

**THREE DOORS TO CHURCH GROWTH**  
*(Front Door, Backdoor, and the Door to the Future)*  
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Growing a church in today's culture is a specialized undertaking. It requires great spiritual perception, a love for people, vision, anointing, and methods that attract and keep people. The rapid changes in technology and people's behavioral patterns are difficult to keep up with. What worked yesterday may not work today. Diversity of culture from one location to another, make universal methods difficult. Yet, the church growth experts have done a lot of research on trends in this postmodern culture. This research can provide insight for making discriminating decision about structuring our growth plans. In the following essay you will find numerous quotes from the quotes from the experts in the field of church building. Their research and conclusion are insightful. You will find the experts' defense of Sunday school to be incredible!

**The Open Door**  
*(Evangelism)*

The fact that Sunday school is an effective tool in teaching and nurturing Christians is so obvious it has not been challenged, but its effectiveness as an evangelistic method has. This concept has been debunked in a recent survey by Thom Rainer and published in his book entitled, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*. This book is based on one of the most challenging evangelistic research projects ever attempted. It is a vast survey that included 576 Baptist churches, which have had at least one convert per every twenty members in a one year time period. The study included churches of less than a hundred to over 1500 from forty-one states. An important factor to emphasis about this survey is that these churches were winning new people and not just growing in attendance. A church can grow in membership and attendance by drawing people from other churches and not really be evangelizing the lost.

The survey revealed a number of surprises, one of which was the effectiveness of Sunday school as a dynamic method of evangelistic growth. When ask which methodologies were most effective for evangelism, pastors revealed the "big three": preaching, prayer ministries, and Sunday school. It is interesting that the category of "relational evangelism" was fourth in importance when considering Sunday school to be a relational ministry. This overlapping category puts Sunday school in a solid place of important right behind preaching and prayer. "Sixty-three percent ranked Sunday school as a major factor in their evangelistic effectiveness. Nearly 90 percent of the churches in the follow-up interviews identified Sunday school as their most effective assimilation tool."<sup>1</sup>

For those who find their Sunday school a diminishing ministry should consider Rainer's exhortation: "Those who think something is inherently wrong with Sunday school should consider two things: First, many Sunday schools are quite effective—the leaders in these evangelistic churches will attest to that. Secondly, churches with

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 83.

ineffective Sunday schools violate the very principles that make Sunday school a viable organization: they dilute biblical teachings, fail to train effective teachers, replace systematic Bible teaching with other types of group activity, and relegate Sunday school to the status of one more church activity.”<sup>2</sup>

In follow-up interviews, pastors revealed a high level of enthusiasm for Sunday school. “Leaders have not been oblivious to comments about the prospective demise of the Sunday school. They expressed bewilderment that a methodology so effective in their churches was declared terminally ill by pundits. Indeed, several pastors shared that they listened carefully to the critics, trying to determine if they and their churches were about to be left behind in a future methodological wave. But ultimately all came back to the position that Sunday school is neither ill nor dying nor dead. On the contrary, Sunday school, done well, is one of the most God-blessed methodologies in the recent history of the church.”<sup>3</sup> “Several church leaders told us that new members or new converts who did not become involved in the Sunday school were likely to drop out of the church within a year.”<sup>4</sup> Citing a study by Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens about the demise of the mainline denominations, Rainer emphasizes their conclusion: “The surprising conclusion of the study was that mainline churches were declining because they had failed to provide or emphasize regular biblical training for all age groups. Thus an entire generation grew up in the church without comprehending biblical truths, the uniqueness of the Christian faith, and the demands of discipleship. Without an anchor to hold them, millions left mainline churches.”<sup>5</sup>

Rainer concluded with the following assessment: “If the responses we received are indicative of evangelistic churches across America, we may anticipate that Sunday school, a methodology from the eighteenth century, will be a methodology of the twenty-first century. Churches will continue to make changes in Sunday school, as they have for two hundred years. But the essential function of reaching, teaching, discipling, and ministry will probably take on a new priority in the renewed Sunday school of the twenty-first century.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Close the Backdoor** *(Retention/Discipleship)*

