

Reflections from Wilhoit & Ryken's *Effective Bible Teaching*

1. I must spend sufficient time on, and be effective in, the planning stage. I could be a highly effective communicator but still fail as a Bible teacher because of problems in the strategy / planning stage [21-22]. Part of this preparation is thorough study of the biblical text: "Personal ownership of what one teaches is the minimum requirement for effective Bible teaching" [27]. Therefore, I should not rely on curriculum writers, for they sometimes miss the point and I must be able to discern that problem when it occurs [28]. I also have been considering this issue with regard to the Gronlund book, *Writing Instructional Objectives for Teaching and Assessment*. This principle really is the guiding one for the rest of the things I thought were important.

2. I must learn the tools of good Bible teaching.

The tools of textual analysis are within reach of anyone committed to understanding them [34]. I must learn to consider the Bible as literature [35], and teach the passage in terms of the type of writing it exhibits [23]. I must identify the central idea of the passage, the thought that unifies the passage, instead of focusing on facts and ideas not coherently leading to a theme [23]. I must be careful not to paraphrase, allegorize, look for meaning in each line instead of in the passage as a whole, rely on parallel passages, and revert to erroneous typology [27]. "It is impossible to teach the Bible well without interpreting it" [36], but the principles of interpretation "can be mastered by any lay person who possesses the desire and gifts to teach" [36-37].

I would like to see more emphasis on this kind of teacher training within the local church. "But seldom do ministers provide their congregations or even their Sunday school teachers with a method for reading, studying, and teaching the Bible" [38]. "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" [39].

If I do not communicate clearly, "Learners may have to concentrate so much on following what is being said that they will have little opportunity to reflect on what they hear" [46]. I should make use of strategic pauses and visual aids [47]. Regarding the latter, "It is impossible to overstate the need for a teacher to put the main concepts of a lesson in written and visual form" [56]. I could use slides for illustrative graphics, key phrases, etc. [47]. Given my personality, I was pleased to read that, "...challenging and controversial teachers are some of the best at fostering active learning" [48]. I can challenge their complacent faith and help them construct a real faith. Effective methods include case studies and allowing controversy to arise in discussion [48].

3. I should allow stories to affect the imagination and emotions.

While I must be able to bring the text relevance, to draw from it life-changing concepts [28], I should give weight to the rich humanity and everyday realism of the stories, not simply reduce it to religious platitudes [30]. "In keeping with the kind of book the Bible is, teaching can be significantly strengthened by more reliance on the imagination" [35]. "Bible teaching needs to do justice to the experiential and literary nature of the Bible itself" [36]. "The content of the Bible is much closer to the lived experience than many theological treatments of it would suggest [36]." The relevance of this is that "Good biblical interpretation must ask and answer two questions – what a passage meant to the original audience and what it means to us today" [32]. I must allow the students to see into the lives of the biblical characters and then provide sufficient application to the student's life [33]. It is a mistake to do only one of these. "Bridging the gap between our own world and the world of the bible requires that we make a two-way

journey. We begin by traveling from our own time and place to the ancient world of the Bible. Then we take a return trip to our own experience of life. Two questions govern our interpretation of a biblical text: What did it mean then? What does it mean now?" [96]. "The imagination enables us to identify with things beyond ourselves... The imagination is also our image-making and image-perceiving capacity," so it complements the analytical intellect and I should be sure to engage it in the students. "Reconstructing such practices prevalent in the world portrayed in a biblical text is not optional; it is the necessary first step in understanding and teaching a passage from the Bible" [99].

4. I should endeavor to illuminate the Bible's stories for my students.

I know I need to get more visual in my presentations. "We can make the nature psalms come alive with slides from our family vacations. Visual images come in various forms. One is simply physical objects that a teacher takes to class. Slides are also especially effective... one can use words to create imagined scenes... Maps are always a relevant source with such passages. Relating geographical facts from the ancient world to familiar distances, population figures, and so forth is likewise effective" [100-101]. In light of the discussion in my previous point, it is important for me to consider that, "The Bible contains far more appeals to the imagination (image-perceiving capacity) than we are usually aware. All we need to do is be active in picturing the details and following the cues laid down by the biblical text" [101]. "The world of the Bible will cease to seem strange and remote if we can relate it to things in our own world" [102].

