



CHURCH SUNDAY-SCHOOLS.

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RATHER more than a hundred years ago a pious layman of the city of Gloucester sowed a seed, of which it may with truth be said, that when it had grown it became "greater than all herbs and shooteth out great branches." When we know that in Great Britain alone there are more than 6,000,000 children in attendance at the Sunday-schools, that is to say 1,000,000 in excess of the number of children attending in our day-schools, notwithstanding the fact that attendance at the former is voluntary while at the latter it is, or is supposed to be, compulsory; when we consider that Sunday after Sunday there are more than 600,000 men and women who without fee or reward cheerfully give their services as teachers of this vast body of children we may fairly say that no modern institution has made so rapid a progress in a few years as that of Sunday-schools. And the Sunday-school system has not been confined to Great Britain: in America, in Australia, in Canada, wherever indeed the English language is spoken, Sunday-schools have been established and flourish, so that it has been computed that throughout the world there cannot be less than 1,500,000 teachers and 12,000,000 scholars; the seed has become a great tree and has shot out great branches which have filled the whole earth. I doubt whether Robert Raikes, when he opened his first Sunday-school in St. Catherine-street, Gloucester, with a staff of four teachers, realized what a tremendous work he was commencing. It is true no doubt that he did not intend to be satisfied, as others had been before him, with a mere isolated effort in his own city, and it is for this reason that we regard him, and rightly regard him, I think, as the founder of the Sunday-school system. Long before the time of Raikes, holy and earnest persons had been in the habit of gathering children together on the Lord's Day and giving them religious instruction. Individual efforts had been made from time to time by Roman Catholics, Nonconformists, Church of England clergymen and laymen to encourage a more devout observance of Sunday by collecting together the children in their districts to teach them the truths of the Gospel. Mr. Townshend Meyer who has carefully studied the early history of Sunday-schools gives the following striking description of some of the early pioneers of the movement:—

"A striking and dramatically contrasted group is made by these early founders of Sunday-schools. The Cardinal Archbishop of Milan (Cardinal Borromeo) a prince of the Roman Church, yet all his life 'the bold opponent of her enormous abuses' as severe in self-denial as munificent in charity; Alleine, the ascetic, tender-hearted Nonconformist, the fire of whose zeal stimulated a weak body to fatal over-work; the beautiful, witty, accomplished, yet 'perverse' young widow, Mrs. Boevey, glittering in her white and silver raiment; the learned Unitarian enthusiast, Lindsey, long struggling between ties of family and associations which bound him to the Establishment as Vicar of Catterick, and chaplain to his godfather the Earl of Huntingdon, and stings of conscience which told him he was no longer her consistent servant; the quiet, gentle young Methodist, Ha. . . Ball, with her peaceful home and orderly ways; and lastly, old weaver Jemmy, toil-battered, shrewd and kindly, clattering his brazen pestle and mortar to call his troupe of ragged urchins about him—all in their several modes and districts paving the way for the good work to be done by the prosperous, practical, Gloucester printer, with the aid of his modest clerical colleague, the late Berkshire curate, and some time master of King's School in the cathedral city."

It would be easy to multiply the names of men and women who, before the time of Raikes, had been moved to gather together the children in their parish or neighbourhood into what might very fairly be called a Sunday-school class in order to train them in religious knowledge; but the essential difference between these efforts and that of Robert Raikes consists in this, that all those who preceded him in the work were content with establishing schools in their own neighbourhood and took no steps to induce others to adopt the system, while Raikes, not content with his own individual work in the city of Gloucester, took every opportunity of urging the adoption of the practice far and wide, and never ceased his advocacy till the scheme was generally adopted throughout the land. As has been well said by Mr. Alfred Gregory in his biography of Robert Raikes: "From cottager to king, all learned of the new institution through Robert Raikes. He raised Sunday teaching from a fortuitous rarity into a universal system. He found the practice local: he made it national." To effect this object he possessed singular advantages. His father was the proprietor of the *Gloucester Journal*, one of the oldest newspapers extant, and being a philanthropist as well as a journalist delighted to make his journal the organ of every good cause. The son, who became editor of the newspaper at the early age of twenty-two, made full use of these advantages. He used its pages to recommend his new scheme throughout the length and breadth of the land, and the movement, which had before only been heard of in a few remote villages or provincial towns, soon began to spread and establish itself as an essential part of the parochial system. In attributing however to Mr. Raikes the credit of having created the Sunday-school system it would be unfair not to remark that he was greatly assisted in his work by a Church of England clergyman, the Rev. Thomas Stock, who was at that time head-master of the Gloucester Cathedral-school.

