

THE DISCOVER TRIAD

THREE FACETS OF A DYNAMIC SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS

David Francis

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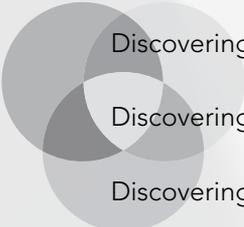
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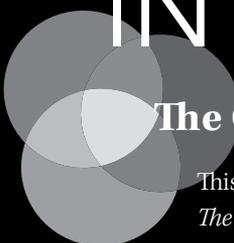
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INTRODUCTION

The Context: Invite, *Discover*, Connect

This book is part three of four in a series based on my book *The 3D Sunday School*. That book described the three dimensions of a balanced Bible study ministry: Invite, Discover, and Connect. The second book in the series, *I-6: A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School*, drove (pun intended!) more deeply into the Invite dimension. This book will explore the Discover dimension in greater depth. The reader would be well served to read the Discover chapter in *The 3D Sunday School*, which can be downloaded free at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool, as that material will not be repeated here.

Discover

What a rich word! I spent a number of fascinating hours on thesaurus.com pouring over the word *discover*, its synonyms, and its synonyms' synonyms! "The word **discover** goes back to Latin *dis-* and *cooperire*, meaning 'to remove the covering; completely uncover.' By 1553, it was used to mean 'seeing or gaining knowledge of something previously unknown' and 'finding out; bringing to light.' You discover ('uncover') something that is already there, something that has existed but is generally unknown - but you **invent** something that has never existed before."¹

What's a Triad?

In general terms, a triad is a unit of three. In sociology, a triad is a three person group. In chemistry, a triad is a group of three closely related elements or compounds. In geography, a triad may refer to a cluster of three cities, such as the Piedmont Triad in North Carolina. The strategic nuclear defense/

delivery system of long-range bombers, land-based missiles, and submarines is referred to as a Triad. On a computer monitor or television set, each pixel of the image is made up of a triad of three colored dots: red, green, and blue. In mathematics, the triad is the sum of one plus one plus one. The Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras attributed special significance to the triad. In music, a triad is a chord of three notes. On a guitar, the notes will be strummed in rapid succession to form the chord. On a keyboard, the triad of notes will be played simultaneously. This is my favorite use of the word, and the one most analogous to what I'm calling the Discover Triad.

The Discover Triad

There are three important and interrelated aspects of Sunday School work that contribute to a consistently excellent Bible study experience: Scripture, stories, and shepherding. If you have read any of my previous books, you know that I believe that there is much more to an effective Sunday School ministry than what happens in the “Sunday School hour.” Yet that hour—or 75 minutes in many churches—is the weekly culmination of that 24/7 ministry, whether you call it Sunday School or use some other term. It's the time it all comes together. The *occasion* of Sunday School is the focus of the ongoing *ministry* of Sunday School. It's when we count! But boys and girls, men and women are not motivated to keep coming to a class or group just to be counted. They come back because of the quality of the Bible study experience itself, and—perhaps even more—because of the ministry that has taken place apart from that weekly experience. The purpose of this little book is to motivate you to make your class a dynamic experience of discovery that people don't want to miss. It is a book for members as well as leaders. In the chapters that follow, I hope you will discover some new insights into how the triad of Scripture, stories, and shepherding can contribute to that kind of Bible study experience.

Three Indispensably Intertwined “Notes”

Scripture, stories, and shepherding are the three “notes” of the Discover Triad. Each is intertwined with the others to create a great group experience. Scripture is about Bible study and teaching, discovering truths that have always been there, that have existed but are generally unknown. Scripture comes alive in the context of the stories of the learners, as they share how their stories have been impacted by God’s story. The way you get to know people’s stories—their dreams, their hopes, their challenges, their failures, their joys, their sorrows—is through a system of shepherding. Shepherding finds its basis in the Scriptures. And thus the cycle continues. I almost used the analogy of the “hat trick” instead of the triad. The “hat trick” is used in athletics to describe accomplishing three of something in one game. The most familiar is in hockey, in which a player who scores three goals in one game is said to have turned the hat trick. There are similar hat tricks in cricket (where the term originated), soccer, baseball, and even auto racing (starting on the pole as the fastest qualifier, winning the race, and clocking the highest single lap speed). But my friend Bill Craig reminded me that the hat trick is a rare occurrence. The Discover Triad, on the other hand, is something we want to strive toward every single time our class gathers for fellowship around the Word of God. When Scripture, stories, and shepherding come together on the same occasion, it’s like—well, music! Would you like to have that kind of class experience more often? That’s the goal of understanding the Discover Triad. Let’s get started!

DISCOVERING SCRIPTURE

Sunday School's One Textbook

The textbook of the Sunday School is the Bible. While the Sunday School movement has taken on different expressions in different faith traditions, there is one thing that has remained at its center: the teaching of Holy Scripture. It's been that way since the very beginning. The Sunday School movement began in the 1780s. Robert Raikes is considered the father of Sunday School. Raikes was a newspaper publisher in England, and his primary social concern was prison reform. As he observed his city of Gloucester on Sundays, he was deeply concerned about the plight of the children who ran through the streets on that day. It was an era before the introduction of child labor laws, and for many of these children, Sunday was their only day off after six long days of factory work. Raikes knew that these kids were destined for a life of poverty at best, and of prison at worst. His solution? Create a place for children to learn how to read and write, and also to learn how to be good citizens. So he hired teachers and opened the first Sunday School. His textbook? The Bible!

What about Curriculum Materials?

As the Sunday School movement spread to the Americas, Sunday School "scholars," as the pupils were called, were rewarded for their good behavior and scholarship by having the privilege of checking out books from the school library. A later development was to provide each scholar with an inexpensive take-home paper, published by various Sunday School societies. Denominational publishers, such as the Baptist Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources), continued this practice, then added the innovation of the Sunday School "quarterly" as a way to help every member prepare ahead of time for the class experience. Yet

the focus of all these materials was to help Sunday School members understand and apply the teachings of the textbook—the Bible—and to help teachers guide Bible study in a systematic, educationally sound, life-stage-appropriate, and interesting way. And thus it remains today. The curriculum materials, devotionals, and magazines distributed through Sunday School are valuable tools for helping members prepare for the group session and apply what they learn there. These helpful materials, however, are supplements that support the primary textbook—the Word of God.

Bible Study Curriculum

Sometimes people refer to the materials as “Sunday School curriculum.” We all know what that means, but technically *curriculum* refers to the overall plan for Bible study. For example, LifeWay curriculum is developed around a systematic study of 15 biblical concepts. Curriculum for preschoolers and children is built on a three-year plan, one year of which is a survey of the key stories of the Old and New Testaments. Curriculum choices for students and adults include three-year, six-year, and eight-year plans. The curriculum materials are then developed around these plans. When choosing materials for your Sunday School, whether you choose LifeWay or another publisher, one of your goals should be to provide leaders and learners with a curriculum plan that gives them a balanced treatment of the Bible’s books, topics, and characters.

Scripture: The Heart of the Sunday School Movement

Bible study, or perhaps more accurately, Bible teaching, is at the very heart of the Sunday School movement. Although some churches and classes have experimented over the years with studies of trade books and other materials, the overwhelming majority of Sunday School classes across all faith traditions still have Bible teaching at the center of the group experience. That’s particularly true of churches and classes that desire to reach out to unchurched persons. The research of LifeWay President Thom Rainer among the unchurched found that most say that if they take the time to attend a church or small group, they want to go to one that teaches the Bible!²

Teachers: The Heartbeat of the Sunday School Movement

Recently I enjoyed great conversations during our annual summer Sunday School leadership events at LifeWay Glorieta and Ridgecrest Conference Centers®. In fact,

I have a similar conversation with someone almost every year at these wonderful mountain retreat centers. It goes like this: I have introduced myself to someone before the evening worship experience, or walking to a morning or afternoon conference, or standing in line at the dining hall. As we visit, I ask: “What do you do in your church?” Every year, I meet at least one person who replies, “Oh, I’m just a teacher.” And every year, I scold them for saying that! Then I try to offer a strong word of encouragement, emphasizing that the Sunday School movement has not been built primarily by ministers, but by men and women who have made a commitment to follow God’s call to be teachers of preschoolers, children, youth, or adults. Teachers—or as my colleague David Apple likes to call them, *Discover Leaders*—are the heartbeat of the Sunday School.

