**Utilizing Tension in Teaching Teens the Bible**

**Association of Youth Ministry Educators**

**October 17, 2025

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It was German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in 1888 who first stated, “Out of life’s school of war—what doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger” (Nietzsche, 1888, Maxims and Arrows, #8). Dr. Richard M. W. Wohns expressed the opinion that the “overused and often parodied aphorism, nevertheless accurately portrays the picture of resilience and affirmation for overcoming adversity” (Wohns, 2020, 3). He goes on to recommend this concept be applied to neurosurgical students by exposing them to the ruthless attacks of medical malpractice lawsuits during their studies in hopes this exposure to difficulties will make them more careful when they actually start practicing neurosurgery. But does this philosophy work with a teenage delinquent placed in a supervised prison system in order to be “scared straight?” What about when distraught parents of a wayward child utilize the philosophy of “tough love” in hopes that the struggles the child experiences will be a wake-up call to take responsibility for his life? What about when a group of concerned friends, weary of the self-destruction caused by their addicted friend, confront that friend through a stressful intervention; or what about when a simple Bible-teaching layperson introduces tension, if not outright controversy, in an effort to engage learners in spiritual transformation? Will all the parties involved emerge stronger because of their learning experience?

Pain and suffering are aspects of age-old questions people have debated, discussed, and contemplated since the beginning of time. Does struggle develop strength and can pain really result in gain? In issues of faith, born-again believers have sought value in the struggles they experience through spiritual transformation. Throughout Scripture, pain and suffering, whether the consequences of a person’s own sin or the result of others’ sin, has been associated with learning and spiritual growth (Rom. 5:1-5)[[1]](#footnote-1). However, can or should Bible teachers ethically and purposefully (1 Tim. 1:5)[[2]](#footnote-2) introduce confusion, disorientation, and disequilibrium in teaching environments to induce learning and transformation, or does that job belong to the Holy Spirit alone?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the strategic integration of cognitive disequilibrium and dissonance in conjunction with the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the potential to impact profound spiritual transformation through biblical teaching. What roles do discomfort, tension, struggle, disorientation, conflict, and stress play in the process of spiritual transformation, and how can effective Bible study teachers engage learners in the learning theory of educational disequilibrium and dissonance for the purpose of spiritual transformation? What, if any, is the difference between the teacher introducing cognitive disequilibrium and dissonance and the role of the Holy Spirit causing conviction in the learning and application process of teaching God’s word?

**Biblical Foundations**

There is great power in teaching that can only be found in teaching the word of God. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, NASB, 1977). There are no limits to the surgical incision of a “two-edged” sword nor the depths to which the word of God pierces the thoughts and deep-seated intentions of the heart. Unfortunately, the surgical implications are likely to cause discomfort, at the very least, and/or pain in the process but always for God’s glory and believers’ good. Even the best of teachers cannot, in their own power, apply that level of pressure to induce change through their teaching outside of the power of Scripture and the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the Holy Spirit and the word of God can do this without the aid of teachers, but through God’s mercy and grace, he chooses to use ordinary Bible teachers (even uneducated and untrained ones)[[3]](#footnote-3) as instruments in the process.

Even when Paul emphasized the value of teaching to Timothy, he used some uncomfortable terminology. “All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NASB, 1977). Even though Scripture is inspired by God, the implication in this verse is that his Word is beneficial for teachers to teach. The benefits of God’s Word also include “reproof.” Though there are few who would suggest that a “reproving” process is comfortable most would conclude that it is beneficial. The word “reproof” (also “rebuke” and “convict”) implies some amount of stress or discomfort on the one being rebuked (Benson, 1854). The word for “correction” here means “a setting to rights, reparation, or restoration” (Benson). The implication is that learners have to allow the word and the Holy Spirit to do the unpleasant and uncomfortable tasks of fixing the brokenness of their characters in order to set things right. Added to that is the “instruction for righteousness,” which seems to emphasize the necessity of a teacher. People need not only to be made acquainted with the truth to be convinced of their error, and to be reformed, but they also need a teacher to teach them what is right or what is required of them in order to lead a holy life (Barnes, 1832).

In response to the disobedience of Judah and Jerusalem, God used the prophet Jeremiah to announce (teach about) the suffering they would experience at the hands of the Babylonians. Jeremiah also announced (taught) that God’s anger would eventually subside and that he would restore some of the people to their land (Jer. 32:26-44). The message was so unpopular and unpleasant that the nation’s leaders placed Jeremiah under house arrest. While still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the Word of the Lord came to him a second time. “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know” (Jer. 33:3 NASB, 1977). It is an expression of God’s favor and loving kindness even in the midst of their pain and suffering, which in this case was brought about by their own wickedness (Benson). Keep in mind that there were also those who were still faithful to God (e.g. Jeremiah) who would also have to suffer and experience displacement under the discipline of God’s judgment.

