

Elmer Towns: The 4 Purposes of Sunday School

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Sunday School is not an agency separate or apart from the Church but is, perhaps, the best-structured agency in the local church for carrying out most effectively the teaching ministry of Christ. This arm of the Church is divided into four parts: reaching, teaching, winning and caring.

Just as the New Testament Church was built on teaching and preaching (see Acts 5:42), so the modern biblical Church must be built on Bible study in Sunday School and exhortation in the preaching service. Sunday School is still functionally defined as reaching people, so you can teach the people to win them to Christ and then care for those people spiritually. This fourfold nature of Sunday School is perhaps best expressed in an Old Testament verse that has often been used in the historic Sunday School conventions. "Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law" (Deut. 31:12). This verse reflects the four distinct areas of Sunday School ministry.

Sunday School Is the Reaching Arm of the Church

First, Sunday School is the arm that reaches all ages for Christ. "Reaching" is defined as making contact with a person and motivating him or her to give an honest hearing to the gospel. Since evangelism is giving out the gospel, reaching is basically preevangelism, for it gets people to listen to the gospel. In our text, it is expressed in the word "gather." Note that those who gathered are identified as

- fathers,
- mothers,
- little ones or children, and
- the stranger. Most church members have someone within their sphere of influence who is a stranger to the Church and who could be gathered into the Church.

Sunday School Is the Teaching Arm of the Church

Second, Sunday School is the teaching arm of the Church. "Teaching" means guiding the learning activities that meet human needs. The first step of teaching is expressed in the verse by the words "that they may hear." The ultimate step of teaching is "that they may learn."

Sunday School Is the Winning Arm of the Church

Sunday School is also the arm of the Church that wins people to Christ. “Winning” is defined as communicating the gospel in an understandable manner and motivating a person to respond to Christ. The Old Testament expression “fear the Lord” means to bring a person to reverential trust of God. It was a concept of salvation. Today we might describe a person who “fear[s] the LORD” as a person who receives Christ, or trusts the Lord, for salvation.

Sunday School Is the Caring Arm of the Church

Finally, Sunday School is the arm of the Church that gives spiritual care to all members. One of the objectives of every Sunday School is to spiritually care for all so that all will “carefully observe all the words of this law.” Some people call this nurturing; others call it maturing.

Sunday School is the reaching, teaching, winning and caring arm of the Church. However, this definition becomes a mosaic when applied to individual churches. Just as it takes all the pieces of tile to make up a mosaic, so it takes all four aspects of the definition to describe a beautiful Sunday School. The beauty of the mosaic can be destroyed when we focus on one section of the mosaic and lose the whole picture. This happens when a church demonstrates a strong emphasis of only one aspect, such as gaining an abundance of visitors because of a dominant emphasis on a bus outreach ministry. The focus on outreach causes a church to lose the perspective of teaching, winning or caring.

Some churches have strong teaching Sunday Schools with a deep commitment to Bible mastery, but they have no outreach. Other Sunday Schools are committed to soul-winning; their success is measured by how many people they have won to Christ or prepared for church membership, but they do not have a passion to oversee students to help them grow in Christ. Finally, some Sunday Schools do a great job of caring for their students but ignore the other three objectives.

As important as each function is, do not forget to build a balanced Sunday School. The healthy Sunday School will perform all four ministries equally. **To make your Sunday School healthy, cover the four basics for your students: reach, teach, win and spiritually care.**

Elmer Towns is part of the All Star Sunday School Training Team. For details of meetings with Elmer Towns see <http://allstarsundayschool.com/>

http://churchleaders.com/smallgroups/small-group-blogs/157888-josh_hunt_elmer_towns_the_4_purposes_of_sunday_school.html