

# Sunday school an evolving institution

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Sunday school plays such an important role in Baptist life a typical churchgoer might be tempted to think it always has been around. In fact, it is a relatively modern and evolving invention.

While some debate its origins, most credit a British printer named Robert Raikes as founder of the modern Sunday school movement. An Anglican layman, Raikes was concerned about children in slums he saw drifting into a life of crime. Since many children were forced to work in factories six days a week, he and a local pastor decided to open a school for them on Sunday in July 1780.



While Raikes' aim was to teach reading, writing and arithmetic, he used the Bible as a textbook, introducing a spiritual component to the curriculum. When Raikes died in 1811, an estimated 400,000 people attended Sunday schools in Great Britain. The schools served as a model for Britain's public school system. John Wesley described Raikes' Sunday schools as "one of the noblest specimens of charity ... in England since William the Conqueror."

The idea spread to other nations. In 1785, a Sunday school was begun by

William Elliott, a Methodist layman, in Accomac County, Va. In 1797, Second Baptist Church in Baltimore—now called Second and Fourth Baptist Church—began a Sunday school reported to be one of the first in the United States to use the Bible as its only textbook and all-volunteer teachers.

Like any innovation, the Sunday school movement had its detractors. In Virginia, organizers were criticized because they offered instruction to black slaves. In 1830, a Baptist association in Illinois passed a resolution declaring its lack of fellowship with Sunday schools, as well as foreign and domestic mission and Bible societies.

Opposition to missionary societies and Sunday schools prompted some Calvinist Baptists in the early 1800s to separate into their own Primitive Baptist tradition. Other denominations divided as well. But in time, most denominations came to embrace Sunday school.

Luther Rice, a primary force behind the founding of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions—called the Triennial Convention because it met every three years—joined with others to form the Baptist General Tract Society in 1824. Today, the ministry is known as [Judson Press](#), publishing arm of the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches USA.

After Baptists in the South separated from the Triennial Convention's missionary-sending program in 1845, many continued to use study materials from the northern American Baptist Publication Society. The Southern Baptist Convention formed its own Sunday School Board, now known as [LifeWay Christian Resources](#), in 1891, completing the Northern/Southern Baptist schism.

In 1920, Arthur Flake was named head of the Sunday School Board's department of Sunday school administration. In 1923, he wrote the book

Building a Standard Sunday School containing five points that came to be known as Flake's Formula. Flake's plan—"(1) know possibilities; (2) enlarge organization; (3) provide place; (4) train workers; and (5) go after them"—succeeded in growing Sunday school enrollment from around 1 million in 1920 to nearly 6 million when Flake died in 1952.

Sunday school's golden age lasted until the 1960s, when many denominations began to see enrollments decline. Today, LifeWay Christian Resources reports more than 2 million Sunday school classes in the United States.