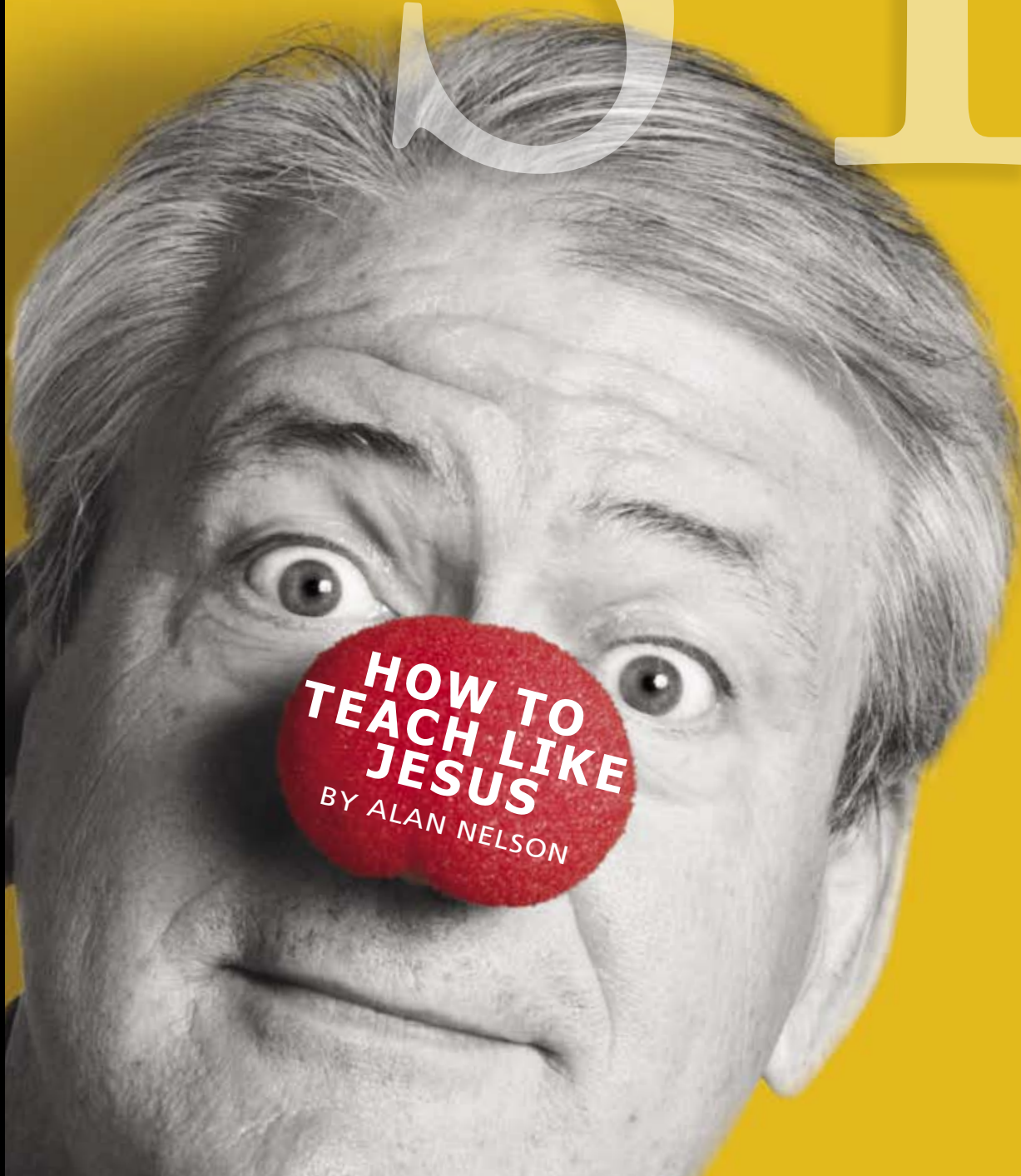


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**HOW TO
TEACH LIKE
JESUS**

BY ALAN NELSON



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Imagine that you're the floor supervisor at a computer factory. One day you notice that nine out of every 10 newly manufactured computers are dropping off the end of the conveyor belt and crashing on the floor. You sprint to the emergency switch and shut down the line. "What's going on?" you scream. "Why isn't somebody doing something about this?" Since you're the factory floor supervisor, your job is to immediately identify the problems and solve them to stop this unthinkable waste of time, effort, and money.