We should however be quite wrong if we were to regard the Sunday-schools which were established a century ago as analogous in all respects to those of the present day. Those were days when the blessings of compulsory education were unthought of, and when in many districts no provision whatever was made for any secular education at all; so that in estimating the work which Sunday-schools have achieved, we ought not to lose sight of the influence which they have exercised on the spread of primary education throughout England. It is no doubt true that the chief motive which influenced Raikes in establishing Sunday-schools in the city of Gloucester was pity for the degraded moral condition of the children of the poorer classes, and an earnest desire to bring religious influence to bear upon them to elevate them to a higher moral standard, but in doing this he must have found the secular knowledge of these children at so low a point that he was compelled to do something to strengthen their minds and intelligence if he were to have any hope of appealing successfully to their consciences. In addition therefore to the religious teaching which was given to the children as its main purpose, the imparting of a knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, subjects now relegated to the Day-school, were regarded as a scarcely less important work of the Sunday-school. Another point in which the early Sunday-schools differed from those of the present day was that the services of the teachers were not given, as is almost, if not quite, without exception the case at the present time, gratuitously, but were rewarded by a small payment; and it will give some idea of the vastness of the organization of the Sunday-school system in these days to learn that it would require an income of £1,300,000 each year to pay the whole of the teachers engaged in the work, if they only received each of them the moderate remuneration of one shilling each Sunday for their services, as in the earliest days of the establishment of the system.

I feel that I shall not carry with me the concurrence of the most earnest advocates of the Sunday-school system when I say that it is, has always been, and still continues to be, my opinion, that in an ideal state of Church life, Sunday-schools ought not to be a necessary part of parochial organization. If all parents, guardians, and god-parents did their duty, religious instruction would be imparted to the children in their own homes, and there would be no idea of delegating this responsibility to others.

Sunday-schools are, then, in my opinion, only a substitute for home-teaching. The question is perhaps only of academic interest, for it must be admitted that these responsibilities are even among what are called the upper classes, very generally neglected, and among the poorer classes, possibly to a great extent owing to the existence of Sunday-schools, almost wholly ignored. The main purpose then of

Sunday-schools is to take the place of the parent, and in the words of the Baptismal Service to see that the children "be virtuously brought up to lead a godly and a Christian life," and "be taught what a solemn vow promise and profession," they made through their god-parents at their baptism. It will be seen, that from my point of view, though the Sunday-school fulfils duties which might and should be performed by the parent, it does not in any way usurp the functions of the parish clergyman. He has a responsibility in regard to the children of his congregation as well as towards its adult members, the chief one being that which was laid upon him after the Reformation, that he should "diligently upon Sundays and holydays, after the second lesson at evening prayer, instruct and examine so many children of his parish sent unto him as he should think convenient in some part of their Catechism." The Sunday-school does not relieve him of this responsibility, but rather makes the efficient exercise of it possible, for it supplies the children with the religious knowledge on which his periodical instruction and examination may be based. It would be quite unfair to say that the establishment of Sunday-schools has had the effect of superseding the practice of catechising. On the contrary the revival of children's services in the Church of England has been coincident with the increase of efficiency in Sunday-schools, and has been due in no small measure to the prompting of persons interested in Sunday-school work.

It being admitted that it is the function of the Sunday-school to supply the religious teaching which a careful mother would wish to impart to her own child there will be no difficulty in determining the course of instruction which should be followed in our Church Sunday-schools. Most children spend from eight to ten years of their life there, and in that time it should be possible to teach them the principal events of the Old Testament, to enable them thoroughly to know and understand the teaching of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, to encourage them to a private study of the Bible, and to implant in their minds an assurance that it is the word of God.

It is in short her first duty to see that the children are trained up to be *Christians*. But her duty does not stop here. The days are long past when there was one undivided Church throughout the world, and however unwilling we may be to magnify the differences which divide the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and from the various Nonconformist sects on the other, however tolerant we may be of those who think differently to ourselves in matters of doctrine, we must not fear to state that it is the duty of a Church Sunday-school to teach to the children under her care most clearly and distinctly the doctrines of her Church, and enable them to answer the question which many, who ought to know better, are unable to answer, "Why am I a Churchman?" And for this purpose the Prayer-Book has provided a manual of instruction which ought to be known through and through by every child who has passed through a Church Sunday-school. In her Catechism she puts forth in the clearest and yet simplest forms the truth with regard to the two sacraments, she points out how the cardinal doctrines of the Gospel are taught in the Apostles' Creed, and that the Lord's Prayer contains a manual of prayer applicable to all the circumstances of the Christian life.

