

31 Days to a Better Sunday School Preview

January 1, we begin a one month challenge for Sunday School teachers, directors, and Ministers of Education (plus any pastors that want to tag along too). 31 Days to a Better Sunday School is an experiment to improve every class in the church. We are encouraging churches to ask all of their Bible study leadership to join us for what I hope will be a great adventure together.

31 Days to a Better Sunday School is focused around three things:

1. Life change happens best in small communities of people;
2. Little things done right add up over time;
3. Most of us learn better by "doing".



During these 31 days together, we are going to complete some simple actions that will make your class a place where people will want to be on Sunday mornings. Most of these activities are things you already know to do, but they may not be on your radar every day. For the most part, the actions we are going to do together will be short and can probably be done in about 15-20 minutes.

So, are you willing to invest a few minutes each day for a month to have a better group? Of course you are! Consider that the average American watches 37 hours of television a week! You've got time and you can do this!

The Vector Principle
little things + time = Big Things

The Vector Principle simply means that small changes have long term outcomes. Many churches today seem to operate off of "The Big Bang Theory of Church Growth". This theory simply means that you find some big, smashing program that some church has done somewhere else, use it in your church, and BANG! Everything is fixed. However, you and I both know that as a general rule in life, when we do the little things and do them faithfully, over time a massive amount of change can occur. A retirement plan is an example. If you want to retire as a millionaire, then save a little money each month when you are young and over time you will reach your goal. Wait until you are 60, and...

We learn better by doing! Have you ever learned to snow ski by reading Ski Magazine? You can pick up some good ideas, but let's face it. You learn to snow ski by going up the mountain and pointing those skis downhill and falling down the slope for a day. You learn it by doing it! Christianity is the same way. James said, "Faith without works is dead", James 2:17. Leading a transformational Sunday School class is not something you really learn from a book. You can get some ideas, but you learn how to be a good Sunday School leader by doing the things necessary to have a great class.

During the 31 days of January, I am going to post a simple exercise for you to do that will make your class the kind of group that people will want to belong to. These 31 days together will be enjoyable, but more than that... I hope that they will be transformational for you and your class.

Day 1 - Transformation



Today's activity: Pray for every person on your class roll.

Yes, pray for them all, even the people who never attend. Pray for the people in your class who are not members of your church. Pray for them each by name.

But I have a specific prayer that I am going to ask you to offer to God on behalf of each person. Pray for spiritual transformation for each one of them.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2.

Above everything else, your class or small group is about the transformation of the human heart. Your group must be missional in your community; you must seek to bring the lost people your group knows into a life transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. And, the members of your group should look more like Christ at the end of this year than they do right now. In fact, YOU should look more like Jesus next year than you do now. If the goal of your group is not the spiritual transformation of the heart and soul, then why does your group meet?

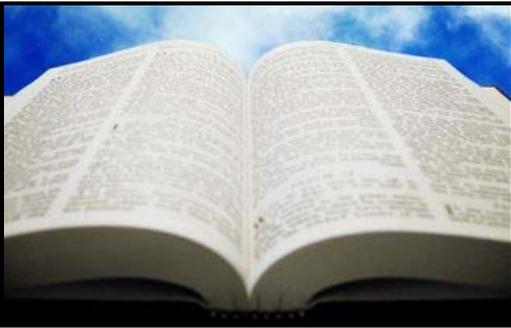
Today is January 1, the first day of a brand new year. Make it a personal goal this year to lead your group to be transformational. You're the leader...

Day 2 - Spend Time with Jesus

Read Acts 4:12-22

As your class leader, it is your mission to lead the people in your group to spend time with Jesus (vs. 13). To accomplish this mission, two things must happen. First, you must spend time with Jesus yourself. Second, when you are leading your group, your group must spend time with Jesus too.

It is the start of a new year. Now is a great time to make some resolutions, no - make that commitments. One of those commitments should be to spend time with Jesus daily. I want to encourage you to make a commitment to read the Bible through this year, entirely through. There is some stunning research that



indicates that American Christians own several Bibles, but they rarely read God's Word. Many followers of Christ have not read His Word from Genesis-Revelation. You can not be a transformative follower of Christ if you are not reading, studying and applying God's revelation of Himself in His word to your life.

But notice one other important point in today's passage. Verse 13 also says that Peter and John were "uneducated and common men". These two pillars of the early church

did not have seminary degrees! I doubt that they had even graduated from Galilee High School! This is encouraging news! You do not need a framed degree on your wall from a seminary or Bible college to be an effective follower of Christ and a leader in His work. In fact, the Sunday School movement you are part of was founded by lay people, not the clergy. The most profound part of Sunday School or small group ministry is that it rests heavily upon the ministry of common men and women who walk with Jesus and are leading others to do the same.

Day 3 - Be A Mentor

Today you have the opportunity to mentor someone.
Start!

It may be a 4th grader you live next door to. Get to know him or her. Many children do not have a dad or a significant adult in their life. This is your chance to help change eternity for some young child.

Maybe it is an adult who attends your group. Two days ago you prayed for the people who are members of your group. Who did the Holy Spirit bring to your mind? Who in your group seems nice enough, but when you look closer does not seem to have any close friends.

Maybe this person is a senior adult, or they may simply be someone that you have been meaning to get to know better. But whoever they are, we need to realize that we have significant opportunities to be the person that someone, somewhere will look back upon some day and say, "That teacher believed in me when nobody else would." Your life is an investment. As Sunday School or small group leaders, we need to be sharing our experiences with others. It is part of the transformation process.



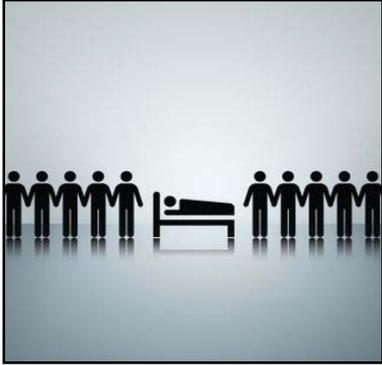
What you can share:

- How to plan a Bible study;
- How to lead someone to Christ;
- How to set up a class room so that people feel warm and welcome;
- What to say when someone has experienced the loss of a loved one;
- How to use a scroll saw;
- How to bake a batch of brownies;
- How to shoot a lay-up;
- How to carry a conversation;
- How to read the Bible.

