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Benefits of a Sunday School Contest

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BY ELM

Sunday School contests have come a long way since Robert Raikes first coaxed London street boys to classes with pennies. Recently, the person bringing the most visitors to First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., was offered a free trip to the Holy Land; the East Side Free Will Baptist Church, Elizabethton, Tenn., gave a used car; and Trinity Baptist, Jacksonville, Fla., awarded a second honeymoon trip to Miami Beach.

Although critics of Sunday School promotion believe that sophisticated Americans have moved beyond the lure of bribes, the current wave of phenomenal Sunday School growth is being swept along by contests. The appeal is traditional; the prizes and/or gimmicks up-to-date. One Sunday School bus captain swallowed a goldfish when the attendance record was broken; other churches awarded a trip to Disneyland, a pony, a monkey, a mini-bike, a bicycle, or a dinner for two at an exclusive restaurant to those "bringing in the most."

"I'd give my grandmother away to attract a crowd so I could preach the Gospel," remarked pastor Ed Dobson of the Baptist Church in Buena Vista, Va.

Not only are expensive prizes given to those with the highest number of visitors, smaller incentives are offered to every-

one to lure the crowds. One church fed the 5,000 with McDonald's hamburgers; another church provided a Kentucky Fried Chicken dinner on the grounds—after Colonel Sanders had given his Christian testimony.

There are five categories of Sunday School contests, each based on a different motive or psychology. (Dr. John Rawlings, Landmark Baptist Temple, Cincinnati, adds, "Don't use the same type of contest twice. If you try to shoot rabbits from the same hole, they'll quit running.")

(1) *The contest to reach a goal or break a previous attendance record.* Last year Jerry Falwell had 19,020 in Sunday School and this year he wants 25,000.

(2) *A contest with another church.* The Tabernacle Baptist Church, Concord, Calif., challenged Oxnard (Calif.) Baptist Temple last spring, with the losing minister speaking in the winning church.

(3) *Awarding a prize to the one bringing the most.* A 12-year-old won a mini-bike at First Church of God, Benton, Ill., for bringing 47 guests.

(4) *Awarding a prize to everyone who comes.* The Hess Road, Wesleyan Church, Appleton, N. Y., gave a kite to all children at Sunday School.

(5) *One section of the Sunday School challenges another.* The teacher of the youth

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department pushed a cream pie in the face of the teacher of adults at Community Baptist Church, Deerfield, Ill., because youth attendance was larger.

The 12 Disciples Campaign has been used in more than 3,000 churches, reports Jim Nicholson, of Gospel Promotions, where a bracelet and charm is given each attender. Each of the 12 Sundays, a lesson is taught on the life of a disciple and a charm of that disciple is given. By attending 12 consecutive Sundays, pupils get a complete bracelet.

Other prizes to all attenders are goldfish, kites, whistles, balloons, yo-yos, candy, buttons, water guns, Bibles, pencils, bubblegum, small footballs.

"Jesus walked on water to draw a preaching crowd. Since I can't do that, I'll give away soft ice cream or cotton candy to kids on my Sunday School buses," says Dr. Greg Dixon, Indianapolis Baptist Temple. His church owns machines to make both.

The Calvary Baptist Church, Middletown, Ohio, divided its large adult auditorium Bible class into the Blue and Grey and refought the Civil War. The large number of members from Kentucky obviously wanted to beat the Yankees, because keen competition doubled attendance.

Danny Smith and Rudy Holland were

boyhood friends in Lynchburg, Va. After college both began churches in the fall of 1971. Smith began the Open Door Baptist Church in Richmond; Holland the Berean Baptist Church, Roanoke. Now both run approximately 500 in Sunday School. They challenged each other for the title, "America's Fastest Growing Church." The contest will be decided this month.

Other contests reverse rewards. "The Ugly Man Cup," for example, is given to the teacher with the poorest attendance. He is usually presented a makeshift cup, with all its ensuing embarrassment, during the main assembly.

Churches using contests often are accused of shallowness, superficiality, or interest only in numbers. The bases of criticism are usually: (1) pupils come only for prizes; (2) promotion cheapens the Gospel of a holy and infinite God; (3) rewards foster self-glory in workers; (4) the only true rewards are given by God; and (5) inflated statistics.

The classic illustration of negative results from a contest arose when a mother wanted her boy to have perfect attendance, but he contracted a case of mumps. She sent him anyway and told him to sit in the corner and, when the teacher looked at him, to "suck in."

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