

What is Sunday School?

When it comes to adult Sunday School, there are varying ideas about what Sunday School is, what it is not, what its purpose is, and how it should be conducted. Here are some points of view that outline my philosophy of Sunday School.

Where did Sunday School start? The English Sunday school movement is usually associated with Robert Raikes of Gloucester (1735-1811), the founder of the Sunday School Union. From 1782 Raikes established classes, often on Saturdays as well as Sundays, for children of the poor who were in employment for the rest of the week. A century after the movement began, over 5¾ million children in England were attending these schools. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/sunday-school>)

Obviously, we now have many American churches that have a program named Sunday School where adults attend. How did this happen? **For a concise history, read on. To move forward to my view of Sunday School, skip to the paragraph with the large asterisk.**

Sunday Schools first appeared in American cities in the 1790s. Following the example of British reformers, American organizers hoped to provide basic literacy training to poor children and adults on their one free day. Typical of these schools were those begun in Philadelphia in 1791 by the First Day Society, a group of clerics and merchants who paid local schoolmasters to teach "persons of each sex and of any age ... to read and write," using the Bible as the central text. By 1819 the last First Day school had closed, and by 1830 Sunday schools of this type had virtually disappeared from the American scene, although traces of their pattern remained visible for decades in "mission" Sunday schools found in [impoverished](#) urban neighborhoods, in rural areas lacking permanent churches, and among newly freed African Americans during Reconstruction. A new-style Sunday school arose in their place, taught by volunteer teachers (a majority of them women) and providing a specifically evangelical Protestant curriculum. By 1832, nearly 8 percent of free children were attending such schools; in Philadelphia alone, the figure was almost 30 percent.

Evangelical Sunday schools grew rapidly as Protestant clergy and lay people [molded](#) them into key elements in an institutional network designed to make the new nation Protestant. (Although some Catholic and Jewish congregations established Sunday schools, the institution itself never assumed the significance it acquired in Protestant religious education.) New ideas about children's needs and potential also fueled their growth, as did congregations' embrace of Sunday schools and the development of common schools in urban areas. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, Sunday schools and public schools grew in tandem, developing a [complementary](#) relationship.

Sunday school societies played important parts in the schools' [proliferation](#). The American Sunday School Union, a cross-denominational national organization founded in Philadelphia in 1824, was the largest of these, publishing curricular materials and children's books and sponsoring missionaries to remote regions. Denominational agencies, such as the Methodist Episcopal Sunday School Union (1827) and the Sunday School Board of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1884), followed suit. After the Civil War, denominational interests came into increasing conflict with the American Sunday School Union, especially in the area of teacher training and lesson writing. Gradually, denominational organizations and teachers' conventions became the organizations of choice, and the American Sunday School Union's preeminence declined. It was at a national Sunday school teachers' convention in 1872 that delegates and publishers adopted plans for a system of "uniform lessons," standardizing the Biblical texts studied each week but permitting each denomination to shape the lessons' contents. And the origins of the [Chautauqua Movement](#) idea can be traced to a Sunday school teachers' summer institute organized by the Methodist bishop John Heyl Vincent in 1873. In the twentieth century, Sunday schools were primarily church institutions, recruiting the next generations of members. Although teaching remained volunteer labor performed mostly by women, the work of managing became professionalized, many congregations hired directors of religious education, and new agencies took on the tasks of [multiplying](#) the number of Sunday schools and shaping teachers' preparation.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Sunday school attendance had declined overall. Nevertheless, Sunday schools remain a significant institutional tool for the religious training of succeeding generations, as many a child could testify.

* Here at First Baptist Church, Summit, we are not running a school anything like the program that was started under the name “Sunday School”. We are not even running a school in my opinion, at least in the case of adults. (You could make a great case that our pre-school through 6th grade is a version of a school.)

Let me point out a serious issue I have with Sunday School as it has typically been done in the Southern Baptist Church. For the most part, “classes” that have been taught lecture style in the form of expert telling a group of class members about the Bible has not created more mature disciples of Christ. “Classes” that function as experts telling everyone else about the Bible while the class members sit and absorb have proved futile for adults to become committed Christians with a true place of service and a true heart for worshipping the risen Savior. Just take a look at Sunday School attendance and it is not hard to see that only half of a church’s membership will show up on any given Sunday and the attendance record of those that do come is considered good if they come half the time. There is an obvious lack of commitment to the “class.”

