

Great Expectations

Planting Seeds for Sunday School Growth



David Francis

 **LifeWay**
Biblical Solutions for Life

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David Francis is the director of Sunday School and Discipleship at LifeWay Christian Resources. Before joining LifeWay in 1997, he served as the associate pastor and minister of education at First Baptist Church in Garland, Texas, for 13 years. David and his wife, Vickie, teach Preschool Sunday School at Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee. They have three married sons.

Contents

Introduction
What Do You Expect? 4

Chapter 1
Expect New People Every Week 13

Chapter 2
Expect People to Say Yes 24

Chapter 3
Expect Classes to Reproduce 40

Notes 46

Other LifeWay Resources by David Francis 47

Additional Help 48

Introduction

What Do You Expect?

*You have been born again—not of perishable seed
but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.
1 Peter 1:23*

A student pastor is said to have asked the famous British preacher Charles Spurgeon how he could be more effective in bringing unbelievers to faith. Spurgeon reportedly asked the student, “Do you expect converts every time you preach?” The student responded that, of course, he did not. Spurgeon replied, “That is why you have none.”¹

What do you expect God to do through your Sunday School? Do you expect Him to send newcomers every week? Do you expect participants in your Sunday School to receive a fresh word from Him each week through a consistently dynamic Bible study experience? Do you expect members to say yes to opportunities to serve in His kingdom enterprise within and beyond the Sunday School hour? Do you expect your class to grow and plant new classes?

Sadly, the answer from many Sunday School leaders today is the same as Spurgeon’s student: “Of course not.” That’s probably one reason Sunday School is struggling in many churches. The purpose of this book is to challenge Sunday School leaders and teachers toward great expectations about what God can do through Sunday School. Before we do that, let’s acknowledge some of the challenges and pressures facing the movement. Sunday School may be suffering today from low self-esteem because of these factors, which in turn may contribute to low expectations.

Sunday School Not Cool?

One of the pressures facing the Sunday School movement today concerns its very name. I've often quipped that there are only two things wrong with the name *Sunday School*: (1) Sunday School is not just on Sundays, and (2) it's not a school. When the Sunday School movement began more than two hundred years ago in England, it was both. It was established to teach reading and writing, using the Bible as the primary textbook, to boys and girls on their one day off, Sunday, after laboring six days each week. When the movement first spread to America, it continued a similar mission of promoting literacy and good citizenship. The movement evolved over the years into a predominantly church-based ministry that is still practiced in most churches in the United States. Scheduled before or after the primary weekend worship service, Sunday School has taken on additional purposes in many churches that extend beyond the hour or so spent in a Bible study group. In fact, many churches expect Sunday School to be a 24/7/365 network of care, prayer, communication, outreach, and ministry. It could be argued that Sunday School is well suited to accomplish all of the purposes of the church except the purpose of worship. That's a great expectation!

But despite all the ministry Sunday School has accomplished, continues to accomplish, and can accomplish, the name *Sunday School* is no longer cool to some people. Guess what? I'm cool with that! Change the name to whatever you want! Just don't be surprised when people still call it Sunday School.

Brand Power

Why do people continue to use the name *Sunday School* to describe this ministry, even when the new, official name in their church is LIFE Groups, Bible Study, Bible Fellowship, or—as in my church—Connect Groups? I believe it's the power of the brand! Despite the fact that neither word in *Sunday School* is adequate to describe this multipurpose ministry, joined together they form a global brand that enjoys loyalty and equity all over the world. Curiously, at the same time some evangelical church leaders are creating new names for Sunday School,

others are discovering—or rediscovering—it. United Methodists, for example, have largely abandoned Church School in favor of a renewed emphasis on Sunday School while also promoting Sunday School as a multipurpose ministry that extends beyond the weekend occasion. Sunday School leaders will find some challenging and helpful ideas and resources at their Web site, as well as the sites of others who have not abandoned Sunday School. The Churches of the Nazarene and Assemblies of God are two other groups with robust Web sites and resources for Sunday School leaders.

