

My Church and Marketplace Adventure Begins

By Marcia Gillis

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Romans 10:17 ESV

The Birth: We Were Hungry to Know God More

There we sat in awe at all that God had taught us through our verse-by-verse study of Philippians. We had used my study guide, "Upward Living in a World Gone Mad." Now our elective study was completed, but none of us wanted to stop. One of the ladies pleaded, "Can't we do another course this summer? It seems like we're just getting started, and we're bonding together. Let's not stop." I protested, "Yes, it's been wonderful, but I won't have time to prepare another course this summer, with all that's going on." Another lady suggested, "Why don't we just choose a book of the Bible and we'll take turns leading a verse-by-verse study each week!" "Which book would you want to study?" I asked. "How about Hebrews?" a group member suggested. So the adventure began....

By the time this adventure began I had been directing discipleship ministries for children through adults, at churches and in the marketplace, for over thirty years, either as a staff member or volunteer. I had felt blessed to see people grow and step into their destiny as a fruit-bearing child of God. I had started classes and small groups that took place on various days of the week and in various places. As time went on, though, I grew more dissatisfied with the many shallow self-help curriculums which featured more of the "How does that make you feel?" questions and less of the "What does God's Word say about that?" and "How should we act in response?" Bible-focused questions. I grew more bored with home groups that used a cd with a few discussion questions type of curriculum, and found many other churchgoers who were also bored.

An exciting part of this adventure included what was happening in the marketplace to which God had led me. For several years, now, I had been working in corporate America, along with teaching and directing volunteer ministries, at my church. About six months prior I had been granted permission from the top brass to use a conference room to lead a verse-by-verse Bible study. At church, and in the marketplace, I found people who were spiritually starving for something that was meaty and would provide them a firm foundation on which to build their lives. They did not want a self-help curriculum, or a book that included the Bible, they wanted God's Word itself!

Summer had begun, a time when most churches wind down, but our small group was winding up. I gave instructions on sound principles of biblical interpretation to our group members. Then, I assigned various members (both men and women) the responsibility of preparing and leading the study on a particular chapter of Hebrews. Each week before our study, I read each chapter carefully, myself, to try and anticipate any difficult discussion topics that might cause difficulty for those who were leading, and prepared to help them, if I was needed.

It would be hard to express the power of the presence of God that we felt, each week, during that Sunday morning church study. We were hungry and thirsty for a deeper knowledge of Him and He filled us. As we went verse-by-verse we were overwhelmed by Him. None of us will ever be the same. From that group was birthed new small leaders and teachers. They led the way they had been taught to lead, with a deep respect for the power of God's Word, following sound principles of biblical interpretation. That study was the beginnings of the "Roundtable Bible Discussion Ministry," which, later, expanded into three groups, one for men, women and couples.

The Adventure Includes My Corporate Marketplace

At work, we were still doing a verse-by-verse study of Philippians, and amazing things were happening! There, I also found people who were hungry and thirsty, from all different Christian and non-Christian backgrounds. Many came from churches that had not trained them how to study God's Word, but had used self-help book-based curriculums. They wanted more. My study group at work included Caucasians, Black Americans and some from Arab descent. It included two Black bi-vocational preachers, Catholics, Protestants and one from a Christian Science background. We had between 1-10 participants on any given week. It was not unusual for joyful laughter to pour out of that room, as we responded to His Word and love. Some weeks the demands of work made it necessary for many to work through lunch and our attendance was down. During the weeks when I had only one, that one was a seeker, a non-Christian with questions. God had prepared their hearts and the situation to be a safe private one in which they could ask questions and meet God. Every week I left the study overwhelmed at how God had worked!

*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. **Go** therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

I had been leading a study at work for about a 1 ½ years when our advertising sales division was sold. The new company brought in their own sales manager, another ordained minister! He began to make appearances at the Tuesday lunch Bible study I was leading. He told me that he planned to start an actual worship service, with preaching, on Thursdays during the lunch hour and that this would be broadcast to other offices of our company, through the phone lines! I found out from another Christian in the office that he had been holding these "tele-conference services" for about two years, and that there were numerous of our offices around the country and in Canada that participated.

I will never forget that first Thursday worship service that took place in our largest conference rooms. A man from an office located in another city led worship, through the phone lines, while conferenced in people all around the country joined in! Following worship, our sales manager preached a powerful, solidly biblical, surrender all message to twenty from our office and to hundreds around the country! Here were people who were hungry to know God more through the power of His Word. They were tired of the shallow preaching and self-help classes their churches offered. They were finding Him at a lunchtime worship service in the workplace, and through the lunchtime verse-by-verse Bible study I led!