If there is a lack of commitment to Sunday School, we must ask the “why” question. Here is what I think. Lecture style, let-me-come-listen-then-leave “classes” will never help people apply Biblical truths. People must engage in the Bible and live it out in community with others. Look at the disciples’ relationship to Jesus, one of the first “Sunday School” experiments. They interacted. Jesus asked questions. The disciples responded. Sometimes their responses were on target, and sometimes they were not. The disciples asked Jesus questions. Jesus told stories. Jesus asked them how they interpreted the Bible. Get the point? They interacted. Then, to blow the system out of the water, the first Sunday School “class” lost its teacher. He left and went back to heaven.

What happened when the teacher left? Did the “class” fold? Did they look for another teacher? No. They became “teachers” themselves. They all took on leadership roles and led others to do the same. They gave away the leadership just like their leader, Jesus, had done. How long did this take? It took three years.

I have another question. If we asked the entirety of our members who come to Sunday School to lead a discussion on the Bible with another small group of believers, the vast majority would say, “I can’t do it.” Even the people who have been going to Sunday School for 20, 30, 40 years have never come to the point where they could lead a discussion on the Bible. That, to me, seems appalling.

Some will say, “I don’t have the gift of teaching.” Does that mean God’s command in Deuteronomy 11:18-19 does not apply to Christian parents? It says, “18 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” I realize that some have the gift of teaching that is God ordained and Spirit given. Those people have the ability to teach powerfully because of the gift given, but this is just like the gift of evangelism. Just because people have been given the gift of evangelism doesn’t mean that they are the only ones who’ve been told to evangelize. We’ve all been given that command. So it is with teaching.

I believe that everyone who has nominal spiritual maturity and is mentally and emotionally stable can lead a discussion with a small group of believers about a passage in the Bible. When a passage is preached or written about in a book (a Sunday School book even), every Christian has the ability to formulate thoughts and questions that a small group of Christians can discuss, encourage each other with, and decide to live out together. Everyone who is consistently breathing in and out and engaged in Bible reading has thoughts, struggles, questions, answers, personal stories, victories, and failures that a small group of people that meet together can use to live out their faith. Are you beginning to sense what I think “Sunday School” is about now?

Sometimes it’s easier to define something by what it is not. Let’s try that for a few lines.

- Sunday School is not listening to an “expert” tell you what he/she thinks about the Bible for 40 minutes and members leaving never to think about Biblical things again until the next meeting.
- Sunday School is not contained in a 45 minute time period on Sunday mornings at 9:15 a.m. In fact it can happen on Thursdays at 8:00 p.m. at someone’s home or in a restaurant or at a state park or around a camp fire.
- Sunday School is not solely about gaining Biblical knowledge.
- Sunday School is not a Lifeway book.

- Sunday School is not a “class.” (By the way, what comes into a person’s mind who is unchurched if someone asks him/her to come to a Sunday School class? I don’t think their idea is what I’m describing by a long shot. I think they think of school and class, teacher and pupil, lecture and boredom, lecterns and chairs.)

So ... what is Sunday School?

(Craig’s definition)

Sunday School is a group of people who come together because of a common Saviour to study His word in order to live it out together to accomplish God’s Great Commission. More simply stated, it is people doing the Christian life together.

That’s a mouthful isn’t it? Study the parts. Injest it. Disagree with it if you like, but I know this, if our people aren’t growing in the Lord through our Sunday School and expressing their faith as encouraged in James 1:19-27. It’s not worth the time, money, and effort. Our church might as well just have worship and go home. That seems harsh, but it’s time we face up to the facts. We cannot do church the way it has always been done. It’s time we really evaluate how we’re doing and be honest with what we see.

Let’s break that definition down a bit:

- It’s a group. Among several terminology changes that I have undergone in the last few years is a change from the word “class” to the word “group”. Every class I’ve ever had lasted for a designated period of time for an academic, intellectual purpose. That is not true of our Sunday School. Your Sunday School Group, if it is an adult group, has no designated length of time attached to it. Also, a group works together to accomplish something. A class by definition only exists to learn. Our Sunday School is more than learning; it is interacting with and engaging the heart and mind to Scripture, and then applying the truth of Scripture to our lives so we can affect the Kingdom for Christ, **and** we do this in community with others, not as individuals as in a class.
- We study the word in order to live it out. Studying the Word for knowledge sake is not biblical. The Word should truly change us from the inside out over time. Studying the Word together with other Christians implies that there is interaction. The Truth of the Word in the Sunday School session should go from the head, to the heart, and back out our mouths. If this happens, you have truly interacted with the Scripture – even if you are wrong in your interpretation. The discussion of Scripture in Sunday School has to walk a fine line between letting people express themselves and bringing out the Truth of the Scripture. Discussion in Sunday School can not be the expression of opinions only. There is a truth contained in the Word that must be mined just like coal is mined from the earth. It takes struggle, digging, and refining, and once the Truth has been brought to the surface, we must make the natural connection to how we can live it out together. Application is the end result, and application of the Word by a group of Christians can change the world.
- Sunday School Groups exist to accomplish the Great Commission. Groups should not only study the Word together, but should do missions and ministry together. Where there is a need, fill it. Where there is a hurt, mend it. Where there is discouragement, lift it. Where there is lostness, find it. The reason we need more groups in our Church is not just to grow Sunday School numbers, it’s to do more ministry! More hands, more feet, more minds, more love, more reaching, more teaching ... hopefully, you get the point.

