
Its Genesis: Emerging Childhood, 1780-1860

The Sunday school as we know it is basically an American institution which was born in England but raised in the United States. Its early years reflected its beginnings, but when it became school age it was drastically changed. These two periods are roughly from 1780-1830 and 1830-1860.

I. From Benevolent Empire to American Dream: The Early Development of the Sunday School, 1780-1830

The revolutionary rains came, the secular sun shone, the winds of renaissance wisdom began to blow and lo, the seeds of the Sunday school began to break through the soil of American early national period society. Fertilized by the freedom fervor of nationalism and cultivated by a class culture, the young plant took root rapidly.

The earlier colonial climate was conducive to the seeds of the Sunday school and its societal soil made an excellent seed bed. Among the factors which paved the way for the coming of the Sunday school to America were: the interaction between Europe and America; the close connection between the church and society; the Protestant heritage of the church and the home being responsible for the formal education and literacy of children; the missionary and educational endeavors; the apprentice and other educational systems which neglected the education of the poor; and the many private and varied school systems.

But probably the most important factor was the charity attitude taken by various religious and philanthropic societies. This was especially true in the middle and southern colonies which were engaged in evangelistic and educational endeavors. It would seem that the schools begun by these agencies were almost direct forerunners of the Sunday school.

The Sunday school like other forms of education in America was a

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unique adaptation of an idea from Europe. It can be argued that the Sunday school in America was a transplant from England rather than an original seedling from North America. Yet there did exist on the American continent the various institutional forms of what later became the Sunday school.

The Sunday school in America was probably a hybrid — that is a native seed in native soil pollinized by an English plant. Once the shoots of the Sunday school broke through the soil, it began to grow at an amazing rate.

The Cultural Context

By the beginning of the early national period, the United States was no longer a colonial outpost but rather a new nation. To develop new traditions and cultural patterns and to formulate its own ideals was a slow process. To sever the European umbilical cord was also painful.

Two cultural forces were at work which would aid in the development of the Sunday school. The first of these was the westward frontier movement with its emphasis upon individualism. It was not an individualism without cooperation, however, for nationalism arose as a parallel development. Such a spirit led to a common language for the new nation as well as the promulgation of the idea that children should be taught to become good citizens. The second was the struggle between the capitalistic and agrarian classes. Many, among them Thomas Jefferson, saw in the rural existence a state of virtue conducive to independence and self fulfillment in contrast to urban life which led to corruption and decay. Such a philosophical position was to profoundly affect not only the public school but also the Sunday school. Not until early in the twentieth century would this fundamental concept be challenged and even then Protestantism would maintain an agrarian stance.

The Sunday school movement in the United States began as a philanthropic attempt to provide children with basic education. Classes were held on Sundays when the factories and mills were closed so that child laborers could attend. Instruction was given in the four “R’s” — reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. This was basically the same pattern as the English schools.

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, may well have also been the father of the Sunday school, in both England and America. Wesley is said to have started the first Sunday school in the world in

1737 in Savannah, Georgia on his first missionary trip, and in England many of his societies engaged in religious instruction.⁵ His mother, Suzanna, began a school in 1765 much like the Sunday schools to follow, except it included more teaching of religion.⁶ Later in his life, Wesley gave his approbation to the Sunday schools when he said, “who knows but what they may become nurseries for Christians.”⁷

However, an enterprising layman and newspaper publisher, Robert Raikes, is credited with founding the Sunday school movement among the poor in England in 1780. Situated in Sooty Alley, an area of Gloucester, Raikes took in his “ragged regiment.” These were the children who worked in the nearby pin factory and who were exploited by their employers. Raikes’ purpose in launching the Sunday school was two-fold: spiritual and societal. He believed that the children of the poor ought to be taught religion, but he also believed that taking the children off the streets on Sunday would be a way to improve society. These two thrusts would shape the Sunday school for the next 200 years.

