A critique of the Southern Baptist Sunday school's attitude toward children based on current and historical analyses

Amy Joyner
A Critique of the Southern Baptist Sunday School’s Attitude Toward Children Based on Current and Historical Analyses

Senior Honors Thesis

Dr. Philip Hart

Amy Joyner
April 29, 1991
Acknowledgments

Some projects take a long time to come to fruition, and this paper is certainly one of them! It's been a "long, hard haul," and I want to take this opportunity to thank some of the people who have helped me along the way. First, I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Committee of the University of Richmond for providing funds which enabled me to attend an Auburn Theological Seminary conference entitled "The Child, the Church, and God." Second, I would like to thank Diane Smith, Wayne Coley, and June Hardy Dorsey for taking time out of their busy schedules to let me interview them. Third, I would like to thank Mrs. Sue Ratchford in the Boatwright Library Interlibrary Loan Office for her assistance in locating several "obscure" materials. Special thanks also go to Kathy Myers and Joanne Williams, both of whom saved my life by helping me type this paper. Finally, I extend my gratitude to Dr. Philip Hart -- my professor, my mentor, and my friend. Thank you for your patience and understanding.
A Critique of the Southern Baptist Sunday School’s Attitude Toward Children Based on Historical and Current Analyses

I. Introduction
   A. Current status of Sunday School
      1. Decline of Sunday School in mainline Protestant denominations
      2. Growth of evangelical and Southern Baptist Sunday Schools
   B. Motivation for a study of the Southern Baptist Sunday School
      1. Need for an understanding of the numerical success of the Southern Baptist Sunday School
      2. Need for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Southern Baptist Sunday School in ministering to children
   C. Guidelines for evaluation: denominational loyalty, vision, caring, and commitment

II. Perspectives on the early Sunday School movement and its influence on the Southern Baptist Convention
   A. The English Sunday School
      1. Robert Raikes: Father of the Sunday School movement
      2. William Fox: Founder of the first Sunday School society
   B. Opposition to the formation of Sunday Schools
      1. Aristocratic protest
      2. Church protest
   C. The growth of Sunday Schools in America
      1. American Baptists and the Sunday School
      2. The formation of the Southern Baptist Convention and its Sunday School program

III. Denominational fervor as a factor in the emergence of the Southern Baptist Sunday School
   A. Precursors to the present Sunday School Board
   B. The founding of the present Sunday School Board
      1. Frost’s campaign and the Convention of 1891
      2. Frost and denominational territorialism

IV. Concern for children as a factor in the development of the Southern Baptist Sunday School
   A. Basil Manly, Jr. and the concern for conversion
   B. Historical setting for the conversion concern
      1. The 1800’s and the preoccupation with death
      2. The view of children as mini-adults and sinners
   C. Changing views of children: from devilish sinners to innocent lambs
   D. The evolving Southern Baptist Sunday School and the conversion concern: Changes in the curriculum from 1895-present

V. Current Southern Baptist Sunday School literature and the conversion concern
   A. The push for conversion in the older children’s literature
B. Concerns about the conversion push
C. Values of Southern Baptist Sunday School literature despite concerns
   1. Age-level appropriateness
   2. Sound educational principles
   3. Sensitivity to the needs of children
VI. Southern Baptist commitment to Sunday School as an inclusive agency of the church
   A. The Sunday School as an evangelistic agency of the church
   B. The Sunday School as a community-building agency of the church
VII. The Southern Baptist Sunday School and the future
   A. Westerhoff's critique of the Sunday School
   B. Southern Baptist Convention concerns
VIII. Conclusion
Sunday School, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For some, Sunday
School elicits a host of positive memories and current images: playing games, making
bread, singing songs, coloring, reciting memory verses, studying Scripture, enjoying
refreshments, talking with friends, laughing and sharing. For others, Sunday School
is simply a waste of time. In fact, in 1957 Life magazine labeled Sunday School “the
most wasted hour of the week.”¹ It seems that more and more Americans in recent
decades have agreed with this pronouncement, for Sunday School attendance
among mainline denominations has continued to drop at a steady rate. In 1970,
Sunday School enrollment was 40.5 million, but by 1986, Sunday School enrollment
had plunged to 26.6 million.²

Despite these dismal figures, however, there is some hope. More conservative
and evangelistic denominations managed to make it through the 1970’s with their
Sunday School programs still intact and even growing. The Assemblies of God, the
Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Baptist General Conference, the Church of
God, and the Southern Baptist Convention experienced Sunday School growth
during the 1970’s.³ Table I in the Appendix shows that Sunday School in
conservative denominations such as the Assembly of God and the Southern Baptist
Convention have also continued to grow throughout the 1980’s while Sunday Schools
in many mainline denominations have continued, for the most part, to decline in
memberships.

In an effort to understand the continued growth of the Sunday School among
some denominations despite an overall decline, this paper will focus on the
elementary Sunday School program of the Southern Baptist Convention. However,
this paper is intended to be much more than a simple analysis of a numerical
phenomenon. Since numbers never tell the whole story, and a Sunday School
program may have a high enrollment without being truly successful, it is the contention of this paper that a Sunday School program is successful when it provides a caring place in which children can be nurtured in the faith. Accordingly, this paper is also an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the Southern Baptist Sunday School in ministering to the needs of its children.

