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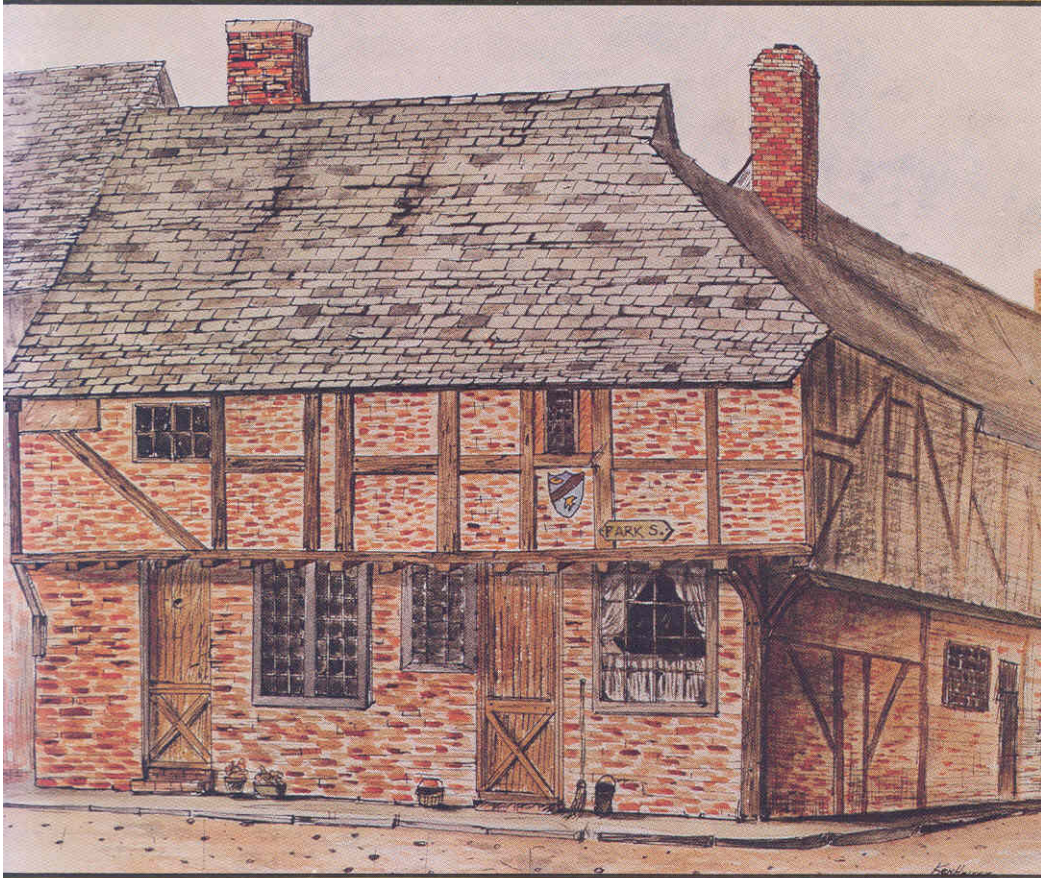
The Founders of Sunday School

Elmer L. Towns

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The Founders of Sunday School



Site of First Sunday School — Gloucester, England — 1780

200 Years 1780-1980

by Elmer Towns



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FOUNDERS OF SUNDAY SCHOOL

The Sunday School is a movement of people who have changed the face of Christianity. It was done by reaching children and adults for Christ and teaching them the Word of God. The purpose was to win people to Jesus Christ and then train them for service.

