SUNDAY, 9:30 A.M.--WHAT NOW?

Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This thesis compares lessons and materials for junior high Christian education from several Protestant denominations. The merits and faults of each are discussed on the basis of the authority and readability of the version of the Bible text suggested, the interest level and age-appropriateness of the activities, and the aptness and relevance of the lesson topics and issues. In addition, there is a proposal of a lesson guideline for junior high Sunday school teachers which includes suggested essentials for lesson preparation and a sample lesson plan.
Introduction

In the religious education of junior high students, it is necessary to capture and hold each student's interest while at the same time fostering understanding, and perhaps belief, of the doctrine or teaching being presented. It can be quite difficult to teach students effectively. Even when a teacher is fully qualified and prepared to teach, there may be failings in the materials being used. For instance, the materials may not be age appropriate. So, it is important that a teacher examine closely different educational materials available to decide which materials and teaching strategies will be most successful with a class of junior high students before choosing what will be used. The materials to be considered should include the version of the Bible text, the lesson book text, and suggested classtime activities. Other considerations should include the amount of available class time for reading the Bible text, discussing lesson topics and issues, and participating in other relevant activities. Teachers may discover new strategies for teaching not only by comparing materials within their denomination, but also by examining the materials available from churches of other denominations and from religious bookstores.

Using the above criteria, I have examined and critically compared several sets of junior high materials: United Methodist (UMC, hereafter) materials, David C. Cook's *Bible Adventures*, Cokesbury's *UMC Trek*, Nazarine, Church of God (both younger and older divisions), Lutheran, and Southern Baptist (also both
version of Bible Text

The selection of a specific version of the Bible text is an important aspect of any religious instructional material. There are a variety of choices, ranging from the very traditional King James Version to the modern Good News Bible. When selecting a text for junior high students, one should consider the clarity and level of the language and whether the effort for clarity has sacrificed beauty, impact, or, most important, authority or interpretation.

Of the materials I reviewed, all favor the use of Bible texts in modern language versions for junior high students, except the Southern Baptist (SBC, hereafter) which does not specify a Bible text. Cook's UMC, the Nazarine, the Church of God, and Lutheran lessons use the New International Version (NIV). The other lesson materials use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is basically the King James Version with some slight alterations in the language. The language of the NIV is clear and, for the most part, easily understood by a young reader. But, the changes for some words have caused some sacrifices. For example, poetic passages from the Psalms and the Song of Solomon have lost some of the aesthetic appeal which they have in the King James Version. Not only have they lost poetic beauty but also they seem to have less impact and are less memorable. On the other hand, the love passage in I Corinthians loses no beauty but becomes exceptionally clearer for the young
reader when the King James "charity" is replaced by the word
"love" in the NIV. In the King James Version, Genesis 1:2 reads,
"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon
the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face
of the waters". (In the NRSV the only alteration is "moved"
becomes "was moving".) In the NIV, the same passage reads, "Now
the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface
of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters".
By replacing "void" with "empty" and "face" with "surface", the
NIV simplifies the vocabulary of the text, thus making it more
easily understood for the young reader. But the NIV passage
seems less memorable than the King James Version. The word
"hovering" certainly does not have the impact which the word
"moved" does.

Word choices sometimes are open to ambiguities and
variations in interpretations. For example, in Leviticus 19:3,
the King James Version states, "Ye shall fear every man his
mother, and his father..." while the NIV states, "each of you
must respect his mother and father..." The words "fear" and
"respect," while they are similar, have different meanings and
connotations in today's language. "Fear" has negative
connotations to today's reader that "respect" does not have.
While we are quick to say that one must respect one's parents, we
do not wish to say that one should be afraid of one's parents, in
the modern sense of the word. The NRSV uses the word "revere"
which has somewhat different connotations from both "respect" and
"fear". A teacher must attempt to decide which version seems to maintain the intent of the scripture and which is least likely to be misunderstood by youths. Thus, all these factors must be considered when deciding which versions of the Bible text to use.

