
Its Greening: Exuberant Adolescence, 1860-1910

The 50 year period from 1860 to 1910 is probably the most important half-century of the Sunday school's development. It was during this time that the traditional Sunday school reached its peak in influence and attendance but also underwent dramatic and traumatic changes.

Like a teenager in enthusiasm, awkwardness, and innocence, there were the pressures of growing up. All the turbulent vicissitudes of such growth were mirrored in the Sunday school.

Near the end of the period, when buffeted by forces of culture including religion, urbanization, immigration, and the public schools, it grew up rapidly. The traditional Sunday school at puberty could hardly be recognized as it made its way out of the teenage years.

I. From Movement to Monument:

The Institutionalizing of the Sunday School, 1860-1890

The Civil War is a watershed in American history. Like tragic events within the lives of persons, this turmoil brought about a rapid maturation of the nation. It was as if the awkward youth had, through the wartime experience, rapidly grown up. Yet there still remained the ambition, self-confidence, and drive of the young adult. Even though many sore spots were still healing, the feeling abounded that the new nation had certainly survived its "experimental stage."

The mood of the nation seemed to have spawned two desires: the maintenance of the national unity and the more rapid establishment of secure institutions. Both desires reflected additional enthusiasm for the public school and the Sunday school, while at the same time bringing pressures to bear upon both.

Developments in Religion

Both change and challenge were apparent in the religious realm.

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As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., notes, “Perhaps at no time in its American development has the path of Christianity been so sorely beset with pitfalls as in the last quarter of the 19th century.”²⁷ In view of Darwinism and the new biblical criticism, the validity of the Bible was at stake.

Beginning perhaps with Horace Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture*, which was to have an impact on theology and religious instruction, was the “New Theology.” As early as 1843 Bushnell advanced the idea that “Children are to grow up Christian, and never to have known otherwise.” It furthered the religious thinking from man as God’s dependent to man as God’s partner in the salvation enterprise. The *New England Primer* had asserted, “In Adam’s fall/we sinned all.” But 100 years later, Lyman Abbott could write, “In falling, Adam did not represent me; I never voted for him.”²⁸ Here was a new view of man — not one to be converted, but rather one who would convert his own environment. This perspective of man which contrasted with the plight of man in an urbanized society led to what Hopkins has called “a social gospel sandwiched in between orthodoxy and evolution.”²⁹

At the same time that religion was being assaulted, urban and industrial developments saw the church fast losing its grip. Thus, both the church’s system of thought and its social program were under attack.

During the period 1860-1890 the culture was an ebullient, expanding one, both encouraging and enveloping an evangelistic American way of life.

By 1872 the Sunday school movement in America was riding a crest of popularity. Temporarily set back in its missionary program by the Civil War, it had regained its militancy with a new emphasis upon unity. Spurred by the Protestant religious revivals of the previous decade and the contributions of various evangelical denominations, its leadership continued to view the Sunday school as a great force for good and for God in the nation.

The pollen of the Sunday school “plant,” carried on by the breezes of a boisterous expansionism, found root in many new places and new forms. Thus, the Sunday school continued to grow and bear fruit throughout the nation’s “Golden Age.”

The Expansion of the Sunday School

The years 1860-1890 were epoch-making in the progress of the

Sunday school. Like its secular partner, the American Sunday school movement during this period was one of the greatest religious educational phenomena the world had ever seen. It influenced the religious education patterns of countries around the world.

Also like the public schools, the Sunday schools were the great religious common denominator. The united outreach effort of Sunday schools was pointed up in the statement that “the Sunday school is the only agency where all the church united in an effort to reach all the people” and that the motto for the Sunday school should be “all for all.”³⁰ By this time “most Americans who considered themselves Protestants sent their children to Sunday school.”³¹ And by 1874 it was estimated that nearly 20 percent, or one-fifth, of the entire population of the United States was connected with Protestant Sunday schools of the country!³² The fact is even more remarkable when one considers the entire frontier where Sunday schools were just being organized. In 1877 at an International Sunday School Convention, a reporter from Dakota, reporting for what he called the Great Northwest, said in his statements: “Of all the public religious institutions, the Sunday-school is the pioneer of the frontier civilization today. It is first the Sunday-school, then the church, then the public school.”³³ In his last sentence, the delegate succinctly summarized the prevailing Protestant educational and evangelistic strategy for the frontier areas.

