

Why the Sunday School Should Be the Outreach Arm of the Church

A "Back to the Basics" Article

The "battle cry" of the Sunday School/Discipleship Team is "Back to the basics . . . because they work!" In my travels around our beautiful state, I have discovered that a disturbing number of churches of all sizes have abandoned the basics of effective Sunday School work. In our recent survey of 1,604 smaller churches (January-February, 2004) we asked this question: "In your church, what is the purpose of Sunday School?" We offered a multiple choice of 1) Bible Study, 2) In-Depth Bible Study, 3) Fellowship, 4) Growth, 5) Outreach, and 6) Other (Specify). We were amazed, and at the same time dismayed, at the multitude of answers that were far from the real purposes of Sunday School. For example, one respondent checked Bible Study and Other. They specified "To Eat" as the other purpose! Another respondent checked Other and specified that their Sunday School was for the Bus Ministry. Many others checked In-Depth Bible Study, which has a strong tendency to close the group to the unbeliever. Our churches have strayed far from the true purposes of effective Sunday School Ministry. It is time to return to the basics . . . because they work!

Sunday School has, as its prime mission "...to teach the Bible" (A. V. Washburn, 1960). It's second, and equally important mission is to evangelize the lost! It is the evangelism portion of this mission I want to explore with you today.

Let's take a look back in history and see what some of our great Baptist leaders have said about Sunday School. In 1902, Dr. E. Y. Mullins said: "The Sunday School must, more and more prove a factor of power in the pastor's work. Already in many churches the Sunday School is the chief and almost only hope for church growth. But whether in the family church, or the church among the masses of the great city, or the country church, the Sunday School will remain the most hopeful field of evangelistic endeavor" (Barnette, 1937 – Page 17). In his book *Building A Standard Sunday School* (1922), Arthur Flake states that the school (Sunday School) shall be positively evangelistic. He identifies the Sunday School as the church's greatest soul-winning opportunity. He further states that "...the soul winners of a church are found in the Sunday School" (Pages 98-99). In other words, the Sunday School is, by design, positioned in the life of the church to be the most effective evangelistic organization available to the pastor and leaders to fulfill the Great Commission!

P. E. Burroughs (1934) begins his chapter on *Winning Through The Sunday School* (Page 59) by saying "We have already intimated that a chief agency at present, depended on in evangelistic effort, is the Sunday School. The fact is now so generally recognized that it does not call for discussion" (Page 59). Today, we have lost sight of this "generally recognized fact" that Sunday School IS the chief agency for evangelism in the local church! We must reclaim this important basic principle.

In discussing the focus and purposes of Sunday School, J. N. Barnette states that "Evangelism is the chief work of the church." He goes on to say that "The Sunday School is the chief agency of the church in evangelism. A Sunday School provides a church with its greatest field for evangelism. The Sunday School puts major emphasis upon reaching people – all classes of people – the lost as well as the saved" (Barnette, 1937).

Southern Baptists have long been seen as leaders in the Sunday School movement. In the 1940's and 1950's, Southern Baptists had phenomenal growth in the local church. The basic principle of Sunday School being the outreach arm of the church made that growth possible. Churches actively practiced this basic principle with marked success.

More recently, leaders have continued to identify the high priority of evangelism in the Sunday School. In *The Ten Best Practices To Make Your Sunday School Work* (Hemphill and Taylor, 2001) the authors state "The age-graded Sunday School ministry provides the best organizational structure for organizing a church's evangelistic, outreach, and ministry visitation effort" (Page 134). In the *Essentials for Excellence* (Raughton and Hanks, 2003) the authors state that Sunday School "... is a most efficient way to reach people for Christ" (Page 9). Ken Hemphill, in his book *Revitalizing The Sunday Morning Dinosaur* states that "The Sunday School that is designed to fulfill the Great Commission must go to work in outreach before anything else. Developing an evangelistic Sunday School and church is not so much a matter of strategy as it is a matter of commitment and climate" (Page 93). Many others have identified evangelism as one of the two primary missions of the Sunday School. A Sunday School that is active, in appropriate balance, in the five functions of the church will become a catalyst for healthy growth. Evangelism is the first of the five functions.