Brand Extensions

I am currently following, with what I can only describe as troubled interest, the emergence of Sunday-morning programs for kids in Muslim mosques, humanist (atheist) centers, and Hindu temples. Such programs have long operated in Jewish synagogues, Mormon wards, Unitarian centers, and elsewhere. Perhaps conceding to the predominant Christian culture, as well as the strength of the brand, most of these programs are called Sunday School. Why are Muslims, atheistic humanists, Hindus, and others using the term *Sunday School*? Because that's what their kids' Christian friends and classmates call it, even if their church doesn't call it that. Why? Because it's the brand name of the movement. What Kleenex® is to facial tissue and Coke® is to soda pop, Sunday School is to Sunday-morning education. I recently overheard a conversation between two young moms who both referred to their Bible study groups as Sunday School, even though I know their two churches call the ministry by two different names. Just last weekend I had a delightful conversation with a young mom who kept talking about Sunday School, even though her church calls it Adult Bible Fellowships. The Sunday School brand—whether it has fulfilled or failed its brand promise in every church—is still incredibly strong.

Principles More Important than Labels

You may be asking, “Was there a point to the ramblings in that last paragraph?” At least a couple! First, let me clearly state that I don't care

what churches call their Bible study ministries. (By the way, unchurched people don't care what labels you put on your ministries either!) Second, I do care that churches subscribe to the principles of effective Sunday School ministry, whether they label it *Sunday School* or use another term. I will use the term *Sunday School* throughout this book to describe that ministry or its functional equivalent by any other name. If you call your ministry something else, just substitute that name. I think most of the principles—and great expectations—will still apply.

Pressure from Two Directions Influences Expectations

Let's get back to expectations. Before we can deal with the characteristics of a Great Expectations Sunday School, we must address some expectations that Sunday School probably cannot completely satisfy. The Sunday School movement is experiencing pressure from two other very significant movements: the small-group movement and the discipleship movement. It is important to note that all three are movements. Why? Because movements are bigger and more powerful than programs. At the heart of all movements are people. Lots of people. And leaders who advocate on behalf of the movements. With lots of passion! Both the small-group movement and the discipleship movement are exerting pressure on the Sunday School movement but from different directions. This pressure has caused some Sunday School leaders to question the principles on which Sunday School is based. And that can lead to confused expectations.

The Discipleship Movement: Deeper Content

The exhortation of the discipleship movement has always been to call Christians to deeper levels of commitment to Christ and the causes of His kingdom. Such parachurch ministries as Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, and Navigators represent this global movement. In Southern Baptist churches the discipleship movement has expressed itself through such programs as Training Union, then Church Training, then Discipleship Training. The occasion for this program ministry was

historically on Sunday evenings, just prior to evening worship, which became common in churches about one hundred years ago. As many churches abandon either the entire Sunday-evening program or just the discipleship ministry, the movement often finds itself looking for another occasion to fulfill its mission of equipping disciples in doctrine, apologetics, and deeper biblical and practical courses of study. Church members are also increasingly busy. So as churches seek to simplify their schedules, they sometimes consider using the Sunday School occasion—just before or after the primary weekend worship experience—as the optimal time to help believers go deeper in biblical content. Some individual classes may make this determination on their own. And they may still call it Sunday School. But it's not Sunday School. It's discipleship, even if it meets during the Sunday School occasion. I'll explain why in chapter 1.

The Small-Group Movement: Intimate Community

The pressure on Sunday School from the small-group movement is less about occasion than location. Whereas the discipleship movement places a premium on discovering biblical content, the small-group movement places a high value on experiencing biblical community. How does it view Sunday School, especially in regard to adults? Typically, it views Sunday School classes as too content-driven to develop the kind of deep Christian community envisioned for small, home-based groups. Some would therefore abandon both the Sunday School occasion and its traditional location. Others would abandon neither but instead advocate for making Sunday School classes more intimate communities. And there would likely be a name change—probably to something like small groups—which would be appropriate since it would no longer be Sunday School!

Sunday School in the Balance

Both of these admirable movements are putting pressure on Sunday School leaders from opposite directions. In order to establish a Great

Expectations Sunday School, leaders need to have appropriate expectations that take these pressures into account. Sometimes pictures are better than words, so let me propose a continuum.



Discipleship groups can be placed near the right end of the continuum, emphasizing deeper content. Small groups can be placed near the left end of the continuum, emphasizing deeper relationships. So where does Sunday School fit? Closer to the middle of the continuum, striking a balance between content and community. A Sunday School class may sometimes move toward the left, especially during times when there is a need to rally around a hurting member of the group. There may also be seasons when a Sunday School class may move toward the right for concentrated study. But to remain true to Sunday School principles, the class needs to move back toward the center as soon as possible, because to move too far in either direction can close the group—usually unintentionally—to new people.

