

**Introduction:**

For three semesters of my college career, I was an education major, studying to be a high school teacher. One of the interesting things to study were the many different theories about how to teach and the best methods of teaching. Every generation of teachers seems to come up with new methods. The same seems to hold true for teaching in the church. Take a look at how different our Bible classes are today from the ones many of our adult members experienced as children. Gone are the days of bare walls and a chalkboard as the teacher lectures and kids regurgitate memorized answers. Now we have decorative visual aids, props, activities, discussions, etc. Theories change. Methods shift. It happens everywhere. This sometimes gives us pause. We get concerned, are these shifting methods taking us away from the Bible pattern? These thoughts have caused me to step back and take a look at the Biblical pattern for teaching. What would a class on teaching theory and methods look like if God were teaching it? What would it be like if we were at school with God? If God were sharing with us the methods he used to teach, what would He share? Of course, we don't actually have to attend a teaching methods seminar hosted by God, we can actually just take a look at Scripture to see the methods He employed either directly, through Jesus or through His prophets and apostles. What I realised is that, personally, God's teaching methods were in the background. They were the white noise of the Bible. That is, in my haste to simply uncover what was taught, I often overlooked the method God used to teach. To be honest, this has been quite a surprising study for me. Examine some of these methods and then note some applications for us today.

**Discussion:**

I. God's teaching methods.

- A. *Preaching*: Perhaps our most common method of teaching today is lecturing, sermonizing, what the Bible refers to as preaching. This method of teaching is one person teaching for a length of time while others simply listen. Jesus taught by preaching in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**). Peter taught by preaching in **Acts 2** and **3**.
- B. *Debate*: Jesus debated with others in order to teach them. Consider **Matthew 19:1-12**, Jesus debated with both the Pharisees and His disciples about the teaching on marriage and divorce. He allowed a give and take, back and forth, response and counter-response.
- C. *Discussion*: In **Acts 15**, instead of simply providing a new revelation about the issue of Gentiles and circumcision, God allowed the church in Jerusalem to discuss (we could also use the word "debate" here) the issue of circumcision. Instead of God directly intervening and simply stating the answer, he let the students, if you will, discuss and debate the issues to arrive at the truth.
- D. *Questions*: Jesus used questions in at least three ways to teach others.
  - 1. *Asked questions*: Instead of just telling people what to believe, Jesus sometimes asked questions to challenge folks to work out answers for themselves. We see this in **Matthew 16:13, 15**, when Jesus asked the apostles who men thought He was and who they thought He was. **Luke 14:3** is another example when Jesus asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not.
  - 2. *Answered questions*: Jesus allowed others to ask Him questions and He would answer them. We see a good example of this in **Luke 20:22**, when the Pharisees and Sadducees asked about paying taxes to Caesar and then in **Luke 20:28-33**, when the Sadducees asked Jesus about marriage in the resurrection.
  - 3. *Turned questions back on the asker*. Sometimes Jesus took a question and turned it back on the one who was asking, forcing the asker to think it through and learn on his own. Jesus did this to the Lawyer who asked what was the greatest law in **Luke 10:25-26**.
- E. *Stories*: When God wanted David to learn about his sin with Bathsheba, Nathan told him a story about a man and sheep (**II Samuel 12:1-7**). Jesus was a master of using stories to teach lessons. He told stories about farmers (**Matthew 13:3-8**), weeds (**Matthew 13:24-30**), mustard seeds (**Matthew 13:31-33**), swinekeepers (**Luke 15:11-32**), women with lost coins (**Luke 15:8-10**), shepherds and sheep (**Luke 15:4-7**), even an unjust steward (**Luke 16:1-13**). Sometimes the scripture records explanations of these stories in spiritual terms, sometimes He just left it up to the hearers to figure it out.

