

# Why Sunday Church School?

For most of us, going to Sunday school was a given when we were children. Attending Sunday school was as much a part of our Sunday ritual as attending the Divine Liturgy. But over the years, Orthodox religious educators have questioned our reliance on Sunday schools, especially because they often meet *during* the time of the Divine Liturgy, thus excluding children from Sunday worship. For decades, there has been a continual call for religious instruction to occur at a time *other* than the Sunday Liturgy. Some parishes have experimented with meeting at other days and times, but Sunday school endures, mostly with children attending part of the Liturgy and then going off to class.

## SO WHERE DID SUNDAY SCHOOL ORIGINATE?

The Sunday school originated in the late eighteenth century in England. With the rapid industrialization of England, before child labor laws and compulsory schooling, children were at work in factories and sweatshops. On Sundays they were free to do as they pleased, often just running wild and getting caught up in immoral and sometimes criminal behavior.

In 1780, Robert Raikes (1735–1811), a journalist in Gloucester, England, wanted to combat this in his city. He organized the first Sunday school to teach literacy skills, Christian teachings, reading the Bible, and skills necessary for everyday life, such as hygiene to children. It was a full day and very strict in its discipline. Because English law barred him from opening a school, it met in the kitchen in a home in the neighborhood of the students. Over time, Raikes established a number of these Sunday schools.

Raikes's work received mixed reviews at the time. Some in the Church of England and the British government criticized him for giving the poor too much control and authority over their lives. However, many British gentry supported his work.

John Wesley, who had preached in the American colonies in the 1730s, visited one of the Sunday schools while on a preaching tour in England. Wesley determined to include the Sunday school in the movement he called Methodism. Sunday school resembled some of Wesley's efforts in Savannah, Georgia, in earlier decades.

Another early developer was William Fox, a wealthy Baptist, who established Sunday schools in the 1780s so that people could learn to read the Bible. Fox also formed the Sunday School Society, which promoted the development of Sunday schools throughout England. Over time, the Sunday school became a regular feature of life in England, with hundreds of thousands of students enrolled in them.

## IN THE UNITED STATES

Because of the religious convictions of the colonists to America, organizing school programs for children to learn to read the Bible, the catechism of their particular church, and basic Christian teachings was present from the very earliest times, although not necessarily as a "Sunday school." Parishes and denominations operated these schools; most schools in the colonies and the United States after 1776 were religiously based. (What we think of as the public school would not begin to be established until the mid-1800s.)

The American Sunday School Union was founded in 1824 to develop resources and to promote the establishment of Sunday schools throughout the American continent, especially as the population began to move westward into the new territories. A controversial issue in the Sunday school was the teaching of blacks, slave or free. Southern states had outlawed education for slaves, and Northerners were viewed with suspicion when they established Sunday schools in the South. Black denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, began to establish their own Sunday schools. As it did in England, the Sunday school became a regular feature of American parish life.

