

How To Teach An Adult Bible Class

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Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. (1 Timothy 4:1-11 ESV)

Your personal choice to be an evangelist is a choice to be a teacher, not just a preacher. This work will likely be done in a variety of settings: *across a kitchen table, typing on a keyboard, talking on a phone, sitting in a restaurant, speaking on the radio or standing before a class of adults.*

For most local preachers, at least twice a week, you'll occupy this place standing before a group of adults with an open Bible. It is a sobering situation that demands "being trained in the words of the faith," carefully avoiding what is "irreverent" and "silly" (1 Timothy 4:6-7). You must be trained in godliness yourself, and present that way of life with such clarity and challenge people with good and honest hearts will learn and respond to set their hope on the living God. Paul said, "teach these things" (1 Timothy 4:11).

Purpose: What Is This Really About?

The purpose of teaching an adult Bible class is to expedite focus on the text of Scripture, with such clarity and simplicity – the students learn God's Word, know how it should be applied, remember it and use that truth in their daily lives. As a teacher of an adult Bible class, you cannot control the students' receptivity or response. But you must be personally clear about your purpose and let every step of your preparation be well connected to the purpose: *to expedite focus on the text of Scripture, with such clarity and simplicity, the students learn God's Word, know how it should be applied, remember it and use that truth in their daily lives.*

Focus on the text. Even if you are doing a topical Bible study, there should be one primary text. Read that text very early, the first few minutes of

the class. Ideally, the students have read this passage before the class. If you have several passages for study, try to select one that will be primary. You should read this when the class opens. Also, in your wrap-up, read that passage again as the class ends. Don't let this text become a mere departure point—a passage you read to introduce your speech about what you want to talk about. Stick to that passage, talk about what it meant in historical context, and take that discussion toward the meaning for us today. Throughout the class, your task is to keep the focus on that text or texts. Any discussion that arises or is generated by your questions to the class ought to be limited to the text or subject at hand. Focus on the text.

Learning God's Word. Speaking ideally, the students are not in your class to learn statistics, stand-alone word definitions, illustrations, trivia, what's on the minds of other students, brotherhood gossip, etc. They are in this class to learn God's Word. Focus on the text with such faithfulness and intensity, your students learn God's Word.

Memory & Application. After each Bible class, students ought to be holding two valuable possessions: (1) a memory of the truth taught from God's Word, and (2) personal intentions to apply that truth in daily life.

Preparation: How Does The Teacher Prepare?

There are four possibilities. (1) **The teacher is unprepared.** He looks over a few verses on Saturday night while watching a TV program or checking Facebook {Bible study in the background}. Or, he just assumes it will all come to him somehow and he will get through it or fake it. That is unworthy, shameful and irreverent.

(2) **The teacher is ill-prepared.** He reads and learns what commentators have written about the text, so has some idea what it is about. But there is no plan, little thought of well chosen words and process, and almost no thought to connecting the text to real life. You can do better and must. {Teachers generally do not do their best work when preparing in a rush.}

(3) **It is possible to be over-prepared** (which turns out to be almost the same as ill-prepared). When the teacher brings into the class the definition of every word, a detailed description of every literary device in the text, a lecture about genre, a discussion of every other passage that relates in some way to the study, and 12 quotations from commentaries. It is way too much; like a stew that is loaded with so many ingredients, the consumer cannot taste anything.

(4) **The desired objective is to be well-prepared.** You know the passage well, having read it many times in quiet, prayerful study. You are familiar with the context, you know what the words mean (though you don't need to bring every single definition into the presentation). You have a well laid out plan. You have considered and edited the time frame, allowing for limited input and you have built personal application and challenge into your plan. How do we get here?

Everyone who teaches an adult Bible class must craft their own systematic process. Your process doesn't need to duplicate or imitate any other teacher's process. You may adapt, change and revise your process as you gain experience and your faith matures. But there must be some process you follow, some orderly system that leads to a good Bible class.

The Process: Finding a good method for you.

This is a brief look at the process I use. Depending on the passage and occasion, I may not do this rigidly, but this is the underlying approach I have in mind (though occasionally adapted):

(1) I make an effort to not depend on previously prepared material. Preachers accumulate tons of material (now especially in digital form). There is a temptation — let's say, when teaching a class on Romans 12:1-2 — to simply dig into your files (paper or digital), pull up what you've done before, look it over and go with it. Usually, that's not a good idea. It can become a bad habit. Preaching and teaching "re-runs" is like eating yesterday's toast—stale and crummy. Start fresh. While you may not arrive at any different conclusions, there is a freshness you will bring to the class. Copy and paste can stifle new discoveries and kill interests. Open your Bible and get started. "You do not have to know exactly where your study will lead in order to get started. The right conclusions will emerge during the process of gathering data," (Wilhoit, Ryken, p.#160). Don't let Google do this for you. You do it. Just you and the Book is the best starting place, accompanied by prayer.

