

From the book DO THINGS WELL.

Do Things Well
Chapter 9

Do Bible Classes Well

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A little girl helped me learn an important lesson about teaching the Bible to children when I naively volunteered to teach preschoolers for six weeks on Wednesday mornings during a ladies' Bible class. I thought this arrangement would allow mothers to study undistracted. Little did I know how unprepared I was to teach 4 and 5 year olds. For one lesson, I chose to teach the children about the fruit of the Spirit. Preacher that I am, I made a PowerPoint presentation featuring different kinds of fruit which I matched to the fruit of the Spirit. Strawberries, my favorite fruit, were love; bananas were joy, pineapples were peace, and so forth. I found placemats featuring fruit, and put one at each child's place. I devised a brilliant exercise using refrigerator door magnets shaped like strawberries, bananas, and pineapples. I talked to the preschoolers about why God called it the "fruit" of the Spirit – fruit is pretty and so our lives should be attractive to others; fruit takes time to grow, so it takes time to bear the fruit of the Spirit. I knew I was in trouble when 30 minutes into the class I asked, "Now children, what are we talking about today?" One bright little girl said without hesitation, "Pineapples!" Augh!

I learned later from veteran teachers that kids don't make the transition between what's concrete and what's abstract until about 11 or 12 years old. The minds of my students could not leap from pineapples to peace. My lesson was a disaster from the standpoint of teaching 4s and 5s about the fruit of the Spirit. I also learned that teaching a children's Bible class is not as easy as it might at first appear. In fact, teaching the Bible effectively to any age group takes time, energy, and skill.

Every person who regularly attends Bible class knows that all classes do not go well. Maybe the teacher did not adequately prepare or a student derailed the study to an unrelated topic; perhaps a younger student did not behave properly or the students were just rambunctious and unfocused. It happens, and for the most part a teacher will just have to make the best of that class and move to the next one with hope and greater determination. But Bible classes can go well. They are both a wonderful opportunity and a serious responsibility. We can do Bible classes well.

Why Do We have Bible Classes?

Bible classes have significant purposes that any of us can forget, so let's think about them for just a moment. *Bible classes ...*

Help us know God and His will. Paul prayed that the Christians "may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). Bible classes help answer this prayer.

Provide a means of instruction and discussion. In Corinth, the apostle Paul discussed the

Scriptures by opening the meaning and giving evidence pointing to a conclusion (Acts 17:1-3). Bible classes provide an opportunity for this exciting and profitable process.

Build on our personal study. Nothing substitutes for personal and family studies, but Bible classes can reinforce and enrich these efforts.

Counteract secular influences. We are bombarded with worldly, immoral influences that insistently tempt and test us. Bible classes help us “examine everything carefully” so we can hold on to the good and resist the evil (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

Help build faith, character, and spiritual strength. Bible classes help us bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17).

Provide a means of evangelism. Bible classes create both an occasion and an opportunity for inviting others to study. In addition, we should keep in mind that Bible classes often give visitors their first impression of a local church, of people who follow Jesus. If the Bible class is a wreck, a visitor will hardly be encouraged to hear or know more.

These purposes make it imperative that we do Bible classes well.

A Culture for Great Bible Classes

Effective Bible classes don't just happen. They are created when a team of leaders, teachers, helpers, parents, and students work together to have accurate, meaningful, relevant studies. Churches which recognize the potential of Bible classes will work to create and maintain a culture in which teaching and learning thrive. Such a culture includes some key dimensions:

Rely on the grace and providence of God, and the power of His word. God revealed Himself in “many portions and in many ways” (Hebrews 1:1). He used people with different personalities and abilities. God's writers employed different types of writing, figures of speech, and visual aids. In light of His own methods, God is certainly not opposed to different approaches and variety. But every teacher must remember that ultimately the power is not in us; it is not in the *method* but the *message*. Peter made clear that he did not follow “cleverly devised tales” (2 Peter 1:16) and Paul pointed out that he didn't use “flattering speech” (1 Thessalonians 2:5). As Paul put it, the word came “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Teachers must prepare and present lessons to help students understand the Scriptures and make applications with the humble awareness that we plant and water while yielding completely to God to give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Raise expectations. If we're going to do Bible classes, let's stop making excuses and do them well. Some teachers have decided that kids will not bring their books to class or get their lessons

at home, so they accept these bad practices instead of expecting and encouraging better ones. Parents get so busy with other stuff that covering the lessons with their kids gets squeezed out. Families use 15 to 30 minute commutes to do nothing, listen to music, or text message instead of doing Bible facts flash cards, practicing memory verses, and using other fun ways of learning God's word. Bible class programs in many local churches need to be reviewed and revitalized. Most churches spend time and money on Bible classes; let's decide not just to do them, but to do them well.