Winning new converts will fulfill only half of the Great Commission. The commission is to “baptize” and “teach” (i.e. evangelize and disciple). John describes a spectacular vision in Revelation chapter twelve of a woman about to give birth to a manchild. A Red Dragon with seven heads sits ready to devour the child as soon as it is born. This ghoulish scenario vividly portrays the sad dilemma the church faces when new converts are birthed into a church unprepared to nurture them. Those who come through the front door must be retained in order for there to be true apostolic growth in the kingdom. Sunday school has for many years provided the church a tool for closing the backdoor.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97.

Barna says, “In a culture saturated with change, one of the most stable aspects in the religious sphere has been Sunday school. . . . Sunday school remains one of the most widely embraced ministry programs.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to say, “19 out of 20 Protestant churches (95%) offer ‘a Sunday school in which people receive some form of planned or systematic Bible instruction in a class setting.’”<sup>8</sup> According to David Kinnaman, director of Barna’s study, “Rumors that Sunday school’s imminent demise are greatly exaggerated. Every weekend more than 300,000 churches offer some type of systematic religious instruction in a classroom setting. . . . Nearly 9 out of 10 pastors said they consider Sunday school to be an important part of their church’s ministry.”<sup>9</sup> Barna has this to say about church leaders who have a diminished view of Sunday school: “Many church leaders have helped perpetuate the myth for twenty or so years. The myth is that Sunday School is no longer effective evangelistically or as an assimilation tool. And those who believed the myth are suffering as a result.”<sup>10</sup>

Thom Rainer conducted a second research endeavor of over 500 churches of various denominations. His accumulated conclusion after so much research is as follows: “After nearly a decade of researching two thousand churches of different sizes, locations, and denominations, I cannot say that I am surprised that Sunday School was rated so highly as an assimilation tool. My surprise in this study, however, was the intensity by which the church leaders expressed their beliefs that Sunday School is the chief assimilation approach. . . . The data is convincing and overwhelming: Sunday School is critical.”<sup>11</sup> In a time of rapid change Rainer observed, “I noticed that many of the highly touted growth innovations had an unusually short life span. What was hyped to be the methodology for the church was gone in a year or so. In other words, it proved to be little more than a fad. In the meantime, Sunday School continued to be the dominant program in most churches.”<sup>12</sup> Rainer praised Sunday school’s effectiveness with these words: “One would think that I would have no surprise when the strength of Sunday School became evident in yet another research project. This time, however, the overwhelming positive response regarding the Sunday School surprised me. No assimilation methodology came close to Sunday School in effectiveness. The leaders told us the methodology was number one, with no real competition. . . . No methodology was deemed more effective than the Sunday School in retaining members.”<sup>13</sup>

Barna concluded the following from his research, “What we learned from these churches is that no organization in America today provides more opportunities for ministry than Sunday School. The small-group movement is certainly to be lauded for its contributions to the kingdom. But, as George Barna recently noted, the movement has been on a numerical decline for the past few years. Barna cited a tendency toward weak

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<sup>7</sup> George Barna, “Sunday School is Changing in Under-the-Radar But Significant Ways,” *The Barna Update*, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org), July 11, 2005, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, (Nashville, TN: B and H Publishing Group, 1999), 29, (Quoting Don Cox).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 31.

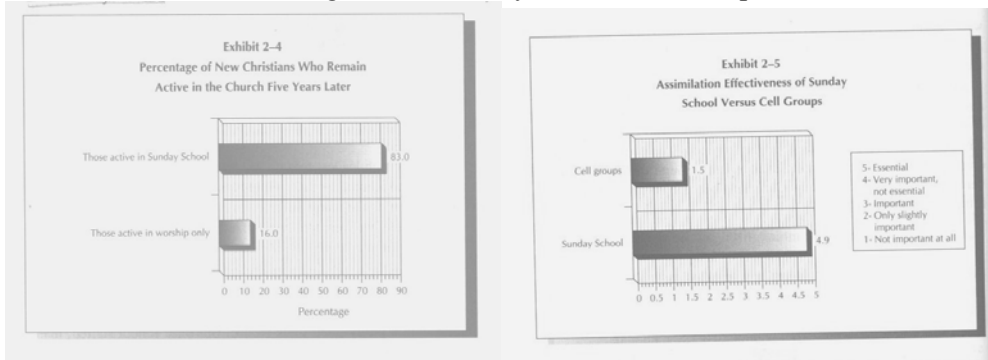
<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 32.

