

SUNDAY SCHOOL HISTORY

Zinzendorf's Instruction Bands

Schools similar to Sunday Schools were established as few as 50 years before the date we celebrate as the birth of the Sunday school movement. Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravians, founded such schools in the middle 1700's. He was concerned about the growth of his converts, and so organized them into small bands or societies. As these societies met together for study and instructions, Zinzendorf strongly supported instructing children in these groups. His bands were comprised of five to ten converts who would meet regularly to study the Bible and to encourage each other. This pattern also was adopted by John Wesley in his evangelistic campaigns.

Robert Raikes of Gloucester

If religious education schools have been around for thousands of years, why is 1780 considered the beginning of the Sunday School? We celebrate 1780 because this is the year that a gentleman living in Gloucester, England, organized a school to instruct the slum children in that city.

Many of us would feel that Robert Raikes' motivation for starting such a school was vastly inferior to the motivation of Gregory, Luther, Melancthon, or Zinzendorf. And yet 1780 is the generally accepted birthdate of the Sunday School.

Raikes' schools did not grow out of a religious revival, although their beginnings coincided with one. He was not a religious leader, and he did not recruit those with formal religious training to staff his schools. He was not an educator, but rather a newspaper man. He did not look to those who were skilled in

educational techniques or philosophies and yet he set the model for a world wide educational organization.

Robert Raikes was deeply concerned about the working and living conditions of the lower classes. He saw what they had to put up with and keenly felt the injustice, even though he himself was a well-bred newspaper editor. Perhaps it was because of his chosen vocation, or perhaps he was particularly sensitive to the needs of others. He may have seen religion too much talked about, and too little practiced. Whatever his reasons, he determined to do something about the social circumstances of the day.

When one of the residents of the slum district complained about the rowdy children living in that neighborhood, Raikes reacted differently from most of his contemporaries. He didn't condemn the parents, although they obviously were part of the problem. He didn't call for a stricter law and harsher punishments. Rather, he sought to make a contribution that would help remedy the problem.

He determined that rather than wasting his time trying to get to the adults, he would focus on the children. He wondered "if something could not be done" to help "the little heathen of the neighborhood" grow up to be respectable men and women. He concluded that "the world marches forward on the feet of little children".

Christ encouraged the little children to come to Him so that he could minister to them. Paul encouraged the Ephesian believers to raise their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (6:4, KJV). This basic principle finally motivated Robert Raikes.

When Raikes turned from his 25 year