



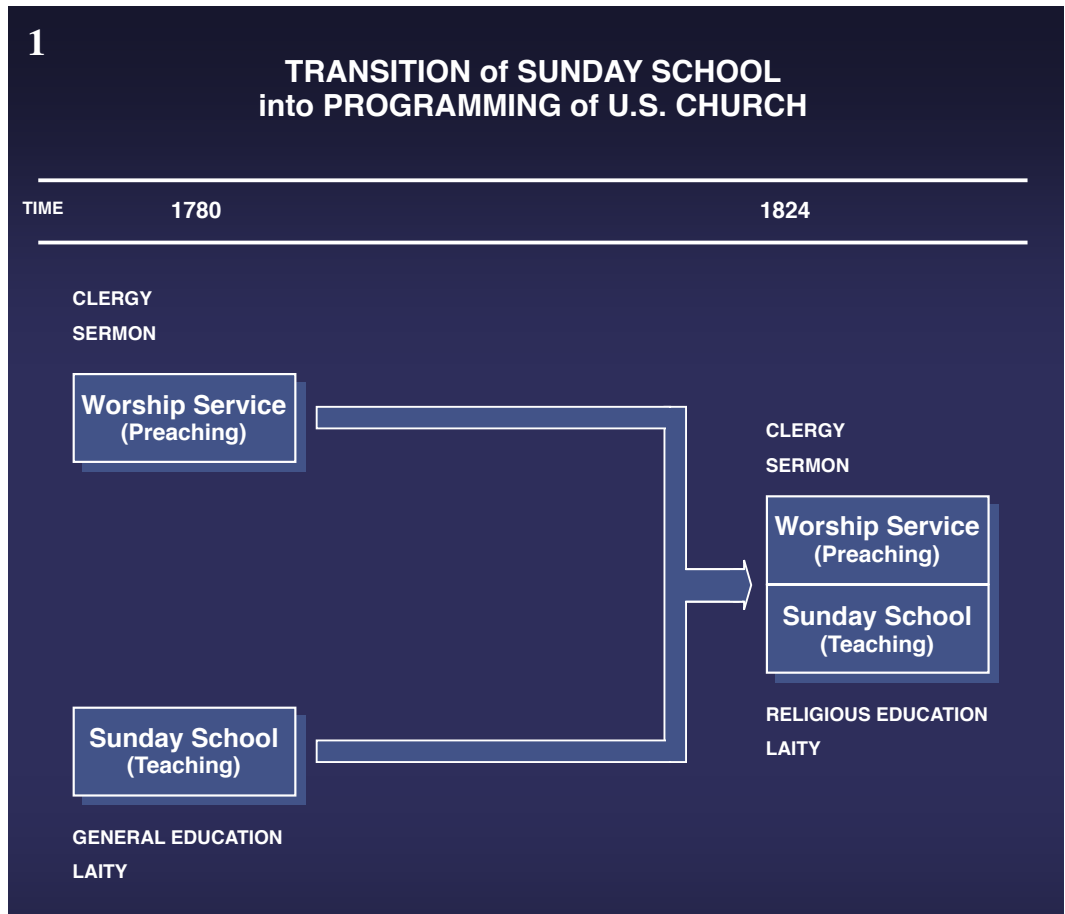
Sunday Schools

THE CHURCH'S ELUSIVE SEARCH

In the last two centuries, two important movements have been integrated into the programming of the local church in the United States. In both cases, the incorporation of each was motivated by the desire to acquire something—something that had been missing and thus something for which the local church had been searching.

Let's consider these two movements.

When Christian education is discussed, we tend to think of it in relation to teaching at a particular time and place. Typically, we think of Christian education taking place in an “education building” on Sunday mornings from 9:30 to 10:30. Looking to the



New Testament, Christ taught the twelve Disciples and instructed them to teach others (Matt 28:20); in the book of Acts, the Apostles were teaching from house to house (Acts 2:42); and Paul instructed his followers to entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2). So, why did “teaching” fail to become an integral part of the church until the nineteenth century?

