Churches today have many choices for their Sunday School curriculum. What considerations should influence a church’s choice of its curriculum resources? Professor Don Anderson of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, believes that the key consideration is how well a curriculum helps teachers teach the Bible effectively and thoroughly. In the first article he examines three factors relating to curriculum development that bear upon effectiveness and thoroughness in Bible teaching. In the second article he presents an overview of Sunday School publishers.

The Sunday School curriculum market is changing. In the past two years one publisher has left the field and another has entered it. Some of the established publishers are making changes. Such changes make it important to step back and examine the whole field of Sunday School curriculum.

Why Is Curriculum So Important?

Before we examine the question of choosing curriculum, let’s consider why a church’s Sunday School curriculum is such an important matter in the first place. Does it really make a difference? I believe it does because the curriculum resources a church chooses for its Sunday School greatly influence the direction of the church. Why is that so? Because a church’s Sunday School curriculum reaches almost every person in the church on a weekly basis.1 No other curriculum used in church reaches as many people. If a church chooses a strong, Biblically-based Sunday School curriculum, that’s the way the church will go. If the church chooses a broader curriculum, the church will go in a different direction. Sunday School curriculum, therefore, is a major factor in the direction of a church.

Three Presuppositions

I work from three presuppositions that shape my thinking regarding Sunday School curriculum.

1. I believe Sunday School is the most comprehensive Bible teaching ministry in churches today because it has a class for every age, meets every Sunday of the year, and covers large portions of the Bible. Because of the strategic importance of Sunday School in a church’s educational program, we need to give special attention to its curriculum.

2. I believe we should use printed curriculum resources in our Sunday Schools, even in adult classes. Using printed curriculum provides structure for effectively teaching the Bible to people.

3. I evaluate curriculum materials from the fundamental Baptist perspective.
So what factors should influence a church’s decision in choosing Sunday School curriculum? Relevant topics? Ease in teaching? Eye-catching graphics and visuals? All these factors are important, but I believe the most important factor is how well the curriculum helps teachers teach the entire Bible effectively to all age levels. Three issues relating to curriculum development determine how successful curriculum resources are in meeting that goal.

The Structure of the Curriculum: Departmental or Uniform

Most Sunday School curriculum publishers today use a departmental structure. In this approach each department studies a different lesson series each quarter. For example, in a given quarter primaries may learn about Daniel, senior highers may study the Gospel of John, and adults may examine the book of Isaiah. The advantage of this approach is that writers can choose age-appropriate lessons for each group and focus on what a particular group needs most at that stage in life. Publishers such as Regular Baptist Press and Gospel Light use this approach. You can tell what structure a publisher uses by examining its scope and sequence chart.

The other structure is uniform, or unified, lessons. (One publisher calls it “synchronized.”) In this approach all the departments in Sunday School, from the preschoolers to the adults, study the same lesson at their own level of understanding.

The oldest and most widely-used form of uniform lessons is the International Sunday School Lessons. In the winter 2013–2014 quarter, for example, all students study the topic of “Jesus and the Just Reign of God” from passages in Luke and James. (The scope and sequence chart shows their current six-year cycle.)

In recent years Answers Bible Curriculum and Generations of Grace have produced lessons using their own uniform lesson cycle.

The advantage of this approach, according to publishers of uniform curriculum, is that families can discuss the Bible lessons at home because all the family members studied the same lesson that day in Sunday School. While uniform curriculum can aid in family teaching times, I see two problems with this form of curriculum development.

First, not all Bible texts are appropriate for every age level and therefore cannot be taught effectively to every age level. The International Sunday School Lesson cycle includes a study titled “God’s Prophets Demand Justice” from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, and Malachi. These lessons are fine for adults, but I am not sure that spending thirteen weeks on that subject is the most effective way to teach children. Answers Bible Curriculum and Generations of Grace have all the children learning about the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. I know this lesson could be presented in a general way to speak about God judging sin, but I don’t feel it is an age-appropriate lesson for little children.

The second problem I see is that while a uniform curriculum draws from many portions of the Bible, it often does not allow a thorough coverage of any one portion. It may have only three or four lessons from a book of the Bible before going to another book. This arrangement means that in a uniform lesson series adults would probably never engage in a detailed study of the book of Revelation or the Minor Prophets.

My observation, therefore, is that uniform curriculum limits the effectiveness of Bible teaching by including some lessons that may not be age-appropriate and by not always engaging in a thorough study of any one portion of Scripture. A departmental curriculum can teach students what is appropriate and meaningful at their age level and allows for a detailed study of Bible passages. Since we believe in teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), I favor a departmental curriculum.