- F. *Contrasts with error*: I know in the past, I have spoken out against having classes that discussed differing doctrines. I have said if we just teach what is in the Bible, folks will learn how to overcome error. While there is some truth to that, I have had to admit Jesus Himself sometimes declared the errors of others in order to show what was the truth. He did so several times in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "You have heard it said...but I say to you" (**Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44**). It is appropriate to explain what others teach in order to refute it and teach others to refute it.
- G. *Anticipating hypotheticals*: Similar to the contrasts with error, God taught by anticipating what someone might say as a conclusion or objection to a teaching and then responded to that hypothetical situation. Paul used this method of teaching multiple times in his letter to the Romans. In **Romans 6:1**, he anticipated someone objecting, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (ESV). Then he dealt with that anticipated objection. He did this in **Romans 9:6**. Paul knew that some of the Jews would claim the word of God had failed if He saved some who weren't Jews and allowed some Jews to be lost. The rest of the chapter is dealing with that anticipated objection. Then again in **Romans 9:14**, when he anticipated that some would say, "Is there injustice on God's part?" (ESV).
- H. *Shocking statements and actions*: We don't like to be shocked. We certainly don't like shocking things done in sermons or Bible classes. Yet, God was the master of the shocking. Jesus often used shocking statements. In **Matthew 5:29-30**, He taught people to pluck out their eyes and cut off their hands. In **John 6:53**, He taught people to participate in cannibalism eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Yes, I know the figurative nature of these statements. But we must understand Jesus was trying to shock people. Today, people would decry this as distracting to the message, but for Jesus it was the message. For those who had ears to hear, it wasn't distracting, it was, in fact, focusing because they were forced to figure out what He really meant. Consider shocking actions. In **John 13**, Jesus shocked the disciples so badly that Peter had to be rebuked when he refused to comply with Jesus' demonstration of washing the disciples' feet.
- I. *Songs*: In **Deuteronomy 32**, God gave Moses a song to teach Israel to sing to one another. This song taught about the nature of God and also about what would happen to Israel if they turned from God. Many of the Psalms were teaching songs. As the Jews sang the psalms they were teaching numerous principles. Obviously singing is a method of teaching because Paul says so in **Ephesians 5:19**.
- J. *Let them make their own mistakes*: I think this is perhaps the most difficult for me to grasp. I have a tendency to want to spoon feed someone all the right answers and immediately squash any statement or action I think is wrong. But Jesus sometimes allowed His disciples to learn by letting them make their own mistakes. He allowed Peter to get out of the boat and sink in **Matthew 14:28-31**. Or even more amazing was Jesus allowing Peter to deny Him three times in **Matthew 26:69-75** and then using it to teach Peter in **John 21:15-19**. I know why this concerns me. Because when Jesus let Judas do this, Judas didn't learn. I fear that some people won't learn from their mistakes so I try to keep them from making them. Jesus allowed folks to make their mistakes at times and then left it up to them to learn or not. As teachers, what we have to learn is we can never control what anyone else is ever going to believe or practice.
- K. *Discipline*: In **Acts 5:1-11**, God used discipline to teach the congregation about fearing Him and obeying Him. He did not concern Himself with who might be upset by it. He simply used the discipline to teach the lessons.
- L. *Mentoring*: The entirety of the Gospel accounts of **Matthew, Mark, Luke** and **John** is one big example of mentoring. Jesus established relationships with His apostles that He had with no one else. The whole purpose was to train and mentor them up to be leaders. He devoted special attention to certain people so they could carry on His work.
- M. *Props and Visual aids*: Many today get upset with visual aids, especially if they are props. We've gotten used to marker boards, overheads and even date projectors, but move beyond that and actually use a prop and that bothers us. However, God used visual aids and especially props all the time. Consider Jesus in **Matthew 22:19**, when Jesus made them produce a coin to look at to make His point about taxes and being devoted to God. In **Matthew 18:1-6**, Jesus used a child as a visual aid in teaching humility and childlike faith. In **Matthew 14:20**, when Jesus fed

the 5000 He left each of the apostles with a basket of leftovers, a visual reminder of God's power to provide for His people.

- N. *Demonstrations*: On the night Jesus was betrayed, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them (**Luke 22:24**). In response to this bickering, Jesus wanted to teach His disciples about humility and service. Did He simply lecture them? Did He just allow a class discussion? No. When we harmonize the Gospels, we recognize Jesus gave them a demonstration of a specific kind of service. In **John 13:4-5**, Jesus girded Himself with a towel and washed their feet. Then in **John 13:12-16**, Jesus stated that this demonstration was meant to be a teaching experience. They were supposed to learn something from it. This was more than just providing His life as an example. This was a specific moment of teaching a principle.
- O. *Learning Activities*: Jesus sometimes pushed His disciples into activities from which they were supposed to learn through their own experience. For instance, the limited commission of **Luke 10:1-20**. Jesus sent the disciples out on an evangelistic mission in order to teach them to rely on God and to prepare them for the real commission He had planned for them. Another example is seen in **Matthew 14:13-21** (the feeding of the 5000) and **Matthew 15:32-38** (the feeding of the 4000). Jesus had the disciples serve the crowds from the minimal amounts of food and then take up the leftovers. That these were learning activities for the apostles is driven home in **Matthew 16:8-12**, when Jesus explained that they hadn't learned the lessons He had intended for them. Jesus had been teaching them lessons with these activities. They were supposed to have learned something by that service and then by taking up the leftovers. Then there is the premier learning activity, which God has asked of us on a weekly basis—the Lord's Supper. According to **I Corinthians 11:26**, we are teaching the Lord's death through this activity, every time we do it. Further, we know from the Old Testament, memorials are specifically designed as teaching methods to pass on knowledge to our children (cf. **Exodus 12:24-27; 13:14, et al**).
- P. *Acting out a role*: God used this method throughout the Old Testament repeatedly. In **I Kings 20:26-34**, Ahab had let Ben-Hadad go instead of killing him as God wanted. God sent a prophet to act out the role of a man who had let a prisoner go free to teach Ahab about his sin in **I Kings 20:35-43**. In **Ezekiel 4:1-3**, Ezekiel was to act out a siege against a brick on which he had written "Jerusalem" to teach the Jews about the siege on Jerusalem (By the way, this also goes back to the idea of using props and visual aids). This was not just an Old Testament form of teaching. In **Acts 21:11**, when God wanted to teach Paul what would happen to him in Jerusalem, He had the prophet Agabus take Paul's belt and bound himself up like a prisoner. He acted out the role of prisoner to teach Paul what would happen to him.
- Q. *Testing*: I know we don't like this one. But the reality is God used testing as a means to teach and measure how well His people were taught. This began with Adam and Eve. Was it not a test to have the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden with them in **Genesis 3**? In **Exodus 16:4**, God used the manna as a test to see if the people had learned to obey Him. He wanted them only to take a day's portion except on Friday when they were to take some for Friday and the Sabbath. Many of them failed the test. Paul used this same principle in **II Corinthians 2:9**, when he claimed he had written the previous letter in order to test the Corinthians to see if they had learned to obey God when it came to disciplining the man in sin.

