



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

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, May 25, 2008**

**Juan Floyd-Thomas, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

Associate Professor of History, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX

#### **I. Historical Background**

##### **From Sunday School to Vacation Bible School**

Sunday school is the general name given to the various forms of religious education undertaken on Sundays by diverse church denominations. For Protestants, this tradition was originally founded in England circa 1769. Many Roman Catholic churches also operate Sunday schools, although Catholics commonly refer to them as Catechism classes. Despite their name, Sunday schools are rarely ever recognized as independent educational institutions that offer formal grades, transcripts or diplomas *per se*. Instead, Sunday schools attempt an even more significant task within the life of the black church, namely, offering meaningful instruction concerning Christian doctrine for its students and the larger church membership. Sunday school often lasts about an hour (sometimes slightly longer) either immediately before or after Sunday worship service.

As a feature of the black church tradition, any form of religious education—especially Sunday school—is important because of the controversial history of education for African Americans from slavery to freedom, and the misuse and manipulation of the Bible by white slave masters and ministers intent upon perpetuating the maintenance of white supremacy and chattel slavery upon people of African descent since the earliest days of American society. The increase of literacy within the African American populace after slavery ensured that African Americans would be exposed to the fully liberating Word of God contained in the Bible as another means of humanizing themselves in the midst of a world that was trying to steal their freedom and their joy. In contemporary terms, Sunday school is a crucial locale for preparing the young and old alike for how to function to their greatest potential within the church and the world.

Sunday school has traditionally been used to explore doctrine and church polity for the assembled learners within a given congregation, but has most especially been geared towards the youth of the church. Although there are many different methods of teaching within Sunday schools, traditionally all such programs tend to use small groups, teaching based on biblical stories and scriptural passages, as well as familiar songs ranging from the spirituals to more contemporary gospel music. It is within the auspices of Sunday school where the notion of “on time, all the time” is invoked within the youngest members of the church, so that they will hopefully grow to appreciate virtues such as punctuality, good attendance, and class participation in a safe, affirming space. In the same spirit, this is also the place where children could, and should, still be children and engage in age-appropriate activities and concerns such as sneaking out to buy candy or ice cream or playing games such as touch football or jumping rope.

Sunday school teachers are usually lay people who are selected for their job by a church board or committee with the approval of the pastor and/or deacons (depending on the denomination). These are church members who are specifically chosen for this because of their advanced experience with the Bible. Historically, few teachers receive any formal training in Christian education, though many Sunday school teachers might have a background in secular education as a result of their occupations. In other cases, some churches insist that Sunday school teachers and catechists attend several courses on religion and theology to ensure that their understanding of the faith is mature enough to allow them to educate others. Finally, it is fairly commonplace in many Baptist churches to allow volunteers to teach even without formal training or backgrounds in education; typically, all that is required in such a case is that the Sunday school teacher demonstrate a clear profession of faith as well as a passion to teach. Whereas most Sunday school teachers keep little or no record of performance by their students for any given week, attendance is often tracked as a means of encouraging children to appear regularly. This is taken even further by giving the youth special recognition and awards for reaching attendance milestones.

**Vacation Bible School (VBS)** is the term for a special type of religious education which caters toward children, usually during the summer. These are typically week long events; however, some churches hold them over a longer period of time. The origins of VBS can be traced back to 1894 when a Sunday school teacher felt too limited by time constraints to properly teach the Bible to children on any given Sunday. Nowadays, many churches run their own VBS programs, without being under the supervision of a national

association. Some churches opt to use themed curriculum programs from their respective denominations or independent publishing houses which provide for easier course preparation as well as more consistent teaching tools and subject matter. These churches often conduct a week long program during the summer consisting of religious education, skits, puppet shows, arts and crafts exercises, and songs geared toward young children. Some churches cannot run their own VBS for the entire summer. They may elect to coordinate their VBS with several other churches in order to provide Christian education and affordable childcare for members of the church and the larger community. Some churches charge a small fee if child-care services are provided through their VBS program.