The Audience of the Curriculum: Denominational or Interdenominational

Denominational materials are written by a denomination (or church group) for a specific denomination (or church group). Southern Baptists, for example, produce LifeWay materials for Southern Baptist churches. Other churches can choose to buy the materials, but the publisher focuses on its own denomination. Regular Baptist Press is also a denominational publisher since it is produced by the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches specifically for the GARBC and other fundamental Baptist churches. The advantage of denominational materials is that the publisher can include lessons that reflect its specific denominational distinctive, such as the Biblical distinctives of Baptists.

The other audience approach in curriculum development is interdenominational (or sometimes nondenominational) materials. As the name implies, these publishers produce material for a variety of denominations, such as Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, as well as for more evangelical churches. Gospel Light, Answers Bible Curriculum, and David C. Cook are examples of interdenominational curriculum resources.

I see two problems with interdenominational materials. First, what happens when you write for multiple audiences? A publisher usually restricts what it says to appeal to as many people as possible. In essence, it has to reach the lowest common denominator of the churches it serves.

The second problem with interdenominational materials is what they don’t say. I imagine that everything interdenominational publishers...
include in their lessons is true. The problem is what they don’t say. Interdenominational publishers typically do not deal with specific issues of eschatology and church government—anything where different denominations may disagree.

Interdenominational publishers may expect each church to add its particular doctrinal distinctives. Such a practice sounds good at first glance, but can we expect teachers to see what is not in their lessons and add that to their lessons? I don’t think so. Most teachers teach just what is in the teachers’ guides.8

Is it not better to use materials that teach the whole counsel of God to begin with? What advantage is there in buying something but then having to add to it when you could buy all you need in the first place? I favor using denominational materials because it includes distinctive Biblical truth.

The real issue here is two-fold: How effectively do you want to teach the Bible to every age level and how much of the Bible do you want to cover? Uniform lessons cover large portions of the Bible, but the issues of age-appropriate lessons for children and the thoroughness of covering books of the Bible, in my mind, limit its effectiveness. Interdenominational lessons restrict the Bible coverage to what the various denominations can agree on, which reduces the effectiveness of “whole counsel of God” teaching.

So what are my conclusions? I want to use departmental, denominational materials: departmental so we can teach the Bible effectively and thoroughly to every age group; denominational so we can have direct teaching on our Baptist distinctives.

The Identification of the Curriculum: Baptist or Unidentified

We need to add one more factor in making the decision of what materials to use—the identification of the curriculum materials. Not just any departmental, denominational materials will do. I believe firmly that Baptist churches should use Baptist materials. If not, a Baptist church may eventually cease to be a Baptist church. A church may retain the name Baptist, but it may cease to function fully as a Baptist church. To be most effective and thorough in our Bible coverage, I believe we should choose only departmental, denominational materials from Baptist publishers.

A church may choose from several Baptist publishers today: LifeWay, Randall House, Bogard Press, and Regular Baptist Press. (Note the lack of the word “Baptist” in most names.) Could a Baptist church choose from any of them? I personally could not do so because, as noted earlier, I work from the fundamental Baptist position. LifeWay is the Southern Baptist Convention publisher. Randall House is the publishing arm of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Bogard Press is part of the American Baptist Association, a Landmark Baptist group. Each of these publishers has something in its doctrinal statement or practice with which I would not agree. I believe we should use a Baptist publisher that holds to what we commonly refer to as the fundamental, or orthodox, Baptist position.

Among the Baptist publishers, the only major departmental, denominational publisher that holds to and teaches the fundamental Baptist position is Regular Baptist Press. I believe, therefore, that Regular Baptist Press Sunday School materials should be the choice of fundamental Baptist churches and all other churches who want to teach all the Bible effectively.9

The issue again is how much of the Bible do you want to teach effectively to all the age groups in your Sunday School. We must insist on teaching all the truths of Scripture in an effective way to all age levels. We should choose our Sunday School curriculum to help us accomplish that goal.

End Notes

1 I say that Sunday School reaches almost every person in a church because it obviously does not reach those who do not attend Sunday School and come only for the Sunday morning service. While that number is unfortunately growing, it still is true that the majority of people in a church attend Sunday School.

2 The International Sunday School Lessons are not a published curriculum but rather a six-year scope and sequence that several publishers use as the basis for their lesson development.

3 The Generations of Grace curriculum is available only for children’s classes.

4 One uniform curriculum has only one lesson in its cycle on Proverbs. One of the studies in the International Sunday School Lessons draws from the Pentateuch, 2 Samuel, Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. Such coverage leads to more of a thematic study rather than a thorough study of a book of the Bible.

5 Uniform lessons draw from many parts of the Bible, but departmental lessons will also cover most of the Bible in a student’s lifetime.