The list is endless, but there are people who are around each of us now who could use some coaching. The time for procrastinating on this has past, now is the time for you to realize that each of us is responsible to pass down godly truths to another generation. The age-old axiom is that discipleship is "caught more than it is taught". To accomplish this, to become a disciple-maker, we must learn to slow down our pace and look for who God may be bringing us into contact with.

Be specific. Who has God brought to your mind that you could be an influence upon? Make contact with them - today! Be strategic, but take action.

Day 4 - A Place to Belong



Today's activity - Contact an absentee.

Here is your plan today: Determine which member of your class has been absent for the longest period of time and call them today. Don't scold them or ask, "Where you been?" Instead, introduce yourself to them (if needed); tell them that you are their Sunday School teacher. Share with the absentee a prayer request from the previous Sunday's class and then ask them if there is anything they would like for you to pray about. If they share anything, ask if you can pray for them right then - over the phone!

What if they aren't home or are not answering the phone? Leave a voice message that you are their Sunday School teacher and that you are calling to check on them. Then, contact another absentee! Keep calling and leaving messages until you actually talk to one of your class's absentees personally!

Contacting absentees is a vital part of your Sunday School ministry. You want your class to have an atmosphere of belonging and acceptance. When a person feels like they belong to a group, they will drive through snow and ice to be there. By praying for their specific needs, you are letting people know that your class is a place of spiritual transformation. You do believe that prayer changes things, don't you!

I am amazed at how following this simple practice of contacting at least one absentee a week with the right message helps the transformation from class to community.

Day 5 - You are an Ambassador

Today's activity - Read 2 Corinthians 5:20. Share the good news of Jesus Christ in some way today with another person.

Of all the things that we are called to do as Sunday School teachers, being an ambassador for Christ is near the top of the list! Recent research reveals that we are not being very good ambassadors however. Barna Research indicates that only 3% of America's churches are growing through true conversion growth of lost people. About 15% of our churches are growing through transfer growth of our church members.



Through all of the debate about the methods or programs a church has at its disposal to evangelize its community, the best way to impact lostness is share the gospel personally! My pastor said it in his sermon Sunday, "Programs don't bring people to Christ, people do!" That is why every person who has committed themselves to being a Christ-follower is also an ambassador of the gospel. Each of us represents Christ to our next door neighbor and our work associates. So if we are ambassadors of Christ, let's be the best ambassadors we can!

So take some time today and find a way to share how Christ has transformed your life with another person.

Day 6 - Togetherness



Today's activity - Call or visit with a class member you do not know well.

Community is one of the most overused and least understood words we use in church today. As a general rule, we seem to understand it as kind of a "feeling" the group seems to have. But there is much more to this word than we realize. Our world suffers from superficial, feel-good community. Unfortunately, this malady has spilled into the church as well. The typical Baptist church today has roughly fifty per cent of its worship attendees who also attend Sunday School. So half of our morning attenders are probably not in a "biblical community". They may be attenders, but they are not yet belongers!

One of the most important things your group can do is offer community, a real and honest place where people can belong and bring their hurts, disappointments, and shortcomings. Superficial alternatives to community are everywhere, including the church. Your group must be about genuine, biblical community.

Finally, a true biblical community is essential to biblical discipleship. Throughout the New Testament there are examples of biblical community: Jesus and the twelve; Paul and Timothy; Peter and Mark. Jason Hayes and Ed Stetzer share the following progression of discipleship.

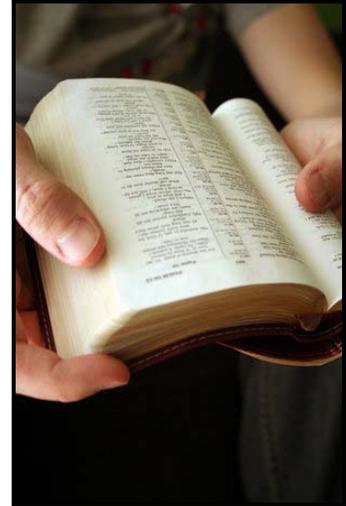
Belong Believe Become

This kind of community does not just happen by accident. This community occurs through close proximity. I want to encourage you to look at your group closely. Who in your group is in need of a personal visit? This person may be someone who is longing for a group where they can belong. Many times you, as the leader of your class, can help them in their journey through simple actions such as a phone call or a cup of coffee at your local diner.

Day 7 - Content

Today's activity - Memorize 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and teach for content this Sunday.

Today we are focusing on the teaching aspect of Bible study ministry. I'm not necessarily talking about delivery or style, lecture or discussion. What we are talking about today is content. In a just completed survey of Christians who attend Southern Baptist churches in Oklahoma, 11% of the respondents indicated that Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists all worship the same God. 29% of respondents revealed God is kind of like an energy source! These are not people who are unchurched; this survey was with church-going Christians!



I was recently eavesdropping on a Bible study group studying the topic of faith. At the end of the lesson the teacher asked an excellent question: "How does do you express your faith in your everyday life?" The Bible study group "spiritualized" their responses. "Well, when Abraham showed his faith by be willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac." "Joshua showed his faith by leading the people into the promised land." The teacher reasserted his excellent question. "But, how do you express your faith?" Silence.

We must help the people in our groups understand that their small group is not a self-help study, that the Bible is not a 12 step manual, and that true Bible study always brings depth of content and character to a person's soul. Real Bible study should express itself in real results, not living out your faith through someone else. Knowing not just what we believe but why we believe it is critical if we are going to be ambassadors of the gospel to our neighbors and work associates who do not know Jesus personally.

This Sunday, press your class to share how the group's Bible study touches their soul. Encourage your group not to "spiritualize" the aim of the study, but to state how they will implement the study in concrete terms.

Day 8 - Responsibility

Today's activity - Provide for someone in need.

Read Isaiah 58:3... and then skip down to Isaiah 58:6-12. Can you identify with this passage? Ever been there?

I want to encourage you today to do something for someone who is in need. Perhaps it is as simple as bringing a Happy Meal to a person on the street corner. Maybe you could take a sack of groceries to your community's Rescue Mission. Change the light bulbs for the elderly couple next door.

