

# **FOCUS ON ROCKS:**

TEACHING THE BIBLE TO JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS

by: Marc Johnson

March 10, 2007

# VOMITORY ORATORY

Boring people with the Bible is a sin. The Bible is the best book. It has dozens of compelling characters. It touches on the most important issues of human experience. Not only does it have great examples of many kinds of literature, its author is God himself. The Bible has inspired men and women throughout history to make incredible, heroic sacrifices. It has shaped our language and traditions. In and through the Bible God speaks. When you look into the Bible it looks back into you. It exposes what is really going on in your soul. The Bible is amazing. Boring people by teaching the Bible poorly is a tragic contradiction of reality. It is a sin—especially with students.

Unfortunately, one of the main complaints junior high students have about Bible studies is that they are mind-numbingly boring, drool-inducing vomitory oratory: spewed words that cause students to want to blow chunks. I remember the vivid, nauseating shock of watching the clock during a bad Sunday School teaching and realizing that the teacher was not even close to being done—the sick visceral horror as the second hand dragged across the clock face.

Howard Hendricks, pastor, professor, author, and excellent communicator, attacks this issue, too:

“I don’t mean to be cruel but I’m compelled to be honest: If all those involved in Christian teaching had to become salesmen and saleswomen to make a living, most of them would starve to death. We’re teaching the most exciting truth in the entire world—eternal truth—and doing it as if it were cold mashed potatoes.”<sup>1</sup>

I never studied the Bible on my own when I was young. Why would I? I was convinced that it was boring. Plus, I assumed I already knew it all because I could answer the trivia

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives*. (Sisters: Multnomah, 1987), 70

questions the teachers would ask. I felt like I had heard it all before. I compensated for boredom by getting in trouble. Heck, at least then I wasn't bored!

Boring kids with the Bible is tragic because its message is so compelling that thousands have chosen to suffer and die for it. It contains the greatest news ever told to humans. It has the power to expose our innermost secrets and transform our thinking. Boring students with this message is a gross misrepresentation of the Word and of its author. Much Bible teaching is ineffective because it is boring, and therefore irrelevant. These are serious problems. Boring Bible teaching runs the risk of inoculating students against the Truth. We must do better. And it is possible. I know the repulsiveness of bad Bible teaching, but I also know the soul-gripping power of the Bible taught well. When the Bible is taught effectively, students experience God speaking directly to them, like there is no one else in the room. When that happened to me, the only thing that made sense was for me to give my life over to God. I was deeply impacted in a lasting way by the people in my life that effectively taught the Bible. As student workers, we need to learn to give consistently high quality teachings from God's Word.

Bible teaching is an essential part of accomplishing our stated mission here at Xenos Christian Fellowship. Our goal in student ministries is twofold; we want to reach non-Christian students for Christ and raise Christian students into powerful workers and leaders for Christ's church. Our vision is to see clusters of students raised up to lead home churches and to become key leaders in student ministries, urban ministry and world missions. For this to happen, we need to do much more than merely entertain junior high students; we must be intentional about our training. Therefore, we have four strategic priorities:

- Bible teaching – Students need to have their minds transformed by the Word of God so they learn to think the way God thinks.
- Evangelism – Students need to learn to love those who do not know Christ and be equipped to effectively share the Good News.
- Fellowship – Students need to develop deep, long-term friendships with other students that are committed to following the Lord.
- Student ownership – Students need to start using their gifts to serve.

Bible teaching plays a critical role in addressing all of these priorities. It provides an authoritative direction for what we are trying to do and gives boundaries for acceptable practices. All evangelical movements have prioritized Bible teaching. Historical examples include Hus, Wycliffe, Luther, Wesley, Edwards and many others. Our movement is no different. As student workers we should aim to excel at communicating biblical truth to junior high students. But how can we do that? What are the most effective strategies for teaching the Bible to junior high students?

## HAVE A MAIN POINT!

If we are going to teach the Bible, then we should teach the Bible. If we believe the Bible is authoritative, it should dictate the content and method of our teaching. We should emphasize what it emphasizes. We should argue how it argues. We should follow its thought-progression. Bottom line, we should teach what and how the Bible teaches. How did biblical authors present their material?

Bible authors had a main point. When they mention their writing methods, it is clear they had a main point. And they were careful to communicate it as clearly as possible to their audience. Luke explains that he carefully investigated everything about Jesus from the beginning and tried to write it out in an orderly way. His stated purpose was that Theophilus, whether that is a group or individual, would know how certain the

teaching about Jesus was (Luke 1:1-4). John plainly states the main point of his books. In John 20:31, he says, “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.”<sup>2</sup> In 1 John 5:13 he says he wrote his eyewitness testimony, “to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” Inspired authors carefully selected and presented their material to prove their main point.

Paul also plainly structures many of his books around a central point. Ephesians is a good example. In the first three chapters he describes the incredible things God has done for those that have come to know Christ. In 4:1 he says, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Almost everything in the following three chapters expands practically on how this subject: how to live a worthy life, the main point of the book. It would be strange to study the argument of a Bible book if the author was not trying to make an argument.

It is not surprising that Biblical authors had main points. At the time, writing was expensive and time consuming; it was very different from modern communication. It would not make much sense to do an in-depth academic study of a student’s email history. Since email is so easy to create, there is very little thought given to syntax, grammar, context and clear communication. As in example below, much of email communication is made up of bursts of shorthand expression.

-----Original Message-----  
**From:** randomstudent [mailto:fuzzilogic@crapmail.com]  
**Sent:** March 06, 2007 4:22 PM  
**To:** someoneelse@poopyscraps.com  
**Subject:** RE: RE: RE: RE: heckfire

omg! lol!!! how ru? watch out!! wizzle the bizzle!! Ha ha.  
g2g brb <3 u!!!  
Rs-FuZz!!!

