

EFFECTIVE BIBLE TEACHING

SECOND EDITION

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To our students

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Preface

From the time that Luther declared that “the entire life and being of the church lie in the word of God,” Protestantism has committed itself to the tasks of preaching and teaching the Word. Of the two, preaching has fared better than teaching.

Bible teaching is a subject of neglect in the contemporary church. Seminaries have required courses in homiletics, and nearly every month brings the publication of a new book on preaching. But where are the books and courses on teaching the Bible? No wonder a Gallup poll uncovered people who believe the Bible to be God’s inspired Word and yet cannot name four of the Ten Commandments. Effective Bible teaching heads the agenda of the church’s unfinished tasks.

Part of the problem is that the church has failed to equip laypeople to study and teach the Bible. Without intending to do so, it has handed over the task of interpreting the Bible to its ministers. Ministers themselves feel more comfortable in the pulpit than in front of a class. They lavish their time on their sermons and by comparison may feel that anything is good enough when it comes to teaching the Bible.

Nor have ministers been quick to see that laypeople teach the Bible effectively. Armed with knowledge of the Bible’s original languages, and having been initiated into the sophisticated world of modern biblical interpretation, most ministers simply do not know how to popularize the methods of technical biblical scholarship that they learned in seminary. “How can I pass on in a few hours what it took me three years of seminary to learn?” pastors ask.

This book is dedicated to the principle that effective Bible teaching by both professional pastors and laypeople is a goal whose time has come.

PART 1

Effective Teaching

1

The Changing Landscape of Bible Study

A quarter of a century has elapsed since the first appearance of this book. There has been no need for a revision of the content of the book. We are still as convinced now as we were at its writing that what we said about the nature of the Bible, as well as the methods of studying and teaching it, provides useful and field-tested practices. We have not updated the principles of Bible study for purposes of this new edition of *Effective Bible Teaching*.

However, the context or landscape of Bible study has changed significantly in the past two decades. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to paint a picture of the changed landscape of Bible study. In the remainder of the book we have added and subtracted on a small scale to adapt our tried-and-true material to the changed landscape that we delineate in this newly added chapter.

We will survey a number of new developments in this chapter, but the underlying theme is the diminished stature of the Bible and its study in the spheres that we still hope to influence. A sense of buoyancy and expectation surrounded the first appearance of this book in 1988. We remember the enthusiasm that permeated workshops we conducted at professional meetings and in churches. It seemed possible that a golden age of Bible study was just around the corner. As spokesmen for our approach, we have lost no confidence whatsoever in the correctness of what we advocate, but we are no longer able to assume that our readers and the people they influence begin with a commitment to the study of the Bible, whether in inductive studies or more formal teaching situations. Twenty-five years ago we wrote in an attempt to keep a

good thing going and give it added momentum; today we write as people trying to revive a worthwhile practice.

The Eclipse of the Bible in the Evangelical Church

A former theology professor at Yale University, George Lindbeck, wrote an essay that illustrates the problematic status of the Bible in the contemporary church. Lindbeck paints a descriptive picture of how, for fifteen centuries, Christendom lived within the intellectual and imaginative universe created by the Bible. The “text above all texts was the Bible,” writes Lindbeck; “Its stories, images, conceptual patterns, and turns of phrase permeated the culture from top to bottom,” even among non-Christians and nonchurchgoers.¹

Lindbeck’s picture of the pervasive presence of the Bible appears, however, in an essay devoted to discussing biblical illiteracy in the modern world. In fact, Lindbeck clinches his point by claiming that when he first came to Yale “even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those now who come from churchgoing families.”²

We have no reason to be surprised by this. The number of evangelical pulpits from which the sermon consists of an exposition of a biblical text is very small. As recently as two decades ago, most young people growing up in evangelical churches would identify the small-group, inductive Bible study as a major ingredient of their high school experience. Today only a handful of Christian young people would make that claim; the chief input into teenagers’ church experience now is a charismatic speaker with a microphone in hand or (more likely) a worship leader or praise band with an amplifying system behind them.

Lack of Models for Bible Study

When the downward slide of people’s contact with the Bible began, the ordinary layperson still had reliable models for how to study the Bible. Potentially the best model of how to study a biblical text inductively is provided by ministers preaching on Sunday morning. This is true because most congregants handle the Bible as they see it handled from the pulpit. Expository preaching can provide the right model, but unfortunately, preachers have largely abandoned the exposition of Scripture as their basic mode of preaching.

There also has been a feminization of Bible study in the past quarter century. This is well illustrated by a remark made at a men’s retreat by a leader whose wife was the director of women’s ministry at a large evangelical church: “I realize you guys don’t know the Bible like your wives do.” The statement was made in a matter-of-fact way and not as a challenge to men to improve the quality of their interaction with the Bible. This kind of gender stereotyping has had

three negative effects. One is that it lowers the bar for what we should expect from men in regard to studying the Bible. We believe that it is inappropriate to expect less from one gender than the other. Second, gender stereotyping incorrectly fosters the idea that Bible study is different for men and women, whereas the methods of Bible study are the same for both genders and for all adult ages.

The third negative effect of gender stereotyping requires more detailed analysis. In some evangelical churches, the women's Bible-study program is the most vibrant arm of the church's Bible-study or small-group ministry. That women should have succeeded so splendidly is commendable. However, success does not eliminate the need to practice the right methods of Bible study. From the beginning of our venture in teaching the methods of Bible study and putting our ideas into published form, a leading emphasis in our approach has been the need for teachers to understand the principles of inductive Bible study—the methods for turning an analysis of a biblical text into a series of questions that lead a group to discover the nuances of meaning that the text stands ready to reveal. Fueled by success, some highly visible women's programs have substituted a topical and experience-oriented approach for Bible study. Personal story-sharing and emotional support have replaced a careful probing of the biblical text as the main ingredient of a Bible study. Most evangelical churches would rightly hesitate to use these procedures for a general church audience. As college professors, we see our female students do brilliant work. The slanting of women's materials away from a study of the Bible and toward a small-group relational experience incorrectly implies that women are less intellectually capable or that they are more interested in discussing their lives than in exploring the Bible. By our standard, Bible-study resources should help a class go through a biblical text, savor its beauty, understand its message, and live out its teaching.

