

The Importance of Sunday School for Missouri Baptists in the Antebellum Era

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Southern Baptists have debated the value of Sunday School ministry. In his 1996 book arguing for the necessity of Sunday School for church growth, a widely recognized Southern Baptist leader, Ken Hemphill, wrote, “Some church growth writers are predicting the demise of the Sunday School. They have labeled it a dinosaur, a relic of the past age. Some contend that the Sunday School was an important growth tool of the past, but it is facing extinction as the church enters the twenty-first century” (1). The debate concerning the value of a Sunday School in a local church’s ministry and outreach strategy is not new for Southern Baptists. Although the arguments against the value and necessity of a Sunday School have come from different directions, several voices have disparaged Sunday School ministry throughout history. Some pioneer Missouri Baptists witnessed new conversions to Christ and organized new churches in certain locations without a Sunday School ministry. Early Missouri Baptists seemed committed to Bible preaching as the primary means for conversions to Christ and the establishment of mission-minded churches. Were worship services and revival meetings the only means for the Gospel of Jesus Christ taking root and spreading throughout the state of Missouri in its earliest days? Although God established early Baptist churches in Missouri in the pre-Civil War era through some barely literate preachers and the Sunday School movement among Missourians faced challenges in that era, most antebellum Baptists deemed Sunday Schools and Sunday School literature as key strategies for further propagating evangelical faith in frontier Missouri among its residents.

The examination and evaluation of three types of historical accounts, related to the value and necessity of a Sunday School within a Missouri Baptist Church, produced the thesis for this

paper. First, this paper considers accounts of conversions and church starts that did not utilize Sunday Schools. Second, this study evaluates apparent challenges to the Sunday School movement in Missouri. Third, this paper examines accounts that support the importance of Sunday Schools in early Missouri Baptist growth.

An opponent of the Sunday School movement could point to testimonies of the manner of God's work among early Missouri Baptists as an argument against the value of Sunday Schools. Evangelical missionaries who entered Missouri after 1795, for the first several decades of the American arrival at least, relied almost exclusively on the spoken Word to win converts and gather new congregations (McCurdy 172-76). Historian Frances Lea McCurdy contends that pioneer preachers in Missouri relied far more on their ability to preach extemporaneously than pre-prepared, written sermons (172-76). A good case in point is Lewis Williams, the first moderator of the Missouri (later St. Louis) Baptist Association. Immigrating to Upper Louisiana with his family from North Carolina in 1797, Williams was known as an expert rifleman, expertise he sorely needed in a frontier area that is now western St. Louis County. After attending a camp meeting in 1809 or 1810, which was his first exposure to evangelical preaching of any kind, he joined the Baptist Church and was ordained a minister in 1811. As was typical of frontier preachers, Williams had grown up in a poor farming family with little formal schooling. He could barely read and was unable to write. Often, he relied on his more literate wife to help him find passages in the Bible. But Williams delivered powerful sermons that drew, spontaneously, on his own conversion experience. His oral presentations were, in the opinion of Baptist historian Robert S. Duncan, "almost always accompanied with a recital of the way the Lord had led him from darkness to light" (81). The unrefined preacher was extraordinarily effective with his impromptu style of witnessing the power of God's grace. His lively sermons

and stories of personal conversion often moved hardened pioneer audiences to tears and brought many women and men into the Baptist fold (Duncan 79-82). Testimonies about God's work, in locations that did not have a Sunday School, could downplay the value of the Sunday School movement among the early Missouri Baptists.