Another way to illuminate the text is to "translate" it for the students. "One kind of translation occurs when we state the details of the biblical text in our own language." e.g. "Elijah suffered a severe case of burnout... Once we start to name things in our idiom, they come alive for us. Without such translation, the world of the bible remains remote from us. A second type of translation is to find modern counterparts for details in the Bible... A third type of translation is to identify the recognizable human experience in a biblical text" [102-103]. Examples might be physical experiences, emotional experiences ["emotions portrayed and implied in the Bible are one of the most consistent points of contact between it and us"], moral experiences ["The circumstances surrounding the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were unique, but the moral experience of lying and thinking we can get by with it is universally human"], spiritual experiences [delight in worshipping, feeling awe of God], psychological experiences [inferred], relational experiences [103-105]. We also bridge the gap with application [106]. "To sum up, the effective Bible teacher finds ways to relate the Bible to everyday life, making it in the process both accessible and relevant. The connections between those two worlds extend far beyond ideas. A wealth of human experiences and literary parallels also bind the Bible and our own lives together" [106].

5. I need to be tightly focused on the main topic.

It is a mistake to try to accomplish too much in one lesson; instead, I should teach one thing thoroughly, and not include many unrelated ideas [31-32]. The lesson must have a point, and have unity, coherence, and emphasis, to produce clarity of thought, a goal in view [35]. "The reason many Bible lessons lack impact is that they do not have a single focus around which the lesson is built" [81]. I should streamline the material, even if it involves leaving stuff out. I should bring up the most important ideas and make them clear [46-47]. I should not overwhelm the students by bombarding them with facts, jumping to cross references too quickly, and using undefined theological terms [30]. I should be redundant: tell them what I will teach, teach it, and then summarize it [47]. I should be "...realistic in [my] expectations of what a class can accomplish. It is impossible to do more than one or two things thoroughly in an hour" [49]. "Students learn better if they do not feel rushed. One of the commonest failings of teachers is trying to cover too much territory in a given lesson" [55]. I should plan on leaving secondary material for last [56].

6. What I should focus on is the unifying theme of a passage.

“Educational research has shown that before people can grasp specific details they need a general framework to which they can relate the specific pieces of data” [109]. “Along with not knowing how to come to grips with a biblical passage, the biggest cause for failure in Bible teaching is lack of focus... in order to be unified, a sermon or Bible study needs a thesis – a statement of what the passage is about and what it asserts regarding that subject” [50]. I should write down a statement of the topic and theme for the passage and then shape the lesson around them [50]. “Everything in an essay relates in some way to the central idea,” so I should look for the topic and theme [83]. I should shape the entire lesson around that combination of topic and theme [84]. “It is not enough to simply choose a single passage for a Bible study. We also need a thesis for the passage and the lesson... If a teacher has not wrestled with the concepts in a chapter of the Bible and come up with a unified statement, the class will not understand that the passage has unity” [84].

“The methodology for arriving at a statement of theme is twofold. First we need to determine what the passage is about... The second step in formulating a statement of theme is to determine what the writer says about the unifying subject or human experience” [110]. “A good statement of topic and theme must provide a single focus for a passage, be brief enough to be manageable, be based on accurate analysis of the passage, cover the entire passage, and steer a middle course between undue generality (thereby ignoring the specificity of a passage) and excessive specificity (thereby limiting universality of application” [92]. I can choose a specific direction for the purposes of a specific meeting, for there are often more than one useful statement of topic and theme for a given passage [90, 110], and they can be taken in different directions [92]. I also need to keep in mind that there is “a creative tension between the need to keep a Bible study tied to an overriding framework and the need to get close to the specifics of the text” [86]. If a passage deals with several things, “it is helpful to break it into constituent parts under the format of theme and variation. The individual parts are variations on the main theme” [87].

