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Christian Education in the Stone – Campbell Movement

ELEANOR DANIEL

The Stone-Campbell Movement has long been committed to the priesthood of all believers. The early leaders deplored the fragmentation of the Christian world that often elevated creeds above scripture. “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent” was a guiding principle. Our forebears believed that unity was possible if all believers knew and understood scripture.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

With that heritage, one might assume that a philosophy of Christian education by which believers would come to know and understand scripture was developed rather early. That is not the case, especially for teaching in the local congregation. *The Christian Baptist* and *The Millennial Harbinger* spoke relatively little of education in the congregation. What was written was primarily an apology for the common education system or a vision of the Christian college in which the Bible was the integrating factor.

But Alexander Campbell from the beginning asserted that the restoration of the church of the New Testament was predicated on the restoration of the practice of universal Bible study. This principle was formative for Campbell throughout his life.

James DeForest Murch observed:

The Stone movement was born in revival and continued to thrive on these periods of religious excitement . . . Campbell had a distaste for emotionalism and mystical impulses. He felt that the shouting and tumult of revival orators, the tears, and the pleadings of the mourner’s bench were an insult to the intelligence of men and the dignity of the Holy Spirit. Rather Campbell called for reasoned study of the Word. Stone too called for a study of the Word, though he more readily tolerated the emotional excesses.¹

Campbell’s philosophy of education emphasized that the purpose for biblical education was to bring people to salvation. He lobbied for proper education for children in the common school, introducing the resolution providing for public education at the Virginia Constitutional Convention.²

Campbell planned to develop a comprehensive system of education, a dream that never materialized beyond Bethany College, which was established in 1840. Campbell invested much of his own money in the fledgling school of which he became the first president. The doors opened in 1841. The Bible was the chief textbook, though study in the major fields of the day was available. Campbell presented lectures in Bible every morning. He believed that the *total* person must be educated—not merely the mind.

Campbell was an educator in another sense. He was a master at debate—a common method of education of the day. His debates were skillful presentations and gained a wide hearing for the restoration ideal. Campbell was not unfamiliar with the concept of the Sunday School. Clarence Athearn observed

1. James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Company, 1962), 116.

2. William Moorhouse, “Alexander Campbell and the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-1830,” *Virginia Cavalcade* Vol. 24, no. 4: 184-88.

that Campbell was first introduced to the Sunday School while he was in Glasgow.³ The Sunday School spread widely in the British Isles after its 1780 inception. More than five thousand Sunday Schools sprang up in Scotland in the first twenty-five years, where they took the form of Sabbath Evening Schools. Two influential Scottish leaders were Robert Haldane and Greville Ewing. Campbell was a member of Ewing's school in Glasgow for a time.

The Disciples were born about the same time the Sunday School came to America. In 1824, the American Sunday School Union was launched in Philadelphia with the express purpose of establishing Union Sunday schools to teach the Bible, while avoiding unique doctrinal emphases. Both Stone and Campbell deplored that kind of Bible teaching. Many sects in America also used the Sunday School to teach creeds and catechisms. Various sects even tried to control the Union. Neither Stone nor Campbell could condone that.

Campbell said in *The Millennial Harbinger* in early 1837:

A portion of the Lord's Day cannot be more profitably occupied than in teaching children to read or commit to memory the sacred Scriptures, and in inculcating upon them the important principles of Christianity. Schools for this purpose should be carefully encouraged by all Christians. But if in Sunday School the Bible is superseded or perverted by human opinions whether in the abstract or the concrete, and they are thus converted into nurseries of sectarianism, no day would be holy enough to sanctify them.⁴

By 1847, he wrote: "Next to the Bible society the Sunday School stands preeminently deserving the attention and cooperation of all good men; for without the people can read the Bible, of what use is the multiplication and diffusion of the Divine Volume!"⁵

Some churches in Kentucky had meetings for the study of scripture as early as 1828, a practice encouraged by Stone. Other early Sunday Schools were reported in Hanover, Indiana, in 1832, and Cleveland, Ohio, in 1844. Many of these early schools had only a parallel relationship with the congregation, meeting in the same buildings, but as separate entities, a practice common well into the twentieth century. Congregational leadership exercised little or no oversight of Sunday School leadership. By 1850, the Sunday School was generally accepted as a part of a church's responsibility.

