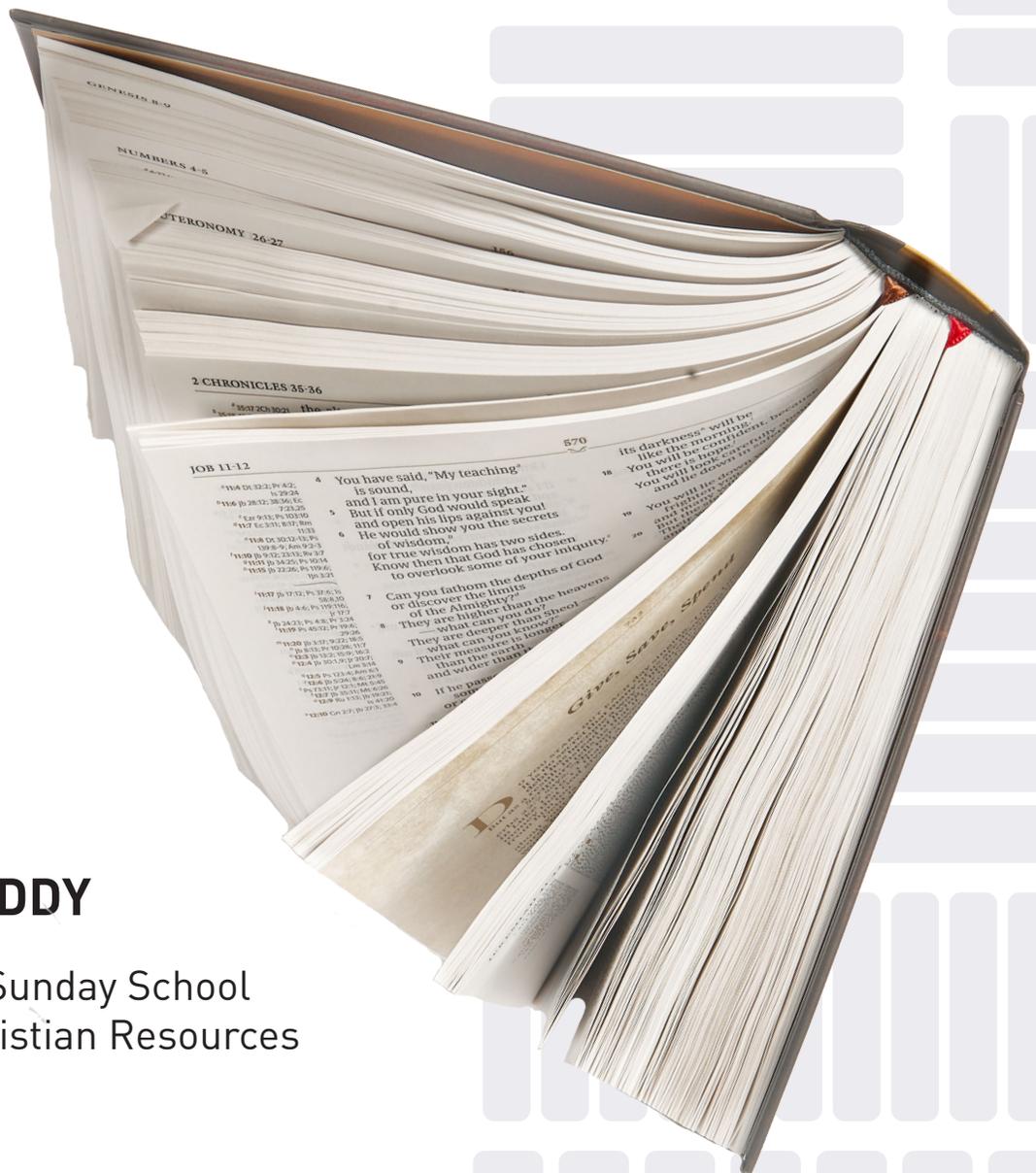


EXPLORING GOD'S WORD WITH INTENTIONALITY THROUGH STUDY PLANS

Why every Bible study group needs a study plan



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INTRODUCTION

As students enter college, they declare a major. For four years students get to choose any course, any topic, and just “go for it.” They pick classes that interest them and skip the boring ones. Universities love it when students explore their options, take random classes, and create a hodge-podge of learning. Does this sound like any college you know of? Of course not!