(2) Be certain you know the book you are teaching from. Who wrote Romans, under what circumstances, to what people and for what purpose? Experienced Bible teachers may not need to review this all the time. But this is background information you need to keep in mind and may be directly related to specific passages. It helps you understand the textual landscape.

(3) Read the passage from several translations. We have access (in either physical or digital form) to many good translations. Even private or paraphrased versions can lead us to some useful thoughts about a passage. The

more you read the passage from a variety of translations, the more familiar you can become with the main idea and the subordinate points.

(4) Lock into the main idea, and be certain you stress that in your study and presentation.

Examples:

Romans 12:1-2 *Living A Transformed Life*

James 2:14-26 *Faith Discovers Its' Existence In The Activity of Obedience*

Isaiah 40:27-31 *God's Perfect Strength Is Our Hope, Our Energy and Life*

Most Bible students do not come to class wanting to leave with 12 word definitions, but rather historical, academic background, debate notes, or illustrations. They want to know what that passage means for them in their thought-life and conduct. What is it about? How should I respond? The teacher must dig for this and get his hands on this during his preparation time.

(5) Give attention – in your personal study – to every component of the text. Notice words, phrases, sequence, connections, mood, etc. This is the hard work of “behind the scenes” study that will likely not all show up in your class presentation. Use your resources, dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries to engage in a systematic study of the text. (Observe elsewhere in this book, there are extensive digital resources to aid you in your knowledge base; See chapters by Dan Petty and Max Dawson).

(6) Slim it down. As you put this material into your final notes and build order into your presentation, boil it down to the time frame you have, mark out places for class input, and cut out all the fat. The notes you take into class should (a) help you move through the text, (b) enable you to punctuate the main idea, (c) mark places in the presentation where class participants can be called on, consulted or can answer leading questions, and (d) prepare a brief well written “wrap-up” you can use the last five minutes of the class time.

(7) Build into your final notes motivation, challenge, and emphasis on practical meaning. Your goal is not to merely occupy 40 minutes or cover 4 more verses. Your goal is not to prove how familiar you are with “the Greek,” or how much insight and interests you have in literary forms. Your goal is for people, at the end of the class, to be involved in self-evaluation and personal resolution to use God’s Word in their lives. Drive everything in the class toward clear personal application. Do this for the people and for the Lord.

(8) Prepare and use a good wrap-up. Watch the clock. If you don't get through all your prepared notes, that is alright. Be sure you take the last five minutes to wrap up. (I have a post it note or card with my wrap-up notes. I pull this out five minutes before the class ends.) A class wrap-up is like a conclusion to a sermon; It challenges people to respond, reminds them of the key points and presses any warnings given in the text. The worst way to end a Bible class is the typical: "Well, I see by the clock on the wall our time is over. So we'll continue with verse 11 next time." As you prepare, think of one question, one point, one challenge or warning you can use to give your students a powerful wrap-up. Don't just stop.

I should stress that my process is not so fixed that I rigidly follow it before every Bible class. Depending upon the subject or location of the Bible study, I may vary my process. The point of relating this is, to encourage you to develop your own process, and the earlier the better.

People: Meet Your Students

Some adult learners are self-directed and mostly self-taught. In every local church there are adults who have a rich background of consistent Bible reading, study, and research, and their knowledge base may be broader and deeper than the adult bible class teacher. Your class work for this person will be mostly a review, but also a necessary challenge for greater application and activity, using what they have learned in life.

Some adult learners have a large reservoir of experience, but without much application of Bible knowledge. These people—when speaking up in a Bible class—will likely not be focused on the text, but rather on their experience, a debate they had, a church they left, or something they recently heard about. This kind of participant input can have some value, but must be kept in good perspective. The teacher may respond after such comments, "That's really interesting, and perhaps many of us will someday have that kind of experience. In dealing with that sort of thing, it will help us to remember what we are studying today in this important passage..." Get back to the text or topic promptly.