Raikes’ basic contention was that children needed to be educated to understand the Bible. To be a good Christian was to be a good citizen; to be a good citizen, one had to know the Bible; to know the Bible was to read; and in order to read, persons had to be taught. For Raikes, the Bible would be the textbook. In this he was different than other charity schools which tended to use catechism and creeds. In his formation of the Sunday school, Raikes combined the secular and the sacred in one teaching activity.

There are many claims to the first Sunday school in America. I have already mentioned the one established by Wesley. Quite possibly the first school patterned on the Raikes model was one started in Accomac County, Virginia in 1785 by William Elliot, a Methodist. The next year Bishop Asbury started one in his home. A first day or Sunday school society was organized in Philadelphia in 1790. One of its members was Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a proponent of public schools, and a leader in temperance reform. Other members included a Catholic, a Quaker, and a Universalist. This religiously cosmopolitan interdenominational beginning was to set a pattern for decades.⁸

But whatever the beginning, Sunday schools in America from 1780-1812 took their place alongside other community schools. Sponsored largely by philanthropic societies or groups of churches,

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the Sunday school usually offered secular instruction based upon religious values. In its foundation then, the Sunday school was religious education in that it was education which was religious but it was not separate from secular education. In the beginning it was one and the same.

The Growth of the Sunday School

The Sunday school movement, however, did not grow rapidly until after 1812. At this time, there was the formation of many national societies and inter-denominational agencies including the American Bible, American Temperance, American Tract, and American Peace Societies, plus the American Sunday School Union, all organized in the 1820's. The new nationalistic emphasis was evident in the title of each of these since all began with the word "American."⁹

Of course the most important of these societies and/or agencies was the American Sunday School Union which spearheaded the inter-denominational effort of Sunday schools for a century. Imagine the emphasis of the ASSU when one of the first managers of the Union, until his death in 1843, was none other than Francis Scott Key, author of the national anthem! From the beginning, the ASSU had ambitious plans for fitting into the national nature,¹⁰ as seen by a statement from a resolution it adopted in 1828:

The Sunday school is an institution eminently adapted to promote the intellectual and moral culture of the nation, to perpetuate our republican and religious institutions, and to reconcile eminent national prosperity with moral purity and future blessedness.¹¹

This theme of republicanism and religion was to last for years.

The Evolution of the Sunday School

During the National period the Sunday schools began to change from charity institutions to schools for the religious instruction of all. In the process, however, they also became multipurpose institutions for social reform. Depending upon the geographical location, the Sunday school served different functions. Soon after its beginnings, it underwent a quick evolution. There seems to have been at least five reasons for this evolution.

The first was that contemporaries felt they had discovered in the Sunday school an educational innovation which could serve any useful purpose and thrive in any social environment. Ralph Ruggles Smith, Jr., in a recent study of the "mission program" of the Sunday school asserts:

Thus, early believers in the Sunday school had no trouble in coming to the conclusion that if the Sunday school could do good for every individual, no matter his social or geographical position, a campaign should be launched without delay to marshal every child in the nation into a schoolroom on Sunday.¹²

A second development, which caused this evolution was the tremendous initial success of the Sunday school, especially in the United States. "This fact served to encourage supporters to extrapolate the Sunday schools' percipitous early growth curve indefinitely upward."¹³

A third reason for this early transformation of the Sunday school was the change in traditional education itself. In a recent study Anne Mary Boylan says: "As increasing religious diversity forced exclusion of sectarian beliefs from publicly supported schools, religious groups devised new methods of religious education."¹⁴ The unity of religion and education which had characterized Sunday school teaching began to break down.

Another cause was the heightened evangelical fervor of the 1820's. These revivals modified the old Calvinist doctrine of predestination and emphasized that an individual could prepare himself for God's grace. Thereafter, a new emphasis upon conversion took place.

A fifth factor was the Sabbatarian influence which made Sunday teaching a desecration of the day, even though it may have been serving religious functions. To teach writing and arithmetic would profane a day which should be reserved for religious purposes. While conviction about the sanctity of the Sabbath may have motivated teachers to abandon reading and arithmetic, it was in Smith's view that "the rise of the common school allowed them to do so with an easy conscience."¹⁵

It was to be the inter-relatedness of the common school and the common Sunday school which was to affect the destinies of both.

