

## SUNDAY SCHOOL: PAST AND PRESENT

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### *Abstract*

The first part of the article shows the history of religious education in South Africa and how the Sunday school was successfully integrated with the existent extensive religious education system used by Afrikaners to educate their children. This system involved the total spectrum of life, including home, school, church and the state. The second part deals with the degeneration of the education system during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in the sharp decrease in the numbers of children in traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches. The conclusion is drawn that the current Sunday school system should be rethought and restructured in order to serve as a tool to educate Christians.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In order to illustrate the fact that the current situation in the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches is in urgent need to reform, this article traces the history of religious education in South Africa. The extensive religion-based education system that was founded by the Reformers and brought to South Africa by the first European settlers was extended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the addition of the Sunday school practice.

The essay will show that during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the whole system changed and all that was left of the extensive education system was the Sunday school. Statistics show that the Sunday school, neither in its traditional form, nor in its modern version, can successfully replace the traditional religious education system.

The conclusion is drawn that the church needs to rethink its ministry to children in order to stop the current tendency of people turning their backs on the church and faith as a result of insufficient religious education and training.

## 2 THE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SYSTEM OF THE AFRIKANERS

### 2.1 Origins of the religious education system

The religious education system that came to South Africa with the European settlers was first introduced by the Reformers and brought to the Netherlands through the work of John Calvin.

The Synod of Dordt, held in 1618-1619 in the Netherlands, gave clear instructions on what children should learn. The aim of the education system was to teach the children to read the Bible, prepare them to become members of church and state by public confession of their faith, to accumulate knowledge, and to form their religious personalities (Van Wyk 1949:27). This was done in three stages (Kaajan 1914:207, 208):

- 1 The first part of education was done by parents in their homes: the parents taught their small children by practising daily family worship, reading the Bible to them and helping them to learn the Bible history and some important Bible texts by heart. Parents had to take their children to church and explain and repeat to them all that was heard.

- 2 The second part of education was the work of the schoolmaster who had to be a member of the Reformed (Protestant) Church. He had to endorse the confession of the Netherlands and the catechism. The children had to be educated on the catechism itself, at least twice a week. Books used were the Bible and selections from the catechism in various levels of difficulty.
- 3 The last part of education had to be done by the preachers. They visited the schools to teach the catechism to the children. Elders and sick comforters shared this task with the preachers.

Parents prepared the children for the instructions they would get from school, while the religious instruction at school prepared them for the last phase of instruction, done by the preachers, elders and sick comforters in a short period of time, usually between three and four weeks (Venter 1929:8). After this, the young people openly confessed their faith in God and became members of both church and state (Weilbach & Du Plessis 1882:24).

This system came to South Africa with the first European settlers and it became official in 1714 when the Governor M P De Chavonnes summarised the existing customs and principles on education into a law. This law remained the guideline for education at the Cape until 1795 and, in the rural areas it stayed unofficially in operation until years after the Great Trek. The Voortrekkers took off into the interior of the country, taking the trusted and well-known Bible-based education system with them into the wilderness. After the Great Trek, the same religion-based education system was used in the newly founded states. Even after the Second Anglo-Boer War, and in spite of the British government's efforts to introduce a new education system, the education system stayed based on the Bible and was known as Christian National Education (Oliver 2005:58).

## 2.2 The development of the Sunday school movement

As can be seen above, Sunday school did not originally form part of the religious tradition. It was started in England in 1780 by Robert

Raikes (1735-1811), a publisher and journalist (Arn et al 1981:14). This first Sunday school was established and conducted by people outside the church and it was designed to teach basic reading and writing skills. Any religious value was incidental; the purpose was moral and educational. By 1789, 300 000 children were attending Sunday school in England (Viljoen 1994:20).

The Sunday school movement became very popular and the Methodist church took it to America in 1785 (De Villiers 1957:257). The Sunday school in Germany started in 1786 and in the Netherlands, it was started in 1836 (De Villiers 1957:257).

The missionary Daniël Lindley started the first Sunday school in South Africa in 1841 in Pietermaritzburg (Greyling 1965:18).

The first official Sunday school at the Cape was founded in Cape Town on May 26, 1844 in the congregation of Abraham Faure who had been involved in the Sunday school practice while he was studying in England (De Villiers 1957:258). It was not Faure, but the elders of the congregation who initially asked for the introduction of the Sunday school into the practice of the church (Greyling 1955:15). The Cape Town Sunday school started with 125 children and six months later 400 children attended (Greyling 1955:18). The second congregation in the Cape that started a Sunday school was Graaf-Reinett in 1849, and after that followed Tulbach in 1856 and Stellenbosch in 1858 (Greyling 1955:18,19).