In 1848, the *Millennial Harbinger* carried a lengthy article by A. S. Hayden and Isaac Errett. Entitled "An Appeal in Behalf of Sunday Schools," it began with encouragement for parents to train their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Midway through the article, they said, "Every church, therefore, should have an arrangement to take not the children of her own members, but of all that may come under her influence, and teach them as a faithful mother trained Timothy."⁶

The history of Christian education in the Stone-Campbell churches is intertwined with the history of the publishing entities. The Christian Standard, the forerunner of the Standard Publishing enterprise, was born in 1866, in northern Ohio. It soon moved to Cincinnati and was under the leadership of Isaac Errett. On December 20, 1873, the *Christian Standard* began to print the new International Uniform Lessons, providing text and commentary to help local leaders. A year later, a monthly Sunday School leaflet carrying the International Series was introduced. The first of Standard's take-home papers appeared January 2, 1876. Not long after, take-home papers were introduced for all ages. More materials appeared as the years passed, not the least of which was the forerunner of the *Lookout* in 1889.

3. See Clarence R. Athearn, *The Religious Education of Alexander Campbell: Morning Star of the Reformation to Come* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1926).

4. Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger*, Series III, Vol. 1: No.2 (February, 1837). Reprinted by College Press, Joplin, Missouri, 93.

5. Alexander Campbell, "Reply to Elder A. W. Corey," *The Millennial Harbinger*, Series III, Vol 4: No. 4 (April 1847). Reprinted by College Press, Joplin, Missouri, 200-201.

6. A. S. Hayden and Isaac Errett, "An Appeal in Behalf of Sunday Schools," *Millennial Harbinger*, Series III, Vol. 5: No. 8 (August 1848). Reprinted by College Press, Joplin, Missouri, 468.

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

At the transition into the twentieth century, Sunday Schools in the Movement were big—and getting bigger. The literature of the day describes huge adult classes, usually divided by men and women. Congregational Christian education was largely equated with Sunday School, though youth societies were popular as well.

In 1910, the American Christian Missionary Society launched the Christian Board of Publication to provide literature for the churches. Perhaps the best known voice was that of Hazel Lewis who trained 26,500 teachers for 6070 churches from 1910-1920. She set up a lab school at the College of the Bible, produced a “Statement of Theory and Curriculum,” produced materials for the Christian Board of Publication for twenty-three years, and wrote several books for teachers. A contemporary of Ms. Lewis was Cynthia Pearl Maus, a youth specialist who launched the first summer youth conferences for the Disciples in 1920, and also initiated Vacation Bible School (VBS) among the Disciples.

The work of the Christian Board of Publication was increasingly linked with the work of the Religious Education Association, a group promoting religious education among all religious groups. The Association was deeply influenced by the Progressive Education Movement of John Dewey and the higher critical methods that influenced biblical scholarship of the time.

A particularly influential theorist for the Disciples was Walter Scott Athearn who introduced the idea of church school, emphasizing the entire church as a school. That nomenclature replaced Sunday School in many congregations. He and William Clayton Bower shaped Disciples education for a long time to come.

Standard Publishing was perhaps even further out on the cutting edge at the turn of the century. The Sunday School genius of the day was Herbert Moninger, who moved to Cincinnati in July 1905 to work at Standard.⁷ He came from a very fruitful ministry in Steubenville, Ohio. He had graduated from Bethany and did graduate work at West Virginia University, Butler, and Yale.

