

Reaching the Whole Body

by Bill Moller

In this edition of CogentNotion expect a slightly different approach toward our topic of discussion. Through the words of some fictional characters, Tom and Jen Smith and their family, we'll attempt to examine a few of the issues concerning Adult Christian Education, or Adult Sunday School, as some might call it.

Tom is a computer programmer in his early forties. He holds a BS in Computer Information Systems Management and is currently employed by Crandoll Athletics, a national sporting goods supplier that provides equipment and uniforms to high schools and colleges. Most of Tom's friends and family were surprised when they heard Tom got the job with Crandoll, because he hadn't participated in sports of any kind since his days with the Bellville Blue Jays Little League team, when he received a trophy for getting the most splinters in a season. Tom has a great appreciation for athletics, but if given a choice between tennis on a clay court in the hot sun and debugging code in his air conditioned office, he'd choose the computer code. Unless of course Jen, his wife, asked him to play -- for her, he'd do just about anything.

Jen, a collegiate athlete and winner of numerous local tennis tournaments was, until six years ago, a high school English teacher. She met Tom at a fund raiser for the girls' tennis team which she had been coaching for several years. Though few would have predicted their whirlwind romance, they married just two years later and now have three children: Tom, Jr., 9, Dani (Danielle) age six, and little Susie who Tom and Jen believe should be the poster child for a "Terrible Two's" parent recovery group.

When Jen discovered she was pregnant with their second child, she and Tom spent a long time planning out how they would manage on one salary if Jen chose to stay at home to raise the children. Jen's mom had helped with Tom Jr., while Jen had returned to work just two years earlier, but asking her mom to handle two kids didn't seem fair. More to the point, they figured Jen could tutor students from home and coach tennis in the spring; then, when the kids were older, she could return to full time teaching, if she wished.

Our story begins with the Smith family along with Jen's parents, Peter and Barbara Wilson, gathered around the dinner table. It was early August, and the group was celebrating the Reverend Wilson's recent retirement. After thirty-five years as the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, in the historic district of Bellville, Pete, as he prefers to be called, decided he had "fought the good fight", and it was time to move on. His church was still growing despite the trend in the opposite direction for most of the congregations in his Presbytery. And, in reality, he wasn't leaving the church completely; he would still have contact through the part time counseling position he had accepted at a private Christian school specializing in reaching troubled teen boys, located just a few hours away.

The discussion around the table had pretty much run the gamut when Reverend Wilson turned to Tom and declared, "So, Jen tells me you're going to teach Sunday school this fall. I think that's great! What class will you be teaching?"

Jen and Tom locked eyes for a fraction of a second and then Tom replied, "Yes, that's right. I'll be team-teaching an adult class on the book of Ruth, with Wendy Carmichael, the Director of Christian Education at our church."

"Wonderful! Wendy's a great gal. Did you know I went to seminary with her brother, George? I'm not sure if either one of us would have made it through without her encouragement. She worked in the Dean's office back then, and the three of us would eat lunch together nearly every day. We used to spend hours laboring over the meaning of different passages, and I hate to admit it, but most of the time she had a better handle on the Scriptures than we did."

Tom interjected, "Yep, she really is quite a biblical scholar. My only concern is that she...well...how do I say this... she's a little...well...NUTS. Oh don't get me wrong, she knows her Scripture backwards and forwards, but she's all over the place when it comes to organizing the material we have to present! At our first planning meeting she started talking about using her flannel-graph board and Bible flashcards. I had to spend twenty minutes explaining that we might be better off, in an adult class, using my laptop and digital projector for visual aids."

As Jen starting clearing the dishes from the table she leaned toward Tom and in a soft voice said, "You know, Tom, Wendy's ideas may not be as "nuts" as you think. Mixing in a few traditional teaching methods along with your high-tech, data-driven presentation might add another dimension to the class. Also, we need to be supportive of her as well. After all, this is the first time a woman has taught an adult class at our church, and she may be as nervous as you are about the whole thing."

"You're right. I keep forgetting that. I get so wrapped up in pulling together all the material and organizing it in the proper sequence that I completely overlooked the fact that I might be putting extra pressure on her," replied Tom, as he poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Pete.

Jen lean over, kissed his forehead and whispered, "That's okay, honey, God loves you just as you are, and so do I." She then turned and headed toward the kitchen.

Suddenly, with a not so loving smack to the shoulder of her husband Pete, nearly causing him to spill his coffee, Barbara Wilson chimed in with, "So Pete? You gonna help the boy? With all your years in the pulpit, you oughta have somethin' you could tell him. Stop bein' so selfish, and share some of the gifts God gave ya."