The Bible is very clear about this issue. God cares for the poor, the widowed, the elderly, and the downtrodden. People to whom life appears to have thrown a curveball. The modern word for it is social justice. In the Bible, it is called love, agape love. Our God does not just represent love, He is love (1 John 4:16).

You see, as we study the Bible, we become responsible for what we have learned about God and His plan for humanity. We must make a choice about what we do after studying God's word: either obey or disobey. Our choices do make a difference.



I want you to begin thinking of your small group or class as a hub or center for social action, but social action with the ultimate aim of gospel action! We respond to the needs of a hurting world because it is the godly thing to do, not because it is cool or because it will get our class mentioned in Relevant Magazine. Jesus was doing social justice long before it was a cool thing to do. In fact, He was criticized for it. Jesus is our King, and the King has made it clear that He wants us to love those around us like He loves us.

Day 9 - Spiritual Priority

Today's activity - Read Romans 10:1. Make a list of seven people that you know personally and who are not in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. After you make the list, pray for each of them to come to a personal relationship with Christ.



Perhaps nothing is as revealing about our spiritual priorities as our prayer life. We pray for what we believe is important. After your class or small group completes its prayer time this week, examine your group's prayer request list. What is on it? What you see on that list is an indication of your group's spiritual priorities.

If your prayer list is like most class prayer requests, there will be needs for health and healing, travel safety, concern for a child or grandchild. But very rarely do I find a Bible study group that is intentional about praying for unsaved people! This is one of the reasons why

baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention are at the same levels they were in 1950 - when we had half as many Baptists and half as many Americans. For all of our talk about evangelism, we have done a rather poor job when it comes to praying for our lost friends and neighbors by name.

A girl's high school class in a small Oklahoma town decided to take praying for the lost seriously. Their class formed an evangelistic prayer list with the names of their school classmates on it. Within one week, two high school boys on their list made professions of faith in Christ, were baptized and became active in the youth group.

We must believe that our God is able, and that His arm is not so short that he cannot save.

Pray for your seven lost friends every day for the rest of this month.

For a pastor's companion to this blog, check out Brett Selby's 31 Days to a Better Church at <http://brettselby.com>.

Day 10 - Simplify

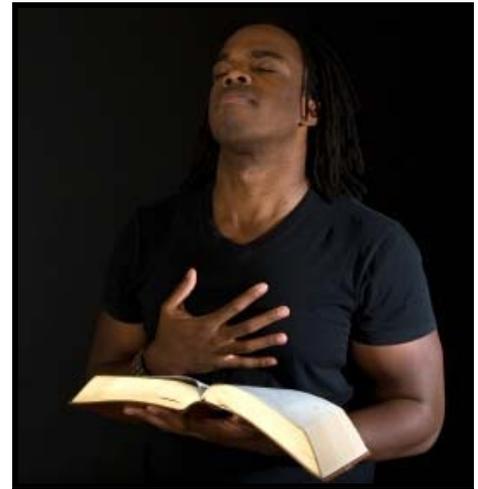
Today's activity - Practice the Bible study method below.

In a recent survey of almost 1,000 Oklahoma church attendees, almost 35% of churchgoing adults believe that the Bible is too complicated to be understood without the help of a trained teacher. 35%!! Over one-third of the people in your adult Bible study believe they cannot really understand what God is teaching them through His word without the expertise of a trained teacher!

This statistic indicates that we have presented the Bible and Bible teaching as so complex that it is too difficult for the average person. The consequences of this belief are enormous, and indicate why it is so difficult in many places to enlist new teachers. The research also indicates why so few people read their Bible with any regularity.

The next Sunday you teach your class, take a few minutes and teach them this simple way to study their Bible. It works for personal study and devotions, as well as in a small group or class.

How much to read for a study? The span of one hand! Spread your hand on the page you are about to read. Read from your thumb to the tip of your small finger. In other words, probably 3/4 to 1 full page. If your Bible is divided into columns (most are), then it only includes one column.



As you read, answer these questions:

- What did you like about what you just read?
- What did you not like?
- Was there anything that you did not understand?
- What did you learn about God?
- If you were to apply what you just learned into your life this week, what would it look like?

That's it. Write this simple Bible study tool in your journal, or even in the back of your Bible. Practice using it as you prepare for this week's study (Take the focal passage from your curriculum and practice).

But just as importantly, share it. Teach this plan to your class. People like John Wycliffe went through tremendous personal strife to translate the Bible so that the average guy can read it and understand for his or her self.

Day 11 - Support Your Local Pastor



Today's activity - Read Hebrews 13:7, 17. Write your pastor a note of encouragement.

You know, your pastor could probably use a simple note of encouragement this week. Let him know you appreciate him and share something specific he does that you really appreciate. Add a verse of scripture if you want. Sign it and mail it today. My estimate: six minutes and you're done! But the few minutes that you take to let your pastor know that you appreciate him will be worth the investment.

I was at a funeral last week of a beloved colleague. This minister who died suddenly in his late 40's had a tremendous impact on thousands of lives. The church was grieving over the unexpected loss of this staff member. But I watched the pastor lead his congregation. He was a rock in a stormy sea. I reflected later about how strong this pastor was for his people, and how he was such an example of God's grace and compassion in difficult times. I started musing about what a typical pastor must deal with on a consistent basis. If the past year was a normal year, your pastor probably did the following:

- Preached and prepared around 100 sermons;
- Visited the hospital 100-200 times;
- Led another 35-50 Bible studies;
- Spent about 250 hours in church committee meetings;
- Personally counseled with about 150-200 people;
- Led about 20 funerals and ministered to the grieving families;
- Had 12 deacons meetings;
- Oh, and don't forget he's raising his own kids and loving his wife;
- You get the idea, right?

Let's face it; your pastor is a rock! Send him a note today and encourage him. He's worth it and trust me, he will appreciate the note.

For a companion to this blog, go to <http://brettselby.com> for the 31 Days to a Better Church.

Day 12 - Your Heritage

Today's activity - Write down your class's "family tree".

Read 2 Timothy 2:2. See if you can find the four generations of Paul's family tree in this verse.

Could you find them? Here they are: Generation 1, Paul; Generation 2, Timothy; Generation 3, faithful men; Generation 4, others. Using your Bible knowledge, you could add a fifth generation, and that would be Paul's mentor... Barnabas!