Involve people in both teaching and in supporting teaching and learning. Leaders can develop a vision for the church's Bible classes and set out to engage all people as both students of the Bible and servants of the Bible class work. This dimension of the church's Bible classes is especially applicable to children's classes. In addition to preparing lessons, there are doors to decorate, bulletin boards to be changed, and manipulatives to prepare. Make efforts to engage a support staff of volunteers – men and women, teen guys and girls. This spreads out the workload and generally gets more done.

Provide needed materials and equipment. Don't make teachers go out to purchase their own classroom decorations or equipment. Find a space somewhere for a resource room and keep it stocked. It's okay to start small. Add materials and equipment as you can; get and stay organized. If the church provides these materials and equipment and keeps them upgraded and organized, you'll almost certainly find more willing and better prepared and equipped teachers.

Do whatever it takes. Bible classes are an important component of learning and growing in the Lord. The classes have great and important purposes. Within the parameters of Scripture and common sense, do whatever it takes to make them effective. Is any effort too hard, any amount too much, any time too long to help people know God and go to heaven?

Components of Effective Bible Classes

Some components are necessary for effective Bible classes for any group.

Purpose and plan. Teachers have an opportunity to not only present information, but also to present it effectively so students may be able to both understand and apply it. Teaching that does this is a process that takes time, thought, and skill. Teachers must step before students with a clear idea of their purpose and how they intend to accomplish it. Curriculum, objectives, and lesson plans are not just the stuff of secular education, but can be usefully employed in teaching the Bible.

Give attention to the learning environment. *What* is taught is more important than *where* it is taught, but the environment where learning occurs deserves some attention. The state of the classroom sends a message to students. A cluttered, disorganized, out-of-date environment conveys the idea that Bible class is really not important, whereas a nicely decorated room with

current graphics and organized materials says this class is important and learning may be exciting.

Engage students in learning. The teacher has information to present, but the most effective learning process engages both teacher and student. The best study involves interaction between teacher and student and some self-discovery on the student's part. This means teachers must give attention to methods of teaching as well as to the message. This also means that students must be interested and willing to participate.

Use contemporary methods of quality education. In Bible classes, we study ancient documents and messages, but this does not mean the methods of teaching and learning have to be ancient. Technology is here to stay and offers some absolutely wonderful opportunities. Of course, it can be abused or overused, but before we rail against and reject it, we will be wiser to see what it offers and use it effectively. If you need help doing this, ask kids; they are typically current on the latest technology.

Be excited about Bible study, learning, and applying. A Bible class teacher has the opportunity to help someone know God and better understand His word. We must never underestimate the wonder and potential of this process. Teachers must read, study, and think to the point of a personal "Ah ha" moment, and then with excitement and passion guide students to discover for themselves. Now that's exciting!

Adult Classes

Help the teacher have access to more resources than the students. A major weakness in many adult Bible classes is that the teacher and students work from the same material. This is particularly the case when brother average-Christian-man who is not a preacher is asked to teach. He has only the same workbook as the students, so the class will almost certainly consist of covering the material in the book during each class period. Now don't get me wrong; I know many good Bible studies have come out of such a situation. But we're thinking about doing Bible classes well; and to do this, the teacher will benefit from additional information. Buy him an additional book on the topic; ask the preacher to share notes on a certain Bible book. Don't just find someone who will agree to teach a class. Try to develop men and women who are skilled and enthusiastic. Support and encourage them, and everyone will benefit.

Balance between presentation and discussion. Somewhere along the way, the idea developed that a class period filled with dialogue between the teacher and students makes for the best class. It's not unusual for someone to commend a class because the time was filled with discussion. This may or may not be an accurate assessment. If students are prepared and informed about the subject and are judicious in making comments, they can enrich the study. But if students are just talking off the top of their heads or taking the discussion to some extraneous topic, this does not make for the best study. If the teacher has studied and is prepared to present his organized lesson, let him.

The class may be more lecture than discussion, but adults can handle this and benefit from it.

Be careful about dissecting a book of the Bible so that its overall message is lost and the study is dragged out too long. God oversaw the writing of the Bible into books, so we should study them as books comprising sections and paragraphs. A “verse-by-verse” study can easily become a “word-by-word” study, in which the point of the book is lost in the details. We can profitably study God’s word by reading and thinking carefully; but when we take a text apart down to its words, we must quickly put the pieces together again into a meaningful whole in which the writer’s point becomes clear and relevant. Also, the message of a book can be lost by dragging out a study so long that people miss the overall point and core message.

