
SHEPHERD

creating caring community



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Fourth Book in a Series of Four:

3 Roles for Guiding Groups: Teacher | Leader | Shepherd

Teacher: Creating Conversational Community

Leader: Creating Commissioned Community

Shepherd: Creating Caring Community

Shepherds

Abraham. Jacob. Moses. David. When God needed someone to lead His people, He often chose a shepherd.

Isaiah 40:11. Jeremiah 31:10. Ezekiel 34. Zechariah 10:2. When the prophets proclaimed God's plans, they were often described as shepherds.

Jesus. Good Shepherd (John 10:1-17). Great Shepherd (Heb. 13:20). Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). We needed a Savior. God sent a Shepherd.

The night watch. Angels. Bethlehem. First to hear, go, and tell.

Sunday School teacher. Small group leader. When God's people need a caring community, God usually calls a shepherd to help create it.

Lead. Feed. Guide. Guard. Prod. Protect. When shepherds need to know what to do, God's Word provides a clear picture.

Shepherding-teacher. Teaching-shepherd. Greek *poimen*. Seventeen occurrences. "Shepherd" except in Ephesians 4. Not office of pastor. Nor gift of teaching. Only one of the 3 *Roles* that includes the other two.

Teacher. You can be a teacher without being a shepherd. You can't be a shepherd without teaching.

Leader. You can be a leader without being a shepherd. You can't be a shepherd without leading.

Equipped. Rod. Staff. Sling. Cloak. Bag. Tent. Maybe a harp.

Sheep. Some spiritual. All social. Seeking. Straying. Sensitive. Skittish. Susceptible. Satisfied: if safe, fed, watered.

John 10:1-14. Know. Shepherds know sheep in general. Their flock in particular. Sheep know their shepherd's voice.

John 21:15-17. Jesus to Peter: Feed lambs. Lead sheep. Feed sheep.

Acts 20:28. Paul to Ephesian elders: Shepherd the church of God.

1 Peter 5:2-4. Crown. For those who shepherd. Willingly. Eagerly.

Introduction

Most people today have never seen a shepherd. So you might think the biblical concept of shepherding has become irrelevant. Not so! Just do an Internet search on the term. You'll discover a fascination with shepherding in many fields (pardon the pun!). Educators, retailers, parents, managers, and mentors, it seems, can all learn from shepherds.

“Heuristics for Herding Autonomous Interactive Agents”

That is the subtitle of an article “Solving the shepherding problem.” Replete with algorithms I hardly understand, it takes a mathematical approach to plotting how to effectively gather sheep and keep them moving toward a target destination.

Gather, Grow, Go

“Autonomous” and “interactive” are apt descriptions of the people who make up most church groups. “Heuristics” are useful constructs that help us solve problems and make decisions based on past experiences, rules of thumb, trial and error, and just plain old common sense. That’s what we’re going to try to do in this book. Our goal is to give you systems, sequences, and science to help you create a caring community in your group; a community that gathers to grow, grows to go, and goes to gather.

Heart and Hands

Psalms 18 and 138 are tributes to King David. You’ll recall that when Samuel was interviewing the sons of Jesse for the job of king, David was not presented by his dad. He was out in the field, shepherding. I (David) have adopted the last of the seventy-two verses in Psalm 18 as my “life verse.”

He shepherded them

with a pure heart

and guided them

with his skillful hands.

One of the Bible's most memorized passages was written by David as a tribute to the Good Shepherd, the Lord God Himself.

Psalm 23: The Good Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd;
I have what I need.
He lets me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside quiet waters.
He renews my life;
he leads me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
as long as I live.

A God Thing

Those who have been called to the long-term care of a flock of God's people have embraced a good thing. Shepherdding is a God thing. It is the foundation for creating caring community in your class or church. Ready to learn how to do it well? Then let's get started!

*For the Lamb
who is at the center of the throne
will shepherd them.
(Rev. 7:17)*

Chapter 1

System

Creating caring community. That is the goal of a system of shepherding. Does God really care about stuff like systems? He sure established a lot of them! The solar system. The digestive system. The incredible spiritual systems prescribed in the Pentateuch. Ezekiel 34 is a sobering reminder of how serious God is about breakdowns in the system of shepherding He established. He Himself has a shepherd's heart. He wants His people cared for.

Caring for Every Person

One of the things that sets apart a healthy Sunday School or small group ministry from a struggling one is a commitment to care for every person. For many years, I have emphasized three foundational principles for building effective Sunday Schools: (1) open groups, (2) open enrollment, and (3) starting new groups as the irreducible law of growth. If I could have a do-over, I would add this one: caring for every person. In fact, I have come to believe that it is number one! A church that utilizes its Sunday School to accomplish this principle needs no other system, especially if it practices universal enrollment.

Universal Enrollment

Simply stated, this practice can be explained to a new member this way: "We believe it is so important for everyone to be a part of a caring community. We assign every member to a class/small group—whether they ever choose to attend one or not. Here's why. We know from research that over 80 percent of the people who attend worship and Sunday School will still be around five years from now. The research also tells us that less than 20 percent of the people who only attend worship will still be with us five years from now. We know that a primary reason for that is a breakdown in care. We don't want that to happen to you. So if you don't find a class or small group, be ready for one to find you!"

Key Transition: From Class Roll to Ministry List

Perhaps the first step a group must take to signal that it wants to create caring community is to change what it calls the roster of people who are members of the group. If it's just a Bible study group that meets once a week, the people who have enrolled are put on a Class Roll. In a caring community, they are added to a Ministry List. What's the difference? A Class Roll connotes that the primary commitment is from Member to Class. That is, the member has made a commitment to attend the class. A Ministry List, on the other hand, connotes that the primary commitment is from Class/Community to the Member. That is, the group has made a commitment to minister to and with the member. Perhaps the difference is subtle, but it is significant. Let's pick the most obvious example to illustrate the difference.

When to Drop Inactive Members?

Your answer to this question depends on whether you are just a Class and are dropping them from a Roll, or a Community and dropping them from a Ministry List. If the former, you'll ask, "Has this person honored his commitment to our class?" If the latter, you'll ask, "Has our class honored our commitment to this member?" You'll get a different answer depending on the question you ask. Caring communities don't drop anyone from the ministry list unless they have (a) died, (b) joined another church, (c) moved too far from the church to receive our ministry (not that they've move too far away to attend!), or (d) requested to be removed. Your motivation will determine whether or not you'll actually practice those wise principles. In fact, when your Class becomes a Community, you'll do your best to talk anyone requesting to be removed (d) out of their request!

Care Groups: The Key to Caring Community

Nothing says "we care" like a vital and functioning system of care groups. Ideally, this means that every person is assigned to a care group and that every care group has a leader. The mission of the care group and the job description of the care group leader are the same:

Contact
Every Member
Every Week

Do you mean every absent member every week? Nope. I mean every member. Every week. The contact can be face-to-face, by phone, by email, or by text message. Or on a really special occasion, like a birthday or an anniversary, the care group leader might make a special effort to mail a card. The responsibility of the care group leader is not to get people to come to class. The role of the care group leader is to help members connect in community. In fact, care group leaders should seldom mention class attendance. Rather, their role sounds like:

- *“Just keeping in touch.”*
- *“Just checking in to see how you’re doing.”*
- *“Anything going on you’d like the class to pray about?”*

The contacts need not be long. Just a quick phone call during a daily commute will do. The goal is simply to stay connected with every person in the group and to report news and needs to the teacher and, in urgent cases, to the pastor so that the appropriate person can make a timely ministry response.

5-7 Males or Females

Best practice suggests that each adult care group leader assumes responsibility for five to seven persons of the same gender. In adult classes, men should contact men and women should contact women. In student classes, this is doubly important. Why not have couples’ care groups? Because usually the women will contact the women but the men contact no one. So make sure that men understand that they are supposed to contact the guys. Not surprisingly, this sets up a perfect organization to communicate information related to women’s or men’s ministries, too, without creating a separate organization. Seven is a good number to shoot for. There are seven days in a week. If the group gets to ten, it’s probably time to enlist one of them to become a group leader and have two groups of five. Repeat!

What About Kids?

Generally, the same principles apply to kids. Each church needs to communicate guidelines and policies about contacting kids specifically.

In most cases, a person who works with kids has agreed to a background check. Parents should know that practice is in place—assuming it is. The parent should generally be the first point of contact as well, or the only one. If the parent agrees to you enrolling their children, after chatting about their child, a kids leader might say, “Would it be OK if I had a quick word with [child] while you listen in?” In most cases, text messages should be avoided, even though smartphones are being provided to younger and younger kids. But postcards are still safe. And getting something personal in the mail is still special to most kids. As it gets rarer, it becomes more special to adults, too.

Don't Forget Your Members in Service

Every adult class should have some “missionaries to kids,” people who serve in preschool, children’s, or student classes. They should be assigned to care group leaders. Or maybe even to a care group leader whose primary responsibility is caring for these “associate members.”

Care Group Time Each Week

Contacting every member every week is the foundational principle for creating caring community. Another best practice is to reserve ten to fifteen minutes at the end of every class session to gather into care groups. There are three primary objectives:

- *Calling the names of all group members to identify ministry needs,*
- *Praying for members serving in preschool, children’s, and student classes, and*
- *Sharing and praying with one another.*

This is one of the primary reasons for having single-gender care groups. Women and men often have different kinds of prayer needs and are more likely to share them if the group includes only their gender.

Every Leader a Care Group Leader

Unless the class is unusually large, most adult class leaders will probably need to “double up” as a care group leader in addition to another role,

such as hospitality leader, fellowship leader, ministry leader, missions leader, etc. In fact, in most classes, some of those positions will need to be combined. One way to view this is that these leaders add the role of care group leader. If you are creating caring community, you might want to turn that around. That is, the leader is first a care group leader who also takes on a class-level function.

Outreach Leaders and Kids Leaders

The one adult leader who does not double up is the Outreach Leader, whose “care group” consists of the people on the prospect list.¹ In preschool and children’s classes, the workers always double up to make sure each of the 3 *Roles*—teach, lead, shepherd—are carried out.

Who is the Care Group Leader’s Care Group Leader?

In an adult class, the care group leader’s care group leader is the teacher. Modeling the role, the teacher contacts every care group leader every week, not just to receive the reports of their contacts but to care for each of them personally, too. A very large class may require a ministry leader, who is responsible for five to seven care group leaders. In this case, the teacher’s care group is that person or persons, the Outreach Leader, and any other class leaders who don’t have a care group leader.

Who is the Care Group Leader for the Teachers?

A growing ministry needs a person who will take responsibility for one of the age group divisions: preschool, children, students, and adults. In a larger church, the division directors contact the teachers each week. The division directors, in turn, are contacted by the Sunday School director. In a smaller church, these division leaders may also double up as teachers, or the Sunday School director may double up as an age-division director. Whoever is left alone at the top of the organization has a care group leader, too—the pastor. Or in a larger church, a staff member. However you make it work, the result of weekly contacts should ensure the pastor has a pretty comprehensive grasp of the state of the entire flock by the time he completes his weekly contacts.