Tim Stafford in a recent article in Christianity Today provides a critique of the modern Sunday School which addresses both the issue of Sunday School growth and the issue of children in the Sunday School. Stafford asserts that modern Sunday Schools are failing to grow for a variety of reasons, including a lack of commitment to Sunday School, a lack of vision, a lack of denominational/local church loyalty, and a lack of concern about children. One reason (perhaps the main reason) that Southern Baptist Sunday Schools have been so successful numerically is that Southern Baptists are currently and have been in the past deeply committed to the Sunday School. They are vision-oriented, denominationally loyal, and concerned about children. What follows is an analysis of the development of the Southern Baptist Sunday School and the current status of the Southern Baptist Sunday School. As these issues are discussed, the factors of commitment, vision, denominational loyalty, and caring will serve as guidelines for evaluation. It will not only be shown that the Southern Baptist Sunday School meets these requirements, but it will also be shown that these principles have an interesting, and often surprising, way of interacting.

Before outlining the development of the Southern Baptist Sunday School, it will be helpful to provide a brief background of the Sunday School movement which will show the basic concern for children from the beginning of the movement. No history of the Sunday School is complete without the mention of Robert Raikes of Gloucester, England (1735-1811). Although he did not invent the Sunday School, his
work in promoting this institution has since earned him the title “father of the Sunday School.” Raikes developed his interest in Sunday School by way of his involvement with prison reform. When he was twenty-one years old, his father died, and Raikes inherited both the ownership and the editorship of the *Gloucester Journal*. As a Christian, Raikes wanted to use this powerful position to further the work of Christ. He began visiting the Gloucester prison quite frequently and was appalled by what he saw. Subsequently, he began campaigning against the “promiscuous and insanitary conditions” and the placement of debtors with other criminals. Although Raikes did achieve a measure of success in his campaign, he became increasingly aware of the need to develop some sort of preventive program.

In his work for prison reform, Raikes came to believe that ignorance and idleness were the two chief conditions that increased the tendency of one to commit criminal acts. Accordingly, Raikes searched for a program that would prevent criminal activity by educating young children and keeping them busy. Since many of Gloucester’s poor children worked every day but Sunday, this day of the week suggested itself as the logical choice for a time to conduct some type of learning program. In Gloucestershire there was a Dissenter by the name of William King who had conducted Sunday Schools for children from 1774. Apparently it was through talking with King that Raikes conceived of the idea of creating his own Sunday School. Raikes established his first Sunday School at Sooty Alley in 1780. The school day lasted from ten in the morning to five in the afternoon, including a lunch break and a worship service. The Bible was the only textbook used, and instruction was of a primarily religious and moral nature. Clearly, educating children in the faith was an important motivation for the development of Raikes’ Sunday School.
J. Ferguson highlights the importance of Raikes' efforts to create a religious educational program for children in the following words, "Raikes seized the kairos, the opportune moment, the fullness of time, and started a movement which was to spread throughout the country and all over the world." 9

A contemporary of Raikes who also did much to further the Sunday School movement was a London merchant by the name of William Fox. Fox became involved in a wholesale trade, which made it necessary for him to travel a great deal. During his travels, he became increasingly concerned about the needs of England's poor, especially the educational needs. At first Fox sought to alleviate his concerns by writing to both houses of Parliament, but he soon gave up on getting any help from the government. In May of 1785, Fox, who was Baptist, shared his concerns at the Baptist monthly meeting held at King's Head Tavern. The group, moved by Fox's speech, agreed to hold a town meeting about the issue on August 16 at King's Head Tavern. During the summer of 1785, before the August meeting, Fox saw an article in a London paper copied from the Gloucester Journal, which was written by Raikes and which set forth the plan of his Sunday Schools. Impressed, Fox began to correspond with Raikes about the Sunday School and about what he himself was hoping to accomplish for England's poor. Thus, by the time of the August meeting, Fox had definite ideas about what he wanted to do. However, because of poor attendance, the August 16 meeting was rescheduled for September 7 at Paul's Head Tavern, and it was at this September meeting that, under the guidance of Fox, the world's first Sunday School was organized. 10

Thanks to the work of Raikes, Fox, and others like them, the Sunday School movement grew like wildfire. By 1787, Sunday School enrollment was about 250,000. 11 By 1811, nearly 500,000 children in the British Isles were involved in
Not everyone, however, was excited about the idea of Sunday School as Fox and Raikes were. Opposition to the Sunday School came from a variety of sources. Part of the opposition came from the aristocratic classes, who believed that Sunday Schools were bringing enlightenment to people who were not supposed to have it. There was a real fear among some aristocrats, although certainly not all, that Sunday School education might lead poor children to become dissatisfied with their station in life. In other words, some aristocrats feared that Sunday School would lead the poor to desire a bigger piece of the pie; and fulfillment of the desire, of course, would mean a smaller piece of the pie for the aristocrats!

As frustrating as this opposition was, the opposition that came from various churches was far more disturbing. Some churches opposed Sunday School because they believed it to be a desecration of the Sabbath. Others opposed for different reasons. Although most Baptists were supportive of the Sunday School movement, others were not. In America, a group of Particular Baptists expressed opposition not only to Sunday School but to all mission oriented societies. At a meeting in Black Rock, Maryland, on September 28, 1832, the Particular Baptists enumerated the reasons for their opposition to the Sunday School. Their primary reason for opposing Sunday School was that Sunday School was based on the idea that children could be "educated into the faith," and Particular Baptists held that only the Holy Spirit could provide faith. The other reasons for their opposition to Sunday School were stated as follows:

Secondly, because such schools were never established by the apostles, nor commanded by Christ.... Thirdly. We have exemplified in the case of the Pharisees, the evil consequences of instructing children in the letter of the
Scripture, under the notion that this instruction constitutes a saving acquaintance with the word of God. We see in that instance it only made hypocrites of the Jews; and... we cannot believe it will have any better effect on the children in our day.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, the Particular Baptists were opposed to Sunday School because there was no scriptural precedent for it and because they considered it to be evangelistic in nature. Since they were determinists, the Particular Baptists saw no need for evangelical efforts such as Sunday School.

