

THE FIRST PRINCIPLES SERIES

The Need for Serious Ordered Learning

As believers in our generation, we have lost the sense of a need for serious ordered learning. According to Edward Farley, “the orientation of the soul for the purpose of acquiring wisdom, which every believer needs regardless of their position in life,” has been replaced with a mastery of academic disciplines for professional ministerial preparation. *Theology* used to be the pursuit of wisdom by every believer, through the serious study of the Bible and reading great Christian books. Now theology is regarded as irrelevant to the average believer and only important if you are preparing to be a minister. In his article “Educated Clergy, Uneducated Laity,” Farley asks a very important set of questions that help us realize how large this problem has become.

“Why is it that the vast majority of Christian believers remain largely unexposed to Christian learning—to historical-critical studies of the Bible, to the content and structures of the great doctrines, to two thousand years of classic works on the Christian life, to the basic disciplines of theology, biblical languages and Christian ethics? Why do bankers, lawyers, farmers, physicians, homemakers, scientists, salespeople, managers of all sorts, people who carry out all kinds of complicated tasks in their work and home, remain at a literalist, elementary school level in their religious understanding? How is it that high school age church members move easily and quickly into the complex world of computers, foreign languages, DNA, calculus, and cannot even make a beginning in historical-critical interpretation of a single text of Scripture? How is it possible one can attend or even teach in a Sunday school for decades and at the end of that time lack the interpretive skills of someone who has taken three or four weeks in an introductory course in Bible at a university or seminary?”¹

The average believer today, worldwide, is in need of serious, ordered learning. J. I. Packer makes a similar assertion as Farley and believes that the need is based upon a serious lack of catechetical instruction.

“One great need today is a renewal of systematic Christian instruction—catechetical teaching—for adults. It need not be called that, nor need it take the form of rigid drilling in preset formulae, which is how oldtime Protestants taught their children; but somehow or other, opportunities must be given for folk in and just outside the churches to examine the Christian essentials, because there are so many for whom this

is a prime need. Preaching often does not help them, for preaching ordinarily assumes in both speaker and hearers confident certainty about the fundamentals of the faith, and where this is lacking, sermons are felt to be remote and even irritating because of what appear as their unexamined assumptions. But the proper place for examining, challenging, and testing the intellectual ABCs of Christianity is not the pulpit, but rather the systematic instruction given in catechetical teaching—at least, so Christian history suggests.”²

After inspecting the churches in his region, Martin Luther found a similar circumstance in his day. He was appalled at the lack of biblical thinking and biblical living among the churches and even among church leaders of his day. In the introduction of his little catechism, we see his motivation for writing what is today called Martin Luther’s “Small Catechism.”

“Grace, mercy, and peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord, from Martin Luther, to all faithful, godly pastors and preachers.

“The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and quite unfitted for teaching.”³

There are periods of church history when serious ordered learning has been strong and periods when it has been weak. Even though we have unprecedented resources and materials available today, the average believer’s understanding of Scripture is fragmented and shallow. Many pastors, although trained in the best Western seminaries, do not know the first thing about systematically training people in the church and thus building strong, thinking Christians and leaders who can proclaim and defend the mysteries of the faith.

What has been the effect? Even though we have seen the gospel expand around the world in the last 150 years, most movements of churches planted by Western, colonial missions’ efforts fail to become strong churches. By the second generation there is a desperate lack of leadership. By the fourth generation they suffer from significant nominalism. Even in America we are losing ground. If one carefully examines bodies of work such as those by George Barna, it is not farfetched to conclude that we are losing almost an entire generation of children who are growing up in our fundamentalist and evangelical homes—children who are not carrying on the faith. Parents consistently demonstrate a significant deficiency when it comes to being strong in the Scriptures and the ability to think, instruct, and guide their children in the faith, in this ever complex, postmodern, pluralist culture.

