

The Line between KNOWING AND DOING

by Mark Baker

WHAT
is the best training?

WHY
theology?

How
do study and action integrate?

In my late teens I had the wonderful opportunity, primarily as a camp counselor, to be mentored and to learn by doing. Yet, I came to a point of needing other resources. At college I eagerly signed up for courses like Youth Ministry and Leading Bible Studies. I went back to camp the next year with new insights and methods.

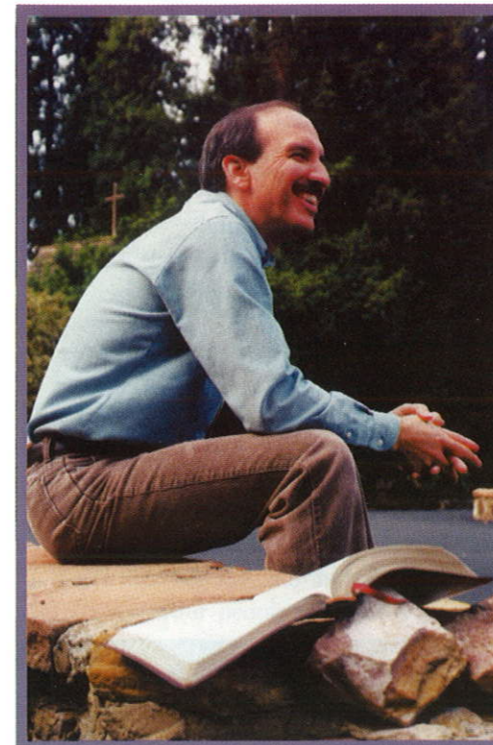
After graduation I headed to Honduras to teach social studies and develop a youth ministry at a bilingual school. I arrived with a well-thought-out approach to evangelism and discipleship. That is not to say that I thought I had learned all I needed to know – I frequently dialogued about ministry with my Honduran pastor, and I read books on discipleship methods. I did not, however, see the need for formal theological training. I told myself I had the content down; I just needed to refine my methodology.

My methods worked well and produced a numerically successful ministry. Yet my neatly packaged Gospel proved inadequate in dealing with questions that arose from day-to-day life in impoverished and war-torn Central America: What is the Christian response to violence, beggars, destitute neighbors? How much money should I spend on myself? How much should I give away? I had grown up in a church that taught that the gifts of the Spirit had ceased, yet the Holy Spirit actively bestowed those same gifts in the church I attended. How could I explain this? Who was right? As I grappled for answers, I began reading books with theological and ethical themes. The result was rich and life-changing.

Unfortunately, however, I began to self-righteously critique those who, from my perspective, had a theology and lifestyle as misguided as mine had been.

After four years, I left Honduras and attended a one-semester study program. I spent long hours reading and discussing issues that grew out of my Honduran experience. The professors, and some of the authors

we read, helped me see how self-righteous I had become. I realized how my efforts to live out the *right* theology enslaved me. I had been fearfully scrambling to label everything I read as correct or incorrect, and then had struggled to live up to what I included in my definition of true Christianity. Failure produced shame. The professors, however, did not reject me for falling short. Instead, they led me to experience God's grace in a new and profound way.



Photos by Jeremy Balzer

That semester launched me in new directions. I entered ministry on a university campus with a desire to communicate a Gospel content and practice a methodology that would facilitate students experiencing God's grace, while at the same time taking seriously issues of lifestyle and justice. I sought help for this mission by voraciously reading books on theology and ministry skills and strategy. But I could only go so far alone. I needed to be part of a community of study and learning before continuing in ministry. After three years of ministry my wife and I went to seminary – the very thing I had previously considered unnecessary. I made progress on the questions I brought with me and, as in earlier experiences

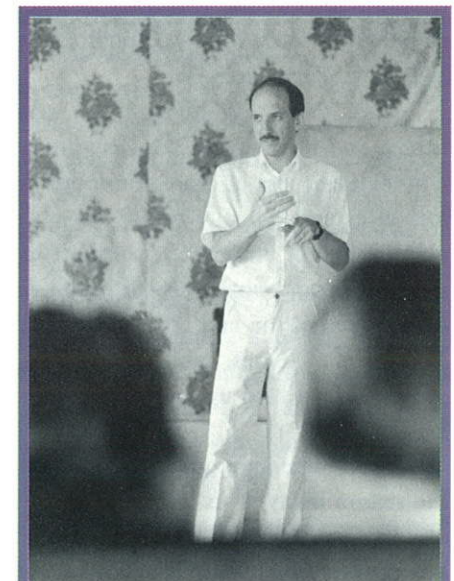
in academic training, I gained new insights and direction. I developed much stronger and sounder skills in biblical interpretation. I left with a commitment to use them and teach others to use them, not so much because they were "*right*," but because I saw their potential for enriching our study of the Bible and the life of the church.

When we returned to Honduras as missionaries, my wife and I increasingly noticed how the God we were meeting in the Bible contrasted with many Hondurans' concept of a distant, angry, accusing God. At every opportunity we sought to model better Bible study methods, and through those methods introduce Hondurans to the God revealed by Jesus Christ.

In the middle of those six years of missionary service, I spent four years studying for a doctorate in Theology and Ethics. Once again issues from my experience in mission motivated and shaped my experience. I asked a Cultural Anthropology professor to help me understand how Hondurans had come to have such a distorted concept of God. The central questions of my dissertation grew out of work with churches in a poor Honduran neighborhood.

My experience leads me to view training for mission not as a formal academic experience that is completed and then applied in life. Training is an ongoing combination of experience, mentoring, personal reading, and formal academic study. Each is crucial and deeply enriches the others as we participate in God's global mission.

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Mark teaching at "Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida" in a Honduran squatter community in the spring of 1997.

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