Despite opposition from various aristocrats and church groups, Sunday School continued to grow and to flourish, in America as well as in England, with many American Sunday Schools being based on British models. In 1824 the American Sunday School Union was established, which was America's first national Sunday School body. This Sunday School Union launched a campaign in 1830 in the Mississippi Valley, and in two years more than 2,000 Sunday Schools were established by the seventy-eight missionaries (some of whom were Baptist) who had been sent out. By 1834, the Sunday School Union had established 16,000 schools. Although these Sunday Schools often met in churches, most of them had no close relationship to the churches.\textsuperscript{16}

During this period, the American Sunday School Union dominated the field. American Baptists were urged to organize Sunday Schools by Richard Furman at the Triennial Convention in 1817, but no formal program for Sunday School promotion was adopted until 1840. At this time, the American Baptist Publication society began to publish Sunday School literature and to employ workers to organize churches and Sunday Schools.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps one reason that American Baptists were slow to
promote Sunday Schools was that they were strongly influenced by the thinking of Francis Wayland. Wayland, who was both a clergyman and an educator (he served as President of Brown University), gradually changed from a denominational approach to Baptist life to the independent society approach. This shift in the thinking meant that Wayland no longer favored denominational structures such as Sunday School unions or missionary societies. He thought these organizations should be peopled only by interested individuals who worked outside the church structure. According to Leon Mcbeth, the denominational and independent society approaches and Wayland's eventual favoritism of the latter have played a crucial role in Baptist life:

As long as Wayland advocated the denominational approach, the Triennial Convention developed as a unified denomination. When he changed his mind, such was his influence that the Triennial Convention reverted to the society approach. This paved the way for the withdrawal of Baptists in the South, who from the first preferred the denominational approach.18

In 1845 Baptists from the South did break away from the Triennial Convention to form the Southern Baptist Convention. Here begins the story of the Southern Baptist Sunday School and the denomination's emphasis on aiding children in the development of Christian faith by formal education.

The first few decades of its existence were difficult ones for the Southern Baptist Sunday School. This difficulty is evidenced in the fact that during its first twenty-five years of existence the Southern Baptist Convention tried at least four times to establish a Sunday School literature printing program and failed. These "broken threads" (to use the words of J. M. Frost) included (1) the Southern Baptist Publication Society,
Charleston, 1847-1863; (2) the Bible Board of the SBC, Nashville, 1851-1863; (3) the Southern Baptist Sunday School Union, Nashville, 1857- sometime after the war; and (4) the Board of Sunday Schools, 1863-1873.\(^{19}\) When the Board of Sunday Schools folded in 1873, the Sunday School promotion program was placed under the Home Mission Board and remained there until the founding of the current Sunday School Board in 1891.\(^{20}\)

Despite the ups and downs of the Sunday School effort during these years and the fact that the "thread" was "broken" more than once, Southern Baptist commitment to Sunday School survived. One reason that this commitment survived and that Southern Baptists were finally able to establish a successful Sunday School Board is that the denominational drive of Southern Baptists would not let them give up. This denominational fervor is exemplified in the writing of I. J. Van Ness, who became corresponding secretary of the Sunday School Board in 1917:

We will be ambitious in a proper sense to have our denomination do its full share of the religious work of the world... Though we may claim to be the real successors of the New Testament churches, we will not be willing to see others pass beyond us in the service to the world in the name of Jesus Christ. This is something more than simple cultivation of competition... It is not pride, but something more worthy than pride, that makes those who have the Baptist spirit ambitious that they with other Baptist churches shall be at the forefront if not in the lead in the religious work of the world.\(^{21}\)
It is evident from the comments of Van Ness that denominational pride was (and still is) an important force behind Southern Baptist religious work.

Denominational pride, however, did not serve as a "free ticket" to an automatically supported Sunday School Board. The establishment of the present Sunday School Board in 1891 was quite a controversial affair. It began on February 27, 1890, when the Religious Herald published six resolutions by J. M. Frost, a Baptist pastor from Richmond, Virginia. In these resolutions, Frost called for the establishment of a new Sunday School Board. It was Frost's intention to submit these resolutions to the Southern Baptist Convention in Fort Worth in May, 1890. From the time that Frost's resolutions were published until the date of the Convention, various Baptist newspapers debated Frost's resolutions. Only the Baptist and Reflector of Tennessee and the Western Recorder of Kentucky supported Frost.22

Frost failed in his efforts to establish a Sunday School Board at the Fort Worth Convention, but he persisted in his efforts. The Fort Worth Convention did establish a Sunday School Committee, and at the Birmingham Convention of 1891 this committee recommended that a Board of publications be established. Immediately, Frost moved that a special committee be appointed to consider the proposal. Frost chaired this committee, which was composed of one member from each state. Because of controversy within the committee, J. M. Frost and J. B. Gambrell (who did not really favor a Sunday School Board) were asked to form a special subcommittee. Frost's later accounts of this subcommittee meeting cannot help but bring a chuckle to the observant reader:

After much conferring together, and at the close of a conference which lasted practically all day,
he proposed to let me write and even name the
location of the Board, provided that he could write the closing paragraph. When the report was written and he added his words, they were accepted, provided he would let me add one sentence.23

What follows is Gambrell's closing paragraph and Frost's clincher sentence:

In Conclusion your committee, in its long and earnest consideration of this whole matter in all its environments, have been compelled to take account of the well known fact, that there are widely divergent views held among us by brethren equally earnest, consecrated and devoted to the best interest of the Master's kingdom. It is therefore, recommended that the fullest freedom of choice be accorded to every one as to what literature he will use or support, and that no brother be disparaged in the slightest degree on account of what he may do in the exercise of his rights as Christ's freeman. But we could earnestly urge all brethren to give to this Board a fair consideration, and in no case to obstruct it in the great work assigned it by this Convention.24

Obviously, J. M. Frost got the better end of that bargain!