Pete's retort was firm, loving. "Babs, he hasn't asked for any help! If there is one thing I've learned over the years it is that

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people have to want help before it can be effectively offered. Imposing my suggestions on someone who isn't seeking my advice is a bit presumptuous, isn't it dear?"

At that point Jen shouted from the kitchen, "Dad, you're a good teacher. I think Tom would appreciate a little advice on ways to handle his class, wouldn't you Tom?"

"Ah...yeah...sure. I'd love to hear what you have to say," grumbled Tom as he glared down the hall at Jen who smiled back at him. Tom knew this scenario was inevitable, but somehow hoped he could avoid it. He and the Reverend occasionally disagreed on biblical interpretation. Tom was raised in an independent evangelical church and Pete's somewhat liberal theology often tested Tom's more conservative approach to Scripture. But, they had always managed to get along, and over the years had developed a mutual appreciation for each other's perspectives.

"Well, son, you're very polite, and I know you'd prefer to organize your own material, but allow me to say one thing that I hope you'll keep in the back of your mind," cautioned Reverend Wilson using his Sunday pulpit voice. "DIFFERENT PEOPLE LEARN DIFFERENTLY, and if you want to reach the whole body of Christ, you'll need to vary your teaching methods and adjust to your audience, or you'll leave some people out of the loop."

Tom nodded his head, but the blank expression on his face was a telling sign. This concept was new to him. He really didn't understand what the Reverend meant. Tom thought, "What's the big deal? Teaching is teaching and learning is learning, right? You read the verses, you check the cross references, you make sure your interpretation fits the context of the passage, and you tell the class what you discovered."

Jen returned to the dining room table with a special cake she had baked. "Dad's right, Tom," agreed Jen. "People have different learning styles, and a good teacher develops a lesson plan that allows for that." She went on, "You remember Stacy Feldman from the high school, don't you? She's the math teacher who used to be my assistant coach for the tennis team. I was talking with her the other day, and she was all upset about something she called 'Differentiated Instruction'. Apparently, that's the popular term for a method of teaching being implemented on all the grade levels. Basically, it's what Dad was saying. In a typical class you'll have some students who are visual learners, some who are auditory learners and some who are tactile learners. Differentiated Instruction would take that class and adjust the teaching method to accommodate the learning styles of each student. What Stacy was upset about, was that she had to rewrite the lessons she had used for years, and begin using multiple methods to teach many parts of her course. That's a lot of work!"

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute!" barked Tom. "Visual? Auditory? Tactile? What exactly are we talking about?" Multiple methods? I'm not sure where you're going with this."

"Easy honey, take a deep breath," cautioned Jen. "I know change doesn't come easy for you. You like things to stay consistent and predictable, just like your computers, but that's not how everyone lives their lives. Let's see if I can come up with an example to help illustrate the concept." She thought for a

moment. "Okay, let's take this cake, for instance. If you had to make this cake, how would you go about it?" she asked Tom.

"I suppose going to the supermarket and buying one isn't the answer you're looking for," Tom smiled. "Okay. Let me see. I guess I'd hop on the Internet and Google it. I'm sure I could find step-by-step instructions on the web. Maybe Martha Stewart's website would have it?"

"Sure! That would work just fine for you. You're a computer programmer. And you'd follow those directions to the letter. I bet the cake pan would be square and the batter perfectly smooth," teased Jen. "Mom, on the other hand, doesn't like computers. So she might pull out a few recipes from her card file -- the one she's put together over the years. She'd adjust the ingredients a little here and there to try to make something special, something new. Then there's dad. He'd ask mom what ingredients were needed, run to the store to buy them, and then call me ten times asking what to do next. So, you see, Tom, you're a visual learner; you read and study and absorb information through your eyes. That's why you have all those books in your office. Mom's a tactile learner. She prefers to learn by doing and touching and experiencing things. That's why she experiments with the recipes and keeps updating her file cards. And dad, well, he's an auditory learner. He likes to have people explain things to him. He'll remember and understand instructions better by hearing them rather than reading them."

