



***JESSE LYMAN
HURLBUT***

***ORGANIZING
AND BUILDING
UP THE SUNDAY
SCHOOL***

Jesse Lyman Hurlbut

Organizing and Building Up the Sunday School

Modern Sunday School Manuals

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THE HISTORIC PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL MOVEMENT

1. **Magnitude of the Sunday-School Movement.** At the opening of the twentieth century the Sunday school stands forth as one of the largest, most widely spread, most characteristic, and most influential institutions of the Anglo-Saxon world. Wherever the English race is found the Sunday school is established, in the Mother isle, on the American continent, at the Cape of Good Hope, and in Australasia. In the United States and Canada it has a following of fourteen million members, representing every religious denomination. Its periodical literature has a wider circulation than that of any other modern educational movement. It touches every class of society, from the highest to the lowest; and its largest membership is found among the young, who are of all ages the most susceptible to formative forces. It is safe to say that this institution has exerted a powerful influence upon the majority of the men and women of to-day, and is now shaping the character of millions who will be the men and women of to-morrow.

2. **A Modern Movement.** Great as it appears in our time, the Sunday school is comparatively a modern institution. Undoubtedly, the germ of it can be traced back to that source of all the religious life of the civilized world, the Hebrew people. The elemental principle of the Sunday school is possibly to be found in the prophetic guilds before the Exile, and the schools of the Jewish scribes after the

Restoration. The great Bible class of Ezra (Neh. 8) was not unlike a modern Sunday school. Yet as an organized institution the Sunday school began with Robert Raikes, the philanthropist of Gloucester, England, who on one Sunday in 1780 called together a group of street boys in a room on Sooty Alley, and employed young women to teach them the rudiments of reading and religion. If Raikes had not happened to be the editor of the town newspaper, and in constant need of copy, his Sunday school might soon have been forgotten. But from time to time he published concerning it paragraphs which were copied into other papers and attracted attention, so that the Sooty Alley Sunday school became the parent of a vast progeny throughout the United Kingdom and beyond the seas. No institution then in existence, or recorded in church history, suggested to Robert Raikes either the name or the plan. Both arose out of his own good heart and active mind. But since his day both the name "Sunday school" and its plan of working have been perpetuated, and every Sunday school in the world is a monument to Robert Raikes, the editor of Gloucester.

3. A Lay Movement. It is a significant fact that the first Sunday school was established not by a priest, but by a private member of the Church of England, that its earliest teachers were not curates, nor sisters, but young women of the laity, and that throughout its history the movement has been directed and carried forward, in all lands and among nearly all denominations, by lay workers.^[1] This is noteworthy, because in the eighteenth century, far more than in our time, the teaching of religion was regarded as

the peculiar function of the clergy, and lay preaching was frowned upon as irregular. The earliest Sunday school may have been preserved from churchly opposition by its own insignificance; or it may have won the favor of the clergy by the fact that all its pupils at the close of the morning session were regularly marched to church. Whatever the cause may have been, it is certain that under a providence which we must regard as divine, both in its beginning and throughout its history, the Sunday school, although a laymen's movement, has received favor, and not opposition, from the clergy and the Church.

4. **Unpaid Workers.** It has been stated that Raikes paid the young women who taught in his Sunday school a penny for each Sunday. But as the movement went onward the conductors and teachers were soon giving their service freely; and this has been the prevailing rule throughout the world. There are a few Sunday schools wherein a curate or assistant pastor is the superintendent, and a few mission schools that employ a salaried teacher who works through the week as a visitor; but it may be asserted that the world-wide army of Sunday-school workers lay upon the altar of the Church their free-hearted, unpaid offering of time, study, and effort. This has been and is a noble, a self-denying, a splendid service; but it has also been a potent element in the progress of the movement. Those who would establish a school, alike in the city and on the frontier, have not been compelled to wait until funds could be raised for the salary of a superintendent and teachers. If only churches rich enough to pay for workers had established Sunday schools in our country, the Sunday school as an

institution would not have advanced westward with the wave of population. And not only has the unpaid service aided the growth of the movement, it has also added to its moral and religious power. The pupils and their parents have recognized that the teachers were working not for pay, but from love for their scholars and their Saviour; and that love has imparted to their message a power all its own.

