

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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## From Scripture to Sharing: Sunday Schools in Churches of Christ

*Gary Holloway*

How can Christians pass on the faith to their children? Home instruction is of primary importance. Christian day schools can help. However, for two centuries Christians have also relied on the Sunday School to help train their children in spiritual matters. This brief survey of the development and practices of the Sunday School in churches of Christ will provide insights into how it can become a more effective tool for passing on the faith.

### **The Origin of Protestant Sunday Schools**

Although Sunday Schools originated in Scotland in the 1780's, they soon crossed the Atlantic and became a peculiarly American institution. The first Sunday Schools in America were organized in Philadelphia in 1791 to teach literacy to poor urban children by having them read and copy portions of the Bible. These schools were Protestant and evangelical but were not affiliated with a particular church. In 1824 the American Sunday School Union, a nondenominational organization, was founded to promote Sunday Schools and provide textbooks and curricular materials.<sup>1</sup>

The Sunday School's work in supporting literacy actually laid the groundwork for the development of public schools in America. The rise of these "common schools" set Sunday Schools free to concentrate on the teaching of religion. By the 1850's there were two distinct types of Sunday Schools: mission schools for the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne M. Boyland, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale, 1988) 6, 61.

unchurched and Sunday Schools for the children of church members. It was about this time also that Sunday Schools began to be programs of local churches instead of nondenominational enterprises.<sup>2</sup> Eventually mission schools passed from the picture and the Sunday School took on the basic shape it has today: a ministry of a local church where children of the church are given religious training.

### **Sunday Schools in the Stone-Campbell Movement (1820-1906)**

Alexander Campbell was at first against the Sunday School. In 1823 he said the early church knew nothing of Sunday Schools because "in their church capacity alone they moved."<sup>3</sup> He believed the Sunday School to be a interdenominational organization that usurped the role of the church. He was also afraid the teachers in the Sunday Schools, who were drawn from several Protestant denominations, would bring their young pupils "under the domination of some creed or sect."<sup>4</sup>

By 1837 Campbell had changed his mind. Responding to a reader's question whether "little ones" should be sent to Sunday School or taught at home, he replied, "Schools for this purpose should be carefully encouraged by all Christians."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to warn again against sectarian teaching in Sunday Schools.

The shift from the interdenominational Sunday School led by the Sunday School Union to each church having a Sunday School for its own children is reflected in Campbell's writings. In 1848 he published in the *Millennial Harbinger* "An Appeal to the Churches in Behalf of Sunday Schools," by A.S. Hayden and Isaac

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Sawicki, *The Gospel in History, Portrait of a Teaching Church: The Origins of Christian Education* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 259, 275.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Baptist* 1 (July 1823) 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Christian Baptist* 2 (August 1824) 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 93.

Errett. These men appealed to each church to have its own Sunday School and announced the formation of a committee that included Alexander Campbell who would produce curricular materials "for the young."<sup>6</sup>

What was the shape of these early Sunday Schools? One church in 1855 reported 48 students between the ages of seven and fourteen and described a typical class: "The Superintendent opens the school by reading a chapter before the class, and prayer. Then instructions are given from the chapter read in the form of a short lecture. Then recitations and reading, and then rewards dispensed according to merit."<sup>7</sup> These 48 pupils had collectively memorized 13,319 verses of the New Testament in the previous five months. This glimpse of a typical Sunday School illustrates how lecture and Scripture memorization were the most widely used teaching methods throughout the nineteenth century.

One problem the Sunday School faced from the beginning was poorly trained teachers.<sup>8</sup> Thus while Sunday Schools were originally exclusively for children, eventually adult classes were begun to educate Sunday School teachers. Some of these classes were quite demanding covering two years of instruction in Bible, archaeology, Christology, and educational methods.<sup>9</sup>

### Bible Schools in Churches of Christ (1906-1960)

By 1906 when churches of Christ were listed separately from Disciples in the United States census, the vast majority of congregations had Sunday Schools. There was, however, a vocal minority who felt, like the early Campbell, that Sunday Schools were an

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<sup>6</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* (1848) 470.

<sup>7</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* (1855) 477.

<sup>8</sup> See the scathing comments on unskilled teachers in *Lard's Quarterly* (July 1865) 378.

<sup>9</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* (1864) 547.

unauthorized innovation. By the 1920's this group had developed a separate identity. These "Non-Sunday School" churches of Christ today number around 25,000 members in 600 churches and are found primarily in Texas.