Though this promise echoes a similar one found in Isa. 48:6[[4]](#footnote-4), the key phrases in this context are: “Call to Me,” “great and mighty things,” and “that you do not know.” The passage seems to imply that if Jeremiah, if not God’s people, would simply cry out to God in prayer, he would educate them on things they do not know, which are “great and mighty.” The Hebrew word picture here for “great and mighty” (also “fortified ones”) is of an impenetrable or fortified city that cannot be breached unless the gates be opened from the inside (Gill, 1863). The word “know,” referred to here, is not just about unknown facts but also about understanding and an intimacy in that understanding. It is an experiential knowledge. When individuals cry out to God while hanging over the disorienting gorge of the unknown between suffering and the great and mighty things they do not know, is when they are most ready to learn.

Consider an instance from the ministry of Jesus. Shortly following the transfiguration, the father of a son who had an evil spirit was distraught, not only because his son was experiencing horrible circumstances but also because Jesus’s disciples couldn’t drive out the spirit. In a tender moment, the father, in his lack of intimate knowledge of Jesus’s identity, pleaded, “But if You can do anything … .” Jesus responded, “‘If you can?’ All things are possible to him who believes.” Then, the father immediately “called on Him, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.’” God revealed to him great and mighty things through the restoration of his son. Later, the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn’t drive out the spirit, and Jesus responded, “This kind can only come out by prayer.” (Mark 9:14-29, NASB, 1977) This seems to suggest again that the learning process is heavily dependent on a “Call to Me” through prayer and a dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit to open the fortress and learn (and experience) great and mighty things.

**Cognitive Disequilibrium and Dissonance**

On October 4, 1957, an unexpected and initially underpublicized event shook the foundations of nationalism in the United States. The Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite into an elliptical low Earth orbit. According to a publication by the United States Department of State, Office of Historians entitled, *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*,

“The successful launch came as a shock to experts and citizens in the United States, who had hoped that the United States would accomplish this scientific advancement first. The fact that the Soviets were successful fed fears that the U.S. military had generally fallen behind in developing new technology. As a result, the launch of *Sputnik* served to intensify the arms race and raise Cold War tensions” (United States Department of State, 2016).

The event became known as “The Sputnik Crisis” in some circles. It was out of that “crisis” that some of the most extraordinary transformations happened in United States history.

The shock experienced by the U.S. military also ignited an urgency among scientists, educators, and leaders in the area of technological development with the belief that education in the Soviet Union was advancing at a much rapider pace than in the United States. In September of 1959, less than two years after Sputnik 1, “35 leading scientists, scholars, and educators gathered at Woods Hole on Cape Cod to discuss how education in science might be improved in U.S. primary and secondary schools” (Bruner, 1977, xvii). The bottom line was that in America, educators needed to figure out a way to make science, math, and technology more fun. Teachers needed to exploit students’ curiosity and sense of wonder in the fields. Coming out of that meeting, the United States engaged in arguably the largest and most significant educational reformation in history. The chair of the meeting was a psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1915-2016). Bruner helped launch a new cognitive revolution in psychology — the shift from focusing on how stimuli or rewards provoke behaviors (behaviorism) to trying to understand the workings of the mind (McCleod, 2024). He also became the Father of Discovery Learning, an educational tool that has become foundational not only in public education but also Christian education. The repercussions of that ten-day meeting are still impacting education in the U.S., and around the world in extraordinary ways. All of this happened and is happening because a metal cylinder a little larger than a basketball caused a fear and panic that lit a fuse for the total transformation of American education.

As cognitive theories in education began to replace behavioral theories, educators, psychologists, and scientists began to reframe how the brain actually works in learners to help them grow in knowledge and maturity. These educators became convinced that tension, disorientation, disequilibrium, dissonance, confusion, and even fear could be useful in the teaching and learning process, a lesson they likely learned directly or indirectly from the Sputnik Crisis. If teachers could introduce these emotions and assist learners in finding balance through an equilibration process, learning, maturity, and behavioral change could actually take place. In addition, if teachers could entice the curiosity of their students, it would increase the desire for students to learn. To be sure, even though most of these philosophies were recognized as secular humanistic, Christian educators have begun to find value in adapted versions of these learning theories, especially when teaching the Bible in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Two of these secular theorists were Jean Piaget and Leon Festinger. It is important to note that both Piaget and Festinger, though developing different learning theories, overlapped in many ways and utilized some of the same terminology. For example, both of their theories use some of the terms interchangeably, such as disequilibrium and dissonance. For the purpose of this paper, the phrase “cognitive disequilibrium” will generally relate to Piaget’s body of work while “cognitive dissonance” will generally draw from Festinger’s body of work.

