

Curriculum Evaluation Guide



Compiled by Ken Braddy

Manager: Adult Ongoing Bible Studies

What is Curriculum?

Curriculum comes from the Latin word *currere*, which means *to run*. The word “curriculum” was used during the Roman Empire to refer to the course used for chariot races. The curriculum *was* the racetrack with its starting and finishing points. Today we think of curriculum in a slightly different way. Normally we view curriculum as the books and lessons we study with others in a group, like at school; we don’t think of curriculum in terms of a racetrack anymore!

The word curriculum, applied to the Bible study materials we use today in our churches, does have connections to the way it was used centuries ago. Today, curriculum gives Bible study leaders a “lane” to run in as they teach Scripture. The scope and sequence (the topics covered, and the order in which they are covered) function like starting and ending points.

Evaluating Curriculum

Perhaps you have been chosen by your church to examine and recommend from the curriculum options of multiple publishers. This is an important task, and one to be approached with much prayer and seriousness. The choices you make today will affect the Bible studies of preschoolers, children, students, and adults for perhaps decades to come.

This guide is intended to help you think about the choices you are about to make, and to help you consider some important things before you make your final decision. With God’s help and guidance, you can make great choices for your church family. Welcome to the journey!

As we begin to think about curriculum, let’s consider some myths that are commonly associated with Bible study materials.

5 Myths about Curriculum

1. **There is a perfect curriculum.** There is no such thing! Don’t waste your time looking for it, because it doesn’t exist. Some curriculum will meet your needs better than others. Don’t give in to the pressures that some teachers bring when they ask you to choose a different curriculum than the one you’ve selected. Help them understand why you’ve chosen it, train them how to use it properly, pray for them to accept it, and stay the course. Every curriculum has strengths and weaknesses, and none are perfect.
2. **The newest curriculum with all the “bells and whistles” is best for my church.** Maybe, maybe not. If you believe this, you’ll likely change curriculum often, because new curriculum is always being developed. In this day and age, there is no shortage of publishers who produce curriculum. Churches produce curriculum. Individuals produce

curriculum. It is better to select a curriculum that meets your criteria, train your leaders how to use it properly, and become experts in it. If you constantly change curriculum, the people in your Bible study groups will never complete a scope and sequence and their learning will be hindered.

- 3. Curriculum should change each time we get a new leader.** The church must decide on a plan for teaching people of all ages. As new staff join the leadership team, they should be in agreement with the educational philosophy (and curriculum) the church has chosen. That isn't to say that a new leader shouldn't be allowed to ever bring about a change in the church's curriculum. Generally a new leader wants to implement a change based on their own experience (i.e. "I used XYZ curriculum at my previous church") and they haven't spent enough time fully understanding their new church's philosophy and reasons it selected its current curriculum. Sometimes the new leader is right, and a curriculum change should be made. In the end it is important to make sure you take the time to do the proper research before jumping ship to a new curriculum.
- 4. Teachers teach curriculum.** Actually, they teach people. Teachers use curriculum as a tool to aid in the teaching of Scripture, but it's just a tool. It tells teachers what they should teach each week to stay true to the curriculum plan and the scope and sequence. It provides teaching procedures and ideas for involving group members in studying the Bible, but ultimately teachers teach people, not curriculum.
- 5. Teachers don't need any curriculum...they have the Bible.** Churches make a big mistake when they allow teachers to create their own curriculum plan and "just study the Bible." It makes sense on the surface, doesn't it? The Word of God is powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, so why not just allow a teacher to open it, teach his or her favorite passages, and save the expense of buying curriculum and training leaders? The answer is, it is a poor plan for teaching the entire counsel of God in age-appropriate ways in a scope and sequence that takes into account the life-long developmental and spiritual needs of preschoolers, children, students, and adults! Some groups that take this approach have been studying prophecy or some other topic that is meaningful to the teacher – and they've been studying it for years! It's like going to a buffet and eating only one kind of food. It's not a healthy approach to Bible study.