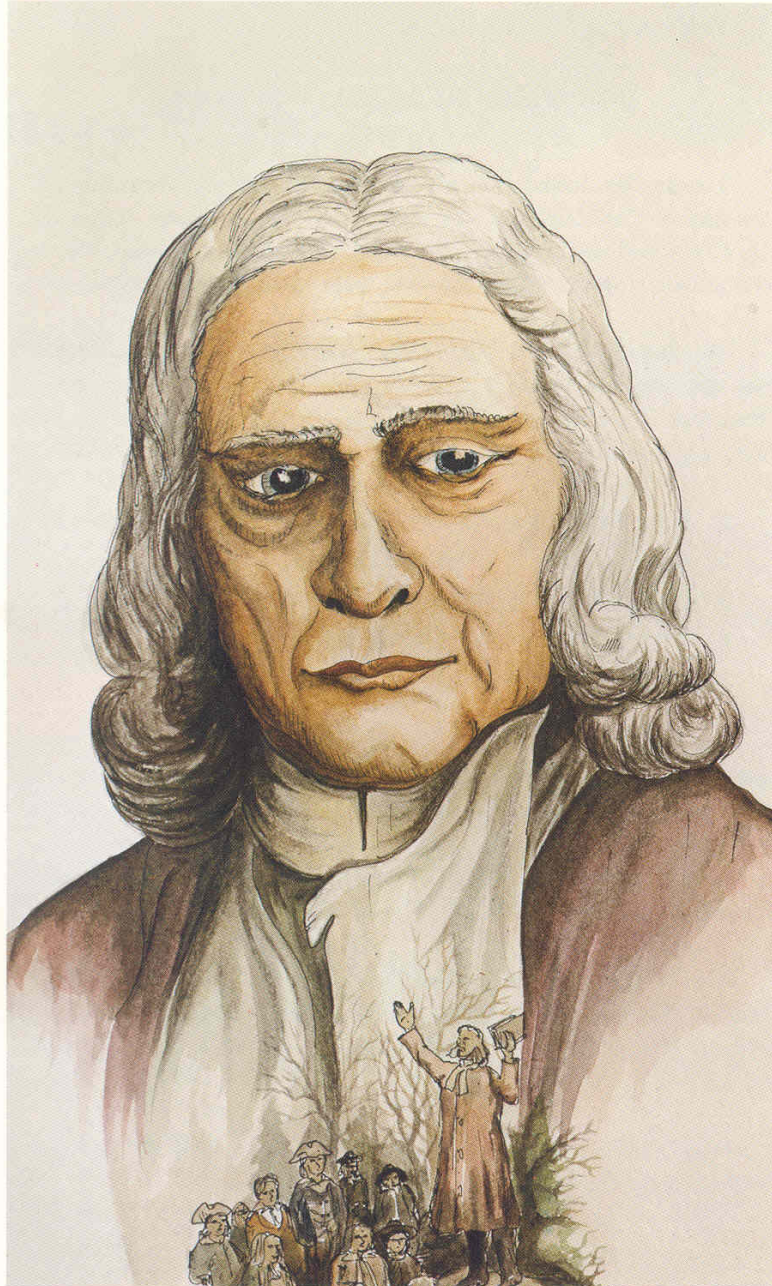
The Sunday School celebrates its 200th birthday in 1980. One of the best ways to properly recognize Sunday School is to honor its Founders. These men are included in this book so that today's pupils may appreciate its past and prepare for the future.

1. John Wesley, Forerunner of Sunday School
2. Robert Raikes, Founder of Sunday School
3. Francis Scott Key, Statesman for Sunday School
4. Stephen Paxson, Spirit of Sunday School
5. Dwight L. Moody, Supporter of Sunday School

During the past 200 years Sunday School has had years of prosperity and periods of decline. The marching orders of Sunday School have not changed. Jesus commanded, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). When this aim is applied to Sunday School, it prospers.

The Founders of Sunday School are honored during its birthday because they had a clear aim of reaching men and women for Christ and teaching them the Scriptures with a view of winning them to salvation.

When today's leaders apply these historic aims, God will continue to prosper the Sunday School.



JOHN WESLEY

Forerunner of Sunday School 1703-1791

The people of Savannah, Georgia claimed that John Wesley began the first Sunday School in their city in 1736. Wesley came to Georgia as a young Anglican clergyman to preach to the Indians in the new colony. Careful study shows that Wesley taught the catechism to the children of his parish on Saturday and Sunday afternoon. This religious exercise does not fit the technical description of a Sunday School. But the desire of Wesley to reach all children with the Gospel was later manifested in the Sunday School movement.