In the majority of churches of Christ, Sunday School programs were well-accepted as a part of each church's ministry. The greatest controversy was over what to call them. Many felt the term "Sunday School" sounded too denominational and preferred the name "Bible School."<sup>10</sup>

In the 1920's Bible Schools began to take the shape they have today in churches of Christ with graded classes, volunteer teachers (usually women for children's classes), and the use of printed lesson quarterlies. The growing importance of Bible Schools is reflected in repeated calls at Christian college lectureships for improving instruction through the use of trained teachers, well-equipped classrooms, printed materials, and established educational principles.<sup>11</sup> At the forefront of this call were two men who left their mark on education among churches of Christ: J.P. Sewell and Henry Speck. These men had been trained in education theory, and throughout the twenties and thirties they published a series of volumes on the work of educating various age groups within the church.

Judging from the Bible School materials used by most churches (the quarterlies published by the Gospel Advocate and Firm Foundation companies), the shape of the typical class was fairly constant from the 1920's to the 1960's. For children, there was an emphasis on Bible stories from both the Old and New Testaments. After the story, certain questions would be asked to impress upon the children's minds the main feature of the story. Memory verses

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<sup>10</sup> Even as late as 1947, J.P. Sewell and Henry Speck argued that "churches of Christ have no Sunday Schools," reserving the name "Bible School" for the church's educational program. See *The Church and Her Ideal Educational Situation* (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1947) 39.

<sup>11</sup> See for example the survey of discussion on Sunday Schools at the Abilene Christian Lectures in William S. Banowsky, *The Mirror of a Movement* (Dallas: Christian Publishing, 1965) 234-243.

were to be learned, although there was less memory work than was typical in the nineteenth-century Sunday School. For older children and adults, the lesson consisted of a reading from Scripture (usually from the New Testament), an outline of the passage, several fill-in-the-blank questions from the Bible text, and then a few questions on the religious teaching of the text. Studies were structured around a verse-by-verse study of books of the Bible. The few topical studies were also quite biblically based.

### **Christian Education During the Last Three Decades (1960-1990)**

A new pattern of leadership for the Bible School has developed in the last three decades. Until the 1960's, Sunday Schools were headed by volunteer leaders--at first called superintendents, later directors, coordinators or similar terms. In the 1960's this role began to be filled by paid ministers, first assistant ministers who had additional duties and later by full-time Educational Ministers.<sup>12</sup>

Today, medium-sized and even some small churches have paid educational directors. In many ways this has been a positive change, placing needed emphasis on the church's educational program. However one negative consequence has been the professionalization of the Bible School program. Elders may be led to think that all it takes to have a strong Bible School is to hire an education minister. Participation and planning by a variety of church members, which was historically one of the greatest strengths of the Sunday School, is often lost. Educational ministers and churches find themselves in a no-win situation. If educational ministers take an overactive role in running the educational program, they stifle the participation and leadership of members. On the other hand, if they turn the program over to others and assume the role of facilitator or resource person, their elders may

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<sup>12</sup> The first full-time educational director in churches of Christ was Alan M. Bryan who worked with the Broadway Church in Lubbock, see Banowsky, *Mirror*, 239.

question their work-habits or the value of even having a paid educational director.

A more detrimental consequence of relying on an educational minister to produce a quality Bible School program is the lack of biblical and theological knowledge expected of them. Many educational ministers are experts in educational theory, child development, and family studies, but have limited training in the text and meaning of Scripture, church history, and theology. Our Christian colleges perpetuate this lack of knowledge by offering degrees in Religious Education that require minimal hours in Bible and Theology.<sup>13</sup> When Elders interview someone for a position as educational minister, they assume the candidate has personal faith and extensive Bible knowledge. Such an assumption should not be made.

The expertise of educational ministers in technique, not content, reflects another significant change in the Sunday School: a change in curriculum. In the beginning, the sole purpose of Sunday Schools in churches of Christ was to teach the Bible. The Bible itself was the text, and teaching methods included lecture, reading and memory work. Early on, Sunday School libraries consisting of books for Bible study were established.<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1850's, quarterlies published by other denominations were being used by some congregations. By 1910, the Firm Foundation and Gospel Advocate companies were publishing their own graded quarterlies for ages 7-adult. The format of these quarterlies changed little until the 1960's, when a noticeable shift in the curriculum of the typical church of Christ Bible School began to take place. In children's classes, knowledge of the Bible, particularly memory work, has been at least partially replaced by an

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<sup>13</sup> This "double standard" between the training of pulpit ministers and educational directors is not unique to churches of Christ, but has for decades been the practice in seminaries throughout the country. The devastating effects of this practice are outlined by James D. Smart in *The Rebirth of Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 87.

