

Faith Pulpit

Improving Adult Sunday School Classes

My purpose in the first article was to call churches back to the priority of adult Sunday School classes because I believe they can do everything small groups can do and more and can provide the best format for discipleship. In short, adult Sunday School has the greater potential for benefit to a church. In this second article I offer some suggestions for how we adult teachers can improve our adult classes so they reach their full potential.

1. Commit to using printed curriculum that covers the Bible systematically.

One of the advantages of adult Sunday School classes over small groups is they can cover all the Bible systematically. This kind of coverage will not happen if adult teachers are allowed to choose their own studies. Systematic coverage can only happen when teachers follow a printed curriculum that covers the entire Bible. And if a church has more than one adult class, this kind of coverage can only happen when all the adult teachers in a church follow the printed curriculum.¹ For adult classes to reach their full potential, printed curriculum that covers the Bible systematically is essential.

As a corollary, teachers should know how to use printed curriculum. It is not meant to be slavishly followed or used as a substitute for the Bible. Rather, it is a guide to help adult teachers prepare their lessons, much like a pastor uses commentaries in his sermon preparation.

2. Care for the needs of the class members.

Ephesians 4:11 speaks of the pastor-teacher.² This hyphenated title means that the pastor of the church is also the teacher. He cannot separate one duty from another. By application, if the pastor is to have a teaching role, then perhaps the teachers should have a type of pastoring role in caring for their portion of the flock.

This analogy may help. The pastor is the undershepherd of the church. He is responsible for the entire flock. One man, however, cannot take care of the needs of the whole flock, even in a small church. He needs help. Think of the American rancher or shepherd. Who helps him? Sheep dogs! We adult teachers should think of ourselves as the sheep dogs of the church who care for a portion of the flock under the authority of the pastor. Now how do we carry out our sheep dog role?

- Make a list of all your class members and pray for each one regularly by name at least once a week. Praying for our class members will prompt us to care for their needs.
- Try to connect with each class member every Sunday morning. We should be in class and ready to go when the first member arrives. That way we can greet each one and inquire briefly about the person's situation.

You may say your class is too big to connect with each person every Sunday. Size can be an issue, which is why I recommend a class size not exceed 25 adults. Also, no matter what the class size, if we really want to connect with each adult, we will find a way to do so.

- Take time at the beginning of each class to ask for prayer requests. Often these requests will reveal needs and special situations. Then we need to follow up on those situations in the weeks and months ahead. They want to know we care for them.
- Spend some time outside of class talking to the class members. A greeting on Sunday morning is not sufficient. Engage the adults in conversation before and after other church services and during the week.
- Be present at critical times in their lives. When a class member or a member of his family (children or parents) is in the hospital, let's make hospital visits. When a family has a special need, let's arrange to take in meals. When a death occurs in the family, we should be present at the visitation and/or the funeral.
- Check on why a person is absent from class. If we don't know where the person is, we should make a phone call. If a person misses several times and no one makes any contact, he will think no one cares and may not return.

To help us know what to do, think of the kind of care a pastor gives to his people. That is the way we should care for the members of our class. That's all part of being a sheep dog!

Some classes recruit a person or a couple to organize the care for the class members. Such an arrangement is quite helpful, especially for a larger class, but we teachers still need to stay in touch with people and care for their needs.

3. Involve the class members in interactive Bible studies.

Too many adult teachers use the lecture method as the primary means of communication in their classes. Lecture has a place in adult Sunday School classes—just not all lecture every Sunday! Rather, we need to utilize an involvement format.

Moving away from a lecture format to an involvement format first requires a change in our mind-set. Think of these two approaches to teaching adults the Bible. In the first approach I study the Bible text thoroughly and then tell my students all I have learned. In the second approach I still study the Bible text thoroughly, but then I plan ways for my students to discover what I have found during my week of study. Which approach do you think will be more interesting and valuable for our adult learners? When we adopt this mind-set, we are well on our way to involvement learning.

So what are the ways we can plan for adults to learn what we found from the text? In this brief article we cannot explore all the different teaching methods available to us as adult teachers, but let me name three basic methods.