It seems evident that this was an era of institution-building for the Sunday school, as it was for society and the public school. Credit is taken by the Sunday school as well as by the public school for being an institution for the progress of the nation. At the first International Sunday School Convention held in Baltimore in 1875, the president’s opening address referred to the Centennial year just being entered. In this address he declared, “The observance of our Centennial would be incomplete without a recognition of the agency of the Sunday-school, in conserving in society those religious principles which constitute the basis of civil liberty and secure its perpetuity.”³⁴

Promoters of the Sunday school spoke in glowing terms of its successes. Such triumphalism is reflected in the Yale Lectures of Henry Clay Trumbull in 1888:

In the latter third of the 19th century, Bible-study and Bible-teaching have a prominence never before known in world’s

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history, and vital godliness is shown and felt with unprecedented potency in the life and progress of mankind. This change is due to God's blessing on the revival and expansion of the church Bible-school as His chosen agency for Christian evangelizing and Christian training.³⁵

Sunday school enthusiasts were not the only ones who recognized the value of the Sunday school as an instructional agency in a country where there was little possibility of systematic religious instruction in the public schools. During the Centennial Exposition in 1876, the French government sent a Commission to the United States to study the principles and methods of primary instruction. The president of the Commission evidently found that no department of primary instruction in the country had impressed him as being more important than the Sunday school. "The Sunday school," he said, "is not an accessory agency in the normal economy of American education; it does not add a superfluity; it is an absolute necessity for the complete instruction of the child. Its aim is to fill by itself the complex mission which elsewhere is in large measure assigned to the family, the school, and the church." He went on to say, "All things unite to assign to this institution a grand part in the American life. Most diverse circumstances cooperate to give it an amplitude, a solidity, and a popularity, which are quite unique."³⁶

By 1887 it was estimated that American Sunday school had enrolled 1,000,000 teachers and 8,000,000 scholars. Compare this to the 11,000,000 enrolled in public schools in 1885 and one can see the popularity and extent of the Sunday school.³⁷

Foundations for the Uniform Lessons

The "big story" of this period, 1860-1890, was the formation of the International Uniform Lesson Series in 1872. It was an effort to provide a uniformity which many leaders felt would lead to a deeper national unity, especially in the face of increasing pluralism. The two main planks of the Uniform Lesson platform seemed to be the *convention movement* and the *teacher-training movement*. These two elements called for a uniformity around which Sunday school forces could rally.

The Convention Movement

From approximately the 1860's to the 1890's, the convention

movement “stood for all that was progressive, evangelical, and idealistic, in Sunday school service.”³⁸

These national conventions were primarily designed to provide delegates with the necessary enthusiasm to return home and organize state and county conventions. For example, in 1875 the report of the delegate from Kansas was that out of the 67 counties in the state, only 34 were organized. “The balance,” he said, “have largely no population, and as buffaloes and Indians do not take well to Sunday-school work, can’t do much in them!”³⁹ He went on to say that the Sunday schools were largely held in cabins and shanties and that they hoped to open them not only in summer, but also in winter.

The convention movement had an able ally in evangelist Dwight L. Moody. At the close of the Civil War, Mr. Moody returned to Chicago from his chaplaincy work in the Union Army to become engaged in Sunday school work. He had made known this purpose to his former associates in the YMCA’s chaplaincy program, William Reynolds and B.F. Jacobs. Mr. Moody told them, “When the war is ended, let’s give our strength to Sunday school work.”⁴⁰ This he did at many state conventions, including the one in Illinois which devised a plan to organize county and local societies on a much wider basis. Of this plan it was said in 1900, “To this action may be traced the system that now exists in America.”⁴¹ The idea of a more permanent and penetrating perpetuation of the “grass roots” was a major factor in Sunday school extension.

The Teacher-Training Movement

At approximately the same time, John H. Vincent, later to become a Methodist bishop, had become the father of the normal institute and the teacher-training movement.

Teacher-training institutes made the “one lesson each Sunday for everyone” an attractive and simple way to instruct volunteer teachers. In Sunday-school teachers’ institutes held from 1862 to 1869, a uniform topic of study in the same school was warmly advocated.

The convention movement, the teacher’s institute, and finally the Uniform Lesson System — a trinity of triumphalism for the Sunday school!

II. From Tradition to Transition: Challenge, Change, and Competition in the Sunday School, 1890-1899

The decade of the “Gay Nineties” was one of transition in America.

