

Teaching the Bible with Youth

The Bible is the beautiful, diverse, and complex Word of God. Teaching this beautiful, diverse, and complex Word is hard enough as it is, but we as teachers have to do all we can to help our youth get the most out of this time with the Bible. As teachers of Scripture to youth we are responsible for that task. To do our part well, we need a solid plan, intentional preparation practices and mindful facilitating while leading.

Below are some quick tips for making the most out of this important time we have with our youth.

Planning and Preparation

- **Be set up and ready to go.** First impressions are important. You should be the first one in the room, greeting all who arrive. You should have Bibles and all supplies set up and ready to go for when your participants arrive. If supplies and books are still shelved, you will appear to be unprepared. Whether your preference is to place books and supplies at the middle of the table or at each chair, do so prior to the participants' arrival. Not being prepared means you will be spending time doing preparation work during your actual learning time. Don't waste time by not being prepared!
- **Display, in brief, what you will be doing in the session.** Some people like to know what's going on; it's a personality quirk for some and it relieves anxiety. Some young people feel more comfortable having a general idea of what they are about to experience. Making a basic session plan also helps them focus on what is happening rather than wondering what they will do next. Having a plan also is a reminder to you and will help you stay on track. Here's an example of what a simple session plan could look like:

8:00 p.m. Welcome & Announcements

8:05 p.m. Mixer

8:15 p.m. Exploring #1 – Psalm 139

8:55 p.m. Exploring #2 – Luke 24:13–35

9:20 p.m. Debriefing and closure

9:35 p.m. Amen

- **Designate a timeframe for each part of your study.** Set a timeframe for everything you want to do in your study and stick to it. If you have an activity you want to include, know beforehand how much time it will take. Be careful not to go over the allotted time so you don't shortchange other parts of your session.
- **Don't over plan; keep it simple.** Don't plan so much that you know there isn't enough time to complete it all. While it's OK to have more to do than what you have time for, make sure what you want to accomplish fits within your timeframe. So often our teaching sessions don't go the way we want them to because we have too much planned and not enough time to do everything we want to do. In other words, don't overbook your study. If you have more to do and you have time, go for it — so long as your core plan is accomplished.

- **Be creative, to a point.** Being creative in how you encounter the Scriptures is awesome and essential, but realistically, you probably don't have time to read the text out loud, read it silently, act it out, rewrite it in today's language, create a prayer based on the passage, Lectio Divina the passage, watch a film clip related to the passage, and use modeling clay in some manner. Be creative, but don't shoot off your entire creative arsenal in a single study. Save some for the next time you lead to keep things new and fresh.
- **Study up.** If you know you're teaching youth, personal preparation of the text is crucial! Don't go into a teaching session as blind as the participants. As their leader, participants expect that you might know at least a little more than they do. Read up on the text, look at some biblical commentaries, and understand the origin and audience of the text in its historical context. Search and see if the text makes references to other parts of Scripture. The more you can learn about the passage, the better leader you will be.

During the Session

- **Don't look distracted.** If you're leading a study, you must engage with your group. Don't look at your notes the whole time wondering where you're going next. Pay attention to what's being said around the room. Make eye contact with youth who are speaking. The more prepared you are in knowing where your study is going, the better you will be able to do this.
- **Affirm the group.** When someone in the group shares an insight, affirming them will encourage that person and the group to know they are in a safe and open place for sharing their thoughts. You can say things like, "Thank you for sharing," "Well said," "That's a great thought," and "I've never thought of it that way." By doing this, youth know their voices are valued, which can encourage more dialogue from others in the group.
- **Keep questions simple.** Ask one question at a time—don't ask multiple questions as one question. Be concise. Multiple-questions-in-one is confusing for the group, making them unsure which question they should answer.

Example:

Good question: What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches"?

Bad question: What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches"? Was he talking to everyone or just his disciples? How do you know?

- **Getting that quiet crowd to talk.** So often when you ask a question to a group you get nothing but silence. Here are some suggestions for getting them to open up:
 1. Ask them, "Do you understand the question?" (Quite often silence happens because the group simply didn't understand the question asked. Make sure they understand it.)
 2. If they understand the question, then ask, "Do you need an example?"
 3. If they say "yes," provide an example, but don't leave it at that. As soon as you finish, put the question back on them by saying something like, "OK, it's your turn."
- **Avoid sarcasm.** One of the biggest mistakes a leader can make with a silent group is to say something sarcastic, such as "Are you awake?" or "Boy, it sure is quiet in here!" or "We'll just wait here all day until someone says something!" "Doing so is often more discouraging to the group than encouraging.

- **A discussion of Scripture is not a discussion if only two out of twelve people talk.** Effective leaders know how to spread the time around. Try saying something like, “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t said anything yet” or “Let’s hear from someone on this side of the room” so others have a chance to speak. Or try breaking into smaller groups for discussions. Sometimes a person will be more apt to open up if they have to speak out loud to only two or three people as opposed to fifteen. Also, don’t hesitate to let the person who has a comment on everything wait for others to speak first. You can say something like, “I appreciate your openness, but I’d like to get as many other voices to speak as I can. I’ll come back to you.” Just make sure you do come back to that person. You don’t want to completely discourage anyone from talking.
- **It’s not all cut and dry.** Often in a Bible study, one person may interpret the passage within the first ten minutes and think the rest of the study is pointless because “What the Bible says in this passage is clear.” As a leader, your job is to keep the discussion going. If others don’t speak up and share a counterpoint, be prepared to do so. You can do this by saying something like, “That is one way to interpret the passage, but have you thought about . . .” or “Yes, that’s good, but let me push you a little and see what you think about this . . .” Gentle push backs are good; condemnation is not! When it comes to understanding Scripture, there’s more than one right answer.
- **It’s about transformation.** The reason we teach and study the Bible is so that by Holy Spirit we might be transformed closer to the image of God that we were created to be. Through our encounter with the text, we become closer to what it means to be created in the “image of God.” This must be the center focus of leading — to be transformed by the reading and studying of God’s Word. Scriptural study is learning beyond facts; help your participants find something about their encounter with Scripture that they can take home and apply in their present lives.

Author: Rev. Jeremy Cain Wilhelmi
Project Manager: Gina Yeager-Buckley

