

Coach's Corner



Vol. 2, Issue 9, October 2009

“Teaching For Change”

In 1994 a former professor of mine at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Perry Downs, authored a book titled Teaching For Spiritual Growth in which he demonstrated that a truly Christian approach to education goes beyond merely communicating information. Additionally, he argued, if we model our teaching after Jesus, we will strive for spiritual growth. That same year my doctoral mentor, Gary Smith, came out with the book, The Prophets As Preachers, in which he contended that when the prophets spoke to Israel and Judah and when they wrote their goal was to see people transformed. Gary wrote out of the wealth of his years as an Old Testament scholar and in the field of his expertise—the prophets.

Each of these men make the same point—one from the Old and one from the New Testament—namely that when we teach the Bible, our goal is not merely to give out facts. We should be teaching for the purpose that people learn about God through His Word and therefore grow in our ability and skill to live to His glory. This is exactly what Paul said in Colossians 1:28 (especially read in light of 1:9-11):

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

Yet, this leads us to an important question: How can we teach in such a way that spiritual transformation and growth will be enhanced? To answer, I believe there are four emphases we should keep in mind as we craft any lesson or sermon. These four principles all rhyme and thus are easy to remember. Over the years I have found that they serve the Christian well toward this goal.

Hook

When we develop a lesson, one of the most important questions we need to ask, once we understand what we will teach, is this: Why should the class or hearers want to pay attention? If we ask and answer that question (and help communicate the conclusion in some way in our teaching), it will go a long way toward helping people want to listen. For example, if we announce to a group that we are going to discuss what the Bible teaches about the Lord's Supper, only a select few aspiring “theologians” might be interested. Yet, if we can use an illustration from someone else's life, a personal story, or maybe even give an example of why it is important, this will often connect people into the subject more intensely. If they can see that an understanding of the Lord's Supper will: (1) Help them understand the application of the cross in their daily experiences; (2) Make communion more meaningful; (3) Enhance their worship; (4) and also draw them closer to Christ, this will help them stay with the teaching. However you decide to “hook” the class or group into the subject and get their attention, it is often helpful to use variety from time to time. A true story, something humorous, a video clip, all these can help do it in different ways.

Book

The heart of your teaching will be the content of the lesson, in other words, what the Bible teaches. Some of you will work with curriculum and so a publisher will walk you through the material. Others will work more from scratch. When it comes to putting together your lesson, let me mention briefly some key things to remember: (1) With any lesson, remember that your study goal is this: what did the author in that passage(s) intend to say as he was inspired of God? Then communicate that to those you are teaching. (2) Usually it is best to have one primary purpose in each lesson or message. For example, staying with our example of the Lord's Supper, our purpose might be something like this: I desire to help my class understand the Lord's Supper so that they can increase in their worship of God through it and have a greater appreciation for it. Or, we might have this purpose: I desire to convince my class to participate in the Lord's Supper more regularly (or for the first time if is a younger class) by helping them understand how we should take communion. I usually write down that purpose statement for any lesson or sermon and once I am done, see if it achieves that goal. (3) Remember that any good Bible teacher will be someone who is regularly reading and studying the Bible themselves. The foundation you build in the Bible will serve you well in teaching. (4) It is always better to over-prepare and to have too much material than to under-prepare and not know what to do with the remainder of the time. (5) As you are putting together the lesson, make sure that each part serves the one main purpose and stay away from "rabbit trails". More often than not, getting off on other topics too far can confuse the class and leave them without any idea what they were supposed to take away from it. (6) If you are struggling with lesson preparation, don't be afraid to ask for help. (7) Don't wait until the last minute to prepare. Prepare a few days in advance. During those days after finishing the lesson, other ideas will come to mind that may be some of your best parts of the lesson and help you refine it.

Look

The third aspect of teaching is helping the class look at and interact with the material. If you stop and think about some of the best classes you have been in, my guess is that they were interactive in nature and not just lectures. Rare is the teacher who can teach for change without involving the hearers in the discussion. Work at asking open-ended (not just "yes" or "no") questions which will help get your class involved. Sometimes, if we have not figured out why the class needs to hear the material or what change should take place, we will not ask good interactive questions. Yet, if we have done our homework in that area and then crafted questions accordingly, that will go along way toward involving people. The more we can involve our class, the more likely they will pay attention and change as a result of the class. If you are having trouble getting people to be involved, one of the ways you might change this is to have the class break up into groups of two or three people, give them specific questions to discuss and answer, and then come back together as an entire class to discuss what they came up with. Additionally, include some variety in the class. If you start out with a clip, a humorous story, or an illustration, then say some words about what you are looking at and why it is important, then break up into discussion groups, then come back together as a whole group, you have introduced enough variety to keep people from "checking out on you" during the lesson. Of course, the younger the class is, the more important it also is to make sure you are involving them in the lesson in such a way that they are physically active somewhere along the way and not merely sitting still for the entire time. Finally, pay attention to or ask advice from experienced teachers if you are still having trouble involving your class in the lesson.

Took

The final aspect of any good lesson is to make sure we know what the hearers took home to apply. As we said above, we are teaching to see transformation take place. What this means for us as teachers is that part of our preparation needs to center around application. What should be applied and how do we communicate that? Application should always flow out of the main message in the lesson. I find it helpful actually to write out ahead of time what some points of application ought to be. I also find it helpful in teaching settings to guide the class in coming up with the points of application themselves. That helps with ownership and they may think of some things you did not.

If you regularly teach, I would encourage you to keep this *Coach's Corner* close by you as you prepare. Though much more could be said on each emphasis, this is enough to point us in the right direction. Finally, pray and work through these four emphases and then trust God to bring change through your teaching in the life of your class or group!

Joyfully Teaching The Congregation With You,

Tom