

## **TEACH THEM THE MEANING OF THE WORD**

by Kendale Moore

*Redemption. Salvation. Born-again.* Words dear to the heart of Christians. But, if you use these words when talking with someone who is a nonbeliever, a typical response might be: "I don't understand. What does that mean?"

So you try to teach them the meaning of the words. You try to teach them the meaning of God's love. You tell them about your personal experience with Jesus Christ. You show them Scripture passages in the Bible and ask them to read them. You draw diagrams and write words to illustrate the concepts. You teach the meaning of words to convey an understanding of God's love.

From the beginning God has used the spoken word, the written word, and reading words to help us understand His love for us. When we still seemed to have difficulty understanding the meaning of God's words, He sent his only son, Jesus Christ. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus' words and deeds were written down for us to read so we could understand the meaning of God's love.

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"  
(John 20:30-31 NIV).

God has used words - reading words, writing words, speaking words - to help us understand and remember His love. But there are many people in our community who do not know or understand God's love for them. There are many people in our community for whom "words" are a stumbling block rather than a stepping-stone to understanding: adults who are functional nonreaders, persons who are non-English speakers, school-age children and youth who need help with basic schoolwork.

Many of those in our community who have difficulty with the meaning of words will never come to a Sunday worship service or midweek Bible study to learn about God's love. But there is a way we can share the gospel with people who have difficulty with the meaning of words. A ministry outreach called Literacy Missions teaching adults to read and write, or teaching English as a Second Language, or tutoring children and youth who need help in school.

By teaching the meaning of words we can offer to help meet a specific, felt need-to improve reading skill, to learn to speak English, to help with schoolwork, to improve job performance.

By teaching the meaning of words we can physically demonstrate the love of Christ.

By teaching the meaning of words we can build trusting, caring relationships.

By teaching the meaning of words we can share the gospel and teach the meaning of God's Word.

Literacy Missions ministries are effective ways of proclaiming the gospel because they use the approaches Christ described in Luke 4:16-19, approaches our congregation can use.

"He (Jesus) went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor' " (NIV).

Examples of actual literacy missions students can help us understand the five ways mentioned in this Scripture passage that we can change lives by teaching the meaning of words.

### **Help the Poor**

Through a Literacy Missions ministry our congregation can preach good news to the poor and teach the meaning of the Word. An Adult Reading and Writing ministry can help adult functional nonreaders who are poor.

Sarah is a single mother. She earns minimum wage working in a laundry. Sarah would like to become a beautician, but she does not read well enough to pass the licensing test. Sarah is a functional nonreaders She is one of the over 40 million adult Americans who read at a fifth-grade level or lower. Sarah is one of the 43 percent of people with the lowest literacy skills who live in poverty (statistics from the 1999 report of the National Institute for Literacy). A local church Adult Reading and Writing ministry is helping her improve her reading skills so she can better provide for her family financially. Her teacher also tells her how her spiritual needs can be met through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

An English as a Second Language ministry can help non-English-speakers who are poor. Gregory works as a janitor in a school. In his home country of Yugoslavia he taught in a school. His lack of ability to speak English well has limited the type of work he can do. He is one of the more than 32 million people in the United States whose primary language is not English (1999 report from the National Institute for Literacy). A local church English as a Second Language ministry is helping Gregory learn to speak English so he can find a job in the United States where he can use his training and experience. His teacher is telling Gregory, a Muslim, about her personal experience with Jesus Christ.

A Tutoring Children and Youth ministry can help keep children in school so they will be more likely to finish high school and have a brighter future. Sammy is a fourth-grader in an inner-city school having trouble with his reading. He watches his brother Marcel, who dropped out of high school, stand on the street corner every day. Marcel is one of over 380,000 students who drop out of high school each year without graduating (statistics from US Dept. of Education). Marcel can't find a job. If he does, he will earn only one-fourth of the income of someone with a bachelor's degree (statistics from 1999 report of the National Institute for Literacy). Sammy goes to a Tutoring Children and Youth ministry at a local Baptist center so he will have a future with a job. His teacher goes to help Sammy have a future with Jesus Christ.

### **Free the Prisoner**

Through a Literacy Missions ministry our congregation can proclaim freedom for the prisoners and teach the meaning of the Word.