Learners: The Focus of the Sunday School Movement

Sunday School teachers don’t just teach the Bible. They teach *people* the Bible. Since the beginning of the movement in England, the focus has been on people. Robert Raikes’ purpose was clear: transformation. His goal was not merely to see young people—and, as the movement spread, adults—gain a head knowledge of the Bible. He desired to see their lives transformed: productivity instead of poverty; promise instead of prison. Raikes wanted to help children avoid physical imprisonment. Many people then and now are spiritually imprisoned, or headed in that direction. In reality, the goal of Sunday School today is not all that different than at its founding: to help people escape or avoid lives of spiritual bondage through the transforming power of the Word of God. I found the following quote on the header of the Web site for *SidewalkSundaySchool.org*, an organization that conducts “mobile” Sunday Schools on the streets of high-density urban areas and ghettos around the world: “A Hundred Years from Now ... it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove ... but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a CHILD.”³ That captures the focus of the Sunday School movement.

The Class: The Genius of the Sunday School Movement

Wouldn’t it be great if there were a teacher for every individual man, woman, boy, and girl who wanted to study the Bible? Well, it’s quite obvious that there is not. Thus the development of the Sunday School class. It’s ingenious! A group of people who gather together, usually once a week, to learn from the Bible, facilitated by one or more leaders, in the context of a fun and caring fellowship of people

navigating a similar stage of life. The rest of this book is devoted to helping your class create the kind of environment and experiences that will make it a top priority in the lives of its members, and a safe, secure, and satisfying place to invite others as well.

Discovery: The Mark of a Dynamic Sunday School Class

Thomas J. Cook, retired Sunday School Director at Jersey Baptist Church in Ohio says, “The only teaching that is teaching is that which produces desirable changes in the life of the learner. The only learning that changes conduct significantly is learning that is *self-discovered* and *self-appropriated*. Never *tell* anyone anything that you can lead him to *discover* for himself.”⁴ Dynamic Sunday School classes practice this principle. It takes work on the part of the leader and the learners. Of course, the teacher has to lead the way in discovery teaching, but the members must also become enthusiastic about discovery learning.

Preschoolers: Natural Discovery Learners

George Yates, Director of Operations for Central Coast Baptist Association in California, in his excellent book, *Teaching That Bears Fruit*, says: “The best way to determine whether or not this [someone standing before a group and dispensing information] is part of our natural learning temperament is to study a group untainted by a regimented system of teaching. I know of only one true cross-section of people that fit this criterion—preschoolers. . . . They learn through discovery and imitation.”⁵ It is an incredibly frustrated preschool teacher who tries to get a room of four-year olds to sit still and listen for more than a few minutes! Preschoolers are natural discovery learners. They don’t read the instructions that accompany the Legos® or Lincoln Logs™, or even look at the pictures on the box. Yates states that discovery learning is “a natural, God-given, instinctive learning ability . . . It is only appropriate that Jesus use a God-given instinctive ability to assist His listeners in the learning process. Since it is a natural, God-given, instinctive learning ability, we should employ it. Jesus did. Jesus used discovery learning throughout His ministry. He still uses it today.”⁶

Learners or Listeners?

Listening does not equal learning. Talking does not equal teaching. In many classes, however, that is the formula: the teacher talks, the members listen. Yates says, “If we want spiritual transformation to take place in the lives of our

listeners, we must allow them to become learners. Many believers walk in and out of churches week after week with no real learning because we have not allowed or challenged them to become learners.⁷⁷ So why do so many teachers, especially adult teachers, but also teachers of youth and children as well, teach primarily by talking? One reason is because they have worked really hard all week, perhaps spending many hours in study, with only 30 minutes or so to share the fruit of that study. And in order to cover the assigned material, the teacher needs to remain in control. In an article I discovered on the Internet, David Hammer, a physics professor at Tufts University, exhorts his fellow science professors, “Discovery learning depends on discovery teaching.”⁷⁸ Teachers must give up some control and certainty in favor of activities that allow learners to discover. Whether in a college class or a Sunday School class, there will always be the classic tension between covering the content and guiding learners in discovery. The advantage a Sunday School teacher has over a college teacher is time. A typical college semester consists of about 45 classroom hours over a period of around 15 weeks. The material must be covered by the end of the semester so that students will be ready to pass the final exam and demonstrate that they have mastered the content. While most Bible study curriculum plans set forth content to be covered, the final exam will be less about how the learner mastered the content and more about how the content mastered the learner. Our final exam will not be about how much Bible we learned, but how much Bible we lived. As James exhorts, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” (James 1:22) Discovery teaching is about producing doers.

Questions: A Key to Discovery Teaching and Learning

Jesus of Nazareth was the Master Teacher. He is the Word of God become flesh. He is the Wisdom of God become human. He is the agent of Creation experiencing the life of the created. And yet, when He visited our planet, and embarked on the three-year teaching ministry that preceded His ultimate sacrifice and resurrection, He asked a lot of questions. When someone asks me a question about my field of expertise, my tendency is to launch immediately into a detailed answer. But when Jesus was asked a question, He was more likely than not to respond with either a story or a question of His own. My favorite example is found beginning in Luke 10:25-37. Jesus is asked perhaps the most important question anyone can ask, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Rather than sharing the plan of salvation, Jesus answered with a question: “What is written in the law.

How do you read it?" The man answered with the great commandment, and Jesus commended him, "You've answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But the man asked Jesus to clarify the commandment by inquiring, "And who is my neighbor?" The Scripture says that Jesus "took up the question" by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, concluding with yet another question! This is a great example of how discovery learning takes place, and how questions can be a catalyst.

Discovery through Teaching by Asking Questions

This is the actual title of an article I discovered on an Internet site promoting The Great Books Summer Program (GBSP), an experience for kids. The article captures an interview with Nora Palmieri, who answered questions around the programs approach, teaching by asking questions: "GBSP isn't just about great literature...it's about teaching kids to think. Our Socratic-style seminars stimulate young minds by investigating big themes and big ideas." Here are a few quotes from that interview:

Helping people think about big ideas requires finding rich literature that raises important questions. It also requires someone who can model good thinking and respect for ideas through his or her questions and listening skills.

Discussions and lectures help students reach an awareness of their own reactions as they read the texts and encourage them to think about issues raised by those texts.

While the formal classroom discussions focus on assigned readings, it is all the thinking and discussing that help students connect ideas, appreciate and respect the opinion of others, and continue to think critically about the important issues raised by the readings.

Exchanging ideas provides new solutions and builds an understanding between people. As a parent, I hope my children will reflect, listen to several viewpoints, and weigh evidence ... that in exploring a big idea such as "justice," my children will learn to act in a just manner ... that in considering the meaning of "freedom," they will value and defend freedom ... that by determining the characteristics of a hero, they will realize their own potential to be heroic.⁹

Isn't that the very kind of thing we hope will happen in a Sunday School class? The literature we study is the greatest of the great literature: the Bible. The big ideas

we wrestle with are the most important ones of all: the questions of life or death, heaven or hell, faith or fate, love or hate, hope or despair, joy or fear, meaning or purposelessness.

Questions: Appropriate for All Ages and Learning Styles

There are two teaching methods that are appropriate for almost everyone: questions and stories. Stories comprise the second aspect of the Discover Triad and will be the subject of the chapter that follows. There are many other teaching/learning methods, but not all are appropriate for everyone. Questions are a universal method! My wife Vickie and I teach pre-K Sunday School. Even at the age of four or five, kids can apply a lesson on helping by answering the question, “What are some ways you can help your mom or dad?” In fact, questions can be asked not just in the formal group time, but throughout the session as the children engage in a variety of activities. Children, youth, and adults require different kinds of questions to provoke them to think about and apply what they are learning. Yates says, “If I can encourage you to begin with only one principle ... it would be to become a student of the question. Study the use of questions by other speakers and master teachers. Proper employment of questions not only comprises the wording; it also encompasses voice tone and inflection, body language, eye contact and the emotion of the question.”¹⁰ One question that has become a personal favorite for drawing out people less extroverted than myself whose facial expression indicates they might have something to share is simply, “Do you have a view on this?” Often the insight they share is a blessing to the entire group.

Whoever Asks the Questions Controls the Conversation

This is an old but true adage. The Gospels report many occasions where someone tried to disarm or distract Jesus with a question, usually about something controversial. Jesus retained control of the conversation by asking a better question! Some adults are pros at asking rabbit-chasing questions. Kids can ask some tough questions, too. In the article “How to Answer Tough Questions from Kids,” Carrie Beth Tonks offers some suggestions for answering questions like “Did God have a mom and dad?” Some of the guidelines she offers to teachers of children are applicable to most any situation: “Answer the question that is asked, be a good listener, make time for conversation, and get on the child’s level.”¹¹ Such questions and conversations tap into the way kids learn. Not surprisingly, when facilitated effectively, it’s the way most youth and adults learn best, too.