6 I realize the GARBC is not a denomination, but in terms of curriculum publication, it functions like one.

7 Interdenominational and nondenominational are slightly different, but for our purposes here I treat them basically interchangeably.

8 Admittedly pastors could review all the materials and instruct the teachers what to add. I question, however, whether pastors have time to do this.

9 In the interest of full disclosure, I served at the office of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches and its publishing arm, Regular Baptist Press, for 23 ½ years. However, as I tell students in my classes at Faith, I believed in Regular Baptist Press materials before I went to serve there (in fact, that was one reason why I wanted to serve there), I believed in RBP when I served there, and I still believe in and promote RBP materials today because they teach all the truths of the Bible from a Baptist perspective.
In this article I overview twelve of the major curriculum publishers, especially Baptist publishers, that Faith Pulpit readers might be aware of, have questions about, or consider choosing for their church ministries. The websites linked to each publishing house are the basis for this overview. Visit these websites to find the scope and sequence of each curriculum.

Answers Bible Curriculum

**Answers Bible Curriculum** (ABC) is produced by **Answers in Genesis** (AiG) of Petersburg, Kentucky. AiG introduced this curriculum to churches in the summer of 2012. It is an interdenominational, uniform curriculum on a three-year cycle of lessons. ABC has a special apologetic focus on equipping students to defend the truth of Scripture, especially the book of Genesis. The AiG doctrinal statement is strong on creation issues (including marriage) and holds to a Biblical position on God, the Scripture, Jesus Christ, and salvation. It does not deal with such matters as church polity or eschatology. The publisher leaves those areas up to the church using the materials. AiG also produces VBS materials and other creation-related resources for use in churches, schools, and homes.

Bogard Press

**Bogard Press** is the publishing house of the **American Baptist Association** of Texarkana, Texas. **Ben Bogard**, the founder of the American Baptist Association, held a landmark position of seeing unbroken continuity of Baptist churches from apostolic times. Bogard Press produces departmental, denominational curriculum for all age levels. Its doctrinal statement denies the existence of the universal church and does not include a statement about a pretribulational rapture. It uses only the KJV for its curriculum. The company also produces resources for VBS, children’s church, and other ministries.

Children Desiring God

**Children Desiring God** (CDG) is a children’s and youth curriculum developed for **Bethlehem Baptist Church** in Minneapolis (Baptist General Conference; formerly pastored by John Piper) and now made available to other churches. The company has produced seven 40-week courses for children in addition to VBS materials and four courses for junior high students. Its curriculum sequence utilizes a closely graded departmental plan (a curriculum for each grade). It probably can be considered denominational curriculum since it is written for one local church. CDG uses the doctrinal statement of Bethlehem Baptist Church, which reflects a pastor/elder model of church government and a five-point Calvinist position. This publisher uses the ESV in its materials.

David C. Cook

**David C. Cook** (formerly Cook Communications) entered the curriculum business in 1875, making it one of the oldest publishers available today. It is a broadly evangelical publisher that carries several lines of Sunday School curriculum. Its Bible in Life curriculum was its original line. Its other lines range from conservative evangelical publishers Scripture Press and Accent to its Wesleyan, Reformed, and Anglican editions. Its curriculum lines are generally departmental and include both denominational and interdenominational materials. The organization does not have a single doctrinal statement since it carries so many different kinds of curriculum.

Generations of Grace

The **Generations of Grace** (GoG) curriculum was developed for the children’s Sunday School at **Grace Community Church** in Sun Valley, California (pastored by John MacArthur) and now available to other churches that want to purchase it. GoG is a uniform, three-year children’s curriculum covering all parts of the Bible. It probably can be considered denominational curriculum since it is written for one local church. Unlike other publishers, it is only accessible online. Its doctrinal statement is that of Grace Community Church, which reflects a pastor/elder model of church government.

Gospel Light

**Gospel Light** was founded in 1933 by noted Christian educator Henrietta Mears. With offices located in Ventura, California, Gospel Light produces a full line of Sunday School curriculum in addition to VBS, books, and Bible studies. It is an evangelical publishing company that prepares departmental lessons for an interdenominational audience. Gospel Light has a general doctrinal statement that does not address issues of church government, church ordinances, or specific eschatological matters. Again this year, as it has for several years, Gospel Light makes its VBS program available for **Liguori Publications**, a Roman Catholic publisher, which then adds its Catholic doctrine.

Group

**Group** began in 1974 as a youth ministry resource when the founder, Thom Schultz, published **GROUP** magazine. The organization has expanded to Sunday School, children’s church, VBS, and other
church ministry resources. It produces interdenominational resources that appeal to a wide range of churches. Group’s educational philosophy is summed up in their statement, “Teach as Jesus taught. Use captivating gizmos to bring kids closer to God.” It has a brief statement of faith that most churches today, even liberal churches, could agree to. Its statement on salvation simply reads, “We believe people receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus.”