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984)

Biblical writing is very different. The authors realized they were communicating a profound message from God (Gal. 1:11-12; 2 Pet. 2:12-21). They were extremely careful about what they said and how they said it. That is why we are justified to study the Bible at a deep level. The authors themselves intended this. If the authors had a main point and were careful about how they expressed it, we should be careful how we express it, too. Furthermore, since the authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write their text, as we understand the thought-progression of the authors we are getting a glimpse at the very thoughts of God himself. Therefore, we should seek to understand and communicate the hierarchy of the argument of the biblical text we are teaching.

Jesus had a main point in his teaching, most of which was done in parables. Robert Stein says “the term ‘parable’ covers a broad range of meanings in the Bible. Basic to all, however is a comparison of two dissimilar things.”<sup>3</sup> He concludes that the central point of comparison is what we should emphasize in our interpretation. He offers three principles to correctly interpret Jesus’ parables:

“The principles are: (1) parables are not allegories but instead tend to emphasize one main point, so that parable or details in parables that do not absolutely require an allegorical interpretation ought not to be interpreted allegorically; (2) to understand the original meaning of a parable, we must seek to understand what Jesus meant when he uttered it to his listeners in the first century, i.e., we must seek to understand its meaning in the first *Sitz im Leben*; and (3) it is important also to understand how the individual Evangelists understood the parable, i.e., we should seek to understand the meaning of the parable in the third *Sitz im Leben*.”<sup>4</sup>

This means that we should first seek to understand the plainly stated main point in the parable. This involves understanding the plot development of the parable itself and the Gospel author’s structural setting or context. To understand a parable we have to find

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 1994) 140

<sup>4</sup> Robert Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) 55

the main point. Once we find the main point we can understand the details in their proper perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Most of Jesus' parables were intended to teach one main spiritual point. If we try to extend them too far we get ourselves into trouble. Early church fathers extended the meaning of parables allegorically. For example, Origen and Augustine suggested numerous detailed explanations of the details of the parable of the Good Samaritan to show that it teaches the history of salvation. Stein points out that the question of their interpretation is not whether or not it is Christian or even whether or not what they say is true. He says the question is whether their interpretation is what Jesus actually meant when he spoke to his original audience.<sup>6</sup> Others in the early church reacted against this type of allegorical interpretation. John Chrysostom, Augustine's contemporary, said it was not good to "enquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learnt the object for which it was composed, to read this, and not to busy one's self about any thing further."<sup>7</sup> Chrysostom's warnings were not heeded. The church almost universally adopted the allegorical interpretation.

During the Reformation a number of interpreters fought against the allegorical interpretation and promoted looking for the plain meaning of the text. Calvin said:

"I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> This hermeneutic principle is valuable with all communication though it has been attacked by postmodern literary theorists.

<sup>6</sup> *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, 48

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. By William Pringle. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 63

The Bible's authors had a main point; Jesus had a main point. When we are teaching the Bible, we should have a main point. And it should be the same as the main point of the text! If our main point is not the main point of the text we are not teaching the Bible; at best we are teaching systematic theology. At worst we are arrogantly propagating our own ideas.

A practical way to emphasize the Bible's thought progression is to identify the passage's main point and make it your main teaching point. Furthermore, our teaching outline should be based on the thought-development of the passage itself. One of the biggest problems in our Bible teaching at Xenos is "nice point, wrong passage." People often give in to the temptation to use a minor point in a passage as a springboard into a semi-related systematic theology survey. Unfortunately, people start to think the passage under discussion teaches the expanded theological point when it does not. We run the risk of teaching our students to misuse the Bible if we do this consistently.

A secondary goal we should have in Bible teaching is to help students gain the tools they need to understand the Bible for themselves. Using the outline of the passage as our outline helps students learn to do that intuitively. Even in topical teachings, which are common in student groups, we should try to find a passage that teaches about the topic, and then teach the passage. We need to fight the urge to read our own ideas into the text. Much heresy starts from an inaccurate prioritization of extraneous material. Jesus blasted the Pharisees and teachers of the law for this (Matt. 23). We do not want to strain out the gnat and swallow the camel! In Bible teaching the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Winston Churchill once said, “If you have an important point to make, don’t try to be subtle or clever. Use the pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time; a tremendous whack.”<sup>9</sup> There are no more important points than the main points of the Bible. Dianna Booher, a communication consultant says: “If you can't write your message in a sentence, you can't say it in an hour.” Ken Davis, author, comedian and speaker, offers helpful suggestions for delivering clear, understandable teachings in *How to Speak to Youth and Keep Them Awake at the Same Time*. He provides a systematic method to develop a main point and remove extraneous material that is very practical and useful. However, he does not emphasize the importance of allowing the Bible to dictate the main point. He calls his system the SCORRE method, an acronym that stands for: Subject, Central theme, Objective, Rationale, Resources, and Evaluation

Many Bible teachers feel that they have to communicate every insight they received during their many hours of study. This is counter-productive. If you have too much material you will bore students to death. In fact, many times if you present too much material they will remember much less than if you have a clear main point. In their insightful book, *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath give principles for developing sticky ideas, or ones that are remembered and acted on. Their Principle #1 is “Simplicity.” They relay a defense lawyer’s quip that “If you argue ten points, even if each is a good point, when they get back to the jury room they won’t remember any.” They then argue that to get to the core of an idea we have to become masters of exclusion.

---

<sup>9</sup> Simpson, James B., *Simpson’s Contemporary Quotations*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), #4928

“We must relentlessly prioritize. Saying something short is not the mission—sound bites are not the ideal. Proverbs are the ideal. We must create ideas that are both simple *and* profound. The Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one-sentence statement so profound that an individual could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.”<sup>10</sup>

This is excellent advice. If our students are going to clearly understand, retain and apply the Bible’s teaching, we need to help them by distilling the main point from the text and presenting it to them in the simplest way possible.