Discipleship requires us to build generations of people who will carry on the ministry of the gospel. The old adage that Christianity is only one generation from extinction is true! Failing to disciple the people in our groups will only result in a weakened and eventually nonexistent church.

Your class or group did not appear out of nowhere. Someone stepped out in faith and started the class you lead now (it might have even been you!). The question becomes, where are your class's "children and grandchildren"? Has your group started a new group? If so, how many? Take a sheet of paper and write or draw your Bible study group's family tree.



You need to share this information with your group. I want to encourage you to write your group's family tree on the whiteboard over the next week or two, and discuss it with your group. Where did your group originate? What are your group's plans to begin a new group? Who are you preparing to become leaders?

Day 13 - Expand



Today's activity - Meet three new people.

It is amazing how cloistered we can become in a very short period of time. Before too long, we find ourselves driving the same route to work, visiting with the same people in the office, and... ahem, sitting in the same seat in worship. Because we tend to treasure some sense of order in our lives, before too long we become extremely predictable.

Ditto with our Bible study group! Let's try an experiment: I bet you already know where each person in your group will sit this coming Sunday, don't you?

This need for order is often very helpful in organizing our lives, but when it comes to expanding the Kingdom, our security net can become a big problem. Our lives turn inward, our classes become self-centered, and unchurched people find it difficult

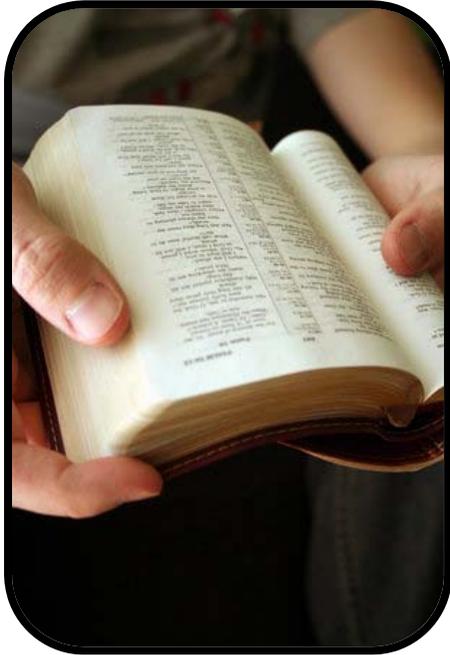
to break into our world. To borrow a verse from Luke 2, "...there was no room for them at the inn." Before we realize it, our groups and our lives become so wrapped in our schedule and agenda that we do not notice those around us that God is putting in our path so that He can bless them through us.

Your challenge today is to meet three new people. Just go out of your way and introduce yourself to three new folks that God places in your path today. Ask them some questions about themselves. Ask them, "What is your story?" Find out if they are interested in spiritual things. Just make conversation.

In Genesis 12:1-3, God promises Abraham that He is going to bless the world through Abraham. God wants to bless the world through you, and through your small group. Let Him work through you...

Day 14 - Have a Bible Teaching Plan

Today's activity - commit to be a teacher of the entire Word of God. Examine this week's study. Are you leading your people into a transformational study of God's Word?



We live in a day where our society no longer values the Bible as the source of truth, as a source of truth maybe, but not THE source of truth. You and I need to commit ourselves to the Bible as the inspired word of God and teach it in its entirety.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Well of course I'm going to teach the Bible! What else would I teach?" Let me share with you some underlying issues regarding what we teach in our open groups (Sunday School).

First, you need a good curriculum. Now technically we don't teach the curriculum, the curriculum is just a guide to help us teach the Bible. It provides good commentary and age-appropriate ideas to help communicate biblical truth to your group. Look at your curriculum as a road map. It is a guide to help you reach your destination. For a Bible study group, we want to teach the entire Word of God. The curriculum is a guide to help us teach the Bible

in its entirety. We must study Habakkuk as well as Philippians! We need to study the justice of God as well as the love of God. Jesus is more than my bff! (That's "best friend forever" for you non-texters).

The second advantage to a good curriculum is that it puts you in a proactive position rather than a reactive position in times of crisis. Not having a curriculum map means that you study marriage after several couples in the church are in trouble. Reactive Bible study is much like locking the barn after the horses have left! A systematic plan to teach through all the Scriptures will strengthen the biblical depth of your members so that they will already have the biblical knowledge necessary before they are faced with a crisis such as the one just mentioned.

Finally, a good curriculum will help prevent your Bible study class from turning into a book-of-the-month club. Some aspects of our society today have crept into the church. We need to teach the Bible, not as a self-help manual or a really cool book, but as the Word of God. Yes, studying the Bible will help you have a better marriage, help you raise godly kids, and be a good steward of your resources. But the Bible was ultimately written so that you and I can actually know God in a personal and real way.

On a personal note, my opinion is that we are losing the younger generation of adults because many of our small groups do not have a systematic plan to study the Bible. Young people today have grown up in a pluralistic culture. Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and new age beliefs abound. When I was growing up, pluralistic meant Methodists and Presbyterians! Young adults are searching for God. They want to know what we believe. Our small groups must present the God of the Bible and avoid pop-psychology studies. I'm just saying...

Day 15 - Three Parts of a Bible Study

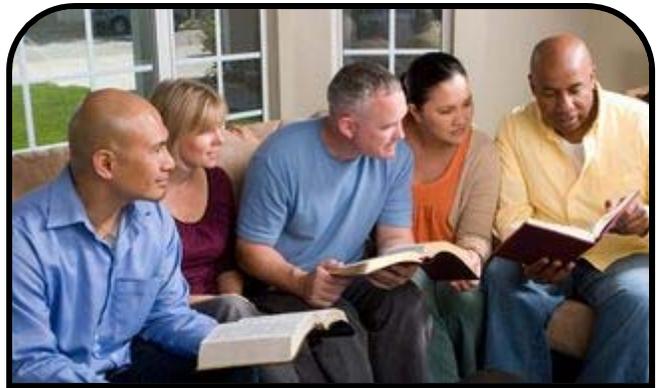
Today's activity - Plan your Bible study for your next group. Read Colossians 1:8-10.

There are three essential parts to every good Bible study.

