

# TEACHING FOR CHANGE

Eight Keys  
for Transformational  
Bible Study with Teens

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To my dad,

**Richard Albert Coley**

My favorite Bible teacher in my youth  
and my lifelong example of living for Christ.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<b>Chapter 1: How do teens learn and remember?</b>	5
<i>Effective teachers know their students brains don't have Velcro®.</i>	
<b>Chapter 2: Where do teens put new information?</b>	15
<i>Effective teachers build on the prior learning experience of their teens.</i>	
<b>Chapter 3: Does sitting passively and listening promote anything more than napping?</b>	25
<i>Effective teachers engage their learners.</i>	
<b>Chapter 4: Do teens all learn the same way?</b>	37
<i>Effective teachers recognize and respond to the need for diversity in their approaches.</i>	
<b>Chapter 5: How did the teacher master the material?</b>	49
<i>Effective teachers are aware of their own thinking and model this for their teens.</i>	
<b>Chapter 6: Why do so many teens dislike group work?</b>	63
<i>Effective teachers skillfully design cooperative learning activities so the results are positive and productive.</i>	
<b>Chapter 7: We are having fun, but how do I know the teenagers are learning anything?</b>	75
<i>Effective teachers include brief assessments that provide evidence of student learning.</i>	
<b>Chapter 8: So what does this look like when I prepare the lesson?</b>	87
<i>Effective teachers create a lesson plan that leads to transformation.</i>	
Bibliography	103

# INTRODUCTION

For her it was the most extraordinary encounter of her life. Like countless days before she was going about the most mundane of tasks, until Jesus engaged her in a conversation that led to her transformation. And it began with a simple request:

“Give Me a drink...”

Followed by powerful insights about God and Himself:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would ask Him, and He would give you living water.”

As the conversation developed, He continued to teach and connect the dots:

“Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again...”

As the dialogue continued, she expressed partial understanding and awareness:

“I know that Messiah is coming...”

At that moment He concluded their conversation by revealing His identity:

“I am He, the One speaking to you.”

Wow, we all would love to have insights into how Jesus taught so we could begin to see transformation in our group members’ lives like the change demonstrated by the Samaritan woman that day. Unfortunately, many teachers mistakenly think that because they have attended many classes or Bible studies, they are ready to lead one.

## **A familiar story...**

Nathan could not wait to get started. Since being recruited to lead a Bible study group, he had laid careful plans and worked tirelessly to prepare for this ministry—teaching his first Bible study session. With a few moments before class was scheduled to begin, Nathan took time to

reflect on his preparations that included contacting each group member personally, organizing welcoming materials, and connecting with the group as a whole through social media. Lots of planning went into organizing the room, greeting visitors, and serving snacks. It was time to lead in prayer and start the lesson. And then it hit him...what was he supposed to do to teach the lesson? A sudden wave of fear swept over Nathan as he came to the realization that he didn't have a clue what to do for the next 45 minutes.

Working with the extraordinary team at Randall House has allowed me the opportunity to develop this book that summarizes my lifelong pursuit to collect keys to unlock the secrets to exceptional teaching. We decided to call this key ring of ideas, *Teaching for Change: Eight Keys for Transformational Bible Study with Teens*. I'd like to introduce you to three friends I had in my mind's eye as I assembled this material:

- Michael, a delivery truck driver and dynamic Christian, said to me, "Ken, I love Jesus, His Word, and the kids...do you think I can learn to be a good Bible teacher?" This brief conversation with Michael began his journey to becoming a highly effective Bible teacher and group leader. ***Do you share Michael's passion, but feel the need to get some training before committing to teach?***
- My friend Dan, a graduate school professor, is a popular author and successful classroom lecturer. But Dan recognized that he needed new teaching tools to be a better teacher on Sunday morning. His group members at church were not responding in the way his grad students were. He eagerly embraced new approaches and became a better teacher in both settings. ***Have you been teaching the Bible for a few years? Is the Holy Spirit prompting you to expand your repertoire of instructional techniques?***
- Jason, a local pastor, recently contacted me and described a significant faculty of dedicated teachers with whom he has frequent training sessions. Despite their regular and ongoing training, he recognized the teachers needed a fresh voice. Their teaching methods as a whole had plateaued, and his group needed to be challenged to a new level of performance. After engaging with these keys to teaching that transforms, his

teachers have new insights and common terminology to inspire a change in culture in their Bible studies. ***Are you responsible for the ongoing training of Bible study teachers and small group leaders at your church?***

If you can relate to one or more of these scenarios, this book is for you.

In each chapter...

- Key concepts of each chapter will be introduced, defined, and explained.
- Where possible, an example of the Key concept of that chapter from the *teaching of Jesus in the Gospels* will be presented side by side with that educational concept.
- Each of the Eight Keys is prominent in *21st century educational literature*. Brief snapshots of this research will be referred to, and you will be directed to additional sources for further reading and reflection.
- In the last ten years neuroscientists and educators have made significant connections between their discoveries in "*mind, brain, and education*" research. I share these findings as they are pertinent to how teenagers perceive, process, store, and communicate their understanding of new ideas.
- *Practical, but powerful, teaching techniques* that lead to meaningful engagement and authentic transformation will be described and illustrated. I want to assist you in developing a toolbox of new skills and techniques so you will be ready to put these into service at a moment's notice.