Proponents of the common school, such as Horace Mann, felt that

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ideally the common school would reach every child in the commonwealth.¹⁶ At the same time, promoters of the Sunday school in 1830 resolved to establish “a Sunday school in every destitute place where it is practicable, throughout the Valley of the Mississippi.”¹⁷ And the cause for both the common school and the Sunday school was projected, by men of vision and stature, some of whom were ahead of their own time. While there were obstacles and opponents to these movements, both succeeded during this period, if success is measured only in terms of the number of schools established. It appears that the Sunday school and the common school had a rising influence on each other. In fact, as viewed from the present historical vantage point, it would appear that neither would have come about without the other.

The Sunday school as an institution was changed during this period from a social-secular school to one almost exclusively sectarian in nature. At the same time it adopted the “School Model” which was to circumscribe it until the present time.

II. From Education to Evangelism:

The Missionary Outreach of Sunday School (1830-1860)

A Destiny and A Dream

The two themes of a “Manifest Destiny” and an “American Dream” symbolized the basic social spirit of the times before the civil war.

The American destiny and dream were inextricably tied to evangelical Protestantism. Robert Handy says: “The middle third of the nineteenth century . . . was a period in which conservative, evangelical Protestantism was a dominant force on the American scene.”¹⁸ In many ways this period was more of a “Protestant age” than was the colonial period.

At the same time, evangelical Protestant religion faced both challenges and changes. The testing came largely from three sources: a denominational fractionalism which brought tensions within, and the stirrings of new scientific discoveries which threatened theological suppositions from without. Added was the heavy volume of immigration from Europe which was composed mostly of Jews and Roman Catholics. Anti-slavery forces were joined by anti-Catholic ones.¹⁹ Protestant religious leaders were interested in preserving a united American Protestantism.

According to Clebsch, the transition in Protestant religion

followed three main themes which made a difference: the erosion of theological pessimism about man, the revivals, and new revelations.²⁰ The gradual theological shift from the Calvinistic to an increasing Arminian strain in Evangelicalism made religion possibly more palatable and more easily absorbed into society. One reason for this was that the old Calvinism with its emphasis upon determinism was opposed to the American national idea of democracy.²¹ Thus, as Winthrop Hudson points out, "Evangelical Protestantism had become defined almost wholly in Methodist terms."²² The emphasis upon individual conversions combined with the evangelical missionary flames spreading across America. Major new movements such as Mormonism and various splinter sects arose, based on what they called "new revelations."

Unlike any other place in the world, in predominantly Protestant America the Sunday school became the common religious educational agency. Thus, the community secular common school was complemented by the common community religious Sunday school. This was particularly true in the rural and frontier areas, for in many such locales the same building often housed both.

The Rapid Extension of the Sunday School

The rise and expansion of the Sunday school in America was as rapid as that of the public school, if not more so. One reason for this is that "the common people took to them gladly." What had begun as a school for the poor had become quickly upgraded to middle class respectability. The Sunday school was no longer an arm of charity but a club to which almost anyone could belong. Sunday school exponents claimed, as did their common school counterparts, that the Sunday school was democratic. It is said that Lyman Beecher sent his daughters to Sunday school in order to break down the lower class image of the Sunday schools.²³ At this point it was visualized as a common Sunday school, common to all children.

Concomitant with the evangelical revivals of the 1820's and 1830's was an evangelical thrust of the Sunday school movement as a missionary venture. As Lynn and Wright put it, "The task was clear: Christianize America so America can Christianize the world."²⁴ It was this dream that made the Sunday school forces into a movement between 1830 and 1860.

By the time of the Civil War, the Sunday school had been established and was operating on four main principles: (1) It was a

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lay enterprise based on non-professional teaching; (2) It was for children of all social classes so far as any denomination or Sunday school union avoided class consciousness; (3) The age limit had been extended from the very young to include some adults; and (4) The time schedule had been reduced to one or two hours.²⁵ These principles provided a basic educational pattern which has existed to the present time.