- Introduction
- Content
- Application

Introduction - Every lesson needs a hook. As you start your study, the average person in your group is not engaged. They may even be wondering if this study is going to apply to them at all. You need a hook, you need an activity that will tweak their interest and get them thinking, "Yeah, I've always wondered about that!" You can always tell when you have set the table for the study that day when you see people lean forward.

For example: say your lesson is from Colossians 1. To start your study that day, you might ask a simple question. "Have you ever reached the point in your spiritual life that it seems like your prayers all start and end the same, like it has become some kind of ritual or something?" Let class members respond, and then direct them to how Paul prayed for the church in Colossae. (By the way, there are five things Paul prayed for this church that we would do well to learn.)



Content - After your opening exercise or statement, you must have content. Your group wants some meat; I mean... you want your group to learn this right? Let's stay with our Colossian study. How about breaking your class into groups and asking them to find five specific things in verses 8-10 that Paul prayed for this young church.

I know you're curious, so here are the five areas of Paul's prayer for the Colossian believers. He prayed that they:

1. Be filled with the knowledge of God's will;
2. Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord;
3. Bear fruit in every good work;
4. Increase in their knowledge of God;
5. Be strengthened in God's power.

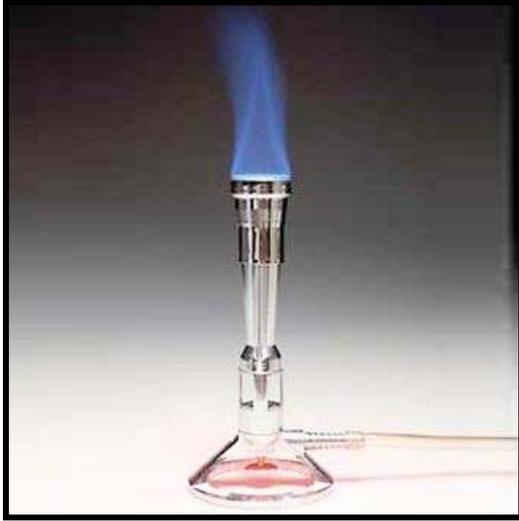
You can have quite a discussion just going through what these five areas of prayer mean and how to do them.

Application - Every Bible study needs some kind of application to our lives. My dad calls this moment the "so what?" part of the study. In other words, now that we've studied the Bible... so what? What will we do with what we have learned? Application is what makes Bible study something tangible and prevents your Sunday School from just being a history lesson! Let's stay with Colossians 1:8-10. First, I would hand an index card to each person in the group and have them write the passage and the five points of Paul's prayer on the card. Encourage them to learn them and to practice them every day, perhaps each night when the family sits down for dinner. Then, I would close the group in prayer, and do you know what prayer I would pray? Exactly... I would pray these five points for my group!

I hope you are enjoying our 31 days together. We are halfway through!

For a companion to this blog for your pastor, check out Brett Selby's 31 Days to a Better Church at <http://brettselby.com>.

Day 16 - Sunday School Chemistry



Today's activity - contact a person in your group and plan a fellowship for your class.

Remember playing with the Bunsen burner in your science lab? Now that was fun! You probably remember all the experiments and how mixing certain chemicals together produce certain reactions. We learned that some things work well together - and some things don't!

We sometimes can become so focused on being an evangelistic or missional group (a group that is impacting its culture during the week), that we can overlook the fact that God wants our group to truly enjoy each others company. Jesus even said for us to love each other, and by our love the world will know that we

are His disciples (John 13:34-35). It's chemistry. Loving, praying, and caring for each other are some key elements of a healthy, missional group.

Many of the people in your group lead relationally bankrupt lives. They may be very successful, at the pinnacle of their career, and not have even one or two close friends. I think I could even make the argument that many people today lack basic relationship skills. Your group needs to be a place where people can connect with one another and overcome some of their social ineptitudes.

Your Sunday School class is a chemistry class where all sorts of personalities are mixed together. The Bible is our Bunsen burner. With it, we refine the impurities from ourselves and from our group. We learn to love and accept the odd member or two. Your class is the place where the rude guy with the loud mouth learns to hold his tongue and become more accepting. You know... kind of the way the small group of guys Jesus surrounded Himself with put up with Peter until he became - Simon Peter, rock-solid!

To accomplish this transformational process, your group needs time together. Plan something social in which your group can participate. These are opportunities for the followers in your group who are farther along in their walk to show how others how to build relationships that are deep and lasting.

Day 17 - Memorize It!

Today's activity - Memorize the key verse in next week's Bible study lesson.

A common complaint I hear from both teachers and learners when it comes to their Sunday School curriculum is: "It's not deep enough". Everyone wants their Bible study to be deep. I want to share an idea with you that will bring depth to your teaching that no curriculum can provide.

First, we need to understand that the people in your group look to you for the application of God's Word in a personal way. In other words, they want to see the gospel personified in you. One of the most valuable things that you can do to help your people know that you take the role of Bible teacher seriously is to memorize it. Now I am not advancing that each Sunday you "show off" for your group with all the verses you have memorized. But I am encouraging you to memorize the key verse in each week's study.

Memorizing the key verse (or if you want a challenge - memorize the key passage) helps you internalize the verse. You find yourself dwelling on it during the week as you are driving to work, or enjoying a cup of coffee. Suddenly, you start seeing applications of the verse during the week, applications that the Spirit will use to help you communicate the truth with your group each week.

Here are some simple suggestions to help you memorize God's word:

- Start early in the week. Don't wait until Saturday night to try to memorize the verse.
- Memorize the verse "word perfect". This habit will keep you from making up words and changing the meaning of what the verse means.
- Memorize the reference! Saying, "Somewhere in the Bible it says..." is very poor.
- Write the verse out during your daily time with God. Writing something is more effective than repeating it in your mind.
- Practice saying the verse out loud, and say it often. Audibly quote the verse in your car, or while you are getting ready in the morning. Speaking the verse out loud helps you with cadence and also helps you discover the "rough spots" you need to work on.



One Sunday I was sitting in the pew as the pastor directed us to his sermon's Bible passage that day. (Yes, we Southern Baptists still use the Bible for our text.) He asked us to follow along. I glanced up during the reading and saw the pastor standing to side of the pulpit, looking at the congregation... and quoting the entire passage from memory! I glanced behind me to see if the words were projected on the wall in the back of the church - the wall was blank. I began to look up during the Bible "reading" almost every Sunday afterward, and almost every time he was sharing the passage from memory.

