

What are your class members really like? What are their specific and individual needs? Where do they hurt? How can we tell whether they're really growing in spiritual maturity? These are just a few of the questions Jeanette Stewart addresses in this article.

ASSESSMENT:

The Key to Effective Teaching

by Jeanette A. Stewart

It was our favorite time of the week. As advisors to a campus Christian group, my husband and I eagerly anticipated Sunday evenings. It was then that we met with our student leaders to evaluate the group as a whole, plan future activities, and pray together. One question that we enjoyed tossing out for discussion was this: "What can we do to reach out to the non-Christian students on our campus?" It usually provoked good debate, resulting in a productive brainstorming session.

However, there was one student named Phil who replied time after time, "Let's have a Bible study." While there is certainly nothing wrong with gathering a group to examine the Scriptures, we used to wonder if he lacked imagination. Or, we speculated, perhaps that was the only outreach technique Phil knew. While both of these may have been true, I think the root of his problem ran much deeper. Phil lacked the ability to analyze his fellow students and assess them accurately. He was unable to appraise their spiritual state and construct an outreach activity to meet their needs.

Perhaps you have encountered this problem, but in another form. One of our friends pastors a small church. After pouring himself into his congregation for almost five years, he was discouraged. He told us, "I have tried to teach the truth. Week after week the same people attend. The problem is their lives. They never seem to change. I don't know where I have failed them." It was a sad confession, but we speculated that his problem was not that unusual. It was similar to Phil's. Although his teaching was scriptural, he had neglected to assess his flock and adapt his sermons to their struggles.

As those involved in Christian education, we are vulnerable to this very issue. While most of us are able to assess our students, oftentimes we overlook the importance of this step. We allow ourselves to become dependent on "what they did last year" or "how it's always done." We let our Sunday School manuals become our masters instead of using them as tools to help us grow in excellence. We forget to assess and adapt our teaching accordingly.

While Jesus ministered on earth, He dealt with individuals. The Scriptures

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record a variety of approaches that He used. Consider, for example, what He told the man in Mark 10:17-22. Jesus correctly evaluated that this man's wealth was hindering him from following God. He told him to give away all his riches. This is a stark contrast to how He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. Christ offered to give this woman water so that she would never thirst again. He used different approaches for different individuals with different needs.

To be effective, however, we must go beyond the step of assessment. We must train ourselves to re-evaluate constantly, always appraising the needs of our students and the effectiveness of our teaching. This must become a habit, second nature, a way of life. Just as a

physician cannot treat a patient whom he has not seen and diagnosed, so we as teachers cannot instruct and encourage a student whom we have not evaluated and then re-evaluated spiritually.

How do we go about making such estimations part of our thinking? Are we to delve into books describing human needs and behavior? Should we turn, perhaps, to the results of psychological testing? No! While these tools can be useful, we must look primarily to the Bible as our authority. God's Word must be the standard we use when gauging a student's spiritual condition. To facilitate the biblically based assessment process, let's consider four key areas essential to spiritual health.

SALVATION

First, we must determine whether our individual students are truly Christians. Many of us teach children and teens who have grown up in Christian homes, attending Sunday School most of their lives. Has Mindy ever accepted Christ as her Savior? Does Vic know Jesus, or just know about Him? I once knew a woman who had been raised by godly parents, gone to a Christian school, and married a Christian husband. She was a member of my church; in fact, she sang in the choir. One day, in her mid-thirties, she realized she had been fooling herself for all those years. She had never really accepted Christ as her own personal Savior! I've recounted a fairly dramatic incident, but the point is valid. The issue of salvation is much too important to overlook.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Secondly, assuming that our students are believers, we must assess the health of

their spiritual lives. Acts 2:42-47, which describes the activities of the early church, provides us with a good overall basis for comparison. How do our pupils measure up to this model? Does Sam lack knowledge of basic doctrines of the faith? How can he ensure that he receives adequate teaching? What about Libby? Is she spending time in fellowship with other Christians? Are our students known for their diligence in prayer? How would you characterize their praise to God? Is it exuberant and excited or forced and faded? Do the individuals in your class reach out to those around them, telling about the Lord and His work in their lives? It is essential that we appraise

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these major areas, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each person.

If any of these elements are not embodied in the day to day living of our students, we must question why not. Recently, my husband and I met a Christian couple whose lives had little similarity to the description in Acts 2. Were they being willfully disobedient? No, this couple simply lacked the knowledge of how God would have them live out their faith. They were almost completely ignorant about any scriptural truth other than salvation. They were somewhat aware of their needs but unknowing of how to implement changes. It is important, then, for us to try to understand the underlying cause of our students’ deficiencies, for this will certainly influence our approach.

Maturity

We leave our job undone if we stop at analyzing just these elements. We must

proceed and assess the area of spiritual maturity. It is not enough to evaluate the presence of teaching, prayer, praise, reach out, and fellowship. We must evaluate the quality of these rudiments. Six-year-old Nathan may know that God is love, but can he describe any other attributes of the Lord? What about Grandma Smith? When she says she fellowships with other Christians, is she referring to her Friday morning sewing circle?

It is imperative that we determine how our students are progressing in their knowledge of God and obedience to His Word. Several years ago I knew a student named Carol. We met weekly for almost an entire year. Each time we got together, we examined one or two aspects of a maturing spiritual life. We discussed how to apply the Scriptures to our lives, how to live out Christianity in our culture. We covered the same principles over and over again, but that is what Carol needed in order to mature. Today she is walking closely with the Lord, a fine example of a mature and godly Christian. As teachers, we must ask ourselves, “Is each individual in my class developing into a well-rounded, spiritually healthy Christian?” Or, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15, are they growing up “in all aspects into Him”?



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Ministry

Finally, we must determine whether or not our students are reproducing in the spiritual realm. When Christians are obedient to a scriptural lifestyle, they are

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obedient to the charge of the “Great Commission.” That is, they are making disciples. Do our students fit this description? Are they involved in some form of Christian ministry? If not, why not? Do they need education or encouragement? My husband once spent an entire semester meeting weekly with a small group of his students. These young men were involved in making disciples; they met with him to learn how to be more effective. They already had the desire to reach out. He simply helped them enhance their skills. If your students are already involved in sharing their faith and discipling others, perhaps you can teach them ways to be even more effective.

Careful assessment is the foundation of appropriate teaching. We must synthesize such appraisals into the fiber of our thinking. We must be constantly evaluating then re-evaluating. It is important to remember, however, that we cannot make our students live godly lives. It is only as individuals respond to the persuasion of the Holy Spirit that they change. We cannot blame ourselves for the students who choose to ignore the Lord and His call on their lives. We can, however, fine-tune our assessment skills and allow God to use us as teachers who are flexible enough to adapt to the needs of our classes.