7. In focusing lessons, I must attend to both thematic and structural unity.

“The unity of a biblical passage consists of two distinct elements. One is thematic or conceptual unity, the idea that governs the passage. The other is structural unity, the unified progression by which a passage unfolds and forms a coherent whole” [109]. Narratives “do not state ideas but instead tell us what characters in a given setting did. We then have to move from story to meaning, from event to theme” [112]. “The best starting place is to identify the human experience that a story presents... With this as the unifying focus of the story, we can begin to formulate subordinate generalizations” [113]. “A second type of unity that is important in a biblical passage is structural unity... We must also be able to show how the passage is actually unified by that idea in its successive parts.” This requires coherence, “the way in which parts relate to each other, especially how one thing leads to the next,” and “the whole-part relationship in which parts relate to an overriding framework” [114]. “The framework of theme and variation [individual elaboration points] imposes a double obligation on the interpreter. One is to discern a principle that is big enough to cover the entire passage or poem. The second is to show how every individual item in the passage relates to the overriding theme” [115].

Poems “are more likely to be images or feelings than ideas, with the result that we must pay attention to the logic of the images and feelings as we divide a poem into its units” [117]. “The unifying subject of all lament psalms is the poet’s response to the crisis. The unifying theme is that God can be trusted to help those in need” [117]. It is helpful to note that, “...most poems are built on a three-part structure consisting of an introduction to the subject, elaboration of that subject, and a final note of resolution or closure... A second principle that organizes most poems is contrast. In fact, a poem might be built around more than one contrast... Finally, many biblical poems use the catalogue or list as the main structural principle... The basis for separating material into a unity might be one of three things – idea, image, or feeling” [119].

With regard to narrative, I should remember that “Narrative or story is emphatically not structured on the principle of theme and variation, though much Bible teaching and preaching tries to force it into such a mold... The most universal organizing principle of narrative is plot conflict... A second important principle is that stories unfold as a sequence of episodes or scenes...[I should] divide it into its constituent episodes or scenes... A further thing to note about the sequence of episodes is that they unfold according to a principle of cause and effect... it is always relevant to show how an event in a story produces the next one, or how it is influenced by what has preceded” [119-120]. “Many stories are organized around a central literary pattern. Usually such a pattern is an archetype – a recurrent story pattern in literature. The most common ones are the quest, the journey, the death-rebirth motif, the initiation, tragedy... the happy ending, crime and punishment, the temptation, and the rescue. The importance of identifying such patterns is that they allow us to see the story as a whole, not simply as a series of events that follow each other” [120-121].

8. We need to reassess how we assess Bible teachers.

Rather than rely on popularity or charisma [73], “We should judge Bible teachers by their success in terms of how much their students learn and apply from the Bible” [42]. However, “No teacher can make students learn... teachers can never do for students what they are unwilling to do for themselves” [44-45]. What the teacher can do is provide the right environment and provocation/motivation to engage the students. “Active learning describes educational experiences that engage students and prompt them to wrestle with information, test its validity, find ways of using what is learned, and relate or adapt it to previously learned material.” [43]. “Unless people are excited to learn something, their learning will be superficial and short-lived... effective teachers do things that motivate students to learn” [43]. “Teachers can motivate students by showing that goals are attainable... Teachers can also motivate students through affirmation... Teachers who do a good job of motivation also convey the impression that they believe what they are teaching is of momentous importance. They communicate this belief nonverbally by preparing well and by showing excitement for the material... Teachers can communicate their love for the subject by telling students how much they enjoy it, or how it affects their lives” [43-44]

We should take time to sell the students on the importance of the material, showing them how it is meaningful [44]. The initial class enthusiasm will not be sustained, but the teacher can influence whether it turns into mundane weariness or matures into a sense of accomplishment [76]. With regard to class enthusiasm, “One of the most important principles to note is that unduly long courses or units are self-defeating. We live in a day of short attention spans. People expect their experiences to be organized into relatively small segments. In general, the topics of Bible studies and Sunday school units should be organized into units of eight to twelve weeks” [76]. “The teacher’s first task is to engender romance and exploration. This is the stage of grand introduction – the first vision of how vital and challenging the subject under consideration is... The next task of the teacher is the need for precision. This includes coming to grips with the facts of the subject being studied... The final phase of learning a subject is the stage of generalization. Having mastered the data, students can now ‘put it all together’ and supply overriding frameworks for the individual details” [77].

