

“CHRISTIAN EDUCATION”

Today is the beginning of Christian Education Week in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Most people identify Christian Education primarily with Sunday School. However, Sunday Schools only began about 250 years ago. In the rest of the sermon I will be speaking of Christian education as thousands of years old, derived from the Bible. I will devote the rest of the introduction to the history of Sunday Schools.

The founders of the first Sunday Schools didn't start Sunday schools for church children. They would have assumed that those children were being taught about Jesus and the Bible in their homes. They started Sunday Schools for the wretched, poor children they saw running wildly through the streets, who had to work the other six days.

They used Bible stories to teach them to read. There were rewards for memorizing Scripture. They printed books affordable to the poor. They collected money to buy food and clothing for the children.

In the early days of the Sunday School movement, when a teacher was commissioned by the church as a Sunday School teacher, he/she was given an empty room. She/he had to go out into the streets, find poor children for the class and bring them in.

Sunday Schools started spontaneously in different places in Great Britain and the United States in the late 1700's and early 1800s. By 1800 in Great Britain 250,000 children were enrolled; by 1830 1,250,000 children, 25% of the population, were in Sunday Schools.

In America, Bishop White, Daniel Webster, Francis Scott Key, and other prominent men founded the First Day Society to start Sunday

Schools for the urban poor, and in rural communities. Its name became the American Sunday School Union. In the 1824 it began the Mississippi Valley Enterprise "to within two years establish a Sunday School in every destitute place where it is practicable, throughout the Valley of the Mississippi." That Project started 5000 Sunday Schools. The American Sunday School Union published Sunday School lessons for all ages and is know for its "ten dollar library." This was 100 books on various subjects. It was the first library in many places.

1.) In Scripture Teaching Their Children Is Mandatory For Believers.

Before the people of Israel left Egypt, Moses gave instructions about celebrating the Passover every year. As part of the Passover supper there was a catechism for the children:

"And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' "that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.'" So the people bowed their heads and worshiped. (Exodus 12:26-27 NKJV)

After Moses gave the Ten Commandments for a second time to the generation preparing to enter the Promised Land, he instructed them:

"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NKJV)

The Word of God was to permeate all that they did each day, both at home, at work, and on the road. It was to be part of the family's conversation. Teaching the children was an integral part of this.

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. (Psalms 78:2-4 NKJV)

Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:15-16)

The role of parents instructing children continued in the Christian era greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.

(2 Timothy 1:4-5 NKJV)

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15 NKJV)

2.) Christian Education Is Not Just Teaching Children

In the Great Commission Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world preaching the Gospel, baptizing, but also teaching:

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20 NKJV)

Teaching grown men and women to observe all things that Jesus commanded implies a variety of instructional goals.

First, people must be able to read in order to read God's Word. It was one of the primary goals of the Reformation to translate and publish the Scriptures in the language of the people and to teach the common people to read. One of the reasons the people were enslaved spiritually to the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages is that only the priests could read the Bible. Everyone else had to depend upon the priest to tell them what the Bible said. I can remember when I was a child, Catholics were discouraged from reading the Bible on their own. They were told that they needed a priest to explain it to them.

Second, to teach people everything Jesus commanded brings His disciples into conflict with the culture. In the early church in order for a craftsman to work at his trade, he had to belong to the guild for that craft and that involved worshiping the patron deity of that guild. Christians would not worship false gods. Also, among the Romans there was the practice of infanticide – putting unwanted babies on the garbage heap to die of exposure. In other cultures Christianity has encountered and opposed polygamy. In our own culture Christianity opposed and destroyed the institution of slavery.

Third, Christian scholars defend the truth of the Scriptures and oppose the intellectual bases for unbelief and heresy. In recent times this has included attacks on the integrity of the Scriptures themselves, evolution and the “big bang” theories versus Creationism, euthanasia and abortion versus the sanctity of life.

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, (2 Corinthians 10:4-5 NKJV)

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. (1 Peter 3:15-16 NKJV)

In the streets of this town there is a Sunday School class waiting for you to collect them and bring them to an empty classroom. If your own children are grown, there are people all around who are ignorant of what Jesus commanded. Jesus has sent you to teach them.