

## **Knowing What to Teach, and How**

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*Knowing what subject to teach and how to teach it  
can become less of a mystery and more of a ministry.*

### **Introduction**

When I was on staff at Las Canada Presbyterian Church, a group of women said to me, “We want to do a small group Bible study, but we want more than a series of Bible lessons. Frankly, we get bored and turned off by that.”

Since these women were from Hollywood, I agreed that they would need something a little more creative. So I began by asking what was going on in their lives, where they were struggling, how meaningful their prayer lives were, what they were learning about their faith.

From that I got a fix on their needs and their learning style. Together we designed a study on the Book of Psalms that became a turning point for many of the women. Not only did they read and meditate on the Psalms, section by section, they also danced, sang, and wrote their own versions of them. They ended up doing a presentation of the Psalms for some other women in the church. They lived in the Psalms in a way that changed their lives.

Preparing to teach people—and not just a subject—is one of the most challenging aspects of the teaching ministry. Sometimes we hit it right on the mark, like the Psalms study. Sometimes one or more things don’t click, and the class becomes increasingly sparse as the weeks pass, finally ending in a whimper—and this in spite of the fact we’re leaching the vital message known to humankind.

Sometimes the reason for the dismal class is obvious—lack of teacher preparation or competition from other classes offered during the same hour. Other times, we can’t quite figure out what’s going on.

That’s a discouraging experience for class and teacher alike. But it can be avoided, or considerably lessened. I’ve taught on two church staffs and have taught education at seminars and seminary, and I’ve noticed over the years that if a few principles are followed, knowing what to teach and how to teach it becomes less of a mystery and more of a ministry.

### **Prerequisite Attitudes**

Some college classes have prerequisites for students. In the church, I think there are prerequisites for teaching, not just the technical qualifications needed but the attitudes necessary. In particular, I find that I teach better when I keep three goals firmly fixed in my mind:

- 1) *I want to take people seriously.*

I don’t just want to entertain or impress people. This is not show-and-tell time. I want to choose and teach subjects that really matter to people with an eternal destiny.

I think it's terrible stewardship for a class on building Christian relationships to sit around answering the question, "What is your favorite vegetable?" People are dealing with life-and-death issues, and they don't need to sit around talking about their favorite vegetable. I think you can build nurturing relationships as you interact with significant content that challenges and deepens Christian understanding.

This doesn't mean everything has to be deep, somber, and serious. In fact, learning needs to be fun; it should intrigue. But **whatever we do needs to be worthy of people's time.**

2) *I want people to learn and grow as Christians.*

My goal isn't to display my learning, to teach creatively, to convey information, or a host of other things. Instead, I want most of all to see changed lives—obedient Christian disciples in the world.

Many years ago, while teaching a series on Romans, a member of the class said to me, "I love your teaching on Romans. You make it so clear. I really feel like I understand it when I'm with you. I feel dumb when I read it myself at home; I can't make any sense out of it."

She thought she was complimenting me. It was actually a rebuke. She was impressed that I understood Romans. But she didn't. She couldn't read her Bible for herself and make sense out of it.

But I'm not going to be with her when she hits a crisis and needs to know that Romans 8 is God's Word to her, or when she's struggling with the messed up social order and needs to make sense out of the environment and how a Christian deals with that.

So, when I'm done with a class, I measure my effectiveness as a teacher by answering the question: "**Have these people learned a little better how to be disciples of Jesus Christ?**"

3) *I want people to experience authentic Christian community.*

Jesus may call us as individuals but only so that we might join others in the journey of faith. Discipleship is communal, not isolated. We not only need to love one another, we really need each other in order to live the Christian life. It's crucial in my teaching that I help people connect with each other, like the group of women did who studied the Psalms.

After I started keeping these goals in mind, the way I prepared and taught were dramatically transformed. In fact, the rest of the principles I share are built on this tripod foundation. Getting to know the people I'm going to teach is a critical part of this process. But once that is in order, other matters must be attended to as well.

