

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT

In the historical development of Christian education the Sunday School movement is relatively new on the scene. Robert Raikes (1735-1811), Gloucester, England, publisher of the *Gloucester Journal*, is considered the father of the Sunday school. His interest in it came by way of prison reform. As he turned to means by which crime could be prevented and children could be started along a way of upright living, he thought of education closely allied with religion. The first Sunday school sessions were held in July of 1780. The curriculum was simply designed to teach the children reading, spelling, worship, the Bible and catechism. The Sunday school sessions lasted from 10-12 in the mornings, and from 1-- 5:30 in the afternoons, all attending church after the first lesson in the afternoon.

The first American Sunday Schools were started in the 1790's, modeled after the English experiments. Their aim was to offer the illiterate, urban poor a basic education - reading and writing - with the Bible as textbook. These schools had no institutional ties to the established church. After 1815 the Sunday School became the educational arm of the evangelical Protestant churches. The need for Sunday School was not felt prior to 1815 as a religiously homogeneous New England and the parochial schools of the Middle Atlantic States provided both religious instruction and an education within a Christian context. When governments began to control the day schools, and Christian doctrine was no longer included in the curriculum, the Sunday school was adopted as one medium by which the church could fulfil its educational ministry. This development led to closer ties of the Sunday School with the church than in England. The Sunday school became in a great measure an interdenominational effort. The first Sunday School Society was organized in Philadelphia in 1791. In 1906 the International Sunday School was formed.

Sunday Schools have changed their aims drastically. In contrast to Raikes' original intent, today's Sunday School movement has become the primary church program of Bible study for all ages. And evangelicals also promote Sunday schools as a means of reaching persons for Christ and establishing them in the faith. J.B. Baldree notes, the small Sunday school class is important to spiritual development and maturity because it is a caring fellowship where class members build a powerful community of faith as lay persons study the Word of God, pray together, and build relationships. So far in history, no Christian education program reaches more persons for consistent, regular, weekly Bible study than the Sunday school."¹ Since the Sunday School curriculum is strictly aimed at providing Bible knowledge and moral instruction, it has done nothing to develop a Christian world and life view and apologetic. Many Sunday School students, after entering high school or university, are unable to relate their faith to the subjects taught. "The typical Christian of our times," says J. D. Smart, "however noble his character is, is unable to speak one intelligent word on behalf of his faith. ,²

Most Sunday Schools are departmentalized and offer a program from baby nursery to senior adult. The most popular time has always been the hour before the worship service whether morning or in the afternoon. The classes are lay taught. Thomas Askew

and Peter Spellman observe that in the 19th century the Sunday Schools afforded opportunity for women to serve the church by teaching the young. The influence of women was so great that some historians have spoken of the "feminization of American religion during these years."³

Current materials are attractive, group graded, well written, and often published in full colour. Popular publishers are David C. Cook, Scripture Press, and Gospel Light. The CRC publishing house has also produced an attractive program.

It is important to note that tensions respecting Sunday schools have developed between evangelicals and more liberal Protestants. In response to liberal curricula evangelicals have developed their own. The United Church of Canada Sunday School curriculum controversy of the early 1960's is a noted example.

From 1926 to 1947 there was a decline in Sunday School attendance, followed by a definite recovery which went on until about 1960, when a loss of enrolment in the American Sunday school set in. The same development took place in Canada. The decline has chiefly affected the Sunday School of larger mainline denominations. In Canada the Anglican and United Church Sunday schools have suffered severe losses.

The Sunday school movement is in crisis today. Dr. Frank Gaebelien noted, "For many years, students of Christian education have recognized such problems of the Protestant Sunday school as the inadequacy of the weekly teaching period of an hour or less as compared with the time spent on secular education, the difficulties of teacher recruitment and preparation, the frequent ineffectiveness of teaching, the lack of adult education in the churches, and the general failure of the Sunday school to communicate a coherent knowledge of the Bible and the elements of Christian truth."⁴

In his insightful article *This Little Light of Mine. Will Sunday School Survive the "Me Generation"?*, Tim Stafford discusses some reasons for the crisis within the Sunday school. He points out that the problem with the Sunday school starts at its very core: the volunteers. They are hard to come by. Even Christians find it difficult to make a year-long commitment. The best explanation for the decline of Sunday school, notes Stafford, is that we don't care enough about children. "The decrease in stay-at-home mothers is perhaps the most immediate short-term cause of Sunday school's decline."⁵

Baby boomers are looking for values and quality. Comments Stafford, "But if they seek 'quality,' Sunday school is the last place they are going to find it. Sunday school's lay leadership practically ensures that, however friendly and personable it may be, its quality control will be weak ... Few people see that Sunday school is medicine for the disease the family has got."⁶

Despite the known weaknesses and criticisms, evangelicals still spend time, much effort and considerable funds on their Sunday schools. Many still think, despite contrary evidence, that the one hour of "religious instruction" will offset the damage done by the public schools.

- 1 *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. p. 837.
 - 2 *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. p. 333.
 - 3 *The Church and the American Experience*. p. 96.
 - 4 *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. p. 333.
 - 5 *Christianity Today*. October, 1990. p. 32.
 - 6 *Ibid.* p. 32.
- Twentieth Century of Religious Knowledge*. p. 1076.