**Jean Piaget – Cognitive Disequilibrium (1936)**

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist known for his work in child development and is the first to make a systematic study of the acquisition of understanding in children. He is thought by many to have been the major figure in 20th Century developmental psychology and is often referred to as the Father of Child Development. A large portion of his theory was based on the longitudinal study of his own three children’s development and various short-term observations of and interviews with other children. Earlier in his life, he had what one biographer referred to as a crisis of belief. As an adolescent, his mother encouraged him to attend religious instruction but he “found the religious argument childish.” Later, while studying philosophy and the application of logic, he became discouraged because the philosophers failed to assist him in his search. He, therefore, turned instead to discovering a “biological explanation of knowledge” (Boeree, 2006). Apparently, the Author of biology escaped his attention.

Piaget observed that as infants or children seek to construct an understanding of the world, their developing brains create schemes. These are actions or mental representations that organize knowledge. When infants experience new sensations through their five senses, they develop schemes structured by simple actions they can perform on objects such as sucking, grasping, or looking. As children age, they develop schemes that include strategies and plans for solving problems. These schemes are like folders organized in the giant file cabinet of the brain. Every time children discover something new, they use the new information to understand the world around them. The children inevitably experience a cognitive conflict or a “disequilibrium” in which one of three things happens: 1) they determine in which scheme (folder) the new information needs to be filed, 2) they determine if the new information needs to be modified to fit under and existing scheme (folder), or 3) they determine if a new scheme (new folder) needs to be adapted or adjusted in which to fit the new information (Piaget, 1954). Since children are by nature curious explorers “and active scientists,” this internal filing process is continuous.

Piaget called this cognitive activity assimilation (the use of existing schemes to deal with new information or experiences) and accommodation (adjusting schemes to fit new information and experiences). If the scheme fits into an existing mental framework, it is assimilated. If it does not, the mind may simply reject it or accommodate the new information or experience (Craig and Baucum, 2002, 54-55). The children, according to Piaget, “constantly assimilate and accommodate as they seek equilibrium. There is considerable movement between states of cognitive equilibrium and disequilibrium as assimilation and accommodation work in concert to produce cognitive change,” all of which is done subconsciously. The internal search for equilibrium creates a motivation for change. Piaget called the mechanism by which children shift from one stage of thought to the next “equilibration” (Santrock, 2021, 142). “Assimilation and accommodation are the two sides of ‘adaptation,’ Piaget’s term for what most of us would call learning. Piaget saw adaptation, however, as a good deal broader than the kind of learning that Behaviorists in the U.S. were talking about. He saw it as a fundamentally biological process” (Boeree, 2006).

Cognitive construction happens in older children, teenagers, young adults, and even older adults, in much the same way when introduced to new ideas and concepts. They experience a conflict, distortion, or “disequilibrium” of sorts as they internally measure and compare this new information to existing knowledge, values, and behaviors in their adult worlds. It stands to reason that if a teacher can stimulate disequilibrium in thinking, the learner will experience this natural, internal process of assimilation and/or accommodation to find balance or equilibrium in cognitive functions—if they determine the new idea is worth maintaining or relevant to their world. Otherwise, they may dismiss it. This speaks to the value of teaching for relevancy and the educational essential of motivation or the “hook” in the lesson. When teaching the Bible, it is important for the teacher to introduce interpretations to words and points of view that for the learners might be new information. Challenging learners to personalize it immediately and consider direct points of application both externally and internally, will enhance learning according to the Piagetian cognitive process. Introducing the lesson by utilizing current events, controversial topics, cultural issues, and interests particularly relevant to the learner are also good ways to utilize the disequilibrium learning theory.

Consider Luke’s example of Jesus’s use of disequilibrium while teaching. “And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ And Simon answered and said, ‘Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets.’ And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets *began* to break” (Luke 5:4-6, NASB, 1977). It is easy to see the tension surface in Peter’s response. A carpenter was giving a seasoned fisherman advice on how to catch fish that was completely contrary to the way Peter had been taught to fish. “And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men’” (Luke 5:10b, NASB, 1977) Then the disciples demonstrated spiritual transformation “when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him” (Luke 5:11, NASB, 1977).

**Leon Festinger – Cognitive Dissonance (1957)**

Leon Festinger (1919-1998) was an American cognitive psychologist best known for his theory of “cognitive dissonance” and “social comparison.” Festinger also made significant contributions to the study of group behavior, self-evaluation, critical thinking theory, and attitude change. He studied under well-known German-born social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, and partnered with him on many research projects until Lewin’s death. Though he was born in New York, Leon Festinger was the son of a Jewish-Russian immigrant, Alex Festinger, who was an embroidery manufacturer. Alex “left Russia a radical and atheist and remained faithful to these views throughout his life” (Schachter, 1994, 99). Not much else is known about Leon’s faith background.

A flying saucer cult field study in 1956 led by Festinger, prefaced his cognitive dissonance theory. Joined by a few of his students, he participated in the cult as an observer and documented the group’s activities covertly from inside the cult. The leader of the cult was a housewife named Marion Keech. Keech said she had been contacted by a group of extraterrestrial aliens, “the Guardians,” that claimed the world would end in a great flood on a certain date. She also claimed the aliens would rescue the cult members along with all their possessions on a flying saucer shortly before the world’s end. Festinger was curious about how the group would respond when it didn’t happen. Of course, the initial “end-of-the-world” prediction date came and went, and then the leadership predicted several more dates each with the same results (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 1956).