Frost also had things go his way when the committee report was brought before the Convention for a vote. The committee hall was so crowded that Frost literally had to be lifted through a window to get into the room. He describes the excitement and expectation in the room as being intense, “The rumor had gone out of a ‘battle of giants,’ like the battle of Waterloo, but with no one certain as to the outcome.”25 As
soon as Frost presented his report, Convention President Dr. John A. Broadus brought the convention to a vote. Frost recalls, "And in less time than I can write it, he brought the Convention to a vote. No one knew how, but all saw it done and acquiesced in the decision." Once again, the Southern Baptist denominational spirit had triumphed. The Southern Baptist Convention had created a Sunday School Board that would last.

J. M. Frost was elected by the Sunday School Board to be its corresponding Secretary on June 12, 1891. He served the Board from 1891-1893, returned to the pastorate for several years, then resumed his position at the Board from 1896 to his death in 1916. With regard to the denominational spirit, Frost returned "in the nick of time," for on March 18, 1896, the American Baptist Publication Society proposed to unite operations with the Sunday School Board. Frost’s April 1 letter, in which he responded to the ABPS proposal, shows how dedicated he was to publishing material specifically for Southern Baptists:

We have no thought whatever of surrendering the work entrusted to us by the Southern Baptist Convention. Under the blessing of God our work has had in these five years a success almost phenomenal and altogether without precedent in Baptist circles. Everyday the Board is growing in power for usefulness and its ability to meet the great ends for which the Convention brought it into existence.

Apparently not discouraged by Frost’s letter, the American Baptists reportedly sent approximately seventeen officials and employees to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1897, which was held in Wilmington, North Carolina. After the Sunday School Board presented its report, one of the American Baptist representatives stood up and
attacked the Board. Frost reports that after this verbal onslaught, many of the representatives made an effort to get the floor. "I never saw so many heavy guns unlimber and get ready for action. Dr. William E. Hatcher, of Virginia, got the floor and in twenty-five minutes made a speech that was a marvel even for him." Dr. Hatcher's speech won the day for the Sunday School Board, and the proposal to unite with the ABPS was quickly shot down. The Sunday School Board was well on its way to becoming the publication society for Southern Baptists.

As important as denominational loyalty was and still is to the survival of the Sunday School Board, the Board never would have survived had it not been undergirded by Southern Baptist concern for children. This concern was manifested early in the life of the Convention. One example of such concern is the proposal made by Basil Manly, Jr., at the Convention of 1863 to establish a Board of Sunday Schools. Manly stated:

But should any attempt be made now? It is evident that the need of Sunday Schools is as great as ever, is even greater with us than heretofore. There is less instruction in other ways. There are more orphans and destitute. There are more ignorant and neglected. These must grow up to vice and ruin -- must poison the very fountains of our young Confederacy -- must affect the moral atmosphere in which we and our children shall live, unless met by early and vigorous efforts. Who shall care for these helpless ones, if not the Churches of Christ? Manly's proposal was the first "apologetic" of the Sunday School movement to be adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention.
The concerns mentioned by Manly in the above manifesto are largely concerns for the physical and moral needs of children, and he was very effective in winning his point, as evidenced by the fact that the Convention did establish a Board of Sunday Schools in 1863. However, Manly was also very concerned about the spirituality of young children and saw Sunday School as a place where young children might be converted to the faith. Many modern religious educators cringe at the thought of early conversions, but for Manly, such conversions were desirable, as evidenced in the following statement:

I am aware that there is a good deal of latent skepticism in many minds, when the conversion of children is spoken of. To me, however, there is nothing more attractive, nothing more desirable, nothing for which I am willing more ardently to labor, and which I will more eagerly expect, until it is accomplished, than the conversion of children, just as early as they can become subjects of correct moral impression; and of a saving change.32

It is difficult to ascertain from Manly’s statement whether his concern for conversion was focused on younger or on older children. However, because Southern Baptists have traditionally focused on conversion of children during the prepubescent years, it seems likely that Manly would have been making reference to older children.33 At any rate, Manly’s emphasis on conversion highlights a concern for evangelism that was widespread among many denominations of his day and still lingers within the ranks of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Before the mid-1800’s conversion of children was “in vogue” among many Protestant denominations. Robert Lynn and Elliot Wright provide insight into the
reason that this was so, stating, "If sex is the common preoccupation of Americans in
the mid-twentieth century, then death was the obsession of evangelical Protestants in
the first half of the nineteenth." Death was very real for people of the 1800's. It was
not by any means a forbidden topic, probably at least in part because household
deathbed scenes were so common. The frequent presence of death naturally led
people to become preoccupied with the brevity of life and the necessity of making life's
important decisions as early as possible.35

Coupled with this sense of urgency, the view of children as both mini-adults and
sinners also contributed to the emphasis on childhood conversion. The view of
children as sinners in need of conversion is especially evident in the songs of the
period. The following hymn from Rowland Hill's Divine Hymns in Easy Language is
one such example:

The little wretch whose lying tongue
    Can whisper to another's wrong,
Will other mischiefs quickly dare,
    And soon be found to curse and swear.

But oh, what a horrible sight,
    When children, with anger and rage,
Like lions, will quarrel and fight,
    While none can their anger assuage.

