

THE ROLE, HISTORY, AND DECLINE OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

Excerpt from the Dissertation
AN ANALYSIS OF SUNDAY SCHOOL FACTORS LEADING TO EFFECTIVE ASSIMILATION IN
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The Role of the Sunday School

In his book *High Expectations*, Thom Rainer identifies seven primary methods and programs that contribute the most to effective assimilation: special events, weekday ministries, recreational activities, youth programs, preschool programs, Sunday School, and children's programs (Rainer 1999, 22). Rainer's research revealed the Sunday School as being the most effective of these methods and programs at closing the back door of the church and assimilating individuals into the life of the congregation (Rainer 1999, 23). When it comes to reaching people and effectively assimilating them into the life of the church the Sunday School ministry still remains one of the most effective tools some 200 years after its beginnings. "America's fastest-growing churches demonstrate that Sunday School groups continue to be the premier small-group growth model in the nation" (Bird 1994, 28). Harry Piland identifies the Sunday School as being a key role in the health of a church accomplishing its mission. "Because of the nature and mission of a church revealed in the Scriptures, and because of the centrality of the Bible in Sunday School, the Sunday School is at the heart of the mission of the church. It is central – not a side issue; it is major – not minor" (Piland 1980, 15-16). In 1913 Dr. George W. Bailey, President of the World's Sunday School Association 1910-1913, wrote that the goal of the Sunday School was to, "put the open Bible into the open hand of every opening heart that is quickened by life from God" (Bailey 1913, 401).

Even with its effective record Sunday School still has its critics that claim it is no longer relevant as an outreach and assimilation ministry to the church. This debate over its relevance is nothing new. With each new generation the question arises and with each new generation the answer is clear, the Sunday School is still effective. Dr. G. W. Bailey defended the cause nearly one hundred years ago.

An institution that is in the prayers of millions, that enlists the abiding support of great-souled men and women, that sounds its victorious advance in every land and in every clime, that sends from its increasing ranks its great armies of recruits into the church of God, and that is to-day making the meaning of the mission of Jesus Christ known throughout the world, needs no defense. It only asks support and service for its triumphant advance (Bailey 1913, 402).

In more recent days George Barna suggests, “Those who proclaim that Sunday School is a thing of the past must realize that one out of four adults (23%) attend such a class on any given weekend. That projects to more than forty million adults receiving some form of religious instruction at a church on any given weekend” (Barna 1991, 238). Thom Rainer writes, “Sunday School has been among the key methodologies of the past two centuries to train adults and youth in the depths of the Bible.” (Rainer 1997, 187.) Experts are telling us that the Sunday School still works. It is an institution that has proven itself effective and its principles, when employed correctly, can grow a church through evangelism and assimilation. Bill Taylor, Director of the Sunday School Group of LifeWay Church Resources, identifies the Sunday School as “the church organized to do the work of the Great Commission” (Taylor 2003, 14). The Sunday School that is intentional about reaching, baptizing, and teaching will grow the church and create a healthy environment for the people of God to gather, grow, and serve.

History of Sunday School

During the late 18th century, Sunday Schools made their debut in America. According to Ann M. Boylan, the original Sunday Schools were of British decent and for the purpose of educating the poor.

Inspired by British examples, most [Sunday schools] were designed to provide rudimentary instruction to poor working children on their only free day of the week. Robert Raikes and other British evangelicals had pioneered this model during the 1780s by collecting children off city streets, cleaning them up, and keeping them in school for two long Sunday sessions (Boylan 1988, 6).

The chief concern among the founders of Sunday schools was to solve social concerns that were arising from the unruly behavior of undisciplined children when the children had time away from work, which was on Sunday. It was also to prepare for a better society in the future. The founders of Sunday School placed more value on proactive training for children to learn right behavior rather than reactive training for adults to unlearn wrong behavior. If the child could learn morals and establish good ethical foundations at this early age then society as a whole would be better tomorrow.

The Sunday school originated with an educational purpose. “Sunday school founders were less concerned about the recipients’ religious indoctrination than about the growing numbers of working children who seemed to be slipping through the cracks in the educational system” (Boylan 1988, 6). It was the goal of the original Sunday school to offer an education to those that may otherwise do without. Yet the very nature of what its founders were hoping for was spiritual transformation as well as secular education of reading and writing. According to Marvin J. Taylor, “The purpose of the school was moral and social reform” (Taylor 1966, 170). It was the intent of its founders to place a Bible in the hands of the children in hopes that, as they learned to read and write, the words they were learning would lead to life transformation.

The earliest goal of evangelical Sunday school workers was simply to bring religious knowledge, and the behavior associated with it, to lower-class youth. By teaching children to read the Bible, these workers believed, they would do more than impart “the truths of the Gospel” to ignorant youngsters. They would also provide a foundation upon which their charges could construct moral lives. True morality, in their view, emanated from knowledge of the individual’s ultimate accountability to God for his or her actions; without that knowledge, individuals had no incentive to behave correctly (Boylan 1988, 133-134).