How do we practically accomplish the purpose of Sunday School?

- Begin casting the vision of what you believe Sunday School is. Simply said, it’s people doing the Christian life together. Move away from classes, teachers, and lecture to groups, leaders, and discussion.
- Begin meeting with your leadership on a regular basis to cast the vision. Danger! Do not schedule a meeting and be nominally prepared. If your next meeting is unorganized and filled with unusable information, it’ll be hard to get leadership to come to the next one.

- Organize Sunday School to be group lead. In other words, let more people lead. Since every Sunday School Leader I know will tell you they grew in maturity of faith when they began to lead Sunday School, we need to give more people the opportunity. All groups should be team lead in some nature.
 - Possible Team Structures
 - 2 Alternating Leaders – One leads one week and one the next. It can be done by the week or by the month.
 - One Main Leader with an Occasional Leader – The main Leader leads most Sundays but shares the load once a month.
 - One Main Leader with Occasional Leaders – The main Leader leads 3 Sundays a month and one of 3 others lead once a month (which means the other 3 lead once a quarter).
- Make discussion of Scripture a priority rather than lecture. Make it a goal for people to feel safe expressing how the Scripture has impacted their lives. A practical lead into more of a discussion atmosphere can begin with every member sharing their testimony with the group over a period of a few weeks. Share together. Cry together. Laugh together. Ask questions more than making statements. Leaders do have to lead, but they do not have to dominate the spoken word every week. **Beware:** Leaders have to be able to gently confront biblical error so discussion does not get opinion based.
- Make Sunday School curriculum more flexible. Give leaders the freedom to choose curriculum with the guidance of the ministerial staff. Let them do a “discipleship” study together for a period of time. (“Discipleship” is in quotes because every curriculum is a discipleship study. Discipleship is not a class on Sunday nights only. It is the purpose of Sunday School, too, in my opinion.)
- Make fellowship outside of Church a priority. The people in a Sunday School Group need to get to know each other. They need to have fun together.
- Make ministry with each other a regular part of Sunday School. Find a local ministry to partner with in order to accomplish something outside the walls of the Church together. Visit your surrounding neighbourhood or community using Sunday School groups.
- Make missions a part of Sunday School. Work together on a mission project locally, in the United States, or outside the country together. How would working together for a week on a mission trip with your Sunday School members affect your group?
- Organize for success by giving more people a role in the leadership of Sunday School. What organization with a mandate as important as ours doesn’t organize to accomplish the mission?
 - Possible roles (and each role can be a team of 2 or 3 instead of just an individual): discussion leader, assistant discussion leader, secretary, greeter, announcements, care coordinator, missions coordinator, ministry coordinator, fellowship/party coordinator, donut coordinator (If you don’t know about this one, you’re missing out!), prayer coordinator, shower (wedding and baby) coordinator, outreach coordinator, and the list goes on. Again, organize for success.
 - Encourage Sunday School Groups to network. With the advent of email, texting, and facebook, groups can connect with each other during the week easily. It’s as easy as someone gathering emails or cell numbers and making a distribution list.
- Connect Sunday School with the other ministries of the Church. If you are in need of a way to organize your people for an event or ministry, use Sunday School. It’s already set up to network and connect people in small groups.
- Start new groups. Sunday School is best accomplished in a small group setting. When groups cease to be small, the family connection becomes impossible. Starting new groups is hard, but worth the effort.

I do not claim to have Sunday School all figured out. I am no guru. However, I am putting time and energy each day into making our Sunday School better as God leads. I will make mistakes. I will fail. Someone in every church has to “live” with Sunday School. Paid or unpaid, someone must be thinking Sunday School all the time. Let’s make it the best it can be in order to affect the Kingdom.