One’s main point should be actively stated. As Bible teachers, we are in the business of calling people to respond personally, relationally and volitionally to the Lord. Many times, the main point of the passage is an application point. If your text does not include a command, your main point should be the logically, contextually-mandated application point. If we haven’t called on students to give themselves to God in new, radical obedience, we haven’t taught the Bible. We’ll look into this in more depth later.

Everything in one’s teaching should support the main point. Ruthlessly delete everything that doesn’t directly support the main point. This is a hard, painful process. As we study scripture, we are often struck by numerous points. It is tempting to try to cover everything. However, it is unrealistic to be able to relay all we have gained in hours or days of study in 20-25 minutes. We must prioritize. Middle school students are young; they don’t have to learn everything in this teaching. They have plenty of time. If they can learn and apply one point during each teaching, that is incredible! Think of the cumulative effect of that kind of teaching over a period of years.

Doug Pagitt is an author and practitioner within the emergent church movement. I’m sympathetic to his complaints about what he calls “speaching: the form of preaching

---

<sup>10</sup> Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick*. (New York: Random House, 2007), 16

that's hardly distinguishable from a one-way speech."<sup>11</sup> He is right when he argues that teaching the Bible is more effective when done within the context of a relationship. However, I'm concerned by his apparent lack of concern for the authority of the Bible over our relationships. He says that we should be careful not to use the Bible simply to support our presuppositions. I agree. Emphasizing the main point helps guard against this abuse. He goes on to say that "the Bible ought to live as *an* (emphasis added) authoritative member of our community, one we listen to on all topics of which she (sic) speaks."<sup>12</sup> By this he means that we should allow the Bible to speak for itself. According to him, our role as Bible teachers is to "preach in a way that opens others to the layers of messages and meaning."<sup>13</sup> I partly agree. Hopefully students will want to get into the Bible on their own as a result of our teaching. However, there are times when it is imperative to argue vehemently against error (Gal. 5:12). Not all "layers of messages and meaning" are equally valid. Other times, if Christians are resistant to following the Lord, we have to urge them to respond (Matt. 18; Eph. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:1-2). I'm interested to know what other authoritative members Pagitt sees in the Christian community. He doesn't say. He does say that when one "expert" teaches the Bible it reinforces the idea that the hearers "are not in a position to speak on how they were implicated by this story."<sup>14</sup> Is that really true? Paul the apostle didn't seem to think his teaching was merely *an* authoritative member of the community. He claimed it was directly from God (Gal. 1:6-12). Jesus claimed that he was God and that his teaching was totally authoritative (Matt. 5). Old Testament prophets said their message was from the Lord.

---

<sup>11</sup> Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 11

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 197

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

When they taught their authoritative message it didn't kill their audience's desire to learn and communicate on their own. Their teaching stimulated others to spread the message. Teaching was Paul's primary method of spreading the news (2 Tim. 2:1-2). Throughout history, when leaders have been raised up that teach the Word of God, more are inspired to spread the Gospel. Pagitt is badly mistaken on this point.

As Bible teachers, we have a profound privilege and responsibility to communicate God's Word to our students. When interpreting, we are not at liberty to use creativity. However, there is room for incredible creativity when we try to help our students understand and apply the text.

## AIM AT ROCKS

Imagine getting separated from your guide in a foreign country and realizing in the middle of a crowd that the local cuisine refuses to stay trapped in your intestines. You need to find a bathroom right NOW. You learn very quickly how valuable just a few understandable words can be. I have a personal goal to learn the phrase, "I have explosive diarrhea," in as many languages as possible. I'm currently at 16.

We need to speak to students in language they can understand. Having a main point is great but if one doesn't know how to communicate that point to their audience they might as well be speaking a foreign language. How can we connect our main point with junior high students? How do they think and what does it look like to communicate effectively with them? Cognitive development researchers have gained significant insight into the mental processes of adolescents. It will be valuable to look at some of

their findings since they have direct implications for selecting the most effective teaching methodology.

For decades researchers have tried to find out how kids think. Obviously, normal children think differently than normal adults. Numerous theories have been developed to explain these differences. The most influential researcher in cognitive development is Jean Piaget, who was a constructivist. That means, he believed children construct theories about how the world works as they experience it (others argue that children are born with innate knowledge). He described four levels of cognitive ability that he believed were universal and consecutive. Since he believed they happened in order he assigned age ranges to the categories. The levels he described are sensorimotor (birth to 2 years), pre-operational (2-7), concrete operational (ages 7-11), and formal operational (ages 11-up). In his language, an “operation” is a logical thought. Laura A. Berk, a child development researcher, states:

“Although Piaget’s description of development is no longer fully accepted, researchers are a long way from consensus on how to modify or replace it . . . . Diverse theories and lines of investigation leave research into children’s thinking far more fragmented today than several decades ago, when Piaget’s theory held sway. But despite intense disagreement on how to characterize cognitive development, researchers continue to draw inspiration from Piaget’s lifelong quest to understand how children acquire new capacities. His findings have served as the starting point for virtually every major contemporary perspective.”<sup>15</sup>

She goes on to add that Piaget provides a useful “road map” of cognitive development that is accurate in many respects.” Since most cognitive development experts use this terminology, I will use it here.

Based on Piaget’s theory, we should expect to be most effective when we focus our teaching methodology to appeal to formal operational students, since middle school

---

<sup>15</sup> Laura A. Berk, *Child Development*. (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 2003), 251

students are typically 11-14 years old. However, that would be a big mistake. Piaget started his age delineation at the first introduction of the new abilities, not once they were mastered and generalized.