5. Self-supporting. The Sunday school has been from the beginning and even now remains in large measure a self-supporting movement. It everywhere involves expense for furniture, for teaching requisites, for song books, for libraries; but for the most part the money to meet these expenses has been contributed in the school, among its own members, and not by the church. Instances are on record, even, where the church, in former times, charged and received rent for the use of its property by the Sunday school! Such short-sighted practice has been rare, but multitudes of churches have found the Sunday school a source of far greater profit than expense. In other words, those who have done the work of the school have also paid its bills, and many families that have received its benefits have been exempt from its burdens. It is noteworthy, however, that this condition is passing away, that churches are awakening to their responsibility and opportunity, and are giving to the Sunday school that liberal support which its work requires and deserves. In the ratio of investment and return, no department of the church costs so little and rewards so richly as an efficient Sunday school.

6. Self-governing. As a result of being self-supporting, the Sunday school has also been a self-governing institution.

Paying its own way and asking no favor, it has been almost everywhere an independent body, accepting no outside authority. It has grown up almost unrecognized and unnoticed by the churches. Fifty years ago scarcely one of the denominations, great or small, gave the Sunday school recognition as an integral part of its system. Little attention was paid to it in the ruling body of the local church. It chose its own officers, obtained its own teachers, made its own rules, and for its teachings was responsible to no ecclesiastical authority. It was generally an ally to, but independent of, the church. In this respect a gradual change has taken place. Its relations are now much closer, its position is defined; and the institution is sanctioned and supervised by the church.

7. **Self-developing.** The system of the Sunday school has been evolved without guidance or control from any human authority. It has been from the first self-organizing, and has been also self-developing. Some might consider the form which it has taken accidental; but it is better to regard it as providential. The men and women who laid the foundations of the Sunday school were building under a divine direction of which they were unconscious. Working apart from each other, on both sides of the sea, and separated by wilderness and prairie, everywhere they established an institution under the same general principles, and with substantial unity in its plans. Perhaps one cause for its unity of method is that it arose in the midst of the Anglo-Saxon race, a people which has instinctive tendencies toward law, system, and organization. If it had started among a Latin people, where men, and not systems, rule,

there might have been a different form of organization, with different aims, with different titles for officers, in every province. But throughout the English-speaking world, which is the habitat of the Sunday school, the institution bears the same name. Its principal or conductor is called a superintendent—cumbrous though the title may be—and its working force are known as teachers.

8. Bible Study. The most prominent trait in the Sunday school of the present is that it has become the most extensive movement for instruction in the Sacred Scriptures that the world has yet seen. All these millions of members, young and old, are engaged in the study of one book—the Holy Bible. Many of these millions, indeed, study the Bible superficially, unintelligently, with narrow interpretations and crude methods; yet in the Sunday schools of the lowest type as well as of the highest some portion of the Bible every week is brought to the scholars' attention. That the Bible is so generally known and so widely circulated, that the demand for this ancient book warrants the printing of more than ten million copies every year, is due more to the Sunday school, with all its defects of method, than to any other institution. This concentration of attention upon the Bible has grown gradually in the Sunday school. In the eighteenth century Sunday school, both of England and America, religious instruction was only one of its aims; and it was instruction in the catechism and forms of worship rather than in the Bible. But by slow degrees the Bible came more prominently to the front, until now the Sunday school is everywhere the school with one text-book. He who surveys the Sunday school through the inner eye beholds it

on one day in each week covering the continent with its millions of students, all face to face with some portion of the great text-book of religion. The thoughtful observer will reflect that a people whose children and youth come into weekly contact with the living word will not wander far from the path of righteousness.



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THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

The general characteristics of the Sunday school, as they have gradually developed during its long history, must be considered in any plan for organizing and conducting an individual school. The institution should be studied both ideally and practically: practically, to ascertain what the Sunday school has been and is now; yet ideally, with a view to developing its highest efficiency and largest usefulness. Such a plan for the specific Sunday school may be called its constitution. It is desirable to have the constitution in written or printed form, but it is not necessary. There is no more complete system than the government of Great Britain, yet it has no written constitution; and Mr. James Bryce has shown us in America that the instrument known as the Constitution of the United States by no means represents our own actual method of government. In every nation there is an unwritten law, wrought out of a people's consciousness, which is more imperative and enduring than any parchment scroll or printed form.

