

*Learning* takes place when there is

- 1) a change in attitudes, motives, and habits
- 2) an acquiring of knowledge, understanding, and insight
- 3) a development of skills, such as
  - a) skill in the use and study of the Bible
  - b) skill in expression of what we believe
  - c) skill in church work
  - d) skill in Christian living

Learning, therefore, involves a matter of change in people, a turning of people. ("Turn Thou me, and I shall be turned; for Thou

art the Lord, my God.") In the growth of the Christian faith and life, Christian learning is

- 1) continuous . . . "first the blade, then the ear, etc."
- 2) varied . . .
- 3) at times indiscernible . . . "the wind bloweth where it listeth," etc.
- 4) expected and promised by the Lord

In the Christian life there is always a gap between what we believe and what we do (e. g., St. Paul). At times, there is a vast gulf twixt what we *know* on the basis of God's Word and what we *do* because of God's Word and will. The remark, "If you really believed it, you'd do it," may represent nothing but pedagogical frustration and blustering. If one says that "Scripture truth is not fully known until it is done," he fails to reckon with two facts:

1. The truth of Scripture is not fully *known* until eternity. (1 Cor. 13:12).
2. Christian experience does not validate Scripture truth; it validates our faith in it.

We mention some of these things now because later we want to say a few words on the importance of evaluation for the use of method.

With the help of Christian teachers Christian learners should

- 1) be led to a knowledge of what their sins are and the nature of God's grace, which brings pardon for every sin
- 2) discover the meaning of life in terms of God's purposes for His redeemed
- 3) see the importance of the Church for the individual and for all mankind
- 4) develop a Christian approach to the solution of everyday problems
- 5) receive a clearer vision of their eternal destiny in Christ—*heaven*

## II

### OUR MISUNDERSTOOD ADULTS

Gaines S. Dobbins devotes the entire first chapter of his book *Teaching Adults in the Sunday School* to the subject of "Our Mis-

understood Adults” and seeks to clear up seven general misconceptions concerning adults. Let us spend a little time with “our misunderstood adults.”

1. *Adults Are Not Grown-up Children.* — There is a vast difference between being childlike in the faith and childish. Cf. 1 Corinthians 13. It is a mistake to think of them as grown-up children, incapable of serious thought and independent action. To perpetrate this blunder will hamstring our methodology, limit our expectations of the class, and confine men and women of God to the ABC’s of Christianity with repetitious boredom.

2. *Adults Are Not All Alike.* — The cynicism of womanhood says: “Oh, all men are alike!” And men with curled lips will utter the rejoinder: “Well, you know, all women are alike.” While there are certain traits possessed by adult men and women in common — each one is born as an individual, is saved as an individual, dies as an individual, and is judged as an individual — you will have in your class

- a) happy, well-adjusted Christians whose heartbeat is in tune with God
- b) Christians who walk the tightrope of the borderline, sometimes cold, sometimes hot: “too religious to be happy in the world, and too worldly to be happy in Christ”
- c) cold, indifferent Christians, defeated in their spirits, people who are fast losing the joy of their salvation
- d) the sick, heartbroken, poverty-stricken, who are tempted to forget that God loves all only because He loves each
- e) the self-confident and aggressive, who welcome responsibility, because they enjoy putting either God or themselves first
- f) timid, hesitant people, afraid you will ask them a question or request them to read a verse of the Bible out loud
- g) people ignorant of the Bible, who think Hezekiah is a book in the Old Testament and that Joshua was one of Christ’s 12 disciples
- h) men and women with twisted personalities, whom some people that think too highly of their own personalities call “queer,” “cranky,” or “peculiar” — those who are offended easily

- i) the adults with limited intelligence, whose spiritual expression may yet exceed the limits of their intelligence
- j) and, finally, the spiritual rebels, who know the answers, but do not believe them

These, Bible class teachers, are your learners!

3. *Adults Are Not Too Old to Learn.* — Said one adult: "I can't stretch my ten-acre field to twenty acres, but if I give it the right sort of cultivation, it will *yield* lots more." "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," someone says with an air of finality. There are two things wrong with this dogmatic assertion. People are not dogs, and we're not trying to teach them new tricks. Some adults cease to learn, it is true, because they close their minds to new ideas and develop a mental laziness which stupefies them. The problem of adult teachers is to keep his adults "awake in the head."

4. *Adults Have Not Lost the Capacity for Romance.* — We are reminded of Miss Jones, the 70-year-old unmarried sister of Mrs. Smith. The guest had arrived in the Smith home the night before and had met neither Mrs. Smith nor Miss Jones. At breakfast, the guest said to Miss Jones: "Mrs. Smith, I presume?" "No," said the elderly spinster, "I am Miss Jones." "Oh, you're not married," remarked the guest. To which Miss Jones replied: "No, not married. *Not yet!*" Christianity is zestful also for an adult, and teaching of adults should be zestful and romantic.