Piaget argued that around age 11, adolescents *start* to develop new cognitive abilities. They develop the capacity to think abstractly. He called this new cognitive ability the “formal operations” stage. Before this stage is reached people tend to think logically only about “concrete” data. They can think logically but it is generally constrained to sensory data that they have experienced or can easily imagine. If presented with two sticks, a concrete thinker would have no problem deducing that if stick A is longer than stick B, a stick that is longer than stick A would also be longer than stick B. However, if this same problem was presented to them in a hypothetical situation, (Travis is older than Jen and Jen is older than Marc. Is Travis older than Marc?) they would be hard pressed to find the right answer.

Hypothetical and systematic thinking are central aspects of formal operations. A person that has reached formal operational ability is able to systematically evaluate problems to find the best solution. One of the most famous tests of formal operational ability is the “combination-of-chemicals” problem. In it, subjects are told that if they combine a set of three clear chemicals in the right order and then add a drop of another chemical it will turn yellow. Students that have reached the formal operational stage will systematically attempt to produce all of the different possible combinations. Students that have not reached this stage will randomly combine chemicals and will not try all of the combinations. Believe it or not, this research should profoundly affect how we teach the Bible because many of the concepts and all of the theology in the Bible is abstract.

Remember, it is only when a child reaches formal operational ability that they are able to understand abstract concepts on their own. If our audience is not processing information in a formal way, we will have to teach very differently. So, is an audience of junior high students full of formal thinkers?

Piaget believed that formal operational ability was universal. This has been hotly debated. The answer is vitally important for Bible teaching methodology. Researchers have found that, “in studies of well-educated Americans in their late teens to early twenties, as few as 30-40 percent have been able to solve formal operational problems.”<sup>16</sup> If 60-70 percent of well-educated American adults fail formal operational tests, how much less cognitive maturity can we expect from middle school students? Even during Piaget’s lifetime the universality of cognitive levels, especially formal operations, was attacked. According to Cole, Piaget’s own conclusion on the matter was that:

“All normal people attain the level of formal operations. ‘However, they reach this stage in different areas according to their aptitudes and their professional specializations (advanced studies or different types of apprenticeship for the various trades): the way in which these formal structures are used, however, is not necessarily the same in all cases’ (1972:10). In other words, a lawyer might think in a formal manner about law cases, and a football coach might use formal thinking to call for particular plays in particular situations, both might fail to use formal reasoning in the combination-of-chemicals task.”<sup>17</sup>

As they mature, adolescents gain cognitive abilities. However, even within individuals these abilities do not develop equally in all areas. Pacific Islanders provide a fascinating case study. When given typical Piagetian tests they fail to demonstrate formal operational ability. However, navigators from the Caroline Islands use a complex system to get from one tiny island to another, scores of miles away, in small outrigger

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael and Sheila R. Cole, *The Development of Children*. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2001), 650.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 651

canoes. When sociologists first tried to understand their navigational system they said the sailors could not talk rationally about it. But they always got to the island they meant to get to. This requires incredible precision, vast star knowledge, and constant estimates of speed . . . or you get lost at sea and die. Later researchers, when they understood the system more thoroughly, found that the system was logical and that the sailors were talking rationally about it. Cole concludes:

“These results suggest that formal operational thinking may occur far more widely than the evidence from typical experiments suggests, and that this type of thinking may indeed be universal in human groups. At the same time, the data make it clear that formal operational thinking does not uniformly replace earlier modes of thought. Its use remains highly restricted to contexts in which the individual has had considerable experience.”<sup>18</sup>

This finding is incredibly important for us as we try to develop an effective teaching methodology. Even most adults don't think formally in a generalized way. They only think formally within areas of extensive experience or expertise. If this is true for adults, it is much truer for students. Therefore, we should assume that any group of junior high students is made up almost exclusively of concrete thinkers, especially with regard to biblical content. As a result teachers should communicate abstract truths in a concrete way.

This is nothing new. Great teachers throughout history have illustrated their abstract concepts with concrete examples. This is why proverbs are valued in so many cultures. Proverbs tend to express profound abstract truth in common, concrete language. “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.”<sup>19</sup> One of the uses Solomon intended for his proverbs was to help the simple become wise.<sup>20</sup> Wisdom, in

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 657

<sup>19</sup> Proverbs 26:11

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 1:1-7

Piagetian terms, is action informed by and consistent with formal operations about life's problems.

Martin Luther's strategy for teaching the young and simple had a major influence on education. Piaget's developmental categories allow us to critique Luther's methodology. Luther wrote a special catechism in order to provide young people with theological education. It is called Luther's Shorter Catechism; it is shorter than the long version. The methodology he prescribed in his preface was to have students memorize the theological points in question and answer form word for word by rote. Later, once students had the catechism committed to memory, a teacher would explain the abstract concepts. Most theological literature for children followed this format. It is both good and bad. It is good because it started a movement to educate children theologically. It got the ball rolling and provided a starting point for further iterations. It also focused on what young people could do. Memorizing words on a page is concrete; kids can memorize. However, a highly authoritarian social structure is needed to keep kids involved in the process until they understand and agree with the concepts. The strategy is not used as much today because it is ineffective if students are not obligated to stay and participate.

As previously mentioned, Jesus used parables as his main teaching method. Why did Jesus teach in parables? Because parables communicate abstract concepts in everyday, concrete terms. They illustrate a point. They helped his followers understand what he was saying. Is that the only reason he taught in parables? Stein says, "no." He says Jesus also used parables "to conceal his teaching from those 'outside.'"<sup>21</sup> That sounds shocking and wrong . . . maybe even heretical. But Jesus himself says parables conceal the truth (Mark 4:10-12). It makes sense when we consider it more closely.

