

## THE SUNDAY SCHOOL AND THE CHURCH.

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Increased interest is evidently being taken in Church Sunday Schools. There is abundant ground for it. It is called for by their existing defects; the difficulties in the way of their radical improvement, and the vital importance which attaches to their character and work. There are problems touching these points which are hardly exceeded in gravity by any connected with the canonical work of the Church; and which, in not a few cases, seem incapable of solution.

The Sunday School has become a prime factor in the home-work of the Church. It is the direct and most potent feeder of the Confirmation class, and, through that of the Church itself. It is almost the only agency through which young communicants can be well grounded in the doctrines and usages of the Church. The Confirmation Class has its proper place in succession, and ought to be made as sound and as effective in its lessons as is possible. Much, very much indeed, remains to be done in this direction; and it ought to be more earnestly and widely attempted. But the time which it is possible to give to the training of the Confirmation class is commonly too limited, and regular attendance and systematic study too hard to secure, to make it a sufficient agency, without the previous work of the Sunday School. It is enough for it, if it supplements the Sunday School teaching and training with higher instruction in the Catechism, the parts and uses of the Prayer Book, and the nature, claims and functions of the Church.

Indeed, one might go farther than this, and affirm the Sunday School, rightly constituted and conducted, to be really our chief dependence for a proper grounding of adult communicants in fundamental Church truth. Not, of course, that they are to be found in the Sunday School classes,—it is a misfortune, and a reproach to our religion, that they are not commonly there as teachers,—but that those who have grown up in the Church from their childhood may have been thus properly trained in the Sunday School. As for any other preparation of adults for Confirmation, it is impossible to get them engaged in any class for instruction, and private, or individual instruction,—half the time next to impracticable,—is, at the best, limited and desultory. Beyond this,—as few will give any attention to self-instruction by reading,—their only chance for growth in knowledge of Church truth lies in the weekly deliverances of the pulpit. This is too often either unequal to skilled teaching, or is too "sore let and hindered" against doctrinal preaching to be able to dispel any such ignorance as is not only natural, but is also continually oozing into the Church from the Denominations.

The true mission of the Church Sunday School, then, is to prepare the way for the Confirmation class teaching and pulpit instruction, by laying a,—simple it may be but yet,—sound and solid foundation of Church truth in the child's mind, heart and life. This is to be done only by thoroughly establishing the child in the knowledge of the Catechism, and by habituating him in some important measure to the use of the Prayer Book and the Church services. Dry and uninteresting, hard to learn and difficult to teach, as many think it, the value of the former cannot be overestimated. No truer words have been written than the following, from the pen of an English Roman Catholic essayist: "If we would discover the secret of the wholesome influence exercised by Anglicanism upon the gen-

eral mind of the country for generations, we shall find it in the pages of the Book of Common Prayer which put before us a 'Catechism,' that is to say, an instruction to be learned by every person before he be brought to be confirmed by the Bishop; a beautiful document in which the primary verities of Christian faith and morals are impressed upon the tender mind, in language at once simple and stately as that of the English Bible." These words might well be inscribed in letters of gold on the walls of every Sunday School room. They are enough of themselves to demonstrate the folly of the too common practice of turning aside, under one pretense or another, to the "Leaflet" and "Question Book," with their diluted and rambling "study of the Bible,"—the favorite instrumentalities of the sects, a practical concession to their methods, often colorless as their undenominationalism, and even when clothed in Churchly guise, a sort of reflection upon the value of the Catechism pure and simple.

The successful teaching of the simple Catechism, of course, depends largely upon the capability of the teacher, and the idea entertained of the true method of teaching. For example, much as we may admire her generous devotion in undertaking, in the absence of adult teachers, the care and instruction of the Sunday School class, the young girl herself half-taught, with no understanding of what it is to teach the Catechism, and with no experience in teaching, and, perhaps, no native aptitude for it, we cannot expect the Sunday School to attain any real success through such agencies. But aside from this widely existent and almost insurmountable difficulty as to teachers, we are constantly having to meet and contend with alien notions, and blind objections to the simple teaching of the Catechism—objections which are generally as stubborn as they are preposterous.

