

“EDUCATION FOR GOD:” THE IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE
AMERICAN SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT, 1790-1834

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“EDUCATION FOR GOD:” THE IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION
OF THE AMERICAN SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT, 1790-1834

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Roland and Janis Leal,
my first and greatest teachers

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For nineteenth-century American Protestants the Sunday school was an accepted and significant part of religious life. Founded in the late eighteenth century, the Sunday school movement became a fixture of American Protestantism by the antebellum period and played a vital role in educating religious adherents. Historian Lewis Glover Pray wrote in his 1847 study, *The History of Sunday Schools and of Religious Education from the Earliest Times*, that he was “not aware of any considerable body or denomination of Christians which do not recognize the Sunday school as a regular, approved, and established means for the early religious instruction and moral culture of the young.”¹ In his book *The Sabbath-School Index*, published in 1868, historian Richard Gay Pardee defined the Sunday school as a strictly Christian institution used widely by churches to foster “the *immediate* conversion” of children and to train them “for the worship and service of God.”² Modern religious historians define Sunday schools in a similar manner. In the most recent study of the movement, now a quarter century old, historian Anne Boylan describes Sunday schools as one of the institutional solutions created by

¹ Lewis Glover Pray, *The History of Sunday Schools and of Religious Education from the Earliest Times* (Boston: Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1847), 231.

² Richard Gay Pardee, *The Sabbath-School Index. Pointing Out the History and Progress of Sunday-Schools, with Approved Modes of Instruction* (Philadelphia: J.C. Garrigues & Co., 1868), 7, 21.

evangelical reformers to address “the problems of educating and disciplining the young.” According to Boylan, the movement became such a foundational part of American religious education that by the 1850’s “a church without a Sunday school was increasingly seen as an anomaly.”³

While the Sunday school was an important part of nineteenth-century Protestantism, most scholars of American religion give little attention to the institution. The nature of American religious historiography is generally broad, focusing on prevailing ideological trends rather than specific individuals or movements. Jon Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and Mark Noll’s *America’s God* consider the development of Christianity from the colonial period to the Civil War. Both scholars characterize the United States in the nineteenth century as dominated by a dynamic and democratized evangelicalism that originated from the confluence of eighteenth-century ideologies and events like religious disestablishment, the First Great Awakening, and Christian republicanism.⁴ Numerous studies addressing smaller time periods support Noll’s and Butler’s broad assertions. Thomas Kidd’s *God of Liberty* explores how evangelicalism both shaped and was shaped by the American Revolution.⁵ Nathan Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity* convincingly argues that religion became democratized during the early nineteenth century, which unleashed a torrent of spiritual experimentation that resulted in the fragmentation of American Christianity and the

³ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 1,162.

⁴ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 2010). Although it is not specifically focused on religion, another work that addresses the same theme is Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

creation of a plethora of new denominational options.⁶ Several excellent studies explore the impact of democratized evangelicalism on particular regions. For example, in *Southern Cross* Christine Heyrman explores how revivalists transformed the South into an evangelical stronghold by adapting their emotional, egalitarian message to the area's hierarchical, patriarchal society.⁷

Despite the rich body of material available on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Christianity, most studies take a very broad view of the subject. As a result, the Sunday school movement has been largely ignored within the historiography of American religion. Several studies of nineteenth-century Protestant reform, mainly Charles Foster's *An Errand of Mercy* and Ronald Walter's *American Reformers*, devote a portion of their analysis to Sunday schools. Still, these discussions are only included to support both scholars' larger claim that reform was a means of social control, making their analysis of Sunday schools understandably brief.⁸ The argument that reform was designed to control society and keep the lower class subservient to the middle class has fallen out of favor in the last few decades. Lois Banner first challenged this view in the article "Religious Benevolence as Social Control: A Critique of an Interpretation," which asserts that reformers were motivated by genuine spiritual fervor and used reform to

⁶ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). David Walker Howe's book *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) contains an informative chapter on early nineteenth-century American religion that supports Hatch's arguments.

⁷ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Another classic regional study is Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

⁸ Charles Foster, *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1960); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

adjust to, rather than control, growing egalitarianism and consumerism.⁹ Building on her convincing argument, recent works like Robert Abzug's *Crumbling Cosmos* assert that Protestant reforms "sought to sacralize the world" rather than manipulate it.¹⁰ These studies bring necessary correction and complexity to previous discussions of nineteenth-century reform, but none of these new interpretations contains updated analysis of the Sunday school movement.

Although generally neglected by major religious historians, Sunday schools possess a small collection of historiography. Supporters of the movement wrote several short histories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but these narratives lack historical analysis and often read like panegyrics.¹¹ The most comprehensive work is Edwin Wilbur Rice's *The Sunday-School Movement, 1780-1917, and the American Sunday-School Union, 1817-1917*. Published on the one hundredth anniversary of the American Sunday School Union (ASSU), the first national Sunday school society established in the United States, this book is highly informative but it essentially praises rather than analyzes the movement.¹² Modern studies of Sunday schools follow Rice's lead by focusing on the ASSU, thereby skimming over the first thirty or forty years of the movement's history. Robert Lynn's 1971 book, *The Big Little School: Sunday Child of American Protestantism*, contains only a few pages on the period between the

⁹ Lois Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control: A Critique of an Interpretation," *Journal of American History* 60 no. 1 (June 1973): 22-41.

¹⁰ Robert H. Abzug, *Crumbling Cosmos: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8. Another study that accepts this view of reform is Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹¹ Early works on the Sunday school include Edmund Morris Fergusson, *Historic Chapters in Christian Education in America: a Brief History of the American Sunday School Movement, and the Rise of the Modern Church School* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1935); Pardee, *The Sabbath-School Index*; Pray, *The History of Sunday Schools*.

¹² Edwin Wilbur Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement, 1780-1917, and the American Sunday-School Union, 1817-1917* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1917).

movement's founding in 1790 and the creation of the ASSU in 1824.¹³ Boylan's 1988 study, which is the most current scholarly work on the movement, spends little more than a chapter on the entire period from 1790-1824. By marginalizing the first thirty-four years of the movement, Sunday school historiography generally fails to fully explain the ideological origins of the institution. Additionally, these works often minimize the vital contributions made by early regional societies like the First Day Society (1790-1817) and the Sunday and Adult School Union (1817-1824), organizations that pioneered the establishment of the American Sunday school movement.

In an effort to fill these gaps, this thesis covers the history of the American Sunday school movement from its founding in 1790 to the American Sunday School Union's tenth anniversary in 1834. The thesis argues that the movement underwent a major ideological transformation during this period as it strove to maintain relevancy in the midst of a progressively militant evangelical movement that swept the Western and the Southern parts of the United States in the early nineteenth century. This study examines the ASSU's evolution from a secular endeavor in Philadelphia that used Christian republicanism and literacy to control the behavior of the poor to an evangelical institution with ambitions to convert and educate Protestant adherents as a nationwide organization. Chapter Two discusses the Christian republican origins of the first Sunday school organization founded in America, the First Day Society. Created in Philadelphia in 1790, this society viewed the Sunday school as a tool for social engineering to promote literacy and cultivate virtue among the poor. Chapter Three explains how the First Day Society's Christian republican ambitions became eclipsed by the explosive growth of

¹³ Robert W. Lynn, *The Big Little School: Sunday Child of American Protestantism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

evangelical activism that occurred in the early nineteenth century. In 1817 this religious mobilization inspired Philadelphia reformers to create a new Sunday school society called the Sunday and Adult School Union, which spearheaded the transformation of the movement into an evangelical reform effort designed to foster conversion and usher in the millennium. Chapter Four explains how evangelicals tried to nationalize the religious version of the movement by creating the American Sunday School Union in 1824. The chapter analyzes two methods the ASSU developed for achieving national influence: mission programs and publishing. Mission programs ultimately failed to extend the society's scope because they tried to merge social control with conversion. However, publishing strict Christian material with a focus on evangelism succeeded in giving the movement a national voice. By 1834 ASSU publications reaffirmed the Sunday school movement as a fully religious endeavor, laying the foundation for the eventual acceptance of Sunday schools as a vital part of American Protestantism.

CHAPTER II

REFORMING MORALS AND MANNERS: THE FIRST DAY SOCIETY AND THE FOUNDING OF THE AMERICAN SUNDAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT

Although Sunday schools became a respected part of evangelical Protestantism during the nineteenth century, the movement was originally shunned by churches and promoted a primarily secular agenda. Developed in the politically and socially tumultuous decades of the 1780's and 1790's, the American Sunday school movement initially drew its strength from the ideals of Christian republicanism and aspired to control the behavior of the poor. Combining Protestantism with moderate Enlightenment philosophy, the leaders of the movement sought to use Sunday schools to develop literacy and virtue among poor children in an attempt to fashion them into responsible citizens who would help ensure the survival of the new nation. One of the best examples of the movement's original vision was the First Day Society, which was established in Philadelphia in 1790 and was the first Sunday school organization founded in America. In its origin, creation, ideology, and methods, the First Day Society exhibited a determination to use religion as a means to achieving republican ends. Ultimately, the members of the organization were more concerned with preventing the "deprivation of

morals and manners” than saving souls, an orientation that initially ensured the society’s success but eventually led to its decline.¹⁴

Origins of the American Sunday School Movement

Although Sunday school organizations like the First Day Society were not founded until the 1790’s, the idea of conducting either religious or secular school on “the Lord’s day” was not previously unheard of in America. Many churches sponsored Sunday schools throughout the colonial period, mainly to provide catechetical training and sometimes a rudimentary education for communities that lacked a regular weekday school. One of the first Sunday schools was founded in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1674, and another was organized in Plymouth in 1680.¹⁵ In 1740 Dr. Joseph Bellamy founded a Sunday school in Bethlehem, Connecticut, to instruct the children of his congregation in Scripture and the catechism.¹⁶ A similar school was founded in the German community of Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in 1747 to “give instruction to the indigent children who were kept from regular school by employments which their necessities obliged them to be engaged at during the week, as well as to give *religious* instruction to those of better circumstances.”¹⁷ These schools were implemented sporadically, however, and were only intended to address the immediate educational needs of specific communities. Moreover,

¹⁴ First Day Society, *Constitution of the Society for the Institution and Support of First-Day or Sunday Schools in the City of Philadelphia, and the Districts of Southwark and the Northern Liberties, with A List of the Names of the Present Annual Contributors and the Members for Life. Rules for the Government of Said Schools, and a Summary of the Proceedings of the Society from Its Commencement to July, 1810. With an Account of the Present State of the Funds*. (Philadelphia: Joseph Cruikshank, 1810), v.

¹⁵ Pardee, *The Sabbath-School Index*, 13.

¹⁶ Joel Hawes, “Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut,” in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 442.

¹⁷ Italicized as original, records of the Brother’s House in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 443; Pardee, *The Sabbath-School Index*, 13.

the Revolutionary War disrupted most colonial Sunday schools, such as when Ephrata's was forced to close after converting its Sunday school building into a military hospital.¹⁸

Due to these factors, Sunday schools did not emerge as an organized, widespread movement until the 1790's. Interestingly, the American movement was actually inspired by a British Sunday school system created a decade earlier by a man named Robert Raikes.¹⁹ Born in 1736, Raikes was a printer and philanthropist concerned with the problems of poverty and crime plaguing his native city of Gloucester. He was especially appalled by the way that Sunday was "prostituted to bad purposes" because of the "lawless state of the younger class, who are allowed to run wild on that day, free from every restraint."²⁰ Raikes reported that poor children used their free time on Sundays to engage in various acts of mischief and petty crime, turning many into juvenile delinquents and, eventually, full-fledged criminals. He attributed this "state of degradation" not only to lack of adult supervision but to "ignorance of the most elementary principles of right and wrong, morality and immorality."²¹

Attempting to combat this problem, Raikes turned his energy and resources to developing an educational system that would use Sunday to both impart literacy and convey good character to poor children. In 1780 he hired several respectable women to teach reading and the Anglican catechism to as many children as he could gather on

¹⁸ For more on colonial Sunday schools, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 40-44.

¹⁹ Alfred Gregory, *Robert Raikes: Journalist and Philanthropist. A History of the Origin of Sunday Schools* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), 43-45. See also Henry J. Harris and Josiah Harris, *Robert Raikes: The Man and His Work* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1899) 35, 64, 222; Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 21, 23-25.

²⁰ Robert Raikes, editorial, *Gloucester Journal*, 1783, in Harris and Harris, *Robert Raikes*, 62.

²¹ Harris and Harris, *Robert Raikes*, 43.

Sundays.²² The women were also required to ensure that the “set of little heathens” attended a church service, maintained a clean appearance, and showed respect for authority.²³ According to a contemporary, Raikes designed his system with a “benevolent [rather] than a religious motive,” hence the emphasis on respectability and responsibility.²⁴ By 1783 Raikes was so pleased with the experiment that he published a short report of it in his newspaper, the *Gloucester Journal*, followed by a similar report a year later in the popular *Gentlemen’s Magazine*.²⁵ He claimed that through his Sunday schools “the behavior of the children is greatly civilized. The barbarous ignorance in which they had before lived, being in some degree dispelled, they begin to give proofs that those persons are mistaken who consider the lower orders of mankind incapable of improvement.”²⁶

The use of Sunday schools spread rapidly among British philanthropists following the publication of Raikes’ report. Interested in both the intellectual and moral improvement of the poor, humanitarians like William Wilberforce found Sunday schools appealing because they took a time often devoted to juvenile delinquency and refashioned it into a day that could foster good citizenship. Several organizations for the promotion of Sunday schools were founded throughout the 1780’s. The most influential one was the

²² Robert Raikes, letter to Colonel Townley of Bolton on 25 November, 1783, published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 54 no. 1 (1784): 410-411; Robert Raikes, letter to the *Arminian Magazine*, June 5, 1785, in Gregory, *Robert Raikes*, 60.

²³ Raikes, letter to the *Arminian Magazine*, in Gregory, *Robert Raikes*, 60; Raikes, letter to Colonel Townley, *Gentleman’s Magazine*; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 15.

²⁴ John J. Powell, letter to authors, 1863, in Harris and Harris, *Robert Raikes*, 55-56.

²⁵ For further information on Raikes, his Sunday school system, and his views on poverty, education, and social reform, see Harris and Harris, *Robert Raikes*; Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 21-23; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 13-21, 437-440.

²⁶ Raikes, editorial.

Sunday School Society, founded in London by Baptist merchant William Fox in 1785.²⁷

Fox started the interdenominational society to organize and maintain schools, and to distribute information about Raikes' system to the public.²⁸ The society's goal was to "prevent vice – to encourage industry and virtue – to dispel the darkness of ignorance – to diffuse the light of knowledge – to bring men cheerfully to submit to their stations – to obey the laws of God and their country – to make...the country poor happy - to lead them in the pleasant paths of religion, and to...prepare them for a glorious eternity."²⁹ Through the efforts of this and similar organizations, the movement spread throughout the British Isles.³⁰ John Wesley commented approvingly in 1784 that "I find these schools springing up wherever I go."³¹

Bishop William White and the American Sunday School Movement

Within less than a decade Raikes' Sunday school system became so popular that it was imported to the United States. The man primarily responsible for this development was Bishop William White, a preeminent leader of the Episcopal Church. Born in 1748, White was one of the few Anglican priests to enthusiastically support American independence. He served as a chaplain to the Continental Congress and developed friendships with leading patriots like George Washington. In 1779 he was appointed rector of St. Peter's and Christ Church in Philadelphia after the loyalist pastors of the

²⁷ The formal name for this organization was The Society for the Support and Encouragement of Sunday Schools, but it is usually referred to as the Sunday School Society. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 33.

²⁸ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 22.

²⁹ Circular prepared by William Fox prior to the first general meeting of the Sunday School Society, in Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 33-34. See also Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 21-23.

³⁰ For more information on the growth of the Sunday school movement in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Harris and Harris, *Robert Raikes*; Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 11-39.

³¹ Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, 42.

congregations fled to England, serving both churches in what was known as the United Parish. Following the Revolutionary War, White immediately dedicated himself to ensuring the survival of the new Episcopal denomination. He presided over the first General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1785, and one year later he was elected bishop of the diocese of Pennsylvania.³²

White traveled to London to receive consecration in 1786, and it was during this trip that he was introduced to Britain's Sunday school movement. While it is unclear precisely how he became familiar with the movement, White arrived in London at the same time that Fox's society was growing in influence among the city's Anglican churches, and he probably learned of Sunday schools through this source. White hints at this in *A Sermon on the Festival of the Holy Innocents* which he preached in 1817 at St. James' Church in Philadelphia for a gathering of teachers and pupils from several Episcopal Sunday schools. In this sermon White recounted his history of involvement with Sunday schools and specifically mentioned the Sunday School Society. He stated that when this organization was founded it made a conscious effort to "engage the co-operation of episcopal authority" and succeeded in winning the favor of many prominent clergymen, such as Bishop Beillby Porteus.³³ These relationships were being built while White was in London, and he likely associated with some of the clergymen recently recruited to support the society, exposing him to the Sunday school movement. Indeed,

³² White served as both rector of the United Parish and presiding bishop of Pennsylvania until his death in 1836. For more information on White, see David Hein and Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *The Episcopalians* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 51-60, 317-319.

³³ William White, *A Sermon on the Festival of the Holy Innocents. With Reference to an Assembling of the Sunday Schools of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the City and Liberties of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: William Fry, 1818), 8.

White's sermon indicated that the primary reason he became interested in Sunday schools is because he knew that Anglican authorities supported the British movement.³⁴

Following the lead of the Anglican clergy, White returned to Philadelphia in April of 1787, determined to make Sunday schools an established part of the Episcopal Church. The bishop's sermon from 1817 explains that his aspirations twenty years earlier for an American Sunday school movement were originally rooted in his religious convictions. In keeping with Episcopal doctrine, White held that belief in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ was the only way to gain eternal salvation. He also supposed that this salvation could be obtained through infant baptism. In his sermon, White ignored the evangelical emphasis on the necessity of personal faith and conversion, asserting instead that parents could choose to place their infants "under the gracious covenants of God."³⁵ He stated, "For this reason...Christian parents have no further duty enjoined on them in relation to their children, than to 'bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord:' it being presumed that they are already owned by him as his."³⁶ Although White trusted that baptism ensured an infant's eternal salvation, however, he did not believe that it automatically enabled children to lead honorable Christian lives.³⁷ Rather, piety and integrity had to be systematically developed through instruction in Protestant doctrine. Consequently, White believed that parents and churches should devote themselves to

³⁴ White, *Sermon*, 8-9. Sunday school historians all agree that White was introduced to Sunday schools during his trip to London, but none of them explain how this occurred. See Fergusson, *Historic Chapters in Christian Education in America*, 14; Oscar S. Michael, *The Sunday School in the Development of the American Church* (Milwaukee: The Young Churchman Co., 1918), 54; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 45.

³⁵ White, *Sermon*, 4. For a complete definition of evangelicalism, see Noll, *America's God*, 5, 170-174.

³⁶ White, *Sermon*, 6.