Old Satan is then very nigh,
    Delighted that thus they have shown
A murdering spirit; and why?
Because ‘tis akin to his own.\textsuperscript{36}

In this hymn, the child is viewed as being like a lion and as having a murdering spirit. The force of the images and tone would be enough to inflict guilt in any human being, especially a child.

In the mid-1800's, however, all this began to change. Sparked by the Romantic Movement and theological trends, children came to be viewed as innocent lambs in need of nurture, not conversion.\textsuperscript{37} Especially influential during this period was Horace Bushnell's \textit{Christian Nurture}, which was published in 1846. In this book, Bushnell argued against the view of children as mini-adults and sinners. Randolph Crump Miller states that although Bushnell's teaching was considered radical for his time, his ideas are now considered to be “the guiding light of all modern religious education.” He further states, “Horace Bushnell was the great emancipator of children from a devastating repression and over-stimulated consciousness of guilt.”\textsuperscript{38} Like the sinner-oriented view of children, this emancipated view of children was frequently manifested in the songs of the day. What follows is an excerpt from \textit{The Sabbath School Bell}, 1859:

\begin{quote}
Very little things are we
O how mild we all should be,
Never quarrel, never fight --
That would be a shocking sight.
Just like little lambs
Softly skipping by their dams.

We will love our teachers, too,
And be always kind and true,
\end{quote}
We'll be gentle all the day
Love to learn and cease to play
And attend to every rule
Of our much-loved Sabbath school.39

Clearly, this is a far cry from Rowland Hill's comparison of children to lions with Satan-like souls.

Within the Southern Baptist Sunday School, it is difficult to detect a dramatic shift in the way children have been viewed. However, by sampling various Sunday School materials over a wide span of time, it becomes evident that subtle changes have taken place. Although conversion, for example, is still an important focus, over the years more and more focus has been placed on nurturing the child, and less emphasis has been placed on the conversion of younger children.

A sample from the April 1895 issue of *The Convention Teacher* demonstrates that Sunday School for Southern Baptist children in those days was probably a very serious and structured experience. Note, for example, the intense schedule required by the Order Exercises for the Sunday of April 21, 1895.

1. Tap of bell. Hats, or any encumbrance which distracts attention, laid on the floor in front of them (the children).
2. Tap of bell. Fold arms.
3. Tap of bell. Rise, close eyes, say Lord's Prayer in concert.
4. Song.
5. Roll-call.
6. Song.
7. Ask all who know the Motto Text to rise; hear each, and reward each with a card.
The lesson for that particular Sunday was taken from Matthew 24:42-51, which states the need to be watchful of the Second Coming of Christ. Miss Lisa B. Robertson, who outlined both the Order of Exercises and the "Hints on the Lesson," stated that this particular lesson was too complicated to teach fully to little ones. Here is how she advocated teaching the subject:

Enlist attention by asking 'What do you call the place in which you live?' (Home) 'Do you love your home? Would you like to leave your home to go way off to stay among wicked people? Who did this for us?' (Jesus) 'What did Jesus leave his home in heaven and come down here among us for?' (To save us from Satan) 'Where is Jesus now?' (In heaven) Then in a very eager, earnest tone say, 'Did you know Jesus is coming back again?' 41

Clearly, in this lesson approach, there was no attempt to side-step the issue. Jesus came and lived among wicked people to save them from Satan. Because he was coming back someday, children needed to be good boys and girls.

Somewhere along the way, a change in emphasis occurred, for a sampling of
Primary Pupil quarterly from 1942 was strangely devoid of the mention of Satan. Salvation was still a prominent theme, but the focus had changed slightly. Instead of emphasizing salvation from Satan, these quarterlies seemed to emphasize salvation as living a new life in Christ, with the quarterlies for older children becoming increasingly outspoken upon this theme. For example, the Primary Pupil Year 1, Book 2 quarterly (designed presumably for first grade students) provided this synopsis of the life and mission of Christ:

God is always giving to his people. He gives them food and clothes. He takes care of them every day. But the best gift God ever gave is Jesus. Jesus came to earth as a little baby. He grew just like you and me. When Jesus became a man he told all the people that God loved them. He gave his life on the cross to show all people how much God loves them.42

The emphasis was on God's love for the child rather than the punishment the child would receive if he or she did not obey. A sample from the Primary Pupil Year 3, Book 1 quarterly (designed presumably for third grade students) presented the same theme but on a more sophisticated level. The following sample is from a lesson entitled “God's Love for Me.” It centered on the story of Zaccheus, an unloved tax collector whom Jesus visits:

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘I will give half of all my money to people who need it. If I have taken money I should not have taken, I will pay it back, four times as much.’

Jesus was glad. He had loved Zaccheus even when he was not good. It was his love that made Zaccheus want to do
right. He said, 'The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.'

Because Jesus did come to seek and to save the lost ones, he is the Savior. He wants to do for all of us what he did for Zaccheus. He will, if we trust him. 43

Again, the image presented here was one of a loving Savior gently “luring” a sinner to trust in him. This was a far cry from the image presented in Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” where God held the sinner above the fiery pits of Hell like a spider on a string!

