



## **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SUNDAY (SUNDAY SCHOOL AND BIBLE TRAINING EMPHASIS)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, August 23, 2009**

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**Lection - Deuteronomy 6:1-9 NRSV**

(v. 1) Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, (v. 2) so that you and

your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. (v. 3) Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. (v. 4) Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (v. 5) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (v. 6) Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. (v. 7) Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (v. 8) Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, (v. 9) and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

## **I. Biblical Scripture and the Call to Teach**

The term "Christian Education" is redundant. To be a Christian means to teach by word and example the messages of Jesus Christ. Although not unique to Christianity, the method of proselytizing persons through words and deeds is an integral part of scriptural writings. Deuteronomy 6:1-9 illustrates that from our Judaic heritage we are instructed to teach our children two things– the "fear" of the Lord as well as the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

In the New Testament, the Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke quote Jesus repeating this scripture from Deuteronomy as a response to the Pharisee's question "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"<sup>1</sup> The Deuteronomy passage is also concerned with the transmission of ideas to future generations. Hence, the elders must teach the children. The teaching of the scriptures to children pre-dates Christianity.

Moreover, Matthew and Mark again remind us to preach the gospel to all nations.<sup>2</sup> Hence, we see that the teaching not only of children but also adults is scripturally mandated. In addition, it is their education and study of the "law" that defines the Pharisees as a class. From the earliest *yeshivas*<sup>3</sup> of Judaism, the education of religious leaders is the root of their education. This tradition carries over into Christian culture with the establishment of seminaries and universities for the express purpose of the training of religious leaders in scriptures. Moreover, it is the basis of the catechumen (the learning of religious principles and teachings patterned after the Socratic instructional method) used in the early Church.

## **II. Historical Advances and Christian Education for the Poor**

Before the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the year 1450, education was primarily limited to the religious establishment and the rich. The Gutenberg printing press made it possible for the Bible and other documents to be disseminated to a mass audience that extended beyond the religious establishment. This wonderful invention coupled with the Protestant Reformation of 1517 made it easier for persons to be literate.<sup>4</sup>

It is this democratization of access to the Bible that provides the partial backdrop for the emergence of the Sunday School Movement in Britain and later in the United States. Robert Raikes and Thomas Stock are credited with the establishment of the Sunday School Movement. Church school began in 1780 less as a response to the gospel call of spreading the good news to all the nations but more as an opportunity to provide an organized, disciplined activity for the children of the poor of Gloucester, England.<sup>5</sup> These

spiritually based classes provided an opportunity to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, catechism and acceptable social mores to the children of the poor and working class and the parents of these children.

Interestingly, the classes were not limited to Sunday; students were often required to attend classes four to five days a week. Ironically, because the subject matter included instruction outside the realm of biblical studies, some people expressed objection to the schools teaching on Sunday. This led to the emphasis on catechesis training on Sundays.

Across the ocean in the newly established United States, with a Constitution that, among other things, called for the separation of Church and State, the push for public education was slowly growing. Like their historical models in Europe, most early American higher educational institutions such as Harvard and Princeton were launched by religious groups. Horace Mann was calling for public education for primary and secondary schools which taught reading, writing, and arithmetic without the religious training elements.<sup>6</sup> However, before Mann there was Catherine Ferguson, a former black slave who founded one of the first Sunday Schools in New York. She saw the Sunday School as a much needed institution, helping the poor, working class, slaves and former slaves improve their social and spiritual lot.<sup>7</sup>

In his book, Black Church Beginnings, Henry H. Mitchell devotes Chapter Eight, “African American Schools and Churches: New Roles in Reconstruction,” to the formative work of the Black church in providing education to African Americans. The chapter opens with this quote from Carter G. Woodson:

“Reconstruction began in the schoolhouses, not the state houses... the missionary teacher was at work long before it was known how the war would end.”<sup>8</sup>

This chapter makes clear that the teachers who came to the South to work with blacks were from the Church, and central to their spiritual work was their belief in education. At the foundation of their educational efforts was the belief in the importance of a strong spiritual life—the two were inseparable. In fact, these teachers saw themselves as missionaries. Alongside this initiative, the development of organized black churches expanded with the mission of building family structures, spiritual grounding, and creating schools to educate the people for life as freed people. These small schools were sometimes in churches or small buildings on church property. Sometimes a family sent one member to school and that child or adult came back and taught what they learned to the other members of the families. Learning to read the Bible was central to the overwhelming desire within the Black community to be educated; thus, the ages of beginning students ranged from young children to the elderly.<sup>9</sup> Summarizing, Nicols writes:

The Black church of the Reconstruction era was incredibly committed to and active in the life and welfare of its people and communities. No phase of need or challenge to action was overlooked. If the Black Church of the twenty-first century were to be half as energetic, sacrificial, and visionary, with all its unprecedented advantages, the condition of African Americans would be immeasurably improved.<sup>10</sup>

In the independent black Protestant African Methodist Episcopal Church, Sunday School emerged as a training ground for youth before they were promoted to leading worship in the adult services. One of the denomination’s founders, Richard Allen, a leader in education, opened a school for children in 1795 in Philadelphia. In 1804, he, along with others, founded the Society of Free People of Color for promoting

the Instruction of School Lessons to Children of African Descent. Allen also operated night school classes for workers which emphasized literacy and self help for adult students.<sup>11</sup>

### **School Days**

When I build my school for black children  
They will come when the spirit say come  
And leave when the spirit say leave.