³⁷ White, *Sermon*, 7.

ensuring that children received a thorough religious education, asserting that this would foster godliness.³⁸

After explaining the value of religious education, White went on in his sermon to explain that Sunday schools could greatly assist the Episcopal Church in shaping the conduct of Philadelphia's youth. By gathering children under a church-sponsored Sunday school for instruction in literacy and the Episcopal catechism, White believed that his congregation could "train their offspring in the paths of righteousness."³⁹ This would not only ensure that children behave uprightly in this life and achieve heavenly rewards in the next, but would also secure a new generation of members for the Episcopal denomination.⁴⁰ Moreover, since Philadelphia lacked a quality common school system in 1787, White hoped that the basic education offered by Sunday schools would attract underprivileged students. Ideally, this would bring degenerate poor children under the patronage of "the members of our churches" and thereby "nourish [them] unto eternal life."⁴¹ The nourishment White envisioned, however, was designed mainly to construct character. Although he hoped to encourage personal conversion, White aspired to use Sunday schools to expose children from every social status to Episcopal doctrine in order to foster Protestant virtues like humility, responsibility, and piety.⁴² This contrasted sharply with the evangelical mission of Christians, which endeavored primarily to change behavior through heartfelt, divinely-inspired repentance.⁴³ White apparently rejected this approach, and either accepted or was oblivious to the possibility that Sunday schools

³⁸ White, *Sermon*, 7.

³⁹ White, *Sermon*, 13, 15.

⁴⁰ White, *Sermon*, 7, 13, 15.

⁴¹ White, *Sermon*, 8, 16.

⁴² White, *Sermon*, iv.

⁴³ Noll, *America's God*, 170.

based on human instruction designed to reach the intellect were more likely to produce doctrinally-engineered behavior than genuine sanctification.

Eager to implement his vision, in November of 1788 White proposed that Christ Church open a Sunday school for boys, which would eventually be expanded into another school for girls once adequate funds were raised.⁴⁴ Beyond allowing White to preach sermons promoting his idea, however, the church's vestry did not take steps to execute the plan.⁴⁵ Historian Oscar S. Michael suggests that the vestry was reluctant to act because the proposal was based on a British "innovation," while historian Edwin Wilber Rice attributes their delay to the belief that Sunday schools were a "man-made appendage" that profaned the Christian Sabbath.⁴⁶ These explanations are inadequate in light of the fact that the historical literature on American Sunday schools, including White's rhetoric, is virtually devoid of anti-British sentiment. Moreover, White's religious goals for Sunday schools likely would have calmed fears that such institutions violated the Sabbath. A more reasonable explanation is that the vestry simply lacked the necessary finances, a situation implied by the church's minute books. Minutes from a vestry meeting recounting White's proposal state that the school's founding depended on whether or not "sufficient funds should be raised."⁴⁷ Moreover, most of the vestry's time was consumed with strengthening the fledgling Episcopal denomination, leaving them

⁴⁴ Walter Herbert Stowe, ed., *The Life and Letters of Bishop William White, Together with the Services and Addresses Commemorating the One Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary of His Consecration to the Episcopate* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1937), 163.

⁴⁵ Minute of Christ Church Vestry, November 22, 1788, in Stowe, *The Life and Letters of Bishop William White*, 163. See also Fergusson, *Historic Chapters in Christian Education in America*, 14.

⁴⁶ Michael, *The Sunday School*, 54; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 48-49.

⁴⁷ Minute of Christ Church Vestry, November 22, 1788, in Stowe, *The Life and Letters of Bishop William White*, 163.

with few resources to put into Sunday schools.⁴⁸ As historian Lois Banner notes, during the late eighteenth century all American denominations were similarly focused on survival. Most churches concentrated on rebuilding membership and finances, which had diminished during the Revolutionary War, and this temporarily limited the growth of church-sponsored reform programs like Sunday schools.⁴⁹

White recognized Christ Church's inability to support his plan and determined to start an American Sunday school movement through different means. He did this by offering the patronage of Sunday schools directly to individual Philadelphia philanthropists from both within and without his congregation, thereby tapping into the city's rich tradition of reform. More specifically, he began to promote Sunday schools less as a religious tool and more as a solution to the problem of vice that was thought to stem from poverty. According to eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking, vice was comprised of negative character qualities like greed, self-seeking, and idleness, all of which terrified American leaders because such qualities were thought to suppress liberty and cultivate social decay.⁵⁰ Although republics required a wise and conscientious citizenry in order to survive, most of the Founding Fathers believed that without proper restraint humanity was naturally disposed to act out of depravity.⁵¹ The lower class was

⁴⁸ White and the Christ Church vestry were respected leaders of the Episcopal Church. Throughout the 1780s they put most of their energy into protecting and Americanizing the new denomination and overseeing major decisions such as the creation of an American Episcopal prayer book. For more on this topic, see Hein and Shattuck, *The Episcopalians*, 51-60; Michael, *The Sunday School*, 135-136.

⁴⁹ Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control," 25-29. For the Revolution's impact on American churches, see Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 194-224.

⁵⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 57.

⁵¹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 345-347.

considered to be especially inclined toward vice because they existed in a state of ignorance and poverty, elements that supposedly fostered corruption.⁵²

Although White stated in his 1817 sermon that human sinfulness was the ultimate cause of vice, he still believed that the uneducated poor were more likely to turn to a life of crime.⁵³ He asserted that, “of those who fall under the penalties of the law, the far greater number have laboured under the ignorance of letters.”⁵⁴ In order to combat this problem, White restructured his Sunday school vision by dropping the emphasis on church doctrine and focusing instead on teaching literacy to poor children. Such a system would not only dispel the ignorance that promoted crime, but would also accomplish “one of the best uses of Sunday schools – the preventing of much disorder, on that day in particular, in the streets.”⁵⁵ His reasoning was reminiscent of the philosophy behind Raikes’ system, and White actually used this plan as evidence for how Sunday schools improved society. He cited the British movement as proof that literary-oriented Sunday schools were useful “for securing the public peace and of private rights,” claiming that “wherever Sunday schools have been established, the morals of the common people have been improved, and the property of people of better condition has been more safe.”⁵⁶ White believed that establishing a similar system in the United States would not only produce the same social benefits but would also help preserve the republic, stating that “our comfort by day, and security by night, are not independent on what we may be now doing, for the educating of the children of the poor.”⁵⁷

⁵² Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 218; Noll, *America’s God*, 57; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 21-22.

⁵³ White, *Sermon*, 6-7.

⁵⁴ White, *Sermon*, 11.

⁵⁵ White, *Sermon*, 11.

⁵⁶ White, *Sermon*, 11-13.

⁵⁷ White, *Sermon*, 11, 16.

This shift to literacy required White to surrender his original goal of using Sunday schools to disseminate Protestant doctrine throughout society. Under his former denominational plan, White hoped that Sunday schools could be used to convert underprivileged children or at least bring them into the Episcopal Church. His new focus, however, caused him to think of the schools as nothing more than a tool for increasing literacy among the poor in order to train them to behave as intelligent, upstanding citizens. In his 1817 sermon, White attributed this change to his recognition of the inherent difficulties in trying to undertake “the work of education, consistently with fidelity to the gospel ministry.”⁵⁸ White never ceased to imagine that Sunday schools would operate under a religious influence, particularly since they would be conducted on the Christian Sabbath, but he also knew that trying to market the movement as a social reform while retaining allegiance to the Episcopal Church would result in paralyzing doctrinal squabbles.⁵⁹ White asserted that the only way to avoid this predicament was to adopt a “plan of indifference to the opinions of one Christian denomination or another.”⁶⁰ Although he mourned that shifting away from doctrinal training was less than ideal, White asserted that “the importance of the elements of reading” outweighed any religious concerns, at least for present.⁶¹ He hoped that denominational Sunday schools would be added to the movement in the future, and desired instructors to be mindful of the eternal impact they could have on their pupils even in the midst of teaching literacy.⁶²

⁵⁸ White, *Sermon*, 10.

⁵⁹ Virtually all educational leaders at the time shared White’s assumption that education would be influenced by religion in some form or fashion, see Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 157; Timothy L. Smith, “Protestant Schooling and American Nationality,” *The Journal of American History* 53, no. 4 (1967): 679.

⁶⁰ White, *Sermon*, 9.

⁶¹ White, *Sermon*, 10.

⁶² White, *Sermon*, iii-iv, 9, 13.

Nevertheless, for the moment White felt that “the comfort of the social state” was “a sufficient excitement of endeavour.”⁶³

Although White’s choice to emphasize the social value of Sunday schools represents a significant shift in his thinking about the structure of the movement, it is not inconsistent with his fundamental intent. Whether he was promoting the religious or cognitive benefits of Sunday schools, White essentially argued from the same position: that education is a means of behavioral control. Although he believed that conversion was the starting point for personal sanctification, he also held that faith had to be supplemented by intellectual development, leading him to assume that doctrinal instruction would cause children to behave as good Christians. In the same way, White believed that instruction in literacy would make children into good citizens, which indicates an underlying presumption that the behaviors and values of the lower class could be easily controlled through education. His approach to creating a Sunday school movement was nuanced, in that it encompassed both spiritual and social benefits, but his final goal of manipulating morals and behavior remained constant. In the end, his decision to promote literacy over doctrinal instruction was not a complete betrayal of his original vision, but was a pragmatic move designed to enable him to gain sponsors from outside his congregation.

Context and Creation of the First Day Society

Within the context of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, White’s attempt to restructure Sunday schools into a tool for social engineering was marketable and

⁶³ White, *Sermon*, 13.

appealing. In the 1780's Philadelphia was the largest city in the United States and served as the political, intellectual, and commercial capital.⁶⁴ The city was dominated by "a very special kind of elite" that was republican, progressive, religiously tolerant, and "enlightened in a thoroughly eighteenth-century manner."⁶⁵ Comprised of prosperous members of the mercantile and upper classes, the elite desired to make Philadelphia into the ideal republican city, and they led the nation in scientific and social reform.⁶⁶ White himself was already an indefatigable reformer before his introduction to Sunday schools, serving in organizations dedicated to causes like prison reform and the prevention of prostitution.

These and other reform societies were created out of a mixture of anxiety and idealism. In many ways, the 1780's was a troubling time for Philadelphians. In addition to debates over the Constitution, several recessions, and the expansion of immigration and commercialization created economic and social turmoil within the city.⁶⁷ Reformers were particularly disturbed by the apparent increase in poverty that occurred during this period. Historian John Alexander estimates that by 1784 at least fifteen percent of Philadelphia's population was considered poor, a designation that encompassed both those entirely dependent on charity for survival and unskilled laborers who "sold their manual labor on a day-by-day basis."⁶⁸ The elite felt that many of these poor

⁶⁴ Gary Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 108, Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 122, 172.

⁶⁵ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 197-198.

⁶⁶ John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 4-6; Nash, *First City*, 176; Jaqueline Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child: Attitudes and Practices in Post-Revolutionary Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1982): 154.

⁶⁷ Nash, *First City*, 123-125; Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 156-157, 160; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 2, 13-20.

⁶⁸ Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 8-9. Although there is not any statistical information on the real amount of crime and poverty in Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century, the elite believed that

Philadelphians used the Revolution as license to begin claiming new liberties that they were supposedly unsuited for due to their lack of education and refinement. They were distressed, for example, when all tax-paying white males were given the vote regardless of rank or intelligence under Pennsylvania's radical 1776 constitution.⁶⁹ The *Freemen's Journal* complained on August 22, 1787, that "the American character [is marked] with an over-driven sense of liberty.... This high sense of Liberty has, indeed, even in ruder minds, produced a fierce independent spirit, without which the Revolution could not have been effected; but it has also in too many created a licentiousness, at present very detrimental, and incompatible with good government." The Synod of Philadelphia expressed a common anxiety in 1780 when it complained of the "decay of vital Piety, the degeneracy of Manners, want of public Spirit and prevalence of Vice and Immorality'."⁷⁰

White's decision to promote Sunday schools as a means of crime prevention tapped into the elite's anxiety regarding the poor, but it also appealed to an idealistic philosophy that drove most of the city's reform programs. This philosophy rested on the Enlightenment notion that republics could only survive by suppressing vice and cultivating virtue among citizens.⁷¹ Early eighteenth-century virtue was loosely defined as "disinterestedness," or the willingness to put aside personal interests to serve the

these problems were on the rise, motivating them to engage in social reform regardless of whether or not these perceived threats were real. Billy G. Smith indicates that poverty levels were actually rising in Philadelphia, see *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶⁹ Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 30-31; Nash, *First City*, 178-179. The radical constitution of 1776 was later replaced with a more conservative constitution in 1790, see Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 26-47, and Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 158-159, 166-167.

⁷⁰ As quoted in Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 213.

⁷¹ Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 345.

collective good.⁷² It encompassed a wide range of public-spirited ethics, including self-sacrifice, responsibility, and loyalty.⁷³ Enlightenment authors, such as Montesquieu, argued that republican virtue was a political ideal that could be achieved apart from religion.⁷⁴ The Founding Fathers generally embraced this notion and believed the only way to protect liberty was through cultivating rationalistic virtue throughout the citizenry.⁷⁵ They viewed Protestantism as vital to the preservation of a republic. Most agreed that the Bible's system of morals corresponded to Enlightenment virtue, causing American leaders to believe that the diffusion of religion would strengthen republicanism.⁷⁶ This presumed partnership between religion and republican liberty created a unique approach to nation-building known as Christian republicanism, an ideology that historian Thomas Kidd describes as a "convergence of classical republicanism and Reformed Christianity that would provide America with a new moral vision.... Classical antiquity supplied the political ideals of the prospective Republic...[while] Christianity supplied the Republic with its spirit and the power to preserve itself."⁷⁷

Christian republicanism offered the American elite the chance to "realize an ideal world."⁷⁸ By promoting virtue through Protestantism, both ecclesiastical and secular leaders believed that they could overcome the threat of vice and become a beacon of

⁷² Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 7-8.

⁷³ Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 99; Noll, *America's God*, 57, 90.

⁷⁴ Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 99-101, 109; Noll, *America's God*, 61.

⁷⁵ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 214; Noll, *America's God*, 95; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 9-10.

⁷⁶ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 199-200, 212; Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 99, 110-111; Noll, *America's God*, 91, 93, 103; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 583, 593.

⁷⁷ Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 98; for a full description of the unprecedented development of Christian republicanism, see Noll, *America's God*, 54-91.

⁷⁸ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 3-4, 41.

liberty for the rest of the world.⁷⁹ This optimism generated a belief among reformers that education could help make the world anew because it could be used to inculcate virtue within the next generation of American citizens.⁸⁰ Consequently, many Philadelphian philanthropists became champions of educational reform.⁸¹ Believing that education fostered self-discipline and intelligence, Philadelphian philanthropists sought to increase the availability and quality of education through a variety of methods, such as charity schools, which were designed for the urban poor and were usually sponsored by churches.⁸²

These efforts to reform weekday education provided the ideal context for the establishment of American Sunday schools.⁸³ As explained in his sermon, White essentially presented Sunday schools as a weekend extension of the charity school movement, an approach that not only appealed to the humanitarian impulses of Philadelphians, but also to their Christian republican ideals.⁸⁴ In highlighting the ways that Sunday schools improved “the morals of the common people” and helped secure “public peace and...private rights,” White demonstrated how the movement could benefit not just the city but the entire Republic.⁸⁵ His emphasis on social engineering was ideally

⁷⁹ Wayne Urban and Jennings Wagoner, Jr., *American Education: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 62-66; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 3-4, 36-37, 613-619.

⁸⁰ William H. Jeynes, *American Educational History: School, Society, and the Common Good* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 36.

⁸¹ Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 224-226.

⁸² For more on the eighteenth-century view on the importance of education and the various methods to reform it, see David Tyack, “Forming the National Character: Paradox in the Educational Thought of the Revolutionary Generation,” *Harvard Educational Review* 36 (1966): 29-41; Urban and Wagoner, *American Education: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 62-87. For the development of charity schools in the late eighteenth century, see Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 31-53, and Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 30-61.

⁸³ For more on the development of the charity school in the late eighteenth century, see Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 37-53; Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 30-61.

⁸⁴ Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 43-44.

⁸⁵ White, *Sermon*, 11-12, see also 13-16.

suited to the optimistic aims of Christian republicanism. When combined with Philadelphian anxiety over poverty, White's ideology created a powerful social argument for the establishment of Sunday schools.

By 1790 the bishop had successfully used this argument to win approximately ten influential supporters to the Sunday school cause. He did this by giving special sermons promoting the movement, which enabled him to obtain support from Christ Church congregants like physician William Currie.⁸⁶ Additionally, White most likely used his connections to other Philadelphian reformers to gain sponsors from outside his congregation. Many of the men White recruited to the Sunday school movement were already engaged in other forms of social improvement, such as Matthew Carey, a printer and liberal Roman Catholic who regularly advocated for expanding Philadelphia's poverty relief programs.⁸⁷ Other influential supporters included the mayor, Samuel Powell, and Quaker merchant Thomas P. Cope.⁸⁸ The most prominent sponsor, however, was White's neighbor and close friend, Benjamin Rush. A famous physician and revered signer of the Declaration of Independence, Rush was a Universalist with ties to both the Episcopalians and Presbyterians.⁸⁹ Throughout his life the physician was involved in numerous causes like temperance and abolitionism, but educational reform was the one initiative that he pursued with consistency and passion.⁹⁰ While he never wrote any Sunday school material, Rush is considered one of the most articulate spokesmen for

⁸⁶ Minute of Christ Church Vestry, November 22, 1788, in Stowe, *The Life and Letters of Bishop William White*, 163.

⁸⁷ Nash, *First City*, 146-147.

⁸⁸ "To the Citizens of Philadelphia, and of the Districts of Southwark and the Northern Liberties. The Address of the Society for Establishing Sunday Schools," *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, March 25, 1791; Boylan, *Sunday School*, 7; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 45.

⁸⁹ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 208-209.

⁹⁰ For more on Benjamin Rush as a reformer, see Abzug, *Crumbling Cosmos*, 11-29.

Christian republican education in the late eighteenth century, and his ideas probably influenced the movement.⁹¹

Rush's views on education were significantly influenced by Christian republicanism. In his 1798 essay, *On the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, Rush stated that republican governments placed special responsibilities on its citizens. It was crucial that schools produce "wise and good men" well trained in patriotism and virtue.⁹² Rush argued that the best way to do this was to infuse instruction with Protestant morality, a belief that was shared by most educational theorists at the time.⁹³ He grounded this proposal in the assumption that "the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments."⁹⁴ Rush further asserted that "a Christian cannot fail of being a republican," because "every precept of the Gospel inculcates those degrees of humility, self-denial, and brotherly kindness, which are directly opposed to the pride of monarchy and the pageantry of a court. A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teacheth him, that no man 'liveth to himself'."⁹⁵

⁹¹ Abzug, *Crumbling Cosmos*, 12; May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 208-211. Reinier asserts that Rush and Powell actually wrote the rules of government for the First Day Society, but she is the only scholar to make this claim, see "Rearing the Republican Child," 161.

⁹² Benjamin Rush, "On the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 87; For more information, see Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 32.

⁹³ Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 38-42; Smith, "Protestant Schooling and American Nationality," 679-680.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Rush, "On the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 88. Rush believed that all religions taught beneficial moral lessons and expressed an openness to having non-Christian beliefs taught in the classroom, but he felt that Protestantism offered the most clear, convincing, and powerful system of ethics. See Rush, "Mode of Education," 88-89.

⁹⁵ Rush, "On the Mode of Education," 87-88.

