



Work Hard, Pray Hard

Students should take Bible study as seriously as school and sports practice.

I'm frequently asked what discipleship resources I recommend for teens. My answer is simple: Give them the Bible itself. Ask students to be students of the Scriptures.

When addressing biblical illiteracy among adults, Bible teachers must start by getting them to recall what it means to be a student and learn a subject in a structured way. Adults may not even associate a structured learning approach with being a disciple of Christ. For many, discipleship is almost wholly defined by doing—sharing the gospel, volunteering, giving, or going on a mission trip.

Teens, on the other hand, know exactly what it means to be a student. They fill the role in school five days a week. Yet we often communicate to this age group that their faith is a matter of feelings and impressions, of subjective observations or experiences, rather than of earnest study.

In Jesus' day, the term "disciple" would have been inseparable from that of "learner" or "student." Learning a rabbi's teachings was foundational to doing what those teachings required. And that is still the case today. We are transformed into doers of the Word by first being hearers.

Today's high schoolers learn physics and calculus and foreign languages. They are expected to annotate literature and draw critical conclusions about its meaning. They complete hours of homework. They seek tutoring when a subject is difficult. They work hard to learn because learning points to definable future outcomes. They are disciples of their teachers, learning with great discipline the various disciplines those teachers instruct.

By contrast, when these same students show up at church to be discipled in their faith, what will be asked of them? Have a quiet time for ten minutes each day. Read a few verses and journal about them. Listen to a testimony. Read a devotional book. Discuss what you're reading with some of your peers once a week.

They are capable of so much more. When we hand them a vision of Christian discipleship devoid of earnest study, it's likely we do more than just short-change them on their ability to learn. We short-change them on the process of becoming a mature disciple. We may also short-change the Bible as not actually relevant without hooks or gimmicks, or as not actually accessible without spoon-feeding.

More concerning, we communicate a tacit value statement. Students understand that what is important is worth our time and effort to attain. They regularly invest long hours, not just in their schoolwork, but in their sports team, music lessons, dance classes, or jobs.

When the church says, "We know you're busy. Just invest a little time in the Bible," students understandably infer Christian discipleship falls below their other commitments. Since it requires so little of them, it must not be that important.

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What if we gave students the Bible and expected them to learn it? What if we asked them to read it like a book—to apply the same skills they are learning in their English class to their sacred text? Read entire books from start to finish. Annotate major themes. Summarize. Outline. Read repetitively.

What if we asked them to learn to rightly divide the Word with all the discipline they would apply to learning calculus or the violin or gymnastics? In an age where the pattern for discipling students has been to repeatedly lower the bar, we should do what the soccer coach, the chemistry teacher, and the SAT prep instructor do: Raise it.

I know what you're thinking: "Our kids won't do that." I agree that teens won't rise to an expectation that we have not set. Not all students will rush to the challenge of a higher bar of discipleship, but for those ready to grow deeper, there must be a place and a mechanism to do so.

If we train them to study God's Word while they still know what it means to be a student, we set them up for a life-long love of the Scriptures. Adulthood is approaching at breakneck speed. They will need deep wells of understanding to counter the messages that will clamor for their attention.

By all means, keep student ministry a place of scavenger hunts and all manner of silliness. But when it's time to open the Scriptures, give them serious tools and train them to use them. Treat them like the adults they will soon become. **CT**

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