

## Teaching Teenagers: Methods That Make Us More Effective

“My class is dead. I just can’t get these kids to talk.”

“I’m ready to quit teaching because I just cannot get my students to prepare their lessons and behave in class.”

“I’ll teach any of the Bible classes, except for the teenagers.”

Such are the frustrations too often expressed by those called upon to teach teenage Bible classes. But it’s not just the teachers who complain. Talk to students, and you will find that many of them are equally dissatisfied. They say things like:

“My Bible class is boring.”

“The teacher lectures too much and never allows us to talk.”

“We cover the same thing over and over again.”

It is tragic that teen Bible classes in many churches are not more effective. This is a critical time in life as teenagers prepare to leave home and set out on their own. While parents are the ones responsible to prepare them for these important life events (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4), we would like to think that our Bible classes make a meaningful contribution to that effort. After all, we go into these classes with an important objective: we want to instill within the hearts of our students life-changing truths. These truths will not only impact their happiness now, but will make a difference in where they spend eternity (Matthew 7:21-23; John 12:48). How can we be more effective at reaching these students who are about to embark on one of the most important periods of their lives?

Most teens seem to be looking for two things in their Bible class. First, they want to be **INVOLVED**. They want the teacher to engage them in a discussion, rather than just lecturing them. Second, they are looking for **RELEVANCE**. They need to know WHY it is important for them to study this subject. With these two things in mind, let’s consider 10 specific methods we can use to make our teen Bible classes more effective.

### **Method #1: Participation Exercises**

It is important at the very beginning of a class to immediately engage your students. This sends a message that you plan to involve them in the discussion.

You can do this with a participation exercise that requires input from every student. For example, pose a question to the class: "What qualities are you looking for in a person you want to date?" Then, have every student share their answer while you make a list on the board.

Because the goal is to create participation, it is important to ask "safe" questions. These are questions that focus on the student's opinion and carry a very low risk of a wrong answer. For example, when we discussed the Sermon on the Mount with our students, we asked everyone to share their favorite part of the sermon. The only way to get that one wrong is to cite something that is not in the sermon.

### **Method #2: Group Projects**

Another way to generate involvement is to divide the class into small teams, and give the students projects to complete together. You might ask them to read and analyze a difficult passage, or answer a difficult question, or construct a list. Have the teams work on their own for a while, and then share their findings with the class.

There are many advantages to group work. It gets all of the students involved. It draws out students who are shy and reluctant to speak up in front of the whole class. It also forces the students to think through a question for themselves. This is when the best learning takes place.

### **Method #3: Scenarios**

Scenarios are stories that teachers can create, which put Bible principles into real life situations. We can talk about principles all day, but until we demonstrate how they are to be applied and see how the students respond, we cannot be sure the message is getting through to them. For example, I've had students who would agree that we should always put God first. However, when I created a story about a teenage girl who had a big date on the same night of a gospel meeting, some had a tough time making the application. Keep in mind that these scenarios need to be true-to-life and involve a situation that is difficult to resolve (i.e. a crisis).

Scenarios are also useful tools for demonstrating relevance. For example, if your class cannot see why they need to study the instrumental music question, create a story of a young person who is being questioned by friends at school about this issue. Suddenly they realize that they might well face this situation and will need some answers.

#### **Method #4: Conviction Questions**

Conviction questions are questions that have at least two right answers, depending on how you look at them. Each student is forced to reach his own conclusion and then defend that conclusion to the class.

For example, in a lesson on modesty we asked our students whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "God really cares about my physical appearance." The answer to the question can be "Yes" or "No," depending on how you look at it. If you are thinking about modest dress, then God certainly does care about my physical appearance. If you take this to mean that God loves beautiful people more than the "not so beautiful," then the answer is "No." Questions like these help spark discussion as each student shares his view of the question.

#### **Method #5: "Why?"**

Teenagers who have been around a while know the "right" answers they are supposed to give in Bible class and can "parrot" them whenever they are called upon. Teachers need to realize that too often our students are simply telling us what we want to hear, and not what they really think.