For Rush, however, religion was only one of many tools for creating virtuous citizens. Unlike White, he did not believe that innate depravity was the cause of crime, asserting instead that “vices and punishments are the fatal consequences of the want of a proper education in life.”⁹⁶ Rush supposed that the remedy for the ailment of vice was to develop humanity’s common moral sense, an idea originally promoted by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Francis Hutcheson.⁹⁷ According to Hutcheson, all of humanity possessed an innate, God-given moral intelligence that allowed them to distinguish between right and wrong.⁹⁸ This morality could be systematically developed through education, and Rush felt that schools should focus on developing this common moral sense.⁹⁹ He also wholeheartedly agreed with John Locke’s argument that environment was critical to the development of virtue, causing him to recommend that teachers enforce things like exercise and cleanliness in order to instill good habits.¹⁰⁰ Rush felt that if educators combined these Enlightenment principles with Protestant values, “the combined and reciprocal influence of religion, liberty and learning upon the morals, manners and knowledge” of students would raise them to immeasurable “degrees of happiness and perfection.”¹⁰¹

Ultimately, Rush believed that the goal of education was not to indoctrinate students, but to “inspire them with republican principles,” create a homogenous

⁹⁶ Benjamin Rush, “Education Agreeable to a Republican Form of Government,” in Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 100.

⁹⁷ Benjamin Rush, “The Bible as a School Book. Addressed to the Rev. Jeremy Belknap, of Boston,” in Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 126-127.

⁹⁸ Noll, *America’s God*, 93-94; Reinier, “Rearing the Republican Child,” 156.

⁹⁹ Noll, *America’s God*, 93-94, 106; Reinier, “Rearing the Republican Child,” 156; Urban and Wagoner, *American Education*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 20; Reinier, “Rearing the Republican Child,” 151-154, 158; Rush, “Mode of Education,” 88, 91-92.

¹⁰¹ Rush, “Mode of Education,” 96.

American identity, and “convert men into republican machines.”¹⁰² As Kidd argues, when it came to education, “Rush’s Christianity served primarily earthly, social purposes: producing virtuous citizens who could preserve the Republic from corruption.”¹⁰³ Rush agreed with White that education should be employed as a means of behavioral control. Unlike the bishop, however, Rush’s educational philosophy did not have faith as its starting point. Although religion was certainly essential to education, conversion was not necessary in order to make children into virtuous human beings.¹⁰⁴ Instead, Rush felt that educators could shape the morality of their pupils if they simply filled children’s minds with knowledge of the Scriptures and forced them to follow good Christian habits.¹⁰⁵ His civic-centered spirituality emphasized behavior over belief and blatantly subverted Protestantism to republican ambitions.

Clearly, Rush and White differed in their personal reasons for supporting Sunday schools. Although White determined that religion had to become subservient to republicanism in order for the movement to survive, he hoped that this relationship would be temporary and believed that Sunday schools offered both spiritual and social benefits. On the other hand, Rush approved of the movement for purely social reasons, focusing only on the ways that the system could improve republicanism. Nevertheless, all of the sponsors were unified in their desire to control the behavior of the poor and thereby ensure the continuation of the American Republic. To that end White gathered the group of supporters on December 19, 1790, to discuss the possibility of starting a Sunday

¹⁰² Rush, “Mode of Education,” 88, 90-92. For the general view, see Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 6-7; Tyack, “Forming the National Character,” 29-33; Urban and Wagoner, *American Education* 87.

¹⁰³ Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Rush, “Mode of Education,” 88-89.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Rush, “The Bible as a School Book. Addressed to the Rev. Jeremy Belknap, of Boston,” in Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 118-122.

school society for Philadelphia and the surrounding districts. On December 26, after finalizing a constitution, the group formally launched the First Day Society, an organization dedicated to the management, promotion, and financial support of Sunday schools. Anyone could become an annual member of the society by paying one dollar, or could achieve lifetime membership through paying ten dollars. The members annually elected a governing body of four officers and a Board of Visitors, charging the latter group with the task of making monthly visits to the schools to ensure proper maintenance.¹⁰⁶ White was elected president, a post he held until his death in 1836.¹⁰⁷ With the necessary structure in place, in March of 1791 the society opened the first three Sunday schools in Philadelphia: two for boys taught by John Poor, and one for girls taught by John Ely.¹⁰⁸

Ideology and Methods of the First Day Society

When they planned the society, the founders preferred civic-minded Christian republicanism over White's original religious ambitions. The society's constitution made no mention of God, conversion, or Protestant doctrine, stating instead that the organization was motivated by two social concerns. The first was that poor children, or "the offspring of indigent parents," lacked the opportunity to attend weekday schools, often because they had to work.¹⁰⁹ The society found the absence of these children from school disturbing due to its belief that "the good education of youth is of the first importance to society" because it prepared children "for virtue, freedom, and

¹⁰⁶ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iv.

¹⁰⁷ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 46.

¹⁰⁸ "Sunday Schools," *General Advertiser*, August 1795; Boylan, *Sunday School*, 7; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 45.

¹⁰⁹ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iii.

happiness.”¹¹⁰ The second major concern was that poor children often used their free time on Sunday “to the worst of purposes, the depravation of morals and manners,” which was just the sort of disorder that elite Philadelphians feared.¹¹¹

The First Day Society proposed to remove these social threats by using Sunday schools as a tool to conform children to the mold of good citizenship. To do this, the organization’s three schools restricted their activities to teaching reading and writing, skills that were considered crucial for attaining enlightened morality.¹¹² Additionally, as in Raikes’ schools, the society required its pupils to follow a strict behavioral code of deference, cleanliness, and self-discipline. Rewards and punishments were based on good behavior and academic progress. If any student was “guilty of lying, swearing, pilfering, indecent talking, or any other misbehaviour,” teachers were obligated to “point out the evil of such conduct” and, if the student proved unrepentant, expel the offender from the school.¹¹³ The goal of this discipline was to teach the pupils to act like “opulent and respectable members of the community.”¹¹⁴ Essentially, the First Day Society required its pupils to follow a standard of conduct based on elitist Christian republican values, despite the fact that these children were generally excluded from the elite community because of their poverty.¹¹⁵

Although the First Day Society focused on crafting poor children into virtuous citizens, it did not totally neglect the religious element considered vital to republican

¹¹⁰ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iii, 20; “To the Citizens of Philadelphia,” *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*. This belief was common among all eighteenth-century social and political leaders, Tyack, “Forming the National Character,” 35.

¹¹¹ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iii.

¹¹² First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iv; 16. Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 34.

¹¹³ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, 16.

¹¹⁴ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, 21.

¹¹⁵ This attitude was typical of many poverty reforms of the period, see Alexander, *Render Them Submissive*, 5-6.

education. Pupils were required to attend a church service between the morning and evening teaching sessions.¹¹⁶ Additionally, the society's constitution stipulated that the only textbooks allowed in the schools were the Bible "and such other moral and religious books, as the Society may, from time to time, direct."¹¹⁷ Due to his Christian republican convictions, Rush was enthusiastic about using the Bible as a textbook in Sunday schools. In his 1791 essay, *The Bible as a School Book*, Rush acknowledged and approved of the fact that Scripture could lead to conversion, but he advocated its use in schools because it was "the best means of awakening moral sensibilities in [children's] minds."¹¹⁸ Later, in a rare reference to Sunday schools, Rush stated that the practice of using the Bible as the only textbook in Raikes' system had caused British students to become respectable citizens, and he suggested that the American movement could produce identical results by following the same practice.¹¹⁹ Rush believed that instruction in the Bible was valuable primarily because it was "the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government... for this divine book, above all others, favours... all those sober and frugal virtues, which constitute the soul of republicanism."¹²⁰

The First Day Society probably supported Rush's view, given that it only discussed the Bible in the context of literacy. Unlike Rush, however, the organization seemed to downplay the spiritual power of Scripture. The society eschewed his suggestion to make the Bible the only textbook in Sunday schools and viewed Scripture

¹¹⁶ These sessions were held from approximately seven to nine in the morning and one to three in the afternoon, see First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, 16.

¹¹⁷ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iv.

¹¹⁸ Rush, "The Bible as a School Book," 125.

¹¹⁹ Rush, "The Bible as a School Book," 129.

¹²⁰ Rush, "The Bible as a School Book," 130.

as one of many resources that could be easily exchanged for other educational materials in order to meet the organization's republican goals. In 1792 the society replaced Scripture with secular textbooks, such as Dr. Joannes Florentius Martinet's *Catechism of Nature*. Although the Bible was reinstated in 1801, along with religious works like Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, this decision indicates that the society placed cognitive development over spiritual knowledge.¹²¹ While the First Day Society desired its pupils to adopt Christian habits, it did not ground this requirement in Christian faith.

The members of the First Day Society not only overlooked the spiritual dimension of Scripture, but they also sought to run the society like a professional rather than religious organization. Though pupils were required to attend a church service, they were not encouraged to become members of a specific denomination or make a profession of faith. All three schools operated on White's interdenominational plan and were not connected to specific churches. In place of a denominational affiliation the society lobbied for an act of incorporation, which it received in 1796.¹²² The First Day Society took its status as a corporation seriously and viewed its work as the fulfillment of a public duty. The fact that the society paid its teachers indicates that it viewed the three schools as providing a valuable service to the Republic.¹²³ Moreover, the organization apparently thought of itself as a key advocate for all forms of public education, for one of its first official acts was to send a petition to the Pennsylvania Legislature calling for the

¹²¹ For more information, see Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child," 161-162.

¹²² See the society's 1796 version of the constitution, in *Constitution of the Society for the Institution and Support of First-Day or Sunday Schools in the City of Philadelphia, and the Districts of Southwark and the Northern Liberties, with A List of the Names of the Present Annual Contributors and the Members for Life. Rules for the Government of Said Schools, and a Summary of the Proceedings of the Society from Its Commencement to Sixth Month, June, 1813. With an Account of the Present State of the Funds* (Philadelphia, 1813), vi-x.

¹²³ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 158.

establishment of a state-funded school system.¹²⁴ The society also believed that it made a vital contribution to the stability and success of Philadelphia. The members expressed this conviction in an appeal for funding published in March of 1791, in which they asserted that their schools enabled poor children to become “qualified and disposed to add to the prosperity and reputation of our country, who might otherwise have added to its disgrace by their vices and to its taxes by their misery.”¹²⁵

Decline of the First Day Society

While the First Day Society supported “religious improvement,” its primary goal was “the good education of youth.”¹²⁶ In keeping with Christian republican principles, the society used spiritual tools to support enlightened morality, making religious aspirations subservient to the cultivation of virtuous citizenship. By using Christian republicanism in this way, the First Day Society not only gave Sunday schools a uniquely American ideology, but invested the movement with a significance that went beyond the amelioration of poverty and addressed the future of the entire Republic. The members asserted that the social advantages of such a movement served to make the value of the First Day Society self-evident to “the friends of humanity and virtue, and place it upon a footing with the many other public spirited institutions which now flourish among us.” Initially, this assumption seemed correct. During the first three weeks of their existence,

¹²⁴ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 45-46; Pray, *The History of Sunday Schools*, 206.

¹²⁵ “To the Citizens of Philadelphia,” *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*.

¹²⁶ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, iii. See also Boylan, *Sunday School*, 7-9; Fergusson, *Historic Chapters in Christian Education*, 14.

the society's three schools attracted around 120 pupils, and by 1800 the schools had enrolled a total of 2,120 male and female students.¹²⁷

Although the First Day Society succeeded in establishing Sunday schools as a legitimate reform movement in Philadelphia, it continually struggled to fund its schools. The society relied on donations, which steadily diminished with each passing year. In 1799 the society had 646 members but only received 370 annual membership fees. The First Day Society attributed this discrepancy to "deaths, removals from the City and refusals to pay."¹²⁸ One explanation for some of these deaths and departures is the annual bouts of yellow fever that struck Philadelphia with a vengeance in 1793-94, and again in 1796-98.¹²⁹ Membership and subscriptions continued to decline from 1800-04.¹³⁰ Consequently, in 1805, the society closed one of the boys' schools, and temporarily ceased paying tuition for the girls' school in 1806.

These cuts allowed the First Day Society to save enough money to reopen both schools in 1808, and in 1810 a posthumous donation enabled the organization to open a fourth school for both genders. This new school attracted 140 students during its first year, which was "a greater number than can be well accommodated or faithfully instructed."¹³¹ Even with this revitalization, however, the society remained unable to solicit steady donations.¹³² The organization's 1813 report called this "a cause of regret" and pleaded, "let not... members become so soon weary of well-doing.... An active, personal engagement in the affairs of the Society, would not be found an irksome, but

¹²⁷ "To the Citizens of Philadelphia," *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*; First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, 18.

¹²⁸ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1813 Summary*, 24.

¹²⁹ Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 197.

¹³⁰ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1813 Summary*, 24-25.

¹³¹ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1810 Summary*, 19. Boys and girls were still taught in separate rooms.

¹³² Boylan, *Sunday School*, 8.

pleasing, employment.”¹³³ By 1815 it was clear that these appeals were ineffective, as the economic and social turmoil caused by the War of 1812 kept the society’s growth to a minimum.¹³⁴ Interestingly, the entire charity school movement faced similar monetary woes during this period, since “the hearts of those who operated the charity schools were larger than their pocketbooks.”¹³⁵

These financial difficulties indicate that by the nineteenth century most Philadelphians did not find the enlightened aspirations of the eighteenth-century Sunday school movement convincing enough to invest in it. The First Day Society was designed to appeal to the anxieties and ideals of the elite, but its message of social engineering was rapidly becoming obsolete in the face of more compelling religious and democratic messages generated by events such as the Second Great Awakening.¹³⁶ The society also diminished in influence due to the loss of some of its most powerful members. Benjamin Rush passed away in 1813, and during the same period William White increasingly turned his attention to fulfilling his original dream of founding denominational Sunday schools.¹³⁷ More importantly, the society’s role as one of Philadelphia’s primary suppliers of public education was supplanted in 1818 by the establishment of state-supported common schools.¹³⁸ With its function and message failing, the First Day Society was compelled to permanently close its schools in 1819. It continued to exist as a corporation, but only in order to donate its annual subscriptions to other educational

¹³³ First Day Society, *Constitution and 1813 Summary*, 21.

¹³⁴ The financial panics of 1814 and 1819, along with the general disruption wrought by the War of 1812, probably made subscriptions difficult if not impossible to obtain, see Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 256.

¹³⁵ Jeynes, *American Educational History*, 49.

¹³⁶ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 9.

¹³⁷ White, *Sermon*, 13-16. See also Michael, *The Sunday-School*, 64; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 62.

¹³⁸ Nash, *First City*, 180; Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 226.

societies.¹³⁹ In the end the First Day Society's Christian republican vision for Sunday schools proved inadequate to meet the remarkable religious and social transformations that occurred in the nineteenth century. Although commitment to Christian republicanism ensured the initial success of the First Day Society, the organization's emphasis on behavioral control was finally forced to give way to a more compelling ideology for the entire movement. This not only resulted in the organization's decline, but paved the way for the creation of evangelical Sunday schools.

¹³⁹ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 9.

CHAPTER III

CO-WORKERS WITH THE LORD: THE SUNDAY AND ADULT SCHOOL UNION AND THE RISE OF EVANGELICAL SUNDAY SCHOOLS

By the second decade of the nineteenth century the republican-oriented version of the Sunday school was rapidly losing support. At the same time, Protestant Christians with a more evangelical view of their faith were working to revitalize the movement. Inspired by the widespread increase in evangelical activism unleashed by events such as disestablishment and the Second Great Awakening, and nurtured within Philadelphia's vibrant reformist tradition, Protestants reshaped the Sunday school into a voluntary reform organization dedicated to spiritual regeneration rather than behavioral control. Evangelical Sunday school societies became popular in the North after the War of 1812, and by 1817 leaders from fourteen of these organizations came together in Philadelphia to create a regional association called the Sunday and Adult School Union (SASU). Although structured similarly to the First Day Society, the mission and ideology of the Sunday and Adult School Union were fundamentally different from the eighteenth-century movement. The SASU's primary goal was to use Sunday schools to foster conversion and sanctification among pupils of all ages and races. It viewed literacy as a means of diffusing Protestant doctrine and used education to engage hearts rather than

minds, believing that this was the only way to produce genuine morality. The organization was convinced that it had a divine mandate to work for the salvation of each Sunday school pupil, to promote the spiritual renewal of society, and to advance the millennium. The SASU's new evangelistic vision proved popular among evangelical reformers, and its efforts to remake the Sunday school into a strictly religious institution ultimately ensured the survival and ignited the expansion of the movement.

Evangelical Activism and Voluntary Societies

The revitalization of American Sunday schools stemmed from the general rise in evangelical Protestant activism that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁰ Many factors contributed to this rise in evangelical fervor, such as the official disestablishment of religion following the Revolution. Deprived of state support, nineteenth-century churches were thrust into a religious marketplace that required them to actively compete for converts and experiment with aggressive methods of recruitment.¹⁴¹ Not all denominations thrived in this new marketplace, but overall disestablishment triggered religious mobilization and increased church membership.¹⁴² The series of religious revivals known as the Second Great Awakening also fueled the spread of evangelicalism. Beginning around 1800, the Second Great Awakening originated with outdoor camp meetings held in the West, particularly in Kentucky and

¹⁴⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 165-166.

¹⁴¹ For more information on the disestablishment of religion and the creation of a religious marketplace, see Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴² For a complete discussion, see Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 268-274; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989): 28-31. Butler stated that the number of American denominations rose from 2,500 in 1780 to 11,000 in 1820, while Finke and Rodney reported that church affiliation rose from 17% of the population in 1776 to 34% in 1850.

Tennessee. These meetings sought to foster conversion and featured highly emotional preaching and displays of “divine power in the audience.”¹⁴³ The revivals became more subdued after moving to the East in the 1810’s, but they retained the goal of adding converts to established or evolving Christian congregations.¹⁴⁴ Like disestablishment, the Second Great Awakening released powerful religious energies that increased and intensified evangelical activity across the country.¹⁴⁵

Evangelicalism formed the core of nineteenth-century Protestantism.¹⁴⁶ It was not a doctrine, but an emotional way of experiencing faith that could be found in most denominations, particularly among the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians.¹⁴⁷ Above all else, evangelicalism emphasized the importance of heartfelt conversion, or experiencing spiritual rebirth through individual acceptance of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection as atonement for sin.¹⁴⁸ Genuine conversion was thought to establish personal relationship with God and inspire believers to lead lives of ongoing moral improvement, a process known as sanctification.¹⁴⁹ Evangelicals also stressed the importance of personal study of the Bible, which they considered to be the divinely-inspired, absolute guide to sanctification.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, nineteenth-century evangelicalism emphasized activism. All believers were expected to aggressively engage

¹⁴³ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 50-55, 58; Mark Noll, *Protestants in America* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61-62.

¹⁴⁴ Walters, *American Reformers*, 21-22.

¹⁴⁵ For a more detailed description of the impact of the Second Great Awakening, see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 186-188.

¹⁴⁶ Walters, *American Reformers*, 23. For the eighteenth-century roots of evangelicalism, see Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 27.

¹⁴⁷ Charles C. Cole, *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 5; Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: A History of Christianity in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 3.

¹⁴⁸ Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening,”* 27; Noll, *Protestants in America*, 50.

¹⁴⁹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 188.

