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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ADULT CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A TRAINING OF KINGDOM WORKERS

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Abstract

Christian adult learners are to be trained to demonstrate Christlikeness and become agents of change in the society where there is the decadence of morality and godliness. Sadly, many Christian institutions that engage in adult education are not preparing their students to function as agents of change in a corrupt society. Instead, most Christian institutions have concentrated on the development of adult learners both intellectually and theologically. The purpose of adult Christian education is to train workers for the kingdom of Christ. Upon completing their training, adult Christians are to be sent to the world as transformation and development agents. They are to engage in good moral conduct as the redeeming salt and light of the world and respond to violence and injustice in society. Therefore, adult learners' teachers should be aware that adult Christians' teaching and training should not focus mainly on training intellectuals but must also include moral education and spirituality.

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Introduction:-

The rapid breakdown of morality and godliness in society poses a severe issue for Christians involved in educating adults. Many adults are now returning to school for further studies. Simultaneously, some have engaged in one training or the other as colleges, universities, religious and cultural groups open their doors for adult learners. Although there has been an increase in the development of theories and curricula appropriate for adult Christian learning, much is yet to be developed on the mission and the specific assignments of adult Christian learners. It is hardly surprising then that many Christian adults are failing to make an impact in society.

Most adult Christian institutions have focused on developing their students intellectually and theologically; sadly, many are not preparing their students to function practically as agents of change in today's corrupt society. If Christian adults reflect and practice what they are trained to do as Christians, the society in which they live will be transformed. Based on these premises, this paper will argue that the purpose of adult Christian education is to train workers for the kingdom of Christ who would be sent to the world as agents of transformation and development. Further, the paper will seek to answer five questions for the Christian adults as kingdom workers:

1. Is there any need for adult Christian education?
2. Why is the training of adult Christians different?
3. Do learners have access to the knowledge of the kingdom of God as they study?
4. What must be the outcome of adult Christian education?
5. How shall Christian institutions offer adult students the necessary training to become agents of change in society?

Finally, the paper will suggest what adult Christian educators must consider today as they train kingdom workers

who are agents of transformation. Each of the five questions will engage literature and the views of adult Christian education scholars. Before we undertake the study of adult Christian education as training for kingdom workers, we will first consider the need for adult Christian education.

The Need for Adult Christian Education

Adults are the pillars that hold the training of children and youth, but when less attention is given to their training, society will suffer as it is suffering today. As John Sisemore has rightly observed, “The current moral, social and theological conflicts are largely, if not totally, the result of the failure to meaningfully reach adults for Christ.”¹ The training of adult Christians is vital because when adults and parents are adequately trained as Christians, they will serve as encouragers and guides for the youth and children who will also become adults tomorrow. There may not be a solid base for children’s education if adults who teach them are not adequately trained. As John L. Elias asserts, “Conducting education of children requires the previous religious education of adults. The main responsibility for children’s education lies in the hands of adults who can do this competently only if they are committed to and well versed in their religious faith.”² Adults are the ones who can adequately teach the children. Therefore, the training of adults is essential.

Further, adults hold the most significant leadership positions in society, at homes, education institutions, and churches. And if they are continually reached for Christ, they will be able to spiritually nurture the children and youth and fulfill their roles successfully as leaders.

As adults participate in educational endeavors, Edward L. Hayes observes that it is a “reflection of awakening community action in adult education.”³ Adults today are faced with diverse problems and challenges resulting from social, political, and technological demands that necessitate many adults to return to school either to improve themselves or for leisure. Further, adults must be trained and nurtured in Christlikeness because many adults today need to be taught how to cope with life challenges and be able to support themselves. Michael Harton encourages the church in the training of adults. He writes,

We must be concerned about the nurture of adults themselves. Parents must be educated, not only in nurturing their children toward faith but in creative approaches to all aspects of child-rearing. Adults need help in dealing with the insecurities and insufficiencies of life, the need for relationships, for hope. They need to develop sensitivity and skill in providing support for fellow strugglers seeking stability in a world of change and flux.⁴

Many benefits could be enjoyed when churches and educational institutions improve the quality of adult education. As churches and educational institutions improve on the quality of adult education, John Sisemore notes, “The children will be blest, the home will be reinforced, the community will be uplifted, the church will be revitalized, and the Lord will be honored.”⁵ Churches and Christian institutions must not relent to provide meaningful training for Christian adults because every member of society will benefit from it, and God will be glorified.

The uniqueness of the Training

An understanding of how adults learn and what adults bring to learning is crucial for adult educators. Gaining insight into adult learning mechanics will create a good platform for building a sound teaching methodology and facilitating effective teaching. Although learning is not unique to adults because children and youths also learn, and the ability to learn continues throughout life, certain factors often make learning easier for adults than for children.