A teacher must also consider how the Bible text is used in the materials. The Nazarine, Cook UMC, and Lutheran materials plan for a large amount of reading directly from the Bible. For instance, the May 17, 1992, lesson of the Nazarine materials has students read aloud John 20:1-8, 24-29. The December 1, 1992, lesson of the Cook UMC materials requires students to look up and read aloud John 8:56, 58; Isaiah 7:14; Isa. 9:6; Micah 5:2; and Exodus 3:14 in the lesson text and Isa. 53:5; Matthew 1:18-23; Isa. 7:14; John 3:16; Micah 5:2; and Luke 2:4-7 in the activities. The Lutheran lessons have comparable lists of readings. Others denominations' lessons provide shorter texts to read aloud, with the Church of God's youth lessons usually providing only a memory verse for the week. For example, the September 1, 1992, lesson of the Church of God materials contains only the verse I John 3:1 which students are to memorize for the week. Whichever materials are used, the teacher must determine how well acquainted the students are with the Bible before the teacher can properly decide what amount of class time to spend on reading and/or memorizing the Bible text.

Lesson Book Text

A good teacher must also consider the lesson book text to be used by the students. Is the text written in understandable and
age-appropriate language, and are the directions and questions easily understood and followed? Moreover, does the text include Bible stories and/or modern stories to apply Biblical truths?

All the lesson materials I reviewed are written clearly with the directions and questions easily understandable. Most are also age-appropriate. But, the Cook UMC lessons and the younger division of the SBC lessons were somewhat simplistic and sentimental for junior high age students. For example, the December 8, 1992, lesson of the Cook UMC materials begins as follows:

Angels? Don't they sit on clouds and play harps? And they have wings and halos, right? Not exactly. In the Bible, angels were God's messengers. Angels were present when God created the earth and made Adam and Eve. Angels also knew about God's plan to send His only Son, Jesus, to earth. Today's story is told from the view of the archangel Gabriel.

This passage insults the intelligence of the students. A teacher will find that by the time a child is in junior high he/she will be offended by the implication that he/she still believes in the wings and halo version of angels. The younger divisions of the SBC lessons, in general, are highly simplified paraphrasing of Bible texts which lack adequate descriptions of events in the Bible. For instance, the October 13, 1991, lesson retells part of the story of Paul and Silas in prison. The Bible text is Acts 16: 23-34. The lesson's version gives only the
basic actions that were taken by the character. A teacher would do just as well to save the church money and read the account straight from the Bible, rather than bother with a lesson which adds nothing towards understanding.

The Cook UMC lessons, the SBC lessons, and the younger division of the Church of God lessons generally paraphrase the Bible stories and also include modern stories to help apply the Bible truths. The Nazarine and Lutheran lessons do not paraphrase the Bible stories but rather move them directly from the Bible stories to analogous modern stories. The Cokesbury UMC lessons and the Older division of the Church of God lessons do not employ Bible stories, but rather focus more heavily on modern stories to illustrate Biblical truths. Again, the teacher must consider whether students need more Bible story review or need more discussion of modern applications of the Biblical truths.

Suggested Class-time Activities

A teacher should also consider activities other than the readings which are included in lessons. These activities could include mental puzzles (such as mazes, crosswords, etc.), games, singing, and crafts. The teacher must consider whether the activities are age-appropriate, have sufficient variety, and whether supplies, space, or time are adequate to complete the activities in class.

The activities in the lessons I reviewed are age-appropriate, neither too easy or too difficult, with the exception of the
younger division of the SBC lessons, whose activities were much too simple. For example, the October 6, 1991, lesson has simple questions like "Acts is in the N__ T__". In comparison, the older division of the Church of God lessons asks more difficult but more meaningful questions. For example, in the October 6, 1991, lesson, students are asked to "list some ways that your difficult person irritates you," "list some positive aspects about your difficult person," and "list some ways that you can treat your difficult person with respect." In the November 24, 1991, SBC lesson, the students are asked to agree or disagree with whether or not story characters in several contemporary examples are behaving as good Christians. The answer for every one is that they are. The activity provides no poor examples for the student to contrast with the good which would greatly strengthen the impact of the good examples. The Church of God lesson for the same date provides an activity in which the student must answer personally which he/she would rather do: "Get a Christmas gift" or "give a Christmas gift"; "clean an elderly person's house" or "talk to a friend on the phone." By providing contrasts, the Church of God lesson stresses the importance of making individual choices more evident to the student, than the SBC lesson does.

