

TREVIN WAX

**GOSPEL-
CENTERED**
Teaching



Showing Christ in All the Scripture



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Dedication

For teachers and small group leaders who love Jesus,
love the church, and love the lost

Acknowledgments

Gospel-Centered Teaching is not just the title of a book, but also the affirmation of a Christ-focused approach to the Bible intended to lead God's people to join His mission to seek and save the lost. I'm grateful for the many pastors, preachers, and teachers in my life who never used the term "gospel-centered" but always turned my gaze to Christ. In the past few years, it's been a privilege to travel across the country and meet teachers and small group leaders who "do the work" of ministry every week without receiving fanfare or recognition. You open the Bible and open your group discussion, prayerfully guiding people to an encounter with

Christ again and again. I hope this book reignites your passion for leading and teaching.

I'm thankful for Bill Craig, Eric Geiger, Jennifer Lyell, and Devin Maddox for believing in the message of this book and encouraging me to develop a hands-on, practical guide to focusing our attention on Jesus. Thanks also to Ed Stetzer and Daniel Davis and all the team members, editors, and writers who make The Gospel Project a Christ-centered resource for people of all ages. Special thanks to my wife, Corina, who has cheered me on during the launch of The Gospel Project and throughout the writing of this book. Finally, I'm most grateful for the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, who has saved me from my sin and sent me out as a witness to His gospel. May He get all the praise!

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1

Something's Missing



Can we have a heart-to-heart? You know, teacher to teacher? Maybe you steer clear of titles like “teacher” and instead think of yourself as a small group leader, or a “facilitator” of discussion with your group as you study the Scriptures. That’s fine. Whatever title you use, the responsibility is the same: leading people to study the Bible and praying they see their lives transformed as a result.

Big responsibility, isn’t it? And if you’re honest, you’ll probably admit that the task of teaching weighs on you from time to time. You know what an important role this is. You’ve heard the apostle James’s warning (James 3:1) about teachers being held to a higher standard. Whether

you're just starting out as a teacher or you've been in this role for decades, you know this is a big deal. People make choices based on what they understand in the Scriptures. Knowing God and His will is life or death. And you are stepping into a big role in helping people know how to read the Bible and understand what it means to live for Jesus.

If you're like me, you feel uneasy about all this sometimes. Your schedule is packed with things that fight for your attention. Spare time is hard to find, and even harder to find is the mental energy needed to study. It's difficult enough to maintain a daily rhythm of personal Bible reading, much less spend enough time in preparation to lead your group. That's why, some weeks, it feels like you're just going through the motions. Things seem to go all right, but you worry that you're not taking this stuff seriously enough.

I've been there. I've led small groups, taught traditional Sunday school, facilitated discussion (or whatever you call the "guided learning" type of model), and helped with home groups. I know the struggle. And nowadays,

whenever I get the opportunity to travel to different cities and speak about teaching, curriculum, ministry philosophy, and big words like pedagogy, I get to talk with group leaders from all ages and different backgrounds. People like you; people like us. The best part of meeting so many people is that I get to listen. And interestingly enough, I hear a lot of the same things, over and over again. It's like a catchy chorus you can't get out of your head. No matter where I go, I hear a common refrain and a number of concerns. Something's missing from our small groups.

“My group isn't outward focused at all.”

The first concern is what I call “missional apathy.” The group leader wants to see God work in amazing ways and bring people into His kingdom. But the group itself seems to be turned inward. There's little desire to engage unbelievers. Little desire to make an impact outside the walls of the church. Little desire to get involved in serving others. So the leader says things like this: “I keep harping on what our group is supposed to be doing, but it's like banging my head against a wall. They know what the Bible says they

should do, but they're just not interested." In other words, lots of Bible study, but no missionary zeal.

"My group doesn't know much about the Bible."

The second concern is biblical illiteracy. The group leader usually has a passion for understanding God's Word and explaining it to others, but the group itself doesn't seem to know the Bible well at all. "The people in my group have been in church for years, but they don't know some basic truths the Bible teaches. I get depressed when I see things on Facebook. It's like they don't see the world the way a Christian should. I want to challenge them to go deeper, but I don't know how. Plus, I'm afraid I'll lose them." In other words, lots of church activity, but little Bible knowledge and little distinctiveness from the world.

"Our discussions always seem so shallow."

The third concern is a dissatisfying Bible study experience. Usually, this complaint comes from the small group facilitator who leads discussion about a passage in the

Bible or a theological topic. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. No one really seems to know how to interpret the Bible, so the discussion veers off in all directions, with everyone talking about what they think about the passage, but not what the passage actually says.” In other words, lots of talking, but no resolution on what the Bible means and how it applies.

We Need More than Quick Solutions

These problems seem like they’re disconnected, maybe even opposed to the others. And you can find any number of books and leaders offering a quick fix.