It is the author's belief, having met hundreds of teachers like yourself, that the Lord has given you a heart to serve Him and a desire to influence teenagers through the power of His Word. But just like Nathan, you are hungry for a deeper understanding about teaching and learning. Everyone who had a hand in the publication of this book believes these Eight Keys will open new insights about how your group members learn and change. Let's don't leave Nathan hanging. He needs our help to design meaningful Bible studies that glorify the Lord and contribute to the transformation of his teens.





## Chapter I

# HOW DO TEENS LEARN AND REMEMBER?

**Effective teachers know their  
students' brains don't have Velcro®!**

*Nathan's first attempt at leading the Bible study for his group of twenty teens went better than expected, given his anxiety just before he kicked off. He felt that he had researched the passage well and was prepared to answer background questions (which never came), but the teens never expressed any level of enthusiasm for the Scripture. He was thankful they cooperated and listened politely, but engaged, they were not. They were not rude or disinterested; they were passive...that's the word, they sat passively. Nathan expected more from them and more from himself. He needed to do some reading about teaching and learning.*

Excellence in teaching God's Word is a critical component when developing a Bible teaching program that glorifies Christ, stimulates spiritual growth in believers, and ministers to both the members and the community God has called you to serve. The Apostle Paul said it best when he wrote and expressed his gratitude for the inspiring growth he saw in the saints at Thessalonica:

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the

word of God, *which also performs its work in you who believe.*

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (emphasis added)

Paul points out that the believers at Thessalonica did not simply endorse him or embrace the message as coming from a human spokesperson. They took hold of his teaching for what it is, God's Word. Furthermore, he identified that it was already working in them. Paul communicates that the litmus test for excellence in teaching is the transformation of believers' lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the major sources of this change is the influence of God's Word on an individual's thinking, believing, and behaving. Where there is effective teaching, there is *change*—in knowledge, in perspective, in attitudes, and ultimately, in behavior. *Where there is no change, no teaching and learning has occurred.* Yes, there can be passive consent, or short term memory of a set of facts. But long term, a lasting change in a person's life is necessary to say that teaching and learning has been successful and effective, and that God's word is "performing its work in you who believe."

With over thirty years' experience of teaching Bible study in many different contexts, this author has discovered that the key to seeing this change happen is the short, but powerful word, **engage**. Content that is taught with the use of techniques that offer the opportunity for Bible study participants to engage with God's Word, with the instructor, and with his/her classmates is more likely to take hold in the believer's mind and heart than instructional approaches in which the participants remain passive. Students learn more when they actively engage with the content than when they sit, listen, take notes, and watch. This book will reflect on the challenges and barriers to more effective teaching that exist in nearly every church and steps you and your fellow teachers/leaders can take to engaging your members in life-changing Bible study.

**KEY #1: TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHERS ASSIST  
THEIR STUDENTS IN THE PROCESS OF COMPREHENDING  
NEW INFORMATION AND BUILDING GOD'S TRUTH  
INTO THEIR THINKING AND BEHAVIOR.**

## The big picture of what you are trying to accomplish:

Have you spent any time recently thinking about what you are hoping to accomplish when you teach a Bible study? Here are some possible responses from those who lead a group once a week:

- My goal is to cover the material.
- I try my best to communicate with my teens what I learned from my study of the passage.
- We have a curriculum especially designed for this age group that we try to get through each week and every quarter.
- We only have 45 minutes, and I try to pack it as full of Scripture as possible.
- After I explain the verses, I encourage my group to ask questions or share what it means to them.

How would you know or measure whether or not you accomplished your goal? The same teachers might respond:

- I was able to get through most of my notes.
- We spent some time on each of the verses we were supposed to cover.
- The teenagers appeared attentive and asked a few questions.
- On the way home in the car, my wife told me I did a good job teaching.

May I suggest that we as teachers of the Word of God, the most important truths in the universe, ought to set much higher expectations of ourselves? Consider these “big picture” goals—

- I would like for my students to fall more deeply in love with God’s Word.
- My goal is for our teens to be able to study the Bible more effectively on their own.
- Each of us, when confronted with the truth of God’s Word, should experience a change.
- I want our teens to be ready to give an account for the hope that is within them.

## Developing a Philosophy of Teaching

At the outset of this book on teaching strategies, I want to encourage you to spend some time wrestling with your *philosophy of teaching and learning*. This is not the occasion for a deep discussion of this topic, but simply put, “what are your core beliefs about what you do as a teacher and how your students learn?” Though you may not realize it, this is an evaluation of your philosophy and your responses have a great deal to do with how you plan and carry out your Bible study lesson every week.

