

HOW TO TEACH THE BIBLE IN SMALL GROUP

- Begin with good Bible study

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” 2 Tim.2:15

Teaching the Bible begins with careful study and proper interpretation. According to Paul, we must aim at “correctly handling” God’s Word, which implies that it is possible to handle it incorrectly. If we are not careful in our study and preparation, what we teach will be incorrect, unhelpful and perhaps even harmful.

- Careful study of God’s Word is basically a two-part process:

Exegesis is the process of determining what the text we are studying originally meant—what was the author originally trying to communicate, and how would the original hearers have understood it.

Hermeneutics is the process of determining what the text means for us today. How should we apply the truth from the passage to our particular life situations?

- Always consider the context

All meaning is context dependent, so when studying the Bible, always consider the context. Context means the portions of scripture immediately surrounding the section you are studying. So for example, if we look at John 9:3 (“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus…) we might conclude that these three people were sinless, which would be false. In order to appreciate the true meaning of the verse, we must read it in its context or “setting.”

This is why in our small groups, we prefer bible studies where the group looks at one passage, rather than topical studies that link together many unrelated scripture verses.

- Make sure you understand the meaning of words

The meanings of words change over time. Some words have several different meanings. And different words can have the same or similar meanings. These are all reasons to make sure you understand what words mean. This may require the use of an English dictionary as well as a Bible dictionary or reference book. For example, the word “world” in the Bible has several different meanings, and understanding the right meaning is key to understanding a text. Sometimes the word simply refers to planet earth—God’s creation. Sometimes it refers to the people who live on the earth (John 3:16). Sometimes, though, it refers to the “world system” that is opposed to God (1 John 2:15).

- Interpret according to the grammar of the sentence

Always consider basic rules of grammar when studying the Bible, because these things are important to proper interpretation—things like verb tenses, subjects and predicates, adjectives and adverbs, etc. A simple rule to remember is “when there is a therefore, always look to see what it’s there for!” Certain words and clauses link one section of scripture to another. Understanding the flow of the argument is often key to arriving at the right interpretation.

- Try to grasp the author’s intention

All writers have a purpose and plan to their writing—there is something they are trying to communicate. Our job in Bible study is to discover the purpose and plan of the author’s writing. For example, in John 20:31, John tells us why he wrote his gospel: “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” Sometimes the stated purpose is not so obvious, like with one of Paul’s epistles. But once you read through an entire letter, the reason for Paul’s writing may come into focus. Things that help us grasp the author’s intention are the historical setting, the time and culture of the writing, and the occasion for the writing. Investing in a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, or a background commentary is always helpful. One thing is always the case: a text cannot mean now what it never meant then!

- Take into account the background of a passage

The more you understand about the passage you are studying, the better your interpretation will be. It's important to consider the historical setting (e.g. the Israelites are in exile), the geographical elements (Jesus had to pass through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee) and the cultural elements (in Jesus' day, the burial of a father was the responsibility of the eldest son). To us, the phrase "taking up our cross" in Lk.9:23, sounds like it means putting up with difficulties, but in Jesus' day, a cross was clearly a place of execution. This small cultural difference greatly alters the meaning of the text.

- Take into account the genre of a particular passage

Genre is the literary style or form of a particular passage. In the Bible, there are many genres—there is history, poetry, prophecy, doctrine, allegory, parables, etc. It's important that when studying one of Jesus' parables, for example, that we don't treat it like it was history. A parable is understood differently from a historical passage, and vice versa.

- Always interpret scripture by scripture

The Bible should be considered as a whole. So, despite the fact that it was written over a broad span of time and by many authors, the message of the Bible is quite unified and its view of God very consistent. A good rule of thumb is to always compare parallel passages (passages that deal with the same subject matter) and to always interpret vague or confusing scripture with clear, straightforward scripture (when Jesus talks about "hating" mother and father in Mt.11, we must understand that in light of His clear commandment to love in Jn,15:12).

At Vineyard Columbus, we prefer inductive Bible study. It prevents people from reading into the Bible their preconceived notions and allows the bible to speak for itself. Inductive Bible study is the surest way to make the Bible our true standard for belief and practice. This is why we prefer the study of God's Word in small group meetings over and above the study of other Christian books or tapes.