In a related phenomenon, recent years have brought a rediscovery of *lectio divina* as a means of studying Scripture. In large part this emphasis came through the effects of Vatican II and the desire in Roman Catholicism for the laity to read the Bible more. Even though one of us has written on *lectio divina* and is a strong proponent of its proper use, it is important to understand that this method arose in a particular context and is not a method to be grabbed off the shelf and used just anywhere.³ It is a method of devotional Bible study that arose in the Western monasteries where the monks were praying through the entire Psalter each week and lived in submission to the ecumenical creeds of the church. Today it is often used as a "Bible-study light" method of devotional reading. But its proper use is not as a replacement for Bible study. Instead it is a method of contemplative prayer that complements the thoughtful study of Scripture.

In addition to advocating the need to understand principles of inductive Bible study, our approach also emphasizes a literary analysis of Bible passages.

A literary text—like a story, poem, or letter—needs to be approached in terms of the kind of writing it is. It is impossible to relive a Bible story adequately without interacting with the characters, settings, and plot. A poem is not adequately experienced if the images and figures of speech are not unpacked. It is no wonder that most published Bible-study materials have not taken people inside a biblical text: the materials do not provide sufficient literary analysis to do so.

The Seductive Appeal of Technology

When we first wrote this book, we could not foresee how widely available Bible-study resources would become. The good news is that maps, pictures, and illustrative videos are now just a click away. For a long time both of us have projected images in our classes to help make the stories come alive in our students' imaginations and to illustrate the images used in the poetic parts of the Bible. We welcome the availability of high-quality, accessible images. Bible software has made a host of resources readily available to the lay Bible teacher.

However, simply having ready access to a variety of computer resources doesn't guarantee effective results. For example, the presence of a wide variety of Bible translations on one's computer has actually encouraged the practice of picking and choosing among translations. One local youth worker will often use four or more translations in his PowerPoint presentations, selecting the translations that contain the words he needs to make a given point. This is actually a form of computer-assisted Scripture twisting. Another downside is that commentary resources of somewhat marginal quality have become mainstream because they are bundled free with widely distributed software.

One of us was an early adopter and remains a dedicated user of PowerPoint, but he is the first to admit that there is no clear research to support its supposed educational benefits. On the whole, we suspect that the introduction of PowerPoint into our churches has had a slightly negative effect. We believe that learning needs to be active. Students need to wrestle with material, formulate their own perspectives, try out their understandings by talking in class, and generally get involved. Though PowerPoint need not be stultifying for teaching, it often is. It supports one-directional communication and can force the presenter to mindlessly adhere to a rigid order such that the happy serendipities that mark good teaching are virtually eliminated. What seems like a potentially great tool for showing maps, images, and video clips has often resulted in death by bullet points. Both of us have witnessed teaching that consisted of little more than the presenter reading bullet points off the screen. Good teaching has an artistry and aesthetic appeal that can never come through that type of presentation.

Why Biblical Scholarship Has Not Helped Bible Study

We are supportive of studious and careful approaches to the study of the Bible by biblical scholars. However, we also affirm the great Reformation belief in the clarity of Scripture. This ideal is captured in the Westminster Confession's statement that "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them" (1.VII). This doctrine has set the Bible free and has encouraged generations to read the Bible in their homes and adopt Bible-oriented devotional practices of meditation and praying the Scriptures.

The data that biblical scholarship provides as a context for a biblical passage is potentially a welcome source of information. The problem is that biblical scholarship can readily become a substitute for the biblical text. Sometimes Bible-study members who carry the largest study Bibles show more confidence and interest in reading the notes than in carefully looking at the text. We need to get the balance right. We can celebrate the place for scholarship in understanding the Bible and at the same time announce that the central message and moral teachings of the Bible are so clear that ordinary people can discover them on their own. We have found that virtually any Bible passage contains within itself the data needed to unpack most of its meanings.

Many Bible-study leaders resort naturally to Bible commentaries when faced with the task of leading or teaching a group. This is generally not a helpful move. Bible commentaries are too atomistic in format, consisting of a mass of individual details that do not readily yield a coherent picture. Bible commentaries are reference books. They do not provide a methodology for systematically working one's way through a Bible passage and then packaging it for an inductive or directed Bible study.

Some tools for Bible study have appeared in recent years. The *Life Application Bible* was a unique product that included maps and graphics throughout to provide information on the setting and context. The editors had good literary intuitions and provided guidance for actually living out the text. In a similar fashion, the NIV Application Commentary series by Zondervan has provided careful, accessible scholarship and a model of respecting the literary units of a text in their analysis.

The limitation of Bible commentaries as models for successful Bible studies is related to recent trends in academic biblical scholarship. A quarter of a century ago, the trend toward literary methods of analysis in biblical scholarship looked promising. Unfortunately, the promise remains largely unfulfilled, for at least three reasons.

First, the appeal of reducing the multiplicity of the Bible to a single overriding paradigm has proved irresistible. The paradigm is variously known

as salvation history or redemption history. That the Bible possesses such a superstructure is obvious, but the tendency in many circles is to reduce virtually every passage in the Bible to a chapter in the overriding story of redemption. Inductive and directed Bible study thrives on the particularity of a given biblical text. Such study dies when every Bible passage is reduced to a single, predetermined message.

Second, much biblical scholarship is more interested in the context of Bible passages than in the text. Context includes historical information gleaned from beyond the Bible itself and the placing of a specific Bible passage in relationship to other Bible passages. An example of the latter might be the claim that we cannot adequately experience the opening chapter of the book of Jonah without taking an excursion into Genesis 10:11–12 (for information on the origin of Nineveh) and 2 Kings 14:23–27 (for information on the king under whom Jonah prophesied). The result of this focus on context has been to divert people from the text itself and to discourage laypeople from believing they can interpret the Bible for themselves.

