

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Baptists and Local-Church Education: Is Sunday School Ministry Still Relevant?

Dennis Foust

The Past

There are only 110 miles between Gainsborough, England, the birthplace of Baptists in 1609, and Gloucester, England, the birthplace of the Sunday School movement in 1780. To understand either movement, Baptists or Sunday School, one must study both.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most Baptists in the United States experienced Sunday School. As early as 1816, Baptist churches in Boston and Philadelphia convened Sunday School to help children learn to read and write and to instruct them in scripture and doctrine. By 1824, the American Baptist Publication Society (ABPS) was founded and the influence of Sunday School expanded. Throughout the nineteenth century, Baptists were at the forefront of using Sunday Schools to lay the foundation for a literate American society.

No other Baptist group emphasized Sunday School more than the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) through its Sunday School Board founded in 1891. In *The Sunday School Board: Ninety Years of Service*, Walter Shurden identified four ways in which this agency guided Baptist ministry: "an educational force," "a missionary and evangelistic force," "a financial force," and an influence in creating "denominational unity."² As the unity of the Southern Baptist Convention disintegrated between 1979 and 1989, many congregations turned away from the Sunday School Board looking to other publishers for trustworthy resources and support for their ministries through Sunday School.

The Present

An increasing number of congregations have moved away from traditional Sunday School groups for all ages and stages of life. Although some question whether the Sunday School model is still relevant, congregations know they must invest faithful attention to nurturing mature faith in the lives of preschoolers, children, students, and adults.

So, why do most congregations continue their Sunday Schools? Is it more than simply tradition or a program that has too much emotional connection for members to walk away? Is it possible that we have not found a better way to organize ourselves congregationally in living out specific dimensions of Christ's vision for his Church?

The Future

As congregations seek to revitalize their Sunday Schools (or whatever they choose to call their ministries that focus on spiritual formation and faith community), they need to:

- Revisit the reasons why Christ's Church must teach
- Include persons of all ages in caring groups providing friendship, support, prayer, crisis response, and compassionate affirmation in the midst of diversity
- Emphasize relationships (do whatever it takes to truly know one another)
- Focus on how obedience to Christ and being guided by the teachings of scripture are connected to practical life-related issues
- Offer all the resources and support needed by teachers and leaders
- Accept nothing less than the pursuit of excellence by those equipping volunteers
- Expect and affirm the pursuit of excellence from each volunteer
- Emphasize involvement in local needs
- Teach people how to pray, love, communicate, live in healthy patterns, share Christ, observe spiritual practices and discover a sense of purpose/calling
- Challenge people to live in obedience to Christ and scripture
- Keep parents and grandparents informed about their children and students
- Provide opportunities for service to others
- Assure a warm and welcoming environment assimilating new people
- Nurture a thinking climate where all questions and views are considered
- Follow up on each and all guests with calls, emails, or visits
- Encourage group members to be alert to prospects for your group
- Be aware of different levels of and capacities for commitment
- Offer teachers opportunities to increase their literacy in the Bible and theology
- Refuse to talk about issues without talking through issues
- Guide people to think morally, see globally, and live faithfully
- Follow through with people's concerns until they are alleviated or embraced
- Help group members identify ways they see God at work in today's world
- Ask group members where they sense God calling them to be involved in the ministry of the Kingdom.

In 1780, as Robert Raikes gathered children from the streets of Gloucester, England, he sensed the Holy Spirit as he saw a need in his context and responded missionally. What will the Sunday School look like in the future? Will it be a program focused on congregational numbers? Or, will it be a ministry calling people to sense the Holy Spirit as they see needs in their contexts and determine ways they might respond?

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¹ Walter B. Shurden, *The Sunday School Board: Ninety Years of Service* (Broadman Press: Nashville, TN), 95.