


AN ESSENTIAL RESOURCE FOR PASTORS AND TEACHERS



TEACHING
TO ~~INFORM~~
Transform
HEARTS

LEE ANN ALEXANDER

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1 | *Introduction*

Imagine the scene. Jesus, the One they'd placed all their hopes in and ditched careers and relationships to follow, had been unexpectedly (at least to them) captured, tortured, and executed. All dreams of overthrowing the Roman government and enjoying powerful political appointments to rule with Him and snub noses at deposed Roman and even Jewish leaders disintegrated as He cried, "It is finished." So when the women claimed they'd seen Him, they struggled to reconcile it all, fought to hope. And then He came to them too!

Our adventure finds them standing on a rock-strewn mountain in Galilee, awaiting another precious meeting with this One who captivated them with a new vision in place of their dashed plans: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NKJV).

You can likely quote that verse. Though it's not clear who coined the phrase "the Great Commission," that sentiment captures both the magnitude and the missional aspect of Jesus' final instructions to His followers before ascending. As such, it remains our instructions as

the continued chapter of the New Testament church, still making disciples of all nations until Jesus returns.

Christians of all stripes can rattle off the Great Commission, but can you quote the next verse? Matthew 28:19 peppers church signs and serves as the basis of countless sermons, and rightly so. But have we accidentally skipped the last page of the story if we do not also quote, revere, and fulfill Matthew 28:20? Jesus instructed, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20, NKJV).

Those final words of Jesus are every bit as powerful as the beloved Matthew 28:19. Jesus gave the *what* of the Great Commission in verse 19: make disciples. In verse 20, He gave the *how* for making disciples: by teaching.

For about four years I served as outreach director of the church I attend in St. Louis; I believe in and am involved in evangelism. But Jesus did not simply intend Matthew 28:19 as a prescription for quarterly block parties and annual door-knocking campaigns. Such efforts are certainly in order, and I personally participate in them. But Jesus’ command to teach is so compelling in this passage we cannot in good conscience claim to be making disciples if we have no teaching ministry in the church.

Evangelism is not complete without discipleship, and discipleship is not complete without teaching. Host all the events you can sustain to attract guests and raise your church’s profile in the community, and knock doors or do whatever works in your setting to make contacts. Befriend new believers and potential new believers. Welcome them in your home. Go to their kids’ graduations and become prayer partners. I cheer on all of those

endeavors. But without some systematic strategy to teach God’s Word, all of those efforts will not establish and retain disciples. We must teach disciples to observe all the Lord has commanded.

TEACHING AND PREACHING

What did Jesus mean when He commanded His followers to teach all of His commandments? The Greek term *didaskontes* in Matthew 28:20 indicates teaching, directing, or admonishing. We know from Romans 12:6–7 and Ephesians 4:11–12 that teaching is a ministry of the church with biblical precedent.

Of course we love preaching too. God chose preaching (*kērygmatos*, or the proclamation of the gospel message) as the method to save those who believe (I Corinthians 1:21). Preaching is a hallmark of our Apostolic heritage. But so is teaching. The apostles taught in the Temple (Acts 5:19–25), Paul said he taught in churches (I Corinthians 4:17), and he instructed that servants of the Lord should be “apt to teach” (II Corinthians 2:24).

As proud as we deserve to be of our legacy of unparalleled preaching, we should also develop a legacy of anointed teaching. If we look to Jesus as our model, we might be surprised to discover that He didn’t switch gears and sometimes preach in one setting and sometimes teach in another. Thetus Tenney recently remarked, “Jesus never really preached as we know preaching. Jesus taught.”¹ It is somewhat difficult to hear and distinguish delivery style through the pages of Scripture today. This is not intended to minimize or critique our model of Apostolic preaching today in any way. I do, however, want

to push Apostolic teachers to communicate the Word of God with passion and spiritual authority. If we need to dismantle old stereotypes of preaching and teaching to do so, let's do it and commit to the more important work of understanding how Jesus ministered and how we should too.

Could it be we've suggested teaching is theoretical learning and the preaching experience in a church service is a separate (more exciting and more highly valued) part of a disciple's life? I fear that we have in some instances, and perhaps it is because of false dichotomies. In so doing, we've given teachers a license to dump information without the goal of spiritual transformation, and that one-sided exchange model has an expiration date in a changing culture that resists one-sided monologues.