Teens

Know your students. During adolescent years, teens typically face numerous developmental and behavioral issues, and it will serve the teacher well to know a little of what’s going on in their lives. Each teen is also an individual with a unique personality and likes and dislikes. Spending time learning teens’ developmental stages and some time with students to learn about them personally can pay big dividends in the classroom.

Avoid lecturing by routinely engaging students. Perhaps the biggest “class killer” for teens is a teacher who lectures. Teaching teens can be a tough assignment, because getting them to talk and drawing them into the study is not always easy. One way to meet this challenge is to be fully prepared with a flexible lesson plan when you step into the classroom. The plan should lead you to work through the assigned lesson in an organized, varied, and relevant way. Following is a sample plan that can be easily adapted to almost any lesson:

The ultimate objective – one or two sentences of what is to be accomplished in the class. If the teacher does not know the ultimate objective, obviously the students will never know it. To state the objective near the beginning of the class informs students where the class is going and serves to anchor the study.

The starter – an illustration, anecdote, or real-life story that students identify with which leads them to the lesson of the day. Don’t make the starter too long or complicated, and don’t let it dominate. It is a bridge to the lesson.

The lesson – by means of the starter, draw the students into the lesson. Have the material organized and engage students with questions, illustrations, and activities. Use small group discussions, simple props, worksheets, and other such activities to give variety and keep kids’ attention.

Applications – help students discover specific applications of the lesson to their lives. The Bible is not only for knowing, but also for doing. Jesus explained that the “wise man” is one who hears

his master's words and does them (Matthew 7:24). The best Bible study for any age group is one in which God's word is understood and personally applied.

Use a workbook efficiently and effectively. Workbooks are a valuable resource and guide for study. But any workbook is only a tool and must never be allowed to rule. Nothing loses students faster than reading aloud from the workbook's text and then going through the list of questions one by one by one. Don't do this. If a workbook does not lead to studying the Bible, trash it and get one that does. If the class degenerates into a discussion of what the writer of the workbook meant by a paragraph or question, skip it and go to another point or question.

Children

Teach the Bible, teach the Bible. The most important activity that goes on in any Bible classroom is reading and studying the Bible. Appropriate teaching manipulatives, props, graphics and other hands-on materials enhance the classroom study, but nothing can substitute for solid Bible study.

Teach at kids' level. It pays important dividends to know the characteristics of your students' age group and stage in life. Younger children, for example, think concretely instead of abstractly. Around 12 years old or so, children start thinking conceptually. Concrete thinking relates to what is here and now, things touchable and tangible. Abstract thinking relates to ideas, concepts, and relationships. Effective teachers spend time learning how kids think and learn so they can use age-appropriate vocabulary, explanations, and illustrations. Remember your students are kids who live in a world of color, activity, and excitement. We can't compete with the world at every level, but we can teach with colorful objects and graphics, activity, and excitement.

Develop a lesson plan and have a good idea about the flow of the class. The plan serves as a reminder of the objectives to be accomplished, Scriptures to be studied, and the various methods of teaching, illustrating, and reinforcing the theme. A lesson plan and class-period schedule guide students through the lesson in an organized way so they may learn as much as possible in a limited amount of time.

Use both routines and surprises. Establishing a routine is good for both the teacher and students because it focuses attention and maximizes time. Centers or designated areas in the classroom can be used to move students around to recapture attention and transition to a new dimension of the study. Punctuating the routine with surprises can also be effective. Keep props or graphics hidden and bring them out as they are needed. Suspense and surprises help students stay engaged and to remember the lesson.

All Bible classes have many variables and none is perfect. Most Bible class teachers are volunteers and some are better than others. Not every teacher has natural ability or time, energy, and skill to teach a great Bible class every time. A student's attitude or behavior can practically ruin a class. Parents can be

persistent about their children's secular education and extracurricular activities to the neglect of their spiritual education. But even acknowledging all this does not diminish the potential and power of effective Bible classes. We as Christians owe it to ourselves, to our children, and to our Lord to learn, know, grow, and serve by doing Bible classes well.

Study Questions:

1. Discuss some of your personal experiences (the good and the bad) with Bible classes. In your opinion, what makes a class excellent?
2. Discuss the purpose of a Bible class. What objectives are we trying to accomplish?
3. Identify some of the reasons that planning is such an important component of a great Bible class.
4. What contributions do parents make to effective Bible classes?
5. Beyond teaching the class, what are some ways that others in the congregation can help support the Bible class program?
6. What tools and resources can churches supply to help teachers with their work?
7. Several suggestions were made about the use of visuals and the appearance of the classroom. Do you think these are important considerations? Why or why not?
8. What was said about adult classes that you found particularly important?
9. What was said about teen classes that you found particularly important?
10. What was said about children's classes that you found particularly important?