The First Principles Series

Throughout church history it has been understood that there is a clear teaching in which every believer needs to be carefully trained. In the New Testament church, it is called “The Teaching” or “The Didache,” which is Greek for *teaching*. Other synonyms include sound doctrine, the faith, the deposit, the Apostles’ doctrine, the traditions handed down, etc. The Scriptures often refer to *the teaching* as “the didache,” and *the gospel*, the heart of the teaching, as “the kerygma”—the Greek word for *proclamation*. In the Early Church, *creeds* were created to summarize the essence of the gospel, and *didaches* were created to provide some ordered way to learn “the teaching.” One was expected to know the creeds and the didache before being baptized. During the Reformation the creeds were expanded to more lengthy *confessions* and the didaches to more lengthy *catechisms*.

Today, however, there is no longer a sense of serious ordered learning that the churches steward and expect every believer to master. We have lost the sense of any serious ordered learning for believers. It has been replaced with shallow material that is individualistic and need driven, requiring very little thinking and placing very few demands on its learners. Fill-in-the-blank is the name of the game. The church is almost out of the picture. Personal experience and thought-for-the-day devotional approaches have replaced rigorous ordered learning. Anything theological is understood as irrelevant. Anything demanding is rejected as academic. Mark Noll, in his powerful indictment entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, believes it will take 100 years to teach believers to think again. As Os Guinness has properly written, we have fit bodies and fat minds. His point: Evangelicals don’t think! This must change if we are going to live godly, productive lives and impact the watching world—and our watching kids—with the good news of Jesus Christ.

If you live in parts of the world where the church is growing fast— Latin America, subSaharan Africa, and Southeast Asia—don’t think that you are exempt from this problem. Your churches, leaders, and believers have been founded in the same Western tradition. You have picked up the same disease. It is now a global epidemic.

The First Principles Series is not just another study. It is a new approach, introduces a new method, and demands acquiring new skills. It is a modern-day catechism but of a significantly different type. It has been over 25 years in the making and has been tested worldwide over the last five years. It is thorough and demanding. Yet most importantly, it reaches back into Scripture and wisdom-based traditions to build a process that avoids the academic sterility of Enlightenment-based scholarship. This booklet is designed to help you understand this new approach, learn a new method, and develop a new skill set. It is designed to equip you with the basics you need to use *The First Principles Series* effectively in founding believers and churches in the faith and leading them down a path of learning to think biblically, through a serious, ordered learning process.

What makes *The First Principles Series* unique? As mentioned above, it uses a very different approach from other contemporary attempts at training believers in the basics of the faith. It draws on significantly different educational methods to ensure that the learning experiences produce thinking Christians, solid in their faith.

A New Approach

The series is based upon a new approach to the learning process. Rather than learning the basics of the faith according to someone else’s systematization, you will follow a thoroughly biblical theology approach. You will study how the Early Church was formed and how it trained its people and its leaders. You will study most of the main passages that contain the teaching, found in the letters to the churches. From those passages, you will draw out the Apostles’ teaching and create your own summary. You will then learn to study key letters to the early churches, in the order that they were delivered, and establish a pattern of study that can be built upon for a lifetime.

The approach is also different in this way: It is not a fill-in-the-blank approach built around a string of individual verses, isolated from their context and often from their meaning. The approach is built around entire books and passages of Scripture. You will dwell on passages for a week at a time and a few key books for two or three months.

In sessions one and two of this booklet, you will learn the design of the entire series. You will learn how a biblical theology approach is fundamentally different from a contemporary, Western systematic theology approach. The latter is currently trapped in Western academia, which is primarily responsible for its categories—categories that are inadequate to postmodernism and the global pluralism of the 21st century. In contrast, the agenda of a biblical theology approach is that of the Church. It is ecclesologically-driven, not academically-driven.