Because Sunday School classes are designed to be open groups, they must concede to those who would criticize them because they are not deep enough, in content on the one hand or relationships on the other. Actually, I think most classes do a pretty great job of balancing those two. The strength of the Sunday School movement is found in this balance. Understanding this dynamic can both help Sunday School leaders absorb criticism from those on either end of the continuum and help them avoid criticizing those movements as well. All three movements make a valuable contribution to faith development. Each can and does influence the practice of the others. The Great Expectations Sunday School leader acknowledges this fact and orders his expectations with this understanding.

Sunday School for Step 2!

The research findings reported by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger in *Simple Church* have challenged many churches to establish a clear disciple-making process their members can easily understand. The primary goal of becoming simple is not to streamline the schedule but rather to identify and communicate sequential steps in a clear process so that members can identify where they are in the process and what they need to do next to continue on the path of spiritual growth. In most churches the first step in that process is worship in general and the primary weekend worship experience in particular.

Step 2 in most simple churches is participation in some sort of small group. We've just identified three such options. For some churches, notably newer church plants without permanent facilities or facilities that are inadequate to accommodate an on-campus Bible study ministry, Sunday School may not be an option. The same is true for churches that are philosophically opposed to the construction of multiuse/education buildings or are financially or legally constrained from constructing such facilities. Others can provide this kind of space for children only. Off-campus small groups are probably the best option in these situations.

However, where culture and circumstances make an on-campus ministry like Sunday School possible, it is hard to beat in terms of helping the maximum number of people move from step 1 to step 2 in a disciple-making process. Rainer and Geiger found that simple churches count horizontally rather than vertically. That means the effectiveness of each step in moving people through the process can be calculated as a percentage of involvement in step 1 (usually the primary weekend worship service). Step 2 divided by step 1 yields an assimilation ratio that measures the effectiveness of the step 2 strategy. For example, if your average worship attendance is 100 and your average small-group attendance is 50, your ratio is 10 to 5. In churches that utilize Sunday School as a step 2 strategy, that ratio is typically 10 to 7 or 70 percent and often much higher. That's one reason to vote for Sunday School for step 2!

Sunday School in Simple Churches?

When *Simple Church* was published, I became curious about whether simple churches were actually employing Sunday School as a step 2 strategy. With Dr. Rainer's encouragement, coauthor Eric Geiger and I analyzed the 400 churches identified as vibrant in phase 1 of the research (which included only Southern Baptist churches; phase 2 surveyed non-SBC churches). This sampling of churches was chosen because each had grown by at least 5 percent for three consecutive years, a hurdle that clearly separated these churches from the comparison group. With the list of these churches in hand, I was able to obtain information on the Sunday-morning schedules of 376 of the 400 churches. I was surprised to learn that among these vibrant churches, 87.5 percent employed Sunday School as their step 2 strategy. (The other 12.5 percent utilized off-campus small groups or a mixture of off-campus and on-campus groups, at least for adults.) Even more surprising was the fact that half of these simply called the program Sunday School. Vote for Sunday School for step 2!²

An Effective Assimilation Tool

Another reason to vote for Sunday School for step 2 is its proven effectiveness at assimilation. In research findings reported by Thom Rainer in his book *High Expectations*, new Christians who had joined a sample of churches were tracked for five years. Among those who attended only worship, fewer than 20 percent were still active five years later. However, among those who attended both worship and Sunday School, more than 80 percent were still active after five years. Vote for Sunday School for step 2!³

It is my view that one reason Sunday School is such an effective assimilation tool is precisely that it does not attempt to achieve the intimacy promised by small groups or the depth of content found in a discipleship group. Having defended Sunday School for many years on both of these fronts, I have conceded that Sunday School operates in social space rather than intimate or even personal space. I believe it is precisely because Sunday School operates in social space that it is a safe

place for people to find themselves in the second step of their disciple-making journey. I'll say more about that in chapter 1.

What Could Be Simpler?

Accomplishing the first two steps of your disciple-making process with every member of the family on one trip to the church? What could be simpler than that? Vote for Sunday School for step 2!

Three Great Expectations

After you have read this book, you should be able to identify three basic expectations of a Great Expectations Sunday School class:

1. A Great Expectations Sunday School class expects new people and a great Bible study experience every week.
2. A Great Expectations Sunday School class expects people to say yes to the total ministry of the class.
3. A Great Expectations Sunday School class always expects to plant new classes.

Whew! That was a pretty long introduction, but I hope it stirred up some great expectations for your Sunday School. Let's get started!

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
It is by his great mercy that we have been born again,
because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.*

Now we live with great expectation.

1 Peter 1:3, NLT