Some Baptists officially opposed the Sunday School movement in antebellum Missouri. Some Baptist Associations of churches split over differing views of missions. For example, the Little Piney Association was organized in 1833 by a few churches in the Missouri counties of Pulaski and Crawford. In 1838, Little Piney Association adopted a Confession of Faith that said,

Art. 11. We believe everything necessary for the instruction and good discipline of the church is recorded in the Holy Scriptures, and should be strictly attended to—at the same time avoiding every tradition and invention of men, such as the Sunday School union, Bible Society, tract societies of all kinds, rag societies, temperance societies, and what is generally known as the Baptist board of foreign missions, home missions, and all ecclesiastical Schools for the instruction of preachers, with all other inventions of men, under the head of religion, which the New Testament does not warrant. And this association does hereby declare that she will not hold any member in fellowship who will invite or allow preachers or tutors of the above societies into their houses after they are known to them; for we believe those who do it are partakers of their evil deeds. (*Minutes of Little Piney Association*, 1838, p. 3)

Although this confessional article opposed Sunday School ministry, it inherently acknowledged Sunday School work in nearby churches. The opposition some Baptist Associations voiced against Sunday Schools accompanied their opposition to the Baptist board of foreign missions and home missions. In contrast to the Association meetings for proponents of Sunday School and the mission boards, historian Robert S. Duncan described the antebellum anti-missionary Baptist association meetings in Missouri as follows:

The business of the association seemed to be conducted simply with an eye to the welfare of its constituents, and of its sister communities. They met, shook hands, read letters from the churches, enrolled names of messengers, received and appointed correspondents, read circular letters and appointed yearly meetings; all of which constituted the sum of the proceedings. There was no effort to evangelize and no money for missions. (427)

Just as the anti-Sunday School commitment accompanied an anti-missions sentiment among some antebellum Baptists in Missouri, so the utilization of Sunday School went hand-in-hand with missions involvement among early Missouri Baptists.

One of the major impediments to the founding of a Sunday School for rural village and small-town congregations was their limited ability to purchase or erect suitable buildings. In these areas, acquiring adequate teaching facilities and storage space for libraries faced daunting challenges. Consequently, many congregations in unsettled areas did not establish full-fledged Sunday Schools for years. Such shortcomings certainly were not the result of apathy on the part of Baptist church leaders. The Shoal Creek Baptist Association in southwest Missouri explained that Sunday School work lay heavily on the hearts of some of our pioneer preachers and leaders before they could engage in it (Largen 39). Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Platte County was organized in 1844 but it did not vote to erect a Sunday School and library until June 1851 (Murray 4). Mount Pleasant United Baptist Church in Hartsburg (Boone County) was formed in 1858. But because the congregation was constantly in financial trouble, it did not establish a Sunday School until 1901 (*Mount Pleasant* 373). Economic factors posed a challenge for Sunday School ministry among some Missouri Baptists who desired it.

The delivery of impromptu sermons in the common speech style and other oral modes of spreading the Gospel were well suited to a frontier society that only slowly improved general literacy rates with public elementary school education. In this context, Sunday Schools organized by evangelical churches became a widely popular alternative to poorly run subscription schools and field schools for both ordinary and well-to-do residents (McCandless 190-203). In fact, Missouri evangelicals successfully established Sunday Schools. Organizers typically erected a small classroom building near their house of worship. Not only did these Schools instill literacy

and basic knowledge on other subjects, they provided instruction to young children in articles of faith specific to the denomination preferred by their parents (Boylan 6-17). Following the older British model, which reached out to the children of the impoverished working classes, the Baptist Church operated a Sunday School at its Benton Street Mission in a poor area of St. Louis. The school had hundreds of students by the end of the antebellum period (Jones 1,18). But, beginning in the 1830's, Sunday Schools grew rapidly across Missouri in both town and country. Countless evangelical societies in Missouri established Sunday Schools. For example, the rural Shoal Creek Baptist Association in southwestern Missouri viewed Sunday Schools as critical to the formation and perpetuation of the Baptist faith (Largen 39). The Baptists in the Blue River Baptist Association in western Missouri passed a resolution in 1844, stating that “we recommend to each of our churches to organize Sabbath Schools at some convenient place within their bounds” (Martin Rice 27). The First Baptist Church of Hannibal, Missouri reported a prosperous Sunday School in 1858, one of many in Marion County (Prince 45).