The Optimum Spiritual Gift for Sunday School Teachers

I do not think people with the spiritual gift of teaching make the best Sunday School teachers. Some may be surprised by this statement. In my experience, the best Sunday School teachers are those whom God has entrusted with the spiritual gift of shepherding. This gift, often translated “pastor-teacher,” is found in Ephesians 4:11. To avoid confusing the name of the gift with the office (position) of pastor in a local church, it is common to refer to it as the gift of shepherding. The Greek word Paul used here, *poimen*, appears in the New Testament seventeen times and is usually translated “shepherd.” In most churches, many more people than the pastor minister through the gift of shepherding. Ironically, those with the title of “pastor” often do not have the gift, but rather a gift-mix like prophet-leader or teacher-administrator. Let’s spend a little time talking about the gift of shepherding.

How the Shepherd is Different

The person with the gift of prophecy (often a preacher) prefers to speak from a pulpit. The person with the gift of teaching also prefers to stand behind a lectern. The shepherd, on the other hand, is most comfortable sitting down among the flock. People with the fourth speaking gift, exhortation, are also comfortable sitting among a small group—even a triad (three people) or a quad (four). They differ from the shepherd in intensity. The shepherd generally is more “longsuffering” than the exhorter.

Circles and Rows

The gift of shepherding includes the responsibility of teaching, but not at the same level as the gift of teaching. You can be a teacher without being a shepherd, but you can’t be a shepherd without being a teacher. Shepherds teach, but they approach that part of their ministry a little differently than the teacher. The distinguishing characteristic of the shepherding gift is a long-term perspective. Unlike the prophet, who expects immediate response, the shepherd is content to watch people make incremental progress. Unlike the person with the gift of exhortation, who may have little patience with someone who is not committed, the shepherd stays in touch with even the chronic absentee. In fact, the shepherd may pay

as much attention to “straying or troubled sheep” as they do faithful and healthy ones. Unlike the teacher, who may spend several hours in preparation for a one-hour lesson, the shepherd studies just enough to feed the flock what it needs. Still not sure about the difference between a shepherding teacher and teaching teacher? Look at the room set-up. If the chairs are arranged in a circle, you probably have a shepherd. If the chairs are set up in rows with a lectern at the front of the room, you’ve got a teacher.

Shepherds Depend on People with the Gift of Teaching

Along with prophets and exhorters, shepherds are highly dependent on the work of gifted teachers who have written commentaries, compiled concordances, edited Bible dictionaries, systematized theology, researched word meanings, and written Bible study curriculum! Shepherds don’t spend a lot of time trying to be original. If a gifted teacher has put together some good spiritual food, the shepherd is quite pleased to feed it to her flock, too! Does that mean shepherds are lazy? Not at all! Most would really like to spend more time in study and preparation. But their highest priority is the flock—their people. Arranging a meal for a grieving member. Visiting someone in the hospital. Calling to chat with a prospective member. Checking with care group leaders to see if anyone needs his attention. Shepherds are just more likely to run out of time to prepare than those with only the gift of teaching. That’s why shepherds need solid curriculum materials.

How to Spot a Shepherd

Here is a simple way to tell the difference between two persons with the gifts of teaching and shepherding. Ask this question: “What are you teaching right now in your church?” The person with the gift of teaching might respond with something like this: “I am teaching a verse-by-verse course on the first twelve chapters of the Book of Genesis.” The person with the gift of shepherding, on the other hand, is more likely to answer, “I’m teaching the seventh and eighth grade boys again this year.” Or “young married couples,” or “senior adult ladies.” The focus of the gift of teaching is teaching the Bible. The focus of the gift of shepherding is teaching people the Bible. A subtle but significant difference.²

One Meal at a Time

There are a few other common characteristics that distinguish the shepherd from leaders with other spiritual gifts. Shepherds are more likely to “cut ‘em some slack” than the prophet or exhorter. A shepherd loves people, is protective of the people overseen, and is prone to jealousy if the flock feeds in someone else’s “pasture.” Shepherds are sensitive to problems in the flock that might cause disharmony. Names, faces, and voices are remembered. Shepherds tend to be self-sacrificing to the extent of sometimes trying to do everything instead of involving the members of the group. A shepherd usually likes to study, but generally just enough to feed the flock what it needs, usually “one meal at a time.”

“Count” is an Important Word for Shepherds

“You can count on me.” “Did you count how many were there?” “Don’t count them out yet; I’m still working on them!” There is an interesting reference in Leviticus 27:32 and Ezekiel 20:37 to “pass[ing] under the rod.” Have you ever wondered how the good shepherd knew he had one lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7)? While they “passed under the rod,” he counted them! And he probably was keeping a special eye out for that sheep. For you see, shepherds are students of sheep.

Shepherds Know Sheep

Shepherds are experts when it comes to guiding, guarding, and grazing sheep. They understand the characteristics of sheep during different seasons and stages of development. They strive to increase their understanding of the general—and generational—characteristics of the age-group they shepherd. Adult teachers will want to stay abreast of the issues adults face during various life-stages, especially life’s frontiers: career, marriage, parenthood, empty-nest, vocational retirement, etc. Shepherds will want to read about helping people deal with life’s crises: disease, divorce, death, relocation, unemployment, etc. They are sensitive to the differences between boys and girls, men and women, in terms of the ways they learn, interact, and communicate. Shepherds never stop learning all they can about sheep.

Shepherds Know Their Flock

Beyond general knowledge about sheep, shepherds get to know their individual sheep. Effective teachers read content with their learners' context in mind. In order to teach to meet needs, the teaching shepherd must become acquainted with each person on the Ministry List. A simple way to do that is to keep a notebook, with a page for each member. As you learn things about the individual, make a note of it on the appropriate page. Standard items include: contact information, birthdays, anniversaries, other significant dates (birth of children, date of new job, death of spouse, etc.), type of work, church and community roles, and perhaps the Bible translation preferred. Shepherds of preschoolers, children, and students will want to include information about the parents, and when/if the child has accepted Christ and/or has been baptized. Extra credit goes to shepherds who record other information, like spiritual gifts, love languages, favorite things, pet peeves, and so on. The notebook is a prayer guide, tracking prayer concerns and answers. Shepherds know their flock's stories and prepare to teach with those stories in mind.

How Shepherds Teach

The teaching shepherd prepares to lead the group in Bible study constantly thinking about the learners, and their needs, their hopes, their hurts, their struggles, their decisions. The shepherd asks, "Who would be encouraged by this passage?" "Who would be challenged?" Can you teach every lesson so that it meets the specific needs of every person every week? Of course not. But if you teach toward the needs of even one or two learners, you'll probably meet the needs of others as well.

Silence: The Shepherd's Secret Weapon

A shepherd does not constantly talk to the flock. He listens. He comforts with his presence. He watches for danger. The teaching shepherd also understands the value of silence during the Bible study session. She asks a question and gives learners time to gather their thoughts. He waits them out, knowing someone will answer if he can restrain himself from rescuing them. Some teachers get into the habit of responding between every learner comment. The solution? Silence. After the first person answers a discussion question, just sit there silently. If you've conditioned the group

to wait for you to respond, it may take a minute or two. But eventually, someone else will speak. And then another. Sometimes you might even call for a minute of silence. Ask a question, or read something, and ask the class to think about it for a minute before anyone responds. You might even ask them to “get their thoughts together” by writing something down.

Nametags: Help the Flock Get to Know One Another

One of the first steps a shepherd takes to move toward caring community is to use nametags to make sure everybody can call everybody else by name. Set a standard about how the class makes nametags. I like to use three lines: (1) first name in large capital letters that can be seen across the room, (2) last name in smaller letters that can be seen when you’re talking with someone face to face, and (3) a line that changes weekly. Each week, everyone is asked to print something different: favorite vacation spot, hometown, hobby, favorite sports team, favorite food, favorite musical group or song, a recent book they’ve read (everyone can write “Bible!”), favorite movie or television show (or genre: comedy, drama, reality, etc.), favorite Bible verse, pet peeve, year (you were born, were married, joined the church), a number (kids, grandkids), mother’s maiden name, fruit of the Spirit you find most challenging, waist size (Just kidding! Don’t get too personal!), etc. You can just imagine the kinds of surprise connections people might make!

Apprentices: The Way Shepherds Reproduce Themselves

How does someone learn how to be a shepherd? By apprenticing another shepherd. Great teaching shepherds are always on the lookout for someone who could be an apprentice. It would not be unusual for the apprentice to first demonstrate effectiveness as a care group leader and giftedness as a substitute teacher. The person should demonstrate a concern for people, an ability to connect ideas, and skill at drawing people into the discussion of Scripture and sharing of stories. After confirming the possibility through prayer, approach the individual with the idea of becoming an apprentice. Be sure they understand that the role is not just an “associate teacher” who will act as a permanent substitute. The goal is to develop so they too can become a teaching shepherd.

The Shepherd's Staff

One of the lessons an apprentice must learn may be something the shepherd learned the hard way. You must enlist a staff to help you. The gift of shepherding has a couple of dark sides. One is the tendency to do everything yourself. The other is the tendency to want to keep your flock together. The answer to both is the building of a missionary team; a team that will reach people and care for them well. Missionaries talk about the people group they have been assigned to reach. Shepherds have a people group, too. When a shepherd reproduces himself or herself through an apprentice, an opportunity is created to focus both the new group and the parent class on a more specific people group—a more targeted flock of sheep. That is good missionary strategy. That is good shepherding. Shepherding well requires a rhythm—a sequence if you will. Ken Braddy offers helpful ideas about that in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Sequence

I (Ken B.) have enjoyed shepherding a group of adults for the past five years. My wife and I began this group as a “paper class.” We were given a potential group member list of forty-nine adults. We made phone calls and sent email invitations to people who were unconnected to any Bible study group. On “launch” Sunday, five people (including Tammy and me) attended as our little group began. I wasn’t sure it was going to make it. We struggled to attract new group members, and the group felt too small to be viable. In time, God sent new group members to us. I became the group’s teaching shepherd.

Guiding this group has taught me a lot about shepherding. The things I’ve read about leading groups have become more real to me in my role as a teaching shepherd. Today, I guide a group of about twenty adults. We’ve made new friends. We’ve seen some of them come and go due to job changes and other circumstances. We’ve experienced ups and downs related to people’s health. We’ve sat and cried with group members who have lost jobs. We’ve seen people struggle in their faith. Shepherding a group has been quite an adventure!

We’ve had a lot of good times, too. We’ve watched God mature people as they began to serve in the church. Some have become greeters, while others have become teaching shepherds in other ministries. I like it when my sheep wander off on purpose to do good things such as serving others.

We’ve been overjoyed when guests have asked to become group members. They’ve found a new home where they feel loved, accepted, and wanted. These new group members have told us they love the Bible study, relationships, and ministry that takes place in the group.