### **Know, Feel, Do**

When I teach a class, I want to affect the whole person, not just the mind but also the heart, and not just the heart and mind but also the will. So as I prepare, I ask myself three questions:

1) *What do I want them to know?*

It never hurts to remind myself of some of the fundamentals of learning—for instance, that we must learn at foundational levels before we can learn at higher levels. We need knowledge before we can apply it; we need to dissect material before we can put it together in a new way.

Too often, in our hurry to get to application, we design courses that assume knowledge that our people don't have. The result is that people are given more than they can handle, and learning doesn't occur. We can also fail if we underestimate what people know.

I know one pastor who taught a class in Galatians, hoping to introduce the class to Paul. By the time the class was over, he realized he had failed to capitalize on his people's knowledge: they already knew Paul; they were ready to grapple with the deeper texture of the book. He had misread the knowledge his people had.

**I also have to make sure that I teach what people need to know, not just what I find interesting.** For example, one fifty-year-old man in a new members class I was teaching told me he didn't know any other prayer except the one his mother taught him as a child: "Now I lay me down to sleep..." He was embarrassed, but he didn't know anything else.

Since there were others like him in the class, I had to resist my urge to talk about prayer at a deeper level. Instead I focused on the fundamentals, answering questions like: What kinds of prayer are there? What is intercession? How do you do it? How do you carve out ten minutes a day? What do you say when you pray? What does the Lord's Prayer mean? What are some patterns of prayer that work for people in the midst of busy lives? How do you pray when you're in the car all day?

**So I can't start teaching until I'm clear about what my people need to know.**

2. *What do I want them to feel?*

Learning is more than assimilating and applying knowledge. I'm teaching people, after all, not programming computers. So I also want to design the class so that it makes a difference in how people feel. This happens in two ways.

First, depending on the topic of the class, **I want the class to feel the emotion the Scripture text conveys.** If we're studying a Psalm of lament, I want them during the class to feel some of that lament. If the passage is about praise, I want them to feel like praising God by the end. If I'm talking about Christian community, I want them to experience at least a little of that by the end of the course. At the most basic level, I want them to "enjoy" God.

Second, **I want people to enjoy the learning experience so that they will continue to want to learn.** If people feel attracted to the subject even after the class, pursuing it on their own through reading or research, I know I've done my job. If they finish the class with a sigh of relief, "I'm glad I'm done with that. I will never study that again!" then I've not engaged their emotions effectively.

3. *What do I want them to do?*

I'm concerned about what people do in the class and outside it. In a class on the spiritual disciplines, for instance, I will not only want people to know what the disciplines are and to be intrigued about practicing them; I also want to help them begin doing them. Knowing that accountability helps with action, I might have individuals pick partners from the class to discuss week by week how they are doing with their Bible reading or prayer.

Whatever the course subject, I want them to practice what Paul in Romans calls "the obedience of faith." I want them to love and obey God more faithfully.

### **Let the Text Shape the Class**

Naturally, the subject will determine how I design a class, but it does that in more ways than one. This is especially true when I'm teaching a class on some book of the Bible.

For example, if I'm going to teach Ephesians 4 through 6, which is about building community, I need to do more than talk about building community. We must experience community in the class in some way. At minimum, that would mean group discussion of the text. It might mean breaking the class into twos or fours or helping people find class prayer partners.

**It's not only vital to teach what the text teaches but also, if possible, how it teaches it.** I'm interested both in the message and in the way the message is communicated. That will be different in the prophets than in Revelation than in the Psalms—very different!

And then within books, different passages will require a different approach. Within the Psalms alone, for instance, we have joy, lament, contrition, despair, and thankfulness. If we're going to be studying a Psalm of contrition, then, part of the learning may involve experiencing pain—maybe I'll ask the class to spend a few moments recalling privately some sin that has burdened them and then leading a silent time of confession.

Approaching the text in this way means I don't have to tie up every lesson in a little package and put a bow on it and say, "Now, go out and do X, Y, and Z." Not every passage is so neatly tied.