“Contrary to common sense, though, the group did not abandon its beliefs and disband even in the face of stark disconfirmation of these prophecies. Rather, a faithful core persisted and redoubled their efforts to convince others of the veracity of their ideas” and to seek comfort from the media and others to lessen the pain of their disappointment. For Festinger, the experience confirmed his cognitive dissonance theory, whose premise was that people need to maintain consistency between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Dawson, 1999, 60-61). Festinger later described the increased conviction and proselytizing by cult members after disconfirmation as a specific instantiation of cognitive dissonance (i.e., increased proselytizing reduced dissonance by producing the knowledge that others also accepted their beliefs) and its application to understanding complex, mass phenomena (Festinger, 1957, 252-259).

Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) describes a mental conflict, stress, and anxiety that occurs when one’s beliefs don’t line up with one’s actions. According to Festinger: “(1) The existence of dissonance (or inconsistency), being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance (or consistency). (2) When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance” (Festinger, 1957, 3).
Dissonance is “an uncomfortable state of mind when someone has contradictory values, attitudes, or perspectives about the same thing,” says psychiatrist Dr. Grant H. Brenner. “The degree of discomfort varies with the subject matter, as well as with how well the person copes with self-contradiction” (Tzeses, 2020).

Recent neurological brain scans have actually confirmed “that decisions associated with higher levels of cognitive dissonance elicited a visible electrophysiological signal in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the area that monitors internal conflicts” (Tzeses). The bottom line of Festinger’s CDT is that people need consistency between their beliefs, opinions, and behaviors. When an inconsistency occurs, it will result in a dissonance, and learners will alter their behavior or attitude in order to reduce the “dissonance.” Festinger believed that this was one of the most powerful motivators for change since learners want to avoid the discomfort, pressure, and tension that a dissonance can cause. In essence, when there are two behaviors, actions, or cognitions at war within their minds, learners are more likely to make meaningful change to remedy the issue and seek alignment (Festinger, 1957).

Clearly, teaching for spiritual transformation seeks to help learners align their behavior with principles found in God’s Word. The values and absolutes in God’s Word cannot be adjusted, although a deeper understanding of them may also cause cognitive dissonance. Jesus said four times in Matt. 5, “You have heard it said . . . But I say to you” either to correct a heretical belief or to teach a fuller understanding of a principle. Those statements tended to cause cognitive dissonance. The teacher’s job is to help learners discover these values and absolutes in Scripture and, in the cases where dissonance occurs, assist learners in eliminating the dissonance by challenging them to adjust their behaviors or re-think their values so learners can eliminate the dissonance and experience balance. Some feelings learners may experience as a result of “biblical” dissonance brought about by a contradiction of biblical values and unbiblical behaviors in the moment are: discomfort, stress, and anxiety and perhaps conviction, guilt, and shame.

The degree to which these effects will depend on how much discrepancy there is between conflicting values and behaviors, how much the beliefs mean to that learner (the learner may not value the biblical standard or believe that it applies to him or her), as well as how well the person copes with the self-contradiction (how they may justify their unbiblical behavior). Note: these feelings may often be the result of the Holy Spirit’s conviction in the learners’ lives, not to mention the teacher’s lives during their preparation for the lesson. Some other signs the learner might be experiencing “biblical dissonance” are: “general discomfort that has no obvious or clear source; confusion; feeling conflicted over a disputed subject matter; being called a hypocrite; being aware of conflicting views and/or desires but not knowing what to do with them” (Tzeses). A secular answer for the purpose of dissonance by Brenner also has some obvious biblical implications. “Developing a sense of inner conflict is a good thing to notice because it can lead to rigid beliefs and sudden changes in beliefs and behaviors,” Dr. Brenner explains. “If competing values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. are not resolved or integrated, it greatly inhibits the ability of groups to have constructive dialogue” (Tzeses).

In the context of learning theories, both disequilibrium and dissonance are very similar by definition and include similar lists of synonyms. Experientially, both feel similar in the learners’ development. Both experiences cause the learner to seek equilibrium, balance, and peace. The main difference between Piaget’s disequilibrium and Festinger’s dissonance is that Piaget’s disequilibrium is a small part of Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development. Its definition comes from an educational perspective. Festinger’s dissonance *is* Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory and comes from a psychological perspective. “While the psychological perspective conceptualizes cognitive dissonance as something that must be resolved, those examining it from an educational perspective see it as an opportunity to foster schema construction and/or reconstruction and design opportunities for dissonance to promote the development of knowledge” (Adcock, 2012, 588).