Author Unknown

### **III. Personal Memories of Sunday School**

In the 1950s, Mr. Cureton was the Sunday School Superintendant at St. Mark A. M. E. Church in Orlando, Florida, the church my grandmother attended. He always began Sunday school promptly at 8:30 a.m. with the singing of a devotional song. “Jesus Loves the Little Children” was a favorite.

### **Jesus Loves the Little Children**

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Red and yellow, black and white,  
All are precious in his sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes the pianist, a teenager, would be present to accompany the singing; more often than not, she was late. The devotional song would be followed by a prayer. Then came the ritualistic recitation of the Decalogue (“The Ten Commandments”) each of which was interspersed with the singing of the refrain “Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep thy law.” I remember being both intrigued and afraid that I indeed was going to encounter the wrath of God because I was not sure I was obeying all the “Thou shalt nots.” It was as an adult that I finally understood the meaning of “covet,” which we said often: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant...” What a relief it was to get to the fifth commandment, not so much for its content, but because then we had the chance to sing “Nearer My God to Thee.”

### **Nearer My God to Thee**

Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee,  
E’v’n thou there be a cross that saveth me.  
Still all my song shall be  
Nearer my God to thee,  
Nearer my God to thee,  
Nearer to thee.<sup>13</sup>

There was something about the singing of that melody that seemed to reassure this young scared lad that, even though I did not understand all I was repeating every Sunday, I certainly would be saved and be nearer to God. Usually by this time, the pianist had arrived and her music made the Sunday school service more interesting. Moreover, I did understand what came next: “Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land that thy God giveth thee.” It was the commandment I heard so frequently at home when my grandmother asked me to do something to which I reluctantly acquiesced.

The recitation of the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer came after the Decalogue. Each was said without the aid of printed text or screen projected text. The African oral tradition was alive and well at St. Mark. Mr. Cureton would then give some instructions, and the gathering which had slowly arrived would disperse into classes. In the classes, the primary grade school children received cards with Bible verses and a biblical scene on the front. The back had a grade level explanation of the Bible verse as well as an instruction for the day. Junior and senior high level students had a magazine which was published quarterly.

The upper level class was led by Dr. James Smith, a local physician who had migrated to Florida from Chicago. He insisted that each student stand and read aloud. If a student had difficulty, Dr. Smith had no qualms about having the person re-read the passage again and again until it sounded satisfactory to his ear.

After the classes, an offering was collected to the singing of songs from the special Sunday school hymnal. It was a collection of Protestant standard hymns such as "Bring Them In," "Bringing in the Sheaves," and "Lift Him Up." Sometimes, we sang songs that were biblical teaching tools such as the spiritual "Children, Go Where I Send Thee."

### **Children, Go Where I Send Thee**

Children, go where I send thee.

How shall I send thee?

I'm gonna send thee one by one  
'Cause that one was the holy baby  
Born and reared by the Virgin Mary.  
Born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children, go where I send thee.

How shall I send thee?

I'm gonna send thee two by two  
'Cause that two were the Paul and Silas  
That one was the holy baby  
Born and reared by the Virgin Mary.  
Born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children, go where I send thee.

How shall I send thee?

I'm gonna send thee three by three  
'Cause that three were the Hebrew children,  
That two were the Paul and Silas  
That one was the holy baby  
Born and reared by the Virgin Mary.  
Born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children, go where I send thee.

How shall I send thee?

I'm gonna send thee four by four  
'Cause that four that stood at the door  
That three were the Hebrew children,

That two were the Paul and Silas  
That one was the holy baby  
Born and reared by the Virgin Mary.  
Born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children, go where I send thee.  
How shall I send thee?  
I'm gonna send thee five by five  
Five were the gospel writers.....

.....I'm gonna send thee six by six  
Six were the six that couldn't get six.....

.....I'm gonna send thee seven by seven  
Seven were the seven that couldn't get to heaven.....

.....I'm gonna send thee eight by eight  
Eight were the eight that stood at the gate.....

.....I'm gonna send thee nine by nine  
Nine were the nine that stood on the line.....

.....I'm gonna send thee ten by ten  
Ten were the ten commandments.....<sup>14</sup>

Sunday school closed with the recitation of the Mispah (also spelled Mizpah) which "is the Hebrew form of the ancient name of the place where Jacob and Laban set up a memorial stoneheap (Genesis 31:49), saying, 'May the Lord watch between us.'" It became a prayer we recited: "May the Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from another, Amen." Thereafter, we were dismissed to go upstairs to the main sanctuary where the adults repeated a similar ritual in the regular worship service. Sunday school was not only training in scripture but preparation for leadership in church and in life.