It may not be a *complete* exposition of Church doctrine, there may be other points with which, in view of the controversies of the present day, it may be regretted that its compilers did not deal, and the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury has endeavoured quite lately to supply some of these omissions, but it speaks much for the respect with which this old manual of instruction is regarded that the Church at large has hesitated to endanger its position by adding to it any statements which might be looked upon by any school of thought in the Church as controversial.

This then is the purpose of a Church Sunday-school, so to instruct the children in Church doctrine that they may all come to confirmation, and, becoming regular and intelligent communicants, may grow into full members of the Church; then to give them such a knowledge of Bible history, such an interest in religious matters as may encourage them, when they grow up to become themselves active Church workers, and lastly, so to influence their hearts and minds that they may live sober, righteous, and godly lives amid the temptations of this evil world.

What machinery then has the Sunday-school for accomplishing this purpose? What ought the organization to be by which this object is to be attained? It is of primary importance that the Sunday-school should be not only under the nominal headship, but under the constant and earnest supervision, of the Incumbent of the parish. On him must rest the responsibility of selecting the course of instruction to be given, he

should himself choose the teachers, and by gathering them together at periodical instruction classes, so imbue them with a knowledge of his own views of Church doctrine that they may be able to pass on this knowledge to their scholars, and so train them up to be loyal members of his congregation when they have passed out of the Sunday-school. He should have a thorough knowledge of the lines on which the school is worked and by frequent visits to the school see that it is being carried on in accordance with his wishes. However tempting it may be to the overworked town Incumbent to delegate this work to one of his assistant curates, he should resist the temptation. It can never be too often pointed out that the future of a country depends upon its children, and so a clergyman, if he wishes in years to come to do an effective work in his parish, must gain the respect and affection of the children in his Sunday-school, that they, when they grow up, may become constant worshippers in his church and earnest fellow workers with him in the parish. But having gained this general knowledge of the working of the school, having laid down the line of teaching to be given there he may wisely leave the details of organization to another; and the paramount necessity for a thoroughly efficient Sunday-school is a good superintendent. Teachers may possibly be manufactured, but superintendents must be heaven born. They must have qualities of a very high order perfectly to fulfil the duties of their position. Like a general they have to command men, and so must have the power of extorting obedience from those working under them; but it must be a cheerful and willing obedience founded on respect for the character of the commander and confidence in the wisdom and justice of his commands. Their whole heart must be in the work; they must be the trusted friends of all the teachers; they should be personally acquainted with all the children. Every detail connected with the management of the school should be settled by them, after consultation with, though not necessarily in accordance with the wishes of, the teachers in their school. A superintendent should never be absent from the school, except from illness or during the few weeks' holidays which he may allow himself during the year, when he should see that an efficient deputy is there in his place; his whole heart should I say, be in the work, it should be his one interest, his hobby if you will, and therefore this work can best be done by a layman, and not by a clergyman who must necessarily have other parochial duties to share his interest.

The ideal is a high one, but the matter is one of supreme importance. A strong superintendent makes a disciplined and efficient Sunday-school; the best staff of teachers will fail if their chief is weak. I have dwelt rather strongly on this point, because if the organization of a school (which depends mainly on the superintendent) is satisfactory, everything else will fall naturally into its place and work smoothly. The teachers will be influenced by the example of regularity and punctuality, the children will acquire habits of discipline and attention and the wheels of the machine will work smoothly. In every school there should be a teacher for every ten children at the most—eight is better. Subject to the general rules of the school teachers should be allowed perfect independence in the management of their class, and should be considered wholly responsible for its discipline. Except in very exceptional cases the superintendent should not interfere between the teachers and their class; all directions by him to the children should be given through the teacher. There ought to be a regular course of lessons, selected by the Incumbent of the parish, and so arranged as to cover in a course of years the whole range of Scripture and Church teaching of which I have before spoken, and this course of lessons must be the basis on which the instruction of each teacher to the children must be founded; but the mode in which the instruction is given may, subject to its being in conformity with the doctrinal views taught in the parish church, be left to the discretion of each individual teacher. One will prefer the catechetical mode of teaching, another may have a greater gift for imparting instruction in the form of an address. Though I am myself a strong believer in the superiority as a rule of the former mode, the intellects of the children being sharpened, their interest excited, their attention maintained, the teaching being, as it were, drawn out of themselves by means of questions and answers; still there are teachers who can keep a class in enraptured interest by putting their lesson into the form of a narrative, who would fail altogether if they attempted the catechetical mode. The children should be encouraged to learn something by heart during the week to say to their teacher on the Sunday—the Collect for the day, a portion of the Epistle or Gospel, a few verses of a hymn—and marks should be given for these lessons as well as for punctuality of attendance and for conduct; and, where prizes are given in a school,