10 ways churches choose curriculum...and some are good

It would be great if churches took the time to properly investigate curriculum they were considering placing in Bible study groups. Sadly, decisions are often made quickly, maybe too quickly, and everyone suffers. See if you can identify the good and the bad methods some churches use to make their decisions:

1. **Marketing** – Guess what came in the mail today?! Selecting curriculum by the marketing efforts of publishers leads to frequent changes (there’s always something better – “the latest and the greatest”). The result? Frustrated teachers, incomplete scope & sequences for learners, and a schizophrenic approach to studying the Bible.
2. **Comfort** – Ahhh, that feels good. Choosing curriculum based on “what we’ve always done” leads to infrequent changes (the other end of the extreme) and churches never consider if there are better, more viable options for their group members. Tradition is king. Long live the king.
3. **Pressure from members** – This is the “tail wags the dog” syndrome. Parents have strong opinions about what their children should study and start a grass-roots campaign to change their church’s curriculum. Adults may voice displeasure about the chosen curriculum, so church staff give in to pressures for the sake of peace (or their jobs). In nature, pressure creates diamonds. In the church (as it relates to curriculum) pressure isn’t so helpful and the results aren’t quite as beautiful.
4. **Professional recommendations** – Church staff receive recommendations from their peers (often around a quick lunch...“Hey, what curriculum are you guys using?” asks one staff member of a friend in ministry). A recommendation is given, a quick decision is made to change, and it’s all done without any significant research. At least you’re keeping up with the Joneses.
5. **Research** – Churches take the time to examine 4-6 publishers’ curriculum and then make choices. It’s time-consuming (6 months +), but you can rest assured you will have a conviction you’ve made the best choice for your church. This is the right way to select curriculum!
6. **Ministry, Vision, & Purpose** – Churches select curriculum based on their ministry’s vision and purpose statements to achieve maximum alignment. This is another great way to choose Bible study materials.
7. **Denominational loyalty** - Churches select curriculum from their denominational publisher(s). This approach gives maximum doctrinal alignment, so if that’s important to your church, this should be a strong option. It’s a safe approach that usually yields positive results.

8. **Empowered teachers**– Teachers determine what they will teach, secure curriculum, and “go for it.” The result is a hodge-podge of curriculum throughout the church, poor scope and sequence, and an unexplainable strategy to members and guests.
9. **Electronic delivery**– “Paper is out, books are dead” is the belief of some people. There are leaders who want to go 100% digital. Are lessons downloadable from the internet? Can we print our own copies? Can teachers access online support and helps 24/7? While electronic delivery has advantages, it also has disadvantages such as (1) no personal study guides for group members...which means people can’t prepare before the study (2) no internet...not every teacher can afford the expense of having a computer or internet service (3) there’s more reasons...just keep thinking!
10. **Silo approach Vs. Coordinated/Aligned approach** – Preschool, children, student, and adult ministries are allowed to select their own curriculum without regard to how it connects to ascending grade levels/life stages, which leads to a silo approach. A coordinated approach, however, considers how each age group’s scope and sequence relates to the ones that come after it so that learning is life-long and spans the course of an individual’s life.

Don't Forget to think about 4 "Starting Points"

Have you ever wondered why some Bible study groups react so negatively when they are given a curriculum to study? Chances are the new curriculum doesn't appeal to the way the group wants to study the Bible.

For instance, if a group prefers to study the Bible book-by-book, that a **TEXT** starting point. Bible study is done by studying the Bible book-by-book and/or verse-by-verse. But don't all Bible studies study the biblical text? Yes! But if the curriculum is built upon a TEXT starting point, the only way it will help group members study Scripture is by going through the Bible systematically. Let's say your curriculum begins a study in Matthew. You'll start with Matthew chapter 1. Next week, you'll move to Matthew 2, and so on, until the entire book is studied. The starting point for creating this kind of study is the biblical text. Many groups prefer to study this way.

But then there are groups that prefer to study the Bible using a **LIFE** starting point. They certainly want to study biblical text, but they like a topical approach. They prefer discovering how the Bible applies to life. A LIFE starting point curriculum will identify a life need or situation, find the most appropriate portion of Scripture, and study it in light of the life issue. In this kind of study, you might be in the Old Testament one week, and in the New Testament next week. The studies do not have to all come from the same book of the Bible like in a TEXT starting point study.