Discussion: Only as Good as the Questions

If I had the choice of sitting through a great lecture or a poor discussion, I would pick the lecture every time! To many people, however, discussion is always better than a lecture. Educational research indeed indicates that people do retain and apply more of what they learn in a productive discussion than they do from a lecture, and usually have a better attitude and higher motivation toward learning. There is an old saying that defines lecture as a process whereby information is transferred from the notes of the speaker to the notes of the listeners without having gone through the minds of either. Sounds like my college chemistry class! But in a poor discussion, sometimes it seems that words go back and forth without going through anybody's brain either! The solution: great questions. In fact, good questions interspersed throughout a lecture improve that teaching method as well.

Three Types of Questions

There are basically three types of questions: open, limiting, and closed. **Limiting questions** have a set of correct answers. “At the end of 1 Corinthians 13, what three things remain according to Paul?” These types of questions have limited value for provoking discussion, but can be used to get a group back to the Scripture or summarize a point. **Closed questions** have an obvious answer, or at least one the learners perceive should be obvious. Comedic educators say these are the types of questions that can usually be answered (a) yes, (b) no, or (c) Jesus! “Which of the three—faith, hope, and love—does Paul say is the greatest?” is an example of a closed question. Questions like this may actually restrict group interaction rather than lead to discussion. **Open questions** don't have one correct answer. They allow participants to share their thoughts about the subject at hand. Such a question from 1 Corinthians 13 might be, “What does Paul's statement ‘Love never ends’ (v. 8) mean to you?” A more open question might be something like this: “From your reading of 1 Corinthians 13, what truths stand out to you?” For some additional ideas around this topic, check out www.godsquad.com, a ministry equipping tool of Campus Crusade for Christ. Click on the links “Discovery Questions” and “The Art of Discussion.” I really like their “Ten C's Concerning Quality Questions.” The ten are: concise, clear, complete, connected, conversational, challenging, contestable, creative, controversial, and considerate. Check the Web site for a description of each.

More Types of Questions

Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill in their book *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* say, “at the heart of sustaining an engaging discussion are the skills of questioning, listening, and responding.”¹² They identify several types of questions, including questions that ask for more evidence (“How do you know that?”), questions that ask for clarification (“What’s a good example of what you are talking about?”), open questions, linking or extension questions (“Is there any connection between what you’ve just said and what Jerry was saying a moment ago?”), hypothetical questions (“In the video we just saw, how might the discussion have been different if the leader had refrained from lecturing the group?”), cause-and-effect questions (“How might halving our class size affect our discussion?”), and summary and synthesis questions (“What do you understand better as a result of today’s discussion?”).

Participation: The Evidence of Discovery Learning

If boys and girls, men and women are going to discover Scripture, they need to be active learners. Sitting quietly may be a polite posture for Sunday School, but it is certainly not the posture of discovery. Active learning is far superior to passive learning in terms of retention and transformation. Have you ever gotten stumped at your computer, and asked someone for help? Which helped you more: the person who sat down in your chair, hammered out some quick strokes, and fixed the problem, or the person who let you do the keyboard work while they patiently guided you through the steps? You retained more if the helper let you do the work, rather than simply showing and telling. That’s the basic idea behind discovery learning in a Bible study group, too. Discussion is just one of dozens of teaching/learning methods that help people participate. In a preschool or children’s class, discussion may look more like one of the word’s synonyms: dialogue or conversation. While kids are engaged in various activities or projects, the teacher watches and listens for teachable moments, and shares a Bible thought or Scripture verse as appropriate. Learners in adult and student classes also need to participate in asking as well as answering questions. The teacher should not be the only one in the class who asks questions of the learners, or the only one in the group who answers questions from the learners. A class where discussion is really just a series of dialogues, all involving the teacher, there is yet work to do to develop an environment of discovery. Think how refreshing it might be if another learner in your class asked, “Do you have a view on this?”

Conversational Moves

Brookfield and Preskill prescribe what they call “conversational moves” to help students develop participation skills beyond just doing their share of the talking. They randomly distribute three-by-five inch cards to each member of the class, who is to practice the move indicated on the card they received sometime during the discussion. They emphasize to the students that these moves are designed to reinforce connections among the members of the group. Here is a partial list of the conversational moves:

- Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person has said.
- Ask a question or make a comment that encourages someone else to elaborate on something that person has said.
- Make a comment that underscores the link between two people’s contributions. Make this link explicit in your comment.
- Use body language (in a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what different speakers are saying.
- Make a comment indicating that you found another person’s ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.
- Contribute something that builds on or springs from what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person’s thoughts.
- Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.
- At an appropriate moment, ask the group for a minute’s silence to slow the pace of conversation and give you and others time to think.
- Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better.
- Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way.¹³

Wow! This participation thing is more involved than I thought! Maybe. But just imagine what could happen in classes that worked together to develop such skills. And there’s a bonus! These skills are not only valuable in a Sunday School class. They are useful in civic, educational, family, and corporate environments as well.

Wouldn't it be great to be asked by your boss, "You've really got outstanding team-building skills; where did you learn them?" and you could answer, "Thank you. I learned them in Sunday School. Perhaps you'd like to come with me sometime!"

Preparation: The Prerequisite to Discovery Learning

Getting ready for a Bible study class takes work, if you want people to discover. Brookfield and Preskill present a comprehensive treatment of tools and techniques for effective classroom discussions in an academic environment. One of the most important insights I took away from the book was the necessity of preparation. Even more significant was the insight that the students as well as the teacher needs to prepare for the class discussion. In so many adult classes I visit, it is obvious that the teacher has prepared, but the discussion is not very productive. Why? Probably because the members are not prepared. Brookfield and Preskill argue convincingly that "having participants do a serious, crucial prereading of materials to prepare themselves for a discussion increases enormously the chance that you will have good conversation." The statements that follow this one sound so much like many classes I have attended: "However, asking students to do this purely to improve the quality of subsequent talk won't have much effect. Students' lives are simply too full for such a request to rise to the top of their priorities. Even those who want to do the reading will often be forced to give time to other, more pressing tasks. They'll rely on their peers to have done the reading for them and will gamble on being able to improvise a comment or two that will make them look properly prepared."¹⁴

Learner Guides: An Inexpensive Way to Help Members Prepare

We recently attended a median adult class at First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia. The discussion was great, and it was apparent that many in the class had come prepared. And they had to buy their own learner guides! It was near the last Sunday of the spring quarter, and the teacher reminded the class that the new learner guides (from LifeWay's *Explore the Bible* series) were available at the back of the room for \$2.00. Too many churches today have just given up, declaring "Nobody reads their lesson, anyway, so we don't even buy the learner guides anymore." Now, you may be saying to yourself, David, aren't you just trying to sell me more stuff? Well, sort of! But for a good reason! Effective discovery learning demands that we at least communicate the *expectation* that those who attend our classes will prepare, and to make sure they have that opportunity.

You Get What You Reward

This is a tested management principle. People don't just do what they are told to do. They do what they are rewarded for. If a teacher assumes that no one in the class will come prepared, and leads the session as if no one has prepared, then eventually no one will come prepared! So how do you reward preparation? One way is simply by encouraging learners to prepare and assuming they will as you create your lesson plan. Ask the members to underline key points, circle terms or statements that perplex them, and write questions in the margins. Start the session with a question, such as "From your reading of the Scripture passage and learner guide, what questions would you like us to kick around this morning?" If there are learning activities or good questions in the learner materials, use them during class. "Look at the question at the top of page 34 in your learner guide." "What disturbs you about the photo on page 46 of your learner guide?" "In groups of four, spend the next five minutes discussing the activity in the gray box on page 37 of your learner guide."

Discovery Teaching Demands Preparation

Planning for discovery learning is harder than preparing for a lecture alone. If you lecture exclusively, you are in complete control of the material covered. You don't have to worry about questions that will throw you off track. You don't necessarily have to understand the context. You just have to deal with the verses at hand. All you have to determine is what you are going to *say* in the thirty minutes or so you have to talk. The first task of the teacher who leads discovery learning is a hard one: deciding what not to say. Or, put more positively, culling out all but the most important kernels of insight or explanation to share with the class. The irony of discovery teaching is that it actually demands a greater familiarity with the context of the Scripture passage than lecture alone. Mathematics professors Ken Bogart and Karen Collins, in a "Workshop on Teaching Introductory Combinatorics by Guided Discovery" presented at Dartmouth College, conclude "Still another role for the teacher is to help students discover the 'big picture' through discussions of relationships among the problems and the main themes of the subject the students are developing."¹⁵ Helping learners connect the passage at hand to the "big picture" of Scripture is a major goal of the experienced teacher. In a lecture on the lecture-discussion method, Evelyn Daniel quoted psychologist David Ausubel as saying "Meaningful verbal learning is the acquisition of ideas linked to other ideas."¹⁶ Daniel contrasts this with rote learning—the memorization of specific items of information which are not necessarily connected

to other ideas and information. Discovering these connections, and guiding learners to discover them, is the ongoing challenge for the teacher committed to discovery teaching.

