

Sunday School and Missouri Baptists

The Story of Sunday Schools in Missouri Baptist Churches and The Men and Women Who

Started Them

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It would be very difficult to find a Baptist Church today that has no semblance of a Sunday School ministry or something very similar. Sunday School is a very important part of church life for countless churches across Missouri. Not only are they offered for children, but many churches offer “Sunday School” classes for adults as well. It has become such an engrained part of church ministry that Sunday School has become impossible to separate from church. The two are closely associated, and for many Missouri Baptists today, the idea of Sunday School existing outside of the church or not existing at all is a foreign and unwanted concept. In the early days of the Baptist movement in Missouri, such was exactly the case. For a few years Sunday School was not even an existent ministry, and even after its birth, Sunday Schools functioned distinct from a single church. Those who have grown up with Sunday School as a part of their church life and who are accustomed to the popular ministry would be surprised to learn of the humble origins of Sunday School and the men and women who worked to turn it into the ministry that has changed so many lives.

From its creation to adoption into the Missouri Baptist church, all the way to the present day, Sunday School has been and continues to be an important ministry in countless churches. Even more importantly, Sunday Schools have been made possible and successful only when men and women are willing to commit their time and energy to serving the Lord through this incredible ministry. This is the story of how Sunday School came to the Missouri Baptists, and of the men and women who should be remembered for their valiant efforts.

Before examining the beginnings of Sunday School, one must first understand the story behind the first Baptists churches in Missouri. During the 18th century, the territory of Missouri was under French and Spanish rule. Because of this, Catholicism was the prominent religion in the area. After the Louisiana Purchase, American families began to settle the territory, including

Baptists families. As Baptists began to move into Missouri, the first Baptist churches were planted. The first of these was Old Bethel Baptist Church, pastored by Reverend Clark. A simply built log cabin church, Old Bethel became the first protestant church west of the Mississippi river (Kingsley 21). The first Baptist churches were small, rural churches that served the small but growing population of Baptists in the Missouri territory.

The first Missouri Baptist Sunday School was formed surprisingly early, not even a year after Old Bethel was established. In 1807, Mrs. Eliza Murphy, a member of the recently founded Fee Fee Church and widow of the Baptist minister William Murphy, seeing the conditions of the rugged frontier, decided to begin a Sunday School at her home for the local children (Kingsley 83). Only three Baptist churches existed in Missouri when Mrs. Murphy began her Sunday School, Old Bethel, Fee Fee, and Tywappity (Twalle). Missouri at this time had a very small population and the Baptist community was even smaller. Despite the small numbers and challenges of living in frontier land, this incredible woman saw a need in the rugged and undeveloped frontier and decided to take action. Her efforts sparked the beginning of Sunday Schools in Missouri Baptists and began the work that would be picked up by many more men and women over the next century.

A decade later another prominent worker in Sunday School, Rev. Thomas Parrish Green, started a Sunday School and accomplished great works through the ministry. Rev. Green pastored Bethel Church after moving to Missouri from Tennessee in 1817. The year that Green began his faithful work, Missouri Baptists had expanded to seven churches but Green was still forced to overcome the challenges of working within an extremely young association. Despite pushback from people who opposed the idea of Sunday School and attempted to dismiss it, Green worked tirelessly in the newly formed Bethel Association (an association of the seven Missouri Baptists

churches) to establish and foster the growth of Sunday Schools (Twalle). As the number of churches in Missouri grew, so too did Green's work expand throughout the area. He is credited as being one the first to work extensively to establish Sunday Schools across Missouri, traveling to counties such as "New Madrid, Scott, Cape Girardeau, Perry, Madison, Saint Francois, Wayne and Stoddard" (Twalle).

Other men such as John Peck and James Welch were also early supporters and active in organizing Sunday Schools. Both men moved to Missouri in 1817, the same year as Green (Twalle). These two missionaries had studied theology together in Philadelphia and were even born in the same year. Peck and Welch traveled throughout Missouri for about three years, spreading the gospel, preaching the Bible, establishing Sunday Schools, and collecting funds to support church ministries. The pair were clearly passionate about Sunday School; for two decades Welch worked for the American Sunday School Union (Twalle). Welch and Peck even established a negro Sunday School less than a year after moving to Missouri (Twalle).