Most people, when they take a step back and look at themselves as teachers, will tell you they teach the way they do based on one of two things:

1. I teach the way my favorite teacher taught.
2. I teach the way I learn best.

While these responses may be both accurate and beneficial, I want to urge you to consider a third alternative—I teach in a variety of ways beneficial for the teens God has called me to lead and influence. Teaching is not about “ME,” but it is focused on effectively communicating God’s Word so teens are given the opportunity to interact with the biblical passage, with their leader, and with each other.

Would you like to change your approach to teaching? Do you need to add new tools to your tool belt that will inspire greater engagement during your Bible study?

This approach, dare I say, “this philosophy,” focuses on what the students do and experience, not on what the teacher does or how much material is covered. A word of warning must be stated here.

**While the teacher strongly considers what the students are doing and experiencing, God’s Word remains the central focus; it is absolute and unchanging; its meaning is not constructed by the students individually or collectively.** But if you desire to see your students *change* (my one-word definition of *teaching and learning*), the teacher must develop strategies to **engage** them. Put another way, the teacher uses active learning techniques which challenge the student to interact with the content as opposed to **remaining passive while the instructor makes the presentation.**

This goes back to the theme of the lesson: *their brains are not made of Velcro®!* Teaching is not the act of throwing concepts at a surface to which they stick. Let's unpack this...during an instructional episode, the measure of whether or not teaching and learning took place is determined by to what extent did *change* take place in the students—change in perspective, attitude, values, disposition, understanding, but most important, change in behavior. We are exhorted by Scripture, "Don't just be hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word." The opportunity for change to take place in your students increases as they are engaged with the material, with the teacher, and with other learners. Why is this? Teaching and learning is NOT about the brilliance of the teacher or a truckload of material. It is about providing students with opportunities to construct their own understanding of the material.

Please read this carefully—I did **not** say "construct his/her own truth." With guidance from the Holy Spirit and the skillful leadership from a godly teacher, learners must have the opportunity to interact with the material in much the same way laborers work with building materials around them. The architect lays out the absolute dimensions of the project, beginning with the corner stone. He specifies the materials and design. Then the construction foreman oversees the brick layers or stone masons as they handle the building materials and construct the building. Our Bible study participants are not sponges that merely soak up material, nor are they like flypaper to which new material sticks. *They must be challenged to sort new ideas, to organize new thoughts, and find places to put them within their mental frameworks.* To fail to do this during the lesson is to miss significant opportunities for change and growth.

Throughout the Gospels we encounter Jesus engaging His disciples in the teaching-learning process:

Jesus engaged their imagination: "Consider the lilies of the fields."

Jesus engaged them in discussion: "Who do men say that I am?"

Jesus engaged them in problem solving: "Why are you troubled? Touch me and see..."

Jesus engaged them by connecting with their prior experience:

"I am the bread of life."

Jesus engaged them with tests: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me..."

Jesus engaged them in active learning: "You give them something to eat."

The central argument of this approach is that effective teaching is not the mere transmission of new ideas or dumping of course content, but as the examples above from Jesus' teaching illustrate, effective teaching includes the engagement of the learner. Christian author Gary Newton explains it this way:

Learning is by nature active, interactive, and engaging. Even listening involves activity of the mind. Participants must discipline their thoughts, focus their attention, direct their gaze, and control their body language. Good listening skills involve all of these behaviors and activities. Learning happens most effectively through active engagement of every aspect of the person. The more engaged and active a person is in the learning process, the greater the potential for learning to take place.<sup>1</sup>

Authors Rick and Shera Melick agree with these two concepts of "change" and "engagement" and have crafted a unique term, *transformactional*. Here is how they summarize their understanding:

Learning is more than mental. It is emotional. It is volitional. It is active. Transformation is indeed mental, but transformation also produces better living through informed action. In using the word "*transformactional*," we hope to stress two important aspects of learning. First, real learning includes action. Second, the process of learning is active. It actively seeks, embraces, and applies knowledge. In the case of Christian education, the learner actively seeks, embraces, and applies the truths of Scripture so that the learner develops Christ-like character and lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

Some Christian educators shy away from the wording, *constructing knowledge*. Bassett and Baumann in *Foundations of Christian School*

# Discover the eight keys that unlock the secret to exceptional teaching.

*Teaching for Change* provides practical, but powerful, teaching techniques that will inspire student engagement and increased learning. Ken Coley weaves together examples from the teaching of Jesus with educational concepts that work. He also offers tools vital to effective communication and meaningful life transformation. Each chapter includes illustrations demonstrating how the eight keys look in a typical lesson.

## This book is a vital resource for every teacher working with teens.



**KEN COLEY, Ed.D.**, has enjoyed a long career in education that includes church ministry and educational leadership. For the last twenty years, he has taught masters and doctoral level classes in educational leadership at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. Currently, Coley is the director of the Doctor of Education Program. He frequently speaks at conferences throughout the United States and has presented internationally in Canada, Haiti, Cuba, Panama, and the Congo (DRC). Ken has been married to his wife Kathy for 42 years, and they have two children, Scott and Caitlin, who are both teachers.



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