---

<sup>21</sup> *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 41

Even when Jesus did use parables to illustrate his points, often his disciples didn't understand (Mark 4:13). This means that the meaning and implication of even Jesus' concrete stories were not readily evident even to his original intended audience! It is no surprise, then, that parables concealed the truth to outsiders. If Jesus' audience had problems understanding him, what makes us think that our teaching is going to be immediately clear to our students? The disciples regularly had to ask Jesus what the stories meant; they just did not get it. Jesus had to explain in detail for his disciples to understand.

It will be no different for us. In order to maximize the effectiveness of our Bible teaching, we need to present biblical material with our audience's developmental level in mind.<sup>22</sup> Junior high students lack life experience and are just starting to gain formal operational ability. We need to spell out both the meaning and implications of the text for them. Presenting abstract propositions is not enough, even if our main point is good. Nor is giving good examples is not enough. We have to illustrate abstract principles with concrete examples and then explain the connection between the two.

When teaching the Bible to junior high students, we have to aim our teaching at concrete thinkers because the vast majority thinks concretely most of the time.<sup>23</sup> Do not think this means we need to "dumb down" our content. Early adolescents want to be treated more like adults. If we are too simple we come off as patronizing and childish. Instead of dumbing down the content, we have to get as focused as possible on the main point and get rid of all extraneous material. It isn't about easy words or

---

<sup>22</sup> With students, it is easy to mistake formal operational ability for spiritual maturity because formal thinkers have much better insight into theological propositions.

<sup>23</sup> Based on cognitive research, I believe all Bible teachings to general audiences ages 7 and up, should be aimed at the concrete operational developmental level. We regularly hear from adult volunteers that are new Christians that they get more out of junior high teachings than ones aimed at adults.

construction, “It’s about elegance and prioritization.”<sup>24</sup> Aiming at the concrete developmental level will also have a major effect on two areas: illustration and application.

### *Illustration*

Concrete thinkers have a hard time understanding abstract thoughts and theological truths are about as abstract as thoughts get. We have a problem. How can we present important, life-changing content about a trans-finite God to concrete students? Is it even possible for them to understand this stuff? Is it possible to teach them without mass confusion and suffocating boredom? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Junior high students *can* understand abstract concepts about God as long as the information is presented the right way. To connect with students, we must illustrate every abstract point in concrete terms. We have to take our main point all the way to the ground. In other words, we need to help concrete operational students grasp the abstract concepts in the text using sensory data and common experience. This is challenging but possible. It will demand all of your creativity. And it can be fun.

According to the Heath brothers, to make our ideas clear “we must explain [them] in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information.”<sup>25</sup> They add: “Speaking concretely is the only way to ensure that our idea will mean the same thing to everyone in our audience.”<sup>26</sup>

A concrete example will be helpful here. If one compares God’s justice, mercy and grace using only propositional definitions students will stare blankly at them. That’s

---

<sup>24</sup> *Made to Stick*, 30

<sup>25</sup> *Made to Stick*, 17

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

if they are good kids. If they are bad kids they will make you pay justly. How can we illustrate justice, mercy and grace concretely? One possibility would be to have a boy (obnoxious if possible) volunteer to come up front. When he comes, throw a hat at him. Then, as he stands there with the hat, explain that if someone steals your hat, they deserve a wedgie. If the boy is paying attention at all he'll run away screaming. Typically, the other students will start yelling, "Wedgie! Wedgie!" The kid will probably throw the hat back at you and complain that it isn't fair (make sure you have the right student for this). At that point you can give him a gift that he doesn't deserve, like candy. After you ask the boy to sit down you can explain how God's justice is like the wedgie. Stick with me here. Doing something bad (like stealing my hat) demands punishment (the wedgie). Withholding the wedgie is like God's mercy. The gift is like God's grace. Is this example concrete? Yes, and it helps define and clarify the abstract concepts in active terms. Though it lacks theological precision, it is fun, memorable and helpful.

Literature on teaching youth has always encouraged using objects lessons like this. Well, maybe not exactly like this, but similar. Using the cognitive development framework helps us see why object lessons are effective; it helps concrete thinkers connect with abstract thoughts. It also helps us predict which types of object lessons will connect and which ones will not. Examples that engage students' interest and understanding will be more effective than ones that do not. Examples that allow students to participate actively will be more effective.

Illustrations must be concrete and be either connected to the students' own experiences or easy for them to imagine. Kids have great imaginations so there is a lot of room for creativity. However, no matter how well you share a personal example, they

will not care about your mortgage or how you decided to remodel your house. They just aren't that concerned about how your spouse upsets you or makes you happy . . . unless it is really out of the ordinary. Use examples they have experience with. Pithy, earthy, common experiences are better: juicy farts, razors in apples, spilling your drink on your pants when you are trying to impress someone, grass stains, drool, hugs. Graphic details add strength: You didn't just accidentally step in dog poop; you felt the steamy brown pudding squeeze through your sandals and gagged. The better you explain your examples the more impact they will have.

Biblical authors go to great lengths to illustrate the concepts they are trying to communicate. Consider Jesus' examples: logs in eyes, light/darkness, sowing/reaping, animals, family, money. There are numerous illustrations in most biblical genres. These illustrations cover the whole range of human experience. When appropriate, authors used graphic, even crude, illustrations (Isa. 28:8; 30:22; 32:11; 36:12; 60:16; 64:6; 66:11; Eze. 23:17-20; Nah. 3:5; SS 7:7; 8:8; Amos 2:13-16; Mal. 2:3).

