

A Community Process for Biblical Learning

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The role of a modern church leader is largely accepted to be that of a 'teacher' working with an '*instruction paradigm*': communicating biblical truth to enable learning from the Bible. This paper explores whether this is a fully biblical understanding of ministry or whether it is better to think in terms of a '*doing paradigm*' in which congregational understanding and behavioural change is the primary concern of a church leader. It will also explore the concurrent role of church communities within this paradigm.

Most church leaders generally tend to work as teachers and instructors of the Bible. We tend to ask, instinctively, if such-and-such a church has 'good teaching'. Our Bible colleges and seminaries largely adhere to this paradigm, thus ensuring that this attitude is propagated within our churches. 'We' preachers are always seeking to improve the quality of our instruction. Success is measured by the quantity and quality of our resources for communication. Learning becomes teacher-centred and controlled as 'knowledge' comes from the preacher. Learning in the congregation can become individualistic and even competitive.

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This 'instruction paradigm' is further revealed if we examine how church leaders typically structure church activities and how we evaluate the success of such activities. The aim tends to be to deliver sound instruction, transferring knowledge to individuals in our congregations. Church leaders offer courses, sermon series and teaching primarily (if not completely) through sermons and talks. The congregation acts almost independently of the 'teacher' as individuals listen to a sermon and take away information in order to digest it. The time of teaching each Sunday is constant, even if the actual learning that occurs during this time varies dramatically from person to person. This 'instructional paradigm' does not mean there is no emphasis on the application of what has been communicated from the preacher, and the need for changed lives. However this model does strongly encourage an evaluation of 'learning' on an intellectual level with an emphasis on people being able to give the 'correct answers' in a Bible study or discussion. It could be said that a 'successful' programme need not depend on changed lives. A ministry can appear largely successful even if people are not changing.

Questions surely arise: are we to be primarily focused on teaching the word of God through this 'instructional paradigm' and is this a biblical understanding of ministry?

Hearing, learning and doing

It does not take much of a look at the Bible to discover that intellectual assent to truths taught (or 'hearing the word') is not enough to constitute

biblical learning. Jesus consistently warns against those who listen but do not obey what they have heard, and conversely commends those who listen and obey (cf. Matt 5:19; 7:24; John 13:17). In Matthew 23:1-3 he describes the Pharisees and teachers of the law as hypocrites, those who teach, but do not do what they teach. Other New Testament writers are equally adamant that real knowledge and true understanding of the truth lead to action. John in his first letter repeatedly reiterates that truly to know God is to obey him and thus love your brother (1 John 2:3-5, 9-11). James calls it self-deception to listen but not to act upon what you have heard. Indeed, *knowing* what is good without *doing* it is sin (James 1:22; 4:17). God's concern for his people is that they become like Jesus; that their lives would authentically link what they are taught and what they do (cf. Romans 12:2).

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If this is the case then it is surely not enough to focus our ministries on the instruction of the truth. To do this is to focus on only one half of the story, and tie ourselves to ways that may communicate truth, but do not effectively teach so that people learn *and* do. Jesus is concerned about his disciples, his learners, and so should we be. Instead of an 'instruction or teaching paradigm' perhaps we need a 'learning paradigm'. Instead of our programmes being teacher-centred and controlled they should become congregation-centred. Success should hence be measured not in terms of resources or speakers but in the quality of people in our churches.

Duane Elmer, Aldeen Professor of International Studies at Trinity Theological Seminary, argues that learning pursued in biblical terms has five distinct steps:¹

1. Recall. This is the cognitive element of learning. The result of understanding information and theories in this sense is that one can repeat and explain what one has 'learned'. Although this is not the whole story it is a vital aspect of learning. As evangelicals it is the understanding of the truth as communicated in the Bible. It is thus the anchor of everything that follows. Without it we would not be obeying the God's word, but something else altogether. It is the remembering part of James 1.

2. Appreciation. This step is the valuing of the information that one has received. It is the recognition that what has been communicated is important and worth understanding. It is the positive attitude to what is being learned. As facilitators of learning it is essential that we create a positive reaction in the people we are working with, for without it they will never progress to the later stages, as they will see no reason to. There are various ways to create this appreciation. For instance it may simply be on the level of being interesting when communicating. More deeply, it will involve getting to know the person better so that our communication connects with their situation. Making Bible learning a community process can be one way in which this can happen.

3. Speculation. This could be termed the 'so-what stage'. It is where the learner, having cognitively understood what has been said, and gripped enough to want to think more about it, starts to ask what difference it will make to life. It is the issue of 'ought': 'what ought I to do as a result of this information?'