Challenge: Connecting a Stand-Alone Lesson

Sunday School classes are open groups by design. An open group is one that not only accepts, but anticipates, that there will be newcomers in the group each week, that all the learners will not be present all the time, and that there will be an *intentional* mix of biblical novices and scriptural scholars, new believers and mature Christians, and even lost and saved persons. One of the requirements for an open group, therefore, is that each lesson stand on its own, with a clear beginning and conclusion, that provides a satisfying experience every single week for the group that is present. So a key challenge for the teacher is to help the learners make the connection to the larger context of that day's lesson. One technique for doing this is the advance organizer, a clear statement at the beginning of a session that connects the current lesson to the larger unit of study and Scripture as a whole. Some teachers like to post a unit outline throughout the study, so they can refer to it at the beginning of each session. In large group time with our pre-K kids, I like to briefly review the stories from the prior weeks, especially if, for example, we are in week four of a unit on creation from Genesis 1-2. I may show the teaching pictures from those lessons, and ask the children to recall what they remember about those stories. Another example of making a connection occurs nearly every Easter. One of the children will say something like "Some bad people killed Jesus." It is important to make sure the children connect that truth with an equally important one by saying, "That's right. But Jesus came back alive. And He is still alive today!" The growing ability to make connections in Scripture means a teacher can never stop being a learner.

The Deep Water of Discovery: Other Teaching Methods

From telling to asking is a first step toward discovery teaching and learning. But there are dozens of other teaching/learning methods that can help a class discover and apply Scripture truth. I encourage you to seek out books and training that will help you discover and experiment with some creative methods. Choosing an appropriate method will depend on the room you're in, the number and age/life-stage of the persons in the group, the available time. Some of these methods require even greater preparation on the part of the learners than the

discussion method. Many top business schools use case studies as a primary learning method. And students dare not show up unprepared! I have been influenced in the arena of teaching methods by the writings of Dallas Seminary professor Kenneth O. Gangel. You can find a good treatment of his *24 Ways to Improve Your Teaching* at www.bible.org (search “24 Ways” at that site), or obtain his book by the same name. Of special interest to teachers of children will be his treatment of “Instructive Play as Learning.”

Beyond the Lecture

Lectures are not bad. Bad lectures are bad! According to Gangel, lecture comes from the Latin *legere*, which means “to read,” referring back to a day when professors would literally read from a textbook while students took copious notes. Now that would be a bad lecture! Gangel identifies three problems with the lecture method: it does not engage attitudes, skills, and feelings, it tends to put the teacher—perhaps even above Scripture—as the authority, and “transmissive teaching tends to stifle creativity and initiative on the part of the student.”¹⁷ But he also identifies three values of lecture: covers the most material in the least amount of time, works with groups of any size, and requires a minimal mastery of the material. Most student and adult teachers will strive for a balance between lecture and discussion. For a teacher who desires to move the class toward more discussion, a good first step is to refrain from starting the class with a lecture. Good icebreaker questions, like the ones in the *Serendipity Bible for Leaders*, would be a good resource to help you get started in that direction. Or simply start with a question like, “What questions do you have after your preparation for today’s class?” Another technique suggested by Brookfield and Preskill is a sentence completion exercise. Some examples: What struck me most about what we read to prepare for the discussion today is The question that I’d most like to ask the author is The idea I most take issue with in our reading is¹⁸ Once you’ve mastered beginning without a lecture, try ending without one, too. Instead, try ending something like, “What questions do you feel are yet unanswered from today’s lesson?” Then don’t answer them! Tell the class to think about them during the coming week, as you will, and come back next weekend to explore some of them together. Then start next week’s class doing that, before bridging the discussion to the Scripture assigned for that session.

A Confession

In reality, my own preferred learning method is a great lecture or presentation. Thus, that tends to be my favorite teaching method, too. I included a section in *The 3D Sunday School* on “Livening up the Lecture” for this reason. So, am I a hypocrite? Sort of! You know what has cured me? Teaching preschoolers! It is said that a person’s attention span is equal in minutes to their age in years—topping out at 18. That’s why I have to tell the Bible story in 4-5 minutes with our pre-K class. I’ll confess some more around this issue in the Shepherding chapter. Adults and students have become accustomed to the lecture because it is easier—for the leader and the learner. For the leader, lecture is easier to prepare. For the learner, the lecture typically requires little or no preparation. We show up, listen, and leave. But do we really learn? Or are too many of us suffering from biblical bulimia, stuffing our heads with a Bible binge on Sundays, then purging our hearts of its truth by Monday? Perhaps there are better ways to discover Scripture and incorporate it into our lives. Will you join me in a fresh commitment to discovery learning? It may mean moving beyond an over-reliance on the lecture. Don’t get me wrong. Teachers have to talk! It is a part of their nature. The critical task for the teacher committed to discovery learning becomes planning the most important things to say, the most important questions to ask, and the most important activities the learners will do. And then connecting it all together in such a way that the Holy Spirit might have opportunity to do His work of spiritual transformation. Or, put another way, to increasingly witness God’s story impacting our stories. With that in mind, let’s turn to the second “note” in the Discover Triad: stories.

DISCOVERING STORIES

Everybody has a story. Even preschoolers! I teach pre-Ks with my wife Vickie at our church. One of the joys of teaching pre-Ks is that they have not yet learned how to spin their stories. They just tell it like it is. Of course, there is a story behind every band-aid! At the check-in station, there are three colors of stickers parents can attach to their children as they sign them into our room, and there is a story behind every sticker. The yellow allergy sticker on Tiffany's back warns of a newly identified intolerance to silverware. The green medical sticker on Sean's shirt reminds us of the remote possibility of a seizure. The red security sticker on Cole reminds us that his birth mother may attempt an unauthorized pick-up. Most people are not walking around with stickers. But they all have stories. I remember the day one of the kids announced, "My daddy got a new tattoo." Some weeks later, we learned that this little girl's father decided he loved his motorcycle more than her mommy, impacting her story in a significant way. One of the best places to share our stories—and how God's story has impacted our stories—is in a Sunday School class.

Jesus and Stories

About a third of the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels is comprised of parables—stories. In his classic book, *Jesus the Teacher*, J. M. Price states, "Undoubtedly the distinctive method used by the Master was the parable or story. It stands out more prominently in this teaching than any other [method]. So noticeable is it that we think of it as almost characteristic of him as a teacher, and we remember his stories above everything else. He was unquestionably the world's greatest storyteller."¹⁹ Sometimes Jesus told stories to make or clarify a single point. Often His stories caused the disciples to ponder the meaning of the parable. After

thinking about it and talking about it among themselves, they might ask Jesus to clarify the teaching. I think that's what you call discovery learning! The Gospels themselves are a story. That's why they are so compelling to read and study: The greatest story ever told in the macro, intertwined with the stories of individual lives in the micro. Jesus did not come merely to be the subject of a story, or just to tell stories, but to impact our stories. He wants us to discover the joys of life in Him—a life worth living abundantly on this earth and eternally beyond it.

Tell Me the Story of Jesus

A couple of hymns come to mind as I write. “Tell me the story of Jesus, write on my heart every word; tell me the story most precious, sweetest that ever was heard.” “I love to tell the story; for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it, like the rest.” Much of the New Testament is comprised of the apostle Paul's letters to churches. Each one of those churches had a story. Each of their members had a story. Sometimes we get a glimpse of those stories. And the fact that we have these letters at all is because the Lord Jesus miraculously intervened in the story of one man, changing his story from Saul, prejudiced against non-Jews and persecutor of churches, to Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles and planter of churches. Stories are powerful, especially when Jesus is at the center of that story!