The general principles to be maintained in establishing and developing a Sunday school are the following:

1. **Aim.** The primary aims of the Sunday school are religious instruction, character-development, and effective service. It is not to teach history, nor science, nor sociology, but religion; and not merely to impart a knowledge of religion to the intellect of its pupils, but, infinitely more important, to make religion an effective force in the life of the individual scholar. As a Christian institution, in the definition given by one of its greatest leaders,[\[2\]](#) "The Sunday school is a department of the Church of Christ, in which the word of Christ is taught, for the purpose of bringing souls to Christ, and of building up souls in Christ." If it be in connection with a Jewish synagogue or temple—as are some of the best Sunday schools or Sabbath schools in our land—it is for the purpose of instruction in the faith of the ancient fathers, and of making their teachings live again in the men and women of to-day. A true religious education, such as the Sunday school seeks to give, will include three aims: (1) knowledge, (2) character, (3) service. There must be an intellectual grasping of the truth; a character built on the truth, out of faith in God, and the life of God inspiring the human soul; and service for God and humanity. The Sunday school seeks to develop not only saints in fellowship with God, but workers for God, who shall strive to realize on earth the kingdom of God, not seeking to be ministered unto but to minister. There have been centuries in the past when the Christian ideal was the cloistered saint, living apart in communion with God. But that was a pitiably incomplete conception of the perfect man. In our age we have the

larger ideal of saintliness with service; and to promote this should be the aim of every Sunday school.

2. **Method.** To attain its aim the Sunday school employs the teaching method. The Sunday school is not, as some weak-minded people have called it, "the nursery of the church." Nor is it, as it has been named, "the Bible service"; for, although it holds a service, it is more than a service. It is not—or should not be—a gathering of groups, large or small, where silent hearers listen to sermonettes by little preachers, miscalled teachers. It holds a service imbued with the spirit of worship, yet worship is not its central purpose. It should have music, but it is not primarily a service of song. It should be pervaded by an atmosphere of happiness, but mere enjoyment is not its object. The Sunday school is a *school*; and the very word shows that its aim is instruction and character formation, and its method is that of teaching. For the work of a Sunday school the essentials are three:

(1) There must be the living teacher who is fitted to inspire, to instruct, and to guide. His part is not merely to pour knowledge into his pupils, but to awaken thought, to guide the search for truth, to call forth expression in character and in action.[\[3\]](#)

(2) There must also be the scholar who is to be taught. It is his part in the process of instruction not merely to listen and to remember, not merely to receive impressions, but to give expression to the teaching, in life, in character, in influence, and in service. The true effectiveness of the teaching in the Sunday school will be shown by the reproductive power of the truth in the life of the scholar.

(3) There must be a text-book in the hands of both the teacher and the pupil. In any school for religious instruction one book will of necessity stand prominent, that great Book of books which records the divine revelation to man. The Sunday school may teach history, geography, institutions, doctrines, literature of the Bible, but these only as a framework or a foundation for the education of the heart into a personal fellowship with God. This character-molding, faith-impelling force is the divine truth taught in the Bible through the experiences and teachings of patriarchs, prophets, priests, psalmists, sages, and apostles, and above all by the words and life and redemptive work of the Master himself. And the subjects of study in the Sunday school need not be limited to the text of Scripture. There may be extra-biblical material for the teaching of character and service; and all this should be open to the Sunday school.

3. Relation to the Church. However independent of the church organization the Sunday school may have been in its beginnings, and however self-dependent some union Sunday schools may of necessity be in certain churchless regions, the general fact is established that the Sunday school as an institution belongs to the church, is under the care of the church, has a claim upon moral and financial support by the church, should be a feeder to the membership of the church, and should gratefully accept the supervision of the church. It should regard itself and be recognized by all as in many ways the most important department of the church.

4. Government. All power must be under direction, and the mighty energies of the Sunday school especially need a