Clearly, Piaget’s work predates Festinger’s and was simply describing how learning takes places when disequilibrium happens and the internal equilibration engages. It usually indicates the cognitive process of gaining new knowledge, ideas, and perspectives but can also contribute to changed behavior. Festinger, whose work came later, highlights the conflict that often exists between the cognitive, affective, and the behavioral domains of learning. Both are learning theories and both are helpful for application in the spiritual transformation of biblical teaching and learning. Both can involve internal processes but both can also be stimulated to direct learning to a specific end. Neither theories include the role of the Holy Spirit’s presence or involvement in learning process, especially in the area of the Holy Spirit’s action as an agent of conviction.

**Teaching for Spiritual Transformation**

**Transformational Teaching – 1978**

Scholars have debated the value and technique of transformational teaching for over six decades. Most of the early research focused on secular and humanistic teaching and learning theories beneficial for public education and in secular institutions of higher learning. What surfaced was a theoretical and philosophical shift from transactional teaching to transformational teaching. Transactional teaching tends to focus learning based on extrinsic rewards for the learners. If the students learn something, they receive something in return like a gold star, a good grade, competency in a task, or even a McDonalds Big Mac®. Eventually they might receive some sort of recognition, certificate, diploma, or degree.

“Transformational teaching is, in short, about growth and not just cognitive growth. Its aim is to spur students’ development across multiple dimensions: mental, to be sure, but also social, affective, and ethical. More than that, it seeks to exploit students’ curiosity and sense of wonder. Transformational teaching, in short, is best understood as a part of the students’ developmental process” (Mintz, 2022).

The process then forces students to challenge the source of philosophic questions and principles they have formally learned, and re-evaluate how the world works. Teaching and learning strategies and methodologies like active learning, student-centered learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, discovery learning, and others seem to be complementary components of the broader approach to classroom instruction called transformational teaching (Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012).

Jack Mezirow (1923-2014), also known as the Father of Adult Learning, was the founder of the Cognitive-Rational Approach to Transformative Learning Theory (also known as Transformational Learning Theory) in 1978. He, was one the early pioneers in the field of adult education. According to Mezirow and his secular humanistic perspective,

“Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or justified to guide action” (Mesirow, 2002, 7-8).

To put it another way, transformative learning is the idea that while learners are in the process of receiving new information they are simultaneously evaluating their past ideas and understanding, and are readjusting their worldviews while processing it through critical reflection. It is beyond simply acquiring knowledge, and impacts the way learners find meaning and understanding in their lives (Wichita State University, 2020). From that perspective it becomes clear how much Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory has contributed to the field.

According to Mezirow, the educational transformative process moves the student through ten phases that begin with a “disorienting dilemma” (disequilibrium or dissonance) where learners undergo experiences that have the potential to shake up their understanding of how the world works or impacts their traditional way of thinking, even their worldviews. It moves into a “self-examination” or “critical reflection” of feelings such as guilt or shame where the learner reacts to the dilemma emotionally, often in a negative way. Then learners move to a “critical assessment” of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions as they stop to think through what they believed before the dilemma and how that belief has been challenged by the dilemma. Ultimately, learners “experience a reintegration” into their lives on the basis of conditions dictated by their perspectives, which means the process completes with the learners fully incorporating the whole educational journey into their life stories (See Figure 1 below).

According to Rick and Shera Melick, “Regardless of the sequence of events, or the elimination of some of his stages, reflective discourse stands out as one ultimate ingredient to the success of accomplishing transformative learning.” They go on to say, “Reflective discourse involves the ability to understand one’s own perspective and that of others, and to communicate relationally toward deeper understanding and acceptance” (Melick and Melick, 2010, 130). Many scholars have concluded that all education (all new knowledge, skills, and perspectives) has the potential to transform learners through this process (Wichita State University and Mezirow & Moarsick, 1978). This is a similar cognitive progression to Piaget’s who defined learning beginning with an introduction of a new thought and the resulting disequilibrium and then accommodation and/or assimilation. It also represents Festinger’s process of learners becoming aware of cognitive dissonance and engaging in a consonance process to ease tension.

FIGURE 1

Mezirow’s 10 Phases of Transformative LearningPaul Desmarais 2021

**Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Transformation**

For years, the Southern Baptist Convention’s publishing house, the Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, now called Lifeway Christian Resources, has encouraged small-group Bible study teachers to teach for spiritual transformation. But what does it mean to teach for “Spiritual Transformation,” and how is that different than simply teaching for transformation as defined by Mezirow’s Transformative Leaning Theory? Amidst the growing conversations about spiritual formation, is there a difference between spiritual formation and spiritual transformation.