<sup>14</sup> Moses Lard suggested each church have a 200 to 500 volume library for children, *Lard's Quarterly* (1865) 378.

emphasis on learning concepts (kindness, obedience, etc.) illustrated by biblical and secular stories. In classes for teenagers and adults, Bible study has generally been replaced by a study of "relevant" topics from a "biblical perspective."

To grasp the extent of this change, one has only to peruse the catalog of the Gospel Advocate Company. In 1970, almost every quarterly offered for purchase was on a particular book or section of the Bible. In 1990, along with studies of particular Bible books, adult quarterlies are available with the following titles: "From Worry to Happiness," "A Giving Heart," "Power to Become," "Practical Christianity," and "Spiritual Aerobics." While these studies may impart some spiritual truths, they are a long way from our traditional emphasis on Sunday school as Bible school.<sup>15</sup>

The driving force behind this shift in curriculum is a quest for relevance. In an attempt to "meet people where they are," more emphasis has been placed in our classes on the felt needs of individuals than on hearing the voice of Scripture. "Thus says the Lord," has been crowded out by "What will this do for me?"

What's wrong with this approach? In a society (and a church) that is increasingly unfamiliar with traditional Christian terms, should we not first identify what questions modern people are asking and then translate the gospel answers into terms they will understand?

This approach has its attractions. It makes us feel relevant, intelligible, and powerful. At base, however, it is unfaithful--to the power of God and to the biblical message. A theology of accommodation is always a theology of distortion. We stretch, bend, or cut the biblical message to accommodate what people want to hear. By doing so, we rob God's word of its power.

But there is a better approach, one with a long history in Christian practice. The theological term for it is "catechesis" or instruction in fundamentals of biblical faith. In the early church pagans who were interested in Christianity were given lengthy

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<sup>15</sup> As another example of this trend, a recent edition of a Bible school training publication popular among churches of Christ has articles on word games, puzzles, and giving children self-esteem, but not one quotation from the Bible.

instruction in the Old Testament stories and their fulfillment in Christ, in Christian terminology, and in Christian forms of moral behavior. Only after this learning did they confess their faith and put Christ on in baptism.<sup>16</sup>

This must be the purpose of our Bible schools today: to train both children and adults in the faith. To accomplish this aim, our emphasis must always be on scripture that provides "training in righteousness" (II Timothy 4:16), not on our own selfish needs.

### **The Future of Bible Schools in Our Churches**

Judging from the type of teaching being done, our Bible Schools are in trouble. Apparently we have overreacted to the limitations of earlier Sunday school teaching. No doubt some teachers grasped the powerful message of the Bible and moved their students to embrace it. But many times our teaching was shallow, relying solely on facts, not meaning. People who had been Christians for over forty years were still "filling in the blanks." Our children could recite the books of the Bible, but did not know the love of God.

Thus we fled sterile presentations of Bible facts to take refuge in relevance. What we have found is that all too often "relevant" answers to life's problems are not based on biblical theology. Rather, they are based on various models taken from the world: the business models of success, psychological models of self-fulfillment, sociological models of interpersonal relationships, and countless others.

But the problem with our Sunday Schools is our teaching, not the Scriptures. The correction to our "just the facts" approach is not the current insipid, topical, discussion classes where unprepared students share their ignorance. The solution is to go back to the Bible and rediscover its great themes of sin, salvation, calling,

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<sup>16</sup> For an interesting discussion of these contrasting approaches--translation and catechesis--see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 132.

covenant, responsibility, and God's love, themes relevant to any age.

We have a strong heritage as a people devoted to Bible study, a heritage reflected in our devotion to Bible School. Today our heritage is at risk. Through neglect and distracting preoccupations with technique and relevance, we have forgotten what gave our Sunday Schools their power: they were Bible schools. We must make them so again so we can answer the call voiced years ago by Alexander Campbell:

We may do this thing; we may cause our children to know the Holy Scriptures from their earliest years; and thus the unfeigned faith of the parents may by prayers and the favor of God, be transmitted to their children's children.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* (1840) 62.

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