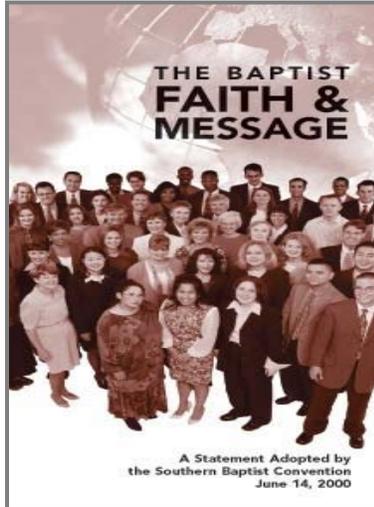
One day I mentioned this habit to this pastor and he just smiled and said, "Most people are unaware of it, but for me it helps me prepare. If I take the time to memorize the passage, God almost always shows me something during the week to help me understand it."

If you want to really get deep... memorize!

Suggested memory passage, just for fun; Isaiah 55:8-11.

Day 18 - Know Your Stuff

Today's activity - read your denomination or church's doctrinal statement. If you are a Southern Baptist, read the Baptist Faith and Message here.



Think with me... when was the last time you read your church or denomination's doctrine statement? You need to know your doctrine. Just as importantly, the people in your group need to know their doctrine. We need more people sharing their beliefs in the open-market, away from the safety of the steeple. In Acts 17:16-34, Paul steps into the market square of ideas in Athens (the Areopagus), and has an open debate with the philosophers of his day.

For your group to truly become missional, it is going to require more than just great fellowship and ministry. Your group must understand not only what it believes, but why they believe these doctrines. Instead of shying away from discussions about your denomination's beliefs during office break time or other opportunities, our groups should carry on a civil dialogue about their beliefs. LifeWay Research has discovered that

86% of unchurched Americans would like to have a discussion with a friend about Jesus Christ.

If you would like to purchase copies of the Baptist Faith & Message for your group, LifeWay has them for sale here for a very inexpensive price (5 for \$1.00)

Day 19 - Write a Mentor

Today's activity - write someone who invested in your spiritual growth.

We'll keep today's commentary short so that you have time to write a note to someone who made a difference in your life. Maybe it was a pastor, a Sunday School teacher, or a coach. Maybe it is one of your parents. But it needs to be somebody who had such influence in your life that you can look back and realize that you are closer to God because of their investment.

As you write this note, realize that you are writing on the tablets of your group members' hearts all the time. The time you invest in study and preparation, visiting their home, and the phone calls of encouragement are vital. And they are part of our Christian heritage.



And the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who may be able to teach others as well. 2 Timothy 2:2

Go to <http://brettselby.com> for a companion blog to the 31 Days to a Better Sunday School.

Day 20 - Everybody Is Known by Name

Today's activity - Arrange to have nametags and markers for your next group meeting.

One of the strongest appeals of a Bible study group is the opportunity to be known, to belong to a group of people who know your name, and know who you are. This possibility is so strong that sometimes we make an assumption that it is actually happening. You cannot make the assumption that people know everyone in the group, so provide nametags every week. My friend David Francis calls this idea one of the three biblical keys of effective Bible study; kenosis, koinonia, and knametags!



My wife Tracy has always been faithful to Bible study. She made a comment in class one Sunday, immediately after her comment a man in the class decided to follow up, and said, "Yeah, I agree. I want to say something about what... uhhhh... SHE said." Although she didn't lose sleep over it, Tracy told me it really bothered her that she had been attending her class for months, and many people did not know her name.

This Sunday, ask everyone to wear a nametag... and wear one yourself. No assumptions... right?

Day 21 - Face Your Group's Sin



Today's activity - Pray over your group's most basic sin.

Today is going to be difficult. There are a number of sins we all commit daily. Here is the scary part of what the Bible says about our sin; "If we say, 'We have no sin', we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Ouch!

One of the things I am learning as I visit with pastors and leaders of the Sunday School movement is that many of our leaders and people understand the principles of how to reach their neighborhoods; we just don't want to do it! For instance, we all know that starting new churches and starting new groups are extremely effective ways to reach people with the gospel, in fact they are essential. So why don't we do start more groups and churches? Because we don't want to, that's why.

We are in the midst of receiving new conference materials for our newest training resource, One Day 3:16. I was studying a seminar we received written by Jim Lehew of Emmaus Baptist in Oklahoma City entitled, 7 Habits of a Missional Sunday School. Habit #6 - Die to Self. I immediately thought, "Bingo, he nailed it". Although we still need to teach the basic principles of gospel growth in our churches, these principles will not conquer the sin we hide that prevents us from doing what we know to do (James 4:17).

Read Luke 9:23-25... and confess your group's sin to God, and turn from it.

A companion 31 Days blog for pastors can be viewed at <http://brettselby.com>.

Day 22 - Learn The Basics



Today's activity - Memorize Flake's Formula (below).

Arthur Flake pioneered the Sunday School movement for Southern Baptists. Although Baptists were involved in Sunday School before Flake's day, Flake is the guy that took Sunday School to the next level. He is the one that recognized the value of starting new groups and training lay people to become leaders and teachers within the movement. Mr. Flake was also the first Bible Teaching Director at the Baptist Sunday School Board. His book, *Building the Standard Sunday School*, is a classic for any person who understands the importance of Sunday School.

Although his "formula" is not found in "bullet form" in his books, the five pieces of his formula can be found sprinkled throughout all of his work. It is widely believed that the five cornerstones of Flake's Formula was the outline of his stump speech that he would give as he traveled the southern states. So without further interruption, here is Flake's Formula.

- Know your possibilities. You need to be familiar with your community and build your Sunday School to reflect the needs of your church's community.
- Enlarge your organization. Add new groups, you cannot expect the current structure to hold more people for very long.
- Enlist and equip your leaders. New leaders for new groups need to be enlisted, and all leaders need training.
- Provide space. Sunday Schools or small groups need space to meet.
- Go into your community. The community is not going to come to you, so you have got to go into your neighborhoods to meet them and enroll them in your group.