Although Moninger’s life was cut short with his untimely death in 1911 (he was thirty-five years old), he made three major contributions to Christian education. First, he led the church into the realization that the Sunday School was the church at work. His passion was that it be work done at its very best to reach the unchurched. He resolved to make sense of the confusing array of names of Sunday School classes. He selected a committee of twenty-five national leaders to recommend the best names for adult classes. The result was a recommendation that Sunday Schools use the names Loyal Women and Loyal Men for the segregated classes. Moninger then organized the Loyal Movement to promote the establishment and growth of classes. The motto was “A Million in the Loyal Classes in Five Years.” Soon there were Loyal Sons, Loyal Daughters, Loyal Men, Loyal Women, Loyal Berean, Junior Loyal Sons, Junior Loyal Daughters, Loyal Boys, and Loyal Girls classes in virtually every church influenced by Standard.

Moninger’s second major contribution was to revolutionize Christian journalism by using the *Lookout* and other publications to promote Christian education. Most notable was his “Front Rank” movement, an effort to encourage Sunday Schools to improve. To achieve “Front Rank” distinction, a school had to be graded, train teachers, hold regular teachers’ meetings, and have a missionary emphasis. He also promoted Bible training tours, Bible School month, and Bible reading.

Perhaps Moninger’s greatest contribution was his zeal for teacher training. He personally conducted classes throughout the city of Cincinnati. His book *Training for Service* was compiled from the lessons he taught in a Northside Union Teacher Training Class in Cincinnati in 1906.

Training for Service became the basic teacher training book for churches throughout the country. Nor did the book die with Moninger. It was later revised by C. J. Sharp, another teacher training enthusiast. The popularity of the book continued, and Orrin Root revised the series, arranging it into twenty-six lessons instead of the original forty. I did the last revision in 1983. The book is still available to the churches that care to provide training for their teachers.

7. See Guy P. Leavitt, “Bible School Genius of the Century,” *Key to Christian Education* (April-June, 1966): 60-63.

Moninger's untimely death was indeed tragic. One can only wonder what he would have accomplished had he lived into his most productive years. At the time of his death, P. H. Welsheimer, a Sunday School enthusiast as he preached at First Christian Church in Canton, Ohio, wrote: "In the little cemetery amidst the hills of Pennsylvania, where the body of Herbert Moninger lies, kind hands have placed a marble slab, but that is not his monument. If you want to see his monument, look around you, and you will behold it in the increased activity in Bible School work."⁸

The other genius at Standard during this era was Lillie Ann Faris.⁹ She came to Standard in 1910, from a faculty position at Ohio University in Athens, where she was also the Primary Department superintendent at the church there. She became editor for lessons for children from Cradle Roll to Juniors. She edited teachers' and pupils' books for children, a journal for teachers, pictures, and take-home papers, traveled widely, wrote books on methods for elementary education, and authored a set of Bible readers. The children's books were approved by a number of State Boards of Public Education for supplemental reading.

Her teaching methods were strikingly contemporary. In 1910, she wrote, "We must remember that through the children's own work the greatest impression is made."¹⁰ She continued, "Teachers of public schools have long ago conceded that for the purpose of imprinting a thought on a child's mind so that he can remember it distinctly, there is no way by which it may be done so effectively as with objects. In connection with this, the child's imagination is a wonderful factor."¹¹ Every lesson in her quarterlies included a biblical treatment, an application, visual suggestions, activity suggestions, and object lessons. She was the originator of the flannelboard.

Lillie Faris was also a masterful storyteller, holding audiences of every age spellbound. Miss Lillie was affiliated with Standard for thirty years, all of the time writing, training, traveling, and teaching so children could be taught the word of God.

One more example of Standard's innovation was their introduction of VBS materials in 1923—the first publisher of VBS materials. They provided materials for three age levels for schools that would last five weeks.

The majority of Church of Christ congregations also utilized the Sunday School and similar programs to address the educational needs of the church. But a schism occurred among these churches, some opposing the Sunday School, usually for one or more of three reasons: (1) they were not found in Scripture; (2) they were often extra-congregational; and (3) women frequently taught in them.