An Adult Reading and Writing ministry can bring freedom to adult functional nonreaders who are prisoners. Mark, one of the more than 70 percent of inmates in US prisons who are functional nonreaders (statistics from National Center for Educational Statistics, Literacy Behind Prison Walls, 1994), wanted to learn to read the Bible for himself. Carolyn, one of the local church literacy missions volunteers working at the prison, wanted to teach someone to read the Bible. They both rejoice that the lock which barred Mark from the Bible-his inability to read-was being removed. Mark has found a new freedom-in and through God's Word.

An English as a Second Language ministry can bring freedom to non-English speakers who are prisoners. Mrs. Lu refused to answer the telephone or a knock on the door. She refused to go out during the day without her husband or one of her school-age children. She did not speak English well and was afraid she would not know what to do or what was expected of her. She imprisoned herself in her apartment. Someone told her husband about a local church English as a Second Language ministry. Today Mrs. Lu looks

forward to seeing her new friends at class each week. She told her teacher, "You are my lifeline." Her teacher told her, "Jesus Christ is my lifeline. He can be yours, too. He provides us freedom that no one else can."

A Tutoring Children and Youth ministry can bring freedom to children and youth who are prisoners. Beth, a third-grader who has difficulty with schoolwork, is a prisoner of poor self-esteem. She says, "Everyone else seems to be able to do the work. I can't. I'm dumb. I'm stupid. There's no use in me trying." Beth is attending a local church Tutoring Children and Youth ministry in her rural community. Her tutor tells her she is made in God's image, unique and special. She assures her that Christ will strengthen her and help her learn. Beth's grades and self-image have improved. Beth's understanding of God's love for her has grown. She is no longer a prisoner of poor self-esteem.

### **Sight for the Blind**

Through a Literacy Missions ministry our congregation can provide recovery of sight for the blind and teach the meaning of the Word.

An Adult Reading and Writing ministry can provide sight to adult functional nonreaders who are blind to the dangers around them. Jean told her friend she couldn't understand why she felt so nauseated and dizzy. The pills the doctor had given her were supposed to help her, not make her feel worse. Her friend read the medicine bottle and asked, "How many pills did you take this morning?" "Four," said Jean. "Well, you were only supposed to take two each day, one in the morning and one at night." "I just guessed at how many to take," Jean replied. "I couldn't remember what the doctor said and I can't read well enough to understand the instructions on the bottle." Jean is now working to improve her reading skills at a local church Adult Reading and Writing ministry. She is learning to read about the physical dangers around her. Her teacher is also helping her learn to read her Bible so she will know about the spiritual dangers around her.

An English as a Second Language ministry can provide sight to non-English speakers who are blind to the dangers around them. Juan is a seasonal farm worker. He asked someone what he should buy to help keep the mosquitoes away from him while he worked. They recommended OFF. Juan had to be taken to the emergency room because he had purchased EASYOFF oven cleaner and sprayed it all over his arms, legs, and face. As he recuperated, he attended English as a Second Language classes at a local church ministry. Juan's teacher helped him see that a word can have more than one meaning. In one situation the word means one thing. In another situation it can mean something different. The teacher also helped Juan see, no matter what the situation, Jesus Christ does not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

A Tutoring Children and Youth ministry can provide sight to children and youth who are blind to the consequences of failure to learn basic skills. David met his literacy missions tutor in the juvenile detention center where he was spending two years. Many youth who go before juvenile court judges have difficulty with reading and basic academic skills. David was in jail as a result of his third traffic violation. Each time he had been stopped and given a traffic ticket he was also fined for driving without a license. The third time resulted in a jail sentence. At his last interview with the juvenile counselor, David said, "I won't be back here again. Since I have been here my literacy missions tutor taught me how to read and introduced me to Jesus Christ. Now I can take the test to get a driver's license." David left the juvenile detention center a free man because his sentence was finished. He also left a free man because he believed in Jesus Christ and asked God to forgive him of his sin. From out of darkness he has seen a new light.

### **Release the Oppressed**

Through a Literacy Missions ministry our congregation can offer release to the oppressed and teach them the meaning of the Word.