## **II. Where Are the Bibles**

A few years ago in Fort Worth, Texas, upon entering a local Baptist church sanctuary and taking my seat, I was intrigued by a question: where are the pew bibles? The church had plenty of hymnals, including copies of the African American Heritage Hymnal, but nary was a copy of the Bible provided by the church. Of course, the membership had been encouraged to bring their own bibles so that they would always be able to present their “swords of the spirit,” often the bigger, the better. Meanwhile, thanks to the church’s financial strength and modern technology, there were large digital monitors mounted on either side of the choir stand which were used to display the relevant biblical passages for the Sunday worship service. Knowing all this, I was still mystified by the fact that pew bibles had become an endangered species in this church and from what I have been told, many other churches. Given the primacy of the Bible within the African American experience, there is an even greater need today to make sure that church members have an ongoing and fruitful relationship with the Bible.

## **III. Bible Education**

Bible education is typically viewed as a means of scriptural formation for those individuals who want to take their understanding of the Bible and its meaning in their lives to greater heights. Bible education often occurs after a church service, typically in the late afternoon or early evening on Sundays or on Wednesdays at noon or in the evening. In years past, Bible education was seen as a form of continued or extended education intended to undergird the serious, disciplined, and committed saints. This educational setting was profoundly different from Sunday school for numerous reasons. Unlike Sunday school, this course of instruction was taught by a deacon or similarly prominent lay leader within the church, but it was fairly common for the pastor to be involved in this ministry at least in an occasional fashion. Whereas Sunday school attendance for adolescents and teens was mandatory in my early years, participation in Bible education was voluntary. As such, those church members who attended these classes, regardless of age, were often considered as being more intentional about learning the Word of God and trying to live according to its mandates. When thinking about the differences between Sunday school and Bible education in the most practical terms, the former reflects how Christian faith is taught, while the latter is more intent on how

Christian faith is lived. Simply put, while Sunday school was often about what it means to be a church member, Bible education is often about what it means to be a Christian.

When addressing the issue of Christian education within the modern black church we must be clear that things have changed. First, there are increasing time constraints affecting the lives of African American churchgoers. These days everyone seems to be overscheduled. Second, there is a diminishing sense of urgency concerning the role of Christian education within the African American community. Next, when thinking about the institutional importance of both Sunday school and Bible training, they are now seen as a means of socializing members into the core culture of the Black church tradition (in other words, “churching the unchurched”). Finally, there has been a shift in focus within many churches away from concentrating on learners organized according to age and gender groups (girls, women, boys, and men) towards life groups (children, young adults, couples, seniors, etc.). While many Sunday schools are obviously focused on providing instruction for children, almost to the exclusion of adults, ironically the concept of “Sunday school” is clearly one which could easily be applied to the many adults who need similar instruction. In fact, nowadays, the existence of adult Sunday school classes—under alternate names such as "Adult Electives" or “New Member Education”—have become popular and wide-spread.

Sunday school and Bible education have been vitally important for African American Christians at various stages of their walk, because they tend to break up the fallow ground of the soul and make the congregation fertile and fruitful in terms of allowing the Word of God to take root among them. Sadly, although Sunday school and Bible education have been key proving grounds for the growth and development of new leadership within the confines of any given church’s membership (especially among the youth), many churches—both on individual and denominational levels—have devalued and diminished the overall significance of Christian education as a clearly defined branch of the Black church’s mission. Given the great need for grounding persons in the Christian faith so that they can withstand the challenges of today, we can only hope that churches will do more to increase Sunday school attendance and the number of adults who are serious students of the Bible.

#### **IV. Quotes**

- “It takes a whole village to educate a child.” Nigerian proverb
- “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.” Martin Luther King Jr., “What Manner of Man” (1958).

