

“Gospel Hardened”

A great blessing of founding a Christian school was the frequent comments of visitors about the high level of excitement in the students about spiritual things. Wide-eyed wonderment and genuine excitement over spiritual discoveries abounded. But gradually this was displaced with a growing callousness obvious to all. Fervent students became cynical, guest speakers who had once fawned over the spiritual level of the kids now were silent. The once excited parents were perplexed, and I was puzzled. How had a spiritually dynamic student body been reduced to a lethargic and cold-hearted group of “I-dare-you-to-change-me” worldlings?

The Bible warns of this phenomenon: *“But exhort one another daily ... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13)*. It is a fact of the Christian life that we can be hardened in our hearts to spiritual things. We call this condition “gospel hardening.”

The Christian school is a primary target. Worldliness abounds with the latest styles and hairdos as the measure of standing and status. Conversations bristle with references to the latest rock record, last night’s TV program, and the upcoming ball game. Conspicuous by its absence is mention of Christ and the things of God. What has happened? Spiritual deception has set in...our youth are hardened through the “deceitfulness of sin” and they don’t even know it.

What has brought this blight upon our Christian schools? What is the cause of such coldness? There are several causes, but foremost among them is an American infatuation with the Greek method of learning over the Hebrew method. For example, the Greeks were known for their pursuit of worldly wisdom and their high esteem for the acquisition of knowledge. The Hebrew approach was much more pragmatic and spiritual in its nature. They wanted to see that learning had a godly origin and a positive effect. Given a choice between seeking help from an uneducated but spiritual truck driver with a long-standing and happy marriage and a thrice divorced marriage counselor with a Ph.D. in psychology, the Greek would opt for the Ph.D. Why? Because he has knowledge. The Hebrew would opt for the truck driver. Why? Because he had godliness and a track record to back it up. Like the Greeks before us, we, too, have bowed at the shrine of knowledge.

This approach to learning is most evident in our Bible teaching. Often it reflects a gold of learning facts about the Bible rather than life principles from the Bible. The Bible is treated academically, like any other subject, with tests, quizzes and grades. And, alas, a God-breathed book which is “spirit and life” is reduced to just one more source of knowledge. Many classes then become a boring but necessary evil in the day’s schedule. Gradually our kids become inoculated against the power of truth because they are exposed to an anemic “letter of the law” approach without the “spirit” of it. A vaccination or inoculation is based on a simple premise: the introduction of a small amount of the disease into the body’s system stimulates the growth of antibodies to build a resistance against any further full-scaled invasion of the same disease. In a

similar way, Christian school students who are vaccinated with small weak doses of the Bible, acquire a dull familiarity with the Scriptures, which desensitizes them to future, life-changing doses of truth. I have seen the youth sections of many churches during the preaching show either a cold disregard for what is said or a disdainful disrespect while they talk and pass notes. Why? They have grown immune to spiritual things. They are gospel-hardened.

A dangerous assumption has surfaced in Christianity, most evident in our approach to training. Many feel that just because truth is taught, it will make one spiritual, but this is simply not true. While attending Purdue University, I was amazed to see our English professor bring a Bible to class. For several days he extolled the eloquence and syntax of the King James English and read large portions to the students. Did its presentation make a difference? None that was evident. Why? Because the mere presentation of the truth, though it has some effect, is not the full plan of God for deep change. His plan includes explanation of the truths as well.

The Apostle Paul makes a distinction in the presentation of truth and its explanation. “...*Ye have obeyed...*,” he wrote, “...*that form of doctrine which was delivered you*” (*Romans 6:17*). The “form of doctrine” is the presentation of truth, “delivered you” is the explanation. The difference is significant in the changing of young lives. Imagine yourself at the foot of the cross at the time of the crucifixion. As you listen, you hear several comments about this event. A soldier says, “A man was executed here today.” That is the presentation of truth. A Pharisee adds, “A teacher was crucified today.” That is the presentation of truth. A woman laments, “A poor, gentle soul was martyred today.” That, too, is the presentation of truth. But a disciple explains, “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins today.” That is the explanation of truth. The presentation of truth without an explanation reduces the Scripture to interesting history or lofty literature. Likewise, when Bible facts are taught out of balance with life principles, it is reduced to cold academics, dead orthodoxy, and a sterile familiarity with holy things. What is needed is an explanation because explanations produce understanding. The Lord Jesus refers to this process as sowing on “good ground.” “*But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit...*” (*Matthew 13:23*).

The solution to this dilemma is to engage the heart of the student as well as the mind. Paul wrote to the Roman converts “...*ye have obeyed from the heart...*” (*Romans 6:17*). The heart is where the facts from the head are processed into action. It is the time when fact becomes faith and knowledge become conviction. It is written about the Hebrews that their “...*heart made them willing... to give*” (*Exodus 35:29*). The Apostle Paul alludes to “...*doing the will of God from the heart.*” (*Ephesians 6:6*).

The question then arises, how is the heart engaged? The Bible gives us clear direction in this matter. Moses instructed his people about the training of their children with inspired words made for our generation. “*And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk*

of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” (Deuteronomy 6:7-8).

In this passage are four vital principles for making the Word of God come alive to the young person.