In the end, **it's a matter of trusting Scripture for both the message and the medium of the message.**

### **Blocking the Class**

Once I see what I want people to know, feel, and do, I'm ready to block the class: I determine what my time frame is—six weeks, ten weeks, a whole year—and then decide when and how I will mix knowing, feeling, and doing in the class.

For example, if I've got thirteen weeks to teach Romans—a sixteen-chapter book, and a "thick" book at that—I have to figure out when I will slow down and when I will summarize. How will I divide the subject week by week into the time available?

Let's also say that I've decided to address the Jewish-Christian questions raised in chapters 9 through 11. Maybe I think the people I'm teaching have some unhealthy attitudes towards Jews, so I'll want to spend three weeks on this section.

The first week I may simply spend the hour getting people to see the theology of those chapters. The next week we may discuss some contemporary Jewish-Christian issues (Jewish evangelism, the Middle East political situation). The week after that, I may want to help the class experience the sense of awe that Paul felt over God's sovereign dealings with the Jews. With that priority in mind, I will see that I can only cover chapters 1 through 3 in summary fashion, 4–8 more slowly, and 12–16 more quickly.

On the other hand, if I have thirteen weeks to cover the six chapters of Galatians, I may want to block the book so I can spend a whole lesson on a couple of verses in chapter 6, focusing on "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." If I've blocked the book, identifying my priorities for the subject matter, I won't feel I'm spinning my wheels by spending so much time on relatively little material.

**When I block the course, I highlight the concerns I've determined need addressing.** I'm no longer subject to plodding along, trying to cover material in equal chunks, using the same format week after week.

### **Choosing a Teaching Method**

Teachers have a number of tools in the teaching tool chest. Effective planning involves choosing the right tool for the right job.

- *Lecture*

Lecture is a good way to cover large amounts of material (e.g. the major views of the Book of Revelation) or complex issues (e.g. the relationship between New Age teaching and orthodox theology). On the down side, lecture does not demand much of students and so can make them passive.

Still lecturing can be one of the best ways to convey information, especially if information is put together in a way not done before. If someone has put the material I want to cover in a book chapter or article, then I simply get permission to copy and pass out that material. That's a better use of class time. Instead, **if I lecture, I want to integrate themes and topics in a fresh way.**

- *Individual study and reflection*

This can also be a powerful way to handle content, especially if you give people guidance during their study. One pastor I know often begins his Bible studies by asking people to reflect silently on the passage for ten minutes, giving them two or three questions to guide their thinking. Sometimes written outlines can help people stay focused during the time of reflection.

This does a couple of things. First, it shows people that with a little perseverance, they can study the Bible by themselves. Sometimes this guided reflection is the only time people discipline themselves to study the Bible alone.

Second, this “primes the pump” for the discussion that follows. People discover themes and questions in the text that are important to them, things a mini-lecture on the teacher’s part would miss. People are forced to engage the text, but before long it engages them.

- *Group investigation*

This is a way you can make use of material already put together well by others. If I’ve found a great journal article or a Bible dictionary article, I’ll put people into groups and have them read the material. I’ll also give them a question (e.g. “What is the definition of ‘grace’ according to this author?” or “What are the principle ways people deal with personal trauma according to the article?” This not only is a way to deliver content, it also starts building relationships.

- *Group discussion*

Group discussion can occur only after people have been provided with information, either from lecture or group investigation, for instance. In group discussion they respond and work with the information they have.

For example, after discussing the background and interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14, on the role of women in the church, I might have them discuss their reactions to a newspaper clipping about a conservative denomination excommunicating a church for calling a woman as senior pastor.

Naturally, group discussion and group investigation are the heart of most small group Bible studies, where the Bible itself is the “article” under discussion.

- *Breaking into twos or fours*

This is a variation on group discussion. I’ve used this in small groups and when I’ve spoken to a thousand people. I ask people to turn to the person next to them and talk for three to five minutes about something I’ve just taught, say, the problem of evil in Job. The question might be when, if ever, have you felt closest to Job?