Early Sunday Schools often met in homes and taught the children about the Scriptures using Bible stories. Women such as Murphy and men like Green, Welch, and Peck were extremely influential in getting the ministry off the ground in Missouri and establishing Sunday Schools across the state. In 1834, the General Association was created and, recognizing the critical importance of Sunday Schools, encouraged more widespread support and urged Sunday Schools to be established by churches and pastors as a ministry to serve the children.

During this time, Sunday Schools were rarely associated with a single church. Sunday Schools were typically an independent ministry with support from local churches of different denominations working together to serve their town and community. In fact, Sunday Schools even functioned in a way as frontier schools, teaching children to read and write in addition to

their Bible lessons. In the early frontier Missouri, Sunday Schools sometimes offered the only source of education for children in small rural communities. These interdenominational Bible schools were important places for learning, Spiritual training, and a safe place for children to grow.

In 1845, the General Association, realizing the importance of the Sunday Schools for the teaching of young children within the church, decided to create a committee on Sunday Schools. They also formally recognized the American Sunday School Union the same year. The first committee was comprised of R. S. Duncan, Wm Duncan, and B. Anderson. For over a decade this committee served the General Association. Very early on, they encountered difficulties and discouraging trends among Missouri Baptists. An 1846 statement said, “our churches should be admonished to remember that great benefits are to be derived from Sunday Schools that can not be obtained through any other medium. As we forget not in age what we learn in youth, we should learn in youth what we ought to remember in age, this may be done in the Sunday School” (Yeaman). The board understood how important Sunday Schools were, but they also recognized that there was an unfortunate lack of them in the state.

Despite their significance to frontier towns and importance in instructing children, Sunday Schools began to struggle, particularly during the 1850s and 60s. The growth of Sunday Schools was limited by a lack of support from local churches and pastors. Baptist Pastors underestimated the value of Sunday Schools, and churches failed to put in the work required to sustain successful ministries. Pope Yeaman pointed out that Baptist ministers had two basic objections to supporting Sunday Schools: one, they did not have the time to devote to the Sunday School ministry, and two, Sunday Schools were viewed as being separate or distinct from local churches. In some cases, ministers even felt that the duty of a pastor was simply to preach a

sermon on Sunday, and nothing else (Yeaman). Sunday Schools were seen as an extracurricular activity that did not fall under their responsibilities. This severe apathy was a major problem for the young ministry. Without the support of pastors who were willing to put their time and effort into establishing and training leaders for Sunday Schools, the growth of these schools was hurt significantly.

A perceived distinction from the local church also influenced the apathetic position towards Sunday Schools. In many cases, because no single church was in charge of a Sunday School, pastors and churches of different denominations began to neglect their support of Sunday School, seeing it as something that fell outside of the duties of the pastor and the local church. The general feeling was that unless Sunday Schools became denominationally based, it would be difficult to organize Sunday Schools and sufficiently support them. The Missouri Baptist General Association knew this. If Sunday Schools were to succeed in Missouri Baptists, they needed to be accepted by the local church. However, an incredibly important change to the way Sunday Schools were ran in Missouri would occur after the Civil War and rejuvenate the program.

In 1867, Missouri Baptists decided to make Sunday School their own by creating the Baptist Sunday School Board for Missouri. The General Association made this decision in an attempt to revive interest in Sunday Schools. Their motto was, "A Sunday School in every Baptist Church in Missouri" (Thalle). During their first meeting the convention stated: "While the convention encourages Sunday-schools in every church and desires to see all interested, still it has been observed that Baptist schools, when established and known as such, have been more successful than union schools, and it is recommended that every church as far as possible maintain a Baptist Sunday-school" (Thalle). This change was met with much enthusiasm and support. No longer were Sunday Schools supported half-heartedly as an interdenominational

effort, but a ministry that Baptist churches were now directly involved in. Baptist churches across the state were encouraged to start Sunday Schools. It was made clear through this move that it was indeed the responsibility of the pastor and the church to foster the teaching of their children through Sunday Schools. The move significantly impacted the number of Sunday Schools in Missouri. The number of Baptist churches that had Sunday Schools exploded from 74 to over 800 in the first five years.