As a teaching shepherd, I have found it helpful to think about my role in terms of a Before-During-After sequence. Shepherding takes place not only during the group Bible study but before and after it, too. At times a shepherd walks ahead of the sheep. Many times, the shepherd walks among the sheep. And on occasion the shepherd needs to walk behind the sheep, gently driving and encouraging them.

I hope that you don't see your shepherding as primarily taking place during the group Bible study. Shepherding a group of people requires more time and energy than the time allotted for the group Bible study. Being a teaching shepherd can (and should) consume a large part of your calendar. It should be your passion.

A Lesson Learned

When I first began teaching several decades ago, my wife and I co-taught a group of eighth grade girls. Initially I saw my role as a "Sunday morning only" thing. I was concerned with delivering good content week after week. I valued biblical accuracy, so I studied a lot. I wanted them to know the stories of the Bible the way I did as their teacher. I occasionally tried a creative teaching method. But in those early days of guiding a group, I wrongly assumed my role was all about that hour of Bible study on Sunday morning. Thank goodness I see things differently today!

After completing seminary, I served on two church staffs. Since 2010, I have served as a lay leader and teaching shepherd in my church. Through serving in my church's LIFE Group ministry, I have come to realize that guiding a group requires around-the-clock duty. I am grateful for the hour my group members gather to study, pray, and minister to one another. But having led a group for several years now, my conviction is that good group leadership requires me to shepherd people Sunday to Saturday. I don't get a day off. And I don't get paid to do it. I do it because that is what a shepherd does.

I have grown in my understanding that shepherding a group requires so much more of me than I initially thought. The people I lead are worth it and I don't mind those 2:00 a.m. calls and emergencies. I value those "Where is God in this?" emails I sometimes receive as people struggle to understand God's activity (or a perceived lack of it) in their lives.

Sunday School, or whatever name your church calls its ongoing Bible teaching ministry, isn't only about sixty to ninety minutes on Sunday morning. If your group happens to meet during the week, it's not only about that mid-week gathering either. Shepherding is about the things you do before, during, and after the group's gathering for Bible study.

Shepherding Before the Group Gathers

Let's think of shepherding before the group gathers in terms of a shepherd guiding the sheep by walking ahead of them. He leads by being out front. He knows where he wants them to go. He has a plan.

Good teaching shepherds know they must do some things before their group gathers. Many of the things done before the group gathers are done in isolation. Leadership can be a lonely place, but shepherds accept that because they know what they do is for the good of their sheep, not for the applause that comes from an audience.

Teaching Shepherds Review Their Ministry List

David has already touched on the difference between a class roll and a ministry list. Teaching shepherds view the names on their ministry list knowing the names represent friends and fellow travelers on a spiritual journey toward Christ-like maturity. The people are much more than just names on a list. They are people to whom the shepherd personally relates.

Groups are fluid with rapidly changing dynamics. A person or couple who faithfully attends the group may suddenly disappear for a time. It's the shepherd's job to know when those sheep disappear and to formulate a plan to go after them. That's why it's an important "before" task to review the ministry list. A regular review keeps people in the forefront of the shepherd's mind.

Teaching Shepherds Pray for Each Person

Another "before" task of shepherds is the act of praying for every member of the group before the next Bible study. These prayers should be specific, made possible because of the shepherd's relationship with each one of the sheep.

The Lord often reminds me of specific circumstances facing group members before we gather for Bible study. The Spirit of God also reminds me of absent group members who need extra time and attention. Every group has a few stray sheep that must be pursued. As a shepherd, I pray for my sheep by name as I see their name on my ministry list, recalling specific circumstances they are facing.

Teaching Shepherds Know Their Sheep

Did you know that in biblical times sheep were not raised for their meat but primarily for their wool? As a result, a shepherd might spend a lifetime with a specific group of sheep. Over time, he would get to know the personality of each sheep and they would get to know their shepherd. The shepherd and the sheep developed a relationship, and good shepherds were willing to lay down their lives to protect their sheep, like David (1 Sam. 17:36).

As modern-day shepherds, you and I must know our sheep well enough to pray for them specifically. We must know them beyond the classroom or living room where our group meets. The people we lead are more than just students of the Bible. They are fellow spiritual pilgrims. They are people. They have families. They have jobs. They have hobbies. They have hopes and dreams, fears and failures. It is our privilege to pray for them and to take their needs before the throne of our Heavenly Father. As shepherds, we do this before we gather together to study the Bible as a group.

Teaching Shepherds Create Group Plans with Sheep in Mind

As I prepare to lead my group members through our weekly Bible study time, I always have them on my mind. I hope you have your sheep in mind, too, as you prepare. I don't want to guide people through a generic study, but I want to tailor it to meet their needs as much as possible.

While attending college, I worked for a national retailer selling men's suits on commission. I learned a lot about tailoring. The company for which I worked sold a large number of men's suits, but the challenge was to fit the "off the rack" suit to the man. This required knowledge of how to alter the suit to fit the person. Over the years I became proficient at marking suits to be tailored. I looked forward to the day when a customer came back to the store to pick up a suit I'd marked for alteration. Normally the suit fit perfectly because it was tailored to fit the man just right.

As a teaching shepherd, I must take my "off the rack" Bible study session (my church provides its groups with one of LifeWay's ongoing studies) and customize it for my sheep. I work at tailoring it to their specific circumstances as much as possible. And I look forward to meeting with my group members because I believe the Holy Spirit will use me to guide

them into a deeper understanding of God's Word. I know the Bible study is going to fit them perfectly—with God's help.

Teaching Shepherds Create Margin on Their Calendars

Another “before” task of teaching shepherds relates to their calendars. We all have the same 168 hours in a week, and it's up to us to decide how to use them for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). That includes our shepherding of people and the management of our calendar to make time for them.

To create margin on our calendars means we must make choices. We must choose between what is good and what is best (most of us don't have to think too long and hard about the differences between what is good and what is bad!). Sometimes it means saying no to things we would like to do so we can say yes to something we should do. Margin allows us to more effectively shepherd our sheep.

I have learned to block sections of time on my daily calendar. I block time during the workday to attend meetings, return emails, eat lunch, blog, and read. After work hours, I block time for my family and school work. I also block time for ministry to my group members. If none of my group members has a pressing need to address, I redeem that time and do something else. If there is a need, then I have the time calendared and I'm prepared to serve my sheep.

I encourage you to do something similar and block time daily or weekly during which you make it a priority to minister to your group members. Sometimes that means spending time with someone at their favorite coffee shop or restaurant to talk through a career decision or other major choice. Sometimes it means helping them with a project around their house. At other times, it means being able to sit in a hospital waiting room while they are recovering from surgery. Without margin, your calendar will be too cluttered to take advantage of opportunities for ministry that are going to come along.

The tyranny of the urgent always fights against the important things available to us. Teaching shepherds have learned to make the calendar their servant. Intentionally scheduling time for ministry is just one way we show how serious we are about meeting group member's needs.

Teaching Shepherds Reach Out to Potential Group Members

Bible study groups have two kinds of visitors: guests and potential group members (or prospects). Guests often attend at the invitation of a group member. One Sunday, a couple in my Bible study group brought their teenage granddaughter with them. She was a guest, but not a potential group member!

Shepherds budget time to reach out to potential group members before the group gathers for Bible study. An email, a phone call, a handwritten note, or a quick at-the-door visit to the person's home are ways to communicate their importance to you and to your group.

As you lead your group, remember that healthy groups need one potential member for every member present. That means that if a group averages fifteen people in attendance, that group needs fifteen potential group members to whom they are building bridges. This explains why many groups that are open and ongoing struggle to grow; they simply do not have enough potential group members to invite to the group's Bible study, fellowship activities, and ministry projects. Maintaining a potential member file with one prospective group member for every member present in your group will help ensure the viability of your group. Reaching out to others is an important "before" action.

Teaching Shepherds Contact Their Missionaries

Another "before" action that shepherds should take relates to the "missionary" members of their group. A missionary member is someone who would attend the group but works with preschoolers, kids, or students. These "missionaries" should remain connected to the adult group that sent them out to serve.

These extraordinary adults have chosen to forego their group Bible study gathering to teach and reach others. But they are still very much a part of the group. These missionaries need adult contact, relationships, and encouragement. Churches will find it easier to recruit new group leaders for all age groups if adult Bible study groups are committed to keeping these missionaries connected and encouraged.

Teaching Shepherds Prepare their Bible Study Early

This is certainly a “before” part of the shepherding sequence. Teaching shepherds know that not only do they shepherd people, but they also shepherd the Word of God. While shepherds may be stronger in relating to people than they are in guiding a Bible study, they still feel a strong compulsion to accurately teach and guide people on a journey into Scripture. Effective teaching shepherds have learned to prepare their next study early in the week.

The company I work for has a helpful website. Thousands of products are available for sale, but there is also a helpful variety of free helps for group leaders. There is an unfortunate trend, though. The company’s website spikes very predictably twice a week. Would you care to guess when the first big spike occurs? If you said “Saturday night,” you’re right. The second spike occurs on Sunday mornings. Why? My guess is that group leaders are late in their preparation and they are seeking help.

I suppose I don’t have to tell you the problem with this. Last minute preparation will always lead to less effective Bible studies. I realize that the Spirit of God is present during our studies and He is the One who “leads and guides us into truth” (John 16:13). But how much more effective would our group Bible studies be if shepherds took seriously the calling to shepherd the Word of God by preparing early?

Preparing early does several things for the shepherd and for the group members:

- *Provides more time to meditate on the rich meanings of the original words of Scripture,*
- *Allows the Holy Spirit to tie the ancient text to current events, demonstrating that God’s Word is relevant for today,*
- *Gives sufficient time to think of additional discussion questions, illustrations, and object lessons,*
- *Ties current events and real-life situations directly to the study, and*
- *Allows the shepherd to live out the text before guiding others to obey it.*

I think the last item listed is a big reason to prepare early. Let's take a quick look at the example of a favorite teaching shepherd of mine, the prophet Ezra.

Ezra: The Teaching Shepherd

One of my favorite Bible verses is Ezra 7:10:

Now Ezra determined in his heart to study the law of the Lord, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel.

There are rich nuggets in this one little verse. Three actions required of teaching shepherds are identified. Also we discover the right order for preparing to guide people to a deeper understanding of God's Word:

- *Study.* This word in the original Hebrew means "to tread frequently over; to pursue." In this context, it forms a great mental picture of a teacher pursuing the truth of God's Word. He reads the text several times, treading over the same verses again and again until captivated by the meaning of the text.
- *Obey.* Once a passage of Scripture is understood, the shepherd must obey it. Disobeying God's Word while teaching others how to obey it makes that person a hypocrite. Only by seeking to live out the Word of God does one have the moral authority to ask others to do the same.
- *Teach.* I like the Hebrew behind this English word! It means "to goad." It's a picture of an ancient near-Eastern practice where teachers would poke their students with a stick of some kind. There was a day when teachers carried rulers and used them to get the attention of a student whose mind had wandered! Teaching includes the transmitting of truth to learners, but sometimes we must "poke them" a bit to move them to action. The Word of God is not just to be known and memorized, but obeyed! Jesus told us that part of our assignment until He returns is to teach people to obey, not just teach them interesting facts (Matthew 28:18-20).