In the Orange Free State Sunday school was introduced in Bloemfontein in 1849. There are no dates to prove the official introduction of Sunday school into the churches in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (Greyling 1955:18, 19).

### 2.3 The relationship between the religious education system and the Sunday school

In 1884, at the annual Sunday school conference, which was attended by 300 people, reverend J C Pauw said that the following must be taught during Sunday school: Biblical history, Bible texts, religious songs, and missionary work (De Villiers 1957:259). It was also stated at this conference at Paarl, that the catechism class was

the highest class in the Sunday school and that the purpose of Sunday school was to prepare children for the catechism class (De Villiers 1957:261). By 1894, 706 congregations had Sunday schools and more than 21 000 children attended.

It is clear that the Sunday school did not act as a substitute for the catechism although, in South Africa, it was always strictly religious. Sunday school was attended by younger children who, when they were old enough, moved on to the catechism class. In both the Sunday school and the catechism class, the Bible was the main instruction book and all the study material was essentially religious. Both the Sunday school and the catechism class were under the supervision of the church (Greyling 1965:20, 21). The Sunday school was not held at the same time as the church service, and the children attended both.

Catechism class was usually under the supervision of the ministers while the Sunday school teachers were ordinary members of the congregation, who had no special training (Greyling 1965:20, 21).

Sunday school formed an extension of, and was supplementary to, the basic Christian education system that formed part of every child's daily life both at home and at school. The aim of the Sunday school was religious training, and it coincided with the normal educational training of the youth with the Bible as the basic study material. Church officials were in charge of both the education system and the Sunday school and both were under supervision of the elders and pastors of the local congregations (Greyling 1955:18).

The foundation of the system was laid at home in the caring and dedicated hands of parents who taught the basics of the Christian faith to their children from the moment they were born, and in accordance with the promises they made when they brought their children to church to be baptised. On this foundation, building blocks were later added daily at school. The church and the Sunday school provided the final touches of paint to the building of personal faith that stood at the centre of each individual's life.

### 3 CHANGES IN THE RELIGION-BASED EDUCATION SYSTEM DURING THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

Modern-day lifestyle put enormous pressure on the traditional Christian-based education system. During the second half of the twentieth century, explosions of knowledge, the availability of modern equipment and technology as well as a new global perspective persuaded Christians that the Bible was no longer the only source of knowledge to be sought.

The immediate result was that the Bible was no longer the centre around which each individual's life was built. The moment that the biblical authority was diluted, the power that the Bible had over family life vanished. This gave rise to the breakdown of family life with all its terrible consequences such as divorce, abuse and neglect, to name only a few.

Children suddenly found themselves in a totally different environment. As both parents pursued their dreams or just tried to make ends meet, the focus shifted from eternal life to life this side of the grave. Family worship vanished and the living example of the parents following Christ and practising the instructions of the Bible in their lives deteriorated. Parents no longer made time to read the Bible or to teach the children Bible stories and verses from the Holy Scripture. With almost no Biblical role models and no Biblical instruction woven into every conversation, the Bible was soon no longer part of everyday life of a great part of the Afrikaner nation who started to 'run the rat race'. The religious education of the children fell onto the shoulders of the schools and Sunday school teachers.

Christian parents believed that the Sunday school, provided by the church, and therefore approved and equipped to care for the total religious forming of the child, could act as substitute for their own responsibilities. Sunday school and religious education at school were expected to make up for the lack of family worship and parental spiritual guidance, to inspire the children to follow the example of

Jesus Christ and to give a firm foundation of faith to sustain their spiritual needs throughout their lives.

The modern-day world perspective influenced the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches to a great extent. While the gap between Christianity and the world is widening all the time (Rutter 1983:33), the Christian church in South Africa reflects far too readily the standards of the society in which it operates (Samson 1983:10). According to Samson, there are no signs anymore of “the alternative community” that the church is meant to be (Samson 1983:10). Most churches in South Africa tend to conform happily to the political, social and business norms of the country while a very large proportion of the Christian community is nominal in its commitment to God (Samson 1983:11).

Here we also need to keep the dismal picture of the history of the different Afrikaans speaking churches in mind (Oliver 2005:79-87). During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dogmatic issues clouded the nation’s spiritual behaviour and thinking, resulting in the founding of three different Afrikaans-speaking churches. The rivalry intensified after the Second Anglo-Boer War when politics entered the dominion of the church and dogmatic issues tended to get even greater attention. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this resulted in religious confusion, when the politics of the day like ‘apartheid’ became part of the message and ‘theology’ of the church.

