

Tim Jarvis, MABC  
Biblical Counselor, Compass Bible  
Church  
Aliso Viejo, California

James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken,  
*Effective Bible Teaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition  
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\$21.99.

Would you classify much of the Bible teaching at your church as little more than “poor lay preaching?” If you were honest, how would you describe the teachers under whom your people sit week after week? Is their material full of biblical content, but dry, disjointed and unconnected to real life? Or, is their teaching illustrative and witty but touching upon the Scripture only long enough to glean only the smallest seeds of truth? Perhaps you are a pastor or lay-teacher who feels like you fit into one of these two categories. Whatever the case, whether you are a pastor hoping to cultivate a strong teaching ministry in your church, or a lay-teacher struggling to communicate the truths of God’s Word in a way that is both useful to students and faithful to the text, Wilhoit and Ryken’s *Effective Bible Teaching* has much to offer you.

The authors, James Wilhoit, professor of Christian Formation at Wheaton College, and Leland Ryken,

professor of English at the same institution, are convinced that poor Bible teaching can be remedied. “The premise of this book is that it is possible to diagnose with precision what goes well and what goes poorly in the classroom. It is also possible to prescribe a cure for every ailment” (14). The hope that one’s teaching can transition from dull and lifeless to stimulating and fruitful is a welcome encouragement for many teachers of the Bible, I’m sure.

Wilhoit and Ryken are persuaded, however, that in our attempts to correct instances of unfruitful teaching in our churches we have looked “too much at the teacher and not enough at the educational process and the content” (15). While not ignoring this “human component” completely—Chapter 4 is dedicated to discussing the traits of an excellent teacher—the authors concentrate their efforts on what is taught more than on the one who teaches it. Their aim is to help instructors craft textually grounded, theologically insightful, well-organized Bible studies that not only convey spiritually nourishing truth in a compelling manner, but also motivate students to think, study and learn on their own. Many good teachers may regularly accomplish the former, but only an excellent teacher will find consistent success in the latter. Indeed,

the notion that genuine learning is self-motivated learning is a principle that underlies the entire book.

We must never forget that all true education is self-education. No teacher can make students learn, a fact that is ignored in contemporary approaches to education that pamper students and ask teachers to shoulder the entire responsibility for education....Students need to be engaged, not infatuated, and that is why we emphasize learning-centered education. Our focus must be on fostering and promoting deep and significant student learning (31).

In order to promote this kind self-motivated learning, Wilhoit and Ryken find great value in facilitating Inductive Bible Studies where students are encouraged and expected to interact with, ask questions about, and formulate their own judgments about the biblical text at the guidance of the instructor. This approach to Bible teaching is distinguished from Directed Bible Studies. Although the various components of the teacher's preparation are the same under each approach, what happens in the classroom is notably different. "A directed study replaces group discovery with the leader's sharing of his or her insights into a passage. Inductive study is radically democratic. It gives every member a vote. Directed study lets the leader do more of the talking" (110).

Wilhoit and Ryken do not mean to imply, however, that inductive Bible studies are always advisable. Some groups are too large while others are too unfamiliar with the material to benefit from an inductive approach. In such cases, the teacher should implement a directed study method so that the students will be exposed to educated teaching rather than the collective ignorance of the other students.

Regardless of how you might assess the validity of the inductive method for conducting Bible studies or whether or not you believe it would work in your particular setting, the principles outlined by Wilhoit and Ryken will serve as reliable tools to help you adequately prepare and present faithful and stimulating Bible teaching. I shall mention a few.

Perhaps most important among the principles discussed by the authors is their exhortation to "come to grips with the text" (17). In order to avoid drifting into the comfortable territory of one's hobbyhorses or to keep from waxing eloquent on theological issues not related to a given passage, teachers must draw their lessons from the text itself. Yet, remaining tethered to the text is not enough. "To teach a passage effectively, a teacher must be able to communicate a sense of its unity" (59). In order to grasp a passage's unity, one must

identify its genre—is it narrative, exposition, poetry?—and locate the “big idea” of the passage. Accurately identifying the genre guards one from wrongly interpreting the passage. Discerning the main idea keeps the teacher from missing the conceptual forest for the exegetical trees. Both practices help “impose a unity” on the passage that will help the teacher and his students better understand the biblical text.

In fact, because Wilhoit and Ryken are convinced that proper interpretation depends upon one’s ability to classify the kind of literature they are studying, they discuss the matter of genre in multiple places throughout the book, dedicating two chapters to specific genres: narrative (Chapter 13) and poetry (Chapter 14). Even in the chapter devoted to helping the teacher recognize and convey the main idea of a passage (Chapter 6), Wilhoit and Ryken give several examples of what this looks like as the teacher comes in contact with the Bible’s various genre.

The authors also outline several indispensable principles for sound biblical interpretation (see Chapter 8). Among these is the reminder to “operate on the premise that the Bible is God’s revealed word, inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore without error” (92). Keeping this foundational premise in its rightful

place helps the teacher properly reverence Scripture as he works his interpretation of various texts.

A second principle a teacher must keep clear in his mind is that “the biblical canon...is an organic whole in which the parts fit together harmoniously” (93). Unfortunately, as it relates to the work of interpretation, the authors understand this principle chiefly in precautionary terms: “Accordingly, one should interpret individual passages in an awareness of what is said elsewhere in the Bible. In the case of difficult or obscure passages, the interpreter should give precedence to biblical passages where the doctrine is clear” (93). The canon acts as a set of guardrails to keep the teacher from driving into a doctrinal ditch as he handles tough passages.

There is more, however, that should be drawn from this principle; namely, that Scripture’s nature as an “organic” document implies that much theological and pastoral treasure can be quarried from understanding how various themes, doctrines and types unfold over the canon and find fulfillment and development as God’s plan of redemption is revealed in greater and greater detail. Although Wilhoit and Ryken mention the progressive nature of Scripture on the following page (94), they do so only to offer