CRISIS IN THE "FAITH FACTORY"

Now think of the people leaving the sanctuary after hearing you preach. By the time they've reached their vehicles, research indicates that they've already forgotten 90 percent of your message. Current research indicates that the typical pastor in America works 50

hours each week. About 25 of these hours are used for sermon preparation and presentation. The average annual salary for a pastor in America is \$40,000. There are about 300,000 churches in America. When you do the math, \$115,000,000 is spent each week on sermon preparation and presentation. This *enormous* cost requires us to ask ourselves the painful stewardship question: How can God be happy when >>>>

90 percent of what we're preaching is "falling off the conveyor belt and crashing to the floor" in the lives of our hearers?

If you could multiply the "take away value" of your message up to nine times, you'd want to know, correct? There's a proven way to significantly increase the residual effect of our biblical messages. It is the method that Jesus often implemented as well as the approach increasingly being embraced by secular organizations. Educators refer to it as "active learning." We call it the 10/90 Principle because people remember only 5 to 10 percent of what they *hear* but up to 90 percent of what they *experience*.

HOW DID JESUS TEACH?

Jesus used a variety of teaching styles. He used mentoring, small group instruction, parables, visual aids, strategic questions, and other forms of active learning. When you

think about it, Jesus' primary discipleship method was a three-year experiential model in which the disciples experienced life with him, resulting in history's most effective transformation of a small group.

In contrast, most churches are not using Jesus' styles of active learning. No wonder so many people can attend church for years and still be spiritually immature. They may glean a few biblical factoids and pick up a talking point or two of doctrine, but they never mature in their faith.

Imagine pastors wearing HWJT bracelets: "How Would Jesus Teach?" It sounds presumptuous—how could anyone teach like *Jesus*? Well, it's more possible than you might think.

Although modern educators are now catching on to the value of active learning, Jesus often implemented these strategies in his teaching. For example, when Jesus turned water into wine at Cana, it involved the experience of pouring water into containers and then the sense of taste as the wedding party noticed the quality of the wine (John 2:1-11). Later Jesus instructed one of his disciples to pay a tax by catching a fish and pulling a coin out of its mouth (Matthew 17:24-26). He healed a blind man by mixing his spit into the dirt to make mud (John 9:1-11). He cursed the fig tree in front of the disciples, causing it to wither (Matthew 21:18-22). He invited Peter to walk on the water (Mark 6:45-56). He instructed Thomas to touch his side (John 20:27). He broke bread, passed the cup, and then washed the disciples' feet. Jesus said, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will" (John 13:1-17).

WHY WE DON'T TEACH AND PREACH LIKE JESUS

Certainly not everything Jesus did was experiential in nature, but he used it on a regular basis. If Jesus used active-learning methods, why don't those of us in ministry do the same? Here are a few observations on our reluctance to teach like Jesus:

We've not seen active learning modeled.

We tend to replicate what we've seen others do. Look at the way we "do" church. Little has changed in centuries



Each generation thinks it's plowing new ground and being radical and more effective, but the essence of what we call a worship service has changed little over the centuries.

of church services. We sing a few songs, make a couple of announcements, hear a sermon, and (in many traditions) receive the Lord's Supper. Styles change. Settings differ. Each generation thinks it's plowing new ground and being radical and more effective, but the essence of what we call a worship service has changed little over the centuries.

We get to be the star in passive learning.