Third, the characteristic way of handling the Bible among biblical scholars and the preachers they produce is to reduce a biblical text to a series of theological abstractions. The effect of this, likewise, is to put something in the place of actually reliving a biblical text, as the conceptual structure short-circuits interaction with the text itself. What a person carries away from such an approach is a collection of ideas—information about the Bible and theological ideas based on the Bible instead of an experiential encounter with the text of the Bible.

We are strong proponents of expository preaching, but that does not mean that all expository preaching provides the correct model for a Bible study. For one thing, expository sermons are orchestrated by a single person—the preacher. When transferred to a small-group Bible study, this model yields a one-directional process of teaching by a leader instead of discussion and discovery by all members of the group. Fifty years ago Lois LeBar lamented that most church adult education amounted to little more than “poor lay preaching,” and her assessment still has relevance.⁴

Educational Theory

The first edition of this book was published at the height of the emphasis on developmental psychology as a foundation for Christian education. This emphasis on developmental psychology opened up a number of important new perspectives on Christian education and was a welcome corrective to the earlier behaviorist orientation. In our book, though, we avoided focusing on how to teach various age groups, a focus that was spawned by a number of developmental approaches. While we affirmed—and continue to affirm—the

need to give specific guidance for age groups, we believe that our emphasis on general principles has proven to be a more useful orientation.

Furthermore, when we wrote the first edition, many people spoke of the field of education as consisting of two camps: teacher-centered and learner-centered. We were never happy with that dichotomy and are pleased to see the new emphasis on learning-centered education, an approach that we have advocated all along. While we honor the expertise of a well-studied and prepared teacher who hopes to foster student engagement, at the end of the day we judge success by the quality of the learning that takes place. To that end, we have always supported strategies of instruction that promote active student engagement, including out-of-class work for students, and active teaching practices, such as discussion and text analysis.

Problems Stemming from English Bible Translations

A quarter of a century ago we were not inclined to think that issues of Bible translation were an important factor in Bible study. Today we have reason to believe that the current state of Bible translation plays a major role in the problems that we delineate in this opening chapter.

Before we even consider the question of translation philosophy, we need to take stock of what was lost when we lost a common Bible. Starting in the seventeenth century and continuing to the last quarter of the twentieth century, when English-speaking people spoke of “the Bible,” they meant the King James Version of 1611. This was the common Bible, and when individuals sat down together to study Scripture, they analyzed the same text. The Bible they held in their hands possessed an authority that readily elicited submission to it. Usually there were no alternate renditions that distracted the discussion.

All of that changed with the proliferation of Bible translations that began to emerge in the 1970s. The lack of a common translation has had multiple effects on Bible study, including the need to take time for group members to register what their translation says and to assimilate the differences that are thus put on the table, along with uncertainty about what the Bible actually says. The most detrimental effect of the proliferation of Bible translations is that it has engendered a thoroughgoing skepticism about our ability to know what the Bible says. In fact, the widespread availability of numerous Bible translations has taken away people’s *incentive* to discover what the Bible says because it seems impossible to ascertain. The attitude quickly gets established, who’s to say what the right translation is? From that question it is an easy step to conclude, who cares what the Bible actually says?

Additionally, we need to consider the way in which dynamic equivalent translations distort what the biblical authors wrote. By “dynamic equivalent translations” we mean those translations that attempt to provide a more natural

and readable translation without strictly adhering to the grammatical structure of the original text. However, in the process, dynamic equivalent translations regularly do the following three things:

1. Omit material that is in the biblical text. For example, in describing the lifestyle of the godly person, Psalm 1:1 uses the metaphor of not *walking* in the counsel of the wicked, but dynamic equivalent translations remove the metaphor of walking and use such renditions as “refuse evil advice” or “don’t listen to the wicked.”
2. Add to what the biblical text says. Psalm 34:5a states that “those who look to him are radiant,” but dynamic equivalent translations add commentary and make it read “*the oppressed* look to him and are *glad*,” or “those who look to him *for help* will be radiant *with joy*” (italics added to show the editorializing that has been done).
3. Replace what is in the biblical text, or offer a substitute for it. James 1:18 calls believers “a kind of firstfruits,” but dynamic equivalent translations replace the image of firstfruits with such substitutes as “prized possession” or “special people” or “most important.”

Omission, addition, replacement—all of these activities produce a substitute Bible. Is a study of a text that is different from what the biblical authors wrote really a Bible study? Only in a very diluted sense. Much of the time, such an exercise is a study of something other than the Bible.

Two further dimensions of the problem deserve special treatment. One is that while essentially literal translations preserve the concrete imagery of the Bible, dynamic equivalent translations regularly offer an abstraction in place of the image that the biblical poet gave us. In Psalm 16:6, the poet compares God’s goodness toward him to the division of land when the Israelites entered the Promised Land: “The lines have fallen unto me in pleasant places.” Dynamic equivalent translations turn the concrete picture of receiving a portion of land into an abstraction: “you make my life pleasant,” or “how wonderful are your gifts to me, / how good they are.” Poetry consists of images; replacing them with abstractions makes study of a poetic passage in the Bible impossible.

As an extension of the impulse to spell it out (evident in all of the dynamic equivalent translation practices noted in the preceding paragraphs), dynamic equivalent translations regularly reduce a multiplicity of meanings to a single meaning, thereby eliminating the multiple meanings that are genuinely in the biblical text and that were intended by the biblical author. Psalm 91:1 gives us the metaphor of a person “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High.” The image of dwelling in a house yields multiple meanings. One-dimensional translations narrow those meanings to one: “under the protection of” or “whoever goes to the LORD for safety.” All good Bible studies, and inductive Bible studies preeminently, thrive on exploring everything that is in a biblical

text. The technical name for this is “the full exegetical potential of the text.” Essentially literal translations preserve the full exegetical potential, while dynamic equivalent translations remove it; they become one-dimensional Bibles in places where the original Bible is multidimensional.

Bible Study Can Still Thrive

Nothing we have said should be interpreted as meaning that the era of good Bible studies is irrevocably gone. On the contrary, Bible study can flourish today as fully as it has flourished at any point in history. The trends that we have delineated make it more difficult to legitimize Bible study and to perform it in the right way, but the methods of succeeding in the venture are the same as they were twenty-five years ago. We remain optimistic.