¹⁵⁰ Cole, *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists*, 5; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 181-182; Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening,”* 27.

in efforts to save souls, not merely for the welfare of individuals, but for the spiritual regeneration of society.¹⁵¹ This focus on conversion made evangelical activism distinctly different from Christian republicanism. The dominant ideology in late eighteenth-century America, Christian republicanism was inspired by the Enlightenment and used religion primarily to promote virtuous citizenship and stabilize the republic. In contrast, evangelicalism used Christianity to change hearts and strengthen American Protestantism.

The evangelical compulsion to convert, along with the general religious renewal produced by disestablishment and the Second Great Awakening, generated widespread obsession with social reform.¹⁵² On a mission to save and sanctify the United States, evangelicals took up the hallmark tool of nineteenth-century Protestant activism: the voluntary society. Historian Mark Noll defines voluntary societies as “organizations set up independently of the churches and governed by self-sustaining boards for the purpose of addressing a specific problem.”¹⁵³ Offering an alternative to the authoritarian religious establishments of the colonial era, voluntary societies enabled the laity to exercise power within the evangelical community regardless of gender or social status. Many of the largest and more successful voluntary societies were interregional and embraced nonsectarian work.¹⁵⁴ Voluntary societies multiplied rapidly in the 1810’s and 1820’s.¹⁵⁵ By the middle of the nineteenth century Protestants created an array of associations

¹⁵¹ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 10; Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening,”* 27. For a detailed discussion of the growth of nineteenth-century evangelicalism and its various expressions within different denominations, see Noll, *America’s God*, 170-186.

¹⁵² David B. Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 34.

¹⁵³ Noll, *Protestants in America*, 67.

¹⁵⁴ Banner, “Religious Benevolence as Social Control,” 39-40; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 56-61; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 191-193.

¹⁵⁵ Noll, *America’s God*, 182. Charles Foster has compiled a partial list of evangelical voluntary societies established in the first half of the nineteenth century, see *An Errand of Mercy*, 275-279.

dedicated to societal causes like temperance, abolition, and women's rights.¹⁵⁶ The object of this evangelical mobilization, referred to by contemporaries as the Protestant United Front or the Benevolent Empire, was the spiritual and social purification of America.¹⁵⁷

Philadelphia quickly became a center of this Protestant crusade.¹⁵⁸ Already possessing an illustrious history of reform, Philadelphia offered evangelicals with a unique combination of challenges and opportunities in the early nineteenth century. Although it suffered financially from the Panic of 1819, Philadelphia boasted some of the most impressive technological and cultural advancements of the period, and by the 1830's the city became the nation's industrial capital.¹⁵⁹ New factories initiated economic expansion and attracted a steady stream of immigrants and relocating Americans.¹⁶⁰ This rapid growth in population and industrialization significantly changed the social fabric of the city, presenting Philadelphian evangelicals with a host of problems. Presbyterians, who along with low-church Episcopalians comprised the bulk of the city's congregations, took the lead in evaluating and responding to Philadelphia's societal troubles.¹⁶¹ In an 1811 report titled "A Narrative of the State of Religion," the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church complained of the prevalence of multiple vices. The report specifically mentioned "the sin of drunkenness" and "the profanation of the Sabbath," evils that were thought to lead "directly to consequences of the most fatal and ruinous kind." The report also asserted that many youth had fallen prey to "carelessness and

¹⁵⁶ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 12; Cole, *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists*, 10.

¹⁵⁷ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 129; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 192.

¹⁵⁸ Nash, *First City*, 179.

¹⁵⁹ Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 256. For a description of Philadelphian innovations and advancements from 1800-1825, see pages 208-256.

¹⁶⁰ Nash, *First City*, 144-145; Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 218.

¹⁶¹ Anne M. Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia, 1800-1824," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 58, no. 4 (1980): 300.

profaneness,” while adults were becoming so consumed with material gain that “the disposition to support the gospel ministry is becoming cold.”¹⁶²

At the same time, the report expressed hope that a new era of religious devotion was dawning. It cited that many “especially visible” revivals had taken place in Philadelphia, resulting in the founding of new Presbyterian congregations.¹⁶³ The report highlighted the increased attraction to Protestantism recently demonstrated by Philadelphia’s African community, which successfully established the city’s first colored Presbyterian and Baptist churches in 1809.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, the report asserted that “an increased exertion for the promotion of pure and undefiled religion” resulted in the founding of many Bible, missionary, tract, and praying societies. This increase in reform institutions led the General Assembly to conclude that, despite Philadelphia’s vices, “infidelity appears to be declining” and “we have sweet and conciliatory evidence that God is in the midst of us.”¹⁶⁵ Many Protestant reformers shared the Presbyterians’ optimism and supplemented the elitist, eighteenth-century Enlightenment notion of moral improvement with a widespread evangelical belief in the possibility of total social redemption. Evangelicals from all denominations embraced the challenge to make Philadelphia into a model Christian community.¹⁶⁶

Many Philadelphian reformers considered religious education crucial to achieving this goal, especially those from formalist denominations like the Congregationalists,

¹⁶² General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, “A Narrative of the State of Religion,” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pa.), August 3, 1811.

¹⁶³ General Assembly, “Narrative.”

¹⁶⁴ Philadelphia’s African community had already established the nation’s first black Episcopal and Methodist churches in 1794, and would go on to found the nation’s first black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1816. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 182.

¹⁶⁵ General Assembly, “Narrative.”

¹⁶⁶ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 215-217; May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 308-324; Noll, *America’s God*, 185-187. For a detailed definition and explanation of the evangelical desire to create a Christian community, see Handy, *A Christian America*, 27-42.

Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. Formalists placed special emphasis on sound doctrine and “believed deeply that learning must go hand in hand with piety.”¹⁶⁷ Well established in Philadelphia, Presbyterians served as particularly key agents in developing religious education in the city.¹⁶⁸ According to “A Narrative on the State of Religion,” in the 1810’s Presbyterian congregations gave “increasing attention...to the doctrines of the gospel.” The report stated that congregants “begin to be generally convinced that it is important for them to love correct principles, in order that they may lead correct lives.”¹⁶⁹ This conviction led Presbyterian evangelicals to inaugurate efforts to catechize and teach literacy to Philadelphia’s poor in order to encourage Protestant morality.¹⁷⁰

In 1807 Archibald Alexander, pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church, founded the Evangelical Society to promote “knowledge of and submission to the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the poor” and to give “religious instruction to the ignorant.” Alexander started the society because he felt that Philadelphia’s five Presbyterian ministers were overwhelmed with “preparation for the pulpit” and were unable to give adequate attention to evangelism and doctrinal instruction. The Evangelical Society started schools, held weekday and Sunday evening services “for instruction and for prayer,” founded chapels, and in 1809 helped launch the first African Presbyterian church.¹⁷¹ The Evangelical Society was comprised of middle-class Presbyterians with a “glowing zeal” for social reform. One member, Alexander Henry, was an Irish immigrant who ran a flourishing

¹⁶⁷ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 321. See also Banner, “Religious Benevolence as Social Control,” 27; Noll, *America’s God*, 175-176.

¹⁶⁸ Boylan, “Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia,” 300.

¹⁶⁹ General Assembly, “Narrative.”

¹⁷⁰ General Assembly, “Narrative.” See also Boylan, “Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia,” 300; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 192, 449.

¹⁷¹ Archibald Alexander, letter recounting the formation and work of the Evangelical Society, 1840, in “The Presbyterian Evangelical Society of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 5, (1909-1910): 150-153.

import business and actively supported the city's Bible and Religious Tract Societies.¹⁷²

Unlike the First Day Society, the Evangelical Society required all members to participate in recruitment and instruction. Alexander stated that "every member of the Society was to be 'a working man.'"¹⁷³ This emphasis on personal involvement encouraged members to experiment with new methods, and before long the society recognized that Sunday schools could be an effective tool for Protestant education.

Evangelical Sunday Schools

The Evangelical Society opened Philadelphia's first strictly religious Sunday school in 1811.¹⁷⁴ Robert May, a British emissary from the London Missionary Society, spearheaded this initiative. May wrote to the Evangelical Society in July of 1811 offering his assistance in starting a Sunday school in Philadelphia based on the "modern" system recently adopted by the British Sunday school movement.¹⁷⁵ This system completely removed literacy instruction from Sunday schools and devoted the class period to Bible reading, prayer, hymn singing, and recitation of Scripture passages memorized by the children during the previous week. The system also granted tickets to the pupils who gave the best recitations, which could be traded in for religious books or tracts.¹⁷⁶ The Evangelical Society accepted May's offer to implement these methods in Philadelphia. May arrived in the city in October of 1811 and served as the society's Sunday school

¹⁷² Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 305; For more on Alexander Henry, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 95-97.

¹⁷³ Alexander, letter, in "The Presbyterian Evangelical Society of Philadelphia," 152. The emphasis on "personal exertions" was typical of most voluntary societies, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 13.

¹⁷⁵ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 52; The British Sunday school movement experienced its own evangelical transformation at the turn of the century, see Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability*.

¹⁷⁶ For more information, see Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 303; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 444-445.

superintendent until January of 1812. During that time he earned a reputation for being a “zealous minister of Christ, and faithful friend of Sunday school children.”¹⁷⁷ Following the British system, May used the school to introduce children to the foundational doctrines of evangelical Protestantism and to encourage them to obey the Bible.¹⁷⁸ His religious intentions were evident in his weekly sermons to the pupils, which included topics like “The Happiness and Advantages Attending Early Piety.”¹⁷⁹ This doctrinally-oriented Sunday school quickly prospered, enrolling over 1,800 students over five years. The Evangelical Society’s success inspired other reform organizations to make Sunday schools part of their educational efforts. The Union Society, created in 1804 for the education of poor girls, also opened a Sunday school in 1811 that enrolled over 300 students.¹⁸⁰

When Philadelphia returned to a state of normalcy following the War of 1812, reformers created societies specifically designed to found Sunday schools in the city and the surrounding counties.¹⁸¹ All of these societies were voluntary and most targeted poor children, since reformers deemed the impoverished unlikely to attend church or receive religious instruction from their parents.¹⁸² Almost every society followed May’s system, except that they also taught literacy. According to historian Anne Boylan, this decision “was made in conjunction with, not in place of, other free schooling opportunities.”¹⁸³ In 1818 the Pennsylvania legislature consolidated all weekday charity schools in

¹⁷⁷ “Sabbath Schools,” *The Religious Intelligencer*, June 12, 1819.

¹⁷⁸ For more on May’s system, see Boylan, “Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia,” 3; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 444-445.

¹⁷⁹ Boylan, “Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia,” 304.

¹⁸⁰ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 51.

¹⁸¹ Sunday school societies were especially prolific from 1815-1817, see Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 3; Pardee, *The Sabbath-School Index*, 17.

¹⁸² Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 55.

¹⁸³ Boylan, *Sunday Schools*, 29.

Philadelphia County under a state-appointed Board of Controllers. The state continued to expand public weekday schooling throughout the 1820's, enabling Sunday schools to focus most of their attention on religious education. The public school system did not gain full strength until the 1830's, however, and poor children were often unable to attend state schools because they had to work during the week. Consequently, most evangelical Sunday schools continued to teach literacy to children, but only devoted a small portion of class time to this activity.¹⁸⁴ Some Sunday school workers recognized that poor adults also needed religious and literacy instruction. For example, Alexander Henry founded the Male Adult Association in 1815 "to teach Adult Males to read [in order] to excite them to the study of the holy Scriptures."¹⁸⁵

Although some were interdenominational, most evangelical Sunday schools in Philadelphia were led by Presbyterians and Episcopalians. This is not only because these denominations considered education vitally important, but because both were numerically dominant in the city. As Boylan notes, Sunday schools were usually controlled by the largest denomination in a particular area. Boston's schools, for example, were managed primarily by Baptists and Congregationalists.¹⁸⁶ Philadelphia had a few Baptist and Dutch Reformed Sunday school societies, but they never equaled the Presbyterian and Episcopalian societies in size or strength.¹⁸⁷ It is also possible that Presbyterians and Episcopalians were especially proactive in founding Sunday school societies in response to the increasing competitiveness of the religious marketplace. In 1776 Presbyterians

¹⁸⁴ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 19; Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 57-60; Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 29.

¹⁸⁵ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 158-159. "Male Adult Association Constitution, 1815" in Boylan, *Sunday School*, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 308.

¹⁸⁷ For statistics, see Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 305.

boasted nearly 500 congregations and 19% of the nation's religious adherents. Episcopalians had 400 congregations and 15.7% of adherents. Presbyterians expanded to 1,700 congregations by 1820, but this growth "failed to match the expansion of the proportion [of the population] who were churchd."¹⁸⁸ Growth of anti-formalist congregations far outpaced that of formalist denominations.¹⁸⁹ By 1850 Methodists captured 34.2% of all religious adherents, while the Baptists possessed 20.5%. In contrast, Presbyterian membership sank to 11.6% of total adherents. Episcopalians fared even worse, with only 600 congregations in 1820 and 3.5% of religious adherents in 1850.¹⁹⁰ Given the increased competition, it is probable that formalists, in addition to a reform initiative, viewed Sunday school societies as a means of promoting their doctrine in a geographic area where they remained numerically dominant.

Creation and Structure of the Sunday and Adult School Union

By 1817 an informal, vibrant network of evangelical Sunday schools emerged in Philadelphia and the surrounding area, such as York County. The movement expanded so rapidly that, according to historian Edwin Wilber Rice, "the desire for some general medium of communication – some central bureau of information upon methods, progress and improvement of Sunday-schools – began to appear in various parts of the country."¹⁹¹ In May of 1817 the Male Adult Association invited Philadelphia's twenty Sunday school societies to meet and discuss the possibility of consolidating under one organization.¹⁹² Delegates from ten of these organizations, including the Union and Evangelical Societies,

¹⁸⁸ Finke and Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America," 30.

¹⁸⁹ For a definition of anti-formalism, see Noll, *America's God*, 176.

¹⁹⁰ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 270; Finke and Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America," 30-31.

¹⁹¹ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 60.

¹⁹² Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 60.

assembled and formed a group called the Association of Philadelphia.¹⁹³ As the name suggests, the group only encompassed Sunday schools in Philadelphia, and its original objectives were unclear. Over the following months, the delegates made several changes that formalized and expanded the association. They applied for an act of incorporation and clarified the association's statement of purpose. Recognizing that the movement had spread beyond Philadelphia, the delegates agreed to establish and support Sunday schools not only in the city, but also "in towns and villages in the country."¹⁹⁴ To reflect its new regional outlook, delegates changed the association's name to the Sunday and Adult School Union.¹⁹⁵ In December of 1817 another meeting was held to formally accept these changes. Eleven delegates attended, and they agreed to the formation of a regional society and elected a board of managers. In January of 1818 an expanded group of fourteen delegates met again to elect a group of officers.¹⁹⁶

The purpose of the Sunday and Adult School Union was to print educational material, supervise instructional methods, and promote general interest in and unity among Protestant evangelical Sunday schools. The SASU targeted the mid-Atlantic region, but any individual Sunday school or association could apply to become an auxiliary member regardless of location. The SASU only required that auxiliaries "acknowledge the leading doctrines of the Bible," pay an annual three dollar membership fee, and submit an annual progress report to the board of managers.¹⁹⁷ In return

¹⁹³ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 159-160; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 61.

¹⁹⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, Constitution, in *First Report*, 27.

¹⁹⁵ Since Philadelphia was the official headquarters, the organization often referred to itself as the Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union in official publications. The final constitution, however, states that the official title of the society was simply the Sunday and Adult School Union, and I have chosen to use this name since it reflects the regional nature of the society.

¹⁹⁶ For a complete description of how the society developed into a regional union, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 60-63.

¹⁹⁷ Sunday and Adult School Union, Constitution, in *First Report*, 27-28.

auxiliaries gained access to SASU textbooks, spelling cards, tracts, and other educational material at a discounted price. Auxiliaries were also issued “A System for the Internal Regulation of Sunday Schools,” which was basically an instruction manual recommending the same combination of memorization, literacy instruction, and catechetical training already used in Philadelphia’s evangelical schools.¹⁹⁸

In order to extend its usefulness, the society adopted an interdenominational structure, explaining that “the comparative *fewness* of Christians calls for all practicable and profitable union among themselves.”¹⁹⁹ In the preamble of its constitution, the SASU stated that one of its main goals was “to cultivate unity and Christian charity among those of different names.”²⁰⁰ Claiming that it did not want to force members to follow a particular creed, the SASU permitted auxiliaries to retain denominational affiliations and clergymen associated with auxiliaries were allowed to become honorary members of the board of managers.²⁰¹ Though the SASU supposedly embraced all denominations, it was mainly composed of formalists. Due to their proliferation in the Philadelphia area, Presbyterian and Episcopalian societies initially dominated the auxiliaries. In its first year the SASU recruited one Baptist and a few Dutch Reformed auxiliaries, but other evangelical denominations were noticeably absent. Methodists did not join the society until the 1820’s, despite the fact that they enthusiastically adopted Sunday schools in the 1810’s. This is partly due to the fact that Methodists were consumed with building their own denomination, leaving them with neither the time nor inclination to join nonsectarian societies. Moreover, due to its rapid national growth, the denomination did not depend on

¹⁹⁸ For a complete description, see Sunday and Adult School Union, “A System for the Internal Regulation of Sunday Schools,” in *First Report*, 29-31.

¹⁹⁹ Italicized as in original, Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, Constitution, in *First Report*, 27.

²⁰¹ Sunday and Adult School Union, Constitution, in *First Report*, 28.

Sunday schools for expansion in the same way that formalists probably did, giving Methodists even less incentive to join the SASU.²⁰² Until the 1820's, therefore, the society was primarily interdenominational in rhetoric rather than membership.

The Presbyterian-Episcopalian dominance was especially evident among the SASU's managers and officers. Comprised of twelve annually-elected members, the board of managers supervised auxiliaries. Six managers also served as officers, a group composed of a president, two vice presidents, two secretaries, and a treasurer.²⁰³ Most of the managers and officers were middle-class members of Second and Fifth Presbyterian Churches and St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Alexander Henry, who served as president throughout the society's existence, belonged to Second Presbyterian Church. Manager and vice president, Thomas Latimer, attended the same congregation. At least four managers came from St. Paul's Church, including John Bankson and vestryman John Claxton. In addition to denominational ties, the leaders shared philanthropic and business connections. Most of the officers and managers were well-known merchants, such as Claxton and Latimer. Both men also supported the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy, a group that lobbied for free public schooling. Before joining the SASU, Bankson helped found Second Presbyterian's Sunday school and the Male Adult Association. Moreover, some of the leaders were related to each other. For example, Claxton's son served as a publication agent, and his nephew was one of the secretaries. Familial, commercial, philanthropic, and congregational ties gave the SASU

²⁰² Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 301, 305, 308; Handy, *A Christian America*, 40. For a description of Methodist expansion, see Noll, *America's God*, 180-181.