Current Southern Baptist Sunday School literature seems to be much like the 1942 literature in theme. Lessons for preschoolers and younger children are geared more toward teaching the love of God than trying to convert the children. For example, a recent lesson from the Bible Learners Teacher (Grades 1&2) is entitled “Jesus Is the Savior,” but the emphasis of the lesson is not on conversion. The story is about the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well (John 4:1-26). After the lesson is read, the teacher is instructed to lead the children in answering the question, “Did you hear some ways Jesus showed us how to live?” Various answers suggested by the quarterly include, among others, “Jesus rested when he was tired,” “He drank water and ate good food,” “He was friendly,” “He was kind to people of different races,” and “He loved God.” After listing these various answers, the quarterly specifically states, “Most first and second graders are not ready to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. But they can know that Jesus is God’s Son and He is their friend.” 44

By the time children are in the third or fourth grade, however, the “push” for conversion begins in current Southern Baptist Sunday School literature. An example of this can be seen in the January 28, 1990, lesson for children in grades three and
four. The lesson is taken from Luke 10:1-12, which is the story of Jesus sending out the seventy disciples. After telling the Bible story, leading in discussion, memory verse learning, and singing, the teacher is instructed to lead the children in prayer in the following manner:

Lead pupils to pray silently while you present the following questions for them to consider. What does the fact that God sent Jesus into the world to die on the cross mean to you? How has Jesus made a difference in your life? What are some ways Jesus can help you? After a time of silent prayer, pray aloud thanking God for sending Jesus and for all the teachings in the Bible.45

This strong emphasis on conversion continues in the literature for fifth and sixth grade students. In fact, the July/August/September 1989 issue of Bible Searchers Teacher (a teacher's manual) contains an article entitled, “The Child and Salvation.” The article is essentially a guide for witnessing to fifth and sixth grade children. It explains to teachers how to tell their own salvation experiences in language children can understand.46

For some people, this increasing emphasis on salvation for the older children seems perfectly logical. They believe that by the time children reach the age of eleven or twelve, they are ready to make such a commitment to Christ. However, others feel that the push is too strong, and are concerned that Southern Baptist Sunday School literature for children may become increasingly more conversion-oriented as fundamentalists tighten their grip on the convention. June Hardy Dorsey, Minister of Education at Ginter Park Baptist Church (Richmond, Virginia), is one such
person. In an interview on February 7, 1991, Mrs. Hardy Dorsey stated that her teachers are finding more and more of an evangelistic emphasis in the literature. For right now, she and the Sunday School teachers in her church are "working around" this overtly evangelistic push, choosing instead to focus on the more nurturing aspects of the Gospel message. However, she envisions a time when Ginter Park might have to look elsewhere for Sunday School literature, a move she would regret because Southern Baptist Sunday School literature for children has traditionally been of a very high quality.47

Diane Smith, Director of Children's Sunday School Development for the Virginia Baptist General Board, also fears that churches may begin to look elsewhere for their Sunday School literature because of an increasingly fundamentalist orientation. Smith stated that there is a validity to the concern that evangelism is being pushed on the children too hard and too early. However, she discourages teachers from abandoning Southern Baptist literature altogether. At the present, Smith encourages teachers to work with the literature, tailoring it to the needs of their individual classes and students. She also urges the teachers to explain to their students that becoming a Christian is an individual matter--a decision they should make only when they feel ready. For the future, Smith is hoping to establish a literature review board that would "tag" the children's Sunday School literature. This tagging process would alert teachers to evangelistic emphases that the children might not be ready to hear.48

As far as the literature for preschool children is concerned, no increased evangelistic emphasis has been detected. Wayne Coley, Director of Preschool Sunday School for the Virginia Baptist General Board, stated that as yet the preschool literature contains no evangelistic push and that he hopes it stays that way. In spite of
this de-emphasis on evangelism in the preschool literature, Coley explained that the Southern Baptist Convention still baptizes over 3000 preschool children (mostly four and five year-olds) each year. According to Coley, this is 3000 too many. He feels that preschool children need to be taught about God's love, not about conversion. He encourages the teachers whom he trains to focus outreach energies on the parents of children rather than the children themselves.49

Although there is a growing question among Southern Baptist educators as to whether they should encourage continued use of Southern Baptist literature or not, there are a number of elements that do encourage continued use of Southern Baptist literature. First, Southern Baptist Sunday School literature is based on age-level appropriateness. Younger children are taught Bible stories and beliefs in simple, concrete terms, while older children are taught the faith message in increasingly sophisticated and abstract terms. For example, although the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1-29) might be taught to both older and younger children, it would be taught on an entirely different level. Lessons for the younger children would focus on Nicodemus as a person who wanted to learn more about God, while lessons for older children would focus on what it means to be born of the Spirit.50 Sometimes age-level appropriateness means not only that the same stories would be taught on different levels, but also that some stories would not be taught to younger children. For example, the Flood story and the Crucifixion are downplayed or omitted from the preschool literature because it is felt that very young children are not prepared to cope with the violence portrayed in these two stories. However, the Crucifixion story is contained in the literature for older preschool children as an option for the Easter Sunday lesson.51

Besides being based on age-level appropriateness, Southern Baptist Sunday
School literature is based on sound educational principles.\textsuperscript{52} The lessons are child-centered rather than teacher-centered, meaning that children are provided with a variety of options and allowed to make choices about what they want to do. As Diane Smith stated, "Children act on the material rather than have it act on them."\textsuperscript{53} And the children really do act on the material. Games, drama, creating songs, and making maps are just a few of the many activity options offered to the children. At Ginter Park Baptist Church, each grade-school children’s class completes one learning project each month. The project is of the children’s own choosing, and a time for working on the project is built into the lesson.\textsuperscript{54} For preschool children, most Southern Baptist Sunday Schools are organized on the activity center model, meaning that a large open room is divided into the following activity centers: art, blocks, books, home living, music, nature, and puzzles. These centers are provided, with some modifications, for preschool children beginning at age two. By the time the children are four and five years old, the centers offer more options to the children, as well as more furniture and supplies. These activity centers are incorporated into the lesson, with the teacher’s literature providing suggestions for the best ways to do this.\textsuperscript{55}