Besides being good at motivating and engaging students, teachers need adequate knowledge [“polished teaching techniques can never compensate for lack of content”; 67], enthusiasm [infectious love for the subject], engagement of the students [draw them into active learning], empathy, and challenge [to question and improve their spiritual walks, to be life-changing] [67-68]. Good teachers have a passion for people, a passion for the truth, a passion for study and learning [“Anyone who lacks the commitment to study should not teach”; 69-70], a passion to share what he has learned, a passion for practical application, and a passion for God [“The goal of Bible teaching is more than the inculcation of a set of doctrines or moral principles. It is to facilitate the student’s relationship to God”; 71] [69-71].

“Effective teaching comes in many different formats... Good teaching adapts itself to many variables. The size of the class, the nature of the room, the degree of interest that students bring to the class, the age and life experiences of students, and the applicability of the subject matter all influence the teaching format that good teachers use” [74].

9. I should consider the ministry aspects of teaching.

“Bible teaching is ministering to people, liberating them from their inadequate concepts of God, expanding their notion of what it means to live faithfully before God, helping them cast aside old self-defeating habits and replace them with habits of holiness... The transformational goal of Bible teaching requires an atmosphere permeated by love, acceptance, vulnerability, and genuine caring” [51]. I must show how God’s grace has worked in my own life, making it personal and real for them [52]. After preparing the content, I should think about what I can share from my own life regarding the subject. This will help them learn and help them bond with me. [53] I must make myself vulnerable, use humor, and involve them [encouraging ownership of the process] to create a positive environment [54]. This also includes responding positively to student disclosures, taking advantage of teaching moments, and building relationships [54-55]. “Teachers, not printed curriculum materials, fine-tuned programs, or media extravaganzas, are the backbone of any good Christian education program” [60]. What I need to keep in mind is the ministry component, that I am not just teaching but also providing pastoral care. “The ideal that guides Christian teachers is to provide students with words that heal and restore” [61]. “To view the teacher as the very spokesperson of God implies that God delights to work through people. Scripture and the sacraments have a powerful effect on lives, but often people are the means by which God’s healing and restoring grace reaches human lives” [61]. “Teachers can speak to the life situation of a student with words of grace in a way that books and mass media ministries rarely do” [62]. “If teachers believe in what they are teaching, of course they want to be emulated by their students. The desire to influence students is basic to teaching” [63]. Thus, the responsibility of the Bible teacher is “momentous” [(see James 3:1); 64]. “Teachers, moreover, need to be convinced that often their teaching of the Word of God is the most caring and compassionate thing they can do” [64]. Two key attributes of a successful teacher are interpersonal rapport and intellectual substance. “Good teachers engender a warm, supportive class atmosphere and have the ability to communicate mastery of a subject in a stimulating way” [65-66].

10. I must be careful about context and interpretation.

I must keep in mind that, “...meaning is usually derived from literary wholes – whole books, whole chapters, whole paragraphs, whole stories, whole poems. This is especially true for distinctly literary forms such as stories and poems... Often an individual statement in a passage, or an individual event in a story, will be nearly meaningless by itself. It may even assert something different from what the whole passage does. The most frequent violation of this principle is a distressingly common practice of trying to get a separate theme out of every verse in a passage... The procedure of moralizing about individual verses breaks a passage into a series of fragments without a unifying focus” [133]. In light of this, I should “... base interpretations of a passage on details that are relevant to the main concern of the passage, not on peripheral ‘stage props’ in the passage” [135]. I also “... must make a distinction between what the bible records and what it approves” [136], and “... pay attention to the writer’s implied or stated pattern of approval and disapproval... The truth is that the characters of the Bible, including the godly ones, are frequently portrayed as doing the wrong thing” [137].

[I read the rest of the book, about inductive studies, teaching inductive studies, and the characteristics of the Bible, but anything the last section provided is covered herein already, and the other two sections mostly provided material I had read previously in other books.]