Stein offers insight on how Jesus found the illustrations and examples he used: "As one reads the parables, one is struck by their real-life, down-to-earth character. Behind them lie the everyday experiences that Jesus had as a child, youth, and young man in Nazareth."<sup>27</sup> As Bible teachers, we should seek to follow Christ's example here. Keep your eyes open for everyday experiences that communicate biblical truth.

Of course, illustrations do not have to be gross; sometimes they should not be. They can be warm, sentimental, scary, funny, happy, sad, etc. The important thing is that they are connected to junior highers' life experience and chosen to fit the main point.

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Method and Message of Jesus' teaching*, 42

For junior high audiences, body function examples work well. Bodily functions are universal, and middle schoolers think a LOT about their bodies. If one is talking to a more sophisticated audience, they can change the analogies and illustrations to fit the audience's world. The key is that your stories, examples and illustrations have to be accessible to the audience. Personal examples are good, especially if they are about when you were their age. I've been surprised a number of times at how enthralled students are when adults talk about their junior high experiences. I've had students ask me to repeat stories like this a number of times. Personal stories are fun, relational and profoundly engaging. There is something deeply human about sharing our stories. Self-deprecation is good, too. Being honest about your shortcomings engages the students relationally, gives them freedom to be honest with themselves and others and helps them see the consequences of disobedience towards God.

The bottom line is that illustrations have to have elements that are connected to experiences students have had or can easily imagine having. They need to be explained with enough detail that they get it. Vague notions are not good enough. It is especially important that your illustrations support your main point. Avoid the temptation to tell a great story because it is a great story. Let the main point dictate the illustrations you use. If it doesn't support that main point it should not be included in your teaching. Always state the connection between the example and the abstract concept as plainly and explicitly as possible.

Another powerful illustrative tool is antithesis. Almost all good teachings develop and fight against the antithesis. Coming up with the antithesis is simple in concept but

sometimes hard to implement. Work here is well worth the time. To develop the antithesis, ask yourself these questions:

- What is likely to happen in students' lives if they reject the main point?
- Who has rejected this point? What is their life like?
- What consequences have I faced when I've rejected the main point?
- Who are contemporary examples that have rejected the main point? Why did they? How has it affected them?

Thinking deeply about the antithesis will help the teacher develop a burden for the main point. It stimulates passionate concern for your audience because you better understand the stakes. Having a strong antithesis will help you develop strong illustrations. Biblical authors are often arguing against a person, group or idea that is contrary to God's direction. This can get harsh, even vitriolic at times (Eze. 23; Matt. 23; 2 Pet. 2; 1 John 2:18ff; etc.). Do not shy away from this kind of conflict. Fight contemporary examples of antitheses to our text's main point. Many of our students are already chasing the world's values: lust, greed and pride. If they allow themselves to be conformed to the world they will ruin themselves and others. The worst part of following the Lord is seeing people walk away. If we can't muster some angst about that we have no business teaching the Bible.

Students like to watch a good fight. They will also remember it. At the very least they won't be bored. Most middle school students lack critical thinking skills. This is partly a developmental issue; critical thinking requires formal operations. If we regularly fight antitheses in our teaching, they will start to pick up on how to think critically themselves. Without a strong antithesis teachings are often flat and boring even if they are presented clearly. Without a clear antithesis we may never grab a student's attention. Thesis/antithesis and black/white thinking is clear and understandable. Don't

over qualify your points, especially when fighting the antithesis. It can suck the life and energy right out of your teaching. Fighting the antithesis often gives new insight into the significance of the main point. If our main point is “love others,” we could fight against “indifference.” We could say: “There are people suffering around you and you don’t care. You think you are strong because you are not affected by others’ suffering. You aren’t strong; you are just not connecting to reality and you are different than God.” Fighting the antithesis clarifies and adds conviction to the point.

In her book *The Process of Parenting*, Jane Brooks says that adolescents’ increasing ability to reason abstractly doesn’t always affect the decisions they make in everyday life. She cites evidence that drivers’ education does not reduce the number of teenage driving accidents. She says this is due to inaccurate theories adolescents hold that block the reception and retention of new factual data. This can be seen in sexual myths youth believe. Some believe they can only get pregnant if they want to have a child or have sex in certain positions. If a student believes these kinds of myths they will not be as receptive to God’s direction. Brooks says, “One must dispel inaccurate theories and then present new facts when the person is receptive and ready to absorb the information.”<sup>28</sup> She encourages parents to talk about their child’s beliefs and underlying assumptions before presenting new facts.

This is good advice for Bible teachers, too. When teaching students in group settings we need to anticipate their false beliefs (antitheses) and argue against them. Addressing misconceptions can open students up to the main point. This is similar to Howard Hendricks’ law of readiness: “The teaching-learning process will be most

---

<sup>28</sup> Jane B. Brooks, *The Process of Parenting*. (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing, 1999), 291

effective when both students and teacher are adequately prepared.<sup>29</sup> Thinking through the antithesis helps us create ways to draw students into the content.

Using interactive discussion is a good way to draw out experiences students have had that relate to the main point or the antithesis. Senter offers insight on this point:

Following the model of the Western church, youth ministry programmers, whether in weekly meetings or at massive conferences, seem to assume that students are best reached by sitting and listening to others sing and talk about God. The problem with this view is that our young people are often simply consumers of Christian teaching rather than individual, dynamic followers of Jesus Christ. For the gospel to mean anything to an adolescent, he must have the chance to talk about what *he* feels and discover what *he* thinks.<sup>30</sup>

Discussion can be very valuable. Questions should be planned so that the answers help communicate or illustrate the main point. Students have the capacity to bore each other to death during discussion so the teacher needs to keep the discussion moving and focused on the main point to avoid rabbit trails. Ask questions that get kids talking about their experiences relating to the main point (“How do you struggle with anger?”). Avoid questions that ask kids to recite trivia (“Where is this found in the Bible? What does this complex word mean?”).