Stories: Connecting Scripture with Experience

A Sunday School class can provide a safe place to share how Scripture is impacting our stories. *ShareYourStoryNow.org*, a ministry of the American Bible Society, invites people to post stories of how God is working in their lives, especially in terms of the impact of Scripture. The site collects stories which are God honoring, promote the life changing nature of the Scriptures, and encourage readers to dig deeper into Scripture. These are exactly the same kinds of stories that need to be shared in Sunday School classes. George Yates says, “Learning occurs when we attach prior knowledge, wisdom, and experience to the information, knowledge, and material being presented at the current time. The process of connecting the two—prior experience and current information—brings about behavioral life-change.”²⁰ The purpose of Bible study is more than learning its content. The Bible is God's “owner's manual” for human life. He does not just want us to know it; He wants us to live it. An effective way to begin a Bible study session is sharing a story that connects a life issue with the passage the group is about to encounter. A current news story works great if it fits. A third person story found on the Internet

can be effective. Even a personal story told by the teacher might be appropriate, as long as it is truly applicable. Perhaps the best story is one told by a class member, recruited by the teacher ahead of time. You could think of lots of stories to introduce a discussion of Romans 12:15 (“Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”) Almost all natural disasters produce stories of miraculous escapes and heartbreaking entrapments, all mixed up together. As I write this chapter, these are some of the stories fresh in the news: people who seldom drive over it plunging to their deaths in the muddy Mississippi River in the I-35W bridge collapse in Minnesota, while a busload of school children get rescued from a precariously perched bus. Miners trapped in Utah and China—and the double tragedy of the deaths of brave men determined to rescue them. Then there is the story of a high school track star perishing in floodwaters in Oklahoma, while an older couple is snatched from the same raging waters in a daring helicopter rescue. Just today, I was moved by how quickly tears turned to smiles, and smiles to tears, in the extra-inning semifinal victory of the baseball team from the tiny Caribbean island of Curacao over a favored team from Venezuela, with a dramatic two-out home run in the 2007 Little League World Series. Stories like these raise questions like “How would God have us react in similar circumstances?” Assuming the Bible passage addresses that question, you’ve set the stage for a life-changing Bible study experience.

Stories: Connecting People’s Journeys

Hearing the stories of other pilgrims on the journey of life can be a great benefit. Sometimes it’s encouraging just to know what other people are facing, have faced, or are about to face when it’s an experience similar to your own. *CarePages.com* is a site devoted to be “Support and Community for Everyone Coping with Illness.”²¹ The purpose of the site is to provide encouragement through sharing stories. It allows people to read about other families facing similar struggles. This is exactly the kind of thing that should happen regularly in a Sunday School class. Sunday School classes are designed to be “open groups.” That is, they are an intentional mix of Christians and non-Christians, newcomers and long-time members, new believers and those who have followed Christ for years, biblical novices and Bible scholars. Nothing can be more encouraging to someone on the front-end of their walk with Jesus than to hear honest stories from veteran believers about their struggles and how God helped them overcome them. A March of Dimes site, www.shareyourstory.org, lets families share stories around the births and lives of their premature babies. My spirit was moved by the story submitted by a high school sophomore, who entered the world 15 years before as a 2 pound,

14 ounce infant, who had decided to give back by becoming a neonatal nurse. In another story Jeannie requests support for her son's new battle with pneumonia and tells her story: "We have spent many nights in the children's ICU wondering if we would have him the next morning and with God's will he is with us. ... Everyone who meets him either thru church, school, or just in the mall goes away with a smile."²² At a site related to the PBS series "African American Lives," I read with fascination stories about how the lives of African Americans and Native Americans intertwined in the post-Civil War era. My favorite story was posted by a woman whose grandparents in the 1930s escaped slavery in Russia, by going to Germany, where a son the grandmother thought was dead showed up and convinced them to move to America. In the factory where he worked, his African American coworkers made fun of his accent, until one day he became angry and told them his story, after which they called him "brother."²³ Isn't a Sunday School class a place where people should be able to discover that they are brothers and sisters because they have been set free from slavery to sin through Messiah Jesus? People make those connections through stories! Suppose a new couple visits your class. They've just moved to your town from out-of-state. Do you wonder why? Then why not give them the opportunity to share their story? Inevitably, someone else will find something in his or her own story that intersects the newcomer's story, and a connection occurs. I travel a good deal, and it continues to amaze me how stories connect. Just two days ago, I was talking following a conference with a young pastor named Brent. As he told his story of moving from his youth minister position in a large church in Texas to his first pastorate in rural Oklahoma, I stopped him—and named the church he had come from! You see, some months before I had visited with a minister at that church, who told me about the youth minister's call. It was a fun connection, and one enabled by connecting stories!

Stories: Sharing our Pilgrimages of Faith

I love the premise of the blog of James Czegled, Associate Secretary for Evangelism, Church Growth, and Worship for the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The subtitle of the site, whose header reads "Telling Stories and Learning Faith," reads "Random musings and an attempt at journaling as a spiritual discipline as I try to figure out where I fit in God's story."²⁴ Aren't all of us trying to figure that out? Through sharing our stories, we have the opportunity to figure it out together. In his blog, Czegled says that "the greatest skills we need for sharing our faith are the ability to listen and the capacity to be a faith friend."²⁵ Wouldn't "faith friends" be a great way to describe your Sunday School class? Whitney Hopley gives this advice in an article at *crosswalk.com* entitled "Share Your Faith at Work": "Don't be afraid

to show your own flaws. Too many Christians try to seem perfect, only to come across as arrogant and phony. Remember that non-Christians will be attracted not by your victories, but by God's grace. Know that they need to see not just who you are today, but where you've come from."²⁶ On a Web site sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) called *faithsharingtoday.com*, readers are urged to "get comfortable with your story" by doing a timeline, including good times and bad, significant events, memorable times, significant relationships, major life changes, etc., then reflecting on how God was present in those events, and how others reflected God's love toward you during those times.²⁷ A great place to get comfortable with our stories is to "practice" them among the faith friends in our Sunday School class.

Sunday School: A Place to Practice Our Stories

In the book *The 3D Sunday School*, I challenge classes to enter into a "kingdom conspiracy" to create the kind of environment and experiences that make their class a safe place to invite others. In the book *I-6: A Six-Lane Strategy Toward an Inviting Sunday School*, I challenge classes to become a Great Commission team, working together to pray for and reach their friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors. One of the ways to do those things is to create an atmosphere that encourages members to "practice" their faith stories. One of the reasons many believers don't feel comfortable sharing their faith stories with unbelievers is that they have few opportunities to share them with other Christians. Storytelling guru Dolly Berthelot credits Sam Keen, a conference leader in a session entitled "Your Mythic Journey" with formulating two fundamental questions a storyteller must ask: "Where do I come from and who has come with me?" and "Where am I going and who will go with me?"²⁸ Aren't those great questions Christ followers should ponder as we develop and share our stories? I have visited any number of adult classes in which a different person or couple has prepared to tell their story. Over a period of time, everyone has the opportunity to tell his or her story. I would make a couple of suggestions based on those experiences. First, I think such testimonies should have a strictly enforced time limit, say five minutes. Second, I think it would be great to let the class follow up with questions and perhaps even an encouraging critique. The first suggestion is offered in the spirit of letting the class be a place to practice your story. In a great story, every word counts. So it must be well thought out. It should probably be written—but not read! The second suggestion could accomplish the goal of sharpening our stories: including missing details and—perhaps more importantly—eliminating unnecessary ones!

Stories Build Community

In an article, “The Value of Story Telling” on her Web site, Dolly Berthelot says, “Like the campfires of old, stories light our way, stir our spirits, warm our hearts. Shared in person or in print, stories can form verbal bridges between people—across gulfs of human ignorance, isolation, diversity, and conflict. Such bridges can also span the generations, a precious gift to the future, our unique yet universal legacies.” She adds, “Authentic story sharing is more essential than ever. In our complex, rapid-fire world, individuals are too often mere fragments, flickers, momentary clicks on a surfer’s screen, too rarely seen whole, and in context. We yearn to be known, to know others, truly. Personal, familial, professional, cultural, and organizational stories, shared wisely and well, flesh out our images, help us perform better, thrive together, and contribute productively to the common good.” She offers even more specifics, stating that story sharing may help “humanize strangers and those different from us; level the playing field for outsiders; foster empathy, human connections, relationships; open minds and hearts, and deepen appreciation of differences and commonality.”²⁹ Shouldn’t those be qualities a Sunday School class should strive for? You have experienced the “serendipity” of discovering that you “have something in common” with another person. Berthelot uses the phrase “the common good.” So does Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7 (NIV), speaking of spiritual gifts. The Greek word Paul uses is *sympheron*. You don’t have to be a Greek scholar to see the English “symphony” in that word. In an orchestra, there are many different instruments and players with different styles. They share two things in common: the musical piece and the conductor. So it is in a great Sunday School class. Suppose you have invited an unsaved friend to come to Sunday School. As people share their stories, what do you want your friend to hear? Well, of course you want her to understand that Christians are imperfect people on a journey. And above the individual parts, you want your friend to hear that there is a commitment to the follow the conductor—Jesus—and practice the “sheet music” He has provided to guide us—the Bible. A class won’t become like this by accident. It must be intentional. You have to talk about it. Practice playing together. Work at it. A great tool for helping this to happen is the icebreaker questions in various editions of the Serendipity Bible.