It not only wakes people from lecture slumber, it connects them to another person. Also, it requires no trained leadership, whereas breaking up into groups of six or more usually does. Finally, I’ve found few people who are offended by being asked to talk with just one other person if the question is not too personal.

### **What Makes for a Good Question?**

As you can see, most of my methods rely on getting people to talk to one another. And that requires that I ask them questions that will elicit fruitful discussion. As I prepare my class, then, I carefully craft my questions, remembering these characteristics of a good question:

1) *It can be answered by the people asked.*

That means I have to ask questions about things people know. They know, for instance, about their own experience. So:

“When did you first realize that grace was more than just a word?”

is more likely to work than:

“What are the three principle views of the atonement?”

I can ask the latter question only when I’ve given them, through lecture or group investigation, information upon which to base their answer.

It also means **I must take into account the unique experiences of people in the class.** In a class of men and women, many women will be left out of a question like “When did you get your first car?”

3) *It is interesting to everyone in the room.*

Some questions fall flat because they ask for information simplistically (“In John 3:16, how do we know God loved the world?”) or abstractly (“What does it mean to love?”). **An interesting question will touch on a specific concern of most of the people present.**

Recently, I gave a seminar on women in leadership. I knew the women attending were vitally interested in the topic, so a simple question like “Where do you think women most struggle in balancing their multiple roles today?” grabbed their attention.

Some questions, of course, merely set up other questions, so they won’t be interesting in themselves. “What are the three principle views of the atonement?” is not inherently interesting, unless it leads immediately to something like, “What theory do you feel is the most faithful to the biblical text?”

4) *It is clear and simple.*

If you have to define words or phrases in the question, it’s probably not a good one. “In light of John’s eschatology, his view of last things, what would you say is the call of Christians today—what is the thing Christians are to do?” can be clarified considerably: “If according to John, good will win out, what difference can that make in our lives?”

5) *It requires a thoughtful response.*

The question should not have an obvious answer. That not only bores people, it wastes class time. **Better to simply state the answer in a declarative sentence and get to the meaty question;** not “How does God show his love to the world in John 3:16?” but “God shows love by giving what is precious to him. What precious thing are you being called to give this week as an act of love?”

Again, a set-up question may be used quickly, but the following question must demand something of the class. **People should have to draw on their experience or put together diverse themes or integrate the teaching into their lives.** Consequently, questions with yes or no or multiple choice answers are rarely helpful.

6) *It will protect people's dignity.*

A good question doesn't separate people based on their knowledge, as in "Where else in the Bible do we find a discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives?" Right away, Bible novices in the class feel intimidated.

Also, a good question will not embarrass people. Naturally, if I want people to share personally, I may need to ask some questions that will risk that. But if I know my group, I'll have a sense about the limits of a personal question.

For example, when I've studied 2 Corinthians 8, about giving, I've asked, "How nervous do you get when you talk with other people about the way you spend money?" It helps people be a little transparent without asking them to reveal too much.

As you can see, **preparing questions is not something that can be done on the spur of the moment. They make or break most classes** I teach, so I give a good deal of attention to crafting them.

### **Working Together**

I once taught a class on the Book of Revelation, and one part of the class became a task force, which was assigned the challenge of finding art and music that had been based on the Book of Revelation.

By the end of the class, they had gathered enough material to lead the last session. They presented slides showing the great works of Western art and played music of great composers, like Handel, displaying for ear and eye how the new heaven and new earth has been interpreted. It was a magnificent conclusion to the class.

But even more magnificent was what happened to the people, especially those in that task force. They met regularly throughout the course. They dug deep into Revelation, thought hard about John's imagery, and found resources to help them understand John.

They also found one another. They didn't have a relationship before the class started. They were just people who happened to share an interest in the last book of the Bible. By the end of the course they were good friends in Christ.

That to me was the epitome of **what teaching is about: getting people immersed in the Word and in touch with one another.** When I've helped people do that, I know I've prepared well.