



Principles of Thirdmill Institute Training

The Thirdmill Institute uses our high-quality curriculum to train students in the Bible and in theology while also adding an increased emphasis on personal and ministry application. We do this by streamlining the learning process and adding in specific documents intended to be used in a group setting. Our curriculum is designed to lift the burden of preparing and teaching classes so local leaders can focus on local application. We call these local leaders Institute Trainers.

The ideal way to participate is through Thirdmill Institute learning communities — a group of people committed to putting into practice what they learn. We recommend studying in the context of local ministry in conjunction with others who are also involved in ministry. An Institute Trainer provides the oversight and guidance needed for these groups. The purpose of this document is to help Institute Trainers learn more about this important task.

Our Theology of Training

A theology of training is the application of biblical principles to training programs. It is similar to the way Jesus trained his twelve disciples. The goal of our training is not simply that people will have a lot of good and biblical information, but that they will use that information to be effective agents in God's kingdom. We want them to be faithful followers of Jesus, and we want them to be effective at bringing about what God has promised to do through our ministry: the transformation of this world into the kingdom of God (Revelation 11:15). We will examine one of the biblical passages upon which our philosophy of training is based, The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.

"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

In this passage, spoken to the eleven disciples after Jesus' resurrection and through them to all believers, Jesus tells his followers to make disciples. The main verb of the second sentence (in the original Greek) is "make disciples." A disciple isn't someone who merely knows a lot about

the Bible or who just attends church. A disciple is someone who, in his or her daily life, follows Jesus, lives for him, and uses his or her gifts to further the kingdom. A disciple is a kingdom agent through whom the Lord brings about all the implications of his victory over sin, death, and the evil one at the cross and in His resurrection. We created our curriculum not just so people would have good and biblical information but as a tool to help them be effective kingdom agents. They need to be disciples.

The Institute has three goals that work together in the discipleship process. The three goals are Loving Presence, Authoritative Word, and Obedient Deeds.

Loving Presence – Discussion Guides used in community

According to this passage, there are three things that need to happen for people to become disciples. First, you need to have a personal relationship with God. The passage says,

“...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

To be baptized in, or into, someone is to be placed in a personal relationship with them. The person who is baptized into the name of the Trinity has a personal relationship with God and with each member of the Trinity. Because of this relationship, he is “with you always, to the end of the age.” We will call this principle of discipleship the Loving Presence principle.

Being a disciple involves experiencing God’s loving presence. In addition to having the presence of the Holy Spirit, disciples can also experience this loving presence through having a loving relationship with other believers. **This is one of the reasons learning communities are so critical to the process of Biblical training provided by the Thirdmill Institute.** Discipling someone involves developing a personal, loving relationship that reflects God’s own love for the disciple. This principle means that the biblical character and emotions of the discipler are an integral part of the training process. It also means that the student, to be effective, must learn to develop and put to use the kind of character and emotions God’s people are called to have. The Thirdmill curriculum refers to this principle as “orthopathos.”

Engaging your character and emotions in the discipleship process takes time and can’t be done just by meeting once in a while and trying to be friendly. It means getting involved in the life of the disciples and allowing them to get involved in your life. Because this takes time, you are limited in the number of people you can disciple at any one time. Details, such as suggestions on how many students you should have in a learning community can be found in the Trainer Orientation Manual.

The Discussion Guides provided with each module will be one of the Institute Trainer’s main resources to help accomplish this goal. They will be used each time your group gathers to

provide areas of focus for your discussion. We hope they will enable the group to learn in community, both from each other and yourself as the trainer.

Authoritative Words – Lessons, Study Guides and Quizzes

Discipling someone also requires that you teach them “all that I have commanded you.” This includes more than the Gospels since the Old Testament points to and is about Christ (Luke 24:24-48), and since the rest of the New Testament is a development of the person and ministry of Christ. Teaching “all that I have commanded you” means teaching the whole Bible. The Thirdmill curriculum refers to this principle as “orthodoxy.” Orthodoxy refers to right beliefs about the entirety of the Bible.

The Institute Lessons, Study Guides, Quizzes and Final Exams will be the main resources to help accomplish this goal. They provide the necessary tools to learn the scriptures and understand the Institute material as it relates to the Bible and theology.

Obedient Deeds – Ministry and Life Skill Badges

Discipling someone also requires that you teach them “to observe” all that Christ has commanded. This means not only talking about the implications of Christ’s commands for action but also putting his words into practice. We’ll call this the Obedient Deeds principle of discipleship. The Thirdmill curriculum calls this principle “orthopraxis.”

