



Faith Pulpit

In Defense of the Adult Sunday School Class

Adult ministries are shifting in churches today. The emphasis seems to be moving away from adult Sunday School classes to small groups. In the first article Don Anderson, professor of Christian Education at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary and a veteran adult Sunday School teacher, calls churches back to the priority of adult Sunday School classes. He believes adult Sunday School classes can do everything small groups can do and more. In the second article he offers some suggestions for how to improve our adult classes so they reach their full potential.

The venerable adult Sunday School class has not been doing well recently. Most churches still have one or more adult Sunday School classes (though some churches have already abandoned them), but a new adult ministry seems to be getting the priority these days—small groups.

I believe that one reason for the popularity of small groups is that in many cases we have not done adult Sunday School well. Adult Sunday Schools in many churches have become stale and lifeless, so we have looked for a new ministry. Small groups seem like the answer to the problems of adult Sunday School classes.

HOW DO THEY DIFFER?

Most of us are familiar with adult Sunday School classes. Churches have had them for decades. Smaller churches may have only one class while larger churches have multiple classes. Churches that have more than one adult class may group the adults by ages (my preference) or allow adults to attend any class they want. Many churches today call the adult classes Adult Bible Fellowships (ABFs).

By small groups I refer to the arrangement whereby churches divide adults into small groups that meet weekly or biweekly, often in people's homes. The make-up of small groups can be by age, by location, or by personal or church choice, and they will often have fewer people than adult Sunday School

classes. Sometimes churches call their small groups cell groups.

RATIONALE FOR SMALL GROUPS

Many churches that use small groups identify three advantages they believe small groups have over adult Sunday School classes—greater personal care and encouragement, increased personal interaction, and more focused personal application of the Scripture.¹

I believe in the importance of personal care and encouragement, personal interaction, and personal application. These are essential elements of spiritual growth. I believe, however, that adult Sunday Schools, properly organized and functioning, can accomplish all of those ministries in the same way and can add additional benefits.

ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL CAN DO ALL THESE

Personal Care and Encouragement—The adult Sunday School class can be organized to care for and encourage people the same way a small group can. The teacher should lead in this caring and encouraging ministry by being aware of the needs of the members and seeking to meet those needs whenever possible. The members of the class should also look out for each other. Knute Larson in his book, *The ABF Book*,² advocates appointing care leaders in a class who can give special attention to caring for the needs of others.

Personal Interaction—The adult Sunday School class can and should be a place where adults interact with the Scripture and with each other. An adult teacher should use engaging teaching methods such as discussion, paraphrasing, inductive Bible study, question and answer, and writing projects.

Personal Application—The adult Sunday School class can and should be a place of personal application of Scripture. This application needs to be more than “May the Lord apply this text to our hearts today.” Rather, it should be a serious discussion of how the Scripture applies to everyday life.

AND MORE

I have tried to make the case that the adult Sunday School class can do everything a small group can do. The problem is that adult classes usually do not give attention to these matters as they should, so it is no wonder churches look elsewhere.

At this point you might say, “So let’s go with small groups then because people seem to enjoy them more.” That might seem like the answer, but I advocate staying with adult classes because if we do them right, they can do all that small groups can do and they offer two additional major benefits.

Systematic Study—I believe that a thorough and systematic study of the entire Bible is important for the spiritual growth of adults. Paul told the Ephesian elders that he had not failed to give to them “the

whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Since all the Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching (2 Tim. 3:16, 17), we need to cover the whole Bible systematically in our church ministries—even the Minor Prophets.

Small groups often focus on topical studies or discuss the pastor’s messages. Usually a pastor does not preach through the entire Bible (nor do I expect him to do so), so following the pastor’s messages will not normally provide systematic study of the whole Scripture.

The adult Sunday School class is better positioned to provide this systematic study because we at least have the possibility of studying through the Bible book by book. Following the Regular Baptist Press adult curriculum cycle will take a person through the entire Bible. Such a study is not likely to happen in small groups.

Ministry of Teachers—Teachers are an essential part of the ministry of a New Testament church (Acts 11:25, 26; 13:1; 18:11). Teachers are so important that the Lord has given the gift of teaching to individuals (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28). Without teachers a local church will flounder.