“Students don’t tell the university or dean which classes they are going to take.”

Students don’t tell their university or their dean which classes they will take. In fact, quite the opposite happens – the university tells them! Professors invest countless hours creating study plans for their courses. Whether students graduate or not depends upon how successfully they follow the study plans for the classes they take.

Students learn to trust that leaders of the university have used their expertise and experience to design study plans that provide them with the information they need to be successful in life.

WHAT IS A STUDY PLAN FOR BIBLE STUDY?

In the world of professionally crafted Bible studies, a study plan is **the beginning point for everything that follows**. A study plan is a detailed, well-thought-out sequence of studies over a prescribed amount of time.

Some Bible studies produced by Christian publishers have short study plans – some may be weeks, months, or up to one year. Other study plans are longer, with some lasting three to five years. Some are even as long as nine years!

Creating the study plan is the hardest work that Christian publishers do. It may take months or longer to develop study plans. The study plan determines:

- The total **number of studies** in the series
- The total **number of verses** to be studied in each session
- **Subject matter** on which the studies will focus (will studies be based on topics or on individual books of the Bible, or something else?)
- **Subject matter that must be omitted** because of lack of space in the sequence
- **Background passages** that add clarity to the focal passage(s) studied in each session

People who craft study plans for Bible study groups ask the question, “What do we want people to know, understand, and do?” They also ask, “What books of the Bible, or what stories in the Bible, or what passages in the Bible best help learners to grasp the biblical concepts?”

A study plan therefore guides the creation of individual Bible study sessions. Study plans create order and intentionality. Study plans ensure that people benefit from them in the following ways.

STUDY PLANS PROVIDE BALANCE

This is perhaps the most important reason that groups should consider using curriculum with a study plan behind it. Group leaders have four basic ways to determine what will be studied:

- A group leader develops his or her study plan based on personal preferences.
- A group leader asks the group members what topic they want to study.
- A church staff leader writes questions based on the pastor's sermons.
- A group uses an ongoing curriculum built on a study plan.

** Only the fourth option ensures that balance is achieved over time.*

Think of it this way: You take your family to an all-you-can-eat buffet. You turn your kids loose, and they come back to the table with piles of macaroni, pizza, and mashed potatoes – not exactly a nutritious, balanced meal. This isn't the best approach to provide them with the right balance of carbohydrates, proteins, and other needed elements for healthy growth.

Groups do something similar when they base their studies on the group leader's personal study preferences, or when they cover topics in a random way, moving from one to the other without any thought about why they are pursuing those topics (sometimes it is only because they recognize an author's name associated with the study). Sermon-based studies have become more popular, but the limitations have also now been recognized. Unless the pastor is balancing his sermons, groups get an imbalanced approach to Bible study.

Groups that use curriculum created by a Christian publisher have an advantage over all other groups. The study plan on which the curriculum is built allows for balanced Bible studies over time. Studies are balanced:

- **Between New Testament and Old Testament books**
- **Between different genres of Scripture**
 - Prophecy
 - Gospels
 - Epistles
 - Poetry
 - Wisdom literature
- **Topically**
- **Doctrinally**

STUDY PLANS LIBERATE GROUP LEADERS

Study plans provide a level of freedom to group leaders who normally create their own studies. Instead of scouring the internet for ideas, commentary, and more, group leaders can trust a Christian publisher's study plan. This frees up hours of valuable time the group leader can invest in building relationships with group members and potential group members. Group leaders are freed to serve and interact with people, rather than sit behind a computer looking for the group's next Bible study.

STUDY PLANS ENSURE HARD PASSAGES ARE STUDIED

A well-developed study plan will address hard passages as well as those that are more familiar to us. Hard passages often deal with issues that a group leader might not prefer to teach, but a study plan "forces" the group leader and the group members to tackle difficult theological concepts, hard sayings such as, "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out" (REF). Some groups might never study about money and finances because a group leader doesn't want to address that topic (even though Jesus spoke about that more than anything else!). If a group leader is intimidated by the subject of spiritual gifts, he might avoid the Bible's teachings altogether. A balanced curriculum study plan makes sure that groups don't shy away from hard passages but receive the entire counsel of God.

