

HISTORY OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The modern Sunday school movement was begun by Robert Raikes in Gloucester, England in 1780. Raikes was a newspaper publisher involved in prison ministry. He served many who were waiting to die, and began to realize that we need to begin earlier with prevention in order to be most effective in Christian outreach.

Sunday school faces many obstacles and challenges from the very start. It was separate from church, so some churches rejected it. The idea of para-church (working alongside) ministry was new, Sunday school being one of the first, and some felt it threatened the church. It ministered to the poor, so some were afraid it would break down what they considered to be God-given class distinctions. Feelings of class distinction were at a very high level in England at the time. It was not able to meet in facilities that were geared to education, and it was free and thus non-income producing.

In the beginning Sunday school taught both religious and secular subjects. Raikes used the Bible, plus other reading books. The Bible was part of the curriculum, but was not clearly its focus. For its first 150 years, it was taught only in the English-speaking world, and was aimed at alleviating social conditions.

Others had previously tried similar experiments, but Raikes knew how to publicize an idea, so his school created a movement.

After the War of 1812, Sunday school spread widely in the United States, for reasons that are hard to discern. In the U.S. there was not as much of an emphasis on subjects other than the Bible because of the availability of public schools.

From about 1900 on, church catechisms were used more than the Bible. These were summaries of the Christian faith as understood by certain groups. Catechisms were thought to teach the whole system of doctrine. They relied on questions and memorized answers.

During 1820 to 1835, the Great Revival in the U.S. changed the denominational structure of much of the U.S. from Congregational and Reformed to Baptist and Methodist. Strangely, the concept of theological pluralism also began to take hold at about the time.

In 1832, one of the biggest Sunday school unions decided to plant Sunday schools in the New West (the area of the Louisiana Purchase) as a missionary enterprise. These were called UNION SCHOOLS. Small communities would select a neutral place and Christians of many backgrounds would come together. They decided to teach the Bible, because the Bible unites, whereas catechisms divide. Publication of catechisms began to slow as a result.

These schools were focused on Bible stories rather than on doctrine, because of this religious pluralism. Lessons focused on application rather than on interpretation. This ultimately proved a weakness, because good application must be based on good

interpretation. The lessons also tended to moralisms that tended to be “American” more than they were Christian. As a result, the Bible lessons were not as transforming as they could have been. Many people learned Bible facts without understanding the Bible’s big picture.

Overall, Sunday school has shown itself to be very flexible, meeting people’s needs at the time. It has grown from being a separate charity or mission to being the nursery of the church and the primary means of entering the church.

Overall, Sunday school has been geared toward action rather than theory or debate. It has been willing to try to approaches and to search for pragmatic results. Overall, the goal of Sunday school has been to meet people’s needs through educational programs.

Sunday School and Conversion

Early Sunday school records report conversions of both students and teachers, One report actually listed more conversions of teachers than of students.

Although Sunday school missionary Stephen Paxson was converted as a result of substitute teaching, and most in the early days thought that Sunday school teaching was the best means of conversion, the New York Sabbath School Society published a pamphlet on why only the converted should teach.

Doctrinal Divisions in the Sunday School Movement

In 1967, the American Sunday School Union became American Missionary Fellowship. At that time the American Presbyterian Church and the Methodists pulled out, calling it “a covert Calvinistic organization”.

History of Sunday School Lessons

From 1850 to 1872 is called the BABEL PERIOD. Every teacher basically did what was right in his own eyes and there was not much real instruction in some Sunday schools. The emphasis was on memorization and recital. People feared that teaching would bring division, and many teachers lacked training. This lack of teaching was a concern of D.L. Moody. The American Sunday School Union urged that instead of massive memorization, verses for memorization be limited to 8 to 12 per week.

In 1872 the INTERNATIONAL UNIFORM LESSON SERIES was introduced, allowing all ages “from cribs to canes” to study a single lesson Scripture at their own level. It was also to be used widely, internationally, “from Boston to Bombay.” In broad terms, the series took the student through the major lessons of the Bible in seven years.

Positive aspects of the IULS were its efficiency and the possibility to coordinate discussion at home and other teaching in the church with the lessons. Its widespread use encouraged even secular publishers to publish commentaries and teaching aids.

Negative aspects were that it gave great influence to those who selected the passages for study. It was also influenced by special interest groups. For instance, the Women's Christian Temperance Union insisted that once every quarter a lesson be taught on abstinence from alcohol, which caused severe straining to find sufficient passages on the topic. Missions groups also exerted pressure on the selection of lessons. Some, too, found it difficult to have everyone on the same passage. They argued that it resulted in "Meat for Babes and Milk for Adults."

This resulted in the development of a parallel organization in 1898, in which women taught the lower grades using other curriculum and Bible verses.

In 1908 GRADED LESSONS WITH DIFFERENT BIBLE PASSAGES were introduced.

Every Child Ministries began by offering churches training for developing Sunday schools in Congo (then Zaire). ECM's first motto was "A Sunday school in every village". Sunday School is still a method God uses in many places to win whole families to Christ, to strengthen families on Biblical principles, and to build churches.

From "The Big Little School" by Lynn Wright, Abingdon, 1982.