Normally small group leaders function more as discussion leaders than teachers. Certainly leading a discussion involves teaching, but usually small group leaders do not need to study a text thoroughly and present an organized Bible lesson.

The adult Sunday School class provides an opportunity for gifted and trained teachers to instruct the class. The teacher can spend several hours in the week studying the text and preparing an engaging lesson with personal application. Such teaching strengthens a church.

I believe, then, the adult Sunday School class provides a more comprehensive ministry because it can do all that small groups can do and provides the added benefits of studying the entire Bible and utilizing the ministry of godly teachers.

WHY NOT BOTH?

Now we come to a crucial question in this matter. You may say, “I can see the benefit of adult Sunday School classes, but why can’t we have both the adult Sunday School and small groups?”

A church may try to have a strong adult Sunday School program and helpful small groups. My observation, however, is that churches normally cannot do both well. Most churches today do not have the personnel, the resources, or the collective energy and will to do both well. My further observation is that when a church chooses to have both, it will normally put more emphasis and energy into small groups. Why? Because small groups are new and fresh, and the church perceives they are the answer to the weaknesses of adult Sunday School classes.

Again you may say, “What is wrong with that? Let’s use something that better meets people’s needs.” The problem is that when a church emphasizes small groups, it diminishes the value of adult Sunday School and the church loses the full benefit of systematic Bible study and the ministry of Bible teachers, as described above.

We already have the organization and personnel in place in our adult Sunday Schools to accomplish our intended goals. Why add an additional layer of administration, personnel, and planning? If we reenergize our adult Sunday School classes, we will have all the benefits of small groups and more.

SPECIALIZED BIBLE STUDIES

Are adult Sunday School classes the only kind of adult ministries a church should have? No, not at all. Because of its nature, I believe the adult Sunday School is the foundation of adult education in a church, but a church can benefit from additional classes I call specialized Bible studies. These classes are focused studies for a specific group of adults for a certain length of time. Examples of specialized Bible studies would be a class for expectant parents, an evangelism class, or men’s and women’s Bible studies.

These kinds of studies do not diminish the value of the adult Sunday School class because they are voluntary and are for a certain length of time. I see these kinds of studies as supplementing adult Sunday School classes. In essence, they really function like another adult Sunday School class but for a special segment of the church.

WHAT ABOUT DEACON CARE GROUPS?

Many churches today utilize a system called deacon care groups in which the church membership is divided among the deacons who are to keep in touch with the people in their group and care for them as needed.

I am not opposed to deacon care groups, I come back, however, to my earlier premise. If adult Sunday School classes are properly organized and functioning, the classes will care for their members and their families. I understand that not all adults attend Sunday School and the deacon care groups may be able to minister to them. So maybe the deacon care groups can focus only on those who do not attend Sunday School. Or even better, why not give to the adult teachers the names of the people who do not attend Sunday School and have them begin to care for these people with the goal of assimilating them into the classes.

WHAT ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP?

Let me address one more issue that often comes up in the discussion of small groups. Sometimes churches call small groups their discipleship groups. They may do so because they feel small groups

can do a better job of discipleship than adult Sunday school classes. I can see why churches think that because too often our adult classes are not a place of discipleship.

I contend, however, that when adult classes are done right, they provide the best discipleship ministry possible. Adult Sunday School classes have all the elements of discipleship—a trained, gifted discipler (the teacher), a group of believers (the class), a systematic study of Scripture, and an emphasis on personal spiritual growth. That's discipleship.

I recognize that many people profit from small groups. However, in our adult classes (with supplemental specialized Bible studies) we have the structure and personnel already in place to educate and disciple the adults in our churches. The weakness is not with adult Sunday School itself but in how we have used (or misused) it. If we will make adult Sunday School classes all they should be, we will not need to add other ministries. In the second article I suggest some positive steps that can be taken to make adult Sunday School the effective ministry it should be.

Works Cited

1. Some churches point to a fourth benefit—greater accountability to each other. However, I cannot find in Scripture any directive that we are to be accountable to one another. All we read in Scripture is that we are to be accountable to God (Rom. 14:12). We are certainly told to encourage and exhort each other (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:24), but I do not see that as the same as being accountable to each other.
2. Knute Larson, *The ABF Book* (Akron, Ohio: Chapel Press, 1997), 102, 103.

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[Other Articles](#)

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