It's More Than Just Teaching

Preparing, studying, relating, serving, ministering, praying—these things and more are necessary if you are going to be a good teaching shepherd. You could show up to your group's Bible study having left many of those things undone and no one would particularly notice—for a while.

People want to know they are truly cared for and that they matter to someone. People want to know they are important. Teaching shepherds excel at caring for people. Group members can tell whether or not a teaching shepherd genuinely cares about them.

As important as the Before actions are, there's more to being a teaching shepherd than just those things. Remember that shepherding is done in a sequence of events: Before-During-After. Let's turn our attention to the During part of the sequence.

Shepherding During the Group's Gathering

If the Before actions can be thought of in terms of a shepherd doing things prior to standing before the sheep, then perhaps we should think of the During actions as the time when the shepherd walks among the sheep. The Before actions prepare a shepherd for the During time with the sheep. Just like the actions the shepherd takes in the Before part of the shepherding sequence, there are different actions to take in the During phase.

Teaching Shepherds Arrive Early

For those of us who guide a Bible study group, our goal should be to arrive early. In fact, we ought to be the first person there. I've tried to live by this saying: "On time is late. Early is on time."

I view this as an important During action, even though it takes place just before my group members arrive. Arriving early to the place where I will guide my group's Bible study benefits me in several ways:

- *I feel more relaxed.* Rushing around causes my mind to wander and to focus on things that won't be helpful during my group's Bible study. Arriving early gives me plenty of time to check things off my to-do list.

- *I have time to pray.* More on this later, but by arriving early, I have time to talk to my Heavenly Father about the people I'll soon guide in exploring and obeying the Bible.
- *I have time to prepare the environment.* I'll unpack this, too, in just a moment. It's one of the things that makes for a better Bible study experience for my group members.

A teaching shepherd should always be the first person to arrive. Group members should never beat the teaching shepherd to the location where the teaching will take place, nor should any guests. What does it communicate to both group members and guests if the shepherd regularly strolls in after everyone has already arrived?

Teaching Shepherds Manage Their Group's Meeting Place

Several moving parts contribute to the effectiveness of the group time and shepherds must oversee them all. Each of these things by itself is a little thing, but excellence is always in the details.

- *Temperature.* If people are uncomfortable, they will have a hard time learning. The room needs to be set to a moderate temperature.
- *Lighting.* This is especially important with groups of older adults whose eyes need that little bit of extra lighting to clearly see their Bibles and Personal Study Guides (PSGs).
- *Seating.* Regardless of where your group meets, you'll want to make certain you have an adequate number of seats for all of your members and guests. I've anonymously visited groups, and I often find myself standing while someone from the group rushes to bring in an extra chair or two. Not having enough places to sit says to the guest, "We weren't expecting you." That's a bad message to communicate to someone you're trying to convince to join your group!
- *Room arrangement.* Rows communicate that the group is expected to sit and listen to the person behind the lectern. Circles communicate, "Let's have a conversation." Maximum involvement on the part of group members happens when they can see each other's faces. If you want to change the dynamics of your group, simply re-arrange rows into circles and watch the exciting new way your group members interact with you and with one another.³

- *Name tags.* If you remember, my wife and I launched a Bible study group five years ago. From day one, we asked our group members to wear name tags. We've done that every day our group has gathered for Bible study. It's helped us get to know one another's names, and made guests feel like they are on equal ground with us when they fill out a name tag that looks just like ours. I do not foresee a day when we will stop this practice! I wish every group would adopt this habit.
- *Personal Study Guides.* Carefully planned studies and expertly crafted leader helps make it easier for groups to have consistent, ongoing studies. In addition to that, Personal Study Guides are the most affordable Bible study tool you can place in people's hands (LifeWay's typical study guide for adults contains thirteen studies and averages out to a very affordable \$.03 a day per person!). Extra Personal Study Guides for guests make a great invitation tool and encourage people to engage with God's Word between Bible study sessions. It's no secret that many people attend church and Bible study groups sporadically. Giving them a Personal Study Guide helps keep them in God's Word between the times they attend.
- *Drinks and snacks.* If your group meets on a church campus, I bet you have coffee available for your group members. You might even have a schedule for your group to bring donuts or other goodies. If you happen to meet in a home, you have probably expanded beyond donuts. Perhaps you include a variety of drinks and maybe even a meal. The point is, whatever you have chosen to provide, have those items set up for your early-arriving members and guests to enjoy.
- *Markers, pens, and self-sticking easel pads.* Some final items in your group's room environment are markers and pens. You'll want a variety of dry-erase and permanent markers, and your group members will need pens. Self-sticking pads can be used on walls to quickly move people into smaller discussion groups. You can also use the giant self-sticking easel pads as extra marker board space (which comes in handy if your group meets in a home). Have a ready supply of these available every time your group gathers for Bible study.

Teaching Shepherds Greet Every Guest

Several years ago, my wife and I moved to Nashville so that I could work for LifeWay. We visited churches each weekend in hopes of finding a new church home. We were shocked and amazed at the actions (I should probably say inaction) of many of the groups we visited.

It was not unusual for us to visit a group and have no one speak to us! We just couldn't believe it. Only on a few occasions did the shepherd approach us to shake our hands and welcome us to the Bible study group. Even fewer group members approached us. That made our search for a new church and a new Bible study group so much harder than it should have been.

Good teaching shepherds have learned the importance of arriving early and having things set and in place. It allows them to focus on guests. A personal welcome and an introduction to other members of the group go a long way in helping guests feel welcome. Good shepherds prioritize meeting guests.

Teaching Shepherds Use a Variety of Teaching Methods

When I first started teaching those eighth grade girls, I'm sure I bored them to tears. I thought I was doing a good job. I even remember saying this to Tammy: "Charles (our pastor back then) has his forty-five minutes, and now I have mine." Yikes. I wish I had those days to do over again!

Since then, I have discovered eight basic learning approaches:

1. Logical
2. Visual
3. Verbal
4. Physical
5. Natural
6. Musical
7. Relational
8. Reflective⁴

Jesus used many of these. In fact, Robert Joseph Choun identified twenty different ways that Jesus taught!⁵ His example is one of variety, and I have now incorporated the eight learning approaches into my group Bible studies. I normally use three or four in any given Bible study session, but over time I use them all. Why? Because the people we teach prefer one or two of those learning approaches. If I only teach using the one or two I most prefer, I'll ignore the learning preferences of most of the people in my group.

One of the greatest ways a shepherd serves the group during Bible study time is by using the eight learning approaches. Your group members will leave the group thinking (or saying), "That was a good Bible study today." What they are really saying is, "That Bible study appealed to the way I prefer to learn."

Teaching Shepherds Remain Flexible

Seasoned teaching shepherds have learned something the rest of us need to accept. Even though they've spent time preparing to guide their group's Bible study and may have even created detailed plans, they remain flexible during the group's Bible study. Let me explain.

Some group leaders believe the number one goal of a group study is to "get through all the points." Most published Bible studies have three or four teaching points. Bible studies created by teachers themselves may have at least that many, sometimes more. The inexperienced teacher may believe that the goal of the study is to cover all the points, but seasoned teaching shepherds know that addressing people's needs is more important than covering all the content.

The veteran shepherd realizes that if one of the sheep is hurting, is extra inquisitive, or is having a hard time understanding, it's alright to jettison some of the things planned. It's better to spend some extra time ministering to and helping specific sheep during the group Bible study. The group can review in the Personal Study Guide the material not covered in the group time. The good teaching shepherd decides when to not cover all the points without feeling guilty about it.

This allows the Holy Spirit to organically direct the flow of the group Bible study. Sometimes the study will follow the path planned

by the shepherd. At other times the Holy Spirit will lead the shepherd to depart from it slightly. On still other occasions the Holy Spirit may lead the shepherd to abandon the entire plan. But it's alright, because the Holy Spirit knows the needs of the group members. Teaching shepherds simply remain flexible to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Teaching Shepherds Lead People to Pray

Yet another way shepherds minister to their group members during the Bible study time is to lead them to pray. Jesus said His house should be called a house of prayer (Matt. 21:13). Shepherds work hard to make sure that the group has time to socialize, study, and pray together.

The prayer time in groups can be challenging. It's one of the things I'm often asked about while leading conferences. "How do we pray together as a group without cutting into the teaching or fellowship time too deeply? How do we set aside time for prayer, which often includes 'Aunt Susie's stubbed toe?'" Leading people to pray is something I've struggled to do well as a group leader. It's a question of balance. Here are several ways that savvy teaching shepherds ensure that prayer happens during the Bible study time without creating an imbalance:

- *The Basket Approach.* I've used this approach and I highly recommend it (especially if you find that the group's prayer needs are larger than you can effectively handle as one big group). Provide each group member with an index card. Ask them to write their name and email address on one side and their prayer request on the other. Pass a basket around to collect the cards. Once the cards are collected, send it around again instructing people to remove one card only. Ask them to pray for the prayer request during the week and to email the person to let them know they are being prayed for. You won't pray for each request in the group time, but the group members will minister to one another throughout the week.
- *Quads.* At the beginning or end of your group time, place people in groups of four and invite them to share prayer requests and pray in those small groups. Sometimes people won't speak up in a larger group setting but they'll speak up when there are only a few people in their group. This is great for helping people get to know one another.

- *The Group Email.* On occasion, I pray a short prayer over the group and ask the Lord to bless them and our Bible study as we begin. I then tell group members, “If you have a prayer request, watch for my email later today. I’ll summarize the study and list important announcements. Just ‘reply all’ and we’ll share requests electronically this week.” We gain more time in Bible study and still share requests.
- *The List.* This is probably the most frequently used way to address prayer requests. The shepherd or the group’s prayer leader writes each request on a marker board as people mention them. After everyone has had adequate time to voice a prayer need, someone prays and the Bible study begins or ends. This approach can consume a lot of time and allow people to wander if the prayer list is long, and the requests are not always specifically prayed for, especially if this is done at the beginning of the group study time.

Teaching Shepherds Apply the Lesson to Life

On a recent trip to Arizona, I met a Sunday School teacher named Carl. He asked me, “How do you apply the Bible to life? How do I help my people know how to live out the Scripture?” What a great, thoughtful question! Carl confessed that he is a good teacher who knows how to study and “rightly divide the Word of Truth.” He struggles, like many of us, to connect the Bible to everyday life and to do it every time the group studies together.

This is where teaching shepherds demonstrate their value. Applying the Bible to life and giving people practical ways to live it out are seen by the shepherd as the most important obligations to the group. These shepherds look at the biblical text and ask themselves:

- *Is there a promise to claim?*
- *Is there a truth to embrace?*
- *Is there a sin to confess?*
- *Is there a verse to memorize?*
- *Is there a habit to develop?*
- *Is there an example for me to follow?*

These and other questions asked by the shepherd help group members connect the Bible to life, applying it to their individual circumstances. Bible study curriculum from publishers like LifeWay have application suggestions embedded in each Bible study and many group leaders find this to be helpful as they prepare to lead their group meeting time.