Reason

The modern Sunday-school movement is generally agreed by historians to have begun in Gloucester, England, by Robert Raikes in 1780. At that time, the conditions for the common people in England were deplorable and a system for public education did not exist. In an industrial center like Gloucester, children of the lower class would work in the factories during the six-day week and then roam the streets on Sundays. Violence and crime were the way of life¹

In the midst of this chaos, Robert Raikes was “convinced that vice was caused by idleness, which in turn was caused by ignorance.”² With this presupposition “he concluded that vice could be prevented by instructing the children.”³ Therefore, he began his first Sunday school in 1790 “not to teach the Bible but to teach reading, writing, and religion to poor children of the purpose of bettering their lot and bringing about reform in society.”⁴ While general education was the primary purpose of the school, the Bible was the text used in the school. As a consequence, the school became evangelistic in nature.

Raikes demonstrated the value of his schools and the movement expanded rapidly. By 1831, “it was claimed that Sunday schools in Great Britain then enrolled approximately 1,250,000 children.”⁵ The continued growth of the Sunday schools in England, as well as in America, were the result of Sunday school unions and societies, which were led by lay leadership. As such, the Sunday school was promoted as an organization independent of the church, primarily since it was viewed as a school that met on Sunday to improve the moral condition of the lower class.

A little more than forty years after Raikes founded the movement, the church in America began to incorporate the Sunday school into its programming. Churches were receptive and adopted Sunday school into its programming for the following reasons:

1. Religious instruction was being eliminated from the public schools based upon the principle of separation of church and state.⁶
2. It became evident that the Sunday school would succeed even if opposed.⁷
3. Denominations would have a means of stressing their particular doctrinal teachings.⁸

In parallel with the establishment of the American Sunday School Union in 1824, denominations created their own organizations to support the Sunday school: Baptist—1825; Congregationalists—1825; Methodists—1827; and Lutherans—1830.⁹ As a result, the Sunday school asserted itself into prominence in the church, with emphasis shifting from general education to religious education, with adult also being included. Evangelism, however, remained the major emphasis of Sunday school.

Result

The incorporation of the Sunday school into the programming of the church resulted in the convergence of the worship service and Sunday school to form one entity (see chart 1). As a result, the church had two major functions:

1. Preaching, associated with the worship service
2. Teaching, associated with the Sunday school

While preaching remained the exclusive domain of the clergy, teaching was the primary realm of the laity. Since the clergy was now responsible for the oversight of the Sunday school, this was the beginning of ministers of Christian education.

Small Groups

The second movement incorporated into the programming of the twentieth century church was that of the small group. When small groups are discussed, we tend to think of a small number of believers coming together on a regular basis (weekly, bimonthly, or monthly) for any number of reasons: prayer, Bible study, fellowship, eating, fun, etc. We remember that Christ spent the majority of His time with a small number of disciples (the Twelve) and Paul usually traveled with a small number of followers. So, why did small groups not become an integral part of the church until the twentieth century?