And then there is the **THEOLOGY** starting point. Groups that prefer this approach like seeing what the Bible has to say about a certain doctrine. They like discovering how a particular theological concept is woven throughout the pages of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For instance, a study on the doctrine of revelation (God's revelation of Himself to man) might start in Genesis 1, then move to another passage in the Old Testament, and finally to a New Testament passage where Christ is seen as the final revelation of God to man. Many groups really value this approach.

And finally, there is **YOUR CHURCH**. Some churches like tying what their groups study to the message preached by their pastor. The belief is that this is the most important message the church could hear, so Bible study groups should continue digging deeper into the pastor's message in their Bible studies. Churches that prefer this approach either write their own curriculum (which can be very difficult to do consistently), or they can create their own using a 2 new tools from LifeWay called (1) Discipleship In Context and (2) smallgroup.com.

10 Steps to Success in Selecting Curriculum

1. **Involve the pastor and get his buy-in.** It's a good idea to begin your curriculum search by talking with your pastor about your goals and objectives. Seek his advice and invite him to be a part of the curriculum selection process. His schedule may not allow him to be at every meeting you conduct, but it will give your process credibility if people know he is supportive.
2. **Form an evaluation team** – Enlist staff members, Sunday School teachers, parents, leaders of short-term studies, and of course, group members. Remember the proverb, “With many advisors plans succeed, for lack of counsel they fail.” Make this group representative of the demographics of your church family.
3. **Allow adequate time** – 4 to 6 months will be necessary for a thorough evaluation of publisher's curricula. Be sure to order samples or request free ones from the publishers you are considering. You'll want to do this very early in the process, perhaps even before the evaluation process officially begins (do this right after your initial meeting with the pastor, before the first team meeting).
4. **Involve publishers** – Invite a representative to meet with your committee and explain the features and benefits of their curriculum. Again, request this very early in the process
5. **Develop an evaluation guide** – Include factors around which you will base your evaluation of all competitors' products. As you evaluate preschool, children, student, and adult curricula, an evaluation sheet will provide consistency in the way you evaluate certain important factors. An evaluation guide can be found at the end of this document.
6. **Pray and seek consensus** – You may not get 100% agreement, and that's ok. Aim for it, but don't let a holdout or two keep you from choosing what's best for your church. Help your team members understand “the big picture” and the give and take it often requires to select curriculum that is best for the church
7. **Report progress to the church** – Determine how frequently the church family and leaders should be informed about the team's progress and calendar a time for reporting and answering questions from leaders, parents, group leaders, group members, etc.
8. **Share your decision with the church** – Let the church know the team's decision took time, many hours, prayer, and was arrived at by the group. Ask for the church family's support and prayers as you move forward to begin using the new curriculum.
9. **Train your leaders** – Provide a training time to familiarize group leaders with the features and benefits of their new curriculum. Allow time before the new lessons begin

so that group leaders have time to become acquainted with their new materials. Consider asking the publisher of your curriculum to send trainers to your church to help equip your teachers with a thorough understanding of their new materials

10. **Follow up in 90 days** – Once you begin using your new curriculum, be sure to evaluate it with your teachers at the end of your first quarter using it. Ask for feedback and clarify any questions the teachers have. Address concerns quickly and make plans for the future

The Curriculum Evaluation Guide

The following Curriculum Evaluation Guide contains several things you will want to evaluate as you compare curriculum and decide which one is best for your church. Many churches find evaluating these things very helpful, but you may have others you wish to evaluate as well. There is a blank page at the end of the Guide, so you can make copies and decide on other things you want to compare.

Remember also that although a curriculum may not have the highest ranking overall, it may be best for your church (i.e. it may be #2 in your overall point ranking, but because it has strong biblical content (and that's important to your church) you select it because you give more weight to the importance of being biblically-centered rather than another factor or factors).