Though the difference between spiritual formation and spiritual transformation lies beyond the scope of this paper, there are many examples of overlap between the two deeply spiritual processes. Many scholars use both terms interchangeably or do not seem to distinguish between the two as two different spiritual processes. Paul described God’s work of spiritual transformation as “the renewing of the mind” (Rom. 12:2). In addition, practical theologians on both sides, if in fact one can distinguish between two sides, seem to find a biblical basis in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18, NASB, 1977). Alex Tang, among others, has suggested that Paul used this passage to describe the spiritual formation process where:

(1) Believers will be transformed into the likeness of Christ. The transformation process is a lifetime ongoing process. (2) It is Trinitarian in nature. (3) The Holy Spirit is involved in the transformation process. (4) God’s glory is restored when the above take place (Tang 2014, 79).

For the most part, scholars have framed spiritual formation as a “movement” and over the years they have “emphasized the need for strong biblical and theological support for spiritual formation to prevent the movement from becoming a Christian fad that does not get entrenched in the Body of Christ” (Teo, 2017).

Though there are many definitions to spiritual formation, Dallas Willard (1935-2013), has developed one of the best. Willard, who was instrumental in working with Richard Foster to found the Renovare Institute for Spiritual Formation and later the Dallas Willard Center for Spiritual Formation, defined Christian spiritual formation as “the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ’s will. It is the process through which Christ is formed in you and me.” According to a Portland Seminary web page, Christian spiritual formation is the process that conforms a believer to the image of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and for the sake of others (2 Cor. 3:17-18). The main focus of spiritual formation is the Holy Spirit, who guides the ongoing journey towards a deeper relationship with Christ that results in submission to God’s will. “Formation is an organic, lifelong, and holistic process involving right thinking (orthodoxy), right behaviors (orthopraxy), and right feelings (orthopathy) of individuals and communities. Spiritual formation focuses on the deepening of one’s relationship with God” (Portland Seminary).

Much is the same surrounding the issues of the term “spiritual transformation.” When called on to explore the growing concern over the “lack of growth” in Southern Baptist churches during the mid to late 1990s, Lifeway Christian Resources determined that the missing ingredient in a vast majority of local churches was an essential element later identified as “spiritual transformation.” This tension of declining church growth resulted in a new and revised strategy for Sunday School in the local churches. The strategy was outlined in a new resource, *Sunday School for a New Century* (1999), and in a book, *The Kingdom Focused Church* (2003), written by the president of Lifeway Church Resources Division at the time, Gene Mims. In those two resources, there is a carefully worded definition of spiritual transformation, based on several years of research. “Spiritual Transformation is God’s work of (progressively) changing a believer into the likeness of Jesus by creating a new identity in Christ and by empowering a lifelong relationship of love, trust, and obedience to glorify God” (Taylor and Hanks, 1999, 151; Mims, 2003, 91).

There are some important phrases in this definition that are essential for Bible study leaders to remember, many of which overlap with the emphases of the spiritual formation movement. The first is that spiritual transformation is “God’s work.” As much as any Bible teacher would like to take credit for the spiritual transformation that may or may not take place, it is ultimately God’s work. This should take a lot of pressure off the teacher, knowing he or she is not ultimately responsible for the transformation. This is the “Spirit” part of transformative teaching and separates it from Mezirow’s secular humanistic learning theory. Even though this is true, God still chooses to use ordinary people (like Bible study teachers) as instruments of spiritual transformation. Teachers may use a variety of teaching methods and address learning theories as they should, but ultimately transformation is God’s work. The goal of “God’s Work” is to continue to sanctify the believer into the likeness of Jesus.

In a day when people of all ages are struggling with their self-image and personal identity, Bible teachers have the answer for everyone’s most pressing questions: their image is in Christ and their purpose is to glorify God. This means that believers don’t have to struggle desperately to find their identity or purpose in an imperfect person they know or follow. It means they only have to set Christ, who already lives inside them, free to transform their sinful natures to Christlike natures from the inside out. Teachers should also note that their teaching is an empowering process that encourages learners along the path of lifelong learning and a deepening lifelong relationship with Christ built on, but not limited to, three key ingredients: love, trust, and obedience. If teachers can teach in such a way to encourage learners to love God and love others, trust God no matter how dire their circumstances, and obey God no matter what the cost, every time a learner experiences Bible study, it should/will enable them to take large and small steps along the sanctification process that is completed on the first day of eternity at glorification. It is true for the teachers as well as the learners.

In order to clarify the transformation process, the Lifeway research team helped further define spiritual transformation through seven phases. These phases became known as the “Seven C’s of spiritual transformation” among the leadership team at Lifeway.

(1) Control: Acknowledge Authority – What authority, power or rule guides the life of each learner. Hopefully that is the Word of God.

(2) Content: Search the Scriptures – What did God say in the Scripture to the first readers or hearers?

(3) Concept: Understand the Truth – What abiding biblical truth(s) is the Holy Spirit teaching to you in your life situation from the Scripture?

(4) Context: Personalize the Truth – Based on the abiding biblical truth(s), what is God teaching you about thinking, feeling, and living today?

(5) Conflict: Struggle with the Truth – What conflict or crisis of belief is God bringing about in your heart to challenge what you think and value and how you live? What life questions problems, issues, or struggles compel you to seek answers and promises in the Bible?