STUDY PLANS SAVE GROUP LEADER'S TIME

If a group leader spends his or her week creating a study, searching the internet, and burying himself in books, who will minister to the needs of the group members? Who will pray for them? How will their needs be met? Dozens of hours of preparation can be exchanged for time with group members and prospects simply by choosing to use a curriculum with a study plan. The teacher no longer must spend most of his week "making it up as he goes." With a strong study plan, a group leader can lead. People's needs can be met. Potential new members can be reached. The gospel can be shared. There's only so much time in every day.

STUDY PLANS ARE CRAFTED BY EXPERTS

The men and women who create study plans and the subsequent curriculum that comes from them have advanced degrees in theology and/or Christian education. These men and women have served on church staffs state convention staffs, seminaries, or other institutions. In teams, they work to carefully craft and edit the curriculum. Employing a team of experts is a much stronger model than a teacher writing his or her own Bible studies.

STUDY PLANS HELP ABSENT GROUP MEMBERS

Discipleship doesn't take a week off, but group members do. Attendance patterns today are erratic. Committed believers may not attend worship or small group studies more than once or twice a month. It is a good idea to provide them with a Personal Study Guide that is built on a study plan. If those study guides are placed in people's hands, they have content to study between group sessions. This allows them to keep up with the group even when they are not present. Disciples should read God's Word daily, and Personal Study Guides help them do that. When you follow a study plan, everyone can stay on the same page.

STUDY PLANS GUARD AGAINST THEOLOGICAL DRIFT

Teachers in churches have all kinds of theological backgrounds – some may have been in church for a long time, others not so long; some are more theologically conservative, others may be less so. Because we are commanded to guard our doctrine closely, it matters what we teach. Turning group leaders loose to teach anything they want opens the door to doctrine being introduced into your church that is contrary to your church's beliefs. When curriculum is provided for group leaders and members, teachers are held more accountable because both they and their group members follow a study plan that is known in advance. People can read and study before the group session. Heresy has almost no chance of surviving when an ongoing study plan is used.

STUDY PLANS LEAD TO TRUSTWORTHY CONTENT

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STUDY PLANS LEAD TO GREAT FINANCIAL VALUE

Study plans are the backbone of Bible studies created by Christian publishers. They start with a well-designed study plan, and from those individual Bible study sessions are created. Those sessions are then bound together in a Personal Study Guide, with other resources for the teacher and the group.

It should not be surprising to know that a church could equip a teacher with a leader guide, a commentary, a leader pack (with posters charts, and maps), and 10 Personal Study Guides for the teacher's group members for about \$75 every 90 days. If you divide that by the 13 sessions in a series, that's just under \$6 a week to equip a group of 10 people to study the Bible. Taken to the extreme, it's barely \$.08 per day per person!

STUDY PLANS ARE EASILY EXPLAINED

When you invite guests to attend Bible study groups, wouldn't it be nice to tell them, "All of our groups study the Bible book-by-book." Or perhaps you might say, "All of our groups study topics relevant to life today in six-session units. Or how about, "Our groups here at Any Church USA study the Bible chronologically."

When you have a study plan, it is easy to explain how your Bible study groups go about studying God's Word each week.

STUDY PLANS ARE EASILY ADAPTED

Adapting a Bible study based on a study plan is easier than creating a Bible study from scratch. Even if a group leader doesn't like the teaching plans or the questions and group activities suggested in them, at least they have a starting place from which to build. It is better and faster to adapt than to create.

STUDY PLANS HELP WITH ASSIMILATION

When you provide Bible study curriculum for guests, you help them fit into existing groups. Some guests will not have strong church backgrounds. Attending a Bible study is a big decision. In fact, some guests feel very intimidated to come into groups where everyone appears to have a firm grasp of the Bible.