## II. Applications: Four lessons I have learned from this study.

- A. *Don't be offended at God's way of teaching*: **Matthew 11:6** and **Luke 7:23** record Jesus' statement, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (ESV). Jesus' point was that He knew He was different from what people expected and wanted. Many would be offended because He did things differently than they were used to or thought the Messiah should. I don't know about you, but this study was a shock to me. I found out that God, Jesus, the prophets and apostles taught in many ways that I would formerly have classified as unscriptural. Let us not be caused to stumble by God, by Jesus, by the apostles and prophets and their methods of teaching. Instead, let's be taught how to teach.
- B. *Let's not be afraid to teach like God did*: In general, it seems to me if God did something, then we are allowed to do so. If God, Jesus, the apostles and prophets taught using certain methods. We are also allowed to do so. **II Timothy 3:16-17** says the Scripture equips the man of God to be competent and thoroughly equipped for every good work. Through these Scriptures we have

seen how the Scripture equips us to teach. Let's not be afraid to make full use of these methods for whatever reason. Let us not be so concerned of looking like some of the false teachers around us that we neglect to be like God who teaches us.

- C. *Refrain from spoon-feeding:* As I examine the numerous methods God used to teach, I couldn't help but notice how so often His teaching was designed to challenge His pupils to think and learn for themselves. He rarely spoon-fed anyone. Yet, that is so often what I want to do. I want to break everything down in very simple lists, formulas and mantras to answer every question for everybody and if anybody ever varies, try to squash them until they fit in my formulaic mold of understanding. But God, Jesus, the apostles and prophets rarely did that. No doubt, there were times to discipline those who taught error. But God gave His students room to make mistakes, be challenged and grow. He almost never spoon-fed them. Sadly, I think that is what most of our teaching today is. Take a look at most of the class books developed by brethren, especially for young people. Aren't most of them a few pages of some preacher telling us what to believe and then a few pages of questions for us to parrot back what we read in the first few pages? I can give you a personal experience of how sometimes we spoon-feed formulaic answers and rarely challenge to think biblically. I know I was spoon-fed and in return have spoon-fed others with the formulaic "five acts of worship". We know what worship is because we've been told those acts over and over again. However, how many of us have actually been challenged to get into the New Testament and define worship? Let me just warn you, it is ever so much harder than listing five memorized actions, none of which, by the way, are actually ever called worship acts in the New Testament. Most of us will say, "Oh, Edwin, we know what worship is." But I challenge you to actually get into the Bible and define worship based on what scriptures say, not just what you have always been told is worship.
- D. *We must keep the main point, the main point:* What is the goal of teaching? Is it not to inspire obedience in the student? We want the student to gain knowledge, remember the teaching and obey the Word. I know some people will find this lesson shocking coming from me, especially in light of my well-known position about Bible classes for our kids. I am absolutely opposed to any method of teaching that is predicated merely on, "The kids will have fun and want to come back." Please notice, God never used any of these methods because He thought they were the fun and entertaining method that people would enjoy. He used them because they were memorable and effective teaching tools. No doubt, sometimes they were fun. I'm sure the apostles enjoyed the feeding of the 5000. I know they enjoyed the work of the limited commission; they came back rejoicing. But fun was not the motivation. Neither was the motivation simply to provide something to do for a class time. God never simply found something that could somehow be connected to something spiritual and so it was used to fill up teaching time. God used methods because they taught, they embedded teaching in the memory and because they inspired obedience. I understand it is rarely effective to bore people with our teaching method. Certainly some thought should be given to making the teaching interesting or developing interest in the student. But we must make sure we keep the proper balance. There is a great difference between a teacher who tells a humorous story because it effectively illustrates a scriptural point and a comedian believing he is teaching properly because he drops a spiritual point or two in his litany of jokes. Our goal is to teach, to inspire obedience, not entertain, provide recreation or accomplish busy-work. I don't care if your favorite method is lecture, if you are only doing it because you think every one else will think it is fun, your motivation and teaching is wrong. On the other hand, I don't care how fun the scriptural method is, if the reason for using it is because it is the effective way to bestow knowledge, embed teaching into memory and inspire obedience then it is the way to teach in that instance. When we keep the main point, the main point, we will do the job properly.

### **Conclusion:**

God is, no doubt, the master teacher. We should follow His example as we strive to get people to walk in His path. Study for yourself and see how God taught others. That can only help improve our effectiveness as teachers.