2

The Church's Unfinished Task

When we speak of effective Bible teaching as the church's unfinished task, we do not wish to minimize much that is good in how the Bible is taught and studied today. The task is already under way, and most churches have a tradition of past successes on which to build. Published Sunday school materials and inductive Bible-study guides likewise contain much that is good.

To complete the task of teaching the Bible with excellence, however, will require that we improve what currently exists. We need to look honestly at where Bible teaching stands today and diagnose where it fails. Then we must devise strategies to correct the system where it is weak. This chapter contains our analysis of those areas where Bible teaching is currently failing and how it can be strengthened.

How the Church Has Fooled Itself about Bible Teaching

One reason for the difficulty the church has in diagnosing its problems with Bible teaching is that it has been conditioned to focus on the teacher rather than on teaching and fostering learning. Our culture, including the Christian segment of it, is obsessed with personality cults. We therefore measure the success of Bible teaching in terms of high interest and charismatic teaching personalities. If classes are full and students are enthusiastic, what can possibly be wrong?

The truth is that the issues are not that simple. Consider two case studies that we recall from our past experiences as Sunday school attendees.

The Class That Knew It Failed

The vacant stares were the first clue that something was not clicking. After that, the evidence continued to mount. Long years of schooling had conditioned the audience to hide its inattention. But the façade of interest was crumbling. More and more blank expressions, yawns, whispered conversations, and pitiful looks of boredom telegraphed to Bob (as we will call this teacher) the message that he had lost his class. Like the pilot of an airplane that is plummeting to earth, Bob desperately tried to regain the class's attention.

He stepped forward. He raised his voice. He glanced up from the floor and scanned the class for an attentive pair of eyes. He hoped that a little variety would add the needed spark. Just for good measure, he asked a question. To his horror, the question hung awkwardly in midair before falling at his feet. No one scrambled to pick it up. He answered the question himself, as he had done so many times before, and sighed with relief when the end-of-class bell finally rang.

Bob left the classroom with a nagging feeling that he had blown it again. He had bored an entire class for an entire hour. His conversation with class members convinced him that his worst fears were correct. Not even the most polite or undiscerning among them thanked him for the lesson.

In the tranquility of a Sunday afternoon, post-teaching depression descended with a vengeance. It was painful to recall the class session. What was even worse, Bob knew that his remorse would not automatically lead to a better session next week. Sometimes class went well, and sometimes it went poorly, but he was never sure why one thing worked and another didn't.

Bob's case illustrates one of our problems: *because we focus on the teacher rather than teaching, we do not know how to diagnose our problems and strengths in Bible teaching.* Knowing that Bob is not Mr. Personality in the classroom, we assume that he cannot rise above mediocrity and do not inquire into the approach and content of his teaching. It so happens that he can be an excellent Bible teacher with proper diagnosis of his teaching.

The premise of this book is that it is possible to diagnose with precision what goes well and what goes poorly in the classroom. It is also possible to prescribe a cure for every ailment.

The Class That Thought It Succeeded

At the very hour that Bob was struggling through his class, Mary's class in the next room was flying high. Mary (as we will call her) was an enthusiastic and witty teacher who held her class spellbound. This multitalented teacher opened the class with a song and then proceeded to capture the audience's attention with an outlandishly amusing story from her days as a Cub Scout den mother. She then read the Scripture lesson and generated some lively discussion by presenting selective assertions made in the Sunday school quarterly.

When the discussion began to wander, Mary stepped in. The sheer charisma of her personality riveted the class's attention. She sustained their interest with another well-chosen illustration and then drafted the most unlikely assemblage of class members for a skit. The props themselves were hilarious. In a moment's time, the normally quiet banker, the klutzy salesman, and the somewhat shy pastor's wife were transformed into a drama troupe. After the laughter had subsided, Mary closed the class meeting in prayer and silently thanked God for allowing her to minister to such wonderful people.

The class was effusive in its praise. Of course people had laughed, but they were also sure that they had learned. They enjoyed their class and were exuberant about its skyrocketing attendance.

On the surface, Mary's class seems to be the opposite of Bob's. Yet for all their differences, the two classes share something in common: both are educational atrocities. In the first case, the evidence is clear and the verdict sure. The second case is more troubling because the class members are unaware of deficiencies.

Surprising as it may seem, class members are not always the best judges of educational quality. Educational research has amassed considerable evidence to show that class members can be inordinately poor at assessing the quality of their learning when a charismatic teacher is involved. In some experiments, classes have been impressed by theatrical teachers spouting off double talk or high-sounding nonsense. Charismatic teachers can seduce students into thinking they have learned when in reality they have only been entertained.

In terms of Bible teaching, the net result in both classes is the same. Neither Bob nor Mary teaches the Bible in such a way that students encounter the text in a manner that nurtures their faith. Mary's case, then, illustrates a significant problem: *we have not learned where to look for success and failure in the teaching of the Bible*. We look too much at the teacher and not enough at the educational process and content. We assume that lively teachers whose classes are filled with enthusiastic students are effective Bible teachers. The reverse is often the case, as a survey of students' Bible knowledge would quickly reveal.

The Two Levels at Which Bible Teaching Can Fail

Autopsies of educational failures generally yield inconclusive results. A definitive answer to the question of what went wrong usually eludes those who probe the fading memories of a bygone class session. Occasionally a postmortem will expose such educationally defeating classroom behaviors as poor eye contact, disorganization, or confusing speech patterns. These easily identifiable behaviors range from merely annoying space fillers, like "um," to serious classroom management issues. While these problems can markedly reduce the effectiveness of a teacher, they are also easily identified and eliminated. The

problems that crippled the educational ministry of the two teachers we have cited were so big that they could be missed by someone looking for easily observable signs of ineffective teaching.

Ineffective teaching must be viewed at two levels: the *presentation level* and the *strategy/planning level*. The presentation level is actual classroom teaching. The strategy/planning level encompasses the teacher's planning and general approach to teaching, as well as decisions about the content and organization of a lesson.