Most pastors won't admit it, but the traditional style of worship sets up the pastor to be the center of attention. "Look at me. Listen to what I have to say. I'm in charge. I'm educated and the authority on this subject. You need what I know." Trying to sound profound and "wowing them with words," we run the risk of undermining the ultimate goal, helping our people "get" the gospel.

Active learning is risky.

Learning experiences that impact are unpredictable at times. The surprise factor is part of the "ah-ha" effect, whereby people are caught off guard and, as a result, remember the lesson for weeks and even years to come. To turn over the learning process to the disciples, even in part, is a scary process for both teacher and student. Notice the angst among the Twelve when Jesus said he'd be leaving them soon. To produce true disciples, we must let them learn on their own. The teacher's job is to provide contexts for learning, not just content, and then unleash the participants to jump in on their own.

Active learning expects more of learners.

The word "disciple" literally means one who is active in learning. Most teaching today is passive in nature. By providing our people with notes, PowerPoint slides, soft seats, and climate-controlled environs, we often lower the threshold of learning to the point that we create consumers, spiritual spectators who just think they're participating. Unfortunately, by taking this safe route and not engaging people in the learning process, we sabotage the outcome. They absorb less because we fail to engage them emotionally, physically, and relationally, all three of which are dynamic influences for learning. We leave it up to them to apply what they've learned cognitively. But

let's be honest, how many people really do? This could help explain why people can attend church their entire lives and not progress beyond the spiritual capacity of a toddler. It's not that the Word is sterile, but rather our methods for teaching it are impotent.

We dismiss active learning because of one or two lame experiences.

Many have had a less than positive experience with an attempt at active learning. Perhaps it was a cheesy camp or retreat activity, a lame illustration, or a poorly executed discussion. We think, *If that's active learning, you can keep it.*

The irony with this notion is that despite countless boring, poorly executed monologues, most of us continue to implement the talking head, one-way form of communication. Poor teaching is poor, no matter what method you implement. But if you want to maximize the long-term retention of the people you serve, employ active-learning methodology. Jesus did. Developing quality active-learning experiences is not easy. It requires a honed skill and practice.

Washing feet and having your feet washed can be awkward for both teacher and student. There will be times when we run the risk of being labeled "cheesy," "weird," or "touchy-feely," but poorly designed active-learning experiences should not be confused with good ones.

When we lead people through active-learning exercises, there are moments when they don't understand why we're doing what we're doing. But when done well, the residual effect is long term. The "ah-ha" often occurs after the experience itself. People "get it." They understand spiritual principles far more effectively when translated into experiential metaphors and emotional contexts. A growing number of demographers suggest that we're moving toward a time more like that of the early church, which means communicating through story, experience, and word pictures. The rise of the arts in the church is a move toward this as well. The arts touch us emotionally, making messages and experiences more memorable. The growing use of film clips, high-tech sound systems, candles, and mood >>>>

This is risky business. Any dynamic learning process is dangerous. But it also affords the opportunity to joust with the status quo and provokes folks to reconsider how they're living.

lighting shows that we're intuitively leaning toward the effectiveness of active-learning principles.

SIX ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE LEARNING

Ready to aim for the 90 percent? If so, here are six elements required for active learning:

1. It involves everyone. Sitting in a comfortable seat while listening to a talking head is an easy but lazy

way to obtain information. Why not watch television, read a book, or watch a video instead? Moreover, involving only a few people in an active-learning experience will not have much of an effect on the entire congregation. To be truly memorable, the experience should involve everyone.

2. It's an adventure. Participants in an active-learning experience don't know what the outcome will be; in fact, even the designer of the activity can't predict the outcome. That's what makes active learning different from an object lesson, the outcome of which is controlled.

USING OBJECTS TO GET WAY BEYOND MERE WORDS

Pine and Gilmore, in their book, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Harvard Business School Press), show how companies that create experiences profit from selling souvenirs. The reason is that people want a reminder of a good experience. When people go on vacation, attend a theme park, concert, or camp, they desire a physical item that serves as a memory trigger to help them relive the experience. At a wedding the reminders are a valuable ring, a photo album, and a dress.

