

Lesson Preparation

by Mark A. Taylor

What is the very first thing you do to prepare a Sunday school lesson so you may teach it effectively? Pray? Perhaps. Prayer certainly is vital and should accompany every part of lesson planning and preparation (and lesson teaching!) But after you've prayed, then what? Read the teacher's book? Read a commentary? Look for great teaching ideas in the suggested lesson plan?

Read the Text

All of those are good to do, but none of them should come first. The very first thing you should do is read the Scriptures you are going to teach. Read it often. Read it repeatedly. Read it in context. Read it from several Scripture versions. Read it every day of the week before you teach your lesson.

If we believe that God speaks to us through His Word, then we should let Him speak before we listen to what anyone else says about a passage. So, to begin, simply pick up your Bible and read the verses or chapters you'll be covering in the next week's lesson.

There's value in reading the same passages of Scripture over and over, day after day. You will see something fresh or ask something new each time you read. During the day, when you're doing something else and you're not even thinking about your lesson, your subconscious mind will still be working on it. And you'll make discoveries—snatches of conversations, radio advertisements, news reports—that relate to the next Sunday's lesson.

Should you do anything besides just read the lesson text? Probably. You may want to read more than just the verses you'll be teaching. You may want to read the chapters before and after the chapter for this week's lesson. If you're teaching straight through a Bible book, this gives you a review of where you have been and a preview of where you're going. If this week's lesson is topical (about a subject from the Bible—grace, gossip, forgiveness, fear—instead of

about a particular paragraph from the Bible), then your students may be considering several unrelated passages. If so, consider the context of them all.

If possible, read your lesson text from several translations. (Put different Bible translations on your list for relatives who need gift ideas for you.) As you compare one version with another, the meaning of the text may become clearer. Or you may see that the passage has widely differing translations. This will be important for you to know.

Answer Your Questions

After reading the passage several times, do something more. In your next reading, jot down questions you have about the text. Maybe there is a word you want defined. Maybe there is a place you want to find on a map. Maybe there is a person you don't know. Maybe there is a phrase you don't understand. Jot down all of these questions, and then begin reading something besides the Bible. While the Bible is our most important resource, it is not our only resource. Although we must study God's Word before we look at men's words, much of what men have written is very valuable. And men and women have written so much! Think of all the Bible study helps that are available to you!

- Teacher's book and other curriculum-based resources
- Bible dictionaries
- Bible atlases
- Bible encyclopedias
- Commentaries
- Bible handbooks
- Concordances
- Topical Bibles
- Chain reference Bibles
- Local experts (your minister, Bible college professors, etc.)

Many of these publications and helps will be available from your minister's library or your church library. You should own several of these books yourself. (Here are some more gift ideas.) Ask your minister or local Christian bookstore for recommendations.

Determine the Message

We're interested in teaching more than Bible facts. Although adults need to know what the Bible says, they need even more to know how to use the Bible's precepts in everyday life. To help them do this, you must think about the Bible passage's impact on your students' lives. Early in your preparation process, you must determine the message of the selected Bible text for your students.

How do you do this? First, you read the text again, and jot down all the important ideas that you see there. Do this in random order, as you see ideas in the text.

After you feel your list is complete, group your ideas into categories, or summarize them with two or four sentences.

Finally, try to summarize the message of the whole text in just one sentence. This becomes the focus of the rest of your preparation and all of your lesson presentation. Everything you do or discuss with your class on Sunday morning will be designed to help them understand and respond to this message.

Let's see how this process might work. Open your Bible to a familiar paragraph, Acts 2:42-47, and go through each step.

A. List all the important ideas in the text

1. The first church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, and to worship (breaking of bread and prayer).
2. The apostles performed awe-inspiring miracles.
3. Each believer considered his possessions to belong to the others.
4. They met together at the temple and in their homes, praising God.
5. Because of their unity and good spirit, everyone looked on them with good favor.
6. Non-Christians became new Christians every day.

B. Group or summarize your ideas

1. The first church was committed to the Word of God.
2. The first church enjoyed dynamic worship of God.
3. The first Christians shared a meaningful fellowship.
4. The first church made an impact on the lost world.

C. State the message of the lesson text in one sentence

The first church set an example for today's church in the areas of Bible study, worship, fellowship, and evangelism.

Here are some tips for successfully following this procedure as you prepare your lessons.

Remember that you're looking for the central message of the text. Don't allow yourself or your class to become sidetracked by secondary messages.

For example, these verses mention that the apostles did miracles in the first church. A study of miracles is surely a worthwhile endeavor, but this is hardly the main idea of this passage.

Realize that the message for one class or one time might be different from that for another. For example, this passage says so much about the first church's fellowship that you might legitimately decide to make fellowship alone the focus of your lesson on this Scripture. That would be especially

appropriate if your class or your church needs to build relationships or has been racked by disunity.

There is the danger, of course, of trying to make the Bible say just what we want it to say. We may impose our bias, our “hobby horse,” our message or interpretation on a Scripture in an effort to make it support the ideas we had before we even considered the passage. This is wrong. The Scripture must speak to us.