teaching, lack of leadership and accountability, confusion of purpose, and inadequate child care as possible explanations for the downturn.”<sup>14</sup>

Rainer says, “New Christians who immediately became active in Sunday School were five times more likely to remain in the church five years later (we did not include those who moved to another community or those who died in the ‘dropout’ category).”<sup>15</sup> “We ask church leaders that had utilized both Sunday School and cell groups why they ranked Sunday School higher. Four reasons were given with frequency.”

- 1) Easier to organize and administer.
- 2) More easily included all age groups.
- 3) Better doctrinal integrity with standardized curriculum.
- 4) Having worship and Sunday School the same day has practical benefits.<sup>16</sup>

“The research is clear if not overwhelming. Sunday School is the most effective assimilating methodology in evangelistic churches today. It is a place where teaching, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and evangelism can all take place. It is the place where relationships are formed and people become connected to the church.”<sup>17</sup> “Its history [Sunday School] is almost as old as our nation itself. But more and more the research indicates that Sunday School is not only our past, it is our future as well. And we who are leaders in the church will ignore this reality to our churches’ peril.”<sup>18</sup>



### **The Door of the Future** *(Children's Ministry)*

It is one thing to miss the boat, but George Barna says that in all of his research and evaluating he “missed the ocean” concerning the importance of ministry to children in today’s culture.<sup>19</sup> The world is looking for the church to help with raising their children. *Newsweek* magazine reported that within the general public 81% of mothers and

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39, (Quoting from George Barna, *Virtual America: What Every Church Leader Needs to Know about Ministry in an Age of Spiritual and Technological Revolution* [Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993], 52-55).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup> George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003), 10.

78% of fathers say they plans to send their young children to Sunday school or some other kinds of religious training.<sup>20</sup> Barna says, “Our children will define the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy.”<sup>21</sup>

“Social scientists have known for years that the moral foundations of children are generally determined by the time the individual reaches age nine.”<sup>22</sup> It is a sad fact to consider that “Only 3 percent of the nation’s 13-year-olds have a biblical worldview.”<sup>23</sup> “Our studies among kids show that 4 out of ever 5 churched 13-year-olds do not know what worship is, and a substantial majority of them admit they do not feel they have ever experienced God’s presence.”<sup>24</sup>

Barna concludes, “Having devoted more than two decades of my life and all of my professional skills to studying and working with ministries of all types, I am now convinced that the greatest hope for the local church lies in raising godly children.”<sup>25</sup> “More than two out of three of them [parents] abdicate that responsibility [spiritual training] to their church.”<sup>26</sup>

Larry Fowler says, “The research reinforces one simple but profound truth over and over again: If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people’s lives; and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young. . . . The more diligent we are in these efforts, the more prodigious a harvest we will reap.”<sup>27</sup>

George Barna was asked, “If you were a pastor of a typical church today, what practical things might you do to reach those outside?” One of the five answers was as follows: “I’d focus the majority of our outreach resources on children, not adults. Few adults get converted. The vast majority of people who ever embrace Christ do so when they’re young, usually before they hit the teen years. Every adult who’s interested in doing meaningful ministry would be encouraged to find a way to serve the kids in the church and community. And I’d do whatever we could to empower the kids to share their faith with their family and friends.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Karen Springen, “Raising A Moral Child,” *Newsweek*, Fall/Winter 2000, 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Larry Fowler, *Rock-Solid Kids: Giving Children a Biblical Foundation for Life* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003), 42.

<sup>28</sup> George Barna, “Catalyst Interview,” *REVI*, July/August, 2006, 16.