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Such a transition time was unsettling to society and to its institutions, particularly the public school and the Sunday school. In an era of upheaval, agents of change look upon institutions as avenues of change while traditionalists trust them as agencies of conservation. Conflicting forces, thus, use such institutions as a fulcrum for their particular interests. Because of its very nature as a uniquely popular institution, the Sunday school received more than its share of such pressures!

The period of 1890-1899 was for the Sunday school a time of transition from tradition. External forces of a confident though confused culture, and a popular though pressed public school system, bore in upon it. Coupled with the internal pressure of its own continued expansion, changing objectives, and competing educational agencies, the Sunday school was placed in an uncomfortable position indeed. Challenge and change were hurtling the Sunday school toward a confrontation with its own future.

The Sunday school in the decade of the nineties was riding a crest of popularity. Not only Protestants, but Catholics, Jews, and Mormons who saw its potential for religious indoctrination and propagandizing had joined the "Bible bandwagon." Even more than previously, the Sunday school became synonymous with "American religion." Such popularity in an increasingly pluralistic society was to test the foundations of the institution.

The very attempt to maintain an American Protestant "unity" in an age of increasing pluralism was difficult. An instructional system locked into an inflexible lesson outline, with a largely ungraded curriculum based solely upon the Bible, came increasingly under attack. The insistence of Sunday school leaders upon keeping non-biblical material out of the Sunday school, as well as other factors, led to the rise of extra-Sunday school instructional agencies. While originally perhaps complementary, these agencies later became competitive with the Sunday school. They drained lay leadership, finances, and the focus of attention away from the Sunday school as an instructional agency.

The rise of these complementary yet competing agencies also raised the question of the education primacy of the Sunday school. At the same time, from an educational viewpoint, the Sunday school like the public school, was feeling the beginnings of "progressivism." New educational theories, especially pertaining to the child and the teaching process, were beginning to have an impact, at least upon the

leadership of the Sunday school movement.

The Rise of Complementary and Competing Agencies

From 1890 to just past the turn of the century, a plethora of extra-Sunday school agencies and activities came into being. Christian Endeavor was begun in 1881 and the Epworth League in 1890. Others such as Baptist Young Peoples Union, Boys Brigade, Boy Scouts, and the YMCA camping program also began in this decade. Various student missionary groups also arose at this time. Two reasons can be postulated for this phenomenon: the circumscribing of the Sunday school by the church, particularly by the various denominations, and the failure of the leaders in the Sunday school movement to understand the unity of the educational process.

By becoming identified more closely with the established church, the Sunday school lost its ecumenical evangelistic dimension. Entire denominations had adopted the Sunday school as the primary instructional agency and had established departments to promote its work.

No doubt there were those who saw the student volunteer movements and social crusade activities as providing the interdenominational “revivalistic” thrust previously carried by the Sunday school. With outside agencies picking up the propagandizing and evangelizing roles, the Sunday school was to assume the more restrictive role of instruction. And that instruction was limited during this period to only the Bible.

The success of the Sunday school was still measured primarily in traditional terms. That is, increasing enrollments, conversions experienced, and the quantity of Biblical information dispensed. And, as historian Ahlstrom observes, the Sunday schools were not necessarily instructionally ineffective: “although they necessarily mirrored the country’s values, the Sunday schools did produce a pious and knowledgeable laity on a scale unequalled anywhere in Christendom.”⁴²

At the same time, it could probably be said that as an “educational movement,” the Sunday school deteriorated in the nineties. Though thousands of pupils continued to study and individual schools improved, the passion for Bible study and for securing conversions waned during the period. The fervor for evangelism was dying down and the flame for education was only a spark.

III. From Transition to Transformation: Progressivism in the Sunday School, 1900-1910

Progressivism was the theme of early twentieth century America. The spirit of progressivism permeated culture, including religion, and centered especially in public education. Since the Sunday school took its direction from these two sources — culture and education — it too was swept along on the progressive current. The progressive education movement was to especially influence the Sunday school in its educational objectives.

Protestant Christianity, as represented by the mainline denominations, had previously identified with American culture. Near the end of the nineteenth century, when the churches finally “took over” the Sunday school it was further inextricably linked to a secularizing culture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most mainline denominations had accepted the new theology which made little differentiation between the goals of Christianity and the goals of society. The Sunday school had finally moved into the church just at the time that the church had moved further into the culture.