¹John T. Sisemore, “The challenge of adult Christian Education” in *Adult Education in the Church*, eds. Zuck, Roy B. and Gene A. Getz (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 15.

²John L. Elias, “Adult Religious Education” in *Expanding the Boundaries of Adult Religious Education: Strategies, Techniques, and Partnership for the New Millennium*, ed. Paulette E. Isaac (San Francisco: Jossey Bass 2012), 5.

³Edward L. Hayes, “Theological Foundations of Adult Christian Education” in *Adult Education in the Church*, eds. Zuck, Roy B. and Gene A. Getz (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 19.

⁴Michael R. Harton, “Importance of Adult Christian Education” in *A Church Ministering to Adults: Resources for effective Adult Christian Education*, ed. Jerry M Stubblefield (Nashville: Broadman Press 1986), 14

⁵Sisemore, “The challenge of adult Christian Education,” 18.

Adult educators must understand that adult learners are different from children as learners, and therefore there must be a different approach to teaching adults. A deeper understanding of the concept of andragogy, the art, and science of helping adults learn, introduced by Malcolm Knowles, will help every adult educator. Andragogy distinguishes how adults learn from how children learn.⁶

The six principles of andragogy as introduced by Knowles⁷ are:

- (1) The learners need to know: Adult learners need to know how the learning will be conducted, what will take place in the learning, and why it is essential. As a result, an instructor of the adult must communicate to them the expectations and objectives of the learning.
- (2) Self-concept of the learner: Scholars of adult education have debated adults as self-directed learners. Despite the various debates on it, the fact remains that most adults can learn and study independently without necessarily being guided by an instructor. For example, many adults today are taking online courses which may not involve much classroom instruction.
- (3) Prior experience of the learner: Adult learners come to the classroom with a spectrum of experience which a teacher can build on in contrast with children who may not have many experiences yet.⁸ Draves William gives an insightful perspective of what adults bring to the classroom. He observes that every adult comes to the classroom “equipped with various experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and ideas.”⁹ Sabrina Marschall observes that “Adults bring deep experiential and workplace-related learning to the classroom; they process life histories rich with diverse experiences, sophisticated problems solving techniques, and coping skills.”¹⁰ The experience that adults bring to the classroom can influence their attitudes towards learning and their perception of the learning activities. Adult’s previous knowledge can help in the process of learning. From a neuroscientific viewpoint, Raymond Wlodkowski has observed that adults build on a network of experiences that they have previously acquired when they learn.¹¹ According to him, the networks are the adult’s previous knowledge which an instructor cannot remove.¹² When an instructor understands the previous knowledge of his student, it can guide him/her on how to present a new concept and how the concept can be related to the student’s experience. However, a lack of understanding of the student’s prior knowledge and lived experience can have a negative impact on the development of a new concept.
- (4) Readiness to learn: The degree of readiness in adults is different from that of children. Adults may be more emotionally and intellectually ready than children.¹³ The level at which adults are ready can also influence their participation in class. Participation and involvement in learning may be greater in adult education because of expected benefits and learning rewards.¹⁴
- (5) Orientation to learn: Adults will participate and be involved in learning if it is relevant to their goals and needs. As McShane observes, “Adult learners have practical goals in mind. What they do in class should relate to those goals because if they do not see the instructions as relevant, they may stop coming to class.”¹⁵
- (6) Motivation to learn: Many adults return to school because they sense a problem. To such adults, learning is necessary to meet specific needs of life. Problem-driven adults are highly motivated to pay attention to learning that will solve their problems. The six factors discussed can provide an insight into how Christian adults can be best taught.

The Significance of the Training

Adult learners and educators need to understand adult Christian education’s significance because having a more

⁶Malcolm S Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4-5.

⁷Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, *The Adult Learner*, 4-5.

⁸ Milford F. Henkel “The Learning Process for Adults” in *Adult Education in the Church*, eds. Zuck, Roy and Gene A. Getz (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 102.

⁹William Draves, *How to Teach Adults* (Manhattan: LERN, 1984), 7.

¹⁰ Sabrina Marschall, “A Conceptual Framework for Teaching Critical Reading to Adult College Students.” in *Adult Learning* 23, no 2 (2012), 64.

¹¹Raymond J. Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching All Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 11.

¹²Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*, 11.

¹³ Milford Henkel, “The Learning Process for Adults,” 102.

