



Adult Bible Fellowships: A Label or a Lifestyle? - March 06

The pressure on churches today to compete in the world of ideas can become overwhelming. Pastors often feel desperate to package their ministries, activities, and services in a way that their constituency will see as relevant. In a world of information saturation, those with a message to communicate have only seconds to grab the coveted attention of their audience. Consequently, it has become more important than ever that the ministries of a church quickly and clearly communicate their essence to their audience.

To the credit of many churches, the communication climate of today's culture has caused many churches to reconsider the names of the ministries they offer. In doing so, they are attempting to express quickly and clearly what a particular ministry has to offer. Unfortunately, some have applied new names to existing ministries without considering if the ministry actually delivers what it promises. Few ministry titles have fallen into such misuse in recent years as, "Adult Bible Fellowship." Frequently, the title has replaced the older term, "Adult Sunday School," or "Adult Christian education."

My father would often say, "You can put a new suit on an ugly man, but you still have an ugly man." For some churches, this saying sums up what has occurred in their use of the term "Adult Bible Fellowship." Visionless, ineffective, and unproductive adult discipleship ministries receive a fresh coat of paint and a new title in the hopes that a new name will draw people to engage the process. The result is that another ministry is threatened to become viewed as obsolete.

In order for Adult Bible Fellowships to have lasting impact in a church, they must do more than dress up defunct programs. They must reflect a church's commitment to the three values imbedded in the title itself.

Adult. For Adult Bible Fellowships to be effective they must maintain a focus on the particular needs and learning styles of adults. Too often, churches make the mistake of operating in total ignorance of the unique ways in which adults learn. Effective and fruitful ABF ministries recognize that adults learn differently than children. Effective ABF ministries train teachers, structure classes, choose curriculum, and communicate Kingdom truths in a way that is consistent with sound adult learning theory.

Bible. As a pastor of adult discipleship and someone who has been responsible for both adult education and small group ministries for nearly 20 years, I am deeply concerned by the growing trend in churches today to eliminate the adult education components of their ministries. Many churches are abandoning purposeful adult Christian education formed around the disciplined study of God's Word in favor of market driven small groups formed around the felt needs of those participating in a given group.

As someone who once pounded nails for a living, I have a large number of tools that make construction and remodeling much easier. However, I would quickly become discouraged if I tried to use a screwdriver as a hammer. Screwdrivers work great for tightening screws, but they are lousy for driving nails. Small groups are great tools for building relationships, but in most churches I have seen, small groups are ineffective in their ability to provide a clearly defined pathways of biblical instruction for adults.

For an Adult Bible Fellowship ministry to thrive, and for a church to be well-formed spiritually, there must be a place where adults can receive thorough, systematic, and in-depth training in living a biblically informed life. Healthy ABF ministries give careful thought to the sequence and content of their courses keeping them consistently anchored in the biblical text. To relegate the biblical instruction of adults to the ebb and flow of a group's felt needs is to neglect the essential

nature of a strong biblical foundation to the ongoing spiritual vitality of adults.

Fellowship. Relationships are central to our life in Christ. Those who lead adult education ministries must not overlook the longing of the human heart for meaningful relationships that flows out of the very nature and essence of the Godhead, (Genesis 1:27). One of the hallmarks of good adult learning theory is that adults learn best in environments where they can share with their peers out of their experiences and accumulated knowledge. Too often, those who simply look to the ABF label do not understand that the relational component of an ABF has to be active and meaningful in order for the ABF ministry to deliver what its' name promises. Failure in this dimension is the shortest route to a local congregation ignoring its ABF ministry.

As you consider the role of ABF's in your church, let me encourage you to evaluate the degree to which you have embraced the three core elements of the ABF philosophy. Don't make the mistake of trying to cover up old and lifeless adult Christian education ministries by slapping the ABF label on them. Be clear on the vision. Be purposeful in your approach. Be committed to the basics.

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