5. *Adults Have Not Outgrown the Possibility of Change.* — Read the N. T.

6. *Adults Are Not Hardened to the Gospel, Because They Are Adults.* — Poor theology!

7. *Adults Are Not Too Busy to Serve!* — Like the men in the parable, perhaps they can truthfully say: "No man hath hired us." Or we may be giving them Martha jobs, and they are "cumbered with much serving." Jesus said: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." And so will Christ's adults.

### III

#### WHAT METHODS TO USE

The methods to be used in teaching the Bible class will be determined by:

1. *The Ability of the Teacher.* — Teachers need to guard against using only that method which they can use best, riding a “natural” to its death as well as to the demise of the class. It is all right in methodology to “do what comes naturally,” but it can become a rut, and a rut is a grave in miniature.

2. *The Ability of the Students.* — Not all methods appeal to all groups; skill in various methods may need to be developed. Good choice of methods stems from the same principle of proceeding from “where the people are,” from the known to the unknown. To fail to train the class in various methods may only limit the effectiveness of the whole situation.

3. *The Purposes, or Objectives, of the Course of Instruction.* — E. g., would you use the lecture method to develop certain Bible skills, or would you, instead, use some activity method for this purpose? (This is a rhetorical question.)

4. *The Available Equipment, Room, and Time.* — Brief sessions hamper panels, forums, and dramatization methods . . . lecture may be most effective under restriction of time.

5. *Size of Group.* — Discussion difficult in large groups; too small a class will not use the panel method.

Whatever method or combination of methods is used, it will still be true that there will be no teaching unless there is learning, and there will be little learning without attention. The Bible class teacher will be intent upon creating and maintaining *interest*; this calls for

- a) an interested teacher
- b) an interesting teacher
- c) an informed teacher

The teacher will need to understand that we learn and study best when

- a) we have become interested
- b) the subject concerns us
- c) we get satisfaction from our study
- d) others do it with us
- e) something is expected of us, and
- f) we have a problem to solve

The *first three minutes* of the Bible class *are crucial*. Get off to a fast start! *Interest* can be created through the use of

- a) a striking introductory statement
- b) a story illustrating the truth to be taught
- c) a question that sets up a problem that grows out of human experience

After attention has been secured at the very outset, it must be maintained by deepening this attention into sustained interest.

#### IV

#### SOME METHODS TO BE USED IN ISOLATION OR COMBINATION

##### *A. The Lecture Method*

Has its strong and weak points. Favorable for use in large groups where discussion poses difficult problems. Various types of lecture:

1. Conversational
2. Provocative
3. Oratorical
4. Inspirational
5. Commentator

Much of the effectiveness of lecturing depends upon

1. Organization of material
2. Aim

Lecturing should also aim at the result of learners who "do the truth." History records a conversation between Demosthenes and Aeschines. Said Aeschines: "When I address the people, they say, 'How well he speaks!'" To which Demosthenes replied: "When I speak, the people shout, 'Let us march against Philip!'"

When you furnish historical information or background material, the lecture is the best method. When clarification or interpretation is needed, lecture better. (Use of investigation and report by member(s) of the class for additional material.) Large group responds best to lecture method; time element may demand it.

But we must remember that we did not learn to drive a car only from hearing a lecture. Lecturing has its place, but an exclusive or predominant use of the lecture method is wholly inadvisable.



We think that herein lies one of the chief weaknesses of our Bible classes. We are preaching to our people for an additional hour at times.

(In developing an expanded program of Christian education in a Christian congregation, two things must be kept in mind:

1. Our facilities must be expanded, and plans for building should be laid on the basis of what we intend to do in our program of education. Our work in adult education is often stifled by a lack of facilities. To build a building, though, and then to plan a program of education is going at a vital problem backwards.

2. Equally important as blueprints for expanded building facilities and the resultant building itself is the concomitant of a training program for lay Bible class teachers. Start this training program before you start the building program.)

#### *B. The Discussion Method*

Has greater teaching and learning possibilities. Requires more thinking *on the part of all*. 40—50 persons can be an ideally sized group for discussion. The teacher is moderator; problems and issues should be assigned, if at all possible, in advance of the discussion for study.

Discussion is not

1. Argumentation
2. Hashing over preconceived notions or pooling ignorance
3. Small talk
4. A bull session in which no decision is reached

“Discussion is a co-operative procedure in which the group faces a problem for which it seeks a satisfactory answer *and plans required action.*”

The leader in discussion keeps group confidence by avoiding a dictatorial attitude, allows all views to be expressed, demonstrates no horror at whacky ideas, remains tactful, accepts correct portion of wrong answer, sees the questions crisscross from member to member, and not only from leader to member, moves discussion toward solution, puts skillful, thought-provoking questions, gives time for thought, maintains a sense of humor, involves all in discussion.