THE DECLINE OF THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

All too soon the schisms within the Movement had an incredible impact on Christian education. Perhaps the greatest impact was the shifting educational philosophy presented by people like William Clayton Bower, who promoted a progressive theory impacted by the more liberal theology of the day as it merged with the Progressive Education Movement. Whereas earlier virtually anyone would have told you that the purpose for Bible teaching was to present Christ and bring people to him to grow in him, the focus became seriously blurred. The result of blurred focus, divisions, and a neglect of development of lay teachers resulted in a 23 percent decline in Sunday School enrollment in the late '20s and the '30s. Innovation became suspect by many. The blame for the decline was placed on methods, not view of scripture. Christian education became professionalized—leaving the lay teacher at risk. The result was a time of malaise from which we have never fully recovered.

The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a number of developments in Christian education. A critical shift was the loss of focus for the church's education program, especially the Sunday School. Once the focus had been outreach and biblical knowledge. But not many churches today have their educational programs organized to capitalize on outreach—not even the VBS, which maintained that posture for longer

8. Ibid., 60.

9. See "The Extraordinary Miss Lillie," *Key to Christian Education* (April-June, 1966): 47-48.

10. Ibid., 48.

11. Ibid.

than the Sunday School. A generation of preachers and church leaders have neglected the educational program of the local church.

Professionalization of Christian education would appear to be a positive move, but, in general, it has reduced the focus on developing lay leadership. Any Christian education program must have effective lay leaders if it is to have an appealing dynamic.

The last thirty years of the twentieth century demonstrated a good many ups and downs, especially among Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. The '70s and '80s were a time of re-discovery of emphasizing Christian education and educating lay leadership. But, on the whole, it was a short revival. Some churches did very well in their teaching programs, but others languished.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

And now here we are in the twenty-first century. How do we make sense of what we see? Some churches have abandoned the Sunday School altogether, largely in favor of small groups. Perhaps those will work, though I suspect that if we give no more attention to the equipping and strengthening of small groups than we did the Sunday School, we will end up with the same problems. And, though I'm a part of and lead a small group and appreciate what it does, it simply isn't the same as Sunday School in terms of systematic biblical teaching. It focuses much more on fellowship—a worthwhile focus—but does not provide a way for people to learn systematically.

I did a survey about a year ago, using the Web sites of the churches with 1000 or more attendance in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ to determine the place of Sunday School and Christian education. The majority of those churches do continue to have Sunday School for adults. But the churches on the West Coast were far less likely to have Sunday School. Though a good bit of information about other teaching programs was found, none of them seemed to be comprehensive. Other churches have Sunday Schools, but give them no attention, in fact denigrating them at virtually every turn.

So the picture continues to be mixed. It is much too early to get a sense of what will happen. But I think we can all agree that we by and large have congregations full of biblical illiterates—and we have to provide effective Christian education, whatever form it takes.

CONCLUSION

In my view, Christian education in congregations will continue to struggle until we decide it is important, regain an emphasis on lay leadership development, and focus on a balance of biblical teaching, fellowship, and outreach. Many years ago D. Campbell Wyckoff, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, said:

My proposal for meeting whatever crisis is deemed to exist is this: respect the Sunday School for what it has been, what it is and does and for its potential future contributions; provide it with appropriate backing and fitting resources; and promote it realistically . . . and in promoting it realistically, claim for it neither more nor less than it can produce. Does the Sunday School have a future? The obvious and unavoidable answer is that it has . . . It has an important future so long as it remains a project of committed lay volunteers, emphasizes life-long learning, has as its dominant ethos that of the family rather than the school, stays simple to operate, and non-ideological in character and is sensible and amenable to reasonable change.¹²

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12. D. Campbell Wyckoff, "As American As Crabgrass," *Religious Education* (January-February 1980).