Some adult learners are silent receivers. The fact that someone doesn't have anything to say, no comments or questions, does not mean that no learning is taking place. It is an obvious social reality that there are adults who prefer to say little in a group or class setting, yet they are listening, learning, and could be some of the best students in adult Bible classes. Never imply that your silent students are not participating or not learning. In some people, there is a lively invisible participation.

Some adults in our Bible classes, sadly, are just putting in time waiting for the “real worship” to begin. Your hope as a teacher should always be, the Word of God will penetrate the hard, dry soil and the interests will begin and continue. If they are coming to the Bible classes, consider that an opportunity to gradually reach and teach them. You might be surprised what is happening deep within these people, though in very small increments. Your work must be done “with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2).

Some adults want knowledge they can immediately apply. That’s good. To want to make personal application is good. Do consider, however, the Bible student should not just jump to application without a good knowledge base (see Dan Petty’s chapter).

Persuasion: Back to our purpose

Remember why you are teaching—to expedite focus on the text of Scripture, with such clarity and simplicity that the students learn God’s Word, know how it should be applied, remember it, and use that truth in their daily lives. You must (not artificially or over-dramatically, but genuinely) convey to the students the seriousness, the passion, the sheer awesomeness of who God is, what Christ did, and how well the Holy Spirit has conveyed to us the good responses to the gospel! Some passages you will teach are stern, vivid and dark in their depiction of sin (Romans 1:18-32); The mood or tenor of such texts must be conveyed – not only by your well-chosen words, but by your tone of voice, gestures and demeanor (with periodic pauses such as one would use in preaching, to let the students ponder the matter). Other passages you will teach are more about the blessings, the joy, and the beauty of holiness and heaven (Romans 8:18-39, Philippians, 1 Corinthians 15). The effective Bible teacher will not “act” the same way in presenting these texts. He must speak with delight and joy and uplift the people with the promises of God, challenging them to think on these things and respond.

Precaution: Managing Class Discussion

The format you follow in teaching adult Bible classes will depend on several conditions: *your personal presentation style, the “personality” of the group, the wisdom of the elders, and the arrangement of the location (large auditorium, small class room setting).* My thinking is that one cannot dictate the dimension of participation from the discussion versus lecture, or some combination. If class participation is a part of what you do, you hold the key to how that is handled. You may find it necessary to make it clear that a Bible class is not an open forum for people (unprepared with respect to the text or subject) to hijack the class and just say anything. Participants with some agenda can literally ruin a Bible class

and turn it into something far away from the purpose. Watch for that and speak with your elders and experienced teachers about how this can be managed. There can be very valuable input from students if they stay on task, exercise brevity and avoid monopolizing the class. My personal preference is to follow a format I'm comfortable with and my students appreciate: (1) Welcome the class to the occasion, (2) pray, (3) read the text, (4) remind us of the context, (5) offer an exposition of the text – with stopping places for leading questions or comments, and then (6) wrap up with practical challenge. Other teachers, with great results, may start out asking leading questions – then take the class to the text. Or, beginning with review questions from the previous class may be best for you. You don't have to figure all this out before noon tomorrow. But you must pray and learn from others and devote yourself to doing better. (See Charles Willis' book, *Effectively Teaching Adult Bible Class*, for valuable help in managing class discussion and crafting good questions).

Remember, young preacher, in addition to the obvious aim of helping people learn God's Word and doing it, there is **the goal of developing your students as learners**. "Your teaching time is to be a stimulus, not a substitute. And the only way you'll get people personally excited about the Word of God is to motivate them to get in touch with this reality firsthand," (Howard Hendricks, p.#117). You are a learner teaching people to be learners.

"For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things."

Resources:

Teaching: The Heart Of The Matter, by John A. Smith
Truth In Life Adult Workbook, Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1992

Effective Bible Teaching, by Jim Wilhoit & Leland Ryken
Baker Book House, 1988

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser
Collins, 2006

Preparing The Young Man To Preach, by Berry Keercheville
Harwell/Lewis Publishing Co., 2004

Teaching To Change Lives, by Dr. Howard Hendricks
Multnomah Publishers, 1987

Bible Study for Joy and Profit, by Charlie Brackett

Clarion Word Publishing, 2008

Effective Bible Teaching, by Charles Willis
Guardian of Truth

Keys To Better Preaching, by John Garlock
Faith Library Publications

Preaching Verse By Verse, by Ronald J. Allen and Gilbert L. Bartholomew
Westminister John Knox Press