As time went by, the church’s dilemma with dogma got out of hand. *Sola Scriptura* made way for ‘the Bible stands in the centre’. The church still proclaimed that the Bible was the main pillar but it was no longer the only one directing the church and believers. In fact, other spiritual books and worldly ideas were implemented and utilised ‘to explain the Bible better’. This opened the door for a lot of *Fremdkörper* to enter the church. Currently, dogmatic issues like homosexuality and the Belhar confession threaten to tear some churches and congregations to pieces while more and more people and children abandon the church and faith because they feel that they are worthless to them.

Hand in hand with parental guidance and the spiritual training provided by the church, was the Christian National Education system that was implemented in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Oliver 2005:58). The degeneration of parental education and training as well as the lack of guidance and provision by the church put a great strain on the school system to provide spiritual education and training to children. Today many middle-aged Christians, and even non-Christian South Africans, will confess that the knowledge they have about the Bible, God and faith, they accumulated at primary school.

When the democratic government ruled that the education system used in public schools would change from Christian-based to non-religious education and training, the Sunday school, the complementary addition to the extensive religion-based education system, was all that was left standing of the traditional religious education system of the Afrikaner nation. For the first time, many Christians recognised the enormous task that schools had, that of providing spiritual education and training on behalf of the parents, the church and the Christian state (before 1994).

Within a few decades, the Afrikaans-speaking Christian church in South Africa lost nearly all its means to educate and train children to be Christians. All that was left was the Sunday school.

#### 4 RESULTS OF THE CHANGES IN RELIGION BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In 1990, the eyes of the world (not those of the church) focused on children, with the World Conference on Children, held in New York. Eleven years later, in 2001 a report on the state of our nation's children (by the office on the rights of the child - ORC) was published, based on the statistics gathered during the 1996 census in South Africa (Yates 2002:2). The shocking facts disclosed by this report, about the disintegration of family structures, problems such as joblessness, HIV/AIDS, abuse, crime and poverty are topped only by the reaction of the Christian church (Yates 2002:2, 3). The fact that the church did not participate in the international debate, showed no



interest in or reaction to the national report and the theological vacuum (Yates 2002:6) concerning matters dealing with children, showed that the church in South Africa proved itself irrelevant and uncommitted to the children of the country and their special needs and problems. South Africa is the number one country in the world with the highest divorce rate, the highest number of rapes and abuses, while the crime rate forces us to live in 'prisons' and to avoid streets with billboards that warn against hijackers. Drug abuse and Satanism are growing at an alarming rate. This tendency places the claim that South Africa is a Christian country, in jeopardy (Samson 1983:9).

According to Operation World, at the turn of the century, 73.52% of the South African population were Christians (Johnstone et al 2001:576). The non-religious part of the population was set at 8.08%. Although the annual growth rate of the Christian population was +1.2%, the annual growth rate of non-religious people was an alarming +6.5% (Johnstone et al 2001:576).

This picture turns darker as we turn to statistics regarding children. The percentage of children of Sunday school age in the world is increasing all the time (Rutter 1983:33). This is also true of South Africa. Forty percent of the total population of South Africa are children – twenty-three percent of these are between the ages of 5 and 14 (Yates 2002:34). Seventy-seven percent of South African children claim to be Christians but an alarming 11% are non-religious (Yates 2002:36).

The statistics of traditional Afrikaans speaking churches paint an even worse scenario:

Gereformeerde Kerke	1985 (GKSA Almanak 1986a:288)	1995 (GKSA Almanak 1996a:336)	2005 (GKSA church office)
Adult members	77 482	78 254	70 345
Children	38 635	30 589	20 514
Total	116 117	108 843	90 859

Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk	1985 (Dreyer 1986:126)	1995 (Dreyer 1996:247)	2005 (NHK church office)
Adult members	130 981	129 477	109 810
Children	63 216	52 255	32 279
Total	194 197	181 732	142 089

Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk	1985 (NGK Yearbook 1986b:42)	1995 (NGK Yearbook 1996b:98)	2005 (NGK church office)
Adult members	967 810	930 774	889 538
Children	464 096	358 063	265 463
Total	1 431 906	1 288 837	1 155 001

In the last twenty years, the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* lost 49% of its children and the *Gereformeerde Kerke* lost 46,9% of their children. Between 1985 and 2005, the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, the biggest Afrikaans-speaking church in South Africa, lost more than 270 000 members. Nearly 200 000 of these were children.