#### **V. Sunday school and Christian Education Songs**

If asked about attending Sunday school as a child, it is the songs that most will recall more than anything else. Following are some of the most well known songs. Some, though written more than one hundred years ago, are sung today.

**The B-I-B-L-E**

Oh! The B-I-B-L-E,  
Yes that's the book for me.  
I stand alone on the word of God,  
the B-I-B-L-E!

The B-I-B-L-E  
I'll take it along with me,  
I'll read and pray,  
and then obey,  
the B-I-B-L-E.

By F-A-I-T-H,  
I'm S-A-V-E-D,  
I'll stand alone  
on the word of God,  
The B-I-B-L-E.

The B-L-O-O-D  
That Jesus shed for me  
Cleansed me from sin,  
I belong to him,  
The B-L-O-O-D.<sup>1</sup>

**Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam**

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,  
To shine for Him each day;  
In every way try to please Him,  
At home, at school, at play.

Refrain:

A sunbeam, a sunbeam,  
Jesus wants me for a sunbeam;  
A sunbeam, a sunbeam,  
I'll be a sunbeam for Him.

Jesus wants me to be loving,  
And kind to all I see;  
Showing how pleasant and happy,  
His little one can be.

I will ask Jesus to help me  
To keep my heart from sin;  
Ever reflecting His goodness,  
And always shine for Him.

I'll be a sunbeam for Jesus,  
I can if I but try;  
Serving Him moment by moment,  
Then live for Him on high.<sup>2</sup>

**Jesus Loves the Little Children** (Original Version)

Jesus calls the children dear,  
“Come to me and never fear,  
For I love the little children of the world;  
I will take you by the hand,  
Lead you to the better land,  
For I love the little children of the world.”

Refrain

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.

Alternate refrain:

Jesus died for all the children,  
All the children of the world.  
Red and yellow, black and white,  
All are precious in His sight,  
Jesus died for all the children of the world.

Jesus is the Shepherd true,  
And He'll always stand by you,  
For He loves the little children of the world;  
He's a Savior great and strong,  
And He'll shield you from the wrong,  
For He loves the little children of the world.<sup>3</sup>

**Jesus Loves the Little Children** (Modern Version)

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

Whether you're rich or whether you're poor  
It matters not to Him  
He remembers where you're going  
Not where you've been

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

If your heart is troubled  
Don't worry, don't you fret  
He knows that you have heard His call  
And he won't forget

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

All around the world tonight  
His children rest assured  
That He will watch and He will keep us  
Safe and secure

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.<sup>4</sup>

**Jesus Loves Me This I know**

Jesus loves me! this I know,  
For the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to Him belong;  
they are weak but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me! loves me still,  
'tho I'm very weak and ill,  
that I might from sin be free,  
bled and died upon the tree.

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
for the Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me! He who died  
heaven's gate to open wide;  
He will wash away my sin,  
let His little child come in.

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me! He will stay  
close beside me all the way.  
Thou hast bled and died for me,  
I will henceforth live for Thee.

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me when I'm good.  
When I do the things I should.  
Jesus loves me when I'm bad,  
but it makes him oh so sad.

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.

I love Jesus, does He know?  
Have I ever told Him so?  
Jesus likes to hear me say,  
That I love Him every day!

Yes, I love Jesus!  
Yes, I love Jesus!  
Yes, I love Jesus!  
In prayer I tell Him so.<sup>5</sup>

Modern Refrain (Author Unknown)  
Jesus knows me, this I love,  
All great things are from above;



Though I sin, the Lord forgives,  
That is why I'm glad He lives!

Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.

### Notes

1. The B-I-B-L-E. Anonymous. Online location: [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org) accessed 2 February 2008
2. Talbot, Nellie. "Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #614
3. Woolston, C. Herbert (Words), George Root (Music). "Jesus Loves the Little Children." African American Heritage Hymnal. #616
4. "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Modern version. Anonymous.
5. Warner, Anna B. "Jesus Loves Me This I know." African American Heritage Hymnal. #335