Late on Sunday evenings, neighborhood children were sent either to the A. M. E. "League" (short for the "Richard Allen League") or to "B. Y. P. U" (Baptist Young Progressive Union). The denomination of the child was unimportant. The main ideas were that they were out of the house, off the street, and within the protective arms of the church.

### **Teach Me, O Lord**

#### *REFRAIN*

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.

Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law; I shall keep it with all my heart.  
Make me go in the path of your commandments, for that is my desire

#### *REFRAIN*

Incline my heart to your decrees and not to unjust gain.

Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; give me life in your ways.

*REFRAIN*

Fulfill your promise to your servant, which you make to those who fear you.  
Behold, I long for your commandments; in your righteousness preserve my life.

*REFRAIN*<sup>15</sup>

#### **IV. The Modern Christian Education Movement**

Since the end of World War II, the Sunday school movement has expanded under the mantle of Christian Education and churches have once again established schools for teaching youth during the week. Protestant church schools, following the Roman Catholic school system model, have sprung up over the country as alternatives to secular public education. These efforts have taken place across the nation. Two New York examples follow.

The St. Joseph Episcopal Church School of Queens Village, New York, is an example of one such school. Although, at the time of its founding in 1951 it was all white, the school (like the neighborhood) saw white people move out. Today, it is predominantly black but still teaches Christian doctrine as the backbone of the school's curriculum. The Reverend Lloyd L. Anthony serves as its Rector.<sup>16</sup>

In Jamaica, New York, The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral evolved out of the Allen A.M.E. Church founded in 1834. Under the leadership of Reverend Floyd H. Flake and Reverend Elaine M. Flake, the Allen Christian School was established in the basement of Allen A.M.E. Today, the school is a 3.7 million dollar facility, housing a co-educational Christian day school serving students from pre-kindergarten through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Allen Christian is a school founded on the teaching of excellence through Christian education. Its mission is clear:

Most importantly, Christ is at the center of all of the schools efforts, and students are blessed to receive a formal Christian education while developing leadership skills and personal balance. The faculty and administration believe that the students, who have a firm grasp of their lives in relation to the Bible's lessons and Jesus' teachings, will be equipped to live a successful and glorious life.<sup>17</sup>

Today, many churches have taken a "seven day a week" approach, creating and supporting paid and volunteer staffed Christian education departments which provide spiritually based learning experiences for children who live within the shadow of the sanctuary. These congregations have assumed the mantle of creating daily programs – a safety zone for children grounded on the spiritual and moral teachings of the church as well as preparing students for completing and prospering in a challenging and demanding world. Thank God for those who still believe in the power and understand the need for Christian education. Unfortunately, the numbers are not even close to what they should be. Hopefully, others will heed the call and take up the mantle and return Christian education to the lofty place it once held in the African American Church.

#### **V. Books About Christian Education**

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### Notes

1. Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:26-28 NRSV
2. Matthew 24:19, Mark 13:10
3. Schools designed for the teaching of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), Misnah and Talmud.
4. Bellis, Mary. "Johannes Gutenberg and the Printing Press: Johannes Gutenberg is known for the invention of the Gutenberg press." About.com. Online location: <http://inventors.about.com/od/gstartinventors/a/Gutenberg.htm> accessed 15 March 2009
5. "Sunday School Library Collection: A Brief History of the Sunday School Movement." The Sunday School Library Collection. McGill University Digital Collections Project. 2005. Online location: <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/sunday/hist1.htm> accessed 15 March 2009



6. Ritchie, Susan. "Horace Mann." The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography. Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. Online location: <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/horacemann.html> accessed 15 March 2009
7. "'Where Katy Lived, the Whole Aspect of the Neighborhood Was Changed': Lewis Tappan's Obituary for Catherine Ferguson (1854); (Working Draft, January 2003)." African-American Religion: A Documentary History Project. 2006. Amherst College. Online location: <http://www3.amherst.edu/~aardoc/Ferguson.html> accessed 15 March 2009
8. Mitchell, Henry H. Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2004.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 144.
11. McCullough, Ashley. "Richard Allen Biography." The Pennsylvania Center for the Book. Pennsylvania State University. 2005. Online location: [http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Allen\\_\\_Richard.html](http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Allen__Richard.html) accessed 15 March 2009
12. "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Words Anonymous. Music by George F. Root.
13. "Nearer My God to Thee." Words by Sarah F. Adams. Tune, Bethany by Lowell Mason.
14. "Children Go Where I Send Thee." African American Traditional.
15. "Teach Me, O Lord." Words from Psalm 75:33-40. Music by David Hurd. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications.
16. Saint Joseph's Episcopal Church and Parish Day School, 99-10 217th Lane, Queens Village, NY 11429.
17. "Allen Christian School." The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York. Online location: <http://allencathedral.org/allen/home.aspx?Sn=all&nid=2028&tidv=20288shlinks=1> accessed 15 March 2009