"You know," said the Reverend, "Jesus gave us some great examples of this kind of teaching. When he was asked about paying taxes, he wanted someone to show him a coin. His questions forced them to look at the coin and take note of the image of Caesar on it. I think that was in Matthew 22. And in John 13 Jesus did a live demonstration to show what service to others looks like, when he washed the disciples' feet. He also varied his presentations according to his audience. When he was talking to the Pharisees he often quoted Scripture and challenged them by questioning their ritualistic practices. For other groups he told stories, parables, using familiar examples like planting seeds, tending soil, shepherding flocks and other visual images to help paint a picture in the minds of his listeners. Which, by-the-way, all the hot new authors say is a very effective method of teaching, particularly when trying to reach the postmodern youth of today. And what about the Lord's Supper? How many senses does that practice involve? You touch, smell and taste the bread and the wine; you see everyone eating; you hear the words, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. Wow! Even Cleopas and his fellow traveler on the road to Emmaus remembered that lesson and recognized Jesus by it, when he took the bread and blessed it. I believe that's in Luke 24, if my memory serves me."

Again, nodding his head - this time with more understanding - Tom admitted, "All right, now I'm starting to follow you! But, how do I apply this differential what-dya-call-it to my Sunday school class? I'm not omniscient. I don't know who's going to be

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in the class, or what they're thinking, and I certainly don't know what their learning styles are."

"That's why assessment is so important," said Jen. "You need to try a few different teaching methods and then probe the class with questions to help determine which methods are most effective. Then keep track of who is responding and who's drifting off during the classes. It may take a while to get a good handle on things."

Tom rolled his eyes in frustration, "Now you want me to give tests and take notes on who's who and what's what? This is starting to sound like a lot of work. Plus, it's not like this is my real job."

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.' Colossians 3 verses 23 and 24," quoted Reverend Wilson. "Don't short change God, just because you're not getting paid. And, I don't think Jen is talking about formal testing, maybe something like occasional litmus tests, to see if the class is absorbing the material or just going through the motions."

Tom sighed, "You're right, Pete. That was a dumb thing for me to say. That's how I got this gig – I opened my big mouth once too often. I kept complaining about how Joe Templeton was so boring. He'd read the verses and then quote from the usual commentaries, but when anyone asked a question he'd just quote more Scripture. I suspect, still being in seminary, he was a little unsure of himself, and varying from his notes to dig into the deeper meaning of the passages was just too risky for him."

Jen added, "Your heart was in the right place, Tom. You just felt the classes could be handled better. Don't you remember how mad you got with the way Bill Morris used to push off everyone's questions until the end of the class, and then never got around to addressing them? I'll never forget that one young woman who finally got up the nerve to ask a question and Bill just blew her off. I don't think she ever came back after that. What a shame!"

"Well, some people aren't very good teachers," suggested Pete. "If they're more concerned about getting through the material than helping the class learn the underlying truths, then maybe they shouldn't be leading the group. Jesus didn't just stand in the Temple and preach; he mixed things up a bit, and while he was doing that He always kept alert to the needs of his followers. That's an important point! A good teacher needs to stay alert to the needs of the class - respecting their concerns, and the demands on their time and energy. It's all part of authentic community. People want to feel they are a part of the class not just a captive audience."

Then the Reverend raised his hand pointing a finger into the air and exhorted, "*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment*" James 3 verse 1. Tom, God holds preachers and teachers doubly accountable for their actions, so I hope those gentlemen and you are taking your responsibility seriously."

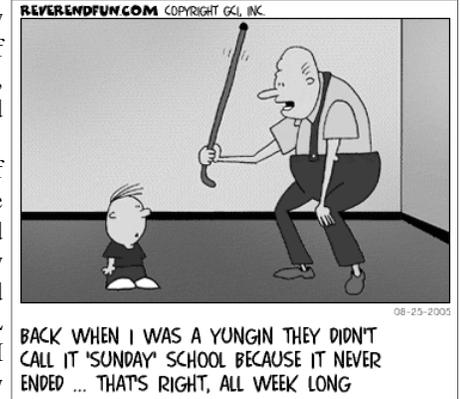
Mumbling into his coffee, Tom once again concurred, "Yes. It is a serious undertaking." Then, Tom pushed his chair away from the table, held out his arms, looked directly at Pete, and asked, "So

how do I do this? How do I take a group of adults, mixed in age, education and professional backgrounds, some of whom have been in the church all their lives and others who only recently came to know the Lord and teach them ALL something? How do I turn a traditional Sunday school class into a

differentiated classroom? How do I teach biblical truths in ways that will keep everyone interested and not leave anyone out? And, how do I get Wendy on board with the whole idea? She is my co-teacher and I don't want make her job any tougher than it is."