Reason

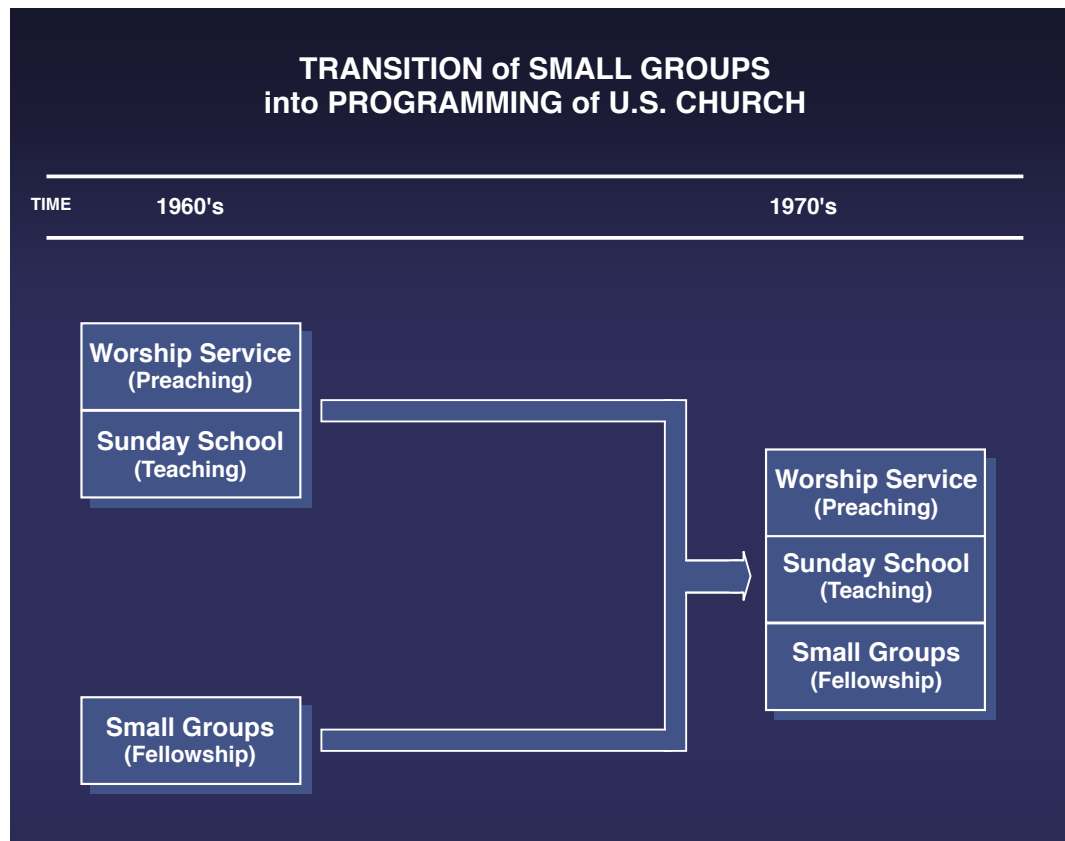
Christ and Paul ministered to small groups, as referenced above. In addition, there are numerous accounts of the church in Acts meeting in house churches. However, in an era of mega-churches in the twentieth century, it became evident that authentic, biblical fellowship could not occur in larger group settings (e.g., worship service or Sunday school).

Even before the church in the later part of the twentieth century became aware of the problem, para-church organizations (Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Navigators, etc.) had already utilized the small group setting in their ministries. During the late 1950's and early 1960's these para-church organizations, again under lay leadership, understood the advantages of the small group as an effective teaching and fellowship environment.

As with the earlier Sunday school movement, the church perceived the value of the small group movement, particularly for fellowship. The local church quickly began to adopt small group ministries in the 1970's.

Result

The incorporation of the small groups into the programming of the church resulted in the convergence of the worship service, Sunday school, and small groups to form one entity (see chart 2). As a result, the church has three major functions:



1. Preaching, associated with the worship service
2. Teaching, associated with the Sunday school
3. Fellowship, associated with small groups

Preaching remains the exclusive domain of the clergy, while teaching and small groups are the primary realm of the laity. Since the clergy was now responsible for the small group's oversight, this was the beginning of ministers of small groups in the church.

Evaluation

The church existed 1,800 years before the modern Sunday school and 1,900 years before the modern small groups. Both, however, have become major programs within the local church. "Why so recent?" And, "Why so important?"

Maybe a more important question would be, "What had been lost that the church needed to add two major programs?" Or, "How and why had the loss occurred?" If teaching and fellowship were lost, which the recent inclusion of these major programs in the church suggest, the questions remain, "How and why did they disappear?" Beyond that, "Are these two programs, as implemented, the correct ones to address the need for teaching and fellowship in the church?"

You have heard the adage, "When everything else fails, read the instructions." The answer to these questions can be found in a study of the New Testament. From It, we should develop our biblical *philosophy of the ministry* leading to a biblical *methodology in the ministry*. Only then will we be able to evaluate current ministry programming and be able to properly align ministry with the Scriptures.



Endnotes

1. C. B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 222-23.
2. Ibid., 224.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 225.
5. Elmer L. Towns, *A History of Religious Educators* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 235.
6. C. B. Eavey, 241.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 251.
9. Ibid., 242.