- ***The group without any missionary fervor?***
They’ve got too much Bible study going on. They just need to get out more! Bust up that group and get them in homes as missional communities.
- ***The group struggling with Bible knowledge?***
Reclaim the lecture-style of teaching and give it to them straight! Give them homework, ditch the

time of fellowship at the beginning, and focus on the content.

- ***The group with shallow discussion?*** Stop spending so much time trying to interpret the Bible passage. Instead, discuss how the pastor interpreted the passage for his latest sermon. Spend some more time in fellowship so you can get into each other's lives and get messy.

You get the idea. All sorts of solutions are offered, ways to fix these problems. Church leaders want to help, so they offer new techniques to jump start your group again, fire up your teaching, or ignite great discussion. Sometimes, the idea is to mimic whatever a growing megachurch is doing. Copy the method and then get on with it.

I'm not against trying new things and implementing new ideas. But I don't think there is a silver bullet to accomplishing discipleship through small groups. There are strengths and weaknesses to every method and model, every study environment, and every philosophy behind how we seek to capture people's hearts with the truth of

God's Word in the context of community. Even though I have my own opinions as to what methods are preferable, this book isn't about technique. Other books do a fine job laying out the options and making the case for doing life together in different ways. This book is about making sure we communicate the message of the gospel for your group, no matter what model you use.

Is It the Method or the Message?

I get the feeling that a lot of leaders are weary of running to the newest fad. Tired of trying to stir up enthusiasm for doing the same old thing. They realize it's not enough to give a face-lift to an old idea or to whip up excitement for the newest method. That's why, in this book, we're not going to focus on the structure of your group. I'm convinced that the method is not what matters most anyway; it's the message. Get the message right, and God will work through a variety of methods. But miss the message, and the best methods in the world won't bring about transformation.

When people share their concerns about the state of their groups, I usually ask some follow-up questions. And the more I drill down with leaders, the more I realize we have a message problem, and not a method problem. Most of the time, the leaders are looking for a new method. But their concerns are really about the message.

It's amazing to hear children's Sunday school teachers, some who've been teaching for more than twenty years, say things like, "Sometimes, I feel like all we're telling these kids to do is share their toys and obey Mom and Dad." In other words, kids' ministry is all about telling kids what to do. The goal is having a church full of nice kids.

Move up a few grades and student ministers worry that all they're doing is telling kids what not to do. You go from "obey Mommy and Daddy," to "don't drink, do drugs, or have sex." For twelve years, kids get all the "do's" of Christianity and then during middle school and high school, they get all the "don'ts." So youth workers will say things like, "We want more than this, right? We want their hearts, not just their behavior, don't we?"

Leaders of adult groups tire of being the perpetual cheerleader for life as it currently is. “I feel like we’re rushing to pull things out of the Bible that just aren’t there. Like we’re more concerned about being practical than anything else.” In other words, Bible study seems to be centered on whatever topic the group considers most needed.

So even if the initial concerns are explained in terms of methods, the real rub with leaders and teachers is about the message. Just what are we doing when we open the Bible? What’s the point? What’s the goal? How do I know if this is really working?

There’s a sense of uneasiness in the growing realization that from childhood until adulthood, no matter what method is used, the main message we seem to be getting across is this: “Being a Christian is all about being a nice person and making the world a better place.” And the reason many leaders are uncomfortable with the current state of things is because they should be. They know that the Bible says much more.

Let's Go Deeper?

So what do we do? Once we put aside the ongoing conversations about the method, we can start examining the message—what it is we're getting across. That's a good start. And almost everyone who starts analyzing our message realizes that we need to go "deeper." The problem is, no one seems to agree on what "going deeper" looks like.

I once met a youth pastor who was so frustrated with accusations of "shallowness" and demands for "more depth" that he told me, "Fine! If they want to go deeper, I'm going to go so deep it drives them nuts. I'll drown them in depth!" Not exactly the best posture to take as a disciple-maker of the next generation.

I didn't like the youth pastor's attitude. But I did understand his frustration. Why? Because sometimes it's hard to please the people clamoring for "deeper" teaching when everyone seems to have a different idea of what "deep" is. That's why some leaders and teachers will change the subject and start talking about the methods again, because the

“deeper” conversation about the message makes everyone want to throw their hands up in despair.

It's tricky trying to define “depth,” but we're going to take a stab at it. To do so, we need to look at two common ways that people talk about “depth.” Both are insufficient.

Depth as “Information”

A lot of folks think that their small group experience is “deep” if they learn something they didn't know beforehand. In other words, they want to close their Bibles at the end of group time with more information than they had when they opened them. *Give me more knowledge! Tell me something I didn't know!*

It really doesn't matter what the information is, as long as it's new, interesting, and makes everyone feel smarter. It can be information about an obscure archeological dig somewhere in the Middle East. Or it can be the careful parsing of the tense of a Greek verb. Whatever. The goal is “more knowledge.”