Shepherding After the Group's Gathering

Teaching shepherds pour a large amount of time into the first two parts of the Before-During-After sequence. They don't stop with the group's Bible study, though. They have learned that completing the sequence of events makes them effective teaching shepherds, so they must press on into the After part of the sequence.

The group leader prepared in the Before phase and shepherded the group in the During phase. Now, in the After phase, the group leader completes the sequence of events that creates a healthy overall ministry to the group's members and guests.

Teaching Shepherds Evaluate

Shepherds should use the time following their group's Bible study to evaluate the session. Each Bible study has several moving parts, and effective shepherds know that before they prepare for the next Bible study, they should stop and evaluate what took place in the most recent group study. A few key diagnostic questions can help you complete an evaluation of the last group Bible study you led:

- *What went right?*
- *What went wrong?*
- *What could have gone better?*
- *Did the people respond to discussion questions? If not, then why?*
- *What activities worked well? What did not?*
- *What will I do differently next time?*
- *Did I clearly explain how the group members can apply this lesson to life?*

There are probably more questions you could add to this list, but these will be enough to help you ponder the last Bible study you led. Don't beat yourself up if things didn't go so well. Sometimes that just cannot be helped. Control what you can. Adjust where you can.

Teaching Shepherds Contact Guests

A survey in the book *Five Handles for Getting a Grip on Your Sunday School* suggests that there is a correlation between the speed of outreach to a potential new group member and the likelihood they will return to your group.⁶ If contact is made within seventy-two hours of the initial visit, a higher percentage of guests will return. The longer it takes to contact a guest, the less likely they are to return to your group.

Shepherds are concerned about their sheep, especially potential new sheep that might be added to their flock. During the After part of the sequence, shepherds carve out time to call, write an email, or drop by to visit the potential group member in their home. Sometimes they do this within hours of the person's first visit. My wife and I experienced this with two churches we visited. On two different occasions before we could get home from lunch after attending church, group leaders from that church left gift bags on our front doorstep! Talk about impressive. As guests, we felt wanted and appreciated. What would it take for your group to do something similar? Not as much as you might think.

Teaching Shepherds Proactively Seek Prospects

You might ask yourself, "What's the difference between proactively seeking prospects and contacting guests?" There's plenty of difference, actually! Guests are people who have attended your group's Bible study. You collected information from them. In a sense, everyone who visits your group is a guest. Not every guest is a prospect, though!

A prospect for your Bible study group may have only attended your church's worship service. Their child may have attended Vacation Bible School. Perhaps a couple from the community came to the church office for marital counseling. If a guest fits the demographic of your group, then that person becomes a prospect. My group's mission is to reach empty-nest adults. If someone visits who is older or younger than that, they are simply a guest. If they are an empty-nest adult, they are a prospect.

Shepherds, in their quest to care for sheep, are always on the lookout for new sheep to add to their flock. They check with leaders at the church's welcome center and reach out to church staff for information about people who are potential group members. Shepherds always have their eyes peeled for persons who fit the demographic of their group.

Teaching Shepherds Contact Absentees

After a Bible study takes place, the shepherd must follow up with each absentee or enlist someone from the group to help reach out to each absentee. Sometimes this is accomplished through a care group system. In some groups it falls to the shepherd to do it.

This is one reason I am a fan of small to mid-sized groups. People have asked me over the years, "What is the right size for a Bible study group?" My strong conviction is that twelve, plus or minus four, is about the right size. Jesus chose twelve men to be in His group; that's a good example for us to follow. Plus, many group leaders just do not have the margin on their calendars or the organizational skills to handle more people than this. It's one reason I'm a big fan of smaller groups. Smaller groups of eight to sixteen people (twelve plus or minus four) are manageable for most shepherds.

There is an exception to this, though. There are some large Bible study groups that are organized for caring. The teaching shepherd in those groups recruits helpers in the form of Care Group Leaders who are responsible for shepherding six to eight people. In that scenario, people are contacted by the person in charge of the care group to which an person is assigned. Those Bible study groups may have upwards of fifty adult members! But they are organized to deliver care to every person who is a member of the group.

Teaching Shepherds Minister to People

Each time a group of people gathers for Bible study, there is no telling what needs may surface. In the Bible study group I lead (a group of empty-nest adults), financial needs have surfaced. I've watched as people cried while explaining the trying situation they were facing. I even had one man tell the group, "I hate my job. I hate living here. Life is terrible." You just never know what people are dealing with. Teaching shepherds must

be able to pivot quickly and address the needs that come up in the group. When one of their sheep is hurting, shepherds drop what they are doing to serve and care for that sheep.

It's fine for the shepherd to minister to group members. It's equally fine if the shepherd enlists others to help meet the needs of group members. If you are the shepherd, you may need to invite people with the spiritual gift of mercy to come alongside you to help a struggling group member. You may need to challenge your group to serve like the people in Acts 6 and Exodus 18. In both stories, people stepped up to help God's anointed leader(s). Their job was to meet the felt needs of people so that the leader (in Exodus it was Moses; in Acts 6 it was the apostles) could focus on the most important tasks.

Teaching Shepherds Thank the Lord

Thankfulness should flow from a shepherd whose heart is filled with debt and gratitude to the Lord for the privilege of guiding a Bible study group. Whether helping preschoolers, children, students, or adults grow in their relationship with the Lord, the shepherd's heart is filled with awe and wonder that God has called him or her to lead His people.

After a Bible study session ends, the shepherd should spend time voicing thanks to the Lord for the opportunity to serve His people. The warning in Scripture is clear: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers" (Jam. 3:1). Those of us who become teaching shepherds face a stricter judgment than group members. We are going to be judged for our faithfulness, our orthodoxy, and the way we care for God's people. Being a shepherd isn't for the faint of heart, but it is for those who have a heart for God and a heart for people. When is the last time you thanked the Lord for calling you to shepherd, teach, and lead His people?

Teaching Shepherds Look Ahead

One last thing, we need to look ahead. This is such an essential After task for teaching shepherds! Although they love God's people, they also want to rightly divide the Word of Truth. This is where the Before meets the After. By looking ahead at the next Bible study soon after the current one is completed and evaluated, shepherds get a jump on their lesson preparation.

Amos: The Preaching Shepherd

A few years ago I came across an often ignored verse of prophecy in Amos 3 that gives us a glimpse into the life of a shepherd:

“The Lord says: As the shepherd snatches two legs or a piece of an ear from the lion’s mouth, so the Israelites who live in Samaria will be rescued...” (Amos 3:12).

What is interesting about this verse is that the Lord inspired Amos to write these words (Amos was a shepherd by trade). The Lord used a shepherd to describe a shepherding situation that sometimes took place to speak to Israel about the way it would be rescued.

As I read this verse, I wondered, “Why would a shepherd bother to rescue pieces of an animal that had obviously become lunch for a predator?” As I pondered the verse, I couldn’t reconcile why a shepherd would risk his life to wrestle pieces of a dead animal away from a predator like a lion, bear, or wolf. I wouldn’t. Let the predator have his lunch. Move away so that you don’t become lunch. That’s what I would have done.

But as I kept thinking about this, it became clear why a shepherd would risk life and limb. He was the shepherd. He wasn’t the owner. He was a temporary custodian of his master’s sheep. It was his sworn duty to protect the sheep, and if a predator came around and killed one, the shepherd still had a master to whom he was accountable. A shepherd might have had to say, “Sir, I’m sorry. I tried to save one of your sheep, but I couldn’t. I can prove that I didn’t take it for myself—see? Here is a piece of an ear, or one of the sheep’s legs.” If a shepherd went out with 100 sheep, he’d better come back with 100 sheep, or be able to explain to his master what had happened to the one(s) lost.

As teaching shepherds, you and I are temporary stewards of God’s people, His sheep. When He trusts us to shepherd ten, He wants us to know we are accountable for those ten. When our group grows and He sends us twenty, we are responsible for those twenty. Shepherds cannot risk viewing the people in our groups as “ours.” They are the Lord’s sheep. You and I are temporary stewards who, like shepherds of old, are responsible to our Master. That’s a sobering thought.

Final Things

There is a sequence that teaching shepherds follow as they carry out their responsibilities. There are things that shepherds need to do Before, During, and After the group meets for Bible study.

Being a teaching shepherd is much more than just showing up and leading the group's Bible study. Sunday School isn't just about Sunday. If you think it is, then you don't see the job.

Being a teaching shepherd means understanding my role as a steward of God's Word and God's people. I'm accountable to my Master, the Lord Jesus, for the people He gives me to shepherd. It's a solemn responsibility that is full of blessings and challenges. It's not for the faint of heart. It is for those who have a heart for God and for His people.

A heart. And a brain! There is so much that is being learned about how people learn. In the third chapter, Dr. Ken Coley will introduce us to some shepherding science, especially as it relates to the teaching part of shepherding. Remember, you can be a teacher without being a shepherd, but you can't be a shepherd without being a teacher.

Chapter 3

Science

We can go to almost any page in any of the Gospels and identify teaching concepts as Jesus interacted with people. Twenty-first century research is catching up to the pedagogy we see in the Sermon on the Mount, the instruction of the twelve disciples, and the one-on-one mentorship of the Samaritan woman. The scientific discoveries and recent research about how our brains work lend great insights to how we can become better teaching shepherds.

For example, with the advancement in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), we can watch the brain at work as it encounters new information, processes it, and stores it into long-term memory.⁷ In addition, a great deal of empirical evidence connects what we know about how people learn with effective techniques that we can all use as we teach.⁸

A group of Stanford University researchers recently produced a book on teaching entitled *The ABCs of How We Learn*. In their text they discuss selecting the right teaching moves in order to produce the right learning outcomes.⁹ These and numerous other current books on the science of teaching and learning should give us plenty to consider if we want to be more effective teaching shepherds.

Five key dimensions related to these current discoveries in mind, brain, and education research intersect with our biblical mandate to be teaching shepherds. We are to be:

- *guides to construction of understanding,*
- *encouragers for high achievement,*
- *reflective practitioners for personal improvement,*
- *team builders through active learning, and*
- *evaluators of progress.*

The Teaching Shepherd as Guide to Construction of Understanding

Marti MacCullough from Cairn University (formerly Philadelphia Bible College) describes what is happening in the minds of your group members as the “construction of understanding.”¹⁰ She is quick to point out that this cognitive construction project makes use of building blocks from God’s Word and your faithful teaching. Individual believers are not creating their own truth, but are receiving and processing new ideas that you present from God’s absolute Truth. This is what is meant by guide. As a shepherd you guide your group members as each one engages with this process.