The American Sunday School Union, which steadily sent missionaries to Missouri after its founding in 1824, opened Sunday Schools across the state. The Missouri Baptist Association (which later became the Missouri Baptist Convention) organized in 1834. The Philadelphia-based American Sunday School Union was a prime source for evangelical tracts and books. A number of evangelicals, who believed their common core beliefs outweighed their doctrinal differences, formed the American Sunday School Union along with the American Tract Society and American Bible Society. At the beginning of the Second Great Awakening, the spirit of ecumenism and its missionary outgrowth had reached its peak (Foster 122-23). Many Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian Sunday Schools in Missouri used printed materials produced by the American Sunday School Union, although they were never officially affiliated with the

organization. The work of the American Sunday School Union in Missouri began slowly, although it sought to expand its operations into the trans-Mississippi West during the late 1820's and early 1830's (Edwin Wilbur Rice 195-97). A prominent leader among early Missouri Baptists, John Mason Peck, often assisted it in its endeavors as he traveled through Missouri and Illinois. He noted that Baptists formed a Sunday School in Howard County in the spring of 1819 that eventually affiliated with the national society (Babcock 143, 194). The Union officially organized in Missouri and Illinois out of St. Louis in March of 1825. Between the two states there were fifty-six Schools and 1,567 students who attended them. The man who led the organization, St. Louis lawyer John Shackford, eventually became an agent and vice-president of the national union (*First Report of the American Sunday-School Union* 7, 11-12). The early growth, however, was slow during the 1820's and 1830's, and the 1847 report of the society does not indicate much better success at that time (*The Twenty-Third Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union* 56). But the fortunes of the American Sunday School Union had improved by 1857, notwithstanding its inability to fund a large number of missionaries. The St. Louis District of the American Sunday School Union, which included the states of Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas, and the Territory of Kansas, organized 5,628 Schools with 276,735 students from 1846 to 1856. Its agents, moreover, distributed 1,061,753 volumes in this period. The same agency organized 604 Schools with 27,436 students in 1856 alone. While 273 of those Schools were founded outside of Missouri, a significant number among the rest were established within the state (*The Thirty-Third Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union* 95).

Early Missouri Baptist leaders considered Sunday Schools important for the spread of the Gospel and the establishment of new churches. For example, Rev. James Ely Welch pastored First Baptist Church of St. Louis and organized mission churches in nearby communities. Baptist

historian Robert S. Duncan said of Welch, “He was untiring in his labors, and did his full share in giving tone and proper direction to religious sentiment in this new and rapidly developing country” (101). Of an important work connected with his mission, Elder Welch says:

On Sabbath, December 18, 1819, we organized in the Baptist meeting-house the “St. Louis Sabbath School Society,” under very encouraging prospects; for some of the most influential individuals in the community gave it their countenance and support. That was more than four years before the American Sunday-School Union was constituted, and from that day to this, in no city or town in the land, has the Sunday-School cause found warmer friends than in St. Louis. (Duncan 101)

Pioneer Baptist pastors in Missouri’s largest city utilized Sunday School ministry as part of their Christian outreach.

Although some early Missouri Baptist churches started without a Sunday School in the antebellum years, Missouri Baptists came to value the challenged Sunday School strategy, after years of experience with it, such that they organized the Missouri Baptist Sunday School Convention at Paris, Missouri in August 9, 1868, during the sitting of the Missouri Baptist General Association (*Minutes General Association, 1868*, p. 11).

Missouri Baptists in the pre-Civil War era deemed Sunday Schools and Sunday School literature as key strategies for further propagating the evangelical faith in frontier Missouri. Certainly, God used other means in addition to the early Missouri Baptist Sunday Schools, such as worship services and revival meetings, to advance the Kingdom of Christ in the antebellum period. The establishment of Sunday Schools faced challenges from some Baptists, who opposed it on theological grounds, and from economic factors. Yet, early Missouri Baptist pioneers clearly valued Sunday School as a key strategy for ministry and evangelism due to God’s use of it to add people to His Kingdom. Missouri Baptist pioneers valued Sunday School ministry in obedience to Christ’s commission in Matthew 28:20 to “teach” His commands.

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