Now, I've got to admit I sympathize with Christians who want more facts. When I was a missionary in Romania, I quickly realized just how blessed we are as English speakers. We have more resources available to us in our native tongue than ever before. It is astounding to consider all the information we have at our fingertips. (And the digital revolution has only increased our access to Bible study tools.)

But even with all these resources, people seem to know less and less about the Bible. Almost everyone agrees that we have a biblical illiteracy problem in the United States. It's an epidemic—even among people who have grown up in church. No one seems to be immune. A lot of the people in our groups have disjointed stories from the Bible floating around in their minds, but no one is quite sure how they all fit together. Even basic facts get mangled in our churches. When church members think Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple, well, “Houston, we have a problem!”

Once you begin to think “depth” means “more knowledge,” you are on track to produce an elitist class of people

who view the Bible as their hobby. It was the ancient Gnostics who were all about “secret knowledge,” not the Christians. The proper understanding of biblical knowledge and information is that it is a means to a greater end. The reason we study God’s Word is because it tells us about God. We want to know more about God in order that we might know God more. The last thing we want is a closed-off group of biblical junkies who view Bible study as their “fix” for the week. Information alone is not the goal, and information is not depth.

So, rightly understood, the pursuit of knowledge is grounded in our desire to know and love God. But if we’re not careful, the pursuit of knowledge is merely a sham to make ourselves feel intellectually superior to those around us. We start to view spiritual maturity in terms of knowledge rather than obedience. At the end of the day, we’ve got people who can win a game of Bible trivia, but who don’t look very much like Jesus.

Theology matters, and we never need apologize for giving people information as we study the Bible. But surely

we want to go deeper than the demons. They've got their theology down (James 2), but are devils still.

Depth as “Application”

On the other side of the spectrum are folks who think “deep” means “practical.” They aren't so interested in gaining more knowledge; they just want to be told what to do. After all, the real need is for Christians to start applying what they already know to be true. “Information isn't the goal, transformation is!” says this group.

How does this play out? The leader who sees “going deep” as “applying the Scriptures” will make sure their group walks away with a number of practical ways to obey the Bible in their daily lives. The idea is to connect the Bible to the choices we make every day. Let's show people how the Bible affects what we're doing at school, at home, or in the workplace. Whatever passage you're studying, just make sure you launch into some practical tidbits for daily living.

Anyone can see why “life transformation” has such strong appeal. Surely we don’t want people looking in the mirror of God’s Word and then walking away, unaware of their reflection. Every teacher should hope for transformation. That’s one of the main reasons you felt called to lead others in Bible study in the first place, right? God used someone in your life to help you see how the Scriptures apply to your life. You saw the relevance of following Jesus, and now you want to see others transformed by personal, practical application of God’s Word.

But even though we’re right to seek to apply the Bible to everyday life, we need to be careful not to reduce the Bible to a list of “do’s and don’ts” for the week. The goal of Bible study isn’t to send a group out into the world with an action plan every week. Why not? Because the Bible isn’t first and foremost about us. It’s God’s message to us, yes. But it’s ultimately about God. If all we draw from Bible study are proverb-like teachings for daily living, then we are approaching the Scriptures as if we’re at the center.

Don’t misunderstand me. The Bible has plenty to say about our daily lives. One of the truths we’ll explore in this

book is how gospel-grounded application speaks to all of life. So the impulse to connect the Bible to life is a good one. The problem is, if we jump too quickly to application in our teaching, over time we create self-absorbed readers who skim the Scriptures in search of personal application rather than the primary meaning of the text. We start seeing the Bible as if it were a self-help book, designed to enhance our current way of living.

In reality, God wants to explode our current way of living and offer us new life altogether. The Bible isn't an assistant to your old way of life. It's the doorway to your new life in Christ. Likewise, the story line of Scripture contains earth-shattering truths that can't be spiritualized into coffee-mug verses that give us warm fuzzes. Depth as application isn't enough.

The Depth of the Gospel

So if the answer isn't information or application, what is it? What's missing? Actually, the right question isn't "What's missing?" but "Who's missing?" Here's a question

we should ponder: Where is Jesus in your Bible study? What role does the Spirit play in your preparation? How does the plan of redemption dreamed up in the heart of God the Father affect the way you read the Bible?

You see, we sometimes get so busy thinking that people need more information or better application that we forget that our main task is to lead people to exultation. That's a fancy word for "worship." We exult—we delight in the Savior we exalt. Exaltation of the Savior leads to exultation of the saints. The Bible is ultimately about Jesus, which means that Bible study ought to lead us to worship Him.

So what's this book about? Not a new technique. Not a new formula for success. In fact, there's hardly anything new in this book. No, my goal is to remind you of something you already instinctively know as a teacher of God's Word or a leader of a small group. It's Jesus who changes lives, and the goal of your Bible study is to continually reintroduce people to Him.

Should we give people information? Yes. Should we give people application? Yes. But most importantly, we must give people the gospel message because it transcends

information and application, yet includes them both. My goal is to offer you a practical guide to making sure your message is centered on Jesus and what He has done. So let's get started!