(6) Conviction: Believe the Truth – What new truth is God leading you to receive and integrate into your life? How is the Holy Spirit leading you to repent or to change your mind, your values or the way you live?

(7) Conduct: Obey the Truth – To what extent will you love, trust, and obey the Lord in what you think and value and the way you live your life? (Taylor and Hanks, 1999, 150).

It is difficult to say that all seven of these phases will be completed in a single Bible study session. What is clear is that the spiritual transformation beginning in a Bible study session will not be complete until the learner experiences all seven phases through the aid of the Holy Spirit. Also noteworthy is that the conviction described in phase six is not limited to the Spirit’s conviction of sin. That is discussed in the following section, but it is the conviction learners establish after, during, or while they acknowledge authority, search the truth, understand the truth, personalize the truth, and struggle with the truth and leads them to conclude a principle upon which to say, “Here I stand” and, “I believe this strongly enough that it has become one of my values or convictions.” It may be that the learner will enter the Bible study having already established this particular conviction and will be open to some other convictions through the study. Note the comprehensive nature of the phases and how they address levels of learning in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. Also consider that the conflict stage relates to the cognitive disequilibrium of Piaget and/or the cognitive dissonance of Festinger and the obedience stage that directs learners to put God’s truth into action.

The Melicks chose to coin their own word to describe transformational teaching “derived from a combination of educational and biblical principles,” *Transformactional*. They said, “it is helpful to understand that transformation is indeed the goal of education, and transformation learning must result in positive action. Responsible action both confirms and seals the learning process” (Melick and Melick, 2010, 4). They point out that transformation is mental but it is also emotional, volitional, and active. They add that it also produces better living through informed action. The word emphasizes both action and active learning and that “effective learning changes behavior” (Melick and Melick, 4-5). To teach for spiritual transformation is to teach for a change in head (cognitive), heart (affective), and hands (behavior). In addition, they identify 14 helpful “Transformactional Principles” to assist teachers in what they call “Christ-Centered Biblical Teaching” through their “Star Method of Transformactional Bible Teaching.” They have gleaned these “from adult learning theory and correlated them with Scripture passages that either teach or demonstrate each principle” (Melick and Melick, 150-151).

**The Holy Spirit in Spiritual Transformational Teaching**

The Holy Spirit has several roles in the spiritual transformational learning process including: regenerating and renewing the believer (Titus 3:5); assisting believers in prayer (Jude 1:20); comforting believers (1 Thes. 1:6; 2 Cor. 13:14); filling believers with joy and peace causing them to overflow with hope (Rom. 15:13) as well as many other roles. He also convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness (John 16:8, Eph. 1:17-18). As has already been referenced, the Piaget’s disequilibrium and Festinger’s dissonance introduced by the teacher is something different than the conviction of the Holy Spirit though He often works in concert with these processes and the methodologies of the teacher. Part of the transformation and sanctification process is learning how to respond to the Holy Spirit’s conviction. When wrong thinking, bad attitudes, and poor behavior are a part of a believer’s life, he or she experiences conviction in much the same way that Festinger described dissonance. “For the Christian, conviction is designed to bring about confession, repentance, and renewal in their relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is good to make people aware of sin because conviction is intended to drive sinners to the rich mercy of Christ found in the gospel” (Lakemacher, 2021).

When a teacher is teaching for spiritual transformation in the power of the Holy Spirit, He works through the teacher and cuts people to the heart, evoking extreme emotions. When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, Luke says, “Now when they heard this, they were ‘pierced’ to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37, NASB, 1977). The Greek word for “pierced” is used only here in the New Testament. The word means “pricked,” “pierced,” “cut,” and “to come under deep conviction.” It rendered them almost unconscious with pain, and the people were most anxious to know how they could be saved (Benson). When Peter, speaking for the disciples, refused to obey the Sanhedrin rather than God and proclaimed Jesus Christ, “whom you had put to death,” Acts records, “But when they heard this, they were ‘cut to the quick’ and were intending to slay them” (Acts 5:33, NASB, 1977). The Greek here is also translated “cut with a saw” as implied to the mind as a saw does to the wood (Barnes). “The Ethiopic version renders it, ‘they were angry,’ and ‘gnashed with their teeth,’ as if a saw was drawn to and fro; they were filled with rage and madness” (Gill). It implies an even deeper lacerating pain than “pierced” in 2:37. This time the cut produced rage rather than repentance. Then at the conclusion of Stephen’s sermon, the Bible says, “Now when they heard this, they were ‘cut to the quick’ and they began gnashing their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54, NASB, 1977). The word “cut to the quick” is the same as 5:33.