Unfortunately, in today's church culture, leaders seem to know that the Sunday School is the best organization in the church to reach the lost for Christ, but make little effort to put into practice the basic principles to accomplish the task. The leaders of the church today must wake up to the reality that a mediocre Sunday School, one focused on itself and not the lost in the community, will not get the job done! Consider the following. In the book *Conducting Potential Sunday School Worker Training* (Poling, 1992), ten reasons are given for making the Sunday School the major outreach organization of the church. They are:

1. *The Sunday School is to witness and lead persons to accept Christ as Savior and Lord.*
2. *The textbook of the Sunday School is the Bible, which points the way to salvation and to the Christian life.*
3. *The Sunday School is church-centered.* Our Lord gave His commission to the church – no other entity has this task. The Sunday School derives its purpose from the mission of the church.
4. *The Sunday School has the largest membership of any organization.* More persons are enrolled in Sunday School; hence, a potentially large force exists to assist the church in its mission.
5. *The Sunday School has the greatest potential membership.* Sunday School is for the youngest baby, children of all ages, youth, and all adults – married or single. Sunday School has the potential to reach out to all members of all families. Anyone, regardless of his/her spiritual condition, can study God's Word. Sunday School has a wonderful opportunity to lead lost persons to study God's Word and to come to know Him as their personal savior.
6. *When the Sunday School is used as the outreach organization, less overlapping and duplication in efforts takes place.*
7. *The Sunday School meets 52 weeks a year.* Sunday School is not an "off-and-on" organization. It takes no vacation; it does not temporarily disband. It is solid and stable. Throughout Southern Baptist history, the Sunday School has remained viable and alive – in both good times and bad times.
8. *The Sunday School has the largest number of workers.* The Sunday School in most churches has more workers than all of the other organizations combined.
9. *Sunday School is organized for outreach, for witnessing, for Bible study, and for ministering.* The structure is there and the people are available. In fact, the genius of Sunday School outreach, witness, and ministry is the assignment of small groups of persons to a worker.
10. *The Sunday School takes the Great Commission and divides it among all the people.* The Sunday School is organized and mobilized with each class and department responsible for specific people.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus placed great value on the individual. The following verses are a small sampling of the many scriptures that emphasize His love and concern for the individual: "Indeed, the hairs of your head are all counted. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7, HCSB); "I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don't need repentance." (Luke 15:7 HCSB); and "A man is worth far more than a sheep . . ." (Matthew 12:12a HCSB). He also used strong statements in an effort to help us understand the value of a man's soul. "What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?" (Matthew 17:26 HCSB). Jesus has shared with us, in no uncertain terms, the value of the individual and his/her soul to the very Kingdom of God. If a man's soul is so important to our Savior, can we be complacent by not sharing the Gospel with those who are lost in our communities around the State? And what is the best way to reach the lost of our community? Have you considered an active Sunday School Ministry that targets the lost?

If you need to make some changes in your Sunday School so it can become more evangelistic in nature and function, what do you do? Good question! I have outlined three steps that will get you started on this journey. Remember, it took you a long time to get where you are today – it will take time to get you back to fully practicing this basic of effective Sunday School ministry.

The first step is for you and your key Sunday School leaders to begin praying about this issue and asking God to give you wisdom in making the right decisions.

The second step for your Sunday School leadership team is to answer the following questions as honestly as possible:

- How can we “educate” the congregation about this need to change the mindset and practice in the Sunday School organization? Consider the Five Star Church Strategy as a foundation for these changes.
- How can the pastor champion Sunday School and share the importance of these changes? I suggest you consider the pulpit and printed communications as foundational to your effort.
- What evangelism strategy will you use? There are many different resources including “*Outreach Teams That Win: G.R.O.W.*”, “*Sharing Jesus Without Fear*”, and “*Learning To Share My Faith*” are a few of the many resources available (all of these resources can be ordered from LifeWay Christian Resources). The “*FAITH Evangelism Strategy*” is also available but requires special training for the Pastor and selected lay leaders.
- What training needs to occur before this change can be implemented? The training will most likely encompass Sunday School teachers and other class leaders, those who keep records (at all levels), and the class members (the congregation), to name a few.
- What other resources need to be gathered to support this change? You may want to consider one of the many computer software resources that assist the church in maintaining appropriate records.
- Is restructuring the Sunday School organization needed to support these changes? If so, what needs to change?
- What else has been discovered on this journey that needs to be addressed?

The third step is to develop a strategy and action plan to move your Sunday School from where it is today to becoming the outreach arm of the church. Your Associational Sunday School Equipping Team (ASSET) and the Sunday School/Discipleship Team of the Missouri Baptist Convention are resources you can call on for assistance.

Practicing the basic principles of effective Sunday School ministry is key to becoming a Great Commission church; one that has a true kingdom focus. Being intentional in making the Sunday School the outreach arm of the local church will be a great start in your pursuit of excellence as you strive to become a Five Star Church!

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