Wesley returned to England and was converted at Aldersgate. The impact of his conversion resulted in a new movement. At first Wesley and his followers were sarcastically called "Methodist," because they used innovative methods to reach the masses.

Wesley divided his followers into small classes, predictive of the Sunday School that was later to come. Wesley wrote over 300 books in his lifetime, aimed at helping lay preachers give out the Word of God. Again, predictive of the Sunday Schools that provided literature for the lay public. Wesley also worked with the masses outside of the established church. Once again, a glimpse of coming Sunday Schools that began outside of church buildings in view of reaching the children of the street.

Obviously Wesley never claimed to begin Sunday School. In his journal he shows surprise when he visited a Sunday School. Wesley called them "nurseries for Christians." Wesley shows delight with the new movement as he writes in his journal (1784) after visiting Leeds, England; the town had 26 Sunday Schools, 2,000 scholars and 45 teachers. Wesley realized he could use the Sunday School to expand his movement, so he called them, "Methodist Sunday Schools." Also he wrote, "There must be a Sunday School where ever there is Methodist society." John Wesley is the Forerunner of Sunday School because he planted the seeds of the movement, 30 years before Robert Raikes began the first Sunday School.



ROBERT RAIKES

Founder of The Sunday School 1736-1811

Robert Raikes, the crusading editor of the Gloucester Journal, in England established one of the greatest lay movements in the history of the Christian church. His first project was jail reform, but it was not a successful project. Raikes became convinced that “vice could be better

prevented than cured.” Therefore he turned to education. While visiting the slum section of Gloucester, some children jostled him on the street. He became disturbed at their rudeness.

“If you think they are bad, you should come back on Sunday when the worst ones are off of work,” an observer told him. Raikes determined to do something and talked with Rev. Thomas Stock, in the village of Ashbury, Berkshire. Out of their conversation came a plan to use laymen to teach the Word of God to children during the best time available, Sunday. They originally planned to reach the children of the streets, not just the children of church members.

Raikes began his experience in July 1780 when he paid Mrs. Meredith, a shilling a day to conduct a school in her home on Souty Alley. She began with only boys and listened to the lessons of the older boys, who in turn coached the younger pupils. Raikes wrote four text books, which he printed on his presses. As a result, they appeared as large newspapers which were held up before the class for the students to read. During those early days, Raikes paid for most of the Sunday School expenses.

The Sunday School grew slowly for two years, in and around Gloucester. On November 3, 1783, Raikes published an account of Sunday School in his paper. Hundreds followed his example and began Sunday Schools. Next, news of the Sunday School appeared in Gentlemen’s Magazine and a year later, another article appeared in the Armenian Magazine, published by John Wesley.

The movement that Raikes began, grew so rapidly that it left him on the sidelines. Sunday School organizations appeared in every major city and some towns boasted that every child within its limits was enrolled in Sunday School. Raikes dies in 1811, quietly and unnoticed.

In 1831, a statue was erected to his memory as the Founder of Sunday School. At that time Sunday Schools of Great Britain had a weekly enrollment of 1,250,000 children, approximately 25% of the population.



FRANCIS SCOTT KEY

Statesman for Sunday School 1780-1843

Francis Scott Key was a well-known statesman in history, arguing cases before the United States Supreme Court and conducting diplomatic missions for the United States. But, he is best known for writing our national anthem, **The Star Spangled Banner**. Key was sent with a flag of truce to a British Admiral during the War of 1812. He was detained on an enemy vessel and that night he witnesses the bombardment of Fort McHenry, near Baltimore, Maryland.

During the night, he saw the American flag by bomb explosions, proudly waving over a battered fort. By the early light of dawn, he saw the flag was still flying, thus he penned the words of our national anthem.