Engage for Change

As group members engage in Bible study, change takes place in their level of understanding, in their grasp of new knowledge, and in a new perspective or attitude. But most importantly, we hope that these changes result in a changed heart which leads to a change in behavior. Scripture is clear; the Lord desires a broken and contrite heart, and He expects us to be growing in righteousness.

Why not allow group members to remain quiet listeners? Research conducted in multiple settings reveals that learners who are engaged in the teaching-learning process recall more new information than those who remain passive. Sitting and listening (including taking notes) is much less effective when compared to other teaching methods if you expect group members to comprehend new ideas and successfully store and remember them for future use.

Teach Like Jesus

Throughout the Gospels we encounter Jesus engaging His disciples in the teaching-learning process:

- *Jesus engaged their imagination: “Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap.”*
- *Jesus engaged them in discussion: “Who do men say that I am?”*
- *Jesus engaged them in problem solving: “Why are you troubled? Touch me and see...”*

- *Jesus engaged them by connecting with their prior experience: “I am the bread of life.”*
- *Jesus engaged them with tests: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me...”*
- *Jesus engaged them in active learning: “You give them something to eat.”*

Effective teaching is not the mere transmission of new ideas or the dumping of content. Rather, as the examples above from Jesus’ teaching illustrate, effective teaching includes the engagement of the learner.

Begin with the Familiar

From what point does the shepherd begin when he wants to guide his sheep to a new location? He obviously begins where they are and then moves them forward together.

Teaching shepherds must begin where their students are and seek to connect with the mental structures created in the brain (schema). All group members come with these mental structures which are built by prior learning and life experiences. Researchers point out that learners grasp concepts more quickly and can retrieve new information more easily when it is connected to prior knowledge. Willis points out, “Cells that fire together, wire together.”¹¹ A non-technical way to view this is to ask, “Where are the learners going to put this new idea?” The probability of them remembering the new concepts improves dramatically if they place the new concept in an existing bucket (prior learning) rather than constructing new buckets.

Jesus Connected the Disciples’ Schema to New Ideas

As the Master Teacher, Jesus connected the audience’s mental structures (schema) in nearly every teaching episode. In a memorable discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus took a profound theological doctrine concerning salvation and put it in terms of an experience common to all humans: “you must be born again.” In His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus began with the simple request, “May I have a drink?” In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus engaged their thinking by directing their imagination to a common flower, “Consider the lilies of the fields...”

The instructional techniques of Jesus once again support current research. A modern educator need only consider the “I am” sayings of Jesus found in John’s Gospel to recognize how Jesus connects with the general schema of all generations and cultures. All people can grasp the temporal meanings of ‘bread of life,’ ‘the Good Shepherd,’ ‘the vine and the branches,’ or ‘the door.’ From these basic concrete concepts, Jesus makes a connection to the eternal truth of His identity and His mission.

What Scientist Say

A group of educators describe this connecting process in this way:

Students connect what they learn to what they already know, interpreting incoming information, and even sensory perception, through the lens of their existing knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. In fact, there is widespread agreement among researchers that students must connect new knowledge to previous knowledge in order to learn. However, the extent to which students are able to draw on prior knowledge depends on the nature of their prior knowledge, as well as the instructor’s ability to harness it.¹²

Neuroscientist and educator Judy Willis, M.D., expresses a similar idea:

To keep this newly learned material from slipping away, it needs to enter the network of the brain’s wiring. Students can retain the new information by activating their previously learned knowledge that relates to the new material.... Effective teaching uses strategies to help students recognize patterns and then make the connections required to process the new working memories so they can travel into the brain’s long-term storage area.¹³

The team of Stanford researchers referenced earlier highlighted the value of using analogies. The goal is to help group members associate unfamiliar concepts with familiar ideas or experiences. This method becomes even more powerful when the teacher introduces two or more analogies for his group to examine. Challenging students to discover the underlying principle of several comparisons activates complex problem solving and deeper learning takes place.¹⁴

The use of multiple analogies calls to mind Jesus presenting three parables about three lost items; a sheep, a coin, and a son. His listeners, both tax collectors and Pharisees, faced the complexity of making sense out of the comparisons of the three narratives. The intersection of the three parables featured a moment of rejoicing in each narrative when the lost item was found. The tax collectors were delighted; the Pharisees, not so much. But higher thinking was demanded from all those present.

The Teaching Shepherd as Encourager for High Achievement

Shepherds believe all group members can grow in their faith and in their cognitive abilities. Books on leadership and teaching frequently point out the importance of communicating high expectations for learners. If we allow our group members to ‘sit and soak,’ we indirectly communicate that we lack confidence in their ability to contribute anything of value.

View Each Student as His Workmanship

Perhaps you grew up in a generation in which teachers believed that a person’s intellect (IQ) was frozen at a particular level early on in life and that measurement would never change. If we adopt this negative view of people, we must ignore Paul’s encouragement to interact with every person as “God’s workmanship” (Eph. 2:10). In the original language, Paul used the word *poiema*, which gives us our word poetry. Just as a poet carefully crafts each syllable in a verse of poetry, so too the Lord designs each of us. The word can also be translated masterpiece, such as a painting or piece of sculpture. The image of Michelangelo or Rembrandt standing before his stone or canvas should inspire us to treat each group member with a spirit of awe and dignity. Each participant has potential to expand intellectually and grow spiritually. The Designer of the universe creates each of His children for His glory and for the purpose of fulfilling good works He has prepared in advance for them to do.

This optimism for such potential is now supported by mind, brain, and education research. Through the use of MRIs, neuroscience has established the concept of brain plasticity. Wilson and Conyers summarize their findings this way:

Studies showing that learning changes the brain's structure and function supports the view that academic ability of almost all students can be improved with the appropriate educational conditions. This has major implications for educational practice.¹⁵

As long as the individual remains active, the research says that the brain continues to grow, to expand, and to be molded.

So how do these concepts impact our teaching? First, as we engage all of our group members, we do so with a sense of expectancy, using phrases like “you can do this,” “this is important,” “you need to tackle this.” Second, effective shepherds give learners the opportunity to interact with the material, other learners, and the shepherd. When a person lectures non-stop, he subtly communicates that he is the only person in the room who has insight into the lesson content. Perhaps, far worse, the students believe he is the only one through whom the Holy Spirit is speaking.

In I Peter 5:2-5, we find several exhortations for all of us who shepherd a Bible study group:

- *Shepherd God's flock among you...*
- *Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock...*
- *All of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another.*

These verses challenge the teaching shepherd to step back from the precision of a finely tuned lecture and allow time for the messy activity that occurs at a construction site. We must embrace the noise and disorder that accompanies the building process that occurs as a result of human mental endeavor.

Think of a skill that you have honed over the years. No doubt a more experienced person coached you and observed your first clumsy efforts at the basic techniques. Imagine where you would be today if you had never been allowed to actually touch the power tools, swing the clubs, or thread the needle on a sewing machine? When we fail to allow interaction and elaboration during class time, it is as if we are saying, “Don't touch the tools of our trade. Just watch me do it.”

The Teaching Shepherd as Reflective Practitioner for Personal Improvement

Do you have any experience playing or coaching a team sport or singing in or directing a choir? Both of these pursuits beautifully illustrate the concept of reflecting on both your performance and the actions and reactions around you. The directors and performers in sports and music illustrate the need for an obsession with getting better. Checking statistics. Reading reviews and critiques. Watching video of practice and past performances. In the case of many athletic competitions, this is happening during the game! (How many shots did the player take in the first half? What pitch did he throw last time in this situation?) As a coach of dozens of teams over three decades, I can tell you that most mornings around 3:00 a.m. following a game the previous evening I found myself wide awake as I relived every possession, analyzed every at bat, and grieved over every missed opportunity to score.

But do we have the same commitment when it comes to being a teaching shepherd?

While conducting a teachers' training seminar, I had a participant respond to the concept of reflective practice this way:

"Ken, I teach the Bible study lesson three times every week. The first time, I go through it mid-week after I finish studying. The second time, I teach the lesson on Sunday morning. The third time, I teach it again in the car on my way home after church."

I interrupted, "And which one is the best?"

"The third time is always the best!" he stated without hesitation but with a little regret.

I responded, "This process means you will be a better teacher every week."

Reflective practice is that which stands between you improving every year and you being a first year teacher over and over for thirty years. So what are you evaluating in regards to your teaching? Here are just a few of the dimensions of teaching on which you should reflect:

- *Was the content presented in ways that allowed for construction of understanding?*
- *Did the presentation and activities connect with the schema (mental structures) of my audience?*
- *Was everyone engaged in each activity? What worked best? Any holdouts?*
- *Did I approach the group in ways that acknowledged differences?*
- *Did I model or describe how I went about learning this material?*
- *Did I include opportunities for them to work together on a task?*
- *Did I weave in formative assessments (more on this later) to check for understanding?*

As you mature as a teaching shepherd, these concepts will become so ingrained in your mind that you will find yourself making adjustments in your lesson plan and your planned activities *while* you teach! If you sense a drop in energy level in the group during one phase of your lesson, you can, with experience, reach in your tool box and introduce another method to magnify God's Word in ways that are more effective and meaningful.

What the Experts Say

Gregory and Chapman explain that one size does not fit all when it comes to learning:

Each student is unique. They differ in countless ways, including physical characteristics, personalities, backgrounds, cognitive abilities, experiences, learning preferences, and social development. Teaching experience and recent research tell us each brain is distinctively wired and impacted by previous experiences. With this knowledge, effective teachers know that learners cannot be placed through the same education hoops.¹⁶

Metacognition: Thinking About Thinking

What do you do when you hear a ten digit phone number for the first time? Some look for number patterns that are familiar. Others see a high school team picture with the numbers lined up on uniforms. Others create a song using the numbers. My wife identifies the geometric pattern of the numbers on a phone or keypad. No matter your approach, the response you give requires that you think about your own thinking. This is the essence of metacognition.

You hear the pastor say, “Let’s turn to the book of Philippians,” and you rehearse in your head, “General Electric Power Company” to help you remember Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. That would be your cognitive strategy for remembering the order of these four epistles from Paul.

Metacognitive Dialogue Leads to Extraordinary Learning

As you study, research, and pray in your preparation to teach each week, have you ever asked yourself, “How did I learn this?” What happens each week in my thinking processes when I encounter a passage, verse, or word that I don’t comprehend the first couple of times I read it? Some teachers stop immediately and pray. Others look up the unfamiliar phrase in another translation, a commentary, or a Greek or Hebrew dictionary. These are all cognitive strategies. As an effective teacher of God’s Word, you no doubt have developed approaches that allow you to unravel the mysteries you face each week.

But do you ever share your metacognitive processes with those you are discipling? The research is overwhelming in its support for the effectiveness of teachers who share their cognitive strategies with their students. Wilson and Conyers describe the process this way:

(Think) about one’s thinking with the goal of enhancing learning. In its simplest terms, metacognition involves being mindful of one’s thinking processes, such as strategies to puzzle out the meaning of an unfamiliar word or improve recall of specific facts. The goal of teaching students to be metacognitive is to guide them to consciously recognize when and how to employ the thinking and problem-solving strategies that work best for them.¹⁷

The next step to even greater learning is to guide students to share their own mental strategies with each other. Another exciting dimension to metacognitive conversations is that the new insights and strategies your disciples gain are transferable to future personal Bible study. You are training independent learners, which is the goal of discipleship!