Finally, in addition to being based on age-level appropriateness and sound educational principles, Southern Baptist Sunday School literature is also based on the needs of children. Wayne Coley finds this to be especially true with regard to preschool children. The aim of the preschool Sunday School is to create a loving environment that will eventually prepare the child to hear about the love of God. Coley trains his teachers to be aware of children’s need for love, acceptance, trust, self-esteem, security, guidance, and dependence/independence.\textsuperscript{56} The songs and stories taught to the children are designed to help fulfill these needs. For instance,
more and more songs which utilize the individual name of the child are being included in the preschool literature. Here is an example of one such song: "Jesus loves Joe, Jesus loves Sue, Jesus loves Mother and Daddy, too." This song, which was printed in *Beginning*, a take-home magazine for the parents of babies, creepers, and toddlers, is designed so that the name of the child being sung to can be substituted for "Joe" or "Sue." In this way, the child is taught that he or she, in particular, is very special.

Thus far it has been shown that vision, denominational loyalty, and concern for children are factors which have helped the Southern Baptist Sunday School to grow and to serve its constituency. There is a further factor that needs to be mentioned -- the factor of commitment. Sunday School is important to Southern Baptists. They consider it to be a crucial part of the church and are committed to its future existence and success. One reason that Sunday School is so important to Southern Baptists is that it has traditionally functioned as the growing or reaching arm of the church. When writing about the relationship between Sunday School and Southern Baptists back in 1963, Brooks Hays and John Steely stated:

> Among Southern Baptist churches, at least, the Sunday School is an evangelistic agency. Some of our churches report that as many as 80% of their new church members come to their decisions to unite with the church through the ministry of the Sunday School.

Viewing Sunday School as an important evangelistic agency has long been a part of the Southern Baptist heritage. In 1922, Arthur Flake, who was head of the Sunday School Administration Department, set forth five principles for church growth through the Sunday School. These principles are stated as follows:
Find the people.

Enlarge the organization.

Provide the space.

Enlist and train the teachers.

Visit and enlist the people.59

Flake's principles eventually came to be known as “Flake's formula” and have achieved somewhat of a revered status among Southern Baptist Sunday School leaders.

Today, Sunday School is still viewed as an important evangelistic agency of the church. Broadman Press continues to publish “how-to” books for church growth, and invariably these books mention Sunday School as the key to success. A fairly recent book by Ralph Smith and Bobb Shotwell entitled Helping Churches Grow is an example of this type of book. From the very beginning, these authors stress that the way to help a church grow is through the Sunday School. They assert, “The Sunday School is the key organization in the life of the church. The success of all other organizations in the church is directly related to the growth and success of the Sunday School.”60 Shotwell also utilizes and expands Flake's formula, adding to it such steps as “Make a commitment to grow,” “Promote outreach,” and “Teach the Bible to win the lost and develop the saved.”61

Southern Baptist churches are committed to Sunday School because they understand its importance as an evangelistic agency, but this is certainly not the only reason. Sunday School is important because it undergirds all other missions of the church and because, very often, church community is born and nurtured through the Sunday School. June Hardy Dorsey sees Sunday School as absolutely essential to the formation and maintenance of community at Ginter Park Baptist Church. When
new members join a Sunday School class there, Mrs. Hardy Dorsey knows she need not worry about their “falling through the cracks.” She knows that in a Sunday School class new members will be welcomed and made to feel a part of the church family.62

In addition to serving as a support group for new members, Sunday School often serves as a support group for people who are experiencing life changes. This function of Sunday School also helps to foster a close church community. For example, at Ginter Park, there is a Sunday School class of older women (called the Can-Do class) who have been together for many years. Most of them joined the class as young mothers; so they have supported each other throughout the child-rearing years and middle adulthood. Now they are helping each other through the golden years of their lives. Quite a few of the women are widows, and having a group to support them through the grieving process has been important.63 For these women, Sunday School is much more than a place to learn about the Bible. It is a smaller community within the larger church where one can know and be known. It is a community of Christian friends who help carry each other through both the good and bad times in their lives.

Because Southern Baptists value Sunday School as an agency of the church that both evangelizes and fosters community, their commitment to Sunday School is unlikely to waver. In fact, Harry Piland, Director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Sunday-School Division, is quoted as saying, “In a sense, for the Southern Baptist Convention the Sunday School simply is the church.” 64 For many Southern Baptists, letting the Sunday School die would mean letting the church die. Since it stands to reason that Southern Baptist Sunday School will live on for some time to come, it also seems appropriate to ask what Southern Baptist Sunday School will be like in the future -- and to ask what changes are needed to keep it viable.
In response to this question, John H. Westerhoff, Professor of Religious Education at Duke University Divinity School, has offered a number of concerns about religious education in general and Sunday School in particular which the Southern Baptist Sunday School needs to address. In his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, Westerhoff criticizes modern religious education because it is based on a schooling-instructional paradigm, with some type of "school" serving as the context and some form of "instruction" serving as the means. According to Westerhoff, the schooling-instructional paradigm is inadequate for a variety of reasons. First, the schooling-instructional paradigm "eliminates the process of religious socialization from the concern and attention of church educators and parishioners." Second, this paradigm "encourages adults to be with children in ways that assert their power over them." Finally, the schooling-instructional paradigm is concerned primarily with teaching religion, and not sharing faith. As an alternative, Westerhoff proposes "a community of faith-enculturation paradigm." He states:

No longer is it helpful or wise to emphasize schools, teachers, pupils, curricula, classrooms, equipment, and supplies. Instead we need to focus our attention on the radical nature and character of the church as a faith community.