4. Application. Up to this point everything has still been in the mind and none of it has transferred into life. Now, however, knowledge becomes

¹ Talks by Duane Elmer and Ralph Enlow on learning can be found at www.euroleadershipresources.org/resource.

action and the 'seamless life' that was mentioned earlier begins to occur. Here what was thought about in the last point is put into practice. But as Elmer points out an essential part of the process is the Christian community to give encouragement, challenge, support and prayer.

5. Resolution. This is the final stage when action becomes habit or integrated into the life of the Christian. This is where things have become truly seamless. It is where we can say 'I do consistently' or 'I do well'. This is the end to which Christian education works; a life of obedience, where character has been transformed where there is integrity and the Christian is truly 'wise'.

There is one problem, not yet examined, that must be taken into account when discussing Christian education: sin. Due to our rejection of God, our whole body and mind has been corrupted. Our rebellious hearts, determined to live for self, affect how we view the world, including the truth presented by God. Paul makes this clear in Romans 1. People have 'suppressed the truth by their wickedness' (1:18) and our minds have been given over to depraved things since we did not consider it worth retaining the knowledge of God (1:28). We twist truth to serve ourselves. Even atheists have realised this:

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown. To explain how a philosopher's most remote metaphysical assertions have actually been arrived at, it is always well (and wise) to ask oneself first: what morality does this (does he -) aim at? I accordingly do not believe a 'drive to knowledge' to be the father of philosophy, but that another drive has, here as elsewhere, only employed knowledge (and false knowledge!) as a tool.²

Thus we must be ever aware when reading the Bible that we can interpret it to our own ends. Our sin will be an ever-present influence on us. We are not moral beings who only need to understand the truth cognitively to be changed. We are corrupted self-idolaters. How does Bible learning as a community process fit into all of this? Bible learning as a community process best aids people to be doers of the word and not simply hearers of it. One of the key aspects of being a learning community is that it must be a community committed to obedience. If sin is the main hermeneutical obstacle, then mutual accountability for obedience is essential to understanding. If it is not then the Bible will not be the guiding rule and Christ-likeness will not be the end result. The Anabaptists understood this point well. They rejected the scholasticism of the Reformation and the clergy-laity division in favour of hermeneutic activity taking place within the local faith community. It was a process of discussion and consensus.³ The Bible, primarily Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, was central to their understanding,⁴ interpretations were to be tested by the faith community,⁵ but perfected in obedience.⁶ Without this, and the work of the Holy Spirit to illuminate, Bible learning is impossible.

Bible learning as a community process

With this guiding rule in mind, let us now turn to the benefits of Bible learning as a community. First, learning as a community takes the focus off

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cited in Stephen Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity* (CUP, 1995), 9.

³ Bradley G. Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community: The Congregational Hermeneutics of the Mennonites,' (1997, www.eric.ed.gov), 4.

⁴ Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 13.

⁵ Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 10.

⁶ Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 4.

the teacher and on to the people. It is a process that people do together. This helps with step two of Elmer's process of learning: appreciation. If people are involved in the process of learning in more than a passive hearing mode then they are more likely to engage with it and see its value. They will themselves feel valued and important, not merely as people to be talked at but as vital to the task of understanding as they bring their own knowledge and experiences to the table. This is not to relativise learning since step one is still to understand biblical truth cognitively. Also obedience to God is still key. Thus experience and prior knowledge is to be held accountable to God's word. However learning as a community helps as people bring different experiences that may benefit understanding a passage and its implications. Their experience likewise can help in step three, speculation, where we examine what God's word is challenging to do. They may have experience that has seen it applied before, or may be able to see with greater clarity areas of our lives that need changing.

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We find another benefit when we come to the application stage of learning. To be able to implement what we have been challenged by and resolved to change we need a group of people around us who can support through prayer, challenge and encouragement. If they have been part of the process that has led to this application then the support they give can be even greater. In addition interpreting the word together is vital if the church is to move forward as a community and apply God's word not simply to the individual's life, but to the life of the church family itself. This certainly is the way Paul writes to the churches: they are to apply the word as a community to their life as a community. It is that life, a community united in Christ (Ephesians 3:6), doing the good works that he prepared for them to do in obedience (2:10) that brings glory to God as his wisdom is displayed (3:10). Going through the process of understanding and working out the implications together will only strengthen the resolve of the whole church community to implement those decisions.

