



# The Birth of Sunday School

---

On a dark evening in 1780, Robert Raikes, a wealthy printer and editor of the *Journal* in Gloucester, England, gingerly picked his way along Sooty Alley, a muddy street in the slum district of his city. A servant walked ahead with a lantern. The dirty, ragged children who filled the street shouted obscene remarks at this upper-class intruder, and one hit him squarely in the back with a fistful of mud.

Seeking shelter in a doorway, Raikes roundly reproached a thin, tired woman who came to see what the commotion was about. He told her the parents of those children should feel ashamed of their conduct. She answered:

“Yes, sir. But the children work all day. At night they have nowhere to go, nowhere to play, nothing to do. And you should see how it is on Sundays!”

Raikes went back to Sooty Alley the next Sunday afternoon. What he saw appalled him. Older boys were cursing and fighting among themselves, and setting little boys against one another. Younger girls and boys were standing about watching, or lolling listlessly on the mudcaked earth. A half-clad man, club in hand, was chasing some boys who had broken a window.

These children were put into the factories and apprentice shops at six years of age. Most of them worked twelve hours a day. Eight out of ten of the boys were in jail before they were twenty-one. The hangman got about one in four.

Raikes was the leader of a committee to aid men sent to prison, and was proud to be known as “the man who helps the poor.” But he saw that it would take more than gifts of money really to help these children. They needed, particularly, something to do on Sunday—the one day of the week that they were permitted to spend in “idleness.”

A pious churchman, Raikes decided to bring some of them together for religious instruction. He went about the poverty-stricken neighborhood, hunting for (later he wrote) “any decent well-disposed women.” Mrs. King, of St. Catherine Street, became his first helper. Tactfully he won the consent of several other parents. By offering candy and coins, he rounded up a dozen boys one Sunday morning and led them to Mrs. King’s house. There he read the Scriptures and told a simple story with a simple moral.

Sunday by Sunday the crowd of ragged children grew, as word spread that there were sweets and pennies to be had just to sit still and listen. Girls begged to come, and Raikes defied the taboo against “mixing the sexes” and welcomed them. His business associated thought he had gone mad, for every Sunday morning his tall form could be seen, immaculately dressed in velvet coat, silver buckles house and high hat, leading a small mob of rowdy children to Raikes; Sabbath School. Some one derisively called it “Raikes Ragged School.”

From the Ragged School there developed the modern Sunday School, an institution that now covers the world. Today millions of young people and adults regularly receive religious instruction from volunteer teachers, in churches of almost every creed—perhaps the mightiest force on earth for moral teaching and character building outside the home.

During the first year of his experiment, Raikes added three other teachers, paying them a shilling a Sunday. Also he began teaching reading and writing. Since slum children could not go to school, he would bring the school to them on Sunday. He printed small booklets with the alphabet and Bible verses—the first Sunday School literature.

The children came at ten on Sunday mornings and were instructed until noon. They went home for lunch, returned at one o’clock for church. After church they came back to classes and repeated the catechism until half past five. Then Raikes dismissed them “with an injunction to go home without making a noise, and by no means to play on the street.”

The Ragged School man laid down the rule that the children must come with hands and faces washed and hair combed. To the many who had no comb or brush he supplied combs and showed them how to use them. He visited many of the homes, often having to arouse fathers and mothers from drunken stupors; he broke through the crust of suspicion and distrust with friendly words and gifts of clothing for the children.

Raikes induced several of his business associates to set up Ragged Schools in Gloucester and London. They appealed to churchmen to conduct Sabbath teaching for children in the churches. But vigorous opposition developed. Ministers argued that it was beneath the dignity of the clergy to instruct offspring of the lower classes. They complained that the children were noisy and dirty.

The principal objection sprang from the belief that no work of any kind should be done on the Sabbath. One bishop wrote a heated letter, warning ministers that teaching children on Sunday was heresy since “it is sinful to use the mind or body on the Sabbath Day.”

In reply Raikes quoted the great Teacher’s words, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” He compromised by excluding subjects requiring manual exertion, such as writing and arithmetic and won some clerical support.

Gloucester's editor could not have foreseen that this would become a world-wide movement, but he did see immediate results among the children. They proudly showed him their clean hands, The classes became quiet and orderly. Painstakingly Raikes corrected their speech, demonstrated common courtesies and good manners. The boys showed promise of leadership he made monitors, on their honor to help the others at all times.