The Presentation Level

Teacher-improvement books and workshops almost always focus on the presentation level. This is understandable. After all, this is the most observable level. Good communication in the classroom is like a qualifying exam: if teachers can't pass this qualification, they are not even in the running for a rating of "effective."

But by tackling problems at the presentation level, we have generally treated the symptoms rather than the ailment. Presentation problems can often be solved by feedback, practice, and coaching. Often just mentioning distracting behaviors to conscientious teachers will motivate them to monitor and eliminate the tendencies.

Suppose, for example, that John is told, "That was a good presentation, John. I did notice, however, that when a hard question comes up in class you always drop your eyes and avoid eye contact with the class members. When you do this you cut yourself off from the class and from the help that class members might be able to offer on the issue." Chances are good that John's nonverbal communication can be fairly easily altered through self-monitoring.

The Strategy/Planning Level

We are convinced that the key to better Bible teaching lies at the strategy/planning level. In fact, many presentation problems (such as stating unclear ideas, being under stress, rushing through a lesson, or confusing a class) can be traced back to faulty planning. Better classroom techniques will not salvage a lesson whose content was forged with flawed interpretive or educational premises at the Sunday school teacher's kitchen table on Saturday morning.

Strategy or planning problems are more difficult to spot and eliminate than are presentation problems. This should not mislead us into thinking that they do not exist. They are what lie behind many ineffective attempts at instruction and are the reason why some teachers can "do everything right" (at the presentation level) and yet be ineffective Bible teachers.

Problems at the strategy or planning level require different intervention techniques than those at the presentation level. The problems at the planning level are often missed by inexperienced observers, but the problems are real.

The two teachers we described earlier failed at the strategy level. They lost the educational battle at the level of organization and content. Unfortunately, since their problems were not easily spotted, few people could help them reach their full potential as teachers.

Strategy and Planning Problems

Our analysis of the leading problems at the planning level is based on personal observation, conversations with students, and informal surveys we have conducted. We believe that there are seven leading culprits.

Inability to Come to Grips with a Biblical Text

The hardworking teachers described earlier had one main thing in common: they could never get a firm grip on a Bible passage. They both stared long and hard at the assigned passage, but seldom did all the pieces come together. Bob was a walking encyclopedia of facts about the Bible passage. His classroom strategy was to unload these facts on the class as he marched through the passage verse by verse. Mary was even less able to get close to the text. In fact, she had long since given up on the possibility of getting a handle on the passages she taught. She flitted from one detail or exercise to another because she had no strategy for systematically studying a Bible passage.

When Bruce Lockerbie, former dean of faculty of Stony Brook School, a Christian college preparatory school, was asked, “What is the problem with the way the Bible is being taught today?” he replied, “The problem is that there’s been almost no instruction in the teaching of the Bible. People who think themselves prepared to teach the Bible are often teaching *about* the Bible. In other words, they’re teaching doctrinal persuasions or outlines of systematic theology.”¹

Three specific manifestations of this problem are especially prevalent. One is the *inability to teach a biblical passage in terms of the kind of writing it is*. Many teachers we have observed couldn’t state the essential differences between a story and poem if they had to. Yet an awareness of the genre of a passage, or the type of writing that a passage is, programs how we approach it. To teach a psalm, for example, without realizing that poets speak a language of images and metaphors is to cut against the grain, yet this is how biblical poetry is often taught. A minister who regularly reads psalms to patients in the hospital admits that he does not choose them for Bible studies because he “can’t think of anything to say about them.”

Equally symptomatic of the inability to deal adequately with a biblical text is the prevailing *failure to identify the big idea of a biblical passage*. What we will call throughout this book the “big idea” of a passage is the thought that unifies a biblical passage and that ought to govern a class session. Ineffective

Five Ways to Avoid Interpreting a Biblical Text

When teachers do not know how to come to grips with a biblical text, they find other ways to fill the time. Here are five examples of classic ways to avoid analyzing a text in terms of the type of writing it is. As you read these pieces of commentary on the story of the separation of Abraham and Lot (Gen. 13), try to identify the common activity that each specimen represents.

Exhibit A. When the land was unable to support the flocks of both Abraham and Lot, Abraham proposed that he and Lot choose separate areas in which to live. Abraham allowed Lot to choose where he wanted to live, on the understanding that he himself would move in the other direction. Lot looked around and was attracted to the well-watered land of the Jordan valley. He chose this territory and moved to Sodom, which was known for its immorality. Abraham dwelt in the land of Canaan.

Exhibit B. In this story, Lot represents the person who lives according to the flesh. Abraham is the person who lives by the Spirit. The riches of Abraham are a picture of the riches we have in Christ when we walk in the Spirit. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land, represents the promised Holy Spirit. Sodom is a symbol of the flesh. Lot's choice of Sodom as a place to live is a choice to live by the flesh. The well-watered Jordan valley that tempts Lot to move there represents Satan, who lures people to live by the flesh.

Exhibit C. Verse 2 tells us that Abraham was very rich. This shows us that riches are a blessing from God. This verse about Abraham's wealth should encourage us to be diligent in our work, knowing that God wants us to be successful, just as Abraham was. God will reward our hard work, not our laziness.

Exhibit D. Verse 2 informs us that Abraham was wealthy in flocks and herds. We know that this wealth did not destroy Abraham's

faith in God. This reminds us of 1 Timothy 6:17, which states, "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God." Verses 8 and 9 tell us that Abraham offered Lot the opportunity to choose where he wished to live. Abraham here obeys the command in Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Exhibit E. In this chapter Abraham is a type (foreshadowing) of Christ. Abraham lived a life of self-sacrifice in order to benefit Lot. So Christ led a life of self-denial for the sake of others. Abraham lived by faith in God's promises. The Gospels portray Christ as living in the strength of the promises of his heavenly Father. Abraham was a peacemaker, just as Christ was. Abraham talked with God, just as Jesus did on many occasions. The story of Abraham thus points us to its fulfillment in the life of Christ.