STUDY PLANS ARE WELL-ENGINEERED

The book *Crash Course* by author Paul Ingrassia details the rise and fall of the "big three" automakers. The book is a fascinating look into the inner workings of the automobile industry and the decisions made by executives that led to the crash of that industry years ago.

During this time when poor decisions we made by American automakers, Honda quietly rose to prominence because it was led by engineers, not the "bean counters" like at General Motors (p.66). Ingrassia notes that this was a critical difference in Honda's success and GM's failure. Let's think about this and how it applies to Sunday School curriculum, discipleship, and study plans.

The car you drive was not created by a single engineer. In fact, teams of engineers worked for years to develop and test the very car you drove to work today. Would you dare drive a car that was designed by just one engineer? Surely not. I know I wouldn't trust the experience and background of just one engineer.

In a similar way, some churches are opting to have a staff member (or teachers) create (we'll use the term "engineer") their own Bible study lessons each week. *One person is responsible for creating a lesson rather than a team of experts.*

Here are several advantages of using a curriculum series from a Christian publisher, rather than having a single teacher/engineer write their own:

ONE ***A team of “curriculum engineers” keeps the lesson free of doctrinal error.***
When you have multiple experts (editors, writers with advanced theological degrees) who craft Bible studies, the chances of doctrinal errors slipping into the material is reduced to almost a zero possibility. Multiple filters are in place to make sure that only accurate biblical doctrine is presented in each study. If you have only one person writing Bible studies, you don't have a built-in system for catching mistakes in doctrine.

TWO ***A team of “curriculum engineers” work from a long-term study plan.*** As said earlier, it takes years to design a car, and dozens of meetings with marketers, engineers, execs, and salespeople to create a product that will be received well in the marketplace. “Curriculum engineers,” in a similar way, work a long-term plan that is known as the scope & sequence of the curriculum. The scope and sequence is a detailed plan that sets strong guidelines for what the curriculum will lead learners to study over the course of time; the scope & sequence can actually stretch many years into the future, giving the entire team a strong framework around which to build lessons. This is not so if you have only one person writing their own studies. They will struggle to tell you what they are going to lead their class to study in two weeks.

THREE ***A team of “curriculum engineers” brings diversity and creativity to the process of building lessons.*** Automakers employ hundreds of experts, engineers, craftsmen, and workers to produce the vehicles you and I enjoy driving. No church can come close to employing the hundreds of theologians, editors, writers, proofreaders, graphic designers, and others that produce quality Bible study materials that are “ready to use.” Hundreds of people speak into a lesson's design, theme, Scripture passages studied, illustrations, and more.

A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE OF A STUDY PLAN: EXPLORE THE BIBLE.

LifeWay Christian Resources produces numerous ongoing Bible studies that have individual study plans behind them. Crafted and engineered by experts, these Bible study series provide all the benefits described in this paper.

One of those study plans has made Explore the Bible a very successful and popular brand of Bible study. Explore the Bible helps group members study the Bible in a balanced way. It leads group members to study every book of the Bible over time, giving them “the whole counsel of God.”

Would any pastor not like his people to be taken through an exploration of the Bible in a systematic way, appropriate for every age person in the church? I think not! Preschoolers, children, students, and adults can all go on a journey to explore, understand, and live God's Word.

The Adult Explore the Bible Study Plan is based on a **nine-year study plan**. Within those nine years, every book of the Bible will be explored. Within the nine-year study cycle, there are **3 sets of 3-year study plans**. Every three years, group members receive balanced studies because all genres of Scripture are studied (there is balance within the balance!). **Every three years, books of poetry, history, prophecy, gospels, and epistles are studied. Studies also alternate between Old Testament and New Testament books.**

CONCLUSION

Study plans and the curriculum they inspire provide balanced studies for God's people. Study plans are well-thought-out, taking long periods of time to create because they are foundational to strong Bible studies.

Study plans help Christians experience balanced Bible studies. Created by curriculum experts with advanced degrees and years of experience in church ministry, study plans free group leaders to minister and serve the people in their groups.

Affordable, accessible, and strategic, study plans help Christians grow spiritually.

Study plans enhance people's spiritual growth and are necessary to maximize people's potential to grow as disciples.

A study plan is superior to random studies.