Key was a Christian and taught a large Sunday School class of over 300 men. Also, he was one of the founders of the American Sunday School Union, and served on its board of directors. Key chaired the Sunday School convention in Washington, D. C., 1830, when the Mississippi Valley Enterprise was introduced and approved. The Mississippi Valley Enterprise was an ambitious project to plant a new Sunday School in every town between the Alleghany and the Rocky Mountains, or between Pittsburg and Denver. The area comprised 1,000,000 square miles with a population of over 4 million people. Key attempted to raise \$40,000 to get the project done. A newspaper called the meeting the most important ever held in the United States. U. S. senators and congressmen addressed the Sunday School convention on behalf of the project. The Clerk of the House of Representatives was the secretary.

The Mississippi Valley Enterprise was one of the most successful projects in the history of Sunday School. Led by Stephen Paxson and other hard working missionaries, over 61,297 Sunday Schools were established with 407,244 teachers and an enrollment of 2,650,784 pupils. They thought they could complete the project in two years, but it took 50 years to complete the mission. They employed approximately 80 missionaries a year and spent a total of \$2,133,364.13 on the project.



STEPHEN PAXSON

Spirit of Sunday School 1837-1881

One of the greatest American pioneers, did not search for land, rivers, or natural resources. Stephen Paxson was a pioneer who searched for lost souls. During his lifetime he founded 1,314 new Sunday Schools with an enrollment of 83,000 students.

Paxson was born with a speech impediment and later was nicknamed “stuttering Stephen.” He also was lame, but these difficulties did not prohibit him from doing the work of God.

His little girl begged him to attend Sunday School so she could win a prize. When Paxson got there, they asked him to teach a class of boys. Teaching involved listening to the boys read the Scriptures, he simply corrected them when they made mistakes. “Let’s go home,” he said when they finished reading the lesson. “You are supposed to ask us questions out of the little book,” the boys told him.

Paxson was so embarrassed that he did not know the Scriptures, that he took a Bible home and read it carefully. He became a Christian by reading the Scriptures and ultimately volunteered his life as a missionary for the American Sunday School Union.

He named his horse Robert Raikes, after the Founder of Sunday School. The horse was so well trained, that it never passed a child, but waited for Paxson to stop and give out the Gospel.

Paxson was a well-known speaker on the east coast, raising money for Sunday School libraries. He made the sophisticated audiences laugh and cry, but more important he made them give money. They could see beyond his grammatical mistakes to the great vision he had for pioneering the west with the Word of God. A result, Paxson began Sunday Schools in cabins, tobacco barns, taverns and dance halls.

Stephen Paxson retired to a St. Louis office and died in 1881. He is remembered as a Founder of Sunday School because of his great enthusiasm and commitment for the movement.



DWIGHT L. MOODY

Supporter of Sunday School 1832- 1899

Dwight L. Moody is said to have “shook two continents for God.” The foundation for his world-wide ministry came through Sunday School.

As a young boy, his Sunday School teacher came into the shoe store where he was working and led him to Jesus Christ. After that, Moody moved to Chicago and joined the Plymouth Congregational Church. He rented five pews and filled them with young boys he brought in off of the street. But he realized he could do more to reach Chicago for Christ. Moody started a Sunday School in a former saloon in the vice-ridden section of Chicago called “little hell.” When this small room could not accommodate the pupils, Moody moved it to North Market Street and eventually became the largest Sunday School in Chicago.

Moody spread enthusiasm through several Sunday School conventions between 1859-1864. In Springfield, Illinois he remarked, “This thing (the convention) so far has been a dead failure.” He began a prayer meeting with a few people and within a few days, the entire convention experienced revival. Sunday School delegates returned home to revive Sunday

School across Illinois. Out of that convention came the great Sunday School leaders; Jacobs, Eggleston, Tyng, P. B. Bliss and others.

Because of his compassion for education, Moody founded other educational endeavors for Christ, such as Northfields Schools. Next, he founded the Moody Bible Institute in 1882, one of the first Bible Institutes in America. Out of M.B.I. came the Moody Colportage Series, an organization to provide inexpensive Christian literature, Moody Monthly magazine, and Moody Press. Today the organization founded by Moody has extensive ministries around the world.

Moody eventually went into city-wide evangelistic crusades that brought hundreds of thousands to Jesus Christ.