

# “Well, What Do You Know?”

## The Importance of Content

*by Ronald G. Davis*

Educators are sometimes accused of being more concerned about content than about life. That accusation, perhaps occasionally justified, often overlooks one basic truth: life decisions are made from a cognitive foundation. What one knows (and doesn't know) strongly affects his or her behavioral decisions.

Poor choices—even sinful choices—often come as a result of either inadequate knowledge or erroneous “knowledge.” Perhaps one doesn't know enough of God's truth. Or maybe he or she has believed a lie and mistaken it for the truth.

Teacher preparation for a lesson session must early include two questions: (1) “What do my learners know about the content at hand?” and (2) “What do they need to know to make better life decisions?”

Adult teachers, especially of long-running study groups, may proceed with the (wrong) assumption that the students already know the content of the typical Bible lesson. (If they do, then they need to be studying something deeper!) But sincere Bible students want to know more and more about the character and the plan of God, the history of his people, and the application of godliness to daily life. In this light the teacher's first goal is to establish a firm cognitive base for the students. This will allow them to develop godly attitudes and behaviors.

Truths to be known, resulting in faith to be affirmed, leading to right living to be blessed—that is why we all teach. No teacher need apologize for emphasizing knowledge of the Bible and Bible backgrounds.

## The Background

Historical and geographical settings characterize truth. Myth and folklore are set in “once upon a time” and “countries far away.” The Bible is set in real times and real places. Fiction creates people (and lesser creatures) to do the

whims of the author. Truth records the deeds of real people. Understanding the culture of the biblical story helps one understand the Bible texts and the Bible people. Seeing how individuals lived their daily lives—through their hopes, fears, and aspirations—and how they responded to the good news of Christ helps the contemporary person make right decisions.

Introducing your students to some typical residents of Jesus' first-century Galilee and Judea and the wider Roman world is important in New Testament lessons. To do this, consider using an occasional dramatic monologue. Possibilities include a Christian living in Colosse when Paul's letter arrives, a Roman centurion stationed in Palestine, a Judean shepherd, a believing Jew, a Galilean peasant present at the feeding of the thousands, and a vine grower.

Perhaps a member of your class or congregation who enjoys drama would like to write his or her own monologue. This requires a diligent study of texts and commentary sources. You need about 300 to 400 words for a three-minute presentation. Here is a sample for a shepherd, a "bad" shepherd, which could be used as background for Luke 2, John 10, or some other "shepherd" text:

Yeah, I'm one of those "bad" shepherds you hear about in the big city of Jerusalem. If we shepherds do our jobs well, no one notices. When our sheep are sold for sacrifice, the buyer is looking forward not backward. When our sheep become someone's tasty meal, thoughts of our work are "swallowed" along with the meat.

But I've heard all the snide remarks: "Wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw the temple." Our reputation precedes us from field to field. Sure, they trust us with their sheep, but step out of the field and we're suspected of everything: thievery, drunkenness, profanity, irreverence. We end up dirty, smelly, tired, and hungry.

So perhaps our manners don't quite match the standards of the Pharisees. We don't rightly care a fig. And maybe we don't get to the synagogue as often as we should. But those sheep don't protect themselves, don't water themselves, don't find new grass for themselves—even on the Sabbath.

Perhaps a Pharisee could come out and watch the sheep while we go to the synagogue! Ha! I'll see that the day the Messiah comes, greets me by name, and says, 'Say, friend, I'm a shepherd too. Let me watch the sheep while you rest for a while!'

Obviously geography is a part of every lesson as well. From the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, Jesus lived and served in real places. Maps of those areas around the sea and the city will significantly support your learners' understanding of the context of his teaching. John is very careful to indicate Jesus' location, which varies from Galilee to Jerusalem and back to Galilee. Two basic learning principles for maps are size and interactivity.

Because the Sea of Galilee is only about 12 miles from north to south and about 6 miles at its widest, a wall of your room can become a “one foot = two miles” map, or six feet by three feet, very easily. The sea on your map should approximate the shape of an upside down pear.

Use stick-on labels to designate places of Jesus’ teaching. For example the site of the Feeding of the 5,000 is on the northeast shore. This geographical context will help students see the way Jesus and his disciples sailed across the sea before the people ran around the shore to meet him on “the other side” near Capernaum. Let students guess and measure the distances, given the simple scale.

You can use a scanner to capture a drawing of Jerusalem to create an overhead transparency or a computer-projected image. This will promote a clearer concept of Jesus’ movements around the city at various times. Your discussion can include his birth in Bethlehem, only a few miles to the south. You can also point out the temple and nearby Bethany when your lesson texts call for it. Students may not realize that the Jerusalem of Jesus’ day was little more than one mile square; overlaying that with your local street grid can be insightful.

Any pictorial material of Israel, in any format, that you use to decorate your room will help students confirm the reality of Jesus’ places.

## The Word

With every lesson the Scripture text is a starting point. Seeing it, reading it, and hearing it should be “givens” for the students. The old-fashioned strategy of letting students read one verse at a time in sequence around the group may be a novel idea in contemporary classrooms. But your class probably has some who are excellent oral readers; you will want to use those God-given talents as well. Also consider letting students hear the text read professionally from a prerecorded format. These are available in Christian stores and online.

In a lesson series that emphasizes one writer, seeing the repeated use of key words and terms will have a cumulative effect that is nothing but positive. You might like to keep a running tally of the times certain key words are used from lesson to lesson. Put up a large sheet of paper with the heading “John’s Frequent Words,” for example. List several, such as *light, darkness, life, know, word, God, Father, world, truth*. Mark the times the words are found week to week. Your learners will be surprised how emphatically repetitious John is!

Because John uses the same words repeatedly, your class may enjoy and appreciate an introduction to some of the Greek language words that stand behind those frequent uses. For example when Jesus calls himself “the light of

the world,” the Greek for “light” is *phos* (pronounced *fos* with a long *o*) while the Greek for “world” is *cosmos*. These two Greek words form the basis of some common English words: *photograph* and *cosmic* are just two examples. If you don’t have skills in Greek personally, a Bible dictionary will help.

## Never Too Much

Your students can never know too much Scripture nor too much about Scripture. God’s Word is deep and wide. Scholars have plumbed those depths and widths for centuries. Ordinary Bible students have delighted in its riches from the time Moses began writing it down by God’s Spirit.

As Paul insists, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). The diligent teacher of adults will never stop asking the students, “Well, what do you know?”