Transformation in the Sunday School

“At the outset of the 20th century, the Sunday school seemed ready for another hundred years of dazzling growth.” In the 30 years following the International Convention of 1875, numbers in the Sunday school had more than doubled.⁴³

Perhaps some of the growth success in the Sunday school was due to the popularity of the organized class. Around the turn of the century, Sunday school classes for young men, young women, and adults, flourished. This development paralleled the increasing popularity of the public high school and college. As a result, the Sunday school, as an instructional institution, had moved beyond the work with children to include all ages.

Despite its continuing growth and success there was also continuing criticism of the Sunday school. Perhaps no school system has been so savagely attacked since 1900 as the Sunday school. One reason was its continuing lag behind the public school system in education standards.

Conservative Sunday school leaders did not seem to try to rectify the situation. They were largely occupied in promotion and mechanical organization, rather than education.

Perhaps in response to this situation, early in the twentieth century

all types of replacements were proposed for the Sunday school. And as Kennedy suggests, “the very variety of these attempts indicated the church’s continuing search for structures that would fulfill the nurturing task alongside what the public schools provided.⁴⁴ The search for better educational practices in the Sunday school, however, was not uniformly engaged in. Many traditionalists, glorying in the past, were neither interested nor able to bring the Sunday school into the present.

Neither did the Sunday school accept the challenges of industrialization or immigration. The response of Sunday school leadership to the American urban situation and to the immigrants who inhabited it was defensive. Ironically, one of the agencies most often employed to bring about the “American ideal” was largely impotent when faced with a new opportunity of “Americanizing” the hordes of foreigners touching American soil.

The Rise of the Religious Education Movement

The influence of religious educators, the progressive ideas of pedagogy and child psychology, and the demand for curriculum reform, better housing, and newer methods were seen in the area of religious instruction. While the general populus may have been fairly content with traditional practices in the Sunday school, the emerging progressive religious education movement was bringing transforming influences to bear upon the Sunday school institution.

There seemed to be at least five developments which would eventually transform the old-line Sunday school movement into a more modern religious education movement. Three of these pertained to new organizations: the Religious Education Association organized in 1903 for this stated purpose: “to promote religious and moral education”; also in 1903, a Department of Education in the International Sunday School Association, formed to extend the training and upgrading of Sunday school teachers; the formation of the Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations in 1910, bringing together in one ecclesiastical body representatives of all the mainline Protestant denominations.⁴⁵

The fourth factor was the employment of professional directors of Christian education. In 1907, a community religious education federation employed a full-time person to do the work for Sunday schools that a city superintendent of education did for the public schools. The next year several local churches employed a director of

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Christian education exclusively for their local work. This was a first step toward professionalizing the Sunday school agency which, heretofore, had been completely volunteer and dominated by the lay amateur educator.

Finally, there was the continued rise of extra-Sunday school activities, particularly the burgeoning movements for weekday religious instruction. These were to further broaden the idea of instruction being more than the Sunday school. The traditional Bible-centered Sunday school concept was to move toward that of a total church school idea.

Organized in 1903, the Religious Education Association had its nucleus in the Chicago area. Its executive committee was made up of William Harper, president, and professors George Coe and John Dewey of the University of Chicago, plus two others.

Another "Illinois Band"

Here then was another Chicago-based "Illinois Band." Like the earlier group of Vincent, Moody, Reynolds, Eggleston, and Jacobs, this group was committed to improving the Sunday school 30 years later. Both groups included scholars, laymen, and ministers and felt that their efforts were directed toward the needs of the nation. In both groups were men of vision, creativity, stature, and persuasion.

But it is in the differences of these two "Illinois Bands" that the transformation process of the Sunday school is reflected. The emphasis of the first group was upon conversion, of the second, upon character-building. For the first group, the program was extension, while for the second group it was education. Pertaining to curriculum, the first group promoted ungraded Bible-related, content-centered material, while the second group proposed a curriculum that was graded, life-related, and pupil-centered. The first group used personnel who were generally lay volunteers and often untrained. The second group insisted upon trained professionals wherever possible.

Transforming the Objectives of the Sunday School

It would appear that by the turn of the century, the doctrine of the separation of church and state was firmly implanted in the public schools. They were beginning to give up most of the moral and religious instruction which had traditionally been taught. Sunday schools, therefore, would have to provide the majority of moral and

religious instruction for the Protestant child. Such religious instruction was appreciably beyond the sectarian portion previously taught. This would demand not only an increasingly broadened curriculum beyond just biblical content, but would also require more qualified teachers. The new aim of the Sunday school was apparently to provide a religiously knowledgeable and moral citizen.