Students that are starting to develop abstract thinking abilities are comparing, for the first time, how things *are* with how they *ought* to be. They tend to be idealistic, sometimes naïvely. Their idealism is good and can inspire them to take bold steps of faith. As Bible teachers we should make a point to appeal to their sense of heroism. In the past few years we have seen students learn concern for the poor as a result of good Bible teaching. They have worked hard to raise money for impoverished people across

---

<sup>29</sup> *Teaching to Change Lives*, 109

<sup>30</sup> Mark Senter, *Reaching a Generation for Christ*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997), 579

the globe. It has been inspiring to others in the church. Students are often willing to take a chance to try something big for God. We should encourage this in our teaching by painting vivid pictures of what is wrong in the world and how much better things could be if we followed God's direction.

There are countless books and resources on teaching and communication that have great information on how to present material effectively. One area seems to be lacking: emotional communication. Most material encourages teachers to be enthusiastic. That is important, but it is too simplistic. How are we supposed to be enthusiastic about the genocide or the plight of the lost, poor, and dying? Enthusiasm is a start, but we need to go further if we are going to communicate our main point clearly.

A more complete principle of using emotions in teachings is this: *tie your tone to the text*. It is important to fit the tone, or emotional output of your presentation, to the content of the text. This includes variations of tone that run the gamut of human emotion. I've heard some teachers express concern about emotionally manipulating students. That would be bad. However, as long as a proper emotion is tied to the text, it is not hard to avoid emotional manipulation. Without this connection between emotion and content we risk powerfully denying the truth of our words. For example, imagine saying, "God is really great," in a stone cold monotone. We have just communicated that God is boring and stupid. Or imagine cracking a joke (even one that is actually funny) while talking about the problem of evil. The delivery just completely contradicts the proposition. Emotion that fits can make the content come alive. Good teachers make people feel things. Great teachers make people feel what they should feel.

My friends complained for years that I was unemotional. I thought I was strong because I was emotionally stable. Then a friend pointed out that Jesus was overwhelmed by emotion a number of times in the Gospels. He was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. He was overwhelmed by anger when he cleared the temple. He was overwhelmed by sorrow in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. Jesus was deeply emotional. He also expressed his emotions to the point that his close friends, the Gospel writers, knew what he was feeling. He wasn't dominated by his emotions. He felt deeply and responded to life and relationships fully. He inspired deep emotions, too; he was polarizing. We should help students mature emotionally by the way we teach.

Be intentional about how you say what you say because emotional expression impacts the content we are communicating. I am not advocating conjuring up melodrama. Students loathe hypocrisy. To make progress in this area, add a reminder next to important points on your notes about what emotion you want to communicate.

Fitting emotional output to the content helps students engage, understand, and remember content. When used properly it can also increase the sense of conviction students must feel to take action. Emotional expression is concrete because students experience emotions. In fact, adolescents experience adult-strength emotions without the vocabulary or cognitive processes to fully understand and communicate them. Mature expressions of emotion tied properly to biblical text give students tools and words that enable them to handle emotions wisely. As Bible teachers we need to be committed to maturing in all areas with the Lord, including our emotions, so we can lead our students to do the same.

In Summary, since junior high students are concrete thinkers we must communicate the abstract principles in scripture in concrete ways. Use pithy, earthy examples that students have experience with or can easily imagine. Draw these illustrations out from your everyday life experience. Use object lessons that shed light on the topic. Develop the antithesis and fight against it. Utilize discussion to include students in the learning process. Be intentional about the way you communicate your points. Tie the tone to the text. If we can incorporate these ideas, students will be much more likely to understand and obey God's Word.

### *Application*

In his book *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, Dan Lambert offers an insightful section on how Jesus would teach teenagers today. One important point he makes is that Jesus would teach so students respond:

If your kids file out of class and never think again about what they just discussed, you have failed. If you want to teach to make a difference, then teach as if your teaching makes a difference. Give your students something to do as a result of your lesson.<sup>31</sup>

He says that teachers, even when they have prepared well and give good insights, often fail to have appropriate application and challenge. He adds, "The Christian faith is a *practical* faith. God wants his truth to make a difference in our lives. As teachers, we need to help teenagers discover how their faith matters."<sup>32</sup> He says that if Jesus were teaching youth today he would teach obedience to God's commands because our ultimate goal as Bible teachers is to see our students submit to God. "I don't believe any lesson is complete until students know what to do with it."<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Dan Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 201

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 201

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 197

Lambert is right on target here. What a waste to spend hours of time developing an engaging, understandable lesson for our students if they don't take any action in response to it. It is like working hard to cook a great meal and flushing it down the toilet instead of eating it. If we don't call for action we are pumping students up with useless trivia. Without obedient action, truth is a poison that causes profound arrogance. Without calls for action we are inoculating students against God's truth. Isaiah needed a face-to-face encounter with God to get him ready for his unresponsive audience. I don't know if I could endure it. The main complaint I hear from junior high students about school is that it is boring. One of the main reasons they think it is boring is because it doesn't seem to have any practical connection to their lives. The Bible has direct, challenging, inspiring application for our lives. We poison our students if we don't call on them to respond in faith.

Often teachers expect students to find appropriate application points on their own. Since middle school students are concrete thinkers, they have real difficulty making abstract logical leaps. That means most will have an incredibly difficult time seeing the logical implications of abstract concepts. Until people have extensive experience with the Bible it is unlikely that they will be able to find appropriate application points on their own. Therefore, it is our responsibility as teachers, who have more experience and expertise with spiritual things, to provide logically consistent application steps for our audience. We must do this thinking for them and explain how we identified the application points. Then we *have* to urge them to take action. I don't mean to downplay the role of the Holy Spirit here at all. He can and does directly challenge the souls of our students. This fact does not in any way relieve us of our

responsibility to supply appropriate, specific, concrete application points. It should also be noted that even brilliant abstract thinkers regularly reject God's leading. We still have to call on students to respond to the Lord in obedience.