We need God's resources to bear fruit. But where we place our roots is paramount. Only as we grow them deeply into the spiritual resources of God's grace will we produce fruit. Make the Bible your spiritual resource. Delight in it and feed your soul with its truth. God can use you to help win the lost.

W. Wiersbe, Prayer Praise and Promises: A Daily Walk Through the Psalms

The Church Ministry Expansion

At church we had expanded from one group to three. **I had trained the leaders in sound principles of biblical interpretation**, and had given them further instructions to help them be effective. Initially, the church staff had been skeptical about multiplying from one to three verse-by-verse Bible discussion groups, during the Sunday morning hour, but they became enthusiastic as they heard the testimonials of lives changed. **I urged leaders to strongly recommend that each student begin to read from Genesis, using a study Bible, and that we only do verse-by-verse study in the New Testament.** The strategy paid off! Students began to take responsibility for their own personal growth. Their use of a study Bible helped even the new believers understand what they were reading. Starting in Genesis gave them a foundational understanding crucial to a more complete knowledge of God's plan and the New Testament. New Christians were quickly able to interject deep insights into the weekly discussions and became excited about their own spiritual growth and increasing knowledge of God's Word.

As of the writing of this article, I am preparing to teach a Wednesday night elective class on "Walking in the Power of the Word and Spirit," which will be followed by the launch of three more verse-by-verse groups in the spring, this time on Wednesday night. From surveying our groups, I've found that very few of the participants come from an Assembly of God, Pentecostal, or even Charismatic background. They come, primarily, from the mainline churches. They have come to our church because they want to be part of a church that actually takes them through the Bible, verse-by-verse.

Questions you may have

Why did I start these groups during the time slot I did? The Sunday morning is a convenient time for the whole family. Sunday mornings and Wednesdays are, most often, the only time period when there is systematic Bible teaching and discipleship for children and youth. When churches discard and/or fail to plan, organize and promote these discipleship opportunities, or offer a sound alternative, they sacrifice the children and youth. What is offered for children during home groups is "childcare" not systematic "discipleship." The biblical ignorance of our children and youth testifies to the ineffectiveness of our current commonly haphazard approach, especially in the youth department. Ask any Assemblies of God teacher in the Bible-Theology department and they will confirm that youth are entering our universities with less biblical knowledge each year.

What are they doing in the mega-churches? During the past several months I've been speaking to leaders in the children, youth and adult ministries at some of the fastest-growing mega-churches. The mega-churches are drawing a crowd, but many have a long ways to go to increase their effectiveness at making disciples, as do the smaller churches. In most cases, but not all, they are putting all their emphasis on the home groups. My research has revealed that many of them, in their small groups and youth ministry, utilize curriculums which include a cd "teaser" and a few discussion questions or feature

application-focused discussion questions on the pastor's sermon. There are few churches that encourage a deeper study of the passages the pastor preached on, or utilize verse-by-verse study. I did find, though, that some of the churches empower small groups to do verse-by-verse, themselves. Some include deeper Beth Moore or Blackaby type studies in their leader recommended curriculums for small groups. I appreciate those recommendations.

The Findings of a Six-Year Study of a Thousand Churches

Churches that want to become more effective in growing disciples need to read the book, *Move*, by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson. So what did they find that highly effective disciple-making churches do?

Practice 1: They get people moving. Best practice churches promote and provide a high-impact, nonnegotiable pathway for first steps—a pathway designed specifically to jumpstart a spiritual experience that gets people moving toward a Christ-centered life.

Practice 2: They embed the Bible in everything. At best practice churches, the Bible goes well beyond its role as the foundation for teaching and life instruction. These churches *breathe* Scripture. Every experience within the church begins with the question, “What does the Bible have to say about that?”

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

THIS BOOK contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners and the happiness of believers.

Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable.

Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe and practice it to be holy.

It contains light to direct you, food to support you and comfort to cheer you.

It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword and the Christian's character.

Here paradise is restored, heaven opened and the gates of hell disclosed.

Christ is its grand object, our good is its design and the glory of God its end.

It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully.

It is given you in life and will be opened in the judgment and will be remembered forever.

It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

— Anonymous (found on the flyleaf of an old Bible)