as will probably usually be the case, every child who attains a certain standard should be entitled to receive one. It is, to my thinking, a mistake to give a fixed number of prizes to each class, irrespective of the degree of proficiency and regularity of attendance attained by the children of that class. The more satisfactory plan is to give every child an opportunity of gaining a reward if they are so minded.

In one school with which I am acquainted a special distinction in the shape of a medal is given to every child who is not absent from the Sunday-school once during the year, that is, attends 104 times, and so successful has this plan been in encouraging a regular attendance that, while in a school of 200 boys, the distinction was, during the first year after its inauguration, only gained by three boys, this number has steadily increased year by year, until seven years later it was obtained by no less than fifty, or a quarter of the whole school. A boy obtaining this reward for the second time receives a bar, like that placed on the ribbon of a soldier's war medal, and I know one boy who possesses a medal and six bars, which shows that during the whole seven years of which I have been speaking, he has not been absent on a single occasion from the Sunday-school.

A most important feature in connection with a well organized Sunday-school is the children's service. It is unfortunately the case that this is very commonly held in the school-building itself, in the same room in which the school itself is held. Although it may sometimes happen that there is no alternative, I would urge the extreme desirability of a great effort being made by every parish clergyman to hold these services in the church itself. It is very difficult to get the children to be really reverent in a room which is associated in their minds with the daily drudgery of learning the three Rs, and the Sunday-school has failed in one of its most elementary duties if it does not instil in the minds of its children a reverence for divine worship. Then over and above these weekly children's services, there should be once in the month a public catechizing of the children in church. It is by means of this that the Incumbent will keep in touch with the school, will be able to satisfy himself that the prescribed course of lessons is being rigidly adhered to, is being faithfully and effectively taught, and their meaning sufficiently grasped by the scholars as a whole.

These then are broadly the lines on which a Sunday-school may be effectively worked. It only remains to consider how far the Sunday-school system has fulfilled the intention of its founder. It is admitted by all who have had an opportunity of judging of its work that it has conferred benefits on the country which could have been conferred by no other organization. It has brought religious teaching within the reach of every child in England, it has supplemented the ministerial work of the parish priest by instructing under his superintendence the little ones of his flock, it has repaired the negligence of parents who have been too often indifferent with regard to the religious training of their children, and if we admit, as we are compelled to do, that, even after a century of work, much remains for it still to do, it is only a recognition of the fact that the Sunday-school is, after all, but a human organization, and lacking in the completeness and perfection which characterizes a divine institution. But year by year it is making good its deficiencies, and adapting itself more and more to the needs of the children committed to its care.

The courses of lessons published by the Church of England Sunday-school Institute and other Church societies are all that can be desired to assist the teachers in their responsible work; in many parishes normal classes are held to teach them how to teach; preparation classes are part of the machinery of every well-organized parish; and a vigorous effort is now being made to provide for a systematic visitation and inspection of Sunday-schools. All along the line there is energy, activity, and reality. Spurred on by the secularizing tendency of modern educational legislation, the Church of England is endeavouring by promoting the efficiency of her Sunday-schools to supply the want of that definite dogmatic religious teaching which is no longer permitted to be given in many of the day-schools of this country. The helpers in this work may not in all cases be highly-trained teachers, but their common motive for undertaking the work is the constraining love of Christ, and what is wanting in technical knowledge is made up for in enthusiasm, so that we cannot doubt that this great Sunday-school system inaugurated in such a humble spirit by Robert Raikes a century ago, is destined to do an even greater work in the future than it has accomplished in the past, and be an instrument in God's hands for preserving our dear motherland from the indifferentism, the agnosticism, the scepticism, and atheism which has stained the national life and marred the prosperity of some other nations.