Here are five ways that, through the centuries and today, teachers and commentators have managed to create the appearance of analyzing the text while actually avoiding it. Teacher A paraphrased the passage instead of stating analytic insights. Teacher B allegorized the passage. Teacher C, assuming that every verse (rather than the passage as a whole) must yield a meaning, moralized on the individual verses. Teacher D, unable to treat the story as a story, took his students on a bicycle trip through parallel passages elsewhere in the Bible. And Teacher E, in a process of interpretation known as typology, treated the details in the story as saying something about the life and work of Christ.

Why do teachers do these things? They do not know how to come to grips with the passage as a story and as a whole, so they find substitute ways of dealing with the passage, actually avoiding the text itself.

teachers tend to focus on isolated facts and to present their audience with a stream of unrelated ideas in the dim hope that if they throw out enough ideas a few will stick. Research and common experience show that learning does not happen that way.

Theologian Bernard Ramm once gave this humorous portrait of a preacher who had much to say but lacked a grasp of the passage:

He announced his passage for the study and went to work—but what work! In his attempt to explain the text he was like a chicken with defective pecking aim. The poor hen pecks all around the corn but never hits it. She squints with her beady eye, she cocks her head, and then she pecks—and misses. She over-shoots or under-shoots. So the poor man of God does everything but explain the text. I got 30 minutes of various and diverse unrelated and uninspiring pious observations. Each observation was a worthy one. But the passage itself remained untouched. We had been all around the text but never in it. Pious observations are not Bible study.²

This situation is extremely common, and it leads to a third symptom: *escape from the biblical text to other material*. It is easy to identify people who do not know how to interact with a biblical text in terms of the kind of writing it is. Such people talk about matters beyond the text itself—about the writer; the cultural context; and that perennial favorite, “background material.” Teachers (and preachers) who do not know how to talk about the text talk about other things. They fill the time with class discussions, “creative activities,” and moralizing. They share anecdotes, tell jokes, and introduce illustrations related to the subject of the passage under consideration. But they do not analyze the passage itself.

Excessive Confidence in Published Materials

Using curriculum materials can help a teacher, but that practice does not eliminate the teacher’s need to arrive at a personal understanding of a passage. One of us remembers being in a particularly awful Bible study in which the leader foundered helplessly while time dripped with painful slowness. The leader bombarded the group with a stream of isolated observations and a series of anecdotes and applications. But nothing fit together.

During the post-study chitchat, the teacher admitted that he had “used someone else’s notes.” He had tried to lead using someone else’s preparation. Many publishers of Bible-study materials have fostered such a practice by their promise to equip any teacher to teach a passage with an hour of preparation.

We need to be reminded, therefore, that teachers can never effectively teach beyond their grasp of a subject. They may be able to teach beyond their own experiences, but they cannot teach what they do not understand. Merely

parroting a prepared lesson is not teaching. It is just that: parroting. Someone stated it well when he noted that “‘I can’t teach you anything I don’t know’ is such an easy, silly, stupid thing to say. And yet we have to say it. If I’m going to stand in front of a group, I had better know something or have something to say to them.”³ Personal ownership of what one teaches is the minimum requirement for effective Bible teaching.

Another reason we cannot put all our faith in curriculum writers is that they sometimes let us down. Recently some junior high material on the Old Testament prophets came to our attention. The lesson on Jeremiah focused on both the prophet’s and Jesus’s use of “object lessons” in their ministries. The study concluded with an application involving the energy crisis. The more we read, the more bewildered we became. The author obviously did not know what the main point of the chapter in Jeremiah was. To compensate for this lack of understanding, the writer focused on some concrete aspects of Jeremiah’s ministry and for good measure mentioned Jesus. The use of the energy crisis as the application defies explanation.

Much as we may dislike admitting it, curriculum writers and Bible commentators sometimes miss the point. A teacher must be critical enough to spot such lapses. We have designed this book to help teachers gain the skill and confidence to make wise decisions about curricula and commentaries.

Too Many Facts, Not Enough Meaning

We live in an age of cheap and available information. Factual information about the Bible is readily at hand. But despite all the biblical information available, the church is often lacking in maturity and spiritual understanding, and its biblical illiteracy is often alarming.

In the information age in which we live, we desperately need people who understand the big ideas of their faith and who can use these to guide their lives and the mission of the church. “Running out of information is not a problem,” writes author and expert in future studies John Naisbitt, “but drowning in it is.”⁴

It is our use of Bible knowledge, not the mere possession of Bible facts, that produces growth toward godliness. To know who composed the book of Ruth or where Moab is or what a kinsman-redeemer was will not by itself direct our lives. Knowing that God’s providence is at work in the daily routine will. Of course, such knowledge emerges from specific details, but an effective teacher weaves these details into life-changing concepts.

Misconceptions about the Bible

To teach the Bible accurately, we need to know what we are teaching. A lot of Bible teaching is based on misconceptions about the book we teach. Because the Bible is our religious authority, we slip into viewing it as something that it

is emphatically *not*—namely, a theological outline with proof texts attached. “Why didn’t God just give us an outline?” a new convert asked one of us. We don’t know why, but God didn’t.

A look at published Sunday school materials and many Bible commentaries shows how thoroughly they have reduced the Bible to a single type of material—abstract, conceptual, and theological. Consider our sermon outlines and the headings in many Bible commentaries or study guides. They often name theological and moral propositions instead of the human experiences and images that actually make up the biblical text. When we label Psalm 23 as a psalm dealing with providence, we lose sight of the sheep and grass and water that make up the poem.

Somehow the rich humanity and everyday realism of the Bible get flattened into religious platitudes in much Bible teaching. The Bible emerges as a serious “spiritual” book, unlike other books in our familiar experience. “I guess I just don’t know how to carry over to the Bible what I know about other books,” a student recently confided regarding her inability to deal with the Psalms as poetry.

Overloading the Student

A leading hindrance to effective Bible teaching is bombarding a class with too much data. It is easy for teachers who have immersed themselves in preparation to forget that class members come to the passage without the benefit of such preparation.