To some persons it is an objection that the study of the Catechism primarily and necessarily is so much a matter of "mere memorizing." But how short-sighted and unintelligent this is! The child's first learning is always the noting, and fixing in the memory, of forms as facts. The realizing of these forms as facts comes later; and last of all, it reaches the understanding of both forms and facts as realities. The child's memory is, therefore, its treasure-house of materials for its future consideration and comprehension. That anything, then, at this early stage, serves to discipline its memory into the habit of fixing and holding any form of "sound words" and certain truth, is of the first utility. To learn the Catechism by heart is, then, in accordance with both the laws of mind and the vital importance of true religion.

This objection is, however, very commonly re-enforced by the plea that the child does not and cannot understand what he is learning. This is only applying to the Sunday School the absurd principle so often laid down in the Public Schools,—that the child should not be required to learn anything that he does not understand. This has already been substantially answered. But it may be added that to thoroughly memorize the formula first, facilitates the work of attaining its comprehension, both by giving the mind the mastery of what is to be comprehended, and by leaving it free for the exercise of the comprehending thought, without having, at the same time, to toil for the lost portions of the formula. Besides, who does not know that there are thousands of things which may be known as facts and truths, and may be effectively and usefully applied, which are not at all understood in their inner nature or philosophy; not a few, indeed, which are even beyond the comprehension of the profoundest thinkers? Especially is this true,—in reference to revealed religion. That, indeed, would be no true religion at all, if it did not involve profound truths, supernatural facts, and Divine mysteries, which, while knowable, are necessarily

beyond finite comprehension. The religion of him who will believe nothing which he does not understand, is a compound of profound ignorance and sublime egotism. And the religion of those who are always for holding the young back from Church duty, because "they are not old enough to understand," generally consists, rather in flattering themselves that they understand, than in endeavoring to practice what they really know.

Another class object, that the study of the Catechism is so dry and uninteresting. This is simply falling in with the current craze for "a good time generally," which would turn the Church into a Sunday club-house, and Divine worship into a sort of sacred amusement. The Sunday School ought, of course, to be bright and spirited in its conduct and general exercises, as a means to a greater life and earnestness in the class work, but not as an end in itself or as a "catch-penny" device. Unfortunately in the effort to increase numbers and compete with rival schools of a proselyting character, the struggle is not so much to secure honest study and sound teaching as to devise attractions, excitements,—something which "will draw." It is painful to see to what an extent in some sectarian Sunday Schools this is carried; into what agonizing fancifulness of illustration, sentimental jingle in music, and semi-theatrical shows and performances, it leads. But this neither accords with the aims of the Church nor the mission of the Church Sunday School. The complaint of the religious amusement-seeker, that the study of the Catechism is too dry and uninteresting is, then, of an alien and unchurchly origin. Besides this, if the alleged defect appears so far real that it seems to necessitate a change for some more popular line of study, the fault lies in the capacity of the teacher, erroneous aims and methods in teaching, or some defect in the general management of the Sunday School.

Another objection is, that "Bible-teaching" should have a larger, if not the chief place, in the Sunday School instruction. This, also, is largely an importation from the sects. It is in accordance with their theories that "the Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants," and that it is competent for any one to interpret the Bible for himself. It involves the prevalent and growing use of the leaflet system, and its natural concomitant,—verse-and-text dissection and exposition. One may cheerfully admit the excellence of the intention which animates the current, wide-spread "Bible Study" of the Sunday Schools, Bible classes, Bible readings and Prayer meeting text-repeating of the sects. But when he looks at the general increase of superficiality in the knowledge of the Bible, and at the startling prevalence of levity and irreverence in the popular use of the words of Holy Writ, he cannot but doubt the wisdom of the agencies and methods employed, and must deprecate their adoption by the Church. This, however, does not involve objecting to the careful memorizing of select portions of Holy Scripture, such as are set forth in the Prayer Book, by pupils in the Sunday School, provided it does not interfere with the paramount study of the Catechism. The truth is,—though the Bible-study objectors seem not to know it,—the Catechism and Prayer Book are from beginning to end *instinct with Bible truth*, and are, for the aims and uses of the Church, her *best instrumentalities* for perfecting her children in the knowledge of its letter and practice.

Dismissing these objections as alien and untenable, it has only to be added that they have been thus fully considered, not only because they are calculated to embarrass and mislead those who have the charge of the Church Sunday School, but also because they lead to the discrediting of the Catechism as *fundamental* in Church training, and utterly ignore the fact that in its character, aims and methods, the Church Sunday School is and must be a something quite