Though evangelism was not the expressed outcome of the original Sunday Schools, there existed a hope that transformation would take place in the lives of these children to lead to a better life. Morality was taught based on the truths of scripture. In a sense, the early Sunday Schools existed to assimilate young people into a vision of a more productive and moral society. With education as its primary focus, evangelism became a significant result.

As time went on the schools became distinctively evangelistic. “After 1800, the purpose of Sunday School expanded to both education and evangelism. The first national Sunday School effort began in 1824. The American Sunday School Union’s stated purpose was to organize, evangelize, and civilize” (Rainer 1996, 81). These evangelical schools now existed for the primary purpose of regeneration and conversion.

The new evangelical Sunday schools differed fundamentally from the First Day schools and others like them in their founders’ purposes and personal backgrounds and in their appeal to potential pupils. Although all Sunday schools provided an education centered on Christian belief, the founders of the evangelical schools placed paramount emphasis on the religious aspects of teaching, which they defined in a specifically evangelical Protestant manner. For them, teaching reading and writing was only a means to a greater end, not an end in itself. That greater end – an evangelical interpretation of the Bible – was to be achieved by teaching students to read the Bible, familiarizing them with its contents, and leading them to interpret it as their teachers did (Boylan 1988, 9-10).

The Sunday School was now being intentionally programmed for evangelism. Within the next 100 years the evangelical Sunday School became the primary outreach arm of the church. Once intended for children, now the organization was expanded to include all ages. Sunday School had become the open door to the church. According to Thom Rainer, “By 1900 about 80% of all new church members in America first came to church through the Sunday School” (Rainer 1996, 81). In 1902, E.Y. Mullins said, “Sunday School is the chief and almost only hope for church growth” (Hemphill 1996, 4). Reaching and assimilating people into the church was accomplished primarily through the Sunday School ministry. This trend continued until the mid-twentieth century.

Sunday School Plateau and Decline

To be an organization with such a rich heritage and effective history it is hard to understand the recent trends of plateau and decline in the ability of the Sunday School to reach and assimilate new members into the church. Studies tell us that involvement in the Sunday School is not as prevalent today as it once was. From 1973 to 1988 the Sunday School ministry “plunged 34 percent, from 40.5 million in 1970 to 26.6 million in 1986” (Maxwell 1988, 63). According to Steve Parr, specialist of the Bible Study Ministries department of the Georgia Baptist Convention, Sunday School enrollment has increased only 4.8 percent from the year 2000 to the year 2003 in the state of Georgia (Parr 2004). These declining, and somewhat plateaued, statistics raise a very important question. If the Sunday School is so effective then why is it not growing at a greater rate? Why are we seeing such a decline in Sunday School participation? Is it that the methods of Sunday School are no longer relevant to our churches in reaching and assimilating new members? Is the Sunday School out of date?

The decline of the effectiveness of Sunday School can be explained with its change in focus and purpose in the local church. As has already been stated, the Sunday School’s productive early years were focused on evangelism. These small groups existed for the purpose of reaching people for Christ and teaching them for life change. It has only been within the past few decades that the emphasis on evangelism shifted to an emphasis on discipleship and fellowship. Ken Hemphill suggests that it is this shift in purpose that has caused the decline in Sunday School. “It is my conviction that the beginning of the so-called demise of Sunday School can be traced to a time when denominations and local churches failed to use the Sunday School with evangelistic intentionality and purpose” (Hemphill 1996, 4). Hemphill goes on to say, “We have lost our passion for evangelistic outreach, and this has clearly reduced the effectiveness of our Sunday Schools” (Hemphill 1996, 19). Max Caldwell warned that the Sunday School is

in danger of becoming extinct if we do not seek to employ it as a means of reaching the lost.

Just because the Sunday School has been an effective means of sharing God's Word in the past, however, doesn't necessarily make it so today. We cannot take the Sunday School for granted. We are less than one generation away from forgetting the purpose of the Sunday School. If we ever fail to share with new people the purposes of the Sunday School and the need to do effective Sunday School work, we could wake up one day to realize that our Sunday Schools have lost their zeal for reaching out to the lost world (Hemphill 1989, 20).

It is not the Sunday School ministry that has failed, it is operator error. We are not using an evangelism and assimilation tool for evangelism and assimilation and therefore, it is rendered ineffective. Try to drive a nail with a screwdriver and it will not be very effective, but use the hammer to accomplish this purpose and it will work every time. Our Sunday Schools today are driving nails with screwdrivers and becoming increasingly frustrated because they can't seem to get the nail in the wall. Even with such decline, there are some churches that are growing as a result of their focus on the Sunday School as the primary agent for evangelism and assimilation. According to Charles Arn, church growth specialist, "a healthy congregation with extensive committees and boards does not automatically have an expanding Sunday school, but a thriving Sunday school nearly always guarantees increased church membership" (Lehmann 1989, 405). As we observe these effective Sunday Schools that are contributing to church growth, it is very important that we gain a better understanding of the factors within the organization that contribute to a person coming and remaining involved in the Sunday School ministry and the church as a whole.