Overloading the student can take several forms. Well-meaning Bible teachers who want to make historical passages come to life often end up burying the learners beneath a mountain of names, dates, and places. Similarly, people desire to see their Bible heroes as real people with whom they can identify. The danger is that teachers who set out to paint a living picture end up overwhelming their students with long lists of “interesting facts.”

Another complaint that we hear from adult students is that teachers often give them insufficient time to adjust to a text. When using cross-references, teachers seem to simply drop people into another text. Explanations of the context and message of the parallel text, if given at all, usually come while people are busy thumbing through their Bibles trying to find the passage. To understand a biblical text takes time, and traveling between texts at breakneck speed leaves students bewildered.

Our college students tell us that the use of undefined theological terms was a major problem for them in junior high school and high school. Terms like *providence* and *justification* and *morality* were tossed at them with abandon, even though these terms had little meaning for them. The same thing can happen in adult classes.

Trying to Do Too Much in a Session

Many Bible teachers try to accomplish too much in each lesson. They would accomplish more if they set more modest and realistic goals. The educational “rule of simplicity” tells us that doing less may be a way of accomplishing more. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once asserted, “We enunciate two educational commandments, ‘Do not teach too many subjects,’ and again, ‘What you teach, teach thoroughly.’”⁵

It is of course legitimate to focus on several aspects of a Bible passage. But we should heed the advice of author Reuel L. Howe, who listened to hundreds of sermons and solicited comments from laypeople who listened to recorded sermons at his retreat center. He found himself agreeing with their biggest complaint: the sermons contained too many unrelated ideas.⁶

Ineffectiveness in Bridging the Gap

“Bridging the gap” is the phrase used by Bible expositors to refer to the process by which we make the biblical text relevant to modern living. Good biblical interpretation must ask and answer the questions of what a passage *meant* to the original audience and what it *means* to us today. Bridging the gap requires us to perform both activities. This is exactly what is often missing. Despite our affirmation that the Bible is our rule of faith and practice, many Christians read it with a disquieting sense that its shepherds, kings, and battles have little to do with modern life.

Several signs tell us when the gap is not being bridged. One is uninterpreted biblical material. We are talking here about the Sunday school lesson filled with biblical facts that are treated as ends in themselves. This has long characterized curriculum materials for children. Instead of interpreting a Bible passage, teachers often simply paraphrase its content in their own words.

Teachers who fail to interpret biblical material sometimes take a one-way journey to the world of the Bible. This was Bob’s practice, as we saw in the first of the two examples above (“The Class That Knew It Failed”). He was great at telling his classes all they could ever want to know about the world of a Bible passage, but he rarely made the return trip from the world of the Bible to our own world.

Another thing that signals inadequate bridging of the gap is insufficient application of biblical principles to a student’s life. The question often left unanswered in contemporary Bible teaching is, what difference is this supposed to make in my life this week? In fact, we have almost come to expect it. When we speak of someone’s being “a good Bible teacher,” we usually mean that he or she is full of facts about the Bible but may make little attempt to wrestle with applying those facts to modern living.

Another failure to bridge the gap is neglecting to make the journey from our time and place to the world of the Bible. Mary, in the second example above

(“The Class That Thought It Succeeded”), stayed firmly rooted in twenty-first-century America and made no pretense of living inside the world of the biblical text. She was an enthusiast for “relevance,” and her lessons were, in a sense, *all* application.

In addition to these ways of neglecting to bridge the gap, there are ways of bridging the gap that are simply wrong. One is the old standby of moralizing about isolated details in a text instead of first mastering the passage as a whole and then deducing principles from it. In the story of David and Goliath, for example, we read that “David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage and ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers” (1 Sam. 17:22). A Bible lesson entitled “Be a Giant-Killer” moralizes thus: “A giant-killer does not carry excess baggage—nonessential things and petty personal preferences—into battle.”

Closely related is the persistent tendency to allegorize or spiritualize a biblical passage. One of us recalls a teacher of an adult class who did a good job of treating the surface details in a battle story in the book of Joshua and then admitted that he didn’t know how the story applied to our lives today. A class member came to the rescue by asking, “Why can’t we spiritualize the story?” The suggestion made a big hit, and in no time at all the story had been allegorized to “teach” such far-flung truths as Christ’s atonement and the Holy Spirit’s infilling. The impulse to allegorize is one of the most pervasive features of Bible teaching in our day.

Keys to Improved Teaching

If we have correctly diagnosed the problems in contemporary Bible teaching, the solutions to these problems can be identified with equal precision. The list below lays out our proposed solutions. We treat them briefly because they are a virtual outline of the entire book that follows. Most of these points will receive chapter-length treatment later in the book.

Focusing on the Bible Itself

Bible teaching should be just that: *Bible* teaching. We are convinced that people avoid the text because they do not know how to interact with it. We are also confident that the tools of textual analysis can be learned by any committed teacher.

Chief among the tools of textual analysis is approaching a biblical text in terms of the kind of writing it is. The technical term for a type of writing is *genre*. In defending genre study, C. S. Lewis said that “the first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.”⁷ Applied to the Bible, this means that stories must be taught as stories, poems as poems, and theological exposition as theological exposition.

When we approach the Bible in terms of its genres, it will quickly become evident how much of the Bible is literary (though not fictional) in nature. It is filled with stories, poems, visions, proverbs, letters, and other literary forms. That is why (to quote Lewis again) there is a “sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are.”⁸

Teaching the Big Idea

The antidote to the “too many ideas” about which the sermon listeners complained is to make sure that a Bible lesson unifies all the details around a single focus. We are so sure that this is a major factor that determines whether a lesson is good or bad that it will be a unifying theme of this book. People will only “get the point” if the lesson has one.

From time immemorial, three time-honored principles have been said to govern a good essay or speech: unity, coherence, and emphasis. These same principles apply to a good Bible study. When applied, they produce the clarity of thought that characterizes any good learning experience. By “clarity” we mean more than clear ideas. We also mean that a lesson has a goal in view toward which the teacher moves the class. Such goal-centered lessons will of course avoid the abuse of overloading students and trying to do too much in a given class session.