Internationally there were some outcries about the spiritual neglect of children by the church. Frank and Pearson said in 1998 that the church is doing too little too late in reaction to the shocking report called 'All God's children' that stated devastating facts about the neglect of children in the Church of England (Frank & Pearson 1998:2). In America, the same cries are heard (Darcy-Berube 1995), with the same results: no action. In South Africa, no one seems to acknowledge the extent of the problem, nor the reasons behind the current statistics.

## 5 THE PRESENT SITUATION REGARDING SUNDAY SCHOOL

The above-mentioned history of the way that Sunday school was used as a supplementary addition to an extensive, existing system of religious education and training should have warned the church and believers that the Sunday school could not simply be turned into a comprehensive system that could stand in for, replace and cover all that for hundreds of years had been done daily by parents, the school, the church and even the government. Sunday school in its traditional form was supplementary, adding a final touch, and to be honest, a 'nice to have', but by no means the key point of religious education.

The average time of the Sunday school is one hour each week for the smaller children and two hours for the older children (De Villiers 1957:320). Working on a very optimistic target of forty Sundays' attendance a year (but it is closer to 25 Sunday school lessons per year), the total length of time a child will spend in Sunday school if he or she attends for ten years is less than seventeen days (Graham 1983:47). Apparently, the church and parents thought that the once a week Sunday school, 25 weeks a year, would be enough to give solid foundation of faith to the young ones. Even now, with the truth screaming from the statistics and the chaos around us, no one seems to be alarmed.

Somehow Christians thought that the Sunday school could replace church services, worship and both formal and informal instruction to the youth. No one seems to realise that the Sunday school cannot cope with the load that was dumped on its shoulders.

The church thought that it was finally getting to grips with the demands of modern-day worship when it 'partially' replaced or supplemented the Bible with modern textbooks, creative multimedia aids and new ideas for the Sunday school to teach children about God. The new macro 'community' churches (such as *Lewende Woord* and Moreletapark Dutch Reformed Church), not really bound

by dogma or tradition, practise the 'modern' creative form of Sunday school under other names such as small groups, pal groups or care groups, with nearly the same devastating effects as in the traditional churches. Although these churches attract great numbers of young people to their services, most of these young people do not have a personal relationship with the Lord. Three years after the youth services of Moreleta Park started, preaching continues to focus on conversion to Christ.

This left the church 'in a state of almost complete lethargy as it is faced with a generation of children and young people who have not received their just inheritance:

- knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ;
- introduction to the character of God;
- familiarity with the teaching of scripture;
- access to the wealth of Christian experience in the older generation;
- safe and appropriate opportunity for personal exploration and response' (Frank & Pearson 1998:5).

## 6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above-mentioned trends, we may conclude that, under the present circumstances, the Sunday school alone, because of the way it has been conducted, does not succeed in grasping the tremendous opportunity it has to change a life for eternity, to change a society and the destiny of a nation (Mathie 1983:22).

We have developed a generation of people who do not know the basic truths of the Christian faith and are therefore unable to live by it or raise their children correctly (Samson 1983:14). Christian children are left with the paint of the Sunday school lesson in their hands but nowhere to apply it because, where the firm foundation of faith should be, there is a huge crater left by family disruption. Where the building blocks of faith should be, there is a gap left by incompetent parents, a non-religious school system and the controversies in, and seemingly 'don't care' attitude of the church.

This results in countless Christians who are spiritually starving and dying. The once-a-week Sunday school practice led Christians to believe their children could spiritually survive on one piece of bread every week. They believed the church when it taught them that the sweet tasting crumbs that the children received at Sunday school would keep them satisfied, healthy, and spiritually growing for a week or two or even longer. This stands in contrast to parents who want the best for their kids and in every aspect of life, try to give it to them, regardless of the time, money and effort that it takes to do so. Modern parents play classical music to unborn children, teach them to swim when they are only a few weeks old, take them to specialised trainers and extra classes to make them champions even before they go to primary school. Why then, would normal, intelligent parents who do all of this for their children, be satisfied with an almost non-existent religious education system and a Sunday school observance that cannot turn their precious children into Christians with a strong faith and a personal relationship with God?

Parents are in such a state of spiritual under-nourishment and starvation themselves, that they are helpless and cannot grasp the extent of the problem or the devastating results of their lack of action on behalf of their children. On the one hand, because of their own lack of personal faith and knowledge of the Bible, they feel incompetent to teach their children, and are glad to leave this task to someone else. They are spiritually empty, with nothing to offer to their children. Like sport and academic training and for that matter, everything else, they want to leave it to the professionals who 'know what they are doing'. On the other hand, because faith and a personal relationship with God is not a priority in their own lives, they do not seem to understand why it should be an important part of the education of their children. Together these two attitudes leave Christians ignorant and speechless, not capable of putting up a fight for the sake of their children's lives and eternal destination.