²⁰³ Sunday and Adult School Union, Constitution, in *First Report*, 27-28.

an inbuilt network of support.²⁰⁴ These pre-existing alliances probably worked to exclude Sunday school workers from other denominations that were not part of this network. In some cases, however, these connections helped the society grow. For example, managers Latimer and Joseph Dulles used their business ties to Presbyterians in Charleston, South Carolina, to introduce Sunday schools to that city. These schools then became the SASU's first out-of-state auxiliaries.²⁰⁵

Ideology and Mission of the Sunday and Adult School Union

The Sunday and Adult School Union functioned to supervise and supply Sunday schools and, no less important, to pursue an expansive evangelical mission. Unlike the eighteenth-century movement, the SASU did not exist to serve the Republic or heal a specific social problem. Its annual reports occasionally expressed concern that children loitered about the streets on Sunday being lazy or mischievous, but references like these never figured prominently in the society's publications.²⁰⁶ Instead of adopting the Christian republican focus on poverty and vice, the SASU identified strongly with the evangelical version of the movement. Its first annual report in 1818 considered Sunday schools "decidedly *Christian*" and "the glory of the Christian church, in the present day."²⁰⁷ The report described founding and supporting Sunday schools as strictly religious activities that flowed naturally from devotion to Christ.²⁰⁸ This report also

²⁰⁴ For more on the managers and officers, see Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 305-306.

²⁰⁵ Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 306; Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 5-6.

²⁰⁶ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 3, 18. See also Sunday and Adult School Union, "Philadelphia Sunday School Union: Extracts from the Fourth Report," *The Religious Intelligencer*, June 9, 1821.

²⁰⁷ Italicized as in original, Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 34-35.

²⁰⁸ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 37.

referred to Sunday schools as “the work of the Lord” and attributed the society’s existence and success to divine favor.²⁰⁹ In contrast to the First Day Society, the Sunday and Adult School Union defined its work in overtly religious terms and asserted that Sunday schools were fundamentally spiritual in nature.²¹⁰

The SASU diminished the social benefits of Sunday schools to refocus the movement on its evangelical pursuit: gaining converts. In its instruction manual, the society deemed the “special duty” of teachers “to impress upon the minds of the children the necessity of repentance towards God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”²¹¹ The second annual report in 1819 asserted that the SASU existed to instruct pupils in the “essential principles of the gospel” and that its members were the divinely-appointed “instrument of bringing these little children to Christ.”²¹² Unlike the First Day Society, which used Sunday schools to improve the intellect and morals of students, the SASU used religious education to instill a sense of godliness within children before evil took root, trusting that this spiritual awareness would encourage sanctified living.²¹³ The society’s driving motivation was to occupy “the citadel of the heart” with the “seed of divine truth,” and thereby ensure that “all our children may be taught of God.”²¹⁴

This exclusive focus on spiritual cultivation led the society to minimize efforts for temporal improvement. In contrast to the First Day Society, the SASU never mentioned

²⁰⁹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 25. For examples of SASU expressions of reliance on divine blessing, see *First Report*, 14, 33, 36, 39; Sunday and Adult School Union, *The Second Report of the Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union, Held at their Annual Meeting, Held in St. Paul’s Church, May 25, 1819* (Clark & Raser, 1819), 15-16, 43.

²¹⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 34.

²¹¹ Sunday and Adult School Union, “System,” in *First Report*, 31.

²¹² Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 5, 56-57.

²¹³ Sunday and Adult School Union, “Extracts from the Fourth Report,” *Religious Intelligencer; First Report*, 34-35, 39. See also Walters, *American Reformers*, 194.

²¹⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, “Extracts from the Fourth Report,” *Religious Intelligencer; Second Report*, 63.

that education could help pupils improve their economic or social status. A few auxiliaries reported attending to students' physical needs, such as when the Sansom Street Sunday School Society provided clothes for "destitute" pupils.²¹⁵ Nevertheless, the reports rarely mentioned such acts. The society was certainly not against providing for pupils' material needs, but it probably thought that other reform organizations would assume this responsibility, leading the SASU to assert that its only duty was to prepare students for conversion and sanctification.

The Sunday and Adult School Union's religious orientation was augmented by its view that conversion had both collective and individual benefits. More specifically, the SASU believed cleansing the hearts of individual sinners could purify society and serve to usher in the Second Coming, a period in which Jesus Christ would return from heaven to reign as the ultimate Judge of the world. This belief was called millennialism, and according to historian Ronald Walters, virtually all evangelical activists shared and were inspired by this idea.²¹⁶ Teachings on millennialism varied, but the most popular version among nineteenth-century evangelicals was post-millennialism.²¹⁷ According to this view, the Second Coming would only occur when all ungodliness had been eradicated from the world. Through perfecting society, evangelicals believed that they could spiritually bring the kingdom of God to earth and inaugurate an era of peace and prosperity culminating in the physical return of Christ.²¹⁸ Post-millennialism was particularly compelling in light of the optimism generated by the revivalism and economic expansion of the early nineteenth century. Protestants viewed American

²¹⁵ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 17.

²¹⁶ Walters, *American Reformers*, 24.

²¹⁷ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 289.

²¹⁸ Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control," 35; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 286-289; Walters, *American Reformers*, 25-26.

prosperity as a sign of the millennial advent to synthesize “the faith in progress characteristic of the Enlightenment with biblical Christianity.”²¹⁹

Post-millennialism significantly energized the SASU and served as a powerful justification for the organization’s existence. The society believed the Second Coming was imminent because of advances in technologies like printing and the rapid multiplication of Sunday school and other reform associations, all of which accelerated the diffusion of the gospel.²²⁰ The SASU recognized that it was part of a broad evangelical mobilization, but the society also claimed it had a special part to play in inaugurating the millennium. In keeping with the formalist belief that religious education was crucial for fostering conversion, the managers believed that they were divinely destined to prepare society for Christ’s return. They hoped that the organization would continue to expand until it diffused “the cheering beams of revealed truth through the most distant regions of the globe” and ushered in “that glorious day, when... the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.”²²¹ The SASU also claimed that Sunday schools were “among the most efficient and successful means of extending the kingdom of ‘Emanuel God with us.’”²²² The society pointed to its cutting-edge instructional methods and the rapid growth of auxiliaries as evidence of its ability to hasten the millennium. The managers even called the organization one of the brightest “luminaries that now enlighten our spiritual horizon.”²²³ This self-designation endowed the SASU’s pursuit of conversion with an objective beyond ensuring the

²¹⁹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 289, 296. See also Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 216-218.

²²⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 36, 40; *Second Report*, 60.

²²¹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 40; *Second Report*, 58.

²²² Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 34.

²²³ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 56. See also *First Report*, 34, 36, 40.

salvation of individuals. Ultimately, the Sunday and Adult School Union desired to build a heavenly kingdom on earth, one soul at a time.

The SASU aspired to a lofty spiritual mission, but struggled to find corresponding standards of success. The SASU often made the general claim that through its schools “souls had been converted to God,” but the society rarely qualified these statements with tangible evidence.²²⁴ One of the most concrete demonstrations of the SASU’s effectiveness was when pupils made personal confessions of faith and joined churches. Accounts of such events, however, were noticeably lacking in the society’s reports. While it is possible that auxiliaries did not keep formal records, SASU schools did not seem to generate unusually large numbers of converts. In the 1818 report the Fifth Presbyterian church stated that in one of its schools only two out of over one hundred pupils “have become the subjects of a work of saving grace.”²²⁵ The Combined Schools of the Northern Liberties, an auxiliary located in a working-class suburb of Philadelphia, reported only one conversion out of 450 students.²²⁶ The Sansom Street Sunday School Society had 240 students, but only reported one public profession of faith.²²⁷

Perhaps because of these unimpressive numbers, auxiliaries resorted to other means of evaluating success, such as student attendance. Auxiliaries commonly asserted that they fulfilled the SASU’s evangelical mission because they drew large numbers of students. For example, in 1818 the Sabbath School Society of the Second Reformed Dutch Church stated that it accomplished far more than “the most sanguine expectations”

²²⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 33; *Second Report*, 13.

²²⁵ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 13.

²²⁶ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 11.

²²⁷ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 17-18.

because its school attracted 155 pupils in only two months.²²⁸ The other auxiliaries judged their effectiveness in a similar manner, focusing on the number of pupils rather than converts. The SASU highlighted attendance because it felt that the battle for a child's soul was already partially won once they started attending Sunday school. If students simply came regularly, God would "open the hearts of the children" and begin leading them toward conversion.²²⁹ The society acknowledged that this process was often slow and imperceptible, but it never doubted that the religious instruction provided by auxiliaries would eventually produce "fruit unto eternal life."²³⁰ As the 1821 report asserted, "The practical influence of *Christian education* will be felt at the remotest period of existence."²³¹ The promise of future benefits from early religious education relieved the SASU of the responsibility of converting every Sunday school student in the present, allowing the society to settle for partial fulfillment of its evangelical goals. The SASU did not substitute attendance for conversion. By making attendance a likely precursor to salvation, however, auxiliaries were able to assert that they made children "hopefully pious" and thereby claim success regardless of their lack of converts.²³²

In addition to attendance, the Sunday and Adult School Union evaluated its spiritual impact by the outward conduct of students. Auxiliaries regularly exulted that "evident improvement in the morals of the children has been the reward of the teachers."²³³ This moral improvement was usually defined as an increase in respectful, reverent conduct. Auxiliaries often reported that mischievous students became more

²²⁸ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 18.

²²⁹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 23.

²³⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 38.

²³¹ Italicized as in original, Sunday and Adult School Union, "Extracts from the Fourth Report," *Religious Intelligencer*.

²³² Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 17.

²³³ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 12.

punctual, orderly, and attentive.²³⁴ This behavioral improvement was used as evidence for the “saving benefit” of evangelical Sunday school education.²³⁵ The SASU also used students’ diligence in memorizing Scripture as a way to measure spiritual growth. The society reported with satisfaction that in some schools children regularly memorized entire books of the Bible, which was taken as a sign of “great love for and delight in the holy Scriptures.”²³⁶ Since the society gave prizes to students who recited the most verses, however, it is possible that children memorized Scripture out of a desire for rewards rather than because of genuine conversion. Prizes were also given for good conduct, giving the children a less than spiritual incentive to conform to Protestant standards of piety. The SASU failed to consider the impact of external pressures like rewards, believing that any increase in memorization and morality was due to the powerful spiritual lessons taught in the schools.

By using behavior as a criterion for success, the SASU revealed that it had not completely abandoned the Christian republican outlook of the eighteenth-century movement. The society maintained that the Protestant code of conduct promoted in auxiliaries improved social morality and exerted an uplifting influence on the intellect, which was similar to the arguments made by the First Day Society to support its schools.²³⁷ Asserting that “education is the natural inheritance of a child,” the first report reminded members that “to instruct the rising generation and to combine for such instruction is a duty obvious to everyone.”²³⁸ Like the First Day Society, the SASU believed that ignorance fostered vice, but with the cognitive tools afforded by literacy,

²³⁴ For examples, see Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 14, 17; *Second Report*, 26, 28.

²³⁵ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 21.

²³⁶ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 12, 19, 25.

²³⁷ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 36; *Second Report*, 58.

²³⁸ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 37.

children could rise above poverty's degradation.²³⁹ The second report maintained that "the order, the obedience, and the diligence which reigns in the schools" not only fostered sanctification but helped ensure the moral stability of entire neighborhoods and cities.²⁴⁰ Echoing the ideology of the eighteenth-century movement, the SASU stated that the ethical and intellectual benefits of Sunday schools increased virtue, liberty, and happiness, and helped raise up "future fathers and mothers of society."²⁴¹

Unlike the First Day Society, however, the Sunday and Adult School Union made the moral benefits of Sunday schools subservient to its religious goals. While auxiliaries used improved behavior as evidence of success, they expressed frustration if moral transformation was not followed by a confession of faith. The first report stated that an auxiliary called the Canaan Society School "speaks favourably of the progress and deportment of the scholars, but laments that so little of saving benefit appears to be the result of their labours."²⁴² In the second report the Newtown Sabbath School Association noted that, while the morals of its scholars had improved, none had been converted, causing the auxiliary to apologize for not presenting "a more satisfactory report."²⁴³ Other auxiliaries drew similar distinctions between the moral and spiritual improvement of scholars, and only considered their work successful if both elements developed simultaneously. For the SASU, true progress was made when students "exhibited such a change of conduct, as indicates a change of heart."²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 38; Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 61.

²⁴⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 13, 58-59.

²⁴¹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 38, 40.

²⁴² Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 18-19. The Canaan Society School was affiliated with the First Reformed Dutch Church.

²⁴³ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 17.

²⁴⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 9.

Ultimately, the Sunday and Adult School Union fully embraced the notion that Sunday schools had both moral and spiritual functions, a nuanced position similar to Bishop William White's. In contrast to White, however, the SASU never used the moral benefits of Sunday schools to justify the society's existence. Its criterion for success focused on temporal indicators like good conduct, memorization, and attendance only because the society genuinely believed these things indicated conversion and sanctification. Emphasizing attendance or pious behavior helped assuage frustration over the lack of verifiable conversions, but did not diminish the organization's evangelical fervor. Moreover, the SASU rewarded religious behavior in order to inspire students to pursue spiritual transformation.²⁴⁵ The society's definition of achievement, although based on outward signals, was not inconsistent with its mission to evangelize Americans and accelerate the millennium. The SASU sought to redeem rather than control society and made citizenship subservient to the pursuit of salvation. The SASU thereby inverted the movement's previous understanding of the relationship between religion and republicanism, making the latter a by-product rather than the goal of Sunday school education.

Expansion of the Sunday and Adult School Union

The Sunday and Adult School Union's evangelical, millennial ideology motivated the society to actively expand its sphere of pupils. One way it did this was by sponsoring Sunday schools for Africans, particularly in Philadelphia and the surrounding area. Philadelphia was a major urban center for Africans, and by the middle of the nineteenth

²⁴⁵ Boylan, *Sunday Schools*, 67; Noll, *America's God*, 192.

century there were over seven thousand free people of color living in the city.²⁴⁶ In the 1810's and 1820's these Africans started to carve out a vibrant community by celebrating their own holidays and founding their own reform organizations. They also pioneered some of Philadelphia's most notable religious achievements, establishing five African churches and the first African denomination in America by 1816.²⁴⁷ Nevertheless, due to lack of training and resources, the African community struggled to establish quality schools. They were also excluded from the Pennsylvania's public school system until 1822, causing them to be dependent on white American charity schools as sources of education.²⁴⁸

Many SASU auxiliaries capitalized on this need by specifically targeting the African community. For example, the Union Sabbath Schools of the Northern Liberties opened a school for Africans "composed chiefly of females, from 10 to 90 years of age." In 1818 the auxiliary was pleased to report that "most of them can read the Scriptures, and many of them recite... from 20 to 10 verses of Scripture every Sabbath."²⁴⁹ Many auxiliaries expressed surprise that Africans possessed the same ability and eagerness to learn as white Americans, although this revelation did not keep most of the schools from being segregated. The Auxiliary Evangelical Society proudly reported to the SASU that its black students, "notwithstanding their unpromising appearance, evince a capacity for improvement not to be despised. More rapid improvement had not been witnessed in any school than here."²⁵⁰ African adults seemed particularly eager to access the literacy instruction provided by SASU schools, perhaps because of lack of educational

²⁴⁶ Nash, *First City*, 147; Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 254.

²⁴⁷ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 55, 182-183; Nash, *First City*, 147; Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 254-255.

²⁴⁸ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 23; Nash, *First City*, 180.

²⁴⁹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 9.

²⁵⁰ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 24.

opportunities earlier in life. By 1819 Africans represented nearly two thirds of the organization's almost eleven hundred adult students.²⁵¹ The society welcomed these students and continued to actively recruit African pupils of all ages until the mid-1820's. Segregation kept the organization from embracing complete equality. Nevertheless, this partial attempt to bridge the racial divide infused the SASU with an attitude of openness that was noticeably lacking in the First Day Society and established Sunday schools as a central part of African religious life.

In addition to establishing successful Sunday schools for Philadelphia's African community, the SASU constantly expressed a compulsion to widen the geographic scope of the organization. The managers asserted that "our spiritual horizons are numerous beyond calculation." They insisted to members, "Time is short, and much is to be done.... Let your past success animate you to new and increased efforts."²⁵² Propelled by a desire to spread religious education to all Americans regardless of color, the SASU hired a paid missionary in 1821. Reverend William C. Blair received a commission to address the "large tracts of country [that] are yet ignorant of the benefits of Sabbath school instruction."²⁵³ Blair traveled 2500 miles throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina to complete his charge.²⁵⁴ He established sixty-one Sunday schools, revived twenty schools, and visited thirty-five others. He founded six tract societies and four adult schools.²⁵⁵ Blair assessed as great the need for evangelism across the country. He suggested, "There ought to be eight or ten

²⁵¹ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 23.

²⁵² Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 45, 56, 59.

²⁵³ Sunday and Adult School Union, "Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union, Fifth Report – May 21, 1822," *Boston Recorder*, June 8, 1822.

²⁵⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, "Fifth Report," *Boston Recorder*.

²⁵⁵ Sunday and Adult School Union, "Fifth Report," *Boston Recorder*.

Sunday-school missionaries in every state.”²⁵⁶ The SASU accepted Blair’s recommendation and hired M. A. Remley and Reverend Timothy Alden as additional missionaries in 1824.²⁵⁷ Since most evangelical societies still operated on a voluntary basis at the time, the SASU’s decision to hire professional missionaries revealed the strength of its compulsion to convert. It also signaled a shift in the SASU’s role in the religious marketplace. Employing missionaries was ultimately a promotional campaign that demonstrated the society’s desire to increase its competitiveness and influence within the Benevolent Empire.

The SASU’s efforts to enlarge its sphere of influence met with prompt success. Within its first year of operation the society supervised forty-three schools. Forty-one were located in Philadelphia, a remarkable figure considering that the First Day Society never operated more than four schools in the city.²⁵⁸ This growth caused the managers to assert that “this Union...though but recently formed, is fast advancing to the full attainment of all that it originally proposed.... System, zeal and perseverance, will, with the divine blessing, accomplish all we desire.”²⁵⁹ If the steady increase of SASU auxiliaries was any indication, this prediction proved correct. In 1819 the society received an act of incorporation and had 129 affiliates throughout Pennsylvania and nearby states like North Carolina and Delaware. Interestingly, the First Day Society officially closed its schools that same year but decided to remain as a legal entity in order to divert its funds to the SASU.²⁶⁰ After hiring Blair in 1821, the organization grew to 313 auxiliaries. By

²⁵⁶ William C. Blair to the Sunday and Adult School Union, in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 69.

²⁵⁷ “Sunday School Missionaries,” *The Religious Intelligencer*, August 28, 1824.

²⁵⁸ Boylan, *Sunday Schools*, 11.

²⁵⁹ Sunday and Adult School Union, *First Report*, 25, 34.

²⁶⁰ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 9.

1824, only seven years after its founding, the Sunday and Adult School Union had 723 affiliates in seventeen states.²⁶¹

Moreover, the SASU was delighted by the formation of other regional Sunday school societies. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Divie Bethune, friends of Alexander Henry, founded two Sunday school societies in New York in 1816.²⁶² Mrs. Bethune ran the Female Union for the Promotion of Sabbath Schools, while her husband started the New York Sunday School Union Society for male students. By 1817 these two organizations founded seventy schools throughout New York, a number that expanded with each passing year. Similarly successful societies prospered in Boston and Baltimore.²⁶³ The national growth of Sunday schools led the SASU to proclaim that the movement was “rich in fruit and rich in promise....the happy influence which Sunday Schools exert on the intellect, the morals and the happiness of society...will be the germ of the future and progressive good to places and periods now unknown.”²⁶⁴

While new practices like hiring missionaries and recruiting African pupils account for part of this growth, the ultimate reason for the SASU’s expansion was its reinterpretation of the mission and function of Sunday schools. The rapid advance of the Protestant United Front made the society’s efforts to reorient its schools around evangelism seem relevant and appealing, even as it made the republican drive to control behavior increasingly obsolete. By casting the Sunday school as an opportunity to become a “co-worker with the Lord” in preparing students for conversion, the society created a powerful religious identity for the movement that all evangelicals could

²⁶¹ “Sunday School Union: From the Seventh Annual Report of the Sunday and Adult School Union, 1824,” *The Columbian Star*, June 19, 1824; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 66.