One of the implications for training using this model has to do with the role of the trainer. In this model, the primary role of the trainer is not imparting knowledge. Nor is it imparting skills. Nor is the primary role instilling character. Rather, the primary role of the trainer is facilitating the integration of knowledge (Authoritative Words), life and ministry skills (Obedient Deeds), and biblical character (Loving Presence) in the life and ministry of the student.

The Badges, provided with each course are the main resource, help reach this goal. They will facilitate discussion on training in ministry and life skills along with action points to put into practice in areas of character and ministry experience.

Implementation

One of the main objectives in the implementation of Institute Training involves application and contextualization. The trainer helps the students to understand and to be able to use the content through specialized group dynamics that focus on application and contextualization. This could be called a classroom experience but is quite different than most classes.

Applying and Contextualizing the Content in the Classroom

If the primary purpose of the classroom experience is not to transmit information, then what is the goal of this time together, and how does the Institute Trainer accomplish it?

One of the main goals of the small group meetings is to help the students relate the content of the Institute lessons to their own experience in ministry and in life. We want to relate the content to their behavior and character in life and ministry. People understand concepts and new information better and more meaningfully when they are able to relate them to their own lives and when they hear how other people relate them to their lives.

We might call this a process of applying and contextualizing the content. Application and contextualization are like two sides of the same coin. Application begins with the biblical content and shows implications for individual and collective thought, obedience and character. Contextualization begins with the context of ministry — the culture, the church, the people and their situation — and calls forth from Scripture answers to questions the people from that context are facing.

So application asks questions like, “What are the practical implications of this lesson for your context? What does it mean for your ministry? What does it mean for your church? What does it mean for your involvement in the world?” Contextualization asks questions like, “How can this lesson based on the Bible help me face and deal effectively with this particular situation or problem I am facing?” You will find questions like these in each Discussion Guide that come with each Module. There is a full explanation of the Discussion Guides in the Trainer Orientation Manual. Application and contextualization are very similar, and it’s impossible to separate them completely. The difference is a matter of emphasis. In practice, it means (1) taking seriously the implications for thought, obedience and character suggested in our Discussion Guides and (2) encouraging the learners to take initiative in asking and seeking answers to their own questions. The former is a focus on application, while the latter is a focus on contextualization. In other words, don’t assume that the questions and suggestions for action in the Discussion Guides are the only ones. Encourage the learners to think about their own situations and come up with their own.

There is an important sense in which you don’t really understand content until you know how it applies to you in your context. You may be able to pass a test on the content, but you are not able to use it effectively in God’s kingdom until you understand at least to some extent how it applies to the contexts of your life and your ministry in your part of the world.

The second main goal of the classroom experience is to promote loving and supportive relationships between the Institute Trainer and the students, and among the students. This goal is no less important than the first. As mentioned earlier, it is this bond of love and respect that

keeps the trainees wanting to be in the program even when the training becomes personal and uncomfortable. It is this bond of love and respect that encourages people to be open about their experience and allows them to learn. Without this atmosphere, it is difficult to learn. This is an atmosphere that opens them to the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

Here are some suggestions about how to achieve these two main goals of the classroom experience:

1. At the beginning of class, pray that the Lord will be your teacher in ways that will make you all more effective in God's kingdom. You might also want to pray for specific ministry opportunities for the trainees or life issues. Include the trainees in the prayer if possible.
2. Don't lecture.
3. Minimize the transmission of content to only what is necessary to accomplish the main purpose of the class. Some transmission of content will be necessary to clarify the meaning of someone's experience. But it should be done only for that purpose. You want to relate the content to their experience, so that requires talking about the content. But don't relate content simply for the sake of relating the content.
4. Don't ask questions designed to test their knowledge of the content. Hopefully, the students have already taken a test on the content through the Institute online learning site. Testing their knowledge of the content is not the purpose of the classroom. On rare occasions asking questions designed to test knowledge may be helpful. But too much of this for the wrong reasons will create an atmosphere that is counter-productive to learning. Focus rather on how the content relates to their lives and ministries. If in the process they say something unbiblical, don't be afraid to correct it. But try to do so in a way that affirms any element of truth in their answer.
5. Don't ask questions that you already know the answer to. Again, you're not trying to see how much content they know. You're wanting for them to explore how their life and ministry relate to the content. This is similar to the previous point, but reemphasizes it from a slightly different perspective.
6. Create and maintain an atmosphere that says, "I value and want to learn from your experience." Rather than an atmosphere that says, "I know the answer, and I want to see if you do too. If you know the right answer you will be trained." Creating such an atmosphere requires believing that a more educated person and a person with more experience can still learn from a less educated person and from a person with less experience. That's the way the body of Christ works. If you don't really believe this, you can't be an effective Institute Trainer. Don't just pretend to be interested in their experience. They will eventually see your true motives and will react accordingly. If they

are convinced you care about and respect them, you will be creating an effective learning environment.

