
Introduction

by Dr. Robert A. Crandall

It is a real honor for me to participate with you in the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Sunday school which, in the words of D. Campbell Wycoff, is “as American as crabgrass.” The Sunday school represents the greatest single influence on American Protestant religious education. More than a century ago F.D. Huntington described the Sunday school in typical 19th century language as follows: “The Sunday school appears to take on the character of an endless experiment by the grandeur of its objective, by the inexhaustible interest it touches, by the immortality of the soul it nourishes, as well as by the variety of the conditions in which it exists. It is invested with the mystery and charm of an unfinished enterprise. Its plan is never quite filled out.”¹ In these words, Huntington encapsulates the genius and spirit of the American Sunday school. The idea of “an endless experiment” still characterizes the Sunday school as it enters its third century.

Today the Sunday school remains the most controversial and continuous religious education agency in Protestantism. In its “roller coaster” existence of popularity and paucity, it has won the acclaim of leaders in government, religion, and education. It has been called, “the most enduring religious movement in American history” and has outlasted every other movement (such as labor, peace, temperance). As “pioneer and precursor” of the American public school system, the Sunday school also indirectly influenced the development of Roman Catholic parochial schools, the public library system and popular educational programs for adults. It has shaped the social, economic, and political systems in the United States and left an indelible impression upon the entire culture. In fact, it has made an impact around the world. These lectures, however, are purposely centered upon the development of the Sunday school in the United States.

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While lauded on one hand, the Sunday school has also been ridiculed as “the most wasted hour of the week” on the other hand. It has been the recipient of jokes such as, “When is a school not a school? When it’s a Sunday school!”, and has received sneers from both religious leaders and professional educators. It should be acknowledged that as a religious instructional agency the Sunday school has been educationally suspect, with reason, for its often shallow content and methodology.

Though rooted in social action, the Sunday school does not have a good history in that arena. It failed to deal with the race issue and its red, white, and blue banner has supported war efforts. It also failed to cope adequately with industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

Today the Sunday school remains the main Protestant religious instructional agency, enrolling nearly 40 million persons. In many smaller churches, it is the *only* religious instructional agency. For that reason, as Robert Lynn and Elliot Wright in their book, *The Big Little School*, suggest, “It is vastly more important than is probably realized by its modern supporters or depreciators.”²

If indeed “the past becomes the present writ small”³ then a look at the history of this marvelous institution should be helpful. Someone has suggested that history is a lamp, so in this sense “to light the present is to show the future.” Certainly then, as William Bean Kennedy asserts, “Investigation of the development of the Sunday school therefore contributes to wider understanding of the strategy decisions now being faced in the American society and in the church.”⁴

It is my hope that these lectures, which will endeavor to sketch the past 200 years of the Sunday school in America, will be the prologue to much discussion, deliberation, and development of better religious instruction in many local churches.

The problem facing any historian or person who would endeavor to cover 200 years of the Sunday school in 150 minutes is the basic problem of the Sunday school itself. That is to be erudite without being obtuse, to explain without boring, and to suggest some answers without being simplistic. When I speak of the Sunday school, I do so in the generic sense.

To enable us to get a hold of the main developmental process, I am suggesting a grid. Vertically it has been divided into three chronological periods which make up the three sections of these

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lectures. These are from 1780 to 1860, 1860 to 1910, and 1910 to the future and beyond. Each of these periods are then divided up into smaller segments of “bite size” chronological pieces. Horizontally, there are two factors which intersect the Sunday school throughout its history. My contention is that the Sunday school has consistently set its direction by the loadstone of the Protestant American culture and has been guided by the loadstar of public education. I will endeavor to show what was happening in culture, particularly in the religious realm, and somewhat in public education. A third factor which will only be incidentally noted is the Methodist movement. It would appear that the fortunes of the Sunday school have fairly well followed those of Methodism. I will attempt to note places where these impinge upon one another.

However exciting, just sketching is not enough to give direction. The person who would be prophetic should look beneath the surface events to see what was happening and what was contributing to the success of a movement such as the Sunday school. Therefore, I will be suggesting nine developmental themes or characteristics which were present in different periods of the movement and which remained fundamental to the Sunday school. Three of these will be treated in each part.

Among those that I have noted and will amplify later are these: the church as the family of God; meeting the need of persons; Bible-centered teaching; evangelism; clergy interest and support; lay volunteer teachers; and organizational enthusiasm. ■