

Faith Pulpit

Choosing Sunday School Curriculum

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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ The advantage of denominational materials is that the publisher can include lessons that reflect its specific denominational distinctives, such as the Biblical distinctives of Baptists.

The other audience approach in curriculum development is interdenominational (or sometimes nondenominational) materials.⁷ 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.

Works Cited

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.

Mr. Don Anderson

[Other Articles](#)

Don Anderson earned degrees from Faith Baptist Bible College (B.A. and Th.B) and Grace Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Th.M.) For 40 years, Don has been involved in church educational ministries as a Sunday School teacher and leader in his local church, as a faculty member at Faith Baptist Bible College, and as a member of the editorial staff of Regular Baptist Press. He currently serves as the Sunday School superintendent of his church and teaches an adult Sunday School class. Don and his wife Elly have two married children and four granddaughters. The Andersons live in northwest suburban Chicago and are active members of First Baptist Church of Arlington Heights, Illinois.