### *C. The Panel Discussion Method (Town-Hall Meetings)*

1. The subject is organized around an arresting issue and then subdivided. "Why Not Say It?" "Can a Christian Be a Lodge Member?"

2. Members are chosen who prepare their presentation in advance (4—6 persons).

3. Panel Members discuss the question in a conversational style *among themselves*, not directing their remarks to the audience, yet speaking so that they can be heard by the entire group.

4. Moderator uses this brief presentation by panel (three minutes per speaker) to prime the class and then uses discussion method to lead to a Biblical conclusion and action. Allows panel members to quiz one another and the members of the group to quiz the panel.

### *D. The Teach and Test Method*

1. Assign readings to the whole class (special reports by volunteers).

2. Prepare a true-false test on lesson (used either before or after; cf. S. S. Teacher Training Course method).

3. Discuss points of quiz which represent in essence an outline of the lesson.

4. Discuss subjects related to quiz.

5. Summarize points learned and how to activate them.

### *E. Investigation and Report*

1. Deals with a problem, and facets of this problem are studied by smaller groups within the group or by individuals within group.

2. Guidance given to smaller study groups or individuals to find materials sought.

3. Report to group.

4. Discussion of reports and conclusions for action.

Variation: "Buzz groups" meet for part of class time with an assigned problem. Guidance must be clear.

### *F. Storytelling Method*

1. Jesus used this method a great deal.

2. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus did not argue nor lecture. He told a story. Parable of Good Samaritan.

### *G. The Meditation Technique*

1. Class reads small portion of chapter under study silently. Members look for three things in text and may mark them:

- a) things they do not fully understand (? or Q)
- b) commands or directives they found (arrow)
- c) new understandings that came to them (lights)

2. Leader then asks for their *questions* to clear up misunderstandings and further explains the text; members go on to the *directives* they found for their lives and discuss them; leader then calls for the "*lights*." The value of the entire section then summarized. The next section can then be assigned for meditative study.

### *H. The Audio-Visual Method*

1. Find suitable aid or aids: recording, films, slides, filmstrips, pictures. (Blackboard an excellent aid!)

2. Preview thoroughly, and determine "things to watch" and "things to be discussed."

3. Present pictures, etc.

4. Follow with study of text "Life of St. Paul"; Resurrection filmstrip. Hollywood religious films illustrate possibilities of method in terms of awakening interest in accuracy and detail.

5. Re-show aid to let group observe what was missed in first showing and what developed through the discussion (S. S. filmstrips and "Redeeming the Time").

6. Conclude discussion with summary, and lead over to action which can follow.

### *I. Project Method*

The project is a purposeful enterprise carried to a satisfactory conclusion. This starts with a felt need or problem:

1. Something to be solved: poor church attendance.
2. Something to be appreciated: the work of an institution, e. g., old-age home, Lutheran university, etc.
3. Something to be done; conducting a V. B. S.

(NOTE: We are indebted to Pastor Oscar Feucht for many of these fine suggestions.)

## V

## TESTING RESULTS OF TEACHING

Results of teaching need to be determined in relation to objectives: (1) What are you trying to achieve? (2) To what extent did you seem to achieve these desired objectives?

Various forms of testing results of teaching are:

1. *Attendance Test*

"Business goes where it is invited and stays where it is well treated." . . . This is not a plea for big classes, which can be a hindrance to learning.

2. *Knowledge Test*

Faith does not flourish in an intellectual Sahara. Jesus used Scripture to teach facts!

3. *Attitudes Test*

Jesus used Scripture to teach people to *face* the facts! (Heb. 4:12, 13.)

4. *Abilities Test*

What development of skills was there in

- a) skills in use and study of the Bible
- b) skills in expression
- c) skills in church work
- d) skills in Christian living

5. *Character Test*

Teaching that is life-centered should result in learners who are Christ-centered. . . . Chinese student who wrote to his American friend: "I am reading the Bible and behaving it."

6. *Stewardship Test*

In terms of

- a) time
- b) talents
- c) influence
- d) possessions

## VI

## AN OBLIGATION

Bible class teachers are obligated to “produce the goods” — in the best manner possible (1 Peter 4:11).

An all-out effort to recruit our people for Bible study in the Bible class must be coupled with an all-out effort on the part of teachers to be interested, interesting, and informed. Of our Bible class teachers it must not be said: “The hungry sheep look up, but are not fed,” nor, “For tender souls he served up half a Christ.”

While there may be “lots of ways of skinning a cat,” there is one sure way to take the hide off a Bible class, and that is by poor teaching.

But conscientious teachers, who are continually striving to do a good job better, have a promise which spells success: “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.” Let our Savior be your Teacher. His methods are sound.

Austin, Tex.