Doug Pagitt, emergent author and practitioner warns that "when communities are convinced they are better off with a unified understanding of God that is best articulated by trained presenters, we end up with people who cannot translate what they hear in church to the way they live their lives."<sup>34</sup>

Tragically, I believe this does happen. People walk away from Bible teachings all of the time without any sense at all of what action they need to take. However, I disagree with Pagitt about the reason this happens. He says recognizing authoritative Bible teachers causes members to be passive. I doubt it. I think it has more to do with Bible teachers' failure to help their people connect the dots from the abstract theological concepts in the passage to logical, real-life implications. Recognizing mature believers as real authorities in the church is at the heart of Paul's elder theology (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). Furthermore, a primary role of elders in the early church was protecting against false teaching (Titus 1:9) and leading the local church (Titus 1:7). It is important that Bible teachers guide their students into the truth. That is why I have argued that following the thought-flow of the passage is essential. We have an incredible responsibility as teachers and we can do real harm if we fail. However, recognizing that mature leaders have authority and expertise in Bible teaching is not the reason people are passive. People remain passive either because their hearts are hardened, they are lazy, or, more likely, because their leaders have failed to call them to action. My answer to the problem

---

<sup>34</sup> *Preaching Re-imagined*, 29

of passivity is in direct opposition to Pagitt's. I think teachers and leaders should actually teach and lead.

In order to fulfill our responsibility as Bible teachers, we need to provide at least a few concrete steps students can actually take to apply the main point of the text. However, do not mistake this for mere calls for external compliance. God is not impressed with legalistic posturing. Our emphasis in application should be placed on urging students to draw close to God relationally. Mark Senter says, "Teaching on issues is important so that students are guided in what it means to put faith into practice. But the overriding need of us all is a deep, rich, ongoing love relationship with Jesus Christ." Senter supports his conclusion by citing Gal. 5:22-24; the fruit of the Spirit is a consequence of living by the Spirit. That means that focusing exclusively on moral teaching is ineffective because it is sub-biblical.

With middle school students, our teachings must get very concrete, to the point where we offer specific words they can say to God to confess, worship, and make requests. Christian junior high students have the Holy Spirit inside of them and so they want, from the deepest parts of their soul, to connect with and please God. Often they are paralyzed by ignorance because they don't know what to do or say to draw close to God. Without instruction here, they are vulnerable to false teaching, especially legalism and ritualism. It is our responsibility as Bible teachers to give our students practical application steps they can take to draw close to God and respond to him in obedience.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Biblical authors had a main point. If you are teaching the Bible, you should have a main point, and it should be the passage's main point. Because the vast majority of junior high students think concretely, you should aim your main point at the concrete-operational developmental level. This means that every point must be illustrated and explained so concrete thinkers can grasp the meaning. It also means that it is our responsibility as teachers to provide appropriate, challenging application for our students.

In order to increase the overall quality of junior high Bible teachings at Xenos, there are a few steps that will be helpful for us to take. First, we need to revamp our teaching feedback form so it includes more hierarchy in the evaluation categories so it better matches the emphases discussed in this paper. Second, we should run a teacher-training workshop for our small group Bible study leaders to help them develop consistently high-quality Bible teachings. This paper could serve as the basis for the syllabus. For the class we should provide positive and negative examples of the principles of these teaching principles. The format could be similar to the examples Strunk & White give in their fantastic writing guide *Elements of Style*. Specifically, time should be spent developing and evaluating different application points and discussion questions.

The Bible is powerful. If we can develop skills that help us communicate the Bible clearly to middle school students, their lives will be transformed. We will see many come to know Christ and be raised up to be powerful workers and leaders for Christ. The most effective way to teach the Bible to middle school students is to have a single, actively-

stated main point that comes directly from a biblical passage, is well illustrated, includes appropriate, challenging application, and is aimed at the concrete-operational developmental level.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berk, Laura E. Child Development. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 2003.
- Brooks, Jane B. The Process of Parenting. Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing, 1999.
- Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark and Luke, trans. By William Pringle. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949.
- Cole, Michael and Cole, Sheila R. The Development of Children. New York: Worth Publishers, 2001.
- Davis, Ken. How To Speak To Youth . . . And Keep Them Awake At The Same Time. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
- Heath, Chip and Heath, Dan. Made to Stick. New York: Random House, 2007
- Hendricks, Howard. Teaching That Changes Lives. Sisters: Multnomah Books, 1987.
- Holy Bible, The: New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984
- Lambert, Dan. Teaching That Makes A Difference. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- McNabb, Bill and Marby, Steve. Teaching The Bible Creatively. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.
- Mueller, Walt. Engaging The Soul Of Youth Culture. Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2006.
- Pagitt, Doug. Preaching Re-Imagined. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Senter, Mark, Dunn, Richard. Reaching a Generation for Christ: A Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997.
- Stein, Robert H. A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing By the Rules. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978.
- Strunk, William Junior and White, E.B. The Elements Of Style. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

### RELATED WORKS NOT CITED

- Barna, George. Growing True Disciples. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001.
- Hull, Bill. The Disciple-Making Church. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1990.
- Longenecker, Richard N. Patterns Of Discipleship In The New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- McCallum, Dennis. The Death Of Truth. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996.
- Rice Wayne, Junior High Ministry. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
- Stone, Douglas and Patton, Bruce and Heen, Seila. Difficult Conversations. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Stott, John, Between Two Worlds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Strobel, Lee. Inside The Mind Of Unchurched Harry And Mary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.