The factors in this Guide are as follows:

1. Group leader resources
2. Group member resources
3. Cost
4. Scope and sequence
5. Publisher
6. Parental emphasis
7. Training and support

Group Leader Resources

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
Leader Guide has easy-to-follow, organized teaching plan		
A variety of age-appropriate teaching methods are suggested to engage learners in active Bible study		
A Class Kit or Leader Pack is available with supplemental resources/teaching aids		
Leader Guide contains additional details beyond the normal commentary related to persons, places, and customs found in the lesson passage		
Leader Guide has suggestions for helping learners apply biblical truths to their lives		
Leader Guide has detailed biblical commentary and background information on the biblical passages being studied		
Leader Guide clearly identifies the teaching aim, lesson goals, and central truth of each lesson		
Other:		

Total

Group Member Resources

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The Personal Study Guide is printed on quality paper that is bright and has easy-to-read text		
The Personal Study Guide encourages preparation prior to the group's session through daily reading and/or Scripture memorization		
The Personal Study Guide clearly communicates the scope and sequence of the curriculum		
The Personal Study Guide encourages the group member to apply biblical principles to life in practical ways		
The Personal Study Guide encourages the group member to use the Bible before, during, and after the class session		
The Personal Study Guide has a visually appealing layout that makes sessions easy to follow and understand		
Biblical commentary in the Personal Study Guide aids the group member in understanding the context of the lesson passage		
The Personal Study Guide moves the learner toward a personal faith in Christ through age-appropriate evangelistic lessons		

<p>Total</p> <p>_____</p>

Cost

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The cost of the Leader Guide relative to the one currently in use is lower		
The cost of the Personal Study Guide relative to the one currently in use is lower		
The cost of the Leader Kit or Class Kit relative to the one currently in use is lower		
The product does not have a history of regular, significant price increases		
Ancillary resources for group leaders are available and affordably priced		
The overall cost of curriculum will either stay the same or be lower if the curriculum being evaluated is chosen		
Unused materials or curriculum damaged in transit can be returned to the publisher for credit		
The overall value of the curriculum being considered is higher than the one currently in use		

Total _____

Scope & Sequence

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The curriculum has a clearly defined scope and sequence		
The scope and sequence provides for a balanced study of Old and New Testament books		
The scope and sequence takes an appropriate amount of time to complete		
The scope and sequence is age-appropriate		
Evangelistic lessons are a part of the curriculum's scope and sequence		
The publisher's scope and sequence is not changed often, and when changed, clear reasons are given		
The scope and sequence for adults coordinates with the scope and sequences of younger age groups		
The scope and sequence addresses key doctrines important to my church		

<p>Total</p> <p>_____</p>

Publisher

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The curriculum is based on conservative doctrine that is in alignment with the teachings of our church		
The publisher of the curriculum has a high level of experience and expertise in producing curriculum		
The authors of the curriculum are godly teachers and leaders in the church and are conservative in their doctrine		
The publisher produces curriculum that is of the highest quality (paper, covers, durability, etc).		
There is an extensive background check and application process before writers are approved by the publisher		
The publisher and/or editors are easily accessible by phone, e-mail, or other means		
The publisher understands the church and creates curriculum that meets the needs of teachers and leaders		
Other:		

<p>Total</p> <p>_____</p>

Parental Emphasis

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The adult curriculum is designed to inform parents about the lessons being studied by their children each week		
The adult curriculum contains ideas for parents to engage in spiritual conversations with their children		
Take-home pages (children's curriculum) inform parents about the topics studied by their children		
The adult, student, and children's curriculum are aligned so that each person studies the same passage of Scripture, or a similar topic		
Children's curriculum is built on the philosophy that parents are the primary teachers of their children		
Parents are assured that the curriculum provides a fully developed scope & sequence for every family member		
Devotional materials are available that aid the parent in helping children establish disciplines such as prayer and Bible reading		
Other:		

Total _____

Training & Support

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes
The curriculum contains clear instructions on how to use it effectively		
The publisher provides training for teachers (videos, blogs, articles, etc)		
The publisher provides training for teachers through live workshops and events		
Curriculum contains articles to develop teachers' skills		
Curriculum contains administrative helps for teachers		
Editors are available to answer questions about the curriculum		
The publisher can provide on-sight training at the church if requested and paid for by the church		
Other:		

<p>Total</p> <p>_____</p>

Other: _____

Curriculum: _____

1=Poor 10=Excellent

Criteria	Rating	Notes