

Adult Education: YOU Can Meet the Challenge!



by Jeanette Stewart

Sometimes I envy Sunday School teachers who teach adults," a discouraged preschool worker confided to a friend. "Grown-ups sit still, listen quietly, answer questions appropriately, don't have difficulty sharing materials and never have to be accompanied to the bathroom!"

"While those things are true," her friend answered thoughtfully, "teaching adults provides unique challenges too. Sure, adults conform to comply with accepted social standards, but that doesn't guarantee their mental restraint. At least children let you know when you have lost their attention. With adults, that's often a more difficult assessment to make."

Undoubtedly, adult instruction carries distinct CHALLENGES for anyone willing to accept the task. Perhaps a better understanding of some of these challenges will provide the basis for improving our efforts to educate our peers spiritually. Let's consider several issues.

One of the first concerns facing the teacher of adults is the viewpoint held by many grown-ups who attend Sunday School or Bible study classes: formal instruction is for children. Sometimes this opinion comes out in the following way:

"I've graduated from school. I've learned what I require to get along in life. I no longer need to pursue formal education." For such people student books, lectures, late night studying or organized learning are relegated to days gone by. Others may express the attitude that only young people should receive biblical training by saying, "I simply cannot learn any more. Since I graduated from school, my brain just won't function like before!"

As a result of this commonplace belief, many adults approach Christian tutelage with an attitude of complacency. Although some may admit to having problems in their lives, few see the Bible as a source for solving every day dilemmas. Largely unaware of their own spiritual needs, they envision themselves neither learning nor needing to learn. Therefore, teachers of adults must *establish the legitimacy of pursuing God through formal study of His revelation in the Scriptures.*

If the typical adult stands unconvinced of his own need for biblical education, what does prompt a person to attend a Sunday School class or Bible study? Often students arrive in the classroom with goals distinctly different from those of

their instructor. Although all of us would like to see in our students a desire for spiritual growth, unfortunately that's not the primary goal of many. Consider the young mother who, prior to sitting down in Sunday School has bathed, clothed and fed three children, tidied her house and left Sunday dinner simmering on the stove. By the time she settles her children into the preschool department and arrives at her own class, she is ready to put up her feet and relax.

Contemplate the state of the business man who returns from a business trip Tuesday evening, just in time to dutifully

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accompany his wife to their weekly Bible study group. His mind is cluttered with details of the deal he's about to close, the risks involved and how he will spend the extra money this particular transaction will afford him.

Imagine the widow who all week long has been pining for the fellowship and light-hearted laughter that once filled her home. When she meets with other people, she wants an audience to listen to all her pent up thoughts and emotions. Even students who attend faithfully often arrive with unprepared and unreceptive minds because of their somewhat dubious motives for attendance. Therefore, the second challenge a teacher encounters is to *unify an improperly motivated class around the goal of finding answers to life's perplexing questions from a study of the scriptures.*

The "locked into my lifestyle" syndrome seems to prevail among the majority of adults, thus providing a third challenge to us as Christian educators. As we promote what may be radical changes necessary to produce godly living, we cannot ignore the everyday environment in which our students exist. Since adults harbor a history of habits to which they are tied, lifestyle changes often seem unfeasible.

For example, most adults face the often overwhelming responsibilities of career and family. A middle-aged couple tethered to a home mortgage, a car loan, and a large monthly credit card statement probably will have more difficulty

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learning to give cheerfully to God's work than will an unencumbered, single twenty-two year old embarking on a successful career.

Likewise, jobs and children can stretch discretionary time beyond flexible limits, making a change in day to day activities seem beyond possibility. Imagine the difficulties a working mother must overcome with two small children in diapers to carve out time for prayer if she has never before developed this habit.

Additionally, taking risks which might affect job security or social position will draw disapproving frowns from critical onlookers. Picture the decision a father of four faces when he discovers widespread unethical practices within his work place. Does God really want him to quit his job? How will he find another job? Who will pay his bills in the interim? What will his family and neighbors say?

Since most adults habitually have sought the approval of their contemporaries, effecting change in their lifestyle requires a great deal of effort. Therefore, a *prudent teacher of adults will attempt to provide both the motivation and tools necessary to bring about changes leading to godly living.*

Although the challenges of adult education at times can seem almost unsurpassable, I believe they can be managed with a three pronged approach: commitment, curriculum and communication.