One way to get beyond this problem is to follow up a student's answer by asking him why he gave that answer. For example, if a student says he believes the Bible is God's word, ask him to explain why he believes that and to cite evidence to back it up. If he is able to give a good explanation, we will know that his convictions run deep. If not, we will know that there is a need for more teaching.

#### **Method #6: Devil's Advocate**

Sometimes the reason students do not see the relevance of a subject is because they have never been challenged on that subject. For example, it's hard to get students excited about a study of denominational errors when they have never been confronted with them. One way to overcome this problem is to have the teacher play the role of "devil's advocate." Let me illustrate:

When we studied denominational doctrines with our teens, I began the first class by handing out index cards with a false doctrine briefly stated on each. The students were asked to use their Bible to answer this error. As they tried, I would respond with the kinds of arguments that our denominational friends would make. Most were not prepared to deal with these challenges to their faith. But they were able to see the relevance of the class we were about to begin. In fact, they were eager to find some answers.

Let me add this word of warning: always be sure the “devil’s” arguments are adequately answered by the time you get done. The goal of this exercise is to demonstrate relevance, not create doubt!

### **Method #7: The Hot Seat**

This teaching tool is designed to equip students to handle peer pressure. One of the keys to overcoming negative peer pressure is to know exactly how you will respond when confronted with it. This method helps students formulate a plan of action.

The hot seat is actually an old folding chair painted bright red. With the students sitting in a circle, each one takes his turn in the hot seat. At this point he is given a scenario like this one: “You are sitting on a bench in front of school 20 minutes before classes begin. One of your good friends comes running up. “I need your help,” he says. “I forgot to do the math homework last night. If I do not get it done, I’m going to fail this class. Please let me copy yours.”

The student must immediately explain how he would respond and what Bible principles guide his decision. When he is finished, the class discusses his response and puts together a plan of action that they are committed to follow when faced with a situation like this.

### **Method #8: Search & Discover**

Sometimes teachers find it difficult to get their students excited about working with the text. One way to stimulate their interest is to send them to the text searching for specific pieces of information.

For example, in one of our classes we were studying the battle between David and Goliath. We began class by breaking up our students into teams. Each team selected one member to read this story out loud. As the story was read, each team member searched for all the advantages Goliath had going into this battle with David. When they are finished, they shared their findings with the class and we discussed the lessons we could learn from this story. The point is that the students seemed more motivated about reading when they were searching for something specific.

You can use the same approach with any passage. Instead of just asking students to read, send them on a “spiritual scavenger hunt.” Ask them to search the text for specific pieces for information.

### **Method #9: Anonymous Answers**

There are many reasons teenagers are often reluctant to speak up in Bible class and tell us how they really feel. However, it is also difficult to be effective as a teacher when we don't know what our students really think about a specific issue. One way to overcome this problem is to allow students to answer questions anonymously.

For example, we recently passed out an index card to each student in our class and asked them to answer this question: "List at least one specific area of your life where you need to show greater boldness." We ask them to take a moment to write their answers on the card and then pass them in. Written on these cards were some really great answers that reflected the struggles some of them were experiencing. However, I suspect they would not have been so honest were they not able to give their answer anonymously. You can use this approach with any question when you really want to know how your students really feel on an issue.

### **Method #10: Challenges**

Our teenagers are capable of doing much more than we typically challenge them to do in Bible class. We must move beyond filling in blanks and challenge these students to stretch their minds and develop their Bible study skills.

For example, when we teach our teens about the prophets, one month of that class is spent having the students write a brief term paper on one of the Minor Prophets. When we talk about how to study the Bible, they are required to write a brief commentary on one of the New Testament epistles. Compared to what they usually do in Bible class, these things might seem very challenging. But when we consider the kind of work they do in school, this is well within their ability. We need to stop giving our teenagers "baby food" in Bible class and really challenge them.

### **Summary**

Teenagers are not a uniquely difficult group to teach, they are simply a unique group! Teaching them effectively requires that we adjust our methods to fit their special needs.