Questions: Bringing Out Stories

We have already observed the importance of questions in the discovery of Scripture. Questions are equally important in the discovery of stories. The entire group needs to accept responsibility, along with the teacher, for drawing out stories.

Berthelot says, “We can learn so much by asking good questions, sometimes tough questions, and really listening, with an open mind and heart.”³⁰ It has always amazed me how an older person in a nursing home setting, who may not remember what they had for lunch, can remember vividly events that happened decades earlier. But you have to ask the questions! I recently discovered a Web site connected to Ohio State University with some great pointers for such encounters, which they identify as intergenerational “life reviews.” Perhaps some of the suggested questions might spark some of your own: “Where did your parents meet? Marry? What are some of your best childhood memories? How did your parents wash clothes? Tell me about your pets. What was school like for you? How did you get there? What were your favorite subjects? What is your most vivid memory of bath time as a child? Tell me about the first hour you remember. What games did you enjoy as a child? What is the best present you ever received?”³¹ (Note: for my father-in-law, it was a leather football! I’ve heard the story a dozen times. And it never grows old.) Check out the site for some additional ideas.

The Storytelling Circle

In an interview posted at artsedge.kennedy-center.org, entitled “Joseph Bruchac, on Sharing Stories,” this American Indian storyteller answers questions about the process and practice of storytelling. He says stories help you understand the world better: “When you hear a story, you can find yourself in that story.” Describing the process of storytelling, he relates what he learned from a Mohegan Indian elder: “The story is a circle...with four dots. The first stands for the importance of listening. We have two ears and we are always supposed to listen to two sides of everything. The second dot stands for observing, using our two eyes to see that far away and that close to us. The third is memory because if you don’t remember what you’ve seen and heard, it’s as if it never happened. And then, of course, the fourth, which completes the circle, is to share. To listen, to observe, to remember and to share.” In terms of the sources of stories, Bruchac responds, “Everybody has stories. You have stories of your ancestry, stories of your family, stories of the place where you live and stories of your own personal experience. And, indeed, I tell stories from all four of those directions.”³² For Christians, our personal experience includes our relationship with the Father through the Lord Jesus. Often that is the hardest part of our story to tell—or even to make sense of, especially when our story is impacted by disappointment, discouragement, disease, and death. That’s why we need to ask each other questions like “How has your relationship with Christ helped you during this chapter in your story?” That’s why we need others

who have had similar experiences to tell their stories, and testify to the difference it made because they knew God. It's OK to share other people's stories! In fact, sometimes it is more appropriate than sharing a personal one. Jesus was never the hero of His parables. So how do you learn the stories of others? Follow the four steps of our Indian storyteller: listen, observe, remember, and share.

Brevity: The Hallmark of a Great Story

Read the parables of Jesus. None are very long. They include just enough detail to keep your attention. No detail detracts from the main message. We've all heard the phrase, "to make a long story short" more than we've heard a long story made short! Like Jesus, a great storyteller makes every word count. He uses facial expressions and body language effectively. She varies her voice tone and volume. But above all, the great storyteller understands the value of brevity. In a Sunday school class with more than 10-12 people, telling stories concisely—yet vividly—takes on even greater importance. Experienced teachers of preschoolers and children know the importance of avoiding what Kenneth O. Gangel identifies as the problems of storytelling: "reading the story instead of telling it, including too many details that bog down the story, overemphasizing minor details which obscure the main implication, rote memorization which leads to a mechanical presentation, "sermonizing" the implication rather than letting it find its natural place in the story, offering the story without enthusiasm, using visual aids as a crutch rather than using facial expressions and body movements as the primary visual support, and poor organization that does not allow the story to progress systematically to its logical climax."³³ While Gangel is talking about telling a story from another source—primarily the Bible—the same principles apply to sharing our own stories. Practicing these principles in our Sunday School classes will help us be more effective at sharing our stories outside the class.

Listening: Reclaiming a Dying Art

Do you know what is the most important part of a truly great discussion, where Scripture and stories intersect in powerful and meaningful ways? Listening! I have been in many classes where the group's definition of listening was "not talking—yet!" In fact, I have been guilty more often than not of "listening" that way, too. How about you? To truly listen is to really want to understand the thoughts of the speaker, feel her emotions, and connect with him spiritually. It is hard work—much harder than talking. Yet we all know what it is like to be talking, but no one is really listening. Attentive listening involves our body as well as our mind.

Leaning in. Eye contact. Saying, “Tell me more about that.” Asking, “How did that make you feel?” Reflectively summarizing what the other person has said. The art of listening begins with a genuine interest in the views and stories of others. I love to hear people’s stories. Even people I don’t know. Just today, one of the dozens of prayer requests e-mails sent out daily to those who subscribe to our church’s prayer alert ministry really moved me. It was about a couple that had lost one of their premature infant triplets after a mere two days of life. The health of the other two tiny babies was more promising. Wouldn’t you like to know more about their story? Me, too! On a recent plane trip, I had a fascinating conversation with the Director of Aging for a major city, whose own story of caring for her aging parents, her political leanings, and Unitarian affiliation led—after the first two hours!—into a spirited discussion of things spiritual. Don’t get me wrong. I love to talk! But I’m growing more and more fond of listening. With an open mind and heart—or at least trying to do that. Working hard to turn down the constant chatter in my overly active brain. Will you join me in that effort? As we develop the art of listening, we will listen more attentively to God as He speaks to us through His Word and through others. I’ve got an additional challenge for teachers: you have to model being the best listener! It’s your job to try to listen for everything that is said and who said it. One technique suggested by Brookfield and Preskill is the “Designated Listener.” This person is pre-selected with the task of listening, speaking only to ask clarifying questions, and charged with summarizing the discussion at its conclusion. That would be a great assignment for a person being considered as an apprentice teacher.

The Subject Trumps the Story

Brookfield and Preskill cite P. J. Palmer on the issue of the subject. “There are really three parties to a conversation,” he says “the teacher, the students, and the subject itself.” “Of these three parties,” the authors observe, “the subject is the most frequently neglected, but it too has a voice that ‘we must strain to hear . . . beyond all our interpretations.’ Although interpretive filtering is inevitable, Palmer advises that a text, a lecture, a film, or even a picture needs to be understood, at least initially, on its own terms. The tendency to jump to conclusions that fit personal experience or that address a currently pressing problem should be resisted to allow the relatively unfiltered message of the subject to come through.”³⁴ For Sunday School, the subject is the Bible. When its story contradicts ours, guess which needs to be “less wrong”? That’s right: our story! Our stories are subject to His.

Your Story: The Last Chapter Is Not Yet Written

Ultimately, this whole story thing is not just about discovering stories or sharing stories. It is not just about getting to know each other better. Although there is great value in that, frankly you can do that in any social group. We love stories. It's how we make—or try to make—sense of things. Neurobiologist Paul Grobstein argues that there is actually a part of the brain designed specifically for storytelling.³⁵ God has wired us to love stories, to identify with them, to learn from them, to create them, and to share them. He wants desperately to be a part of our story. The Bible is His Story, a saga of His unrelenting love affair with the people He created. In Jesus, He literally stepped into the human story; the Son of God became the Son of Man. The great stories of the Bible report the amazing things that happen when God intervenes in the story of an individual or people group. Aren't you amazed that the lineage of Jesus includes Rahab, whose life as a prostitute was not the end of her story? Or that David's sin with Bathsheba, and the death of the child of that murderous and adulterous affair was not the end of their story? That God, in His great mercy, gave the two another child, Solomon? Or that Peter's story did not end with his denial of Jesus on the night before His crucifixion? There were yet chapters to be written in Peter's story. There are chapters yet to be written in your story, too. In mine. In ours.

Sunday School: Where Scripture and Stories Meet

The goal is to bring harmony between Scripture and story, like two notes played simultaneously. Neither is sufficient by itself. I have seen classes on both extremes. Youth classes whose teachers thought the best way to approach Sunday School was talking with teens about nothing in particular around a box of donuts and classes of children sitting for an hour around a table while a well-meaning teacher “drilled” them on the Bible. Preschool classes that were little more than playtimes supervised by babysitters, with little attention to the connection of activities to a Bible truth or story and adult classes where the teacher stood behind a lectern and talked for an hour from copious notes. But I have also observed classes with an amazing and wonderful blend of Scripture truth and relevant stories. That is the kind of environment most likely to produce life-changing Bible study. It's what I like to call fellowship around the Word of God. Let's work to make our classes a place where Scripture and stories meet. Then we're only one note short of the Discover Triad. To that note, Shepherding, we shall turn our attention in the next chapter.