¹⁴Henkel, “The Learning Process for Adults,” 102

¹⁵S. McShane, *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers* (Washington, DC: National Center for Family Literacy, 2005), 19.

profound understanding could impact educators' approach and learners' attitude. The goal of Christian education is for Christ-like growth. Warren Benson, while citing Robert Pazimino, defines Christian education as:

A deliberate, systematic, and sustained divine and human effort to share or appreciate the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, sensitivities, and behaviors that comprise or are consistent with the Christian faith. It fosters the change, renewal, and reformation of persons, groups, and structures by the power of the Holy Spirit to conform to the revealed will of God as expressed in the Old and New Testaments and pre-eminently in the person of Jesus Christ, as well as any outcomes of that effort.¹⁶

As educators, one would like to develop intellects; Christian education is more than developing intellects. The focus is Christlikeness.

Further, we can say that Christian education's goal is to grow and nurture believers in Christ-like maturity. Christian education involves more than growth. It also involves maturity in Christ. As Perry Downs rightly observes, "Christian education simply defined, is the ministry of bringing the believers to maturity in Jesus Christ."¹⁷ The goal of adult Christian education is not different from the goal of Christian education. The only difference between the two is that adult Christian education is pertinent only to adults. Upon this premise, we can say that adult Christian education's goal is for adult Christians to grow in Christlikeness and become His disciples who will serve as agents of change in society.

In discussing the importance of adult Christian education, Michael Harton says, "The purpose of adult Christian education should be to help adults establish the essential saving relationship with Jesus Christ and discover their place in His divine plan."¹⁸ Relationship with Jesus is central in this type of educational endeavor. Gilbert Peterson, while explaining the nature of adult Christian education, says, "The major tasks of adult Christian education is to teach us (adults) how to live a full, productive life in which health and wealth are not overlooked, but are seen as of less importance than one's relationship with God and our fellow man."¹⁹ The training involves a holistic growth of the individual involved.

From the above definitions, it is observable that the training is for adult Christians to become transformed to Christlikeness, grow in Christian maturity, and become agents of change who will influence others with their way of living. The training, therefore, involves transformation, growth, and service.

According to Jack Mezirow, transformation "Refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narrative. The process may itself become a frame of reference, a dispositional orientation."²⁰ Mezirow's emphasis rests on the transformation of perspective. However, education scholars have criticized his theory for failure to address social change. While defending his theory in an article titled *Understanding Transformation Theory*, Mezirow declares that transformation theory's assumptions are "constructivist, an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is central to making meaning and hence learning."²¹

Jack Mezirow and Paulo Freire are the two leading theorists of transformative learning. While Freire sees transformative learning as "having liberation from oppression as its goal and social justice as its orientation," Mezirow sees transformative learning as "concentration on rational thought and reflection as central to a process of responding to a disorienting dilemma, questioning and revising assumptions, engaging in discourse, and acting on a

¹⁶W.S. Benson, "Philosophical Foundations of Christian Education" in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Anthony M. J. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2001), 27.

¹⁷Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 16.

¹⁸Harton, "Importance of Adult Christian Education," 25.

¹⁹Gilbert A. Peterson, "The Needs and Nature of Adult" in *The Christian Education of Adults* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 47.

²⁰Jack Mezirow, "Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory" in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspective on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 19.

²¹Jack Mezirow, "Understanding Transformation Theory" in *Adult Education Quarterly* 44 no 4 (1994), 222.

new perspective.”²²Besides Mezirow and Freire, Daloz and Dirkx have also contributed to transformative learning theory. While Daloz’s approach is developmental, Dirkx’s approach is spiritual.²³

While the theorists have tried to explain how transformation occurs in a learner, one will argue that the kind of transformation that takes place when a person is renewed in mind cannot be made possible by human power. Transformation cannot take place except by the word of God through the Holy Spirit. It is when one enters into a relationship with Jesus Christ only that a genuine transforming relationship can occur. The kind of transformation referred to here is Christ living through an individual to the extent that the person begins to do everything like Christ.

Gilbert Peterson, when describing what will take place in the life of those who have been transformed, summarizes it thus, “Growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Savior; selfless commitment to the development of others; thinking, creating, problem-solving; truly understanding that it is not ourselves but Christ living through us that makes the difference; this is what Christian maturity is all about.”²⁴ The kind of transformation that will take place in the life of an adult believer who has been trained will lead to a Christ-like life that is ready to render selfless service to others.

It must be emphasized as part of the training that for Christian adults to make changes in society, they must be changed themselves. In other words, they must look different. Looking different does not necessarily mean physical difference; it means that a transformation has taken place in the totality of their lives. A Christian adult who has been transformed must be different from an unbeliever adult who is not a Christian and has never been trained.