Perhaps out of well-meaning intentions to clarify what should happen in the classroom versus what should happen in the sanctuary, we have tried to create artificial distinctions between teaching and preaching. I understand that methods and the scope of what we do in each format is different, but the polarization we've created in shoving them apart has happened at the expense of teaching. I've heard it said that preaching is for salvation and teaching is for retention or preaching is yelling and teaching is telling. Those distinctions only seem to confuse the issue when a passionate teacher doesn't whisper and an anointed teaching session leads to salvation. A more concrete model to illustrate the distinction comes from my friend, church planter Mark Blackburn. He hypothesized preaching tends more toward inspiration and teaching

tends more toward information—both with the goal of application if done well.

Perhaps we should analyze how our perception of a division between preaching and teaching may have developed out of natural sociological and communication dynamics. In a helpful study of how to most effectively minister to disciples, one book defines five contexts in which God shapes hearts:

DISCIPLESHIP CONTEXTS

Context	Size	Focus	Distance	Learning from Jesus	Church Expression	Outcomes
Public	100s	Engaging with an outside resource	12'	Jesus and the crowds	"Sundays"	Inspiration Momentum Preaching
Social	20–70	Sharing snapshots that build affinity	4'–12'	Jesus and the 70	Missional Communities	Community Mission Practice
Personal	4–12	Revealing private information	18"–4'	Jesus and the 12	Small groups	Closeness Support Challenge
Transparent	2–4	Living in vulnerability and openness	0"–18"	Jesus and the 3	Deepest friendships; marriage	Intimacy Openness Impact
Divine	Alone with God	Being with your Creator and Redeemer	Inner world	Jesus and the Father	Personal walk	Identity Destiny Truth

Figure 1.1 from *Discipleship That Fits* by Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom²

The way we communicate in groups of less than four people is different from the way we communicate in a group of four to twelve (a small group). When we transition to a larger group, we lose some of the more intimate communication; we are more protective about sharing personal stories as the group size expands. Another natural break happens when we move into groups beyond one hundred people. Ideally discipleship should happen in all five of these contexts, but what does this model mean for preaching and teaching? Much of the delivery we have associated with our model of preaching is a practical matter of communicating to a large group of people that necessitates inspiration and passion to engage people we don't know individually. Of course, we don't communicate in the same way when we are talking to nine or ten people we know personally. While the chart is helpful to understand some basics of effective communication in a variety of church formats, I think it also suggests some of the distinctions that have arisen between preaching and teaching are a natural byproduct of logistical differences between whole-church services where we need to communicate differently than in small-group classes.

Is it possible we have segregated preaching and teaching to reflect different expectations about the outcomes of our classes? Perhaps polarization in our understanding of teaching versus preaching has developed because too often we have not experienced a move of the Spirit in classes and needed a way to explain its absence? Could that phenomenon be a trust issue? We can trust most anyone to relay content, play games with our children, and maybe even throw out Bible facts to adults. Do we trust

teachers to minister as the Spirit leads so growing disciples encounter Jesus Christ in a class? If we relegate teaching to be only cognitive and reserve spiritual transformation experiences only for preaching, we can delegate teaching to most anyone and reserve preaching for the senior leadership of the church. Maybe our teachers have even bought into this model because it's less responsibility. In any case, I'm advocating we nudge teaching over to be more like how we've defined preaching. Teaching is a biblical mandate and a spiritual act. We can and should expect the move of the Spirit.

If we define teaching as a spiritual mission, an important evaluation question follows: are we teaching to inform or to transform? In a culture where our phones pull up millions of pages of information in 0.77 seconds on any topic, being a repository of information no longer gives us an edge as teachers. And don't think me heretical for this, but what good does it do if we teach our students the top twenty or forty greatest Bible stories or even teach them to memorize key verses if teaching does not also prompt students to allow the God of those passages and its truths to transform their lives?

Paul instructed, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2). Transformation here spans the scope of the new-birth experience as well as ongoing maturation. Its essence is "the process of growing in grace, being sanctified, becoming progressively more Christ-like in every way."³ What a perfect definition of lifelong discipleship. All of us—believers of

every age level and stage of our walk with God—need that process of ongoing transformation at work in our lives. If our teaching ministries provide an avenue for the Spirit to transform lives through His presence and the revelation of His Word, we make every class effective and indispensable.

Protestants and Catholics consider the teaching ministry of the church to be their predominant means of discipling believers. Every other ministry venue is a distant second.