A New Method

The First Principles Series is also designed around a very different method, making it a radically different educational experience. The method is designed to help those you are training think biblically. Traditional Western Bible study material is often made up of a fragmented set of categories and individual verses. In one form or another, it has been shaped by Western systematic theology categories, which are tied both to the university system and to Reformationbased theological systems. The emphasis is on knowing specific information and applying it in an isolated fashion to your life. This new method is driven by what we refer to as a *Socratic discussion*. In one sense it is old, going all the way back to Socrates. Yet in another sense, it is new: It teaches a way to do theology in community that is relevant to our lives and impacting in our culture.

In the Socratic method, the focus will not be on the knowledge-application formula, but on circling around and around biblical passages and ideas until they begin to integrate

into all aspects of our lives. The Socratic discussions will dominate your gathering times in study together, bringing the collective pursuit of wisdom to bear in a back-and-forth, dialectic fashion. The whole process will lead to the Scripture permeating all aspects of your life, to the ability to develop your own short- and long-term responses, and ultimately to developing the ability to think biblically in all aspects of life. It will launch you into a lifelong pursuit of wisdom.

Session three of this booklet will guide you through a basic understanding of this educational method. It will help you understand specifically how this method is woven through the structure of each *First Principles* booklet. It will also help you understand the structure of each unit—moving from the study of passages and key writings, through the Socratic discussion, and ending up with a reflective process, which integrates all aspects of the teaching into one's life as a whole.

A New Skill Set

With this new approach and new method comes the need to learn new skills. Many pastors go through seminary and essentially learn how to be little professors in their churches—which might as well be schools. Lectures do not develop people; they pass on knowledge. With this new approach and method comes the need for a new set of skills, for which most pastors have little experience, let alone training. What are some of these new skills?

- How to lead a Socratic discussion.
- How to help people learn to think through issues.
- How to coach a person through life issues so that they develop principles and strategies of growth, which permeate every aspect of their lives.
- How to break free of traditional Western systematic theology categories and do really good biblical theology.
- How to give birth to understanding and insight in an entire group or in an individual as he or she shares faulty insights.
- How to help believers in your church and study group learn to interpret accurately for themselves.

In sessions four and five we will work on identifying these skills and give basic direction on how to begin developing them. In addition to the above skills comes the need to learn how to read a passage from an article or book with understanding. A final skill, in which we all have very little training, is quality assessment. The goal of our method is not knowledge, so simple testing for knowledge will not suffice. We must learn to do what is called *qualitative assessment*. Are their lives changing? Are they really learning to think biblically? Are they getting it? Is this setting the foundation for all of their life and thinking? Do they really understand the passages? Questions like these lead to

meaningful assessment. You will also be introduced to the concept of *folio* and *portfolio* assessment tools and processes and to the idea of *mentoring*.

A Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom

The goal of *The First Principles Series* is to lay a foundation of the first principles of the faith in the lives of believers—a foundation that is so strong that not only will they be able to think biblically from here-on-out as they live their lives, but also that they will desire to begin a journey toward the lifelong pursuit of wisdom. So in session six, we will paint the vision of how this series can lead them this direction and how they can build for a lifetime on the work they have begun in this effort. Session six will show you how to produce this vision and goal in the lives of those who complete the entire *First Principles* process.

You will also be introduced to two future series that are under development—*Mastering the Scriptures and Impacting Culture*—and how to lead people into them as a next step in their serious ordered learning.

So let's begin!

DESIGN OF THE LEADER'S GUIDE

The Leader's Guide is designed to be completed over a six-week period, followed by a six-week training experience in which members of the group in training take turns both participating in and teaching *Becoming a Disciple*, book one of *The First Principles Series*, under the observation of a skilled intentional facilitator. See page 13 for a suggested 15-week format.

Structure of the Guide

The guide itself consists of six sessions, conducted once a week for a two-hour period. The sessions are as follows:

Session 1: The Didache: Retrieving a Theological, Historical Idea

In session one you will learn the biblical idea behind the series. It is critical to understand the biblical foundations of the entire series.

Session 2: The Series' Structure: A Biblical Theology Approach

In session two you will overview the structure of the entire series at one glance. This is the "big picture" of the series. It will also focus on the entirely different approach encountered in the series.