The Teaching Shepherd as Team Builder through Active Learning

Exceptional research about cooperative learning has been around since the 1970s, but Jesus models these concepts in the Gospels. Two educators, David Johnson and Roger Johnson, identified five components of successful cooperative learning techniques, and a sixth was recently added. First, let's look at their definition of cooperative learning:

An instructional arrangement that allows two to six students the opportunity to work together on a shared task in order to jointly construct their knowledge and understanding of the content.¹⁸

Before we examine the strategies involved in successful cooperative learning experiences, let's take a moment to deal with the negative perceptions some may have about 'group work.' Pause for a moment and consider your own preferences and previous experiences. Often the criticism of group work focuses on the assignment being vague, undoable in a reasonable timeframe, or too easy or too difficult for the group. Sometimes the disapproval revolves around the group process; some folks watch while those considered stronger students do all the work. Or maybe the knot in your stomach is a result of the product that the group produced that, somehow missing the point, was not authentically connected to the main point of the lesson or, worst of all, no one even asked to see your response or work product. From a leader's perspective, the concerns include wasting of valuable class time and the group becoming chaotic.

It just doesn't have to be this way. Without getting into technical educational research, educators have established that this approach to learning is highly effective, and researchers have seen successful outcomes when cooperative learning is properly carried out.

What Researchers Say

Here's what researchers determined is needed to make 'group work' productive:

- *Positive Interdependence.* The group's success depends on everyone's cooperation. Each participant is assigned a role to play in the group's process. Here are some typical roles: leader of the discussion, recorder of comments, researcher, and presenter.
- *Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction.* A spirit of respect, encouragement, and support for each group member pervades the group process. This is where relationship building and camaraderie forms in your group.
- *Individual and Group Accountability.* Each member is expected to contribute and the group is expected to present the results or work product to the larger group. There is a sense of positive pressure to create a valuable response and be prepared to present. (Translation: you can't goof off and avoid being called on.)
- *Interpersonal & Small Group Skills.* Communication skills and conflict resolution techniques are discussed, which builds trust. Where else in our society is there a better place for individuals to learn to work effectively toward a common goal with others? Suggestion: Scaffold the development of these skills by using groups of two to three participants before moving to groups of four to six.
- *Group Processing.* Time is allotted to reflect on the group's interaction. Following the period of time in which your group gathers, be sure to allocate time for a full group discussion of each group's findings as well as a few moments to evaluate the process itself.
- *Provide a Meaningful Task.* The goal or work product needs to connect with the group members so that they view their efforts to be relevant and the work product authentic. (This element was added by Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009.)¹⁹

One of the most vivid illustrations of these elements of cooperative learning can be found in the book of Nehemiah. In this narrative Nehemiah, the new construction foreman, has a Herculean task before him: the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem. The previous structure was

a protective fortress that encircled the city, but decades after Babylonians attacked God's holy city, the wall was a two and a half mile pile of rubble. Chapter 2 concludes with Nehemiah calling the citizens of Jerusalem together to give themselves to a meaningful task. Chapter 3 describes how Nehemiah divided the workers in subgroups and assigned the work by communities, calling on them to restore the particular gate and portion of the wall that stood next to their neighborhood. Positive interdependence is on display as we read how each section of the wall was restored beginning at the Sheep Gate (3:1) and moving counterclockwise around the layout of the structure. Face-to-face promotive interaction permeated the teamwork necessary for Nehemiah's followers to serve both as construction workers and security monitors. This double duty is described in 4:15 and following. This passage further illustrates (in v. 16) individual and group accountability, in that "half of my men did the work while the other half held spears, shields, bows and armor." And Nehemiah 5 describes the exceptional leadership skills Nehemiah employed while a large portion of the construction force worked through a major conflict involving taxes, mortgages, and usury (5:1ff). Following the completion of the wall, Nehemiah and Ezra led the citizens of Jerusalem in a worship experience that included but far exceeded group processing: "then they knelt low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground" (8:6).

Perhaps your class is not ready for a ten-minute cooperative learning activity. I recommend beginning with brief, one-minute activities (Think-Pair-Share) during which group members develop positive working relationships, gain confidence in their ability to contribute, and learn to trust you and their classmates. Reluctance to contribute is most often based on fear of rejection. After several positive experiences, your group will be ready for a longer, more complex assignment.

The Teaching Shepherd as Evaluator of Progress

Proverbs 27:23 states, "Know well the condition of your flock, and pay attention to your herds." In the Hebrew, the first phrase can be translated, "know the face of." So just how well do you know the extent to which your flock is growing in its knowledge of Scripture and more importantly with its walk with Christ?

Shepherds must accept the responsibility of assessing their group members' level of comprehension and challenge them to put the biblical content into practice. I am not suggesting you give your group an exam or quiz to evaluate their progress. Let's take a look at formative assessment.

Active learning often has the potential to be formative, if the teacher and the students take note of the achievement level of the class or individual students:

- *From the teacher's perspective:* what is the quantity or quality of the responses I am getting from the learners?
- *From the student's perspective:* how do adjust my personal study to perform at the level of expectation established by the teacher?

James Popham defines formative assessment as “a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics.”²⁰ He emphasizes that formative assessment activities are planned and are not spontaneous as a result of unpredictable or spur-of-the-moment reactions to an unresponsive class. Robyn Jackson affirms the importance of this approach:

Formative assessments are one of the most powerful ways to improve student achievement because they provide real-time feedback to you and your students on their progress toward the learning goals, and they help students see a direct relationship between how hard they work and what they learn.²¹

Jesus demonstrated these concepts in Luke 9 when He inquired of His disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” Aware that His disciples were dealing with major-league cognitive dissonance (that moment when you realize you hold two contradictory beliefs), Jesus wanted them to express what they were hearing from others as they attempted to sort out His identity. Their responses were all over the map: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets of long ago come back to life (v. 19). He was aware that their prior religious training made it hard for them to make sense of His ministry and miracles. His followers were cataloging scattered pieces of information and experiences, but they weren't getting it.

Jesus knew that if He gave a quiz that day, most of them would fail. But instead of bulling ahead with more lecture material, the Savior demonstrated how to meet the needs of learners. Only Peter's response is recorded, "God's Messiah" (v. 20). This also illustrates another crucial point: the role of the Christian educator is to assist students by stimulating the construction of understanding of absolute Truth within their mental framework and not the manufacture of a personal, relativistic truth.

As the Master Teacher, Jesus was aware that all learners carry pre-existing perspectives, dispositions, and attitudes, as well as a knowledge base. To make matters more challenging, this background varies widely from student to student. Jesus demonstrated for us that effective teachers are aware of the schema or background of their students and find ways to connect with or 'hook' the lesson to prior learning.

- *The disciples needed help with their misconceptions.* Teachers prepare by making a metacognitive or thinking analysis of their own learning.
- *Closely related to the first need that Jesus connected with is their need to clarify and correct faulty thinking about His identity.* Jesus already knew His identity, but He demonstrated great teaching for us. Effective teachers spend time thinking through how they learned specific concepts: what was tricky? what was counter to what was expected? what needed to be broken into pieces to add learning and retention?
- *The disciples needed an opportunity to construct their understanding.* Jesus provided them with an active learning experience! Frequently, Jesus gave His disciples and others the opportunity to voice their understanding of the topic at hand. This necessitates students thinking through their responses, hearing how it sounds as it is stated audibly, and also seeing the reaction of both the teacher and other students.
- *The disciples needed some time to work together.* He allowed time for cooperative learning. Social interaction with other learners is a powerful way to engage students. Not only do students get to experience the benefit of expressing their understanding, but they also have the opportunity to hear and learn from other students.
- *The disciples needed to pause and check their comprehension.* Jesus met this need by providing them with a brief time of assessment.

When was the last time you were in a Bible study group and the teacher took a few moments to find out if the class was tracking with him or her? And asking “Do you have any questions?” doesn’t count. Again, let’s be clear, Jesus (unlike you and me) did not need to ask them questions to gauge their level of understanding. He knew they didn’t get it! But measuring for understanding in brief interactions with your students provides information about levels of comprehension to both the teacher and the student. Perhaps the student was not even aware that he was misunderstanding, as was the case with the disciples. Formative assessments provide both teachers and students with brief snapshots during the lesson.

Rollins outlines three strategies that help learners monitor their own comprehension, summarize key ideas, and stay engaged in and focused on the content. Here are Rollins’ three techniques with some suggestions for how we might implement them in a Bible study group:

- *VIP: Very Important Point.* As your group members work through a passage, they can use a highlighter to indicate a VIP phrase or verse. After completing the passage, they can go back and explain why they highlighted the portions they chose.
- *Sticky notes.* As individuals study a passage, they jot down reactions, questions, or summary statements on sticky notes. The restricted space requires that students think more carefully about how they express their thoughts.
- *Coding.* This strategy works well when the passage has two or three main ideas for which the teacher can create a code that can be written in the margin. For a first time reading of Matthew 5:13-20, a reader could mark blocks of verses with J/G standing for Jesus/Grace. By contrast, other sections can be marked P/L for Pharisees/Legalism. Another coding exercise could be reading the four chapters of Jonah and marking each section with BA for bad attitude, or SA for selfish attitude, or GA for godly attitude.²²

Planning for Engagement

So what does engagement look like in your flock? Most teachers want everyone in the group to focus, but many appear to believe this happens best when the teacher talks non-stop. Nothing could be further from the truth. When scientists measured brain activity and the chemical reactions associated with learning, they discovered that the chemicals necessary for processing and retaining new information can be depleted when a lecture goes for longer than twenty minutes. Beyond that period of time the learner is merely writing random notes and zoning out.²³

Level I Engagement

Here are some specific categories related to engagement that the teaching shepherd ought to consider using to guide his or her group:

Thinking. The teacher engages the students by posing a question like, “Imagine a time in your life when you were standing with a crowd waiting for the arrival of someone. How did that compare to the scene in the crowded Galilean street as described in Luke 8:41?”

Reading. The teacher identifies something in the text that all group members will be able to find on their own without great difficulty. For example, Paul uses a form of the word bear three times in Galatians 6. You might say, “As I read Galatians 6 aloud, please be listening for the verses in which you hear the word bear.” (Or ask them to read silently and look for the three occurrences.)

Writing. The teacher selects a word or phrase in the text that needs to be thought of in the group member’s everyday speech. The teacher could ask students to review a passage that uses the words sin, iniquity, or transgression. (Many Old Testament passages use all three.) But few people use these terms in every day speech. You can instruct them, “Please jot down how you might express this in your conversations tomorrow.”