DISCOVERING SHEPHERDING

Let's see. So far, you already want us to weave together Scripture and stories into a meaningful group experience, and we've got to do it in about an hour each weekend. Right? Well, not exactly. As you've already figured out, it's virtually impossible to do all of that in just one hour a week, especially if your class has more than ten or twelve people in attendance. But Sunday School should be much more than a one-hour-each-week experience. I've often quipped that there are only two things wrong with the name Sunday School: it's not just on Sunday, and it's not a school! But I don't want to change the name, because most people know that it's more than that. Sunday School is rather a 24/7/365 network of communication, care, outreach, and yes, Bible study. For great Sunday School classes, the weekend (or in some cases, weekday—which really messes with the name!) Bible study hour celebrates the culmination of a week of ministry, and the beginning of another. The part of the Discover Triad that pulls it all together is *shepherding*.

The Optimum Spiritual Gift for Sunday School Teachers

This may be a surprising statement: I do not think people with the spiritual gift of teaching make the best Sunday School teachers. Of course, God can use any person, regardless of their giftedness, if they are available and teachable. But in my experience, the best Sunday School teachers are those who have discovered or are discovering that God has entrusted them with the spiritual gift of shepherding. This gift, usually 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 other sixteen times the Greek word, *poimen*, appears in the New Testament, it is usually translated “shepherd,” so we're certainly on solid ground to call it shepherding. There are many

more than one person in a local church with the gift of shepherding, and often the man with that title has different spiritual gifts. Let's spend a little time talking about the gift of shepherding. (Most of this material is taken from my book, *Spiritual Gifts: A Practical Guide to How God Works Through You.*)

How the Shepherd Is Different

The person with the gift of prophecy (often a preacher) prefers to speak from a pulpit. The teacher feels most at home behind a lectern. The shepherd, on the other hand, is most comfortable sitting down among the flock. Picture a shepherd with a staff, sitting or standing among the flock, watching for and warning of danger, using his staff to pull those back in those who begin to stray away, and soothing and guiding the sheep with his voice, and you've got a pretty good idea about the gift of shepherding.

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 serious about growing in the Lord, the shepherd stays in touch with even the chronic absentee. In fact, the shepherd may pay equal attention to "straying or troubled sheep" than 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 they need.

Shepherds are Dependent on Those 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 Sunday School 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 they need solid curriculum materials to use.

After serving as a preschool teacher for many years, I have come to trust the ideas in the materials. I've learned to just trust what the leader guide suggests, and the kids usually love it. That's something I've had to learn. It comes naturally for the person with the gift of shepherding. But sometimes those with this gift are made to feel guilty by those with a teaching gift. If you're a shepherd, please allow me to give you some advice: Don't feel guilty! You're doing fine.

How to Spot a Shepherd

In the *Spiritual Gifts* study, I offer the following example as a 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 something like this: "I am teaching a six-week 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." He might even add with excitement in his voice, "One of them brought a friend a few weeks ago. He's going to be baptized this morning!" The focus of the gift of teaching is teaching the Bible. The focus of the gift of shepherding is teaching people the Bible. Subtle, but significant.

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 those in his/her care, and prone to jealousy if his/her flock feeds in someone else's "pasture." Shepherds are sensitive to problems in the flock that might cause disharmony. He or she usually remembers names, faces, and voices well. Shepherds tend to be self-sacrificing to the extent that she sometimes tries to do everything herself instead of involving the members of the group. A shepherd usually likes to study, but generally just enough to feed the flock what they need, generally "one meal at a time." Saturday night preparation is a recurring reality. (Note: At LifeWay, we know there are lots of shepherds teaching Sunday School, because the computer that serves up the free curriculum supplement, *EXTRA!*, gets hammered every Saturday evening—at 9:00 p.m.!) "Count" is an important word in the shepherd's vocabulary: "You can count on me." "Did you count how many were there?" "Don't count them out yet; I'm still working on them!"³⁶

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. How does this apply to Sunday School teachers? Shepherd-teachers strive to increase their understanding of the general characteristics of the age-group which their class is assigned to minister. LifeWay's "Understanding Series" is a set of free downloadable books for teachers of preschoolers (www.lifeway.com/understanding/preschool), children ([/children](http://www.lifeway.com/understanding/children)), teenagers ([/youth](http://www.lifeway.com/understanding/youth)), and adults ([/adults](http://www.lifeway.com/understanding/adults)). The growing shepherd-teacher will also seize opportunities to learn more about the generational characteristics of the group they guide. 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. And, of course, effective shepherd-teachers will be 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—in general.

Shepherds Know Their Flock

Beyond general knowledge about sheep, shepherds get to know their individual sheep. Effective teaching starts with the needs of the learners. In order to teach to meet needs, the shepherd-teacher must become acquainted with each member on his or her class 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 their page. Of course, there are some standard items the shepherd will want to include about every member: 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 they bring to class. Teachers of preschoolers, children, and youth will want to include information about the parents, and when/if the child has accepted Christ and/or been baptized. Extra credit goes to shepherds who record other information, like spiritual gifts, temperaments, love languages, favorite things, pet peeves, and the like. The excellent shepherd-teacher will use this notebook as a prayer guide as well, noting prayer concerns and answers to those prayers. In other words, shepherds know their flock's stories, and prepare to teach with those stories in mind.

The Shepherd's Preparation for Teaching

Effective teaching, as we've already seen, involves a lot more than getting through the content of Scripture. Just like any other Bible teacher, the shepherd starts with the Scripture, reading it several times and perhaps in different translations before consulting the leader's guide or any other helps. He makes note of questions he'd like answered. She jots down words she'd like to understand better. Then the helps are used, and notes taken. Then comes the hard part, culling out all but the very best statements, questions, and activities to come up with a teaching plan. But the shepherd-teacher does one more thing. Throughout this entire process, the shepherd is thinking about the learners: their needs, their hopes, their hurts, their struggles, their decisions. He is asking, "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.

Shepherd-Teaching Doesn't Have to Wait for Sunday

Imagine that you are preparing for next Sunday's lesson, based on 2 Corinthians 1. As you read verse 4, ("He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God.") You recall that it has been about one year since Chris and Kathy lost their son Nathan in a tragic auto accident. Then you flash back to over a dozen years ago, the night your best friends Billy and Frieda called to frantically inform you that the same unthinkable thing had happened to their son Craig. The meaning of the Greek words translated "comfort" and "affliction" don't seem very important right then. Nor does the larger context of the passage. All you can think about is Chris and Kathy, Billy and Frieda. (The little bit of shepherd in me had to stop to cry just now.) You know what? A shepherd-teacher doesn't have to wait until Sunday to apply that passage. These two couples—real friends of mine—are at different places in their journey in regard to the impact of this Scripture on their stories. Frieda and Billy have become comforters; Chris and Kathy still need to be comforted. The good shepherd-teacher would approach this passage altogether differently if one of these dear couples was in his class. I hope you're grasping the subtle differences between shepherd-teachers and teacher-teachers. Neither is better than the other. They're just different. And suited for different roles.

Silence: The Shepherd's Secret Weapon

The experienced shepherd knows exactly what to say in the hospital emergency room or at the funeral home: nothing! Of course, that's hyperbole. The shepherd

of course says something. But not continuously. He has a sense of what to say and when to say it. A sheep herder with his flock is not constantly talking to them. But he is listening. Comforting with his presence. Watching for danger. The shepherd-teacher also understands the value of silence in 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? You guessed it: silence. After someone has shared, just sit there silently. Especially 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 (it will seem like five at first!) before anyone responds. You might even ask them to write something down during that time of silence, to "get their thoughts together," if you will. This is particularly effective if you have a group dominated by a few extroverts.

The Shepherd's Staff

Wow, this shepherding stuff looks like a full time job! Shepherding a Sunday School class is 24/7/365. Being a shepherd indeed can demand a lot of time and energy, especially, as is their nature, the shepherd tries to do it all by himself. The wise shepherd, however, enlists a team—the Shepherd's Staff if you will—that will assist in the shepherding, and share in the joy it brings. A class that is serious about shepherding will also enlist a team of Care (or Connect) Group leaders. A care/connect group leader is responsible for making a weekly contact with 5-7 men or women (men contacting men, women contacting women), and reporting needs and news to the teacher, directly or through the Connect leader. In smaller adult classes, the outreach, teaching, and inreach leader can "double up" as group leaders, just as workers in preschool and children's classes do. A class could reach an enrollment of 18-24 before additional leaders beyond the original three would be required. Yet the wise shepherd does not wait that long, but identifies and enlists care group leaders as the class grows. He trains the leaders in the use of the notebook and other shepherding skills. Who is the care group leader for the care group leaders? That would be either the teacher or the Connect leader. In a large class with a number of class leaders, the teacher will serve as the group leader for her team. I have seen dozens of different adaptations of this structure. The important thing is to establish a system where everyone is being shepherded. This is even more important if you are a teacher of a class and have a gift like teaching or exhortation. I know teachers with these gifts that do a great job as Sunday School teachers, as long as they compensate by having a great class organization.