Parents of these overworked, underfed children began telling Raikes of the transformation in their children. There were words of gratitude such as a grimy laborer spoke: "Guv'nor, we don't have to beat our Tom near so mooch now." A factory owner wrote Raikes a glowing letter of appreciation. His workers—mostly six to twelve years old—who attended the Ragged School were more obedient, less quarrelsome.

After November, 1784, when the Gentleman's Magazine presented a full discussion on Raikes' project, the movement spread rapidly. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, supported it vigorously, declaring, "The Sunday school is one of the noblest institutions which has been seen in Europe for some centuries." Wesley introduced singing in the Sabbath schools, set up classes by ages, shortened the hours of attendance and made the service more attractive.

Some of Raikes' teachers went to Bradford, center of the woolenmill industry, which boasted of employing more children than any other English town, and organized Sunday Schools in the poorest districts. Churches in Leeds and Bolton followed this example. At Stockport in 1784, churches of various denominations buried their differences to erect the first building especially for Sunday School teaching. More than one thousand children attended in relays throughout each Sunday.

By 1785, Raikes estimated from reports that two hundred and fifty thousand children were attending Sunday Schools all over England and Scotland. London had fifty schools; Edinburg, thirty-four.

William Wilberforce, Member of Parliament, became a patron of the Sunday School movement and won the support of numerous important men. He spent funds liberally to print and distribute Bibles for the children. Wilberforce also interested Queen Charlotte, who invited Raikes to Court. It was a proud day for Robert Raikes as he stood before King George and the Queen, declaring that children with schooling and moral training make better subjects.

Robert Raikes' Sunday School helped advance two movements of tremendous effect upon society; general education for all and the decline of child labor. The great-hearted Gloucester editor began to champion the idea that every child, however poor, should have some schooling. To have schooling, there must be time free from work. He denounced the smug dictum that education for the masses was dangerous. "I know from men in prison," he wrote, "that in their unlettered state they early fall prey to criminal influences. Learning goes with morality, and these will save the child to useful life."

Manufactures and apprentice masters stubbornly resisted any move to reduce the working hours of children, but Raikes set up classes on week nights to teach reading, writing and ciphering. He paid for the teachers. In his Journal he crusaded for night schools and for advancing the age of apprenticeships to ten and twelve. Untiring he argues with business leaders and Members of Parliament telling them: "The future strength of our country depends upon what we make of our children."

Before Robert Raikes passed away in 1811 in his seventy-sixth year, he saw the hours of labor shortened for children so they might attend school. Later the Sunday School Union, formed in 1803, helped to bring about the Education Act of 1870 which compelled local authorities to provide day schools for all children in the British Isles.

Other far-reaching effects stemmed from Raikes' project. He invited a noted Gloucester jurist to visit his Ragged School. This stern and harsh judge had often sentenced children to be whipped for petty offenses. But when he saw a hundred slum children kneeling in prayer, his eyes filled with tears. He became one of Raikes' teachers and, instead of ordering cruel punishments, began to induce friends to help wayward youths.

The first formally organized Sunday Schools in America appeared about 1790. Soon they spread all over the young nation. Daniel Webster characterized the Sunday School as the most effective means for moral instruction. General William Henry Harrison taught a Sunday School class in a small church near the banks of the Ohio until his election as President.

Countless thousands of lay persons, obscure citizens and noted leaders, have formed the mighty volunteer band of workers in Sunday Schools. John Wanamaker, Philadelphia merchant, while postmaster general, commuted each Sunday from Washington to teach his Sunday School class. William Jennings Bryan was regular teacher. Russell Colgate, James L. Kraft and H.J. Heinz are typical of the Sunday School teachers and leaders among businessmen of America. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, declares: "The Sunday School is undoubtedly the most effective means in our country for fighting juvenile delinquency and crime."

The World Council of Christian Education estimates a total Protestant Sunday School membership of 60,000,000, about 25,000,000 in the United States.

So the influence of Robert Raikes' Ragged School grows. As he himself hopefully wrote. "Perhaps what we have started will someday far exceed our first expectations."

*40 Stories for You to Tell*

Gladys Mary Talbot