All the lesson plans have a degree of variety in activities. Usually the student materials provide only reading and a selection of Bible-based mental puzzles. The teacher's book then provides suggestions for object lessons, games, and crafts. Only
the SBC materials suggest singing and provide songs with music. The Cokesbury UMC lessons provide the greatest variety and interest-providing activities for vivid object lessons, such as candle lightings to represent the "light of the world" and making leaflets to be passed out elsewhere. The least interesting is the Cook UMC lessons which suggest leaving time for crafts and games, but give few practical suggestions, thus leaving it entirely to the teacher to be creative or not creative.

The lessons I reviewed all give adequate consideration to the availability and expense of supplies. Most include supply lists in the teachers' books, such as paper, pencils, glue, scissors, construction paper, other inexpensive craft supplies. The most difficult to obtain are those listed by the Cokesbury UMC. These include candles, balls of string, index cards, and other somewhat more expensive items. The Cokesbury UMC lessons also require more planning ahead on the part of the teacher.

Some of the activities from different lesson plans could cause space problems. For instance, a few lessons from the Cook UMC lessons require availability of a kitchen; the SBC lessons require rooms where singing will not bother other classes; and the older Church of God lessons require floor space for physical games.

The Cokesbury UMC lessons give the best consideration of time. A well-prepared teacher could complete most of the object lessons in fifteen to twenty minutes, leaving class time for other activities. For example, the December 1, 1991, lesson
provides a plan for a five-minute object lesson which is quite effective. The teacher merely pours water from a pitcher into a bowl while students watch and read aloud Philippians 2:5-11 in which Christ "emptied himself" of pride. The idea is expressed orally and strongly reinforced visually.

The Cook UMC and the Lutheran lesson activities are often too short for the time provided, while the Church of God lessons provide more than can be completed in class. For example, a class could read through and complete the activities provided in the December 1, 1991, lesson of the Cook UMC materials in about thirty minutes, while a typical class time at a local UMC church is around forty-five minutes, or more. This leaves the teacher with fifteen minutes or longer to occupy the students' interests. In contrast, the younger division of the Church of God lesson for December 1, 1991, includes a singing while walking in a circle exercise, a short story of two pages to read aloud and discuss, a word-find puzzle, an exercise in which students evaluate the behavior of six hypothetical characters, and a series of personal self evaluation questions for students to answer. All of these are to be completed, along with any extra activities, such as discussion or prayer, in one hour. A teacher of this lesson would be hard pressed to complete the activities in an hour. If the students were slow or disorganized, as junior high students can be, the teacher could not possibly complete the entire lesson plan. But, this is better than not having enough materials.
Time becomes a major concern for a teacher. A teacher must consider not only how much time is available for each portion of an individual lesson, but also how much time is required for teacher exposition and explanation followed by interactive student activities to complete the learning process.

In the plans I reviewed, the largest section of time is spent by the students reading aloud; the second largest is spent by the teacher giving directions, leading prayers, and explaining lesson to students; and the third and least portion of time, to student-input in puzzle activities and to student discussion. The best plans are the Nazarine and the older division of the Church of God, which allot more time to student discussion than the other plans. The Church of God plans allow close to twice the time that the other plans allow for discussion—forty to fifty minutes, compared to twenty to twenty-five for an hour lesson.

Another consideration for a teacher is the visual effectiveness of the lessons. Colorfulness and variety spark interest better than drabness.