The diagram on the facing page pertains to children and youth, but the statistics reported for adults at the end of this chapter echo this sentiment. In fact, some church leaders believe in teaching so much, one pastor says, “If your time is limited, go to Sunday School instead of hearing me preach.”⁵ I am not suggesting we do that, but are we taking seriously our mandate to teach? Are we dismissing teaching as a necessary chore for children or new believers and delegating it so we can focus on other priorities?

My argument is that spiritual growth does not happen accidentally. Similar to the principle of entropy that order naturally devolves into chaos and not the other way around, we do not coast into spiritual maturity. The Bible compares discipleship (ongoing lifelong spiritual formation) to growing (e.g., the Parable of the Sower and the principle of sowing, watering, and reaping), which suggests discipleship takes time, work, and long-term investment.

Our responsibility as the body of Christ is to be part of that investment—an intentional choice we make to

ensure the whole church is growing in discipleship at every age level and every stage of faith development. In addition to the social component of spending time together and building relationships so discipleship can happen organically, we must invest in formal training. Teaching still matters, and it still works.

HOW CHURCHES PRIORITIZE SPIRITUAL FORMATION

When it comes to children's spiritual formation, what are the priorities of your church?
What are the 3 main ways you do this?

Barna

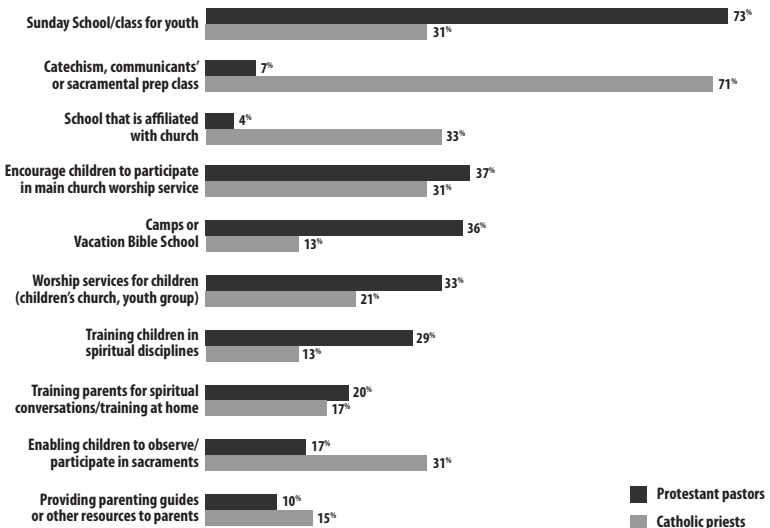


Figure 1.2 from *"Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation"* by Barna Group⁴

Paul's second letter to Timothy is memorable since the context of his end-of-life final instructions to church leaders adds urgency to his writing. Paul specifically

charged Timothy to develop teachers (II Timothy 2:2). He reminded him that the teaching of Scripture is “able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (II Timothy 3:15).

Creating a church culture that honors and receives preaching is vital. Have we also invested in a culture and structure that brings a teacher alongside the preacher to reinforce the preached Word in a teaching atmosphere that expounds Scripture, facilitates questions, and likewise opens up an atmosphere for transformation? If preaching is critical for the conversion of those evangelized, teaching is critical to disciple. It is in a teaching atmosphere that believers can ask questions, dig into the Word, and be rooted in faith. Are we being intentional in promoting the ministry of teaching, training teachers, and equipping them with resources to be effective in their role?

Every Christian must experience God, but every Christian must also receive teaching to understand the experience. The pursuit of faith divorced from a church setting that systematically studies the Word of God risks creating disciples with no roots for stability. Teaching prepares us to grow and experience more of God continually. After all, it is Scripture’s formula so “that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:17).

THE ANATOMY OF THE HEART

North Americans have a preoccupation with the heart. *Heartbreaking*, *heartfelt*, and *heartwarming* label the most poignant of life’s moments. Yet we typically approach learning and teaching as solely intellectual experiments.