One of the most important aspect that learning as a community brings is that of being a check and balance to the influences of sin. If we are in a community that not only meets once a week to look at the Bible, but a community that really know each other, we will begin to see in each other areas of weakness, where we are most prone to self-justification. Then as we present our interpretations of Scripture the community can weigh these carefully, as the Mennonites argued should happen,⁷ and sin can be rooted out. It must also be noted here that churches as well as individuals can misinterpret God's word. In this situation larger collections of churches can act as a check and balance for each other.⁸

Putting it into practice

Having looked briefly at the benefits of such an approach we must now turn to ask what this looks like in practise. Since the emphasis is no longer on teaching *per se*, but on learning, the method of communication and learning may vary from church to church. Some groups will need to use more visual methods, others will choose to use monologues, still others discussion groups, and others a mixture of other forms of communication. The group, their ability to learn and their cultural learning methods will change the way one teaches. As a result methodologies need to be worked

⁷ Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 10.

⁸ Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 11-12.

out in each context. Having said this, it can be helpful to look at the ways that some groups have done this as working examples.

The Anabaptists⁹ emphasised the community hermeneutic. They taught the Bible to each other and then talked over the implications with each other. Spitelmaier in 1527 wrote about this process: ‘When they have come together they teach one another the divine word and one asks the other: how do you understand this? Thus there is a diligent living among them according to the divine word.’¹⁰ For them the role of the Spirit is essential. It is the Spirit who guides individuals. Today they continue this teaching. Article Four of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective reads: ‘We seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the Church.’¹¹ For them the Spirit’s role and the church are inseparable. Illumination, interpretation, discernment and understanding all take place within the church.

At The Crowded House in Sheffield this desire for the community to understand the Scriptures together and applying them as a community is important. A number of congregations have a weekly teachers meeting. The Crowded House Sharrow Vale, Hunters Bar and Broomspring hold a joint one each Wednesday evening and The Crowded House Abbey hold one on a Wednesday lunch-time.

The teachers meeting for The Crowded House Sharrow and Crookes takes place for one hour from 9-10pm. At the moment this is preceded by a mini-hermeneutics class for half an hour from 8.30pm. The meeting generally starts with a prayer and then they read the passage together. People have read through it before and come prepared with what they think the teaching goal of the passage is. They discuss this and look at what the big message of the passage is. They then talk about application with specific reference to people and situations in the congregation. They have found that ideas come by working things through ‘out loud’.

The Crowded House Abbey’s teachers meeting takes place at lunch time every Wednesday ten days before the passage will be taught. Again it is strictly one hour long and for this meeting people deliberately come unprepared. The reason is to model good hermeneutics. The leader takes them through the process he would go through in preparation, simply asking out loud the question he would ask himself were he working on his own. In this way they work through the following framework:

1. What does the text say?
2. Why does it say it here and in this way?
3. So what does it say to us?
4. How does it address our hearts?

Also, if there is time, some discussion will be given to how it might be taught, e.g. through monologue or interaction.

Here it seems appropriate to talk about the difficulties in implementing learning as a community process. First, there is less control for the leaders. When things are opened up for discussion more ideas may be put forward. In an age where there are many more ‘voices’ that influence us, those voices will inevitably find their way into the church. Perhaps moving a community towards learning together is a process that takes time, as people increasingly submit themselves to Christ and thus become willing to have those ‘voices’ silenced as they seek to live in obedience to Christ. We will also need to cultivate a culture where false ideas are challenged. There is a danger of ‘niceness’ in England which makes it very hard to contradict someone in this way. However if we are about true Bible learning then we

⁹ Information on the Mennonites is from Bradley G. Siebert, ‘Tested in the Faith Community: The Congregational Hermeneutics of the Mennonites,’ (1997, www.eric.ed.gov). See also www.anabaptistnetwork.com.

¹⁰ Siebert, ‘Tested in the Faith Community’, 16.

¹¹ Siebert, ‘Tested in the Faith Community’, 10.

need to be willing to do this. In a community marked by grace this should be possible.

Preparation on the part of the leader may well inhibit the community effectively discussing things if the leader is seen to 'have all the answers'. Perhaps we need to let go of some of the preparation in order to have a more open discussion.

It is clear that to implement such a strategy, to create communities as 'discourse communities of faith',¹² we need to change our whole view on teaching. We need to move from an 'instruction paradigm' to a 'learning paradigm'. Our teachers need to become facilitators of learning, encouraging people in our congregations to discover knowledge, to take it to the next level of engagement and apply it so that obedience takes root in our lives. We will need to use our imaginations as we look at how our congregation learns best. We must avoid evaluating our ministries along the lines that others do and instead rejoice at witnessing changed lives. If we want to see people become like Jesus and glorify God we need to desire learners and doers of the word.

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¹² Siebert, 'Tested in the Faith Community', 3.