The lessons I reviewed are mostly colorful and bright with both photographs and artwork. The Nazarine lessons are an exception, generally having regular black and white text and photographs overlaid with dull blue or red. Overall, the Lutheran lessons are the most attractive to the eye, with each lesson printed on different colored paper and with artwork in a full range of bright colors.
It would be interesting to compare visual aids too. But, only one church provided me with visual aids, thus I could make no comparisons. Remember though that good visual aids are a great plus in instruction. The more senses that are employed in learning, the more memorable the lesson is.

Another consideration for a teacher is whether or not the lessons are extended into the week and whether they have a sense of continuity. All the lesson plans allow for the materials to be taken home for the week. The Church of God plans and the Nazarine plans allow for part of the lesson to be done at home rather than in class. The Cook UMC lessons include a leaflet called the Pix for student to read, which contains a story and home activities. Most plans provide a memory verse to be learned for the week. The Cokesbury UMC and the younger division of the Church of God lessons provide lists of daily devotional Bible readings. Work throughout the week should help students remember what they learned the week before.

Other ways may be used to establish continuity throughout a series of lessons. For example, the SBC lessons for 1991 establish continuity through the theme of witnessing. The lesson plans that relied more heavily on Bible stories establish continuity by chronology or by order of the books of the Bible. Those that focused more heavily on modern stories do not maintain continuity from classtime to classtime. They rely more on expectation of surprise to hold the students' interests.

Lesson Topics and Issues
Lastly, the topics and issues covered by the lessons are a teacher's greatest concern. The lessons I reviewed fall into two main divisions of the topics covered: the first is personal problems and issues such as loneliness, greed, and witnessing; the other is social concerns such as divorce, abortion, and sexual morality. All plans include discussion of personal issues, easily addressed with particular scriptures. While these address the emotions, they are not as emotionally charged as the subjects of the second division. Unfortunately such concerns are becoming more and more the problems of younger and younger students. Of the lessons I reviewed, only the older divisions of the Church of God lessons and the SBC lessons directly address these concerns and support statements with Bible texts.

The September 8, 1991, Church of God lesson condemns sexual immorality. It provides for personal discussion of the subject, helping students to define their own beliefs and to make their own decisions. Unfortunately, the lesson does not provide Bible texts or make particular moral suggestions in the student materials, although these are suggested in the teacher's guide.

The older division SBC January 19, 1991, lesson discusses and condemns abortion also. It bases its decision on Psalm 139:13-15, Genesis 1:28a, Exodus 1:15-2:20, Matthew 18:10, Matthew 14:19:14-15, and Deuteronomy 18:10a. The lesson provides for discussion and includes a personal account and an address where students can get more information on the topic.

In addition, the December 15, 1991, SBC lesson deals with the death of a loved one, and the March 22, 1992, lesson deals with personal debilitating illnesses. Each lesson provides Bible texts, discussion time, and advice to help the students.

Overall, I believe the older division Church of God lessons and the older division of the SBC lessons are the best, most effective plans that I reviewed. Their willingness to address controversial issues and their reliance on Biblical authority outweighs any drawbacks such as slightly more difficult language, limited activities and the lack of illustrative Bible stories.

Finally, lessons should not only provide religious, moral positions on such contemporary issues but also be easily understood by the youth, have reliable and readable Bible texts, encourage student participation, and incorporate as much variety and color possible, in order to keep students interested and enthusiastic about learning about God, about being a Christian, and about living as a Christian in a world with many controversial issues requiring personal, moral decisions.

Proposal for the Rehoboth UMC Class
To meet the needs of these young students, I am proposing that the teacher of this Sunday school take the initiative to design his/her own series of lessons, based on ideas and topics collected from the Cook UMC lessons, other lesson materials available at local Christian bookstores, and his/her own creative planning.

Based on the above research, I now would like to propose a plan to improve the religious education process for the junior high Sunday school class at my church, the Rehoboth United Methodist Church in Parker City, Indiana.

