

THE CHANGING ROOM¹
I Corinthians 15: 51 (KJV)
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
June 12, 2011

Today we recognize and thank all those volunteers who make our program of Christian education run smoothly. This year I particularly say at the very beginning how grateful we all are to Ashley Ward for stepping in as Interim Director of Education and Youth and doing such a superb job. Ashley has been a gift to us all.

I

The Sunday School movement is unique in that it was from the beginning a lay movement. Robert Raikes, the founder of the Sunday School movement, was a layman in Gloucester, England in 1780. From the outset his teachers were laity, and his students were both boys and girls. This was quite upsetting to the established clergy, who initially opposed it! They argued that the teaching of the Bible could not be turned over to the laity. They were not officially trained!

But the movement caught on both in England and America, and it has proven to be one of the most influential, life-changing movements in Christianity. To have the laity both teaching and studying the Bible together

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may have threatened the established clergy control of theological content, but it also made for a thoughtful, informed laity who could read the Bible and come to their own conclusions. This lay movement has been a sheer gift to Christianity.

I regularly hear people bemoaning the fact that many young adults do not seem to have a desire to be involved in church. They seem to be a missing generation in many congregations. To solve that challenge, many congregations are reverting to an entertainment model for worship. “If we entertain them, they will come,” seems to be the mantra. But let me pose another solution: namely, an active and vibrant church school. I am talking about making Christian education for all ages one of our top priorities. I am talking about the assurance that quality, age-appropriate classes are provided consistently for every age group in the congregation, and that they be led by committed lay people who grasp how crucial their volunteer work is for the future of this church and the larger church in general.

II

A sign placed on the door of a church nursery quotes I Corinthians 15: 51 in the King James Version: *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.* I have given this sermon an unusual title: “The Changing Room.” I

think every Church School room should be a changing room, a room where in the long run we are all changed because of what happens there.

The term “changing room” is usually reserved for the little cubicle in a department store where you try on new clothes before deciding whether or not to buy them. Some might think of a changing room as the place where your team changes into its sports-gear. I have vivid memories of changing into the uniform of my university team and preparing to go out before sometimes as many as 90,000 people or more for football games. Those changing rooms were filled with careful reviews of our game plan leading up to pep talks and breathless anticipation of the game before us. And at the end, they were filled either with great celebrations or with quiet resignation for a loss. Changing rooms make a difference!

Church school classrooms are all changing rooms. They are places of transformation, of growth, of deepening understanding, and places that can form us to more closely follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

III

Church School matters. In fact, I believe that it matters so much that I would venture to say this: a strong church cannot be built without a strong Church School, or at least something like it. I will offer three quick reasons to back up what I just said.

Reason #1: the church of which we are a part depends on biblical literacy. Church School is one place where biblical literacy begins. It is a place where hard questions can be asked, and a place where the insights of scripture can be applied to the difficult moral questions of our day. We do not worship the Bible, but an understanding of the Bible is a foundation of all that we do. The Bible is like a window. If you just look AT the window you only see a streak here, a speck of dust there, a bug crawling on the windowpane, or perhaps your own reflection. But if you look THROUGH the window, you see the world outside. In Church School we learn to look through the words of the Bible to the meaning behind the words. Biblical literacy is not optional; it is required for a healthy church.

Reason #2: we are a community, and community needs small groups to care for one another. In Church School, we inevitably learn more about each other than we do in large congregations. It is in those small groups that we hear people struggle with the challenges of life, and in that struggle we see ourselves. We hear wisdom from others, and we discover insights that we could not find alone. In that engagement we see how people of faith fulfill Jesus' call to love one another.

Reason #3: you can never predict what impact a Church School class can have on a person. Even the person who seems least engaged in a class

may very well be absorbing something that will be life-changing. That Church School room will truly be a changing room. For children a Church School provides a place where Bible stories are told, acted out, and learned. For youth, Church School provides a place where they can think critically about what direction their lives may take. Many a vocational decision has been made in the context of a Church School class. For adults, a Church School class provides a place where they can come to grips with some of the more difficult parts of the Bible. They can study together, and in that study get new insights into their own life. There are many fads in church life, but Church School has stood the test of time. It makes a difference!

IV

So today we pause to recognize and thank those who believe in Church School, invest time in Church School, and make sure that every age group in the church has quality time in Church School. And as we thank them, let us remember that their work is absolutely essential for the future of this or any church.