- Question and Answer—Prepare a series of questions that lead the adults through the content of the passage. These questions will explore the “who, where, when, and how many” questions of the text. You will find it helpful to put these questions on paper.
- Discussion—Discussion is the next step up from Q&A. Good discussion questions explore the “why and how” issues of a text. Discussion questions require more than identifying information from a verse; they require an analysis of what the text says.
- Paraphrasing—Ask adults to put the Scripture text in their own words. Such an exercise is a great way to involve them and help them explore the meaning of the text.

Where do you find ideas for involvement teaching methods? Look first in your printed curriculum, but don’t just take what the teacher guide gives to you. Be creative. Think of ideas on your own.

I have one word of caution. Be sure the teaching methods we use actually get people into the Bible text. I have seen some printed adult lessons where lecture is the main method and the suggested discussion questions deal only with peripheral issues and not the text itself. Every teaching method should get the adults into the Word in some way.³

When you have tried some of these methods, start adding other activities such as crossword puzzles and interview of characters from the text. A whole new world will begin to open up to us.

I have only mentioned a few teaching methods. Many more methods are available to us. Once we change our mind-set, we will be able to think of a lot more. The guiding question in choosing a method is “what will help my students discover what I learned this week from the Bible text?”

4. Lead the students in making meaningful applications.

Too many lessons on Jonah have left Jonah in Nineveh and never brought the truths of Jonah to our 21st century. No wonder people look for something else more relevant.

We need to spend the majority of our time in interactive Bible study, but we must also lead the students to make meaningful applications. A guiding verse for me for several decades has been James 1:22. “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” We must lead our students to be doers of the Word and not just hearers of it.

Notice I said “lead our students to make meaningful applications.” I did not say, “tell the students meaningful applications.” If we can lead our students to see how they should respond, they will be more likely to make the responses. How do we help our adults see the responses they should make from the text?

First, we need to consider the response we need to make from the Scripture. Only when we have attempted to respond to God’s Word can we lead our students to do so.

Second, we need to allow time in class for application. If we allow only 30 seconds at the end for application, not much is going to happen.

Third, we need to ask our adult learners a key question that will bring out several ways to respond to the text. A question such as, “What do we learn from our study of Jonah?” is probably too broad. Better to ask, “How can we Christians show that we care about people and their spiritual needs?”

Your adults will give several answers to your question. Encourage them to choose one way to respond during the week. Will everyone respond in some way? No, they won’t, but as we begin to focus on application each week, our students will begin to think in terms of application and will make it a part of their lives.

5. Take advantage of training opportunities.

We adult Sunday School teachers can better lead our classes if we take advantage of ongoing training.

- If a Sunday School or Christian education conference comes near you, plan to attend. Even if you have to pay your way, do it. It will be a good investment in your ministry.
- Read some teaching books. Four helpful tools are Impact Teaching by John and Daria Greening (Regular Baptist Press), Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur by Ken Hemphill (Broadman Holman), Effective Bible Teaching by James Wilhoit and Leland Ryken (Baker), and Teaching to Change Lives by Howard Hendricks (Multnomah). These books will encourage you and give your new ideas and renewed enthusiasm for your teaching ministry.

- Bring in a trainer. Ask your pastor if your church can bring in a Christian education specialist to provide some training. The trainer may be a person from the area, from a Christian publishing company, or from a nearby Christian college.

The adult Sunday School class can offer so much to a church. If we adult teachers give this ministry our best efforts, we can see it meet the needs of our adult learners. They will grow in their knowledge of the Scripture, they will become “doers of the Word,” and they will mature in their discipleship.

Works Cited

1. I recommend the adult materials from Regular Baptist Press. The adult curriculum covers all the Bible from a fundamental Baptist perspective.
2. Ephesians 4:11 reads “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.” Many Bible teachers see the last two listings as the duties of one person—the pastor-teacher.
3. I also sense that discussion in small groups often does not involve a thorough study of the Scripture but rather the members’ thoughts about the passage and how they should respond. I believe in responding to the text, but we can do so only after knowing what the text says.

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[Other Articles](#)

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