The church seemingly refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem. It tends to dwell on dogmatic principles and play hide and seek on moral issues on which the Bible is clear, and refuses to stand up and address the problems it is facing despite the fact that

the statistics can no longer be ignored. Sunday school in its present form is no substitute for the extensive religious education and training that were characteristic of the first three hundred years of Afrikaner history.

The church also seems to have difficulty finding people who are willing and able to help. If they are not properly appointed by committees and structures, do not have the correct certificates and training, or do not belong to the 'right' denomination or even the correct 'wing' within a denomination, their help is refused and their work and proven results are disregarded. It seems that the church is often more concerned about its image, structures and titles than about the souls that are lost because of the lack of unity, teamwork and vision, especially on the level of youth work. Discipleship is its aim and discipleship means knowledge and action, but it seems as if the present forms of ministry and Sunday school are more concerned with maintaining dependence and lengthening childhood in faith than promoting responsibility, gifts and the priesthood of all believers, because the former are non-threatening to church leadership (Graham 1983:49).

Graham (1983:50) states: "Someone once said (or if they didn't they should have), that there is nothing like the prospect of death for wonderfully concentrating the mind." The 'death' of our present Sunday school and church structure should focus our minds to set new priorities for the education ministry to children. Therefore, I wish to make a few recommendations.

The first thing Christians need to know is the fact that we need the Bible to be(come) disciples of the Lord. The Jews did not discard the Torah before or after the Second World War because other people wanted them to live and behave differently. They stayed Jews and still live according to their faith. The Moslems, even in this day and age, are true to their Koran. Why then, do Christians think that they can survive without *Sola Scriptura*? Proof that the Bible is the only answer can be seen in the pages of our own history. For three hundred years, the Afrikaner nation lived by the Word of God. They knew the contents of the Bible and lived according to its instructions (although I must admit that each one interpreted it in his/her own

way). The Bible was the main and often the only source used for instruction and education of the children (Oliver 2005:106). For three hundred years the nation survived, and even became famous (or infamous depending on the way you look at the facts) for their steadfastness, faith in God, and conservative worldview, based on their interpretation of the Bible. We have to plead to the Afrikaner church and the Christians to bring the Bible back into its rightful place: the centre of Christian life.

Francis Xavier said: 'Give me a child for the first seven years, and you may do what you like with him afterwards' (Castle 1983:32). History (Communism and the Roman Catholic Church) proved these words true and I hope it will act as a warning that the spiritual welfare of the children of our nation is at stake.

We have to accept the fact that most of the children attending Sunday school today are no longer Christians. They need to be evangelised, in order to reach the following goals: "The short-term aim of evangelism of children is their enjoyment of God *now*. As they enter into that experience and knowledge, they also often enter into the role of an evangelist themselves and invite their friends to the event, which has helped them" (Frank & Pearson 1998:8, 9). The medium-term aim of evangelism of children is that they will grow into leadership skills, gifts and roles in the church, living the example of Christ and proclaiming the gospel with their whole life (Frank & Pearson 1998:8, 9). The long-term aim of evangelism is to give people the opportunity to enter eternal life.

The church must once again meet people at their point of need and in their existential reality. The current starting point for the church is to take its members (both adults and children) back to the basics of the Christian faith. The traditional approach of the catechism can, with a minor adjustment here and there, still be useful in this education process. The starting point and first of the three steps is a question of knowledge. How do I become a Christian? The modern day evangelism 'story of my salvation' (John 3:16; Isa 59:1, 2; 2 Cor 5:21; John 1:12; Rev 3:20) combined with the picture of the cross bridging the gap of sin between God and man, is a wonderful starting point to this question. Secondly, Bible texts should be explained and the



contents of the Bible (Bible stories for the children) should be taught. This must be combined with a way of life that distinguishes between right and wrong. Thirdly and very importantly, is not gratefulness as the old catechism teaches us, but obedience - a totally new concept for many Christians. This implies that the church should institute a formal 'Sunday school' or learning opportunity for its adult members. The church needs new models for all-age education and much greater commitment to the growth and spiritual well-being of its members. Christian religious education is not in the business of passing on knowledge (Graham 1983:49). The Christian church and its members some time or another, will have to face the risk that initiating spiritual growth will bring (Graham 1983:49).

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