If we follow the steps of lesson preparation outlined so far—(1) careful and repeated reading of the Scripture passage, (2) thorough study of several resources written by reputable scholars, and (3) an objective listing of the passage’s points, we will most likely discover God’s message to us and not our own. Nevertheless, God’s Word is multifaceted. A passage of Scripture may legitimately teach or emphasize more than one truth. Use your knowledge of your students’ lives to decide which message is most important to them.

Now that you’ve completed these steps, you are ready to decide specifically what you’ll do with your class on Sunday morning (or whenever you’re teaching).

Consider Your Plan

A good lesson has structure, an outline, a sense of direction. The good teacher carefully plans his or her lesson time to lead students to specific conclusions and commitments. Each part of the lesson should logically lead to the next part. Each section has its own purpose, a vital role to fill in helping students to understand and respond to Bible truth.

Each section of such a lesson will answer a question in the minds of your students. Let’s look at each one.

Why study the lesson? Adults learn best when they see how the information presented will help them deal with the problems and trials of their lives. They are seldom interested in learning facts just for the sake of facts. This is an important difference between how adults learn as contrasted with how children learn. Children will often memorize verses and repeat the highlights of a Bible hero’s life just for the fun of it. Adults will not.

The first few minutes of each lesson, then, should show your students that today’s lesson relates to real life, *their* lives.

What does the Bible say? Next, lead students into an examination of the Scripture itself. They must know more than Bible facts, this is certain. But they must begin by understanding what the Bible says.

In some lessons you will not need to spend a long time in this section, because you’ll be dealing with a Bible text or story that most students have

already considered many times. Other weeks you'll be dealing with unfamiliar passages that may require more time.

Probably 75 percent of adult teachers stop with this part of the lesson. But you must do more.

What does the Bible mean? What are the implications of this passage for life today? Suppose every Christian obeyed this passage: how would our church, our world, change? This section of your lesson helps students answer such questions.

If 75 percent of adult teachers stop after the second section of our plan, probably 90 percent stop after this third section. But the Christian education cliché is still true: "The lesson isn't learned unless the life has been changed." You must make time for the fourth section of our lesson plan.

What should I do about it? Give students the chance to make specific, personal response to the truth of God's Word. Not every student will respond to every lesson. Not all students will decide to make some change in their lives every week. But you must challenge them at the end of each lesson to make such a change, because some of them—maybe many of them—will do so each week.

Don't cheat your students or shirk your responsibility by failing to save a few minutes for this part of the lesson.

Choose Your Methods

The lesson plan as outlined assumes that the teacher will do some talking, helping the class interpret, understand, or complete the activities. It also assumes that at times the teacher will not be speaking at all. Many adults like to talk as well as listen. In fact, many adults learn *better* when they talk than when they listen! So *regularly choose learning activities or teaching methods that give your students the chance to express themselves.*

Allow students to dig into the Word for themselves. Students thus will discover what the passages say on their own, instead of merely hearing what the teacher tells them it means. Students learn more from teachers who give them this opportunity. So *regularly choose activities or methods that give students the chance to search for and find the truth.*

Of course, it is not necessary to use several different methods each week. But most of us tend to do the same kinds of things, to use the same methods, week after week. Good teaching, though, often contains a surprise factor. When you do something that students aren't expecting, if you introduce a new method or an unusual activity, you recapture their attention. You keep them from thinking that today's discussion is the "same old stuff." You help them see that

there's something important they should consider right now. So *regularly choose a new activity or method*. Here's a worthy goal: try to use one new method each month.

How do you know which methods to choose? In addition to the above guidelines, remember these.

Consider your time. Some learning activities require 20 or 30 minutes for students to complete them effectively and report back to the whole class. If you have only 45 minutes for your whole session, you may decide you don't want to spend this much time on just one part of your plan.

Consider your room. Asking students to cut headlines from a newspaper and mount them on the wall may be a good idea—unless you're in the church auditorium or your classroom is newly painted! In that case, use a portable bulletin board. Or choose a different activity. You should use your room to its fullest potential. But don't choose a method that may lead you to abuse your room.

Consider your material. A brief passage like Acts 2:42-47 tells a story; it is fairly easy to understand. But if your Sunday-school lesson were based on a whole chapter from Romans, or from the whole book of Esther, you'd have a different situation. To discover the truth from one of these Scriptures for themselves, students would probably need an hour or two. So you might lecture to them, explaining the Scripture's background, context, or main points in a way that they can quickly grasp. Then a learning activity or set of discussion questions might work well for the last half of your lesson, as they're responding to the truth of the Scripture. Your lesson material, then, often determines the best method to use.

What's the last thing you do as you're preparing your lesson? Pray? Definitely; for, despite our thorough preparation, our well-written plan or well-chosen methods, such things will not guarantee our success. Only God's presence and power and Spirit will accomplish that. And He's eager to provide when we confess our total dependence on Him.

This article is adapted from the book *You Can Teach Adults Successfully*, by Rick Shonkwiler, Mark W. Plunkett, Mark Taylor, Daniel Schantz, and Ronald G. Davis. ©1984 Standard Publishing.