From the Archives: Sunday School Cards- An Innovation in Christian Education

Among the smaller collections in the archives of B.L. Fisher Library is a collection of Sunday school cards, graphically visual tools used in the teaching of Sunday schools in the United States from the late 1800's through the 1960's.1 Sunday school was an innovation in Christian education proposed by Robert Raikes in England in the 1780’s as a way to provide general education to children from poor backgrounds. Education was not universal or free, so Raikes envisioned teaching basic reading and writing using the Bible as the textbook on Sundays, since many children worked during the remainder of the week. The movement grew rapidly and spread to the United States by the 1790’s.

![Typical Sunday School Card - Front and Back](image-url)
While religious images have a long history within the Roman Catholic tradition, Protestant images aimed primarily at children began in the late 1700’s with the publishing of primers and early illustrated books. By 1824, American Sunday schools began using gift cards to invite children to Sunday school, which were used as admission tickets. As early as 1850, visual images for Sunday school education began to appear (Sabbath School Cards, or Scripture Maps, etc. was published by A.C. Beaman in Worcester, MA in 1850). There was an explosion of illustrated books, tracts, and newspapers aimed at children during the mid to late 1800’s as a theological shift began to accept the idea that children could receive salvation without waiting to attain adulthood.
Under the influence of Horace Bushnell’s 1847 book *Christian Nurture*, Protestants began to tie visual images to pedagogy and also emphasize the role of religious education in the home. At the same time, a series of National Sunday School Conventions led to the planning of the international uniform lesson system at the fifth convention in 1872 by representatives of the Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Based on a seven-year schedule all Sunday schools would work through the same lessons to uniformly cover the Bible. Companies, such as the Providence Lithograph Company and David C. Cook Publishing Company had been involved in publishing Sunday school material earlier, but with the international uniform lessons and the invention of color lithography, all the pieces were in place for the development and growth of the Sunday school card.
These cards were usually sold in quarterly sets of 13, with 12 of the cards representing individual lessons with a “Golden Verse” for memorization and questions for review at home, ideally by the mother of the child. The 13th card was a review card, which often had boxes for the teacher to check for attendance. David Morgan notes that

“Illustrated cards had been used early on by the ASSU (American Sunday School Union) and the ATS (American Tract Society), but the brilliant coloration and pictorial detail of the lithographic cards in the final decades of the nineteenth century enhanced the religious image’s capacity to compete with the rival visual culture in advertisements and nonreligious books for children that made effective use of color printing and halftone technology.”

Colleen McDannell writes, “During the first half of the twentieth century, the Sunday school was the main conduit for the movement of Protestant material culture into the home. Children made ‘art’ in Sunday school, and they brought mass-produced products home.” So, while Protestants criticized Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians for the veneration of religious images, similar images quickly became a part of Protestant life through the guise of educational tools.
A Typical End-of-Quarter Review Card

Designed to fit easily in a pocket and yet compete with advertising cards and other childhood ephemera of the time, Sunday school cards were an innovation in helping reinforce the religious lesson from Sunday school. Bright, colorful, and exciting visual images helped remind the child of the scripture for memorization, while the card itself served as a Sunday school lesson in miniature to be reviewed at home within the family context. Such items are often dismissed as trivial relics of a bygone era, but in the study of the material culture of religion this is a very superficial view. People imbue items with religious meaning as a way to make the sacred more real, to embody belief and theology in a concrete form. Gordon Lynch notes from other studies that it is similar to a child projecting love and comfort.
to a special blanket or toy. Human beings in a desire to understand and make sense of God can project theological meaning onto material items, and these items then begin to take on special importance within everyday lived religion. Sunday school cards and the images they used became a means through which generations of children not only learned about God, but emotionally and spiritually connected to God through the use of their senses in a very physical and theologically significant way.

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary’s mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

Endnotes

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