Human nature is such that physical objects act as catalysts for memories that store emotions.

Group has developed a line of resources called Unforgettables

(www.unforgettables.org), designed to help pastors create memorable message experiences. From outward appearances, the objects may seem inexpensive and insignificant, but they become mnemonic triggers when attached to an experience. The theology of the idea isn't new. When the people of Israel crossed the river into the Promised Land,

they took stones from the river bottom to create a monument so that when future generations asked what the stones meant, the people could tell them. Sanctifying

the objects of the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant, immersion in water, sacrifices, and stone tablets all took on special value and meaning when associated with a purpose or event.

Jesus gave new meaning to mud, to small loaves of bread and fish, to water and wine, to a coin in the mouth of a fish, to ointment, and to a Roman instrument of execution. Significance came in the meaning attached to a physical item, far more than the object itself. Whether it is a church building, a car, a house, a piece of clothing, or any number of other examples, we attach emotions and memories to them. By providing people with simple and symbolic items related to a lesson, we create an echo effect, by which people are more apt to remember an intangible principle.



Participants might respond with laughter, embarrassment, chatter, thoughtfulness, and even tears. Whatever the responses, the learning will be rich.

3. It stands alone as a fun or captivating thing to do with friends. Effective learning activities are intrinsically interesting. They cause participants to want to share the ideas with people outside of church.

4. It evokes emotion. The emotional element is what drives an experience from short-term to long-term memory. When you ask people to reflect on the most memorable times in their lives, they nearly always refer to times of intense emotions, both positive and negative. Just as searing a steak locks in its flavor, emotions serve as the glue that seals learning.

5. It is age-appropriate. One reason pastors reject active-learning methods is that the ones they've experienced were childish or goofy. It is imperative that these experiences genuinely appeal to the age group to which they're directed.

6. It is coupled with strong debriefing and world-class questions. Even a modest time spent reflecting on an activity deepens learning. One of the most valuable benefits of discussions with a partner or a small group is the insight participants gain into *themselves* as a result of articulating their thoughts and feelings. Putting thoughts into words requires next-level thinking. How can we truly know or understand something if we can't begin to articulate it?

Great questions are open-ended; there are no right or wrong answers or simple, one-word responses. Instead, answers are individual and different, depending on the respondent's unique perceptions, knowledge, personality, and experiences. Great questions are never lame, obvious, or leading.

THE BUZZ EFFECT

One beneficial side effect of active learning is the way it gets people talking about their Sunday experience from Monday through Saturday. They'll be telling their friends, neighbors, work associates, and relatives about the zany things they did in church last week, or how their hearts were deeply moved, or will show them the souvenirs they took away from the Sunday message. >>>>



The more people talk about these experiences, the more your church stands out as different from the majority of status quo churches, and the more others want to come visit. Without knowing it, you've turned pacifists into evangelists, consumers into raving fans, and spectators into participants. Regardless of size, this is an effective means to pique curiosity in your church. By making the Bible real and attaching it to everyday life, you fulfill the desire of many for Scriptures to make sense.

GETTING REAL

I can hear some of you saying, "C'mon, get real. I can see doing this sort of thing from time to time in a staff meeting, leadership retreat, or small group, but do you really think I'm going to employ active-learning methods in Sunday morning worship services?" As the leader of your congregation, you're the cultural architect. You establish the norm for your congregation by what you say and how you explain things. Don't go for immersion right away. Sprinkle first; then pour; then immerse. You'll be amazed at how well people respond if you gradually introduce active learning in nonthreatening levels and then occasionally deepen the involvement. Use variety. The approach will keep people anticipating every week what you're going to do next. Try these levels:

Level 1: Employ a visual aid, creating a metaphor for a key point.

Level 2: Recruit one or two others to demonstrate the experience in front of the rest.

Level 3: Ask everyone to participate with an experience or visual aid on his or her own.