Changing of the objective from Bible instruction and conversion to character-building seems to reflect John Dewey's emphasis upon growth and child development. At the REA Convention in 1903, Dewey expounded upon the principle of gradual development of religious knowledge and experience, stating that as far as everyday life is concerned, "it becomes a matter of conformation rather than of transformation."⁴⁶ Whatever their own personal convictions, religious educators were being forced to think in terms of Christian experience as developmental rather than as a single event.

Bifurcation in the Sunday School

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Sunday school was not only undergoing transformation but also bifurcation. During the early years of the twentieth century there occurred a deep split within American Protestantism as far as the Sunday school was concerned. On the one side were the church professionals ready to reform the Sunday school and make it conform to both modern culture and current education practices. On the other side were the evangelicals who wanted to keep the Sunday school much as it had been in the early days. The split followed roughly along theological, sociological, and pedagogical lines. The "new theology" wedded to the "new education" seemed, to the evangelicals, to work toward a "new religious education" which appeared to approve scientific evolution and theological liberalism. Also, recognition of the pluralistic nature of American culture by the professionals posed a threat to the Protestant American uniformity designed and desired by the majority of evangelicals.

Because of the transforming nature of the religious education movement, and because of the split which was developing in the Sunday school ranks, it would never remain the institution envisioned by Vincent and Jacobs. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the Sunday school was undergoing transformation. Of the Sunday schools at that time, Lynn and Wright conclude, "in 1910 a dream was fading. It was

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the end of an era.”⁴⁷

Summarization of the Period

A period which began with the national culture largely molded by the Sunday school ended with the Sunday school largely molded by a national culture. From a dominant force in American culture at the beginning of the period the Sunday school became a diminishing force at the end of the period.

The Sunday school began the period as a participant in a national Protestant American religion, and at the end of the period became a participant in an American democratic civil religion.

At the beginning of the period, the Sunday school was part of a united Protestantism with one unified objective. But at the end, it found itself as part of a bifurcated Protestantism with disparate objectives. The seemingly inextricable link between the Sunday school and the theological position of the various Protestant denominations is evidenced by this development.

The Sunday school made a significant instructional contribution to both culture and public education at the beginning of the period, but was making a negligible contribution at the end.

At the beginning of the period, the Sunday school was a fellow-partner with public education in religious instruction, but by the end of the period, it was a follower of public education. The public school at the beginning of the period taught non-sectarian moral and religious values, while the Sunday school taught sectarian doctrines. By the end of the period, the public school had largely abdicated this role and the Sunday school had accepted the teaching of all of religious instruction.

The Sunday school began the period as a volunteer interdenominational movement, but ended the period under the domination of denominational institutionalism. The Bible-centeredness of the Sunday school at the beginning of the period made Sunday school interdenominational or even supra-denominational; at the end of the period it largely reflected denominational concerns.

The Sunday school began the period as a lay volunteer movement, but ended the period under the dominance of largely clergy professionals. Robert Lynn has projected as a potential thesis: “Wherever the leaders of a religious educational enterprise adopt modern, professional standards, there will be a consistent strain

toward integration of that institution with the larger social systems.” Could this be one of the contributing factors to the absorption of the Sunday school into the more secularistic, pluralistic American culture?

The Sunday school began the period as a school outside the church and at the end had become a school within the church. Beginning at best as only an adjunct to church life, it was seen as an integral part of the church’s educational ministry at the end.

The Sunday school began the period as a Sunday school associated with the church, and at the end of the period it had become part of the church as school.

At the beginning of the period, the Sunday school was designed almost entirely to provide instruction for children. But by the end of the period, it encompassed all ages in its instructional program.

There was uniformity of purpose and procedure in the Sunday school at the beginning of the period when the emphasis was upon instructing the masses. At the end of the period, when the emphasis in the Sunday school was upon instructing the individual, the approaches were diversified.

From Past to Present: Some Principles for the Sunday School

The major emphasis of the development of the Sunday school during the half century 1860 to 1910 was mobilization. This took three forms: the expanded use of lay volunteers, the development of the community of faith, and a defined and refined organizational and promotional program.