²⁶² Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 159.

²⁶³ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 162-163.

²⁶⁴ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 39.

endorse.²⁶⁵ The SASU never fully refuted Christian republicanism, but insisted that its primary function was to prepare Americans for the millennium, focusing on training citizens for a heavenly kingdom rather than an earthly republic. This conscious decision to embrace evangelical activism and strictly religious education provided nineteenth-century Sunday schools with the justification and drive for expansion that the eighteenth-century movement lacked. As a result, the SASU quickly became the new face of American Sunday schools and prepared the way for the most important development in the history of the movement: the creation of a national Sunday school union.

²⁶⁵ Sunday and Adult School Union, *Second Report*, 32.

CHAPTER IV

CREATING MORAL MACHINERY: THE AMERICAN SUNDAY SCHOOL UNION AND THE NATIONALIZATION OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS

By the mid-1820's evangelicals had transformed Sunday schools into a Protestant reform effort dedicated to conversion and millennialism. Nevertheless, many regional societies, such as Philadelphia's Sunday and Adult School Union, felt that the movement had yet to reach its full potential. Accordingly, the SASU spearheaded the creation of a national organization called the American Sunday School Union (ASSU) in 1824. The purpose of the ASSU was not only to support existing Sunday schools, but to spread the movement throughout the United States. Seeking to implement this lofty ambition, the Union started a regional mission program called the Mississippi Valley Enterprise in 1830, followed by a similar initiative called the Southern Enterprise in 1833. The Union marketed these programs by merging the evangelical goals inherited from the SASU with the social engineering originally promoted by the First Day Society. The ASSU hoped to generate widespread support by uniting the objectives of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century movements, but in the end this strategy alienated evangelical denominations like the Baptists and Methodists. Simultaneously, however, the Union sought to extend its national influence by becoming a major publishing society. This initiative focused exclusively on disseminating basic Protestant doctrines in order to generate conversions.

As a result, ASSU publications were embraced by evangelical denominations and became a competitive part of the religious marketplace. Ultimately, the American Sunday School Union discovered that the most effective way to achieve widespread influence was by focusing on evangelism without social control. The Union never became truly national in reach, but its evangelical publications gave the movement a national voice that laid the foundation for future expansion and, eventually, made Sunday schools a permanent part of American Protestantism.

Revivalism and Evangelical Expansion

As discussed in the previous chapter, evangelical mobilization was the hallmark of American Protestantism in the 1810's. Denominational expansion accelerated significantly in the following decades, primarily because of the religious democratization popularized by the revivals known as the Second Great Awakening. These revivals reached their height in the late 1820's and, according to historian Nathan Hatch, they "challenged common people to take religious destiny into their own hands, to think for themselves, to oppose centralized authority and the elevation of the clergy as a separate order of men."²⁶⁶ Populist religious leaders like Methodist preacher Lorenzo Bow and Elias Smith, the founder of the "Christian" movement, emphasized the spiritual liberty of the laity and encouraged emotionalism, considering it to be a sign of divine power. Rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, these ministers adopted an evangelical approach to conversion that involved a personal, instantaneous decision to follow Christ. Moreover, revivalists sought to empower the laity by asserting that every Christian had the ability to understand and explain Protestant doctrine apart from clerical supervision.

²⁶⁶ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 58; Walters, *American Reformers*, ix, 21-22.

Charles Finney, the most popular revivalist from 1825-1830, denied “the implicit authority of learning” and argued that education was unnecessary for interpreting the Scriptures.²⁶⁷ Consequently, revivalists often decried the hierarchical authoritarianism of formalist congregations like the Presbyterians and Episcopalians, preferring instead to build “movements from the ground up.”²⁶⁸

By nurturing the emotional needs of the laity and encouraging religious democratization, revivalism fostered spiritual experimentation and contributed heavily to the expansion of evangelical denominations like the Baptists and Methodists. In the 1780’s Baptists had 400 congregations and the Methodists had only fifty. In 1820, however, both denominations boasted 2,700 congregations. By 1860 the Baptists had nearly 12,150 congregations while the Methodists had 20,000. Much of this growth took place in the West, defined as the area stretching from the Alleghenies to the Rocky Mountains and from Michigan to Louisiana. Since the West generally lacked firm religious and social hierarchies, emotionalism and spiritual democratization were attractive to many settlers, leading to tremendous gains for evangelical denominations. For example, by 1815 the Methodists grew from 3,000 to 30,000 congregants in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio.²⁶⁹ Evangelical growth was slower in the South due to the area’s hierarchical social structure, but Methodists and Baptists still managed to make

²⁶⁷ For more on Finney, see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 196-199; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 95-102.

²⁶⁸ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 57. For more on evangelical revivalism, see all of Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity*; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 172-192; Noll, *America’s God*, 161-186; Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 594-611.

²⁶⁹ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 597.

impressive inroads in the region.²⁷⁰ By the middle of the century both denominations collectively boasted 32% of the nation's religious adherents.²⁷¹

In contrast formalist denominations, such as Episcopalians and Presbyterians, not only found it difficult to establish themselves in the South and the West, but they struggled to keep pace with the overall growth of evangelicalism. These denominations questioned the legitimacy of revivalism and upheld a hierarchical structure that tended to suppress spiritual expression and religious democratization.²⁷² As a result, formalist denominations became increasingly unpopular. In 1776 Presbyterians boasted nearly 500 congregations, but only grew to 1,700 congregations in 1820 and 6,400 in 1860. The Episcopalians fared even worse, merely expanding from 400 congregations in 1780 to 600 congregations in 1820 and 2,100 in 1860. By mid-century, both denominations possessed 15% of the nation's religious adherents, only half of the following enjoyed by the Methodists and Baptists.²⁷³

Creation of the American Sunday School Union

The drive for expansion produced by revivalism significantly impacted the development of the Sunday school movement in the 1820's. Since the largest Sunday school societies were dominated by formalists, particularly the Sunday and Adult School Union, supporters of the movement felt the need to consolidate in order to match the

²⁷⁰ For more on this topic, see John Boles, "Evangelical Protestants in the Old South: From Religious Dissent to Cultural Dominance," in *Religion in the South*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 13-34; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*.

²⁷¹ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 270; Finke and Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America," 31. See also Noll, *America's God*, 180-181.

²⁷² Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 186. See also Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*.

²⁷³ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 270; Finke and Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America," 30-31.

explosive growth of evangelicalism.²⁷⁴ In 1820 the New York Sunday School Union Society wrote to members in its annual report that “great benefit...would result from a union embracing all the Sunday-schools of the United States.” The report asserted that such a union would not only be economical, but would also enable “vast amounts of facts and information...[to] be embodied with precision, and presented annually to the public, [which] would afford a powerful and irresistible appeal to their patronage and support.”²⁷⁵ Charleston’s Sunday-School Union Society made a similar appeal in 1823, asserting that “Sunday school unions are designed to concentrate the temporal and spiritual powers of men into one grand stream....We hope to see this union extend until their circles be united.”²⁷⁶ That same year, the Princeton Sabbath-School Society expressed the wish that the Sunday school movement “may continue to flourish and extend its genial influence till that happy day shall arrive when one mighty union shall be formed.”²⁷⁷

Throughout 1823 the Sunday and Adult School Union, the largest Sunday school society in the North, actively corresponded with the New York Sunday School Union Society and other major Sunday school associations about the formation of a national organization. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the SASU invited delegates from all interested societies to convene in Philadelphia on December 11, 1823. At this meeting “the expedience of forming a National Society was determined,” and the delegates agreed to allow the SASU to organize the new union.²⁷⁸ According to the

²⁷⁴ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 162-164.

²⁷⁵ “Report New York Sunday-School Union Society, 1820,” in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 71.

²⁷⁶ “Report of the Sunday and Adult School Union, 1823,” in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 72.

²⁷⁷ “Report of the Sunday and Adult School Union, 1823,” in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 72.

²⁷⁸ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 3, in American Sunday School Union, Papers, 1817-1915, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia. Hereafter referred to as ASSU papers.

SASU, this decision was made because the society had “already extended its happy influence over a large portion of the states; and, although not in name it was in fact, a National society. It furnishes a broad and sure foundation upon which to erect a superstructure that should be in name, as well as in fact, a National institution.”²⁷⁹ On May 25, 1824, at its seventh annual meeting, the SASU adopted a constitution that reflected its new national outlook and changed its name to the American Sunday School Union. The SASU transferred its 723 auxiliaries and assets to the Union and invited other Sunday school societies to do the same.²⁸⁰ Many organizations enthusiastically accepted, such as the New York Sunday School Union Society and the Sunday schools in Charleston, Boston, and Princeton.²⁸¹

Organized to “combine the efforts of the Sabbath School Societies,” the American Sunday School Union retained many characteristics from its parent organization.²⁸² Like the SASU, the Union functioned to supervise and provide materials to auxiliaries and to promote interest in Sunday schools, with the ultimate aim of generating conversions.²⁸³ The structures of the two societies were virtually identical. The Union was run by a group of officers consisting of a president, multiple vice presidents, a treasurer, and two secretaries, along with thirty-six managers charged with overseeing auxiliaries. Initially, although the ASSU claimed to be nonsectarian, most of its personnel were formalists who previously worked for the SASU. Alexander Henry was elected president, a position he

²⁷⁹ “Report, Sunday and Adult School Union, 1824,” in Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 78.

²⁸⁰ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 4.

²⁸¹ Foster, *An Errand of Mercy*, 163-164.

²⁸² “Sunday School Union: Extracts from the Seventh Report of the Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union,” *The Columbian Star*, June 19, 1824.

²⁸³ American Sunday School Union, Constitution, 1824, ASSU papers; *The Third Report of the American Sunday-School Union: Read at Their Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Philadelphia, on Tuesday Afternoon, May 22, 1827* (Philadelphia: I. Ashmead & Co., 1827), 11-12; *The Fifth Report of the American Sunday-School Union: Read at Their Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Philadelphia, on Tuesday Afternoon, May 26, 1829* (Philadelphia: I. Ashmead & Co., 1829), 6.

maintained until his death in 1847. Other former SASU leaders served as Union managers and officers, such as Philadelphians John Dulles and Thomas Latimer. Because there was little change in leadership, the Union was dominated by Presbyterians and Episcopalians.²⁸⁴ In 1824 94% of ASSU managers came from these two denominations.²⁸⁵ The Union also relied on SASU networks to gain new personnel. For example, Dulles used his business connections to reformers in New York to hire two of the Union's longest-serving workers: corresponding secretary Frederick W. Porter and chief publication editor Frederick A. Packard. Unsurprisingly, Porter was Episcopalian and Packard was Presbyterian.²⁸⁶ The Union tried to attract leaders from evangelical denominations like the Baptists and Methodists. By 1830, however, 54% of the managers were still Presbyterian or Episcopalian.²⁸⁷ Thus, like its predecessor, the ASSU was interdenominational primarily in name alone.

Despite the similarities between the two societies, the American Sunday School Union was not simply an expanded version of the SASU. As the first Sunday school organization with a national outlook, the ASSU's ambition went far beyond that of previous societies. The constitution stated that, in addition to supporting existing auxiliaries, the Union's primary purpose was to plant new Sunday schools in every community throughout the United States.²⁸⁸ The managers asserted emphatically in the first report that their goal was "to place the means of learning to read and understand the

²⁸⁴ Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 307; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 78-79, 95.

²⁸⁵ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 63.

²⁸⁶ Boylan, "Presbyterians and Sunday Schools in Philadelphia," 306-307. For more on Packard, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 174-177.

²⁸⁷ For the exact denominational breakdown of the 1830 group of managers, see "Appendix," in Francis Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort; A Sermon, Delivered at the Request of the American Sunday School Union, May 25, 1830* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1830), 59.

²⁸⁸ American Sunday School Union, Constitution.

Sacred Scriptures within the reach of every individual in our country.”²⁸⁹ Other reports continually emphasized the same objective, reminding members that the Union existed “for the benefit of a *nation*.”²⁹⁰ The fourth report called auxiliaries “nurseries of the church of God” and expressed the hope that “many thousands” would spring up “in every section of the land.”²⁹¹ George Boyd, an ASSU agent charged with raising funds, expressed the attitude of all personnel when he stated that the Union was “designed to be a common fountain of truth” that would improve the religious and moral character of Americans.²⁹² For the members, therefore, the ASSU’s purpose was not simply to supervise Sunday schools but to serve as a spiritual and moral guardian for the nation.

The Union believed that the best way to safeguard American Protestantism and morality was to spread religious education, an approach that was likely encouraged by the formalist tradition of its key leaders. Although claiming that it wanted to inspire “revivals of religion,” the Union generally eschewed the most popular evangelical methods of reform, particularly the emotional, democratized style of revivalism.²⁹³ Unlike populist preachers such as Bow and Finney, the Union viewed “conversion as a process of religious nurturing” and asserted that faith had to be supplemented by learning to result in true godliness.²⁹⁴ Accordingly, the ASSU sought to use Sunday schools to systematically cultivate spiritual awareness within children in order to produce “blessings to be richly

²⁸⁹ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 12.

²⁹⁰ Italicized as in original, American Sunday School Union, *Third Report*, 10.

²⁹¹ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 4.

²⁹² George Boyd, “American Sunday School Union,” *The Religious Intelligencer*, January 31, 1829. For more on the ASSU’s general agents, see American Sunday School Union, *The Second Report of the American Sunday School Union: Read at Their Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Philadelphia, On Tuesday Evening, May 23, 1826* (Philadelphia: I. Ashmead & Co, 1826), 15.

²⁹³ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 6.

²⁹⁴ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 104.

developed in the fruit of future piety.²⁹⁵ Ignoring the fact that revivalists easily gained converts without organized educational programs, the ASSU insisted that an intellectual approach to reform was the most effective path to social regeneration. Moreover, as historian Anne Boylan explains, the Union endorsed a hierarchical system for religious education, aspiring to become the “apex of a pyramid.... emanating from Philadelphia and encompassing all Sunday school workers.”²⁹⁶ This hierarchical goal, combined with its formalist approach to faith, automatically put the ASSU at odds with the mainstream of American evangelicalism. The Union either underestimated or was unaware of the prevailing religious trends of the period.

Consequently, the American Sunday School Union struggled to fulfill its ambition of becoming national in scope. In 1825 the Union oversaw 1,150 Sunday schools with 48,681 pupils, and the following year this number rose to 2,131 schools and 135,074 pupils. By 1829 five years after it was established, the Union supervised 5,901 schools with 349,202 students.²⁹⁷ These numbers, at first glance, may seem impressive. However, most of this growth was confined to areas in the North where Sunday schools were already well established and old SASU networks remained strong. Out of the 5,901 Union schools, New York boasted 2,512 and Pennsylvania had 620. Virtually every other Northern state had between 200 and 300 Union schools.²⁹⁸ In contrast, most states in the West and the South possessed very few Union auxiliaries. Only Indiana and Ohio had over 100 Union Sunday schools. Virginia and Georgia came close with ninety-four and

²⁹⁵ American Sunday School Union, *The Fourth Report of the American Sunday-School Union: Read at Their Annual Meeting, Held in the City of Philadelphia, on Tuesday Afternoon, May 20, 1828* (Philadelphia: I. Ashmead & Co., 1828), 6.

²⁹⁶ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 69.

²⁹⁷ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 12; *Fifth Report*, 6. Boyd, “American Sunday School Union.”

²⁹⁸ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 6.

ninety auxiliaries respectively, but these numbers were minimal compared to the North. Most of the other states in both regions, including South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky, had between twenty and fifty auxiliaries. Arkansas and Florida had only two Union schools, while the entire Michigan Territory had only one.²⁹⁹ ASSU gains in the West and the South lagged significantly behind those of the Methodists, Baptists, and other evangelical denominations, making the society predominately regional in influence.

Creation and Ideology of the ASSU Mission Programs

Striving to become more competitive and fulfill its goal of serving as the nation's spiritual and moral guardian, the American Sunday School Union decided to continue the SASU's practice of employing Sunday school missionaries. The managers asserted to Union members that "[if] your purpose [is] to inform the community that Sunday schools deserve encouragement, you may accomplish it by circulars and journals; but if it is to bless them with the institution itself, nothing can be substituted for a true hearted Sunday school missionary."³⁰⁰ Convinced "that missionaries and Sunday schools were designed for each other," in its first year the ASSU created a special mission fund and hired eight missionaries.³⁰¹ These men were instructed to "establish new Sabbath schools, visit old ones, revive, animate, and encourage such as *were languishing*, organize auxiliary unions, explain the objects of the Society, and by all proper means extend its influence and usefulness."³⁰² The Union attempted to increase its outreach in 1826 by establishing a Committee of Missions, devoting all annual membership fees to the mission fund, and

²⁹⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 6.

³⁰⁰ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 8.

³⁰¹ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 8.

³⁰² Italicized as in original, American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 6.

hiring twenty-three additional missionaries.³⁰³ By 1828 the society employed thirty-five missionaries from eight denominations, but most of them operated in the North where support was readily available.³⁰⁴

Recognizing that its current missionary endeavors only maintained its foothold in the northeastern states, the Union urged members to give “attentive examination” to the idea of starting regional mission programs targeting the West and the South.³⁰⁵ The managers advised that “there is the most urgent necessity for immediate action – the thousands of immortals for whose eternal interest we plead, are ignorant of Christ *the only* Savior....they need your prayers and your charities.”³⁰⁶ Due to startup costs, however, the Union initially lacked the finances to support a professional mission program.³⁰⁷ Moreover, auxiliaries seemed to be primarily concerned with funding their local schools rather than supporting the Union’s ambitious initiatives. Auxiliaries regularly neglected to pay their membership fees, forcing the officers to take money from the general fund to support the missionaries.

Because many auxiliaries displayed indifference toward Sunday school missionaries, the ASSU’s leaders started making aggressive appeals for more funding. After the annual meeting of 1828 several Union leaders held two additional meetings for delegates designed to encourage them “to obtain funds to be *immediately* applied to extend with renewed zeal and energy, the benefits of this Institution.”³⁰⁸ One of the men primarily responsible for hosting these meetings was Lyman Beecher, a highly acclaimed

³⁰³ “American Sunday School Union,” *Christian Watchman*.

³⁰⁴ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 6; *Sixth Report*, 4.

³⁰⁵ “Sunday School Missionaries,” *The Religious Intelligencer*, August 28, 1824.

³⁰⁶ Italicized as original, “Sunday School Missionaries,” *The Religious Intelligencer*.

³⁰⁷ American Sunday School Union, *Fifth Report*, 5.

³⁰⁸ Italicized as in original, American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 16.