III. From the Past to the Present: Principles for the Sunday School

The major theme that seemed to run through the entire period of 1780-1860 is *evangelization*. It was evidenced by three basic characteristics.

The Needs of Persons

The Sunday school began by meeting the needs of the “ragged regiment.” The unfortunate children of English society needed what Raikes and others offered. Much the same conditions existed in Philadelphia, Boston, and other American cities. Over the years that changed. Later, the disadvantaged were those in the rural areas and the Sunday school went there as well.

We should not forget that the Sunday school was started as a social endeavor. One of Raikes’ contentions was that to take the roughians off the streets and make them better citizens would help society as a whole. The same idea was promulgated by J. Edgar Hoover who spoke often in defense of the Sunday school. While there are many who have questioned the social potency of the Sunday school yet there must be something which regular attendance helps.

Recently I heard a black judge from Louisiana say in a Social Action Forum that of thousands of juveniles appearing before him, only one attended Sunday school regularly and that was begun following the offense for which he was being tried. As we have already noted, the Sunday school and many Sunday schools of a mission nature were founded.

In more recent years, the Sunday school has sometimes forgotten the poor and the disadvantaged as it has become more and more a middle and upper class institution. If the Sunday school is to remain the Sunday school it must meet the needs of persons at whatever social level, particularly the poor and the disadvantaged.

How can some of these needs be met? One Sunday school sponsors

an early childhood school to help those children who are slow learners before they begin their kindergarten experience. Another has organized a “pantry” for the community. Another has volunteers who follow bus routes and go into homes to see if families have needs which can be met. One Sunday school offers a youth center for the work of the community. Another Sunday school sponsors a Tuesday night tutoring session to help young people with their high school classes. Another Sunday school acts as a job clearing house to find and channel requests for employment.

Professor Sarah Little suggested recently that perhaps the Sunday school could cooperate with the public school in providing a new model of community services.²⁶ But whatever is done, the needs of persons must come first. Those Sunday schools that are meeting the needs of persons are the growing Sunday schools.

The needs of persons relate to the issues of life. The Sunday school has an opportunity to meet those needs because it is a place where laypersons share with one another.

Evangelism

When I speak of evangelism I mean the concern for spiritual and eternal welfare of persons. The one indispensable characteristic of the Sunday school movement was that of genuine spiritual concern. Wherever the Sunday school has been true to its evangelistic beginnings, the Sunday school has grown. When, as in the past couple of decades, it has lost that emphasis, the Sunday school has declined.

Robert Lynn has observed that the Sunday school is “more of the heart than of the head.” Cold, cognitive teaching will not answer the problems of mankind. Only a warmly affective response to the gospel message will meet the spiritual needs of persons.

It is significant that the fastest growing Sunday schools today are in the Pentecostal denominations with strong affective practices and among the Baptists which emphasize the conversion experience. This should tell us something!

Many of us know personally young people who have come through an entire lifetime of Sunday school experience and never once been confronted personally with the claims of Christ. I’m not talking about spiritual scalp hinting. I’m talking about relating the kerygma to the didache. We must have both.

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*The Centrality of the Bible as the
Teaching Curriculum of the Sunday School.*

Karl Barth is said to have been asked late in life what he believed to be the central truth of Christianity. His reply was that it could be summed up in the Sunday school song, “Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.” We can’t improve upon that message.

The Word of God is our textbook. It is not our ideas, but God’s ideals. People are hungry for God’s Word today. They want to know what it says to them.

I have often said, “Our curriculum must always get people into the Word and the Word into people so that they by the Word can get into the world.”

Perhaps we should be like the old brother who was teaching a Sunday school class in the south. They were using the verse-to-verse method, and he said “Now Brother Brown will you read the next verse and make your commitments upon it.”

In order to be successful, the Sunday school of today and of the future will be careful to emphasize the three characteristics found in the emerging childhood of the Sunday school: meeting the needs of persons, evangelism, and teaching from the Bible. ■