1. *Lay volunteers.* Early in its development the Sunday school moved from paid to lay volunteer teachers. This move accompanied its evangelistic outreach. One of the keys to the development and the continuation of the Sunday school has been lay persons sharing their faith with children, youth, and adults.

Interestingly, the Sunday school was the first movement, even before the public school, to give major teaching tasks to women. In those days women may not have controlled the wealth or possessed the right to vote — in many cases they had to be silent in the leadership of the church — but they fashioned the thought, the opinion, and the morals of Protestant children and youth. In an era without ERA, the power of example and teaching was present.

We need to realize that the Sunday school today is the only place in

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the world where some seven to eight million persons each week share their faith with others.

The task of Sunday school leadership today is not to replace the lay volunteer with highly educated professionals. Rather, it is to better learn how to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Enthusiasm and motivation need to be engendered by something like the convention movement. Some platform is needed to “rally the troops.” Encouragement and inspiration are always needed. Likewise, teacher training becomes very important. One of the problems faced by the Sunday school over the years are teachers who are “out of it,” using outmoded methods. Persons tend to teach as they were taught. For this reason many adults are still using rote methods of learning even though they may have at hand discovery-learning designed materials.

By in large, curriculum materials are better today than they have ever been. But the problem is to find adequately trained teachers to use those materials. Training, of course, is not the only criterion. If teachers are to share the Christian faith, they must know the Christian Christ in personal experience. More is caught than taught. Modeling is always the best method. I have found very few adults who could specifically tell me anything they had learned in Sunday school, but they can always remember at least one or two teachers who made a significant impact upon their lives.

If the Sunday school is to remain the Sunday school, it will have to do a better job of enlisting, equipping, and utilizing the lay volunteer.

2. The Sunday school is *a community of faith* where shared values are important, and each individual has a place. Interestingly, the Sunday school was most effective when individuals were accepted but where community became important. It is true that during the period under discussion, the individual became submerged to the welfare of the institution. This is an increasing problem today.

At no time in history has the Sunday school had greater opportunity to be “the family of God.” People are looking for others who care and share with them. In a mobile society, children and young people desire and need spiritual grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Their parents welcome some real mothers and sisters.

The Christian education executive of a denomination used to say that the Sunday school was 90% fellowship. There is a place for koininia, along with kerygma and didache.

3. *Organization and promotion.* During the half century under

discussion, the Sunday school was promoted with skill and enthusiasm, and the organization at every level was clearly defined.

Imagine prime time on Saturday night, an hour-long TV program devoted to the next day's Sunday school lesson. Each day several spots would be devoted to Sunday school meditation or a Golden Text.

At the height of the Sunday school movement, every major daily paper in America carried daily reading on the Sunday school lesson and Sunday's paper had a full lesson outline.

Imagine Congress adjourning for a great Sunday school parade down Pennsylvania Avenue as was the case in 1910. And see the President of the United States at the reviewing stand. This was the kind of promotion the Sunday school enjoyed in its heyday. It was a continuation of the missionary endeavor of the previous period.

Sunday school "enthusiasm" has been criticized at the same time Madison Avenue sales pitches are condoned. Whenever the Sunday school has enjoyed the support and promotion of the laity, it has grown, whether in the local congregation or nationwide. Excited people accomplish exciting results. Nothing substitutes for enthusiasm. People must be sold on what they are doing and the Sunday school has offered a unique place where persons could invite their family and friends and, in a less structured atmosphere than a worship service, convey some of that enthusiasm.

It is true that in a simpler structure the aim of the organization can also be simplified. At the same time, the basic problem of the Sunday school today remains the lack of an articulated purpose.

Ernest Boyer, former commissioner of education, was featured in a recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report*. He was asked the following question: "What has gone wrong with the public schools?" His response: "The public has expected too much of schools and the schools have accepted responsibilities traditionally fulfilled by home, church, and clubs. The central problem is a lack of clear purpose for the schools."⁴⁸

The same thing can be said today for the Sunday school. Too much has been expected of it and it has accepted too many responsibilities. At the same time, its task is unclear.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, the organization of the school united all the country in national, state, county, and local Sunday school associations. It was truly an ecumenical movement, and within the local church aims were clearly defined. Everyone knew what the task was — evangelism and Bible teaching. But today

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there is no such overarching organization. Individual schools take their view generally from the denominations. Aims are unclear so that teachers and leaders are unaware of their tasks. ■