Congregationalist preacher and ardent reformer. Beecher joined the ASSU in 1828 as a delegate for Boston's Sunday schools and provided critical support for the society's missionary proposals. Famous Presbyterian minister and reformer, Robert Baird, also joined the Union that year, working first as a delegate and then as an agent from 1829-1832.³⁰⁹ Baird helped Beecher promote the Union's missionary vision, offering a special resolution charging auxiliaries to "take immediate measures to establish...Sabbath schools in every place in the United States."³¹⁰ The following year Union agent George Boyd wrote an article for *The Religious Intelligencer* asserting that the ASSU "considers the present time as highly auspicious for a far greater extension for its operations, in order to meet the wants of our increasing population."³¹¹

These appeals from key ASSU leaders garnered the attention of prominent merchant and reformer Arthur Tappan. A resident of New York, Tappan became a Union vice president in 1830. He donated \$4,000 to the ASSU to be used specifically to "attack the problem of 'infidelity' in the western states."³¹² Buoyed by this sizable gift, the Union began a regional mission program. At the 1830 annual meeting several of the society's prominent members, including Beecher, proposed an ambitious initiative called the Mississippi Valley Enterprise.³¹³ This program resolved "that the American Sunday-School Union will...within two years, establish a Sunday-school in every destitute place where it is practicable, throughout the Valley of the Mississippi."³¹⁴ The target area covered an estimated 1,300,000 square miles, stretching from the Alleghenies to the

³⁰⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 5; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 193-194.

³¹⁰ Resolution offered by Robert Baird at the 1828 special meeting, in American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 18-19.

³¹¹ Boyd, "American Sunday School Union."

³¹² Boylan, *Sunday School*, 69; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 196.

³¹³ American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Report*, 4.

³¹⁴ American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Report*, 4.

Rocky Mountains and from Michigan to Louisiana.³¹⁵ The Mississippi Valley Enterprise passed by unanimous vote. Additionally, Tappan's gift generated so much enthusiasm among Union members that they adopted another initiative called the Southern Enterprise in 1833. This program committed the ASSU "to plant, and for five years sustain, Sabbath-schools in every neighborhood (where such schools are desired by the people)" in the states throughout the South.³¹⁶ This area covered an estimated 300,000 square miles and stretched from Maryland to Florida and from the southern Atlantic coast to Alabama.

The Mississippi Valley and Southern Enterprises were motivated by specific ASSU concerns relating to the West and the South, particularly the former region. Union members understood that the growing population of settlers in the West would potentially wield immense political and social influence, making the region's moral character critically important to the nation.³¹⁷ Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the Mississippi Valley Enterprise's purpose statement, ASSU members believed the West was "destitute" of sound religious instruction. They took a condescending attitude toward spiritual life in the West, lamenting that settlers were driven solely by a desire for personal profit and were given to lawlessness and disorder. The 1832 report complained that "in some counties, the forms of justice are not yet established."³¹⁸ The report further claimed that there was a shortage of both religious and educational institutions in the West, asserting

³¹⁵ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 51-77.

³¹⁶ American Sunday School Union, *The Ninth Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union, May 21, 1833* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1833), vi.

³¹⁷ American Sunday School Union, *Second Report*, 16; *Fifth Report*, 9. See also Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 15-17.

³¹⁸ American Sunday School Union, *Eighth Report of the American Sunday School Union, May 22, 1832* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1832), 28. See also Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 25-27, 31.

that “the increase of population far outstrips the extension of Christian knowledge.”³¹⁹

The managers were also particularly concerned about the proliferation of foreign immigrants, fearing that they brought barbarism and Catholicism to the area.³²⁰ Since the annual reports never offered examples to support these unflattering assertions, it is likely that the Union’s negative view of the West was primarily composed of pre-conceived notions grounded in Northern elitism.

Additionally, the Union perceived that a similar lack of religious devotion and quality education existed in the South.³²¹ Relying on common Northern perceptions, the society believed that southerners had fewer churches and schools and were appallingly indifferent to reform.³²² This stereotype was partially correct. The public school movement had yet to fully infiltrate either the South or the West, leaving children in these regions with fewer educational options than their northern counterparts.³²³ On the other hand, the Union’s depiction of both areas as spiritual wastelands clearly ignored the thriving revivalism and steady growth of evangelical denominations that existed in these regions.³²⁴ Overlooking the achievements of populist preachers, the ASSU disdainfully charged that ignorance and spiritual apathy characterized the West and the South.³²⁵ This patronizing and misguided view caused the enterprises to exhibit intolerance for the very

³¹⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Second Report*, 16; *Eight Report*, 29.

³²⁰ American Sunday School Union, *Eighth Report*, 41; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 23.

³²¹ Pray, *The History of Sunday Schools*, 204.

³²² John W. Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise: The Work of National Evangelical Societies in the Antebellum South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 38-42. Historian John Boles asserts that this view was incorrect, arguing that evangelicalism was growing in the South throughout this period. “Evangelical Protestants in the Old South,” 27-33.

³²³ Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 32.

³²⁴ Boles, “Evangelical Protestants in the Old South,” 13-34; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*.

³²⁵ American Sunday School Union, *Eight Report*, 41; Ralph R. Smith and Russell R. Windes, “The Innovative Movement: A Rhetorical Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (April 1975): 150.

areas they sought to reach and probably encouraged the locals to view the Union with suspicion.

The ASSU offered the mission programs as a viable cure for the spiritual dangers supposedly threatening the West and the South, most likely unaware of its biases. The Union's primary aim for the Mississippi Valley and Southern Enterprises was "the preservation of religious institutions" and the dissemination of "the simplest truths of the holy Bible in their simplest forms."³²⁶ In the 1831 report the managers insisted that "when we speak of religious education...we mean EDUCATION FOR GOD; and this implies not merely an education in the science of religion, but the feeling and experience of its transforming power upon the heart."³²⁷ By helping students experience inward renewal, the ASSU believed it could cause children to live righteously. This in turn would make them into virtuous adults, transforming the populations in the West and the South into productive members of society. Nevertheless, in a sermon given at the inauguration of the Southern Enterprise in 1833, Episcopalian bishop J. P. K. Henshaw cautioned that it was small-minded to think of the Sunday school as impacting only the temporal improvement of society, as "its great end is the salvation of souls and the glory of God." He also stated that Sunday school instruction could be used to foster conversion in pupils of all ages, making the institution necessary and relevant for every American.³²⁸ Through this rhetoric, Henshaw and other ASSU supporters attempted to characterize Sunday schools,

³²⁶ American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Report*, 16.

³²⁷ Capitalized as in original, American Sunday School Union, *The Seventh Annual Report of the American Sunday-School Union, May 24, 1831* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1833), 22.

³²⁸ J. P. K. Henshaw, *The Usefulness of Sunday-Schools; A Sermon, Preached at the Request of the American Sunday School Union, in St. Andrew's Church, Philadelphia, May 20, 1833* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union), 20, 23.

and by extension the mission programs, as a vital component of the evangelical crusade to make the United States into a Christian civilization.

Despite this religious aim, the ASSU mission programs also displayed an additional objective: social control. Union managers believed that the populations of the West and the South would succumb to moral corruption if Sunday schools were not established. This disparaging view of Americans in both regions cast the mission programs as a necessary form of behavioral control. The ASSU reverted to the eighteenth-century rhetoric of Christian republicanism in order to validate its motivations. In an 1826 report, replete with Christian republican ideology, Union leaders tried to convince members of the need for Sunday schools in the West by asserting,

If the virtue of a people depend on the principles imbibed in youth, and if, in a government like ours, the prosperity of the nation depend, as without controversy it does, on the virtue of the people, then is [our] society...laying the foundation of our nation's prosperity. It is implanting in the hearts of the people those principles which alone can qualify them to be good citizens, and can preserve the nation from that ruin with which it will be overwhelmed, should vice and infidelity loosen the restraints of virtue.³²⁹

Henshaw agreed with the Enlightenment idea that religion fostered morality and believed that the religious education provided by Sunday schools prevented crime and poverty.³³⁰

Similarly, the ASSU stated that “the knowledge which we propose to furnish in Sunday-schools is [closely] allied to the preservation of the liberty and the intelligent exercise of the rights of an American citizen.”³³¹ In a sermon given at the 1830 annual meeting Baptist minister Francis Wayland cautioned the society to take this alliance seriously, claiming that Sunday schools provided important moral training for the next generation

³²⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Second Report*, 15-16.

³³⁰ Henshaw, *The Usefulness of Sunday-Schools*, 18-21. This attitude was typical of the reformers of the time, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 64.

³³¹ American Sunday School Union, *Ninth Report*, 18; *Seventh Report*, 21-22.

of American leaders.³³² The Union accepted Wayland's assertion and characterized support for its mission programs as a patriotic duty.³³³

Utilizing Christian republicanism to justify the mission programs, the American Sunday School Union sought to merge the First Day Society's desire for social engineering with the SASU's evangelistic goals. The ASSU did not make the cultivation of citizenship its primary focus. The ultimate purpose of the mission programs remained "to turn the anxieties and contemplations of children, *first of all*, to the proper business of a soul providing for its interests with God."³³⁴ Nevertheless, the Union embraced the First Day Society's belief that Sunday schools should be used to enforce virtue and prevent the spread of vice. The ASSU therefore sought to reinstate social control as a secondary motivator for the enterprises, hoping to make "the objects of this Society...alike interesting to the Christian and the Patriot."³³⁵ Once again, however, the Union misread the prevailing evangelical trends of the period. Although revivalists commonly appropriated republican language, it generally was not for the purpose of promoting behavioral control. Instead, revivalists used republicanism to argue for religious democratization. For example, Disciples of Christ founder Alexander Campbell used Jeffersonian rhetoric to call for "the inalienable right of all laymen to examine the sacred writings for themselves."³³⁶ In this context the ASSU's use of Christian republicanism to promote Sunday schools as a means of social engineering would have seemed both outdated and distasteful to most nineteenth-century American evangelicals.

³³² Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 34.

³³³ American Sunday School Union, *Seventh Report*, 5; *Eighth Report*, 39.

³³⁴ Italicized as in original, American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Report*, 24.

³³⁵ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 18.

³³⁶ As cited in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 76. For a complete discussion of this topic, see Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control," 35-37; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*; Noll, *America's God*, 203-207.

Response to the ASSU Mission Programs

Initially, the ASSU seemed unaware that its attempt to merge evangelism with social control would actually prevent acceptance of the mission programs. The society asserted instead that the enterprises “excited deep interest, and received the most cordial support.”³³⁷ The Union upheld this claim by citing a number of religious meetings held to endorse the Mississippi Valley Enterprise. In 1830 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in Philadelphia and resolved to urge its congregations to support the Mississippi Valley Enterprise, particularly through prayer and financial donations.³³⁸ Episcopalian and Dutch Reformed congregations throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey expressed similar enthusiasm for the program.³³⁹ Since the Union was predominantly formalist, however, endorsements from these denominations were not necessarily unexpected. Consequently, the ASSU was delighted when five white American Baptist churches from Philadelphia met to express support for the Mississippi Valley Enterprise. The Union claimed after this event that “not one has surpassed...the Baptists, in the promptness, decision, and energy, with which they have received” the program.³⁴⁰ The society failed to consider, however, that the meeting was actually held to refute criticism from Baptists in other parts of the country, who were “laboring under misapprehensions” that the mission program was developed for devious “political or sectarian designs.”³⁴¹ The meeting’s purpose, combined with the fact that merely five churches attended, actually testified to the strength of Baptist opposition to the Union. In

³³⁷ American Sunday School Union, *Seventh Report*, 30.

³³⁸ “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 39.

³³⁹ “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 50, 53.

³⁴⁰ “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 54.

³⁴¹ “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 58.

1830 the Methodist General Conference stated that the Mississippi Valley Enterprise was “of vital importance to the interests of the Church, and especially to the rising generation.”³⁴² Nevertheless, since the General Conference had no administrative or executive power, this endorsement did not necessarily reflect formal Methodist acceptance of the ASSU.

In the end, there is no record that any of the meetings discussed above actually produced grassroots support for the Union among either formalist or evangelical congregations. Several of these meetings did have some value, however, in that they collectively resulted in raising \$60,000 for the mission programs between 1830 and 1833.³⁴³ Most of these donations were collected in large sums from meetings held by elite northerners. For example, in June of 1830 a meeting was held at the Masonic Hall in New York City to consider the Mississippi Valley Enterprise. Chaired by Chancellor Reuben H. Walworth, this gathering not only drew ministers such as Baptist preacher Spencer H. Cone, but also prominent civic leaders like Congressman and ASSU vice president Theodore Frelinghuysen. Interestingly, all the speeches made at this meeting lauded the Union’s attempt to combine evangelism with social control. Frelinghuysen enthusiastically stated that the ASSU should be supported not only because it “pleads against sin,” but also because it “enlightens and exhorts to duty.”³⁴⁴ Cone offered similar remarks, encouraging support for the Mississippi Valley Enterprise because it would both save souls and promote republicanism.³⁴⁵ Inspired by these endorsements of the Union’s

³⁴² “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 51.

³⁴³ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 70.

³⁴⁴ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 45.

³⁴⁵ “Appendix,” in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 41-43.

evangelical-republican mission, attendees jointly donated \$11,456 to the enterprise.³⁴⁶

Similarly large donations were made from prominent groups like the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society, voluntary reform organizations with national ambitions similar to the ASSU's. These donations did not necessarily signal a widespread increase in support for the Union. Most contributions came from meetings attended mainly by northerners like Frelinghuysen who were already current ASSU members. The donations indicate that the Union's attempt to merge evangelism with social control appealed to the nationalistic values of urban elites.

Overall, the ASSU's strategy of using the mission programs to combine conversion with social engineering failed to solicit nationwide interest from evangelical denominations. By the 1830's, the Methodists and Baptists had already achieved astonishing growth and were securely on the path toward national expansion. Evangelical denominations had little use for Union mission programs, since they generally did not use ASSU Sunday schools as a recruiting tool. Instead, they organized their own Sunday school initiatives. In 1824 the Methodist General Conference introduced a rule requiring ministers to form Sunday school classes for children. Four years later, the denomination formed its own Sunday School Union.³⁴⁷ By the late 1830's, the small group of Methodists collaborating with the ASSU left the society to devote themselves to denominational Sunday school work. Baptist reaction to the ASSU is harder to assess, as the society did not identify particular congregations or associations when referring to "Baptist" supporters. Generally, Baptists in Philadelphia, New York, and other major northern cities seemed to accept the Union. Individual ministers, like Wayland, often

³⁴⁶ "Appendix," in Wayland, *Encouragements to Religious Effort*, 41.

³⁴⁷ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 162; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 381.

worked with the society. On the other hand, there was a noticeable lack of either verbal or financial endorsement of the ASSU from Baptists in the West and the South. Baptists in New England chose to develop their own version of the Sunday school rather than support the Union. They formed a Sunday school association in 1832.³⁴⁸ Similar to the Methodists, most Baptists apparently preferred a denominational approach to Sunday schools.

Occasionally, the ASSU's formalist, elitist ambitions provoked hostile responses from evangelical denominations. The Disciples of Christ charged that the mission programs did not reflect the spirit of true evangelicalism, asserting that they were "hobbies of modern times" designed to enforce an oppressive religious hierarchy. The anti-mission and primitive Baptists, opposed to any practice not found in the Bible, not only disagreed with ASSU's national goals, but claimed that Sunday schools violated Scripture.³⁴⁹ Similarly, the *Reformer*, an anti-mission periodical, labeled ASSU managers "aspiring demagogues" and accused the society of being a "Presbyterian hierarchy" bent on using its mission programs to make "converts to the Calvinistic party."³⁵⁰ The Union was also called "a scheme to filch money from the people" and was charged with using auxiliaries to interfere with "the duties of parents or pastors."³⁵¹ The ASSU was apparently shocked by these accusations, claiming that they were "absurd and incongruous." The Union tried to dismiss critics as malicious individuals who, "masking their deadly hostility under a feign regard for religious liberty, have endeavored to arrest

³⁴⁸ Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 380.

³⁴⁹ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 163.

³⁵⁰ "American Sunday School Union," *Reformer*, October 1829; "Jealousy Manifested," *Reformer*, February 1828; "Orthodox Sunday Schools: Valley of the Mississippi," *Reformer*, September 1830. See also American Sunday School Union, *The Fourth Report*, 9; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 21.

³⁵¹ "American Sunday School Union," *The Religious Intelligencer*, 1831; American Sunday School Union, *The Fourth Report*, 9-10; *Sixth Annual Report*, 23.

the progress of a system, which by its own perpetuity would securely guarantee both civil and religious freedom down to the remotest generation.”³⁵² ASSU managers failed to recognize the weakness of their position, choosing instead to adopt a strategy to project an image of strength in a futile attempt to control the society’s public image.³⁵³

There was one form of opposition that the American Sunday School Union simply could not ignore, namely, the growing suspicion of southern slaveholders toward northern reform organizations. By the middle of the century, racial tension increasingly challenged the growth of voluntary societies. The Compromise of 1820 heightened sectional conflict and led many southerners to suspect that Northerners were covertly plotting abolition.³⁵⁴ White southerners were wary of the Philadelphia-based ASSU and the Southern Enterprise, fearing that the program would use Sunday school instruction, particularly literacy, to incite enslaved Africans to revolt. Nat Turner’s rebellion of 1831 heightened southern antagonism toward any measure that might empower Africans, making the work of Union missionaries in the region significantly more difficult.³⁵⁵ Consequently, by the 1830’s the ASSU unofficially adopted a policy of ignoring Africans in order to gain southern acceptance.³⁵⁶ Whereas African students were a prominent part of the SASU, the Union was conspicuously silent on the subject of black Sunday schools. In 1833 the society ordered its missionaries to “*studiously and constantly*” avoid “the

³⁵² American Sunday School Union, *The Fourth Report*, 9.

³⁵³ Smith and Windes, “The Innovative Movement,” 148-149.

³⁵⁴ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 140-141. See also Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 39-46.

³⁵⁵ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 82; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, “*When I can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*” (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 125-128; Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 76-77.

³⁵⁶ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 26-28; Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 77; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 34-37. See also Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 107.

subject of *slavery*, abolition, and every other irritating topic.”³⁵⁷ Some missionaries and auxiliaries continued to recruit African pupils, but this was probably done without the Union’s encouragement.³⁵⁸

By capitulating to racism, the American Sunday School Union hoped to increase nationwide support for its evangelical-republican goals. This strategy, however, created a source of tension between the Union and other reformers. The gradual exclusion of Africans from ASSU schools generated particularly intense criticism from abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison condemned the ASSU as “being in league and fellowship with the slave-holders of the South” and “utterly dumb in regard to the slave system.”³⁵⁹ As abolitionists recognized, marginalizing African Sunday schools caused the Union to miss an opportunity to evangelize a significant portion of the population, casting doubt on the validity of the ASSU’s overall mission. Implicitly and perhaps unintentionally, the ASSU’s capitulation to racism placed limits on its supposedly boundless goal of serving as the nation’s spiritual and moral guardian. It also ruptured any ties the Union might have had to the abolitionist movement, thereby causing the society to lose a potentially powerful ally.

Ultimately, the mission programs failed to produce nationwide support for the ASSU. Both the Mississippi Valley and Southern Enterprises were aimed at race-conscious white Americans who embraced a formalist emphasis on education and endorsed the merging of social control with evangelism. These qualities attracted a minority of elite northerners but drove away many evangelical congregations, especially

³⁵⁷ Italicized as in original, American Sunday School Union, “Instructions to Missionaries,” Minutes of the Committee on Missions, June 25, 1833, as cited in Boylan, *Sunday School*, 82.