Session 3: The Booklets' Design: Teaching People to Think Biblically

In session three we will look at the structural and educational design of the booklets themselves. All thirteen booklets have a similar design, which is essential to understand in order to teach them well.

Session 4: The Units' Structure: Learning a Consistent Study Process (CSP)

In session four we will focus on the skills needed both to study and to lead a booklet: study skills, reading skills, and a completely new skill for many—leading Socratic discussions.

Session 5: The Assessment: Focusing on Outcomes

In this session we will focus on the idea of qualitative assessment. There is an assessment guide at the end of the booklet, and we will introduce you to the concept of folios and portfolios as a way of assessing progress and planning further development.

Session 6: The Approach: Reshaping Our Teaching

In session six you will assess your current philosophy of teaching and equipping others and design a plan for improving or even radically shifting your whole approach to educating others.

Glossary of Key Biblical Terms and Concepts

In this section of the Leader's Guide, key biblical terms and concepts that are developed in the booklet are listed and defined. Since some of the ideas will be new to you, the glossary will help you review them to keep the ideas clear in your head. You will want to refer to them often.

Lifelong Learning

Again, since the series utilizes a new approach and method and requires a new skill set, you may need further training to lead these booklets with increasing skill. In this section, we give you ideas for further training as well as introduce you to seminars, workshops, and major projects offered by BILD International.

Appendix: "Becoming Established: Assessment Guide from the Pauline Epistles"

This guide assesses the level to which the first principles have actually been implemented into a person's life. It is a central part of the entire assessment process of session five.

Structure of the Sessions

Each of the sessions follows a similar format. Though the actual structure of the sessions in the Leader's Guide is not exactly the same as the sessions in *The First Principles* booklets themselves, the process is the same. (It is the same process that is used in BILD's *Leadership Series* as well.) All the sessions follow the following four-part process.



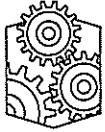
Study the Scriptures

A series of biblical passages are listed at the beginning of each session. These passages are simply to be read and reflected upon in light of the concepts or questions associated with them. This is not intended to be an in-depth study, but simply a reading of the Scripture that forms the basis of the biblical and educational ideas described in the "Consult the Scholars" section.



Consult the Scholars

This section in each session gives a brief presentation of the theological and educational ideas that under gird *The First Principles Series*. They are to be read carefully and reflected upon in the space provided. Some of these will provide a theological summary, some will explain an educational philosophy, and others will address the educational skills needed.



Think Through the Issues

This section consists of one issue and a series of questions related to the issue, to help you reflect on the significance of the theological and educational ideas you are reading. These questions will help you apply the ideas of the educational approach and method of the series.



Apply the Principles

In this section, you will be encouraged to think practically about what you have learned and to record your insights. These insights, session by session, will shape your philosophy of education and will help you think through what you need to fully prepare for teaching this series.

These four areas should be thought of as a process rather than a set of steps. You will find yourself circling around and around the ideas and carefully exploring their implications. This is what is referred to as the Socratic method, which we will introduce to you in some depth in session four of this guide.

A 15-Week Course

This Leader's Guide is intended to be part of a 15 week course. Although you can greatly improve your small group leadership skills by simply working through the guide by yourself, the entire training should be taken for maximum benefit.

Leader's Guide Training (7 weeks)

Introduction (week 1)

The Six Sessions of the Leader's Guide (weeks 2-7)

Practicum (7 weeks)

Introduction to Book One: *Becoming a Disciple* (week 8)

The Six Sessions of *Becoming a Disciple* (weeks 9-14)

Evaluation and Personal Commitment (week 15)

An excellent time and way to teach this Leader's Guide would be to schedule a leaders' study to begin seven weeks before an actual study of book one, *Becoming a Disciple*, begins. The teacher would work through the Leader's Guide with several trainees for seven weeks, and then each of them would begin an actual small group, while the trainer would sit in and observe how his trainees are doing. In this way, a real-time evaluation would automatically take place, and new groups could start every seven weeks.