Perhaps the person most influential in leading the charge to increase Sunday Schools and an absolute giant for the cause was Dr. S. W. Marston. After the creation of the Baptist Sunday School Board for Missouri, Dr. Marston was chosen as its first executive, or “Missionary Secretary,” in 1868, a position he served in for five years. As shocking as the reality may seem, despite there being 45,000 Baptists in the state, only 74 Sunday Schools existed, or one for every 600 Baptists when Marston took over. During his tenure, as mentioned previously, the number of Sunday Schools in Missouri multiplied by over ten. Dr. Marston poured his strength and energy into his mission, traveling “more than 20,000 miles, giving more than 300 sermons and addresses, and writing more than 1,500 letters each year” (Kingsley 85). These remarkable efforts led to over two-thirds of the Baptist churches in Missouri starting Sunday School Programs.

After Marston, other prominent and hard-working men would serve the role of Missionary Secretary. Rev. M. L. Laws served as the secretary in the final year of the Missouri Baptist Sunday School Convention and continued on for another three years after the convention dissolved and the Sunday School Board was formed in 1878. As the Board’s first secretary, Laws oversaw the addition of roughly 50 Sunday Schools. Like Marston, he worked hard to promote Sunday Schools and was a well-respected leader until his death. He was followed by Rev. T. W.

Barett. Later John T. Williams served as the Sunday School Missionary Secretary. During his tenure two missionaries were appointed to spread the use of Sunday Schools: Rev. J. E. Norvell and R. M. Beeson. The extensive work of these men included giving 200 addresses, 120 sermons, baptizing 97 people who were saved as a part of a Sunday School, and visiting 51 churches as well as 86 Sunday Schools (Yeaman 264-265). All of these men continued the faithful work started before them and were influential in the establishment of hundreds of new Sunday Schools.

The Board's efforts continued on until the late 1890s, when another important leader was installed whose faithful efforts ushered in another period of great success for Sunday Schools. In 1899, Charles Roads became Sunday School missionary. Roads moved from Ohio to Missouri, and brought with him experience and a "zeal" for Sunday School (Thalle). By this time, there was no doubt that the Missouri Baptists General Association believed Sunday School to be of extreme importance. The minutes of the 1900 Missouri Baptist Convention reported that, "We believe there is no more important department of our work than that of Sunday School." A report from the State Board of Missions in 1901 evidenced Roads' and the Board's effective work: "During the year our efficient Sunday-school missionary, Brother Charles Rhoads, has labored very effectively in this most important department, and we are happy to say that we believe our Sunday-school work is in better condition now than it has been for many years" (Twalle). After Roads retired due to his declining health, H. E. Twalle became the new Sunday School missionary in 1904.

Rev. Twalle came from Kentucky to be the new leader thanks in part to the American Baptist Publication Society and Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, both of whom partnered with the Missouri Sunday School Board to find a worthy replacement for

Laws. He proved to be exactly that. In 1905, Twalle reported, “during the past year, 365 days of labor; 27,531 miles traveled; 101 institutes and conventions assisted; 527 sermons and addresses delivered, and 658 professions of conversion under his preaching” (Twalle). His incredible energy and passion for his work and the furtherance of the gospel led to Sunday Schools being more prevalent than ever before by the time he retired. When he resigned in 1906, 1,300 Sunday Schools existed in Missouri and had a total of 100,000 students (Twalle). Almost a hundred years after the first Sunday School had been started by Mrs. Murphy, Sunday Schools in Missouri were a thriving ministry reaching thousands and thousands of children across the state.

The story of Sunday Schools in the Missouri Baptists church is a remarkable one. It had its humble beginnings as a simple class led by a faithful widow, it overcame challenges such as a lack of support and organization, and eventually became an organized mission supported by the General Association and furthered by the work of many tireless workers. Without so many faithful men and women who poured their efforts into serving God, Sunday Schools would not be the ministry they are today. While Christians often take Sunday Schools for granted, they are only possible with time, effort and faithfulness on the part of the church, its members, and pastors. Sunday School is a very important ministry and should be treated as such. The early Sunday Schools in Missouri were only successful when the local church supported them. When churches and pastors neglect to teach their members, the consequences are grave. Today, Sunday schools have expanded to adults as well as children, offering small group teaching for believers of all ages. Churches today prioritize Sunday Schools and understand the importance of training believers in the word through such a medium in addition to traditional preaching. But how would Sunday Schools look today if not for the faithful works of people like Mrs. Murphy, S. W. Marston, Charles Board, and Rev. Twalle so many years ago? The hard work of these Baptist

heroes should not be forgotten, but rather remembered and appreciated for what they helped build to this day.

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