For Westerhoff, then, understanding what it means to be together as a Christian community is far more important than discussing instructional method.

In *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, Westerhoff does not go so far as to abolish the Sunday School. However, in a later article in *The Christian Century*, Westerhoff states that he sees no "place of significance for the Sunday School in the
future."71 For Westerhoff, Sunday School is too bound in the past to meet current needs. He sees no way that Sunday School can integrate the polarities of "conversion-nurture, identity-openness and piety-politics."72 Instead, Westerhoff envisions a future where both "religious socialization" and "shared praxis" will take place "without specific reference to age or sex" in three primary contexts: liturgical or familial/communal settings, leisure/retreat settings, and moral or societal/work settings.73

Although the majority of Southern Baptists would not likely agree with Westerhoff's ideas about the outdated nature of Sunday School, they could benefit from his insightful criticisms. In many ways, Westerhoff is right on target. His call for an increased emphasis on community and more balance between conversion and nurture are particularly relevant for the Southern Baptist Sunday School. It remains to be seen if Southern Baptists can incorporate these changes into the existing structure. If they can, then Sunday School may not be as dead as Westerhoff thinks it is.

For Southern Baptists, the future of Sunday School may depend upon Baptists' willingness to switch to a "faith-enculturation paradigm" and to seek more balance; however, even if these changes are made, problems still remain. The number one threat to the Southern Baptist Sunday School today is the Convention itself. As fundamentalists tighten their grip and the controversy among factions heightens, Sunday School workers find it increasingly awkward to conduct outreach programs.74 And with the recent firing of Lloyd Elder, Director of the Sunday School Board, moderate churches wonder just how long they will be able to keep using Southern Baptist Sunday School literature. Eight-hundred churches in the Convention already use literature from the alternative Baptist Literature Board, whose material is
conservative but by no means fundamentalist. Since the future of the Southern Baptist Sunday School is intrinsically tied to the life of the Convention, perhaps the most basic question to ask is not, “Will the Sunday School survive?” but rather “Will the Convention survive?”

Only time can tell whether or not the Convention will survive. In the meantime, millions of Southern Baptist children will continue to go to Sunday School and learn about God’s love through the love of their teachers. Perhaps one day they will look back upon their early Sunday School years with as many fond memories as the author of this paper does. The following vignette told by William Willimon demonstrates just how much memories of Sunday School can mean:

For me, Sunday School means memories of growing up Christian in Greenville, South Carolina. Most of these memories are warm and pleasant . . . There was Mr. Sanders, who in his primary division class would give us 50 cents for memorizing the names of the books of the Old Testament in order . . . But what I liked most about his class were the times when he led us marching, with tanbourine and flags, around the Sunday School assembly room, to the accompaniment of the triumphant hymn, ‘We’ve a Story to tell to the Nations.’ And when the woman from the Aldersgate Class came up to complain about the noise, as she always did when we were in the mood for marching, Mr. Sanders would shout above the din, ‘Aren’t these children wonderful!’
The love and affirmation experienced by William Willimon in Mr. Sanders' class is typical of what many Southern Baptist children experience in Sunday School. It is the concern of today's religious educators within the Convention that children continue to experience such love and affirmation, coupled with sound theological teaching that is presented in a manner accessible to children.
Endnotes


8Ferguson, “In Honour,” 352-353.

9Ibid., 353.


11Lynn & Wright, The Big Little School, 7.


13Ibid., 63.

14Ibid.

15H. Leon McBeth, A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage (Nashville: Broadman


17 Ibid.

18 McBeth, A Sourcebook, 214.


26 Ibid., 20-21.


28 Ibid., 166.

29 Ibid., 167.

30 Ibid., 131.

31 Ibid., 130.

33Wayne Coley, interview by author, Notes, Richmond, Virginia, 20 February 1991.

34Lynn & Wright, *The Big Little School*, 41.

35Ibid., 43.


41Ibid., 37.


47 June Hardy Dorsey, interview by author, Notes, Richmond, Virginia, 7 February 1991.

48 Diane Smith, interview by author, Notes, Richmond, Virginia, 11 February 1991.

49 Wayne Coley, interview.

50 Diane Smith, interview.

51 Wayne Coley, interview.

52 Diane Smith, interview.

53 Ibid.

54 June Hardy Dorsey, interview.

55 Wayne Coley, interview.

56 Ibid.


61 Ibid., 18.

62 June Hardy Dorsey, interview.

63 Ibid.

64 Tim Stafford, “This Little Light,” 31.


66 Ibid., 16.

67 Ibid., 20.

68 Ibid., 22.

69 Ibid., 50.

70 Ibid., 51.


72 Ibid., 641.

73 Ibid., 642.

74 Wayne Coley, interview.

75 Heidi Flick, “M. O. Owens Going Strong at 77,” *The Gaston Gazette* (9 March 1991), 6A.

Bibliography


Duncan, Rev. R. *The History of Sunday Schools: From the Most Ancient Times to the Present*. Memphis: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1876.


Jacquet, Constant H., ed. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. Nashville:
Abingdon Press, 1990, 252-255.


Shurden, Walter B. The Sunday School Board: Ninety Years of Service. Nashville:


Note: Citation methods for this paper are based on Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (1987), and the MLA *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (1988).
### Appendix

#### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Numbers enrolled in Sunday School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Presbyterian Church in USA</td>
<td>(1978) 886,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal Church</td>
<td>(1978) 574,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>(1978) 7,331,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>(1979) 508,964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Nazarene</td>
<td>(1978) 896,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>(1978) 1,293,394</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This figure is for the Presbyterian Church, USA

N. R. means figures were not reported.

All figures are taken from the 1980 and the 1990 editions of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. 