An Adult Reading and Writing ministry can help release adult functional nonreaders from oppression. William, like most adult functional nonreaders, worked hard so no one would know that he couldn't read well. He constantly felt oppressed by his need to hide his lack of reading skill. When asked to read something, he would say, "I left my glasses at home." When asked about something on the bulletin board at work he would say "I didn't see it." William always found himself lying. He would avoid going places where he might be asked to read - like Sunday School. He was constantly afraid someone would find out his secret. When he heard about a local church Adult Reading and Writing ministry he said, "That's for me. I don't want to be afraid anymore." William's literacy missions tutor provided release from oppression. And taught William about the peace and security that comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

An English as a Second Language ministry can help release non-English-speakers from oppression. Toshiro felt oppressed. He thought most people in the United States didn't want him here. When he asked for directions to the school, or for help finding something in a store, people made strange faces at him, shook their heads, and walked quickly away. Occasionally, someone answered. But they usually talked too fast for Toshiro to understand them. So he asked them to repeat their answer. Many wouldn't. If they did repeat the answer, it was usually not slower, but louder; acting like Toshiro was deaf. If Toshiro asked a third time, the person who tried to help usually got frustrated, sometimes even angry, and left. But, Toshiro didn't feel oppressed in the classes of a local church English as a Second Language ministry. "You people are different. You seem to want me here." Toshiro told his teacher. "Why are you different?" His teacher said, "We are different because of the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us to be patient and treat everyone like we want to be treated. We will help you learn English. And we will help you learn about Jesus and His love for you."

A Tutoring Children and Youth ministry can release children and youth from oppression. Jacquee felt oppressed. She had decided by the time she reached the sixth grade that none of her teachers liked her. They always picked on her. They always embarrassed her. They asked her, in front of the whole class, to answer questions they knew she didn't know. Teachers always assigned her to work with the slow group. Teachers always gave her detention for something she said or did. Jacquee felt that teachers were always angry with her. Jacquee started attending a local church Tutoring Children and Youth ministry held in her apartment complex's community room. Jacquee's tutor helped her learn the answers to the questions the teacher asked in math class. Jacquee saw a change in the way her teachers responded to her. She felt a change in how she was responding to the teachers. She didn't feel oppressed. Jacquee remembered her teacher talking about Jesus. Telling her old things will pass away, in Christ you are made new.

### **Proclaim the Year of the Lord**

Through a Literacy Missions ministry our congregation can proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and teach them the meaning of the Word.

An Adult Reading and Writing ministry can help adults who are functional nonreaders understand and have the opportunity to respond to God's love. Cynthia was offered a Bible when she visited a church service. She said "I'll take it. But it won't do me any good, because I can't read a word." Brenda, a literacy missions volunteer in the church's Adult Reading and Writing ministry said, "I'll teach you how to read, so you can read God's Word and learn firsthand about his love for you."

An English as a Second Language ministry can help non-English-speakers understand and have the opportunity to respond to God's love. Dr. Tan came from Communist China to do postdoctoral studies at a major university. He was also attending classes at an associational English as a Second Language ministry. A teacher asked him if he would like to have a Bible. "I've never had one or read one," he said. The next day he returned the Bible saying, "I'm sorry. I sat up all night reading, but could not finish it." The teacher assured him that the Bible was his to keep. Astonished, he replied, "These are more than talking words. Can I have another one for my friend?" Dr. Tan extended his visa two times to stay in the United States to learn more about Jesus Christ.

A Tutoring Children and Youth ministry can help children and youth understand and have the opportunity to respond to God's love. Charlie had never heard about Jesus. They didn't talk about him at home, the teachers didn't talk about him at school. The other kids in the neighborhood didn't talk about Jesus. Learning about Jesus was new to Charlie. The only person he had heard tell about Jesus was the tutor who helped him understand his fifth-grade homework at the Baptist Center Tutoring Children and Youth ministry. Charlie wanted to learn more about Jesus.

There are people in our community who will never understand the meaning of God's love unless we help them understand words and under, stand and respond to "the Word"-Jesus Christ. God is calling you to use your gifts to help our community know:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

What is your response?

Will you commit to pray for our church to begin a Literacy Missions ministry?

Will you commit to become involved in a Literacy Missions ministry?

Will you commit to support Literacy Missions ministries in our association and state?

*Redemption. Salvation. Born-again.*

Will you teach them the meaning of the Word?