In many ways North Americans are products of the Enlightenment movement, Modernism, and Rationalism—philosophical shifts dating back a few centuries to the emerging emphasis on the intellect. When René Descartes articulated, “I think, therefore I am,” he captured a still-prevalent philosophy that our identity and the most important component of who we are is our intellect. Consequently, learning became and still is regarded primarily as a cognitive exercise. Even with the advent of Existentialism and more recently postmodernism, the openness to sentiment and personal human experiences still has not swayed our approach to learning as a matter of the head. In James K. A. Smith’s landmark book *You Are What You Love*, he recognizes God created humanity for relationship; consequently he argues that we should revise that philosophy of human identity to more accurately reflect that I *love*, therefore I am.⁶

Ancient cultures understood the heart in a different way than we do. The Egyptians and Hebrews had a simple approach. Without the anatomical knowledge we now possess, they looked to the heart as the central organ of the body. Thus, the heart occupies a primary place in Scripture, as well as the liver and bowels, which ancient cultures deemed to be connected to the affections.⁷

Today we commonly accept the mind to mean the rational part of our brain and the heart to mean our emotions in even symbolic terms, though we understand the brain and central nervous system to govern much of human functionality. I realize brain researchers, psychologists, anatomists, or any number of scientists could explain in more accurate terms the distinctions between

what I'm generally deeming head and heart. I also understand that scientific research can pinpoint areas of the brain that affect how we feel and what we value. Those anatomical distinctions are not my aim. But whatever part of human beings determines our affections—what we love, cherish, worship, and emulate—we must teach in a way that allows God to transform our affections.

I will use the biblical language of the heart in this book to challenge us to set it as our target when ministering to students. The wise writer of Proverbs instructed his son to “keep thy father’s commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: bind them continually upon thine heart” (Proverbs 6:20–21). This advice followed the warning to “keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23). The heart is foundational to one’s identity and how faith is formed and lived out. God reminded Samuel that He “seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). Scripture points out as well that the heart without spiritual transformation is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). Thankfully the Atonement and new birth brings hope: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). This biblical picture of salvation and spiritual transformation involves the heart.

Luke recorded understanding as a matter of the heart when he recorded Paul’s attempts to teach the Jewish leaders in Rome. Paul taught the leaders from morning till evening, but they disagreed, did not receive the teaching,

and left. Paul quoted Isaiah to diagnose their resistance to truth: “for the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them” (Acts 28:27). The heart is a fundamental part of understanding the teaching of Scripture; we must teach in such a way that God can transform hearts to understand and receive a revelation of Him and His Word.

From this biblical language, we can look to the heart as our primary target, not just to help believers develop right thinking, but right identity, values, and habits. Smith explains, “Unfortunately, the language of the ‘heart’ (*kardia* in Greek) has been co-opted in our culture and enlisted in the sappy sentimentalism of Hallmark and thus equated with a kind of emotivism. This is not what the biblical language of *kardia* suggests. . . . Instead, think of the heart as the fulcrum of your most fundamental longings—a visceral, subconscious *orientation* to the world.”⁸ Another writer adds, “When the Bible speaks of the heart, it means the essence of humanity. The seed of the Word of God connects to the essence of humanity, yet people are responsible to cultivate the soil of their hearts so the Word will bear fruit in their lives.”⁹ Our focus on the heart is a focus on the essence of who a person is and how he will digest Scripture.

What of worldview, you might want to ask right about now? I used to hear the term *worldview* frequently—to emphasize that we must influence students’ beliefs since, as its name indicates, it is the lens by which a person perceives her reality. However, recent research suggests

worldview is not synonymous with cognition or intellect alone or even primarily. One group of Christian writers suggests, “The heart, the individual’s worldview, is first affected by conditions and influences; in turn it influences the direction of the individual’s life. . . . Worldview, once in place, becomes a fundamental heart commitment, directing one’s life choices and values.”¹⁰ Our beliefs are important, but our values ultimately trump what we say we think. You’ve seen it when people say they believe in prayer but don’t pray; they may cognitively believe in its power, but they don’t value the practice. Shape a student’s heart, coach him on developing affections, and his worldview will follow.

I reflect on my pivotal crossroads in Zoology class where I experienced my faith crisis. I didn’t have cold, hard facts to debate the professor, nor did I want to. I knew what I had experienced. I knew it was real and something no amount of research could touch—I had experienced what I had been taught, seen modeled, and lived out. I would argue that no young person sticks or leaves because we present only six verses to prove the new birth instead of sixteen or not enough fossil evidence to combat carbon dating. (In fact, four mediocre reasons are much worse than one good reason; if a reason isn’t solid, don’t present it at all or you destroy credibility.) The teaching that keeps us is teaching that reaches the heart and opens the door for the Spirit to transform us.

Teaching will reach the head by default, but we have to be intentional in our philosophy and methods to reach the heart. The good news is that God created hearts to be malleable. In opposition to those in Scripture who had