First, COMMITMENT. Christian education involves more than preparing and teaching a weekly lesson. As we attempt to instruct others in biblical knowledge, we must give ourselves willingly to our students, both in and outside the classroom. Paul exemplifies this attitude in Colossians 2:1 when he says that he "struggles" for the welfare of the church at Colossae. Although he had never even met them, he was so dedicated to the well-being of this group that he labored for them both in sufferings and prayers.

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We learn even more about Paul's commitment to the Colossians as we continue to study chapter two. In verses five and six we see that Paul cared enough both to commend and correct these young believers. As teachers committed to our students, we obligate ourselves to these same standards. This will require spending personal, one-on-one time with every person. In so doing we will begin to understand the lifestyle constraints, struggles, and motives which influence each individual.

During the past few months I have been meeting with a woman who, although a church-going believer, knows little of the basics of God's Word. Though Julie wants to obey the Lord, she is unhappily married, struggling to maintain her home life. One day after we had studied Ephesians 4:2, she resolved to improve communication with her husband. Her facial expression told all when she returned for our next get together. Downcast, she shared incident after incident wher

she had lost her temper or spoken unkindly. Twice, however, she consciously had chosen to respond to her husband with humility and gentleness. My commitment to her demanded that I praise her for even small successes, then encourage her to submit all her behavior to the truth of God's Word.

Someone once told me that a person who bores another with the word of God should be tried for a criminal offense. If we are to minister successfully to our peers, we must consider carefully our choice of CURRICULUM. First and foremost, our lessons must be scriptural in content. Until believers know God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, life will be a path of confusing, maze-like turns.

Beyond being biblically-based, however, we should have great flexibility in choosing what to teach. If we spend adequate time with our students outside of the classroom, the struggles and problems we see them face will alert us to specific areas of spiritual deficiency. Although many Sunday Schools and Bible study groups use prepared material, consider the exciting possibility of tailoring your own lesson plan around everyday difficulties for which God has provided solutions in His Word. Imagine how easy it would be to hold the attention of your class!

Recently I had an opportunity to apply this idea. For an extended period of time I had been teaching a weekly study on the life of Christ. Although people attend enthusiastically, and I thought Christology an important topic, one day I asked my group if they had any specific questions for which they would like biblical responses. I was amazed! In subsequent weeks we digressed from our study of Christ to cover everything from a biblical view of marriage to the beliefs of Mormons. We must prepare need-centered, relevant lessons which instruct and challenge our listeners to obedience.

When using prepared materials, however, practical illustrations from our own lives can bridge the distance between the lesson writer and our particular students. Again, if we are spending time with our students in every day settings, we are well equipped to evaluate each individual and his particular need.

We must compel ourselves to attract our students by providing the best possible curriculum. In so doing we will elevate the scriptures to their proper place in people's lives, thus combatting the idea that biblical instruction is irrelevant or impractical.

Lastly, we must provide for excellent COMMUNICATION with our classes, both within and outside the formal setting. Some teachers permit questions and discussion at the student's initiation during the lesson, while others are more comfortable confining such interaction to a designated time, such as the end of the lesson. Prepared discussion questions can provide a helpful format for allowing two-way conversation in the classroom, either in introducing a fresh topic or considering how to apply a newly learned truth. Although teachers must provide guidance and control for discussion times, allowing students to verbalize their ideas and thoughts will help them gain confidence in articulating and applying biblical knowledge to their own situations.

Probably the most effective communication between teachers and students takes place outside of the formal classroom setting. As we commit ourselves to spend time with our pupils, we improve our ability to converse about topics both important and trivial. When our students experience our sincere interest in them as individuals, they almost always let down their guard and allow us to see a little of what lies within.

My husband Bill once taught a Bible study group which included a young man named Jim. Painfully shy, for months Jim said no more than a few words. In spite of Jim's apparent resistance, Bill made a great effort to reach out and communicate with him. After almost a year, and a few bouts of self-doubt on Bill's part, Jim responded. Not yet thirty, Jim died about a year and a half ago. At his funeral his wife told me that Jim greatly admired Bill and considered him one of the major Christian influences in his life. Do spend time communicating with the people in your class! God will honor your efforts.

Unquestionably, adult education holds out unique challenges for those who dare accept them. Armed with commitment to our students, a relevant curriculum, able communication and dependence on the Lord, we can influence our peers for the glory of God.

Why not spend a few minutes adapting these suggestions to your own personal style? When the next opportunity for adult education emerges, you can step forward, both equipped and enthusiastic! _____ CET

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