7. Ask them to share their experience as it relates to the content of the lesson.
 - a. You are looking for both positive stories and negative stories. But don't insist on negative stories. Allow these to surface as the trainees feel the atmosphere is conducive to it. Make sure you are creating that atmosphere.
 - b. As they share, ask questions that might help clarify what happened and how it relates content to context — including their own actions and character. Listen carefully. Show you are interested. Make sure you understand before you respond. You might ask, "I understand you to be saying X. Is that right?" Invite others in the group to ask clarifying questions also.
 - c. Affirm the value of the experience that has been shared. Some sharing will probably be more valuable to the group than other sharing. But most of it will usually be useful in some way. Affirm the usefulness of what the person shared.
 - d. Give feedback that will help the students and the whole group sharpen the clarity and usefulness of the experience as it relates content to context. Invite others to do the same if you think it appropriate and helpful in your group.
8. Share your own experiences that relate to the content. Share both positive and negative examples. In other words, be willing to be open with the trainees. Show that you, too, are a learner and that you have sometimes failed with respect to the content of the lesson. Don't shy away from sharing positive examples of how your life and ministry have related to the content of the lesson. Some people might perceive this as pride, but if you know and communicate that everything good you do is of God's grace, you should be free to share such positive examples. In this way, you are modeling the meaning of the content for them from your past experience. It's often helpful to lead with examples from your own life and ministry before asking them to share from theirs, but this isn't absolutely necessary. It often depends on the characteristics of the group.
9. Simulation of ministry within the classroom can sometimes be helpful. You could simulate evangelism, for example. Model it yourself by evangelizing someone who pretends to be an unbeliever. After your simulation, invite the trainees to discuss it. Then give some or all of them the opportunity to simulate the ministry. Give them feedback and invite the other trainees to join in the feedback. This moves the connecting of content to context more toward the present.
10. Once you have contextualized the content by sharing past experiences and by simulation, give the trainees personal growth and ministry assignments that are to be accomplished in their home and ministry contexts — assignments that will help them now apply and contextualize the content in their present life and ministry.

- a. Assign ministry tasks found in the Institute Badges. More information on these is found in the Trainer Orientation Manual.
- b. At the following class, talk about these. That is, ask them to report on some assignment activity. Listen carefully and with interest. Give them feedback designed to affirm and to help them apply and contextualize the content to life and ministry more effectively. Invite others to do the same if you think it appropriate and helpful in your group.
- c. Pray as you feel it necessary and helpful.

Training Models to Avoid

Because of the challenges involved in training, those involved will feel the pull to use “quicker,” less invasive and more comfortable methods. Here are some of the methods to avoid; these will try to move you away from the integration of Covenantal training.

1. “Just give me the content so I can pass the exam. I can figure out what to do later. And I don’t have any character problems.” This model involves no intentional integration. It can lead to the error mentioned by the apostle Paul that “knowledge puffs up.” It can also lead to ineffectiveness in ministry and the use of the ministering-by-transmitting-information model in church.
2. “Just give me the content. I’m also involved in a small group so, that’s where I get the character training.” This model separates knowledge from character training. Who is helping the person integrate the knowledge with his or her character? The student is likely to end up with dry, unapplied theology on the one hand, and character development that is unrelated to that theology on the other.
3. “Just give me the content. I’m also involved in a ministry at my church. I’ll get the ministry part there.” This model separates knowledge from ministry action. Who is helping the person integrate the knowledge with ministry? The student is likely to end up with dry, unapplied theology on the one hand, and ministry techniques that are molded more by cultural and personal priorities than by theology.

As you train students, you will, without a doubt, feel the pull to take shortcuts — to use a more comfortable, less time-consuming method. If you know this pull is coming, you will hopefully be able to resist it better. Don’t give in to the pull away from Institute Training if you want to have a training program that results in effective kingdom ministers. The Institute has included important and required work in the Badges and Discussion Guides that will help you keep on track in this process.