Polling your group. In preparation for teaching Luke 8:23-25, the teacher can ask, “Give me a thumbs up if you have ever been sailing” or “On a scale of one to five, with one being calm water and five being scary waves, show me with your hand the biggest storm you have experienced while boating, sailing, or just observing the ocean from shore.”

Before moving on, notice an important aspect of these first four approaches: no one other than the teacher spoke a word. Not a word. But each group member was challenged to participate by thinking, reading, writing, or responding to a poll.

Please don't misunderstand; verbalizing responses is an effective method of engagement. But I have met many teachers in my travels that raise objections to allowing group members to speak. These objections include:

- *My group is passive by nature. They aren't ready to participate.*
- *My group actually prefers to hear me speak. That's what they come for.*
- *If I do group discussions, I feel like I have dropped the reins and will not get the horses back.*
- *I have some 'big talkers' who just don't know when to stop.*
- *Engagement takes too long. I can't get through my notes.*

Do any of these sound familiar? Here's one more: the same people do all the talking. Consider inviting your group members to engage in your next lesson by using one or more of the Level 1 Engagement categories. You will discover the following dimensions of this level of engagement:

- *One hundred percent of your group will engage, not just a handful of repeat performers.*
- *Activities like the examples above take only a few seconds; no need to be concerned about losing time.*
- *Activities like these take little energy; no need to fear grumpy campers.*
- *Your group maintains focus under your direction; no need to worry about noise or distractions.*

Level II Engagement

Returning to our list of categories of engagement, let's take a look at three more approaches that are a little more involved.

Discussing with one group member. One way to do this is by asking a thought provoking question, one that each group member can answer. After some silence for thought, direct each group member to turn to the person on his or her left or right and share ideas for sixty seconds. Then calls for volunteers to share a summary of the ideas that were discussed.

Large group participation. While many methods exist, Line Up serves as an example of a large-group participation activity. The teacher describes a hypothetical situation that has a large spectrum of possible responses such as do nothing, react, or become aggressively involved. The teacher designates one end of an area for one extreme response and another area for the opposite response. The group members are then directed to stand in the space that most reflects their beliefs or values.

Creating something new in a group. Group members are assigned a group in which they craft a response to which each member has contributed. An example may be the creation of a summary or definition by a group.

Unlike the options listed under Level I Engagement, these three approaches take more planning, necessitate more class time, and demand a greater commitment of energy from group members. But with a little practice, you will find that the investment is well worth it. One significant outcome is the durability of the new learning experience and the likelihood of future use. One neuroscientist explains,

When students build their working memories through a variety of activities, they are stimulating multiple sensory intake centers in their brains. Their brains develop pathways leading to the same memory storage destination. By stimulating several senses with the information, more brain connections are available when students need to recall that memory later on.²⁴

The Master's Model for Teaching

As Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), He demonstrated many of the concepts identified in this chapter.

Engagement/Schema/Active Learning (v. 17). Jesus showed awareness of the emotional state of the two men walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24). He engaged them in conversation about their immediate mindset by asking, “What is this dispute that you are having with each other as you are walking?” He could have interrupted and asked them to listen to Him straighten out all their confusion, but that was not what was best at that moment. He knew they needed to express (elaborate or put into words) the confusion they were experiencing.

Formative Assessment (v.18). Cleopas asked if Jesus was the only visitor to Jerusalem who didn't know the things that just happened. Then Jesus took time to check their understanding and allow the learners to evaluate themselves as they articulated the response to His question, “What things?” (Obviously Jesus did not need to hear it from them—He knew the answers.)

Elaboration. Amazingly, the Creator of the Universe and the Source of all Truth allowed these two travelers to express (elaborate) their confusion and inaccurate interpretation of their prior learning and experience.

Connection to their Schema (vs. 19-23). We see they had a great deal of background knowledge and prior experiences associated with the expectation of following the Messiah. But they were making inappropriate applications and drawing the wrong conclusions. They had all the puzzle pieces but needed to reorganize them.

Conviction and Challenge (vs. 25-26). After giving them the opportunity to express their misunderstanding of Scripture and recent events, Jesus confronted them with a statement that was both convicting and challenging: “How foolish and slow you are to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then He methodically retraced Old Testament teaching about Himself (v. 27).

Science and the Savior: He Already Knew!

The Gospels are filled with examples of teaching techniques demonstrated by our Savior, the Chief Shepherd. Many recent “discoveries” made by scholars in the various fields of mind, brain, and education research magnify the teaching of our Master. Jesus gave us a model for presenting God’s Word that includes loving our assigned flock. One way we show our sheep we love them is by using as many tools as we can to help them understand the deep truths of the Master Teaching Shepherd.

Conclusion

It's David from chapter one again. I just finished reviewing the two Kens' chapters and found some pretty challenging stuff, mostly about the teaching role of the shepherd. That is to be expected. You see, both Kens have an unusually high measure of the spiritual gift of teaching. Both are accomplished teachers. It is only natural that they would encourage you to step up your game as a teacher when it comes to shepherding. Teaching comes naturally to them. They have also learned how to shepherd people well. But that's not their gift. Mine either. One of my gifts is teaching. I am not gifted as a shepherd. I have learned how to do it. And I do it okay.

Your job, if you have the gift of shepherding, is to do the opposite! You are good at looking after people. You may need to learn some more about teaching since it comes with the shepherd job! So we have given you some ideas toward that end. We are teachers who have learned how to shepherd. Hopefully better and better over time as we've learned from others. You are likely a shepherd who is learning how to teach. Hopefully better and better over time as you learn from others.

The optimal spiritual gift for a small group leader or Sunday School teacher is the Ephesians 4 gift of teaching shepherd.

I am convinced of it.

And there is a short-cut toward fulfilling the teaching role it includes. It's called great Bible study curriculum. That is, if the curriculum is designed with understandings like you've read from Ken and Ken. If you use Bible study materials from LifeWay, it will be.

I am convinced of it.

The future of our Bible study ministries is about new, small groups led by teaching shepherds. New groups. Small groups. Shepherds.

I am convinced of it.

Whether it is called Life Groups or small groups or community groups or just plain old Sunday School, the future of groups meeting before or after a worship time remains bright.

I am convinced of it.

A lady on a hotel elevator in Phoenix, Arizona stared at my name badge. Vickie and I were messengers to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. Then she said, "You're our Sunday School man." I guess so. It is the best job in the world. God has allowed me to carry that mantle for the last thirteen years. Others carried it before me and it is time for me to pass on that mantle. Allan Taylor will now be your Sunday School man. He will be my Sunday School man. Sunday School has a missionary heritage and a missionary vision that is still strong. Allan will build on that vision and heritage. Its day is not done.

I am convinced of it.

If I am right, success will come because thousands have answered the call to shepherd boys and girls and men and women in small groups that gather once a week for Bible study. Gathering to grow. Growing to go. Going to gather. We need shepherds to step up. They will!

I am convinced of it.

Will you be a shepherd? Being called a shepherd is one of those things you hope they say about you at your memorial service. What else could you do to make the Great Shepherd smile any bigger when you meet Him? Nothing.

I am convinced of it.

Reflection Questions

Chapter 1

How would you define your system for caring for everyone on your ministry list? Diagram how a ministry need is discovered and addressed.

Are you more of a teacher or a shepherd? To what evidence can you point to validate your answer?

How are you investing in the next generation of shepherds? What are you doing to reproduce yourself?

Chapter 2

Which of the Before actions do you find the hardest to schedule? How might scheduling time through the week help?

Which insight from Ezra 3:10 most resonates with you? How does that insight impact how you shepherd?

Rate the During actions from most important to least important. Explain your reasons for ranking the actions as you did.

What plan do you follow for contacting guests, prospects, absentees, and those with ministry needs? How can you improve your plan?

Chapter 3

Of the five dimensions, which one do you need to work on the most? What steps can you take to improve in that area?

How can you encourage your group members to think about how they think?

What can you do to lead your group to engage more deeply during the group time?

Endnotes

- 1 See page 7 of *Leader: Creating Commissioned Community* by David Francis, Allan Taylor and Ken Braddy (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2016) for more on the role of outreach leaders.
- 2 David Francis. *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works Through You* (Nashville, LifeWay Christian Resources, 2003), pp. 77-80.
- 3 See pages 5-8 in *Teacher: Creating Conversational Community* by David Francis, Ken Braddy, and Michael Kelley (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2015) for more details on moving from rows to circles.
- 4 See page 16 in *Teacher: Creating Conversational Community* by David Francis, Ken Braddy, and Michael Kelley (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2015) for more details on the eight learning approaches.
- 5 See pages 166 -8 of *The Christian Educator's Handbook* edited by Kenneth O. Gangel and Howard G. Hendricks (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1998) for a listing.
- 6 Jerri Herring and Larry Garner, "Five Handles for Getting a Grip on Your Sunday School" (1997), p. 10.
- 7 Judy Willis, *Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning: Insights from a Neurologist and Classroom Teacher* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum, 2006), p. 1.
- 8 Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2010), p. 2.
- 9 Daniel L. Schwartz, Jessica M. Tsang and Kristen P. Blair, *The ABCs of How We Learn: 26 Scientifically Proven Approaches, How They Work, and When to Use Them* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), p. xv.
- 10 Martha E. MacCullough, *By Design: Developing a Philosophy of Education Informed by a Christian Worldview* (Langhorne, PA: Cairn University, 2013), p. 100-1.
- 11 Willis, p. 7.
- 12 Ambrose et al., p. 15.
- 13 Willis, p. 6.
- 14 Schwartz, Tsang and Blair, pp. 1-3.
- 15 Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers, *Five Big Ideas for Effective Teaching: Connecting Mind, Brain, and Education Research to Classroom Practice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013), p. 30.
- 16 Gayle H. Gregory and Carolyn Chapman, *Differentiated Instructional Strategies: One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2013), p. 1.
- 17 Wilson and Conyers, p. 110.
- 18 Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher and Sandi Everlove, *Productive Group Work: How to Engage Students, Build Teamwork, and Promote Understanding* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009), p. 14.

19 Ibid.

20 W. James Popham, *Transformative Assessment* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008), p. 17.

21 Robyn R. Jackson, *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009), p. 131.

22 Suzy Pepper Rollins, *Learning in the Fast Lane: Eight Ways to Put All Students on the Road to Academic Success* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2014), pp. 100-3.

23 Willis, p. 10.

24 Ibid.

Notes and Reflections:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

As leaders of a Bible study group, we carry the responsibility of being a shepherd.

To be a good shepherd, we need a system for creating a caring community. David Francis identifies key concepts that are foundational to a system that shepherds people well. Shepherds also assume different positions with their flock depending on the situation: guiding the group from the front, being among the flock, and walking behind the flock. Ken Braddy addresses the role of shepherd in terms of the weekly sequence of before, during, and after the group gathers. New developments in the science of teaching and learning impact how we shepherd as well. Ken Coley offers some practical ways shepherds can be more effective disciple-makers by embracing and employing some of these discoveries.

Additional helps can be found at www.LifeWay.com/DavidFrancis.

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