This class averages 5-6 students, grades 5-8; it meets from 9:30 to 10:30 every Sunday. Approximately 15 minutes of that time is spent in the sanctuary with all adult and youth Sunday school classes assembled for an opening program, thus leaving approximately 45 minutes for actual class time. The class receives and uses the basic Cook UMC lessons. There is no specific budget, but limited supplementary materials can be purchased upon request.

Some flaws in the Cook UMC lessons the class presently uses include insufficient suggested activities to fill the available classtime, few specific ideas and instructions for crafts and object lessons, and failure to address pertinent social issues which more and more junior high students are facing.

Some Essentials
Bible Text: Plan to use the NIV for in class reading and the King James Version for daily devotions.

Lesson Text: In addition to NIV passages, tell modern stories which illustrate the NIV text used in the lesson.

Activities: Include activities such as pencil puzzles such as crosswords and mazes, crafts, and object lessons. A different type usually should be used each week, but some large activities could be used during several class sessions.

Lesson plans: Provide ideas and instructions or information for weekday activities and community activities.

Topics and issues: Address social topics and issues, including, but not limited to abortion, sexual immorality, divorce, and euthanasia. Also address personal problems such as loneliness, envy, lack of faith and lack of commitment. In addition, address basic Biblical topics, such as creation and the fall of humanity, sin and salvation, and the teachings of Christ.

Sample Lesson Plan

Preparation: Gather materials necessary to complete activities for class. For this lesson’s activity, you will need scissors, glue, letter-size envelopes, and green and yellow chenille wire.

Read through the lesson and make notes on points you wish to emphasize most in discussion.

Pray for guidance in giving the lesson and pray for the needs of individual students.
Remember to remain flexible to the needs of the students.

Sunday, 9:45: Class meets after Sunday School opening general assembly.

Begin with prayer.
Assign opening prayer to a different student each week for the following week, to encourage thoughtful prayer and to develop students' ability to speak in front of others.
Introduce the lesson topic. For example, the topic may be "The Role of Money in Our Lives.
Read aloud the Bible text, which could be Matthew 6:28-30 (NIV).
Ask pertinent questions of the students in order to start them thinking critically on the subject. For example, ask "Why do we need money?"; "What would our lives be like without money?"; "What things in your life do you give more importance than money?"

10:00
Read the lesson.
Allow students to read aloud giving prompting where needed.
Remember students will recall the lesson better if they are forced into attention by reading it themselves.
Be willing to pause where students feel a need to discuss what they have read.

Begin the activity.

Give instructions while passing out the materials.

As the children work on the activity or craft, continue discussion on the lesson topic.

Explain how the activity illustrates the points made in the lesson.

For this lesson, the activity could be making paper lilies.

Give students an envelope, a green chenille wire, and a yellow one for each lily they are to make.

Instruct them to cut off each of the bottom corners of the envelope to make two triangles as large as can be cut from the envelope. Then, cut the very tip off the triangles and open to make them like funnels. Place one inside the other at a right angle. Next fold the yellow chenille wire in half. Make a small curl on each end. Wrap one end of the green chenille wire around the bend in the yellow wire. Place a small drop of glue on the bend. Then, draw other end of the green wire through the small hole of the envelope funnel so that the yellow wire sits in the cup of it. Curl the corners of the envelope around a pencil.
Bring out the points you wish to illustrate while the activity is in progress.

For example, you could discuss how inexpensive it was to make the paper lilies, point out how God provides flowers at no expense to us, ask students if they can think of other things God provides for us. If no one mentions salvation, be sure to add that to their list.

Summarize the lesson.

Answer any last minute questions.

Give assignments for weekly readings, projects, and for next week's prayer.

For example, you could assign students to read William E. Barret's *The Lilies of the Field*, or the teacher might rent the film of the novel for the class to watch as a group. Also, the class might plant flowers for the church or for a group in the community such as the local nursing home.

Tell the topic of next week's lesson, which could be Christ dying for our individual sins.

Encourage students to think about how he died, why he died, and how his death can enable us to become Christians.

Encourage them to bring their thoughts and questions to the next class meeting.

Dismiss.
Works Consulted