There is an easy acrostic to help you remember Flake's Formula: K-E-E-P-Go. I have found that when church leaders, and by that I mean not only Sunday School leaders, but pastors, staff, deacons, and committee leaders, understand the principles of good Sunday School, then doing the ministry of the Sunday School is more easily communicated and supported.

Day 23 - Your Group Needs a Story

Today's activity - Write your group's story on a sheet of paper. Tomorrow, ask your class to share their favorite group story.



What is your group's story? Your story is what someone in your group shares with a co-worker, neighbor, or friend when they ask about their class. It goes something like this: "Bill, I see you driving off in nice clothes every Sunday. Are you going to Sunday School or something?" Bill - "Yeah, you know some day you ought to come to our Bible study group." Jim - "What do you do in your group?" Bill - "Uhhh, well we share a little, and pray, and study our Bible." Jim - "I'm golfing Sunday!"

The story a person in your group shares with someone is very revealing about their perception of the value of the group. A basic story like the one shared above does not reveal a lot of passion about the group, and Jim can detect it. People are drawn to passion, and put off by apathy or a non-committal response.

At your next meeting, ask some people to share their favorite story. Another way to ask this question might be for them to share their most meaningful group story. Listen carefully to the stories shared. Do the stories shared occur in the classroom? Are the stories centered around parties and fellowships? How about stories related to spiritual transformation? A meaningful moment helping a family in crisis? A class mission trip?

Compare the difference between the conversation between Bill and Jim, with this answer from Bill: "Jim, our group studies God's word together. I got some great insight from last week's study that has helped me with a problem I had at work. And you know, this Saturday a group of us guys are going to someone's house that needs some help and install a hot water heater for them. Wanna come?"

In their book *Essential Church*, Thom and Sam Rainer state that a major reason for many people to remain unchurched is that they do not view the church as being essential. The answers your group shares as their favorite story is very revealing about how essential the group really is.

Day 24 - Your Dash

Today's activity - Write the story of how you came to Christ for your kids/relatives to share at your funeral.

What will the final story of your life be? I want to encourage you to take the time today to write in some detail how you came to faith in Jesus Christ. A good way to do this is to write your story as a letter to a loved one. Share some details, but share the most important thing that ever happened in your life. Share some scripture verses that have impacted your life - and share why these verses were so critical in your spiritual development. Tell your loved ones about people that God placed in your journey so that they realize the importance of sharing their faith with others as well.

There is a short story by Linda Ellis that is worth watching. On your tombstone there will be your name, the date you were born and the date you died. In between those two dates is a dash, like 1909-1989. It's the dash that counts. Watch this video and make your dash count.

<http://www.thedashmovie.com/>

Day 25 - New Group Strategy

Today's activity - Plan the start of a new group. Write it on a sheet of paper and tuck it in your Bible.

There is no better time than today than to begin planning when and how you are going to start a new group out of your class. I know you probably don't want to, and I'm pretty sure the people in your group do not want to even think about starting a new class. But you need to do it, and they need to participate.



The simple fact is that the larger in attendance your group gets, the less connected it becomes. Big classes are the bane of group intimacy. It may feel good for a while as the class grows and increases, but after a while the group begins to lose the closeness that is needed for good small group ministry. Mini-worship is not the same thing as small group!

Here are some ideas to help you plan the start of a new group:

- Pray for a leader. The new group will need a leader. You may already have an idea of who in your group would make a great new leader.
- Begin talking about the importance of a new group with your class. Do not blame this on the pastor or your Sunday School director. Being a leader means doing what is right, even if it isn't popular.
- Start asking some people in your group if they believe God may be leading them to help start the new group.
- When things start solidifying, put a target date on the calendar.
- Have a party! The week before you start the new group, throw a party and celebrate.

Every class has a legacy. You don't want to have a legacy of a Sunday School Scrooge who wouldn't let his folks venture out and grow!

Day 26 - Adopt an Orphaned Church Leader

Today's activity - discover a Sunday School leader in the preschool/children's area and adopt them into your group.



I think that the people that serve in the preschool and children's Sunday School classes are among the most overlooked and underappreciated leaders in the church family. They serve in this area because they love children and they have a calling to be Bible teachers and leaders to our kids. Unfortunately, they are often forgotten by adult classes. The end result is that many of these teachers miss adult fellowship and adult Bible study, which they still need!

Your challenge today is to discover one of these treasured saints and adopt them into your class. Your group may already have some folks who have left your class to serve in the children's area. Make sure you are staying in contact with them. Here are some things that an adult group can do to minister to teachers in the children's Sunday School:

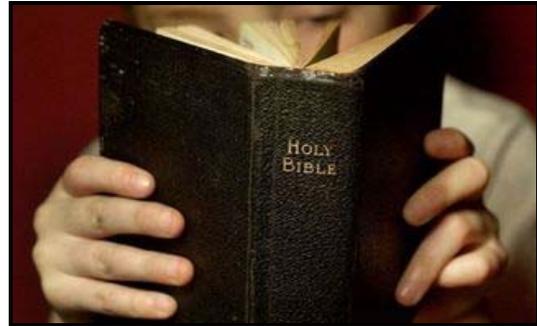
- Make sure you include them in your care ministry and that they receive regular phone calls;
- Take their picture and display their name, picture, and class they teach. You might have one part of your room that says "Sunday School Missionaries" and put pictures there of all of the workers who relate to your class;
- Remember to invite them to class fellowships;
- Ask if one of your class members can substitute for them once a quarter so that the children's teacher can have some "adult" class time occasionally;
- Send them a card signed by the whole class and thank them for their ministry and let them know you pray for them;
- Pray for these workers each time your group gets together.

Day 27 - Gospel-centric Groups

Today's activity - Read Romans 5:6-11.

If you are of the evangelical persuasion, then you recognize the call that we believe God has put on the heart of all believers - to be sharers of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. In a survey conducted by the Nevada Baptist Convention, they discovered that even among Southern Baptists in Nevada, only about one-third of them could adequately explain the gospel to the interviewer. How could this occur in an evangelical denomination?

There is not one smoking gun, but multiple reasons of how this could occur (and not just in Nevada). But a major reason is that we are not as direct about the gospel as we should be with our small groups or Sunday School classes. As a teacher or small group leader, it is vital that you regularly (weekly) share the gospel in your group. Remember that there is a difference between a lesson about evangelism and an evangelistic lesson!