With the calm and deliberate tone of a seasoned professional, the Reverend Wilson began to advise Tom. "First, let's not get overwhelmed by all this. Most people are pretty forgiving and don't expect a Sunday school class to look and feel like a Fortune 500 training seminar with all the bells and whistles and satellite video feeds from around the world. That's not what this is about. High tech doesn't necessarily mean better. I think a good place to start would be to take an assessment of some sort yourself - a test that would help you identify your own personal learning style. There are tons of them available on the Internet or in almost any teaching guide. And you should ask Wendy to take the assessment, also. That way you'll both know what your strengths and weaknesses are, and can compensate, since visual learners tend to plan lessons geared for visual learners and auditory for auditory, etc., etc. The key is to get a handle on the different methods available to convey information and aid learning. Then incorporate some of these methods into your class. Ideally you'd want to break up the class into small groups from time to time and allow them to work on little assignments or projects -- give them the opportunity to interact, and do a little research or compile some lists. You could move around the room and encourage the groups and help those that might be faltering. Also, stay alert for the people who don't seem to be connecting. They might need some help fitting in. For closure you could bring everyone back together for a time of open discussion where they could share what they discovered with the rest of the class. Also, I like to include videos or music in a Sunday school class, once in a while. I found lots of popular movies have Christian themes running through them and there are many music videos available. Sure, it takes a little work to find that stuff, but they're out there. With your knowledge of computers and the Internet you can probably find them much faster than I did."

Jen smiled broadly and added, "I could call our curriculum office, at the high school; they could probably point me toward some books on the subject of Differentiated Instruction." Then her face turned serious as she suggested, "I think the most difficult part of your planning will be in ways to address 'readiness' and 'entry points' for the students in your class. When you have people who bring differing levels of knowledge to a class, differentiation would say that you need to structure the lessons so students who are



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further advanced can dive in and move along without having to wade through material they already know. And yet, you don't want others who are new to the topic to feel like they are falling behind or have too much to learn just to get up to speed. That will be tough in a class like yours."

Barbara put down her cake fork and shouted, "Let the class help with the lessons! Ask a few of the mature Christians in the class to work on projects and present 'em to the group. Nothin' too fancy; maybe look up some Old Testament Hebrew definitions like the term 'kinsman redeemer'. That was a important point in the book of Ruth. Or maybe dig up some maps of Moab, or even print up Wendy's flashcards with key verses. Then you and Wendy wouldn't have to work as hard and the class would feel more involved. I think it's called 'taking ownership', or somethin' like that."

"Those are great ideas, Babs! And, it even addresses the entry point issue that Jen mentioned – giving the more knowledgeable participants an opportunity to step in and move ahead without making others feel left out!" cheered the Reverend.

Jen had excused herself from the dinner table and headed out to the family room where the children had been eating their desert. She stopped at the end of the hall to watch them. Tom, Jr. was reading his favorite comic book, oblivious to everything around him. Dani was watching the latest VeggiTales video, for the 200th time, and mouthing every word the characters spoke. And, little Susie was sitting on the floor, jabbering away to her dolls - instructing them in proper behavior, as though they understood every word she spoke and would do just as she said when they all played in the sandbox tomorrow with Grandma and Grandpa.

Tom walked up behind Jen, placed his arms around her and whispered; "I guess I never realized how our own kids have such different learning styles. Maybe it IS time for some changes in the adult Sunday school. I'd hate for them to have to sit through some of the monotone lectures we've endured."

"Speak for yourself data-boy!" snapped Jen. "I like lecture classes. I'm an auditory learner like my dad. You're the visual learner, not me. Besides, I don't think differentiated Instruction means eliminating lectures. It just means adjusting to the needs of the class. Look at Dani, she's just like dad, Susie is a lot like mom, and Tom, Jr. and you are so much alike it's scary. If we were all in a class together, a good teacher would need to include some text-based material for you and Tom, Jr., some lecture or interactive discussion for Dani, dad and me, and some tangible project-based exercises for Susie and mom."

"Okay, I get it," replied Tom. "Little learners grow up to be big learners, no matter what their learning style. I just hope I can pull this off. It won't be easy. Our church is pretty well entrenched in the old ways."

Jen turned, looked Tom in the eyes and reminded him gently that he wasn't in this alone. "You have Wendy, and dad, and you know you can count on me to help. How about this, Tom? We can add this to our nightly prayer list. I'm sure a little guidance from God wouldn't hurt, right?"

"Sounds good, Jen. Maybe we'll learn something from Jesus, the greatest teacher ever." Tom smiled.

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