First in the thoughts of Moses is the **Preparation** of the heart of the teacher: “...*these words...shall be in thine heart.*” The obvious concern of Moses is that the flame of truth in any child’s heart should come from the altar of the teacher’s heart. It is axiomatic that fire begets fire, and that God’s chosen medium to dispense truth is a pure heart. The result of a godly, burning heart is powerful: “...*your zeal hath provoked very many*” (2 Corinthians 9:2). Such a teacher has a tremendous spiritual influence on his students. But the unspiritual teacher must answer the question: “...*how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh*” (Matthew 12:34). If the teacher has fallen prey to the “cares of this world,” aka the athletic program, the academic program, financial pressures, an over busy schedule, and sin, his own spiritual laxity will certainly be reflected in the coldness of his students. I know of one youth pastor who confessed that over an eight year period, he never read his Bible except to get a lesson for his teens. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to envision the bankruptcy of such a ministry.

The next principle to which Moses alluded is the principle of **Selection**, specifically the selection of the portion of God’s Word which is needed by the listener. The Hebrew word for “teach” is SHANAN, which means “to whet or sharpen.” It carries the picture of an archer sharpening his arrow or a butcher his knife. They want to create a point or an edge which will cut and pierce with a specific purpose in mind. Likewise Moses admonishes Israel to sharpen the Word, ignoring irrelevant truth which does not apply to the need at hand, but sharpening the focus of truth to achieve a predetermined purpose. What purpose? To deal with the “*thoughts and intents of the heart.*” I have found in my counseling that “...*the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12). When the right portion of the Bible is brought to bear on a specific life problem, the results are amazing. The most powerful use of Scripture is selective use; choosing the precise Scripture for the needs of the listener. As there is a need for information, there is also a need for transformation, and that comes only from specific Scriptures applied to specific needs. Perhaps we need to rethink the coldly systematic approach of Bible training, where the calendar and the clock disallow any divergence from the lesson plan. An approach which includes life-changing truth is needed as well.

And it is the life that Moses addressed next. He says that truth should be taught, not merely in a lecture setting, but in the very paths of life where the rubber meets the road; in “the way.” This is the principle of **Application**. Application to what? When Moses uses the term,

“the way,” he is referring specifically to the actions, the behavior, therefore the lifestyle of the student. Talking with them of the Scriptures in the way is in reference to applying the Word of God to life situations as they arise. Walking with a child in the woodlands and observing the birds is a far better time to speak of a God who knows when the sparrow falls than lecturing on it in a windowless room. Likewise, teaching on today’s struggles is far better than creating a hypothetical situation not yet encountered. What are our kids thinking about? What are their intents or true purposes in their lives? To ignore these things because of calendar expectations or academic requirements does a disservice to the student. To fail to address them because we haven’t taken the time to discern them is negligence.

While pasturing one church, I also was the principal. I invited the senior high students to join me in my study for an informal question and answer time. The major rule was that the Bible was the final authority. In short order the true feelings and doubts of these kids came to the surface. Questions about rock music, sex, dating and even their parents soon found their way into the discussion. I was surprised (shocked?) at the people living under a thin veneer of respectable Christianity. I had entered into the real world of these kids and was privileged to talk with them of the veracity of God’s Word as we walked “by the way” together.

I came to realize that what captivated the attention of young people was life principles which addressed their pressing needs and questions. I then tailored a Bible class for juniors and seniors to include a study of temperaments, spiritual gifts, dating and marriage preparation. They absolutely came alive! The Bible was real to them now, and they listened with new attentiveness and wrote with insights which belied their age! I believe that our young people are intelligent and inquisitive. In their youthful idealism, they need answers for living. With a little imagination and effort our Bible classes can be transformed from tombs of the dead into laboratories of the living.

That brings us to the final principle of Moses’ instruction; the principle of **Conversation**. The word “talk” in Deuteronomy 6 is a multi-dimensional word translated 85 different ways in the King James Bible. Its meanings include: to declare, converse, command, promise, warn and even sing. It has the meaning of a conversational interchange around the things of God. AS the teacher and student walk along the way, they discuss the Word of God and its applications to life. This provides the wise teacher with the opportunity to learn the doubts, fears, confusion and even lack of understanding of his pupils, so that he can correct these with the truth of God.

There are specific ways this can be accomplished in the Bible class. For example, pressing social issues could be assigned as a topic for an essay with the requirement that pre-assigned Scriptures be the sole authority. After the writing, these topics could be discussed as a group with a wise teacher guiding the students to form their conclusions from the Bible. Subjects like divorce, abortion, euthanasia, rock music, drugs, the lottery, forms of entertainment, etc. would grip the imagination because of their high profile in our culture.

Classes on current events would be exciting as the kids see how these things relate to Scriptures. Other meaningful ways to reach the heart with the Scriptures would be inter-class debate teams or field trips to local missions or missionary works, not only to see the need of humanity, but also to make sin become “*exceedingly sinful*” (*Romans 7:13*). Video presentations to spark discussion, and plays and skits to illustrate biblical truths in the lives of Bible characters are also effective. The chapel platform should be kept hot and targeted on the needs of the kids.

Another way of exhorting daily is to assign counselors for one-on-one discipleship, counseling, and prayer with each individual student. Faculty and staff could be enlisted for such service, as could church members, parents and other volunteers. Grandparents would be a special pool for such a ministry. Such special attention would provide loving care, special attention, godly direction and needed accountability. And what an avenue for ministry for those looking for involvement in God’s service!

Don’t misunderstand the intentions of these musings. I am not suggesting that the baby be thrown out with the bath water. I am not advocating that all Bible curriculums be dumped! But at the very least, they should be enhanced and supplemented enough to keep life issues in front of the kids while teaching them factual information as well.

Moses stresses principles of teaching which included the preparation of the teacher, the careful selection of Scriptures, application of those truths to real-life situations, and the inclusion of conversation between the student and teacher. The children of Israel had great advantages through these principles. Do our kids deserve any less.