Further, when we talk of transformation in adult Christian education, it involves transforming both mind and life (Romans 12:1-2). The church is called to form a people whose values differ from those of the society by exhibiting Christlikeness. Christian adults who have been transformed will practice Christian piety and continue to live in a renewal of the mind. A transformed life is expected to result in a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17).

The Mode of the Training

God’s word is the manual with which Christian adults are to be trained to understand the assignment God has given to them and the mode of carrying it out. As Kenneth Gangel rightly observes, “The Bible is essentially an adult book written by adults for adults and about adults...most texts commonly used in describing a biblical approach to youth or children’s ministry draw upon passages written to adults who in turn communicate God’s truth to the following generation.”²⁵ Other resources that will be used in training Christian adults must not contradict the teachings of the Scripture. Both the learner and the instructor must seek to have a deeper understanding of what the Scripture teaches.

Further, every theory that will be applied to the training must be in line with the teachings of the Scripture. As Wilhoit affirms, “Effective Christian education occurs when the learner’s actual life experience confronts the gospel.”²⁶ An instructor cannot use a method or apply a theory that is contradictory to the teachings of the Scripture because the Scripture has been given to teachers to correct and to rebuke (2 Tim. 3:16). The Scripture equips a Christian for every good work, and it is the only source of truth. Therefore, once a teaching method and learning theory has been evaluated based on the word of God, it could be applied appropriately

It is essential that adult Christian Educators learn and apply Jesus Christ’s teaching method to their teaching methodology regardless of how one might think it is impossible. As John Garlock jokingly states, “Teach as Jesus taught? Not in every way. He is God; we are humans with infinite limitations. His teaching environment differed

²²Cranton Patricia, “A Theory in Progress” in *The Jossy-Bass Reader on Contemporary Issues in Adult Education*, eds. Merriam Sharran B. and Andre P. Grace (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 321.

²³Patricia, “A Theory in Progress,” 321.

²⁴Peterson, “The Needs and Nature of Adult,” 47.

²⁵Kenneth O. Gangel, “Biblical Foundations for Adult Education” in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Adult Education* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 13.

²⁶James C. Wilhoit, “Christian Adults and Spiritual Formation” in *The Christian Educator Handbook on Adult Education* (Wheaton: Victor books 1993), 52.

from ours. And His knowledge and wisdom being supernatural, are complete.”²⁷ Learning from Jesus’ teaching, the following could be observed:

Jesus Used Questioning Method to Teach

Jesus understands the power of question; He used questions to engage his listeners. He responded to direct questions with indirect answers requiring the one who asked to think critically for an answer. Further, Jesus used questions in many of his teachings to prove points and to make sure that his followers understood the message. Jesus spoke the truth at all times and dealt with real issues. He knew his audience, and he spoke the truth to them.

Jesus used figures of speech to support his teachings.

1. He used hyperbole to prove a point. (Mark 10:24-25).
2. He used metaphor to make his message clear. (John 6:35; 8:12; 15:5).

Jesus knew His Students

Jesus Christ gathered around himself twelve Apostles and a large crowd that followed him, and he taught them with love. He was flexible, and he gave them his attention. Adult teachers must know the students well and understand how they perceive themselves. As Gangel rightly observed, “Learning includes intensely personal experience between teacher and learner.”²⁸ The learning experience must build from known to the unknown as the teacher builds on the past experiences of the learner. The past experience of the learner is the foundation upon which the learner will build the new experience.²⁹

Train Adult Christians for Service

To train Kingdom workers, the curriculum, methodology, and the school administration must prepare the students so that they are all equipped for the kingdom service. The training of Christian adults is to make them disciples. When Christian adults become disciples, they become part of a different community whose actions and activities reveal that they belong to a kingdom wherever they go. The education that adults receive must train them to carry the image of God with them wherever they go. James K.A. Smith examines the relationship of the goal of the church and that of Christian education as he writes:

If Christian education is not merely about acquiring a Christian perspective or a Christian worldview, what is its goal? Its goal, I’m suggesting, is the same as the goal of Christian worship: to form radical disciples of Jesus and citizens of the baptismal city who, communally, take up the creational task of being God’s image bearers, unfolding the cultural possibilities latent in creation—but doing so as empowered by the Spirit, following the example of Jesus’s cruciform cultural labor. If the goal of Christian worship and discipleship is the formation of a peculiar people, then the goal of Christian education should be the same.³⁰

Fundamentally, the Kingdom of God refers to God’s kingly rule, which cannot be limited to a geographical location. His rule encompasses the entire universe. God has given human beings who are his image-bearers the power to rule over his creation, but humans need to learn how to carry out the assignment meaningfully as agents of change. Therefore, kingdom workers have to preach the gospel of the kingdom so the hearers would hear and forsake all other kingdoms and submit to the reign of Jesus Christ (Heb. 12:28).