Using Our Imagination

In keeping with the kind of book the Bible is, teaching can be significantly strengthened by more reliance on the imagination. The imagination is our image-making and image-perceiving capacity. Given this definition, the Bible is a predominantly imaginative book. It is filled with the experiences and images of real life. For example, when asked to define *neighbor*, Jesus told a story (Luke 10:30–37).

“The LORD is my shepherd,” the psalmist tells us, but much Bible teaching assumes that in discussing Psalm 23 we should talk about more “spiritual” things than sheep and grass. Bible teaching needs to do justice to the experiential and literary nature of the Bible itself. In the terms popularized by contemporary psychology, Bible teaching needs more appeals to the right side of the brain, which thinks in images. This will be another leading theme of this book.

The need to use our imagination relates to the point we made about teaching based on inaccurate views of the Bible. If the Bible is not a theology outline with proof texts attached, we will not fully benefit from it if we treat it that way. The content of the Bible is much closer to lived experience than many theological treatments of it would suggest. The ability to apply to the Bible what we know about other books and about our own life experiences is a

significant tool in helping people recognize the Bible's relevance and in making it more accessible to them.

Interpreting the Meaning of Bible Passages

It is impossible to teach the Bible well without interpreting it. The facts do not always speak for themselves. Yet it is this very process of moving from text to meaning that baffles most people. The reason some teachers leave biblical details uninterpreted and others allegorize them is that they do not know what else to do.

We spoke earlier about the problem of “too many facts, not enough meaning.” The way out of this maze is to reach a high enough point that we can see the overall pattern of a Bible passage and the big ideas on which the Christian faith is based. *Interpretation* is simply another word for this process of reaching the vantage point from which to see the big picture.

Interpretation is not a mystical process. It is governed by long-established principles. We discuss these principles of interpretation in the chapters that follow. They are the skills that can be mastered by any layperson who possesses the desire and gifts to teach.

Bridging the Gap

Our entire approach to Bible teaching in this book is based on the model of a two-way journey from our world to the biblical passage and then back to our own world. We will call this “bridging the gap.” It is a mind-set that can be fostered. With imagination and creativity, we can learn to see ourselves and our world in the stories of the Bible. We can learn to state details from the Bible in contemporary terms and counterparts. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well, for example, had been divorced five times and currently had a live-in boyfriend.

Bible teachers also need to develop the knack for seeing recognizable human experience in a biblical text. Such experience exists at multiple levels—physical, emotional, moral, and psychological. When David asserts that before he confessed his sin, his “bones wasted away, . . . for day and night [God's] hand was heavy” upon him (Ps. 32:3–4), he is talking about such recognizable experiences as insomnia, loss of appetite, psychosomatic ailments, guilt-related stress, and emotional fatigue.

In much Bible teaching today, the biblical text and the world in which we live are both mentioned, but they rarely touch each other, except perhaps at the beginning and end of the lesson. Such teaching resembles a rail fence in which the boards run parallel but meet only at an occasional post. What we need is Bible teaching that resembles a picket fence, with the biblical world and our own experiences joined at many points.

Perhaps it has not fully dawned on the preachers of our time that preaching needs to be preceded by strong programs of teaching. The preacher's words fall on barren ground where the people have not first been taught *how* to hear afresh the good news! How to listen, how to weigh and evaluate, how to interpret the lines of Scripture that appear in the sermon—all these “how to’s” are the product of careful preparation, of *teaching*.

Locke Bowman, *Teaching Today: The Church's First Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 86–87.

Why the Problems of Bible Teaching Must Be Addressed

Putting the Bible in the hands of the laity stands as one of the much-heralded fruits of the Protestant Reformation. No longer the exclusive property of the ordained clergy, the Bible was set free and made available to all Christians. Luther himself translated the Bible into his native German, and other Reformers showed equal concern that the Bible be made available in the vernacular.

Today the Protestant laity possess the Bible in staggering numbers and multitudinous versions. But when measured by how these Bibles are actually used, many churches have failed to meet the ideals

of the Reformation. The Protestant tradition has been quicker to assert the right and responsibility of Bible study in both the home and the church than it has been to equip the laity for this task.

Pastors typically exhort their parishioners to read and study the Bible and are distressed when the advice goes unheeded. But seldom do ministers provide their congregations or even their Sunday school teachers with a method for reading, studying, and teaching the Bible. A number of factors promote this odd situation.

Many pastors have been trained to study the Bible from an academic perspective. In seminary they studied biblical languages and devoted considerable energy to learning the technical tools of biblical interpretation. Consequently, many pastors do not know how someone lacking biblical languages and

The minister who refuses to come down from his pulpit and participate in the work of teaching is like a farmer who scatters seed on the land and refuses to do anything more until the harvest. In fact, if he withholds himself from the more open and vulnerable situation of the teacher, he is likely to lack the intimate knowledge of what is happening in his people's lives

which alone makes it possible for him to be an effective harvester. The ministry of the Word is a ministry to people, not in the mass but as individuals, to be exercised with loving care.

James D. Smart, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 22–23.

technical exegetical skills can be trained to interpret the Bible well. Furthermore, many pastors fear that lay Bible study, especially in small groups, will lead to far-out interpretations and theological chaos in the church.

Pastors also know all too well how complex the task of interpreting and teaching the Bible has become as a result of modern biblical scholarship. Biblical languages, archaeological finds, geography, and textual studies can all enlighten the biblical text. But while enlightening, they vastly complicate the process of interpretation. Though pastors would be hesitant to admit it, they tend to operate on the premise that biblical interpretation should be left to the professionals. Consequently, they work hard on their sermons in order to open the dark and mysterious Scriptures to the ordinary Christian.

The Protestant tradition of Bible translation and of commitment to the ideal of the priesthood of all believers has placed effective Bible teaching on the agenda of the church. Good teaching, in turn, requires training and practice. Teachers can learn by doing and by reflecting on what they have done.

Teacher training should receive a much higher priority in the church than it typically does. With it teachers can learn to master a biblical text in terms of the kind of writing it is, to interpret its meaning, and to show the relevance of the Bible to everyday living. It is time to complete the church's unfinished task.