³⁵⁸ Cornelius, “*When I can Read My Title Clear*,” 116; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 36-37.

³⁵⁹ William Lloyd Garrison to the American Antislavery Society, 1855, in Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 38.

in the West and the South. Because the mission programs aspired to establish a hierarchical system for religious education and upheld an intellectual, discriminatory approach to reform, both enterprises were fundamentally out of touch with the majority of American Protestantism. It should be noted, however, that even the harshest critics of the enterprises did not reject the Sunday school movement itself. Major evangelical denominations like the Methodists and Baptists started developing their own Sunday school programs in the 1830's. These efforts indicate that evangelicals were not generally opposed to Sunday schools, only to the ASSU's ambition and approach to become the national head of the movement. Ultimately, the Union mission programs failed because they seriously underestimated the strength of American denominationalism. The ASSU's strategy to reinstate social control as a function of Sunday schools was an antiquated tactic, disconnected from the programs of populist revivalism. Its failure to properly harness the evangelistic impulse of the period kept the ASSU from becoming truly national in scope.

Success of ASSU Publishing

Though mission programs failed to expand the ASSU's geographic reach, the society developed a more viable method of expansion that ultimately succeeded in strengthening the general Sunday school movement: evangelical publishing. By the 1820's advances in print technology made publishing an efficient means of disseminating Protestant doctrine.³⁶⁰ Consequently, the ASSU and other national societies started using

³⁶⁰ David Paul Nord, "Benevolent Books: Printing, Religion, and Reform," in *An Extensive Republic: Printing, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 227. For a general discussion

print to produce religious mass media, which historian David Nord defines as “*universal circulation of the same message*.”³⁶¹ Using a system of centralized production and local distribution, voluntary organizations flooded the country with religious literature, thereby creating a “textually defined community” that transcended denominations and regions.³⁶² Printing quickly became a vital form of competition within the religious marketplace, and the ASSU sought to capitalize on this development.³⁶³ In 1824 the Union established a Committee of Publication, a group of at least five members charged with editing and publishing Sunday school material.³⁶⁴ No more than two committee members could belong to the same denomination and texts could only be published by unanimous vote.³⁶⁵ The Union also purchased stereotype plates, an expensive investment that testified to the society’s commitment to professional printing.³⁶⁶

Determined to use print as a competitive part of the religious marketplace, the ASSU increased production of the spelling books, alphabet cards, and reward books originally published by the SASU. The Union also created a new line of tracts, catechisms, hymnals, and character-building short stories for children. Although these publications were initially intended to generate revenue for the society, by 1826 the ASSU decided to sell all its materials to auxiliaries at cost for free distribution among

of the explosion of printing, both commercial and evangelical, see Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 369-372.

³⁶¹ Italicized as in original, Nord, “Benevolent Books,” 236.

³⁶² Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-15, 60-61.

³⁶³ American Sunday School Union, *Third Report*, 3; *Fourth Report*, 5. For a complete discussion of the impact of printing on the Protestant United Front, see Nord, “Benevolent Books,” 221-246.

³⁶⁴ The exact number of members varied throughout the years, sometimes reaching close to twenty members.

³⁶⁵ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 6.

³⁶⁶ Nord, “Benevolent Books,” 235.

Sunday school pupils, usually in the form of “libraries” containing 75-100 volumes.³⁶⁷ Additionally, the Union started a periodical called *American Sunday School Magazine*. Designed to encourage and advise teachers, the magazine helped individual workers feel connected to the wider ASSU community.³⁶⁸ The Union also produced a children’s magazine called *The Youth’s Friend*, which contained amusing and uplifting stories intended to develop piety.³⁶⁹

The ASSU’s attempt to become a major publishing society was primarily driven by evangelical concerns. The society designed its publications to serve as the most important piece of “the great moral machinery” used by Sunday schools to generate conversions.³⁷⁰ Through print, the Union hoped to become “dictators of the consciences of thousands of immortal beings, on the great and all-important subject of the welfare of their souls.”³⁷¹ While this goal clearly had national implications, the Union only aspired to disseminate its material throughout the country in order to acquaint Sunday school pupils with “the great and cardinal points of Christian belief.”³⁷² As Boylan explains, these beliefs included the “evangelical doctrines of innate depravity, future punishment, and most importantly, the need for a personal experience of regeneration.”³⁷³ Unlike the mission programs, the society never cited Christian republicanism or social control as a secondary motivator for its publishing initiative. Moreover, the managers hoped that publications would broaden their denominational connections, asserting that they wanted

³⁶⁷ “American Sunday School Union,” *Christian Watchman*, June 9, 1826; Brown, *The Word in the World*, 61.

³⁶⁸ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 5.

³⁶⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 6. The magazine’s original title was *Teacher’s Offering*, see American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 5.

³⁷⁰ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 5.

³⁷¹ American Sunday School Union, *First Report*, 5, 23.

³⁷² American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 5.

³⁷³ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 10.

to print “those plain and simple gospel truths, which are peculiar to NO sect, but of vital importance to ALL.”³⁷⁴

It is unlikely that ASSU publications were completely ecumenical. Nevertheless, the society never used printing to control individual Sunday schools and seemed to genuinely desire to “convey the most important truths in the most pleasing form.”³⁷⁵ For example, one of the first full sentences students learned to read from *The Union Spelling Book* was, “We ought to love the Lord our God with all our hearts.”³⁷⁶ Other ASSU materials contained similarly broad content designed to appeal to all denominations, such as a series of short stories featuring innocuous titles like *Why Should I Obey My Mother* and *Christian Politeness*. By using printing to disseminate the essentials of Protestantism, the Union returned to the evangelistic impulse that originally inspired the SASU. This strategy made ASSU materials generally acceptable to both formalists and evangelicals, and the publishing initiative rarely encountered the fierce criticism frequently leveled at the mission programs.

Due to the society’s efforts to be nonsectarian, combined with the explosive popularity of religious printing, the demand for Union publications steadily increased. Within its first two years of operation, the ASSU distributed 11,500 magazines and 904,043 copies of all other Union material. In 1828 the Union printed 15,500 magazines and 1,462,960 other volumes. By 1830 the Union had distributed an impressive six million publications, which averages out to approximately one ASSU publication for

³⁷⁴ American Sunday School Union, *Fourth Report*, 10.

³⁷⁵ American Sunday School Union, *Third Report*, 3.

³⁷⁶ “Reading Lesson VI,” in *The Union Spelling Book* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1838), 25. For more on the philosophy and content of ASSU publications, see Brown, *The Word in the World*, 105-113.

every two Americans.³⁷⁷ The ASSU was particularly successful in establishing Sunday school libraries, and by mid-century 60% of the nation's public libraries belonged to Union auxiliaries.³⁷⁸ Since the opportunity to access free literature was highly appealing, particularly in rural areas in the West and the South, ASSU libraries proved to be an effective tool for recruiting children to attend Sunday schools.³⁷⁹ Due to their nationwide distribution, Union publications most likely served as a critical means of promoting literacy and, more importantly, socializing pupils into evangelical culture.³⁸⁰ The circulation of Union materials exposed an untold number of children to basic Protestantism, making the ASSU's printing initiative one of the most powerful means of religious education in the nineteenth century.³⁸¹

Ultimately, ASSU publications did not necessarily expand the national reach of the society, as there is little evidence that printing assisted in actually founding ASSU auxiliaries. Additionally, since the publications were made available at cost, they did not financially benefit the Union. Nevertheless, publishing remains the ASSU's most effective and lasting initiative. The society correctly assessed the demand for religious publications and responded with cheap, child-friendly educational material. In doing so, the ASSU inaugurated a new era of mass distribution of Sunday school resources that brought greater uniformity to the overall movement. Union publications eschewed the mission programs' emphasis on social control and effectively captured the evangelistic

³⁷⁷ American Sunday School Union, *Second Report*, 4-5; *Fourth Report*, 4-5; "American Sunday School Union," *Christian Watchman*, June 9, 1826; Brown, *The Word in the World*, 105; U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, "Population of the States and Counties of the United States: 1790-1990," United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/pop1790-1990.html> (accessed June 30, 2013).

³⁷⁸ American Sunday School Union, *Sixth Report*, 11; Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 38.

³⁷⁹ Nord, "Benevolent Books," 235.

³⁸⁰ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 70; Brown, *The Word in the World*, 105.

³⁸¹ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 33.

spirit of the times. As a result, ASSU printing crossed denominational boundaries in ways that the mission programs never could and successfully established Sunday school materials as a competitive part of the religious marketplace. The ASSU used publishing to make the movement's resources and message readily available to any community in the country, making the work of establishing and running Sunday schools significantly easier. Eventually, this enabled most denominations to recognize that Sunday schools were a viable means of nurturing religious adherents. By the 1850's a church without a Sunday school was considered an anomaly.³⁸² Although the American Sunday School Union may have failed to become the nation's spiritual and moral guardian, it succeeded in giving the overall Sunday school movement a national influence.

³⁸² Boylan, *Sunday Schools*, 162-164.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

On May 20, 1834, the American Sunday School Union issued its tenth annual report. Celebrating a decade of activity, the managers used this report to review past successes, explain current challenges, and inspire members to overcome difficulties with increasing relevancy by reminding them of the society's original purpose. The report asserted that "a good degree of progress has been made in the establishment of schools in the Valley of the Mississippi," citing that 500 Sunday schools had been established and over 1,000 existing schools had been revived that year. Numbers from the Southern Enterprise were less impressive, as only 304 schools had been collectively established and revived. Missionaries had to proceed cautiously due to southern suspicion of northern-based reform organizations, but the ASSU was still confident that "permanent and very judicious arrangements have been made...to supply the southern States with Sunday schools."³⁸³

Despite this positive outlook, the ASSU found it increasingly difficult to fund the mission programs. The initial outpouring of donations from prominent supporters enabled the Union to cover its missionary expenses from 1830-1833. After this burst of excitement waned, however, the society struggled to support the enterprises, reporting in

³⁸³ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 13-14.

1834 that funds were inadequate to meet costs.³⁸⁴ Unfortunately, the Panic of 1837 exacerbated this problem by ruining many of the Union's most important supporters, forcing the society to reduce the number of missionaries employed in the West and the South. While the ASSU continued to deploy a small group of Sunday school missionaries, both enterprises were essentially brought to a halt by the middle of the century, and the Union's goal of becoming national in scope never fully materialized.³⁸⁵

Another factor that significantly undermined the Union's claim to be the leader of American Sunday schools was slavery. As the northern abolitionist movement became aggressively uncompromising over the issue of slavery in the 1830's, southerners reacted by becoming increasingly defensive of the institution. The ASSU was caught in the middle of these two extremes. Because the society declined to condemn slavery, some of its abolitionist members left the ASSU in protest, including Arthur and Lewis Tappan. According to Lewis Tappan, abolitionists felt that the ASSU's neutral stance made its managers "apologists, if not defenders, of the atrocious system."³⁸⁶ On the other hand, auxiliaries in the South and parts of the West grew uncomfortable with the organization's refusal to specifically affirm slavery. Suspicion of the society ran particularly high in the South. One Union missionary reported that Southerners' "inventive imaginations associate Northern influence – a rupture of our civil compact – dissolution of all social order – an armed host of incendiary *abolitionists* – blood and murder - and a thousand other hydra-headed gorgons dire, with the establishment of a Sabbath school."³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 15.

³⁸⁵ For more on how the Panic of 1837 negatively impacted the ASSU, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 82, 84; Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 100-101; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 32; Nord, "Benevolent Books," 246.

³⁸⁶ Lewis Tappan to F. A. Packard, 1848, as cited in Boylan, *Sunday School*, 83.

³⁸⁷ Italicized as in original, letter from missionary to the American Sunday School Union, as cited in Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 108.

Consequently, many auxiliaries in both regions left the ASSU to join pro-slavery sectarian societies. Slavery thereby increased denominational competition for control of Sunday schools, limiting the Union's influence.³⁸⁸

Even without the divisive impact of slavery, sectarian Sunday schools grew steadily in popularity due to the rapid expansion of American denominationalism in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1830's most sects were strong enough to sustain their own national evangelistic initiatives, leading to the creation of denominational Sunday school associations. The ASSU's 1834 report noted that the number of Sunday schools unaffiliated with the Union was increasing throughout the country.³⁸⁹ This competition expanded with each passing year, making the interdenominational structure that was crucial for founding early Sunday school organizations, like the First Day Society, increasingly irrelevant. By the Civil War most denominations had established their own Sunday school systems, and organizations like the Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society, the Methodist Episcopal Sunday School Union, and the American Baptist Publication Society, which printed material for Baptist Sunday schools, emerged as the new leaders of the movement.³⁹⁰

Despite these difficulties, the ASSU continued to found Sunday schools well into the twentieth century. Since the movement was increasingly controlled by denominational societies, however, the Union adopted new methods of evangelism in the 1920's, such as Vacation Bible Schools and Bible conferences. As a result, the ASSU ceased to focus specifically on Sunday schools, leading the managers to change the

³⁸⁸ For more on how slavery impacted the in the mid-nineteenth century, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 80-84; Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 98-115; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 34-38.

³⁸⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 12.

³⁹⁰ For more on the growth of denominational Sunday school societies, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 160-164; Lynn, *The Big Little School*, 20-21; Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 378-387.

organization's name to American Missionary Fellowship (AMF) in 1974. The AMF continued to develop innovative programs in order to expand its outreach, and in 2011 the society adopted the name InFaith to reflect its broad practices. According to the society's website, InFaith supports "a variety of ministries in rural and urban areas, focusing particularly on places overlooked or underserved by other evangelistic ministries."³⁹¹ The organization embraces a variety of activities including Bible camps, prison and nursing home visitation, chaplaincy training, and church planting.³⁹² The society asserts that, "While InFaith has grown well beyond its original goal of starting Sunday schools... the mission faithfully continues to convey the unchanging truth of God's Word to a changing culture."³⁹³

Although the American Sunday School Union eventually abandoned its goal of becoming the national leader of Sunday schools, the society still significantly impacted the movement, particularly through using publishing to introduce customized curriculum for specific age levels. As noted in the 1834 report, by its tenth anniversary the Union created "infant" lessons that introduced basic evangelical doctrines to five and six year olds.³⁹⁴ The society also developed material for adolescents, called Bible classes, which was intended to educate youth in complex theological concepts and thereby retain their interest in Sunday schools.³⁹⁵ Most importantly, the ASSU abandoned the SASU's focus on encouraging children to memorize dozens and sometimes hundreds of Scriptures at a time. Union managers did not consider "the number of verses recited" to be "unequivocal evidence of the advancement of... scholars in divine knowledge. The words which are

³⁹¹ InFaith, "History," <http://infaith.org/about/history/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

³⁹² InFaith, "What We Do," <http://infaith.org/about/what-we-do/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

³⁹³ InFaith, "History," <http://infaith.org/about/history/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

³⁹⁴ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 17.

³⁹⁵ American Sunday School Union, *Second Report*, 14-15.

learned today may be forgotten tomorrow; but what is clearly understood and forcibly felt, may remain to enlighten the mind and purify the heart forever.”³⁹⁶ Consequently, the Union developed question books with weekly assignments containing ten to twenty Scripture passages for pupils to memorize and discuss. Teachers gave memorization assignments at the beginning of the week and spent the following Sunday asking designated questions about these verses. In this way the ASSU moved Sunday schools away from rote conformity to routine and toward a system that fostered spiritual understanding within children.³⁹⁷

The ASSU continued to modify Sunday schools throughout the mid-nineteenth century, constantly developing new educational material to be used in both Union auxiliaries and unaffiliated schools. In 1834 alone, the society issued seventy-four new publications, mainly short stories such as an illustrated book about the biblical prophet Daniel.³⁹⁸ Claiming that these publications were the best evidence of its commitment to disseminating “all the important truths necessary for faith and practice,” the Union reaffirmed in the 1834 report that it was fully dedicated to circulating its materials throughout the nation.³⁹⁹ The society generally fulfilled this promise. By 1860 the society distributed \$235,000 worth of publications throughout the country.⁴⁰⁰ Additionally, the ASSU pioneered efforts to systematize and improve Sunday school instruction by starting institutes for training teachers in the 1850’s. These institutes were designed not only to acquaint teachers with modern methods of education, but to inspire them to work for “the salvation of a dying world” by training pupils “to a habitual, steady, daily contemplation”

³⁹⁶ American Sunday School Union, *The Tenth Report*, 14.

³⁹⁷ For more on this shift away from memorization, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 44-45.

³⁹⁸ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 16.

³⁹⁹ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 4.

⁴⁰⁰ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 85.

of the Scriptures.⁴⁰¹ These advancements in curriculum, publishing, and teacher training provided an invaluable model for future denominational societies. Most of the sectarian Sunday school organizations developed during the mid-nineteenth century based their methods on the ASSU's instructional system, particularly its question books and age-specific curriculum. Thus, while the ASSU never became national in geographic reach, it wielded a powerful and widespread influence on the development of Sunday school methods and materials.

Ultimately, however, publishing initiatives or new denominational structures do not completely account for the Sunday school's ability to become an enduring part of American Protestantism. Rather, the movement succeeded primarily because of its ideological transformation. When the American movement was founded in 1790, Christian republican reformers like Bishop William White believed that Sunday schools were ideal tools for cultivating citizenship and controlling the behavior of the poor, leading to the creation of the First Day Society. When the rise of evangelical activism in the early nineteenth century made Christian republican reform obsolete, the Sunday school movement survived by adopting a religious mission. Philadelphian evangelicals used the Sunday and Adult School Union to infuse Sunday schools with an evangelistic orientation dedicated to fostering conversion and ushering in the millennium. However, the American Sunday School Union's attempt to nationalize the movement threatened to undercut this new evangelical orientation. By using the mission programs to combine conversion with social control, the ASSU initially minimized the movement's religious function and alienated evangelical supporters.

⁴⁰¹ American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 25. For more on the development of ASSU teacher's institutes, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 370-377.

When the mission programs failed to extend its national influence, the American Sunday School Union chose to reaffirm the movement's evangelical orientation. Through Union publications, Sunday schools became refocused on the aim of disseminating Protestant doctrine in order to educate new religious adherents. The 1834 report exhibited this revitalized vision, stating that Union managers had resolved not to "sacrifice or compromise" their mission "to convert and sanctify" America. While the ASSU never became national in geographic reach, its publications helped ensure that the movement's primary objective remained "to be the instrument in the hands of a sovereign God of lighting up in a single mind the spark of divine life."⁴⁰² As the Union hoped, this aim eventually proved appealing to all denominations. Thus, in less than a century, Sunday schools exchanged a republican outlook for a strictly evangelical mission that made the movement a foundational part of American Protestantism. In 1834 the movement still faced major regional and financial difficulties along with a future massive transition from nonsectarian to denominational leadership. Nevertheless, by redefining itself as a means of promoting "education for God," the Sunday school movement generated the ideological power to sustain these challenges and created a functional religious vision that continues to influence American churches.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² American Sunday School Union, *Tenth Report*, 24-25, 27.

⁴⁰³ American Sunday School Union, *Seventh Report*, 22.

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