Level 4: Have everyone participate in an experience, and then facilitate a debriefing time in groups of two to four. The key at this level is to be sensitive to asking people to participate, without compromising by letting them off the hook. Use phrases such as, "We're going to try something different today, so let's give it a try," or "Let's have a little fun and try something new," or "Here's an experiment, so do this at your level of comfort."

You might be saying, "I pastor a seeker church. We'd scare them away from God if we asked them to turn to a person next to them and discuss their thoughts on an object or physical symbol in their hands." Today's seekers are different from those in the 1980s, when the term became popular to describe people returning to church who desired anonymity. The postmodern influence of today's culture values experiences. Starbucks doesn't sell coffee: It purveys atmosphere, an experience of a community coffee house. The Internet, interactive video games, Dave and Buster's, Barnes and Noble, and McDonald's PlayPlace are of the new genre of experiential environs. You sell your people short when you limit God to a talking-head lecture.

If you're a pastor of a classic church, you may be saying, "Good idea, but it won't work with our permanent press traditionalists. I can't teach these old dogs new tricks." Yes, you *can*. And if you *don't*, you're not doing your job. Anyone who's been attending a church more than a few years has an innate problem caused by his or her reticular activators. This finger-sized portion of the brain blocks messages that are deemed familiar and nonthreatening. For veterans of the faith to hear old things anew, you have to teach differently. You can teach old dogs new tricks if you change the stimulus. While they may

IF YOU TALK LESS, THEY WILL LEARN

In an educational study, during each of five different lectures, a teacher paused for two minutes at three different times during the lectures. The teacher didn't interact at all with students during the pauses; students discussed with pairs or wrote notes. At the end of each meeting, the students were then asked to write down everything they could remember from the lecture, free recall. At the end of the course, they were also given a comprehensive test to measure their long-term retention. The researchers also tracked a control group, which attended the same lectures but wasn't offered the pauses, and this group was similarly tested. This same research test was done twice, and the results were clear: Students attending lectures in which the instructor paused did significantly better on the free recall and the comprehensive test. The difference in scores between the two groups was even enough to make the difference of two letter grades!

Do you realize what this means? If we talk six minutes *less* and engage in an activity that reinforces what we teach, people will learn *far more*.

say they don't like it at first, it's for their own good. They need you to say things differently so that they can hear them again, for the first time.

This is risky business. Any dynamic learning process is dangerous. But it also affords the opportunity to joust with the status quo and provokes folks to reconsider how they're living. But the results are transformational, especially when you are conveying scriptural truths. Look at Jesus' three-year experiential learning program with his disciples.

If you want to keep it real, what it comes down to is not so much the student's discomfort with learning a new way, as much as it is the teacher's angst about teaching differently. Giving up control in exchange for learners to experience truths on their own makes some teachers feel irresponsible. To take up precious "presentation time" for quality discussion and interaction is, well, humbling. Too many preachers are more consumed with being the "star" than with being willing to let people share the limelight of learning.

If you've measured the results of your preaching over

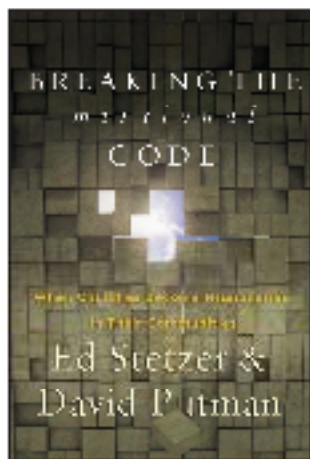
the years, beyond the token church door "Nice sermon today, Pastor," and are happy with what you're seeing in your people's growth, then keep doing what you're doing. But if you want more payoff from your investment and feel as though there might be a better way to grow people, I'd encourage you to try something different. Teach like Jesus. Like every new skill, you get better the more you practice. The more experienced you become at developing your own experiential messages, the more your people will welcome and anticipate them. Make it a strategic tool in your repertoire of methods. Begin simple, and you'll start hearing from people about what they're learning and how they're *remembering* what you've so painstakingly prepared for them. 🙏



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