Here are some suggestions that may help make sure that your group is regularly engaging the good news of the gospel:

- Regularly enlist a group member to share their testimony in class;
- When you do have an evangelistic lesson, make sure you teach it in such a way that you are encouraging lost people to come to Christ, and not just dispensing information about the gospel;
- Learn how to share your own story of how you came to Christ in two minutes or less;
- Call attention to parts of your Bible study that relate directly to the gospel, such as: grace, sin, redemption, the cross, the resurrection, Jesus' humanity/divinity, atonement, and repentance;
- Lead your class to adopt mission trips, especially mission trips where they have opportunities to witness;
- Encourage your group to learn the gospel;
- Go to websites such as www.my316.com or www.mostimportantthing.org and put your testimony online.

On occasion I meet group members who are discouraged that people who do not know Christ personally are not attending their group. May I point this out: People in need of healing do not need a school, they need an ambulance. Groups that do not have a gospel-centric focus are functioning as a school. Pray your group becomes an ambulance bringing the gospel to your community.

Day 28 - Focus for Results

Today's activity - name 3-5 people you could disciple... and start doing it!

We all know the adage about quail hunting: aim at the covey and miss all the birds, but aim at one bird and you are more likely to bring it down. I find that often times we may have a similar situation when our group gets sizable (I'm talking number of people here). As a leader, we need to focus the bulk of our attention on a few people who can then help with the discipleship of the entire group (I almost replaced "discipleship" with "ministry" in this sentence. Ministry sounds so much nicer, but discipleship involves commitment). Although you are focusing the bulk of your time on fewer people, you will have better long term results because you will actually be making disciples.



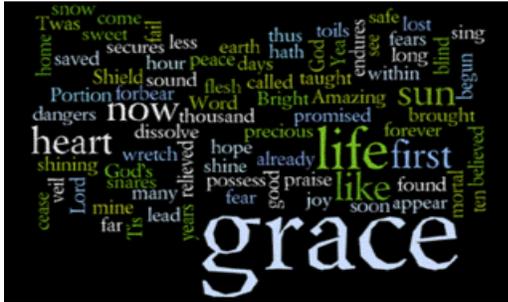
Here are a few suggestions:

- Focus on fewer people;
- Make time in your schedule to share with them during the week;
- Disciple for mission and evangelism (they'll grow spiritually too);
- Have visible targets. Targets should include both length of time and personal growth... i.e. accountability!
 - Give ministry away! In other words, turn these folks loose. You are making disciples, not establishing a fan club!

Need a resource or two? I would highly recommend "One on One With God" by Jerry and Marilyn Fine. This is an excellent and time proven resource that is fairly inexpensive and has a leader's guide. Plus, Jerry and Marilyn are disciple makers themselves. I like to learn from those who are doing it!

For a companion blog for pastors, 31 Days to a Better Church, go to <http://brettselby.com>

Day 29 - Be a Gracious Leader



Today's activity - write down five things for which you are grateful.

Leaders who are gracious have incredible traction with their group and others they come in contact with. Make sure the motive is right... we don't practice graciousness so we can have a great group. But many leaders have a great group because they are gracious!

I will say however, that it is highly unlikely that you are exercising grace in your group if you are not a grateful person yourself. That's why today's activity is focused on what you and I are grateful for. There seems to be a correlation between graciousness and gratefulness (grin). So take a few moments and write your grateful-ness list. Here's mine:

I'm grateful for:

- A God who cares for me through life's struggles, even when I'm not always appreciative and sometimes would rather have a pity party than dwell on how God has blessed me;
- My wonderful wife, and our two great kids;
- God's provision for my earthly needs, plus more than I need;
- A godly heritage passed down from several generations of Mayfield's, Price's, Wilson's, Hickerson's, etc.
- A purpose that keeps me focused so that I don't entirely waste my life.

"...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"... John 1:17

For a companion blog for pastors called "31 Days to a Better Church", go to <http://brettselby.com>

Day 30 - Show You Care



Today's activity - Call every person in your group.

Several years ago, my wife and our pastor's wife began a new ladies Sunday School class. Because we were out of room, the group met in the home of our pastor. Every Saturday afternoon around 4:00, Judy and Tracy called each other and talked for a while, and then they teamed up and called every lady in their group (plus any guests). By 7:00 each Saturday, every lady in their group had not only been contacted, but ministry needs had been discovered, and they had been prayed with.

Over time, these weekly contacts became something that each lady in the group really looked forward to. I would often hear laughter as my wife would visit with her group. But this sense of family and ministry did not happen with the first call, but after several visits over many weeks. The community and sense of belonging these ladies had carried over from Saturday evening to Sunday morning. Then, the calls would occasionally reverse... and when a group member had something exciting to share or a prayer need, they would not wait until Saturday but will call earlier in the week.

Taking the time to contact your group is one of the best community builders there is. Yes, you can have frou-frou coffee, snacks, and a green plant in the corner of the room, but nothing builds community like personal contact over a period of time.

For a companion blog for pastors, 31 Days to a Better Church, go to <http://brettselby.com>

Day 31 - Your Group's Purpose

Today's activity - briefly write your group's purpose, and make a list of three actions you will take to help your group stay on purpose.

Before you get too far along, remember that your group's ultimate purpose is to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). The ingredients of making a disciple include:

- Following the Holy Spirit;
- Bible study;
- Prayer;
- Community;
- Evangelism;
- Missional activity.



Too often we get sidetracked on one of the ingredients instead of the purpose. Often when leading a seminar about Sunday School, I will ask the group of leaders what their purpose is. Here are the top three answers: Bible study, ministry, and fellowship. No, your purpose is to make disciples. We make disciples by reaching out to unsaved people in our neighborhoods, by Bible study and prayer, and yes even class fellowships and ministry. These are actions we take to build disciples.

As you reflect and pray about what God would like for your group to do, remember that these actions are to support the purpose of your group.

After you are done, put the paper with the action items in a noticeable place like your bathroom mirror, or on your refrigerator. Then... do them!

For a companion blog for pastors, 31 Days to a Better Church, go to <http://brettselby.com>