Teachers can’t make the Holy Spirit convict and they can’t make their learners respond to the Holy Spirit. But they can set the table for the Spirit to do his work. As William Yount stated, “It is the Holy Spirit who breathes life in dry bones” (Yount, 1996, 19-20). That being the case, how is the teacher a part of the Spirit’s work on all those involved in a Bible study experience? Ideally, the Holy Spirit addresses the learner from four different angles. The Spirit directly works on learners from within. The Spirit works during the Bible study but also before the Bible study and after the experience. The Spirit can work on the learner through the fellowship with other learners during the Bible study time. Of course, the Spirit works through the Word of God as mentioned earlier. But the Holy Spirit also connects through the teacher. Understand that the teacher may be experiencing his or her own conviction through the preparation of the study, but they also can allow themselves to be an instrument of conviction in God’s hands. They can prepare the environment for the Holy Spirit to be present by bathing the study in prayer before the study during the preparation process, during the Bible study experience, and continuing to pray for those who are members of the small group after the Bible study time. Yount wrote, “If I want the Lord to have a part in my teaching, I must ask Him to take part” (Yount, 20). He goes on to say that the teacher should pray for the learners throughout the week, their life situations, problems, and needs.

During the Bible study, the teacher should be praying that they might notice the multiple “teachable moments” that surface during the study. The term, “teachable moment” has a variety of meanings in different contexts, but it was Robert Havinghurst who originally coined the phrase in the context of educational theory. He wrote, “A developmental task is a task which is learned at a specific point and which makes achievement of succeeding tasks possible. When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible.” He referred to this point as a “teachable moment.” It is important to keep in mind that unless the time is right, learning will not occur (Havinghurst, 1953, 7). When praying through a lesson while teaching it, the Holy Spirit surfaces “teachable moments” that often signify the Spirit is at work. Learners signal these moments in various subtle ways: an expression, a key question, a statement in a unique tone or voice inflections. These happen multiple times throughout a lesson, but unless the teachers are sensitive to these cues from the Holy Spirit, they are likely to miss an ideal moment for learning. While prayer continues after the teacher teaches the lesson, the focus changes to assist the learners in application and obedience and begins to help the teacher refocus on the Holy Spirit’s guidance for the next lesson.

**Conclusion**

Pain always stimulates questions like why, what for, what now, how come, and for how long? When people are hurting, frustrated, confused, and under conviction, including Bible study teachers, the ground is ripe for spiritual transformation and sets the stage for the Bible to make a powerful impact. When learners and teachers are in the midst of disorientation, disequilibrium, and dissonance they are most open to changes in their thinking, values, and behaviors. No one is as miserable as those who are lost. When spiritually transformed teachers are able to teach the Bible through the personal turmoil of learners, utilizing creative and relevant methodology, and especially with lost people present, the learners will experience spiritual transformation. They will also find hope in the grace of the Savior.

Make no mistake about it, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow Him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call” (Bonhoeffer, 1963, 99). A few years after Bonhoeffer penned these words he would be called on to sacrifice his own life. Somewhere preceding and in between these words and his physical death, Bonhoeffer experienced a great deal of cognitive disequilibrium and dissonance. Dying to self is never a comfortable process. Obedience at any cost never is. It was in and through the difficult and tension-filled life-lessons, however, that Bonhoeffer became one of the greatest practical theologians, ministers, and incarnational teachers of the 20th Century. Yet to grow in the faith and likeness of Jesus Christ, it is inevitable that believers experience these difficulties as they present their bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). Peter said, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21, NASB, 1977).

Paul wrote to the Philippians, “that I may know Him (not just know about him or facts about who he is, but know him intimately) and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11, NASB, 1977). There was both an extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for Paul to know Christ. It was to experience the power of his resurrection—something for which all believers should long whatever the cost. But he goes on to say, “and the fellowship of His suffering.” One cannot experience the power of his resurrection without experiencing the fellowship of his suffering. Whether this suffering comes partly from the sin of others or partly from our own sin, there is something to be learned and taught in the heart of suffering (Ellicott). Then Paul reached for the climax of his learning goal, which was to be like Christ, “conformed to His death” so that he could also attain the resurrection of the dead, which is to say the resurrection into the fullness of life and the glorification of a believer in Christ—instantaneously becoming like him.

For some, the opening lines of this paper, “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger,” may seem a little harsh, melodramatic, or uncomfortable in a paper about teaching the Bible for spiritual transformation. But teaching the Bible for spiritual transformation is full of disequilibrium, dissonance, disorientation, uncomfortableness, tension, stress, and even death for both teacher and learner. Consider, once again, the words of Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who lives but Christ lives in me; And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20, NASB, 1977). Maybe the paper should have begun with “What kills me makes me stronger.” It is that surrender (death) of self that spiritually transforms the worst of biblical teachers into the best instrument in the hands of God.

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1. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom. 5:1-5, NASB, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, *from* a good conscience, and *from* a sincere faith. (1 Tim. 1:5, NASB, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13, NASB, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “You have heard; look at all this. And you, will you not declare it? I proclaim to you new things from this time, even hidden things which you have not known.” (Isa. 48:6, NASB, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)