Joyful Life

Joyful Life began publishing Sunday School curriculum in 2003. It is published by Pensacola Christian College of Pensacola, Florida. Joyful Life produces departmental curriculum that is denominational in that it targets fundamental churches. Its doctrinal statement is fundamental and baptistic though it does not claim to be a Baptist publishing house. It operates 160 Joyful Life stores across the country and includes B&H Publishing Group. The Southern Baptist Convention has a rather extensive doctrinal statement with Scripture references, but it makes only general statements about eschatology without any specific time frame or details.

LifeWay Christian Resources

LifeWay Christian Resources, formerly known as The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, is located in Nashville, Tennessee, and is one of the entities of the SBC. It produces denominational, uniform Sunday School curriculum as well as VBS, Bible studies, books, magazines, and church supplies. It operates 160 LifeWay Christian stores across the country and includes B&H Publishing Group. The Southern Baptist Convention has a rather extensive doctrinal statement with Scripture references, but it makes only general statements about eschatology without any specific time frame or details.

Randall House

Randall House Publications, located in Nashville, Tennessee, is the publishing arm of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. It produces uniform, denominational Sunday School curriculum. Its doctrinal statement reflects the Free Will Baptist position that “man has the power of choice” in regard to salvation and that “all believers in Christ, who through grace persevere in holiness to the end of life, have promise of eternal salvation.” Randall House has clear statements on baptism and communion, though it adds foot washing as an ordinance. It includes only a general statement on eschatology with no specific details.

Regular Baptist Press

Regular Baptist Press (RBP) is the publishing arm of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches located in Schaumburg, Illinois. RBP began publishing Sunday School materials in 1952 and has since added VBS, children’s church, youth materials, Bible studies, and other teaching resources. RBP Sunday School curriculum is departmental and denominational in the sense that it is written by fundamental Baptists for fundamental Baptist churches. Its doctrinal statement reflects a dispensational Baptist position. It offers Sunday School curriculum in KJV for all levels and NKJV for children. RBP is the only major publisher in this overview openly identified as Baptist.

Union Gospel Press

Union Gospel Press (UGP), located in Cleveland, Ohio, publishes “nondenominational, fundamental Christian literature.” UGP began as a home missionary ministry called the Gospel Worker Society and started publishing its own curriculum in 1902. Today it publishes a full range of uniform lessons for Sunday School as well as its well-known magazine, Gospel Herald and the Sunday School Times. Its doctrinal statement has a clear pretribulational position, but it does not deal with church polity or ordinances. It uses only the King James Version for its curriculum. UGP is probably the most fundamental of the publishers that use the International Sunday School Lesson cycle.

Don Anderson served at Faith Baptist Bible College from 1978 to 1984 and returned in 2008. He teaches Christian Education and chairs the Department of Local Church Ministries. He also serves as the director of communications at Faith. He earned B.A. and Th.B. degrees from Faith Baptist Bible College and M.Div. and Th.M. degrees from Grace Theological Seminary. Prior to returning to Faith, he served at Regular Baptist Press and the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches in Schaumburg, Illinois.

Don has extensive experience in the field of Christian education as a Sunday School superintendent, adult Sunday School teacher, and Christian Education Committee chairman. He has written Success in Bible Teaching, a teacher training program, and Improving Your Sunday School, a guide for pastors and superintendents, both published by Regular Baptist Press.
Exploring the Lands of the Bible
Study Tour
March 9–18, 2014

Join Dr. Ernie Schmidt, former FBTS dean, for an educational and inspirational tour of Israel. The price is just $2779, which is $330 lower than other comparable trips. The deposit deadline is December 1, 2013, with the final payment due January 8, 2014. For details and a full schedule, contact Dr. Schmidt or visit the Pilgrim Tours website.

Faith Pulpit Day
March 31, 2014

Mark your calendar for Monday, March 31, 2014, for the annual Faith Pulpit Day. The speakers this year will focus on the theme of The Family in Modern Culture. Dr. Douglas Brown, Dr. Jeff Newman, and Dr. Rick Shrader will present papers on this subject. The weeklong Faith Missions Conference begins Monday evening, March 31. Come for Faith Pulpit Day and stay for some of the Missions Conference sessions as well.

Dr. Paul Hartog Publishes Major Book

Dr. Paul Hartog, vice president of academic services and dean of the college, has published a major new academic work titled Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp (Oxford University Press). Dr. Hartog is a leading Polycarpian scholar in international academic circles and spent several years writing this commentary. You will find a description of the book and ordering information through Amazon. Faith is honored to have a man of Dr. Hartog's standing as a teacher and academic officer.