As kingdom workers, adult Christians are trained to be ambassadors of Christ who will reach out and serve their community. They are to live out Christ as transforming agents and extend God’s kingdom wherever they find themselves. Concerning the disciples of Christ, Ray Anderson writes, “A disciple of Christ is not intended to be a little messiah, but to participate in the messianic mission to extend the kingdom into every service and corner of the world.”³¹

As kingdom workers, Christian adults must exhibit the ethics of Jesus’ rule and reign. Their way of living must be in

²⁷John Garlock, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1966), 14.

²⁸Gangel, “Biblical Foundations for Adult Education,” 20.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 220.

³¹Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2006), 115.

agreement with the truth of the message they proclaim. The kingdom workers must act out the message they are preaching so that people would glorify God when they see their good deeds (1 Pet. 2:11-12). Rick Mckinley asserts that Christian acts must communicate a clear message even without speaking. He says, "What would the world think if we loved our sisters in Cuba enough to take the medicine? And how much could our lives say without speaking if we were willing to suffer for the sake of the kingdom? The act alone would preach volumes."³²The kingdom workers' acts will reveal whether they are transformed or not but act alone will not be enough without verbal support.

Proclamations of the kingdom must begin from the church. The church is the fellowship of kingdom workers. It is a fellowship of those who have been transformed by God. George Ladd asserts that the church lacks essence when its relied existence is without God's kingdom. He says, "The church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign and entered through the church and are proclaimed in the world by the church – those who have acknowledged God's rule –and there can be no church without God's kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts."³³

As kingdom workers, adult Christians are to spread the gospel and promote the wellbeing and flourishing of all people by transforming the prevailing culture. Adult Christians are to become disciples after training. They are to become kingdom workers who will build others through their lives and in their place of work.

Outside the classroom walls, adult Christians shall continue to interact with contents that are not formal education, including families, sports, friends, media, politics, bosses, and books. They must be prepared to respond to critical questions that could challenge their faith. As kingdom workers, Christian adults should aspire to live a righteous lifestyle and do what is right because God Himself is righteous (Rom. 1:17; Isaiah 59:17; Hebrews 1:8). They will encourage and promote the right living.

Further, Christian adults will engage in acts of good moral conduct as kingdom workers. He/she will not be indifferent to what is happening to him/her. As a trained Christian adult, he/she will respond to the issues of violence, loneliness, helplessness, poverty, and injustice in society. He/she will speak the gospel's truth in love to bring a change to the situation.

Implications for the Kingdom

The duty of the body of Christ and its workers is to influence the world and be salt and light. Further, the gospel ministry cannot be effective if Christian institutions' focus is only to train intellectuals; the teaching and training in moral education and spirituality must be included in the curricula.

Christian adults exercise what they have learned by way of evangelism. Therefore, they must be exposed to critical thinking and reflective thinking by exploring and comparing what they have been taught. Motivation is also essential when teaching adults. As Wlodkowski asserts, "Before adults can learn anything, someone or something has to gain their attention."³⁴Society is changing today, and its changing calls for teachers of adults to be aware of the change in society that is affecting and influencing adult learning.

Conclusion:-

We have studied adult Christian Education as training of kingdom workers. The training is unique because it is for adults, and typical adults have accumulated experiences that they bring to the classroom.

Adult education is a lifelong learning experience because we continue to learn each day of our lives. Some learning may be received through formal classroom teaching, while others could be received through non-formal curricula. Learning as adults is different from children's or youths' education because most adults return to school to learn because of specific situations, needs, and interests. The situation that needs adjustment or change could be work, recreation, family, or religion.

³²Rick Mckinley, *The Beautiful Mess: Practicing the Presence of the Kingdom* (Sisters: Multnomah Publisher, 2006), 154.

³³George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 117.

³⁴Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*, 47.

Every adult Christian must be trained to become a kingdom worker and become the agent of change. Adult Christians' training is to prepare them to be ready to go into the world and into different cultures where they have found themselves to demonstrate God's glory and effect change. Society will be transformed and changed if Christian adults will reflect and practice what they have learned.

The essence of teaching in Christian education is to lead the learner to a changed life. Therefore, adult Christian learning must lead to changed lives. Central to Christian growth is the proper understanding of biblical teaching. Adults must be reached and evangelized for Christ because they stand in leadership positions at home, church, and society. The church as a body must be ready to reach out to many adults who have stopped attending church services. Every Christian adult must be a soul winner.

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