Apprentices: The Way Shepherds Reproduce Themselves

I'm not positive, but I don't think you can earn a degree in sheep herding. So how does someone learn how to be a shepherd? By apprenticing with another shepherd. Great shepherd-teachers are always on the look out for someone that could be an apprentice. It would not be unusual for the apprentice to first demonstrate effectiveness and giftedness as a care/connect group leader. Another indicator of a possible apprentice would be someone who eagerly took an assignment, such as giving a 3-minute report on the ancient city of Ephesus, and did an outstanding job. Still another test might be asking the potential apprentice to function as the "designated listener" as described in the Stories section. Above all, 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 your apprentice teacher. Be sure they understand that you're not just looking for a substitute or a permanent associate. You want to help him develop to the point that he can shepherd his own class in the future.

Jesus: The Shepherd's Ultimate Example

The chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4), the good Shepherd (John 10:11), the great Shepherd (Heb 13:20), the One who is "the shepherd and guardian of our souls" (1 Pet 2:25), is the supreme example of what it means to be a shepherd. The Bible says that when Jesus "saw the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were weary and worn out, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). Mark 6:34 records a similar statement preceding the feeding of the 5,000. John 10:1-16 records an extended teaching of Jesus about shepherding. Verses 14 and 15 provide the hallmark for a shepherd who allows the Good Shepherd to work through him or her: "I know My own sheep, and they know Me, as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father."

The Shepherd-Teacher's Reward

I am confident there will be eternal rewards for those who serve well as shepherd-teachers and as members of a shepherd's staff. There are certainly rewards in the classroom, among them witnessing girls and boys, women and men "get it" in terms of understanding or applying Scripture truth. A special reward is to hear someone say after a lively discussion, "You know, I never thought about it that way. I think I was wrong on that point. Thanks for that great insight." A very great reward is witnessing one of your class members publicly profess Christ through baptism (by the way, that *is* the way Baptists "publicly profess" their faith!) But you

know what I think is the most special reward of all? When a preschooler comes up to you in a restaurant with his or her mom and/or dad and hugs you—because you're their Sunday School teacher. Or when a child shyly waves at you across the supermarket—because you're their Sunday School teacher. Or when a student introduces you as "my Sunday School teacher" to a group of friends at a basketball game. Or when you walk into a hospital room, and the face of the patient lights up, and with apparent joy in her voice, introduces you to her family, "Everyone, this is my Sunday School teacher." There may be higher callings. There may be more glamorous callings. There may be more prestigious callings. But I doubt if there are any more rewarding callings than that of a Sunday School teacher, especially one who implements the Discover Triad: leading a group of people to enjoy fellowship around the open Word of God, teaching one another through passionate discussions of Scripture, encouraging one another through meaningful stories, and caring for one another through a system of shepherding. That's the kind of class I would love to be a part of. It's the kind of class that can penetrate the spiritual lostness around us, one friend, relative, associate, or neighbor at a time. My prayer is that yours will become that kind of class, as you implement the Discover Triad. Many blessings!

Epilogue: The Heart of the Discover Triad

Hopefully you've heard my heart as you've read this book. Just in case you have any doubts, I believe that the most important of the three facets of the triad is scripture: teaching and studying the Bible. That's been the most important "what" of the Sunday School movement since its early beginnings. But what I would like you to take away from this book is a fresh perspective on the "why" of Bible study through Sunday School.

The Discover Triad revolves around the facet of stories. What if your Sunday School class became a laboratory where you could not only share your story, but sharpen it, too? Why? So you could share it more effectively, more concisely, more interestingly. But it's not just about sharing your story; it's also about hearing other people's stories. At its heart, that's what shepherding is all about: inviting others to share their stories, then responding to their stories. In a sense, a shepherd is earning permission to be a part of another's story.

So what does that have to do with the purpose of Bible study? Simply this: no one's story is truly complete until it intersects with God's Story. One important purpose of Bible study, then, is to become so thoroughly knowledgeable of scripture that sharing God's story is second nature, as natural a part of conversation as sharing your own story.

I love to hear people's stories! It is amazing to me how willing people are to respond to the simple request, "Tell me your story." Sometimes they'll reciprocate, and I'll get to tell a portion of my story. Usually, I try to share a part of my story that connects with whatever portion of their story they shared. Then they share more. And so it continues. In a fascinating sort of way, such a conversation lends itself to "loving your neighbor as yourself." OK, so where does the scripture thing fit in? In fact, it can fit in very naturally. As you hear someone else's story, you might be able to say something like, "That reminds me of a Bible story we discussed in our Sunday School class recently." Or as you share your story, you might say, "I was reading a story from the Bible that really spoke to me." Sharing truths and stories from the Bible becomes just a natural part of your conversation with people, because you know the stories - they are in your heart, you heard and discussed them in Sunday School.

To me, that's a great reason for Sunday School! Not just filling our heads with facts and principles. But being equipped to share scripture and stories in a natural way as a part of our everyday conversations with people who need to know Christ. Jesus described the lost as people who are like sheep without a shepherd. A Sunday School class is a place where we can purpose together to help each other fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, using the tools of scripture, stories, and shepherding. I hope your class will catch a new vision of what a Sunday School class can be and do. May God bless you as you implement the Discover Triad.

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My FRAN Prayer List

The power of prayer should not be underestimated. Think of individuals in the four FRAN groups and list their names below. Then covenant with God to pray for these individuals daily. Pray for the opportunity to invite these persons to church or Sunday School.

NAME

INVITED

Friends

Relatives

Associates

Neighbors



Care Group Member

Name _____

Address _____

Phone: (H) _____ (W) _____ (C) _____

Birthday _____ Anniversary _____

Vocation _____ email _____

Christian? Yes No

Family Members _____

Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts _____

Other Important Dates

Event

Date

Prayer Needs _____

Care Group Member



Name _____

Address _____

Phone: (H) _____ (W) _____ (C) _____

Birthday _____ Anniversary _____

Vocation _____ email _____

Christian? Yes No

Family Members _____

Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts _____

Other Important Dates

Event	Date
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_____	_____
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_____	_____
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_____	_____
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Prayer Needs _____

Care Group Member

Name _____

Address _____

Phone: (H) _____ (W) _____ (C) _____

Birthday _____ Anniversary _____

Vocation _____ email _____

Christian? Yes No

Family Members _____

Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts _____

Other Important Dates

Event	Date
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_____	_____
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_____	_____
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_____	_____
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Prayer Needs _____

Care Group Member



Name _____

Address _____

Phone: (H) _____ (W) _____ (C) _____

Birthday _____ Anniversary _____

Vocation _____ email _____

Christian? Yes No

Family Members _____

Hobbies/Special Interests/Spiritual Gifts _____

Other Important Dates

Event	Date
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Prayer Needs _____

ADDITIONAL HELP FOR SUNDAY SCHOOL DISCOVER TRIAD

The following materials are available for free download at www.lifeway.com/sundayschool as well as the entire text of *The Discover Triad: Three Facets of a Dynamic Sunday School Class*, which you have permission to reproduce for use in your class or church.

Sunday School Kickoff Event Resources

Many churches conduct an annual training event to kickoff the new Sunday School year. A training module for each age group team (preschool, children, students, adults, and general leaders) is available for free download. Each module includes a teaching plan, handout masters, and a PowerPoint® presentation that support and supplement the concepts. These materials will be available beginning in March 2008.

Online Training

For a free online study of this resource led by the author, go to <http://lifeway.acrobat.com/discovertriadcourse/>.

The 3D Sunday School

The 48-page books and training materials for the 2007 and 2006 Kickoff events remain available for download, as does the 2005 materials based on the 32-page book *The Five Step Formula to Sunday School Growth*.

www.lifeway.com/sundayschool

Information about LifeWay curriculum resources, as well as lots of free articles and links to other information is available. Add it to your favorites and visit often.

eSource Electronic Newsletter for Sunday School Leaders

This is a monthly newsletter for anyone interested in growing a Sunday School Bible study ministry. LifeWay has a strict privacy policy, and you must “opt in” to receive LifeWay electronic newsletters. To subscribe, visit www.lifeway.com/newsletters.

Associations and State Conventions

Your local association and state convention has people and resources eager to help you grow your Sunday School ministry. Check their Web site for contact information.