

"A FORWARD MOVEMENT IN SUNDAY SCHOOL WORK."

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The Sunday school is an agency which is or should be the embodiment of the most mature, intelligent and progressive views of the church in regard to the religious education of the young. For its utility the church is as much responsible as it is for its existence. It therefore behoves those who are entrusted with this work to see to it that it conforms to the requirements and necessities of the age in which we live. The church has undertaken the work of religious instruction from a strong conviction that no system of education can be complete without it—that moral must always go side by side with intellectual culture—that if a man is to fall of God, it were better for him to fall of everything else. It says to the youth of our land "Get all the secular instruction you can in the public schools, but 'with all your getting, get understanding,' i.e., education, viewed apart from moral culture, will do a great deal for you. It will unlock for you the mysteries of nature, and familiarize you with the wonders of science. But, if you are devoid of those principles which Christianity alone can furnish—of that higher knowledge, of which the Bible is the only text book, then there is nothing to prevent your other knowledge proving to you a curse rather than a blessing. There never was an age in which this fact needed to be more emphasized than at the present. Never was there more eagerness manifested, or facilities offered in every civilized country, for the acquisition of secular knowledge, than at the present time—an eagerness which is altogether out of proportion to that which is manifested in the pursuit of religious knowledge. May we not with propriety say that the facilities are also out of proportion too? We are all of us, I presume agreed, that in our public schools the Bible should be excluded as a Text Book—which means that religious knowledge shall not form part of the curriculum of our schools. And right here permit me to state that I consider it to be a matter for which we ought as Canadian Methodists, to congratulate ourselves, that our public system of education has been established on so wise a basis, viz., free and strictly secular and non-sectarian. Had it been otherwise, such as for example in England, between the years 1846 and 1870, when the system of education was carried on on a sort of partnership basis between the government and the religious denominations, we might have been found today handicapped and hampered with a dual system of religious education, viz., that of the day schools and that of the Sunday schools. Having been a denominational English teacher myself during that period, I can candidly say that I believe the best interests of religious education in that country were sacrificed, by such an arrangement as was then entered into. Neither the day nor the Sunday schools looked upon themselves as being solely responsible. The consequence was the Sunday school rest-

ed satisfied in concerning itself, with that portion of the work which was purely spiritual and emotional, or at most, that which was only of a denominational character, leaving the day school the duty of imparting an intellectual knowledge of the Bible. I have in my possession the questions on religious knowledge which were given in competitive examinations open to scholars attending the public elementary schools of South Staffordshire, Eng., in the years 1863 and 1864, which shows that the children attending those schools, which were of every type of all the schools throughout the country prior to the introduction of the Board School System, were expected to have instruction in religious knowledge. At the public examinations a Bible lesson was sure to be a prominent feature, whilst pupil teachers from the very commencement of their course, which was at a very early age, in my own case, at the age of 13, were obliged to pass annually an examination in religious knowledge. But here in British Columbia we have it is not so drawn and we know that if religious education is not carried on by the Sunday school, it is not carried on at all. The Sunday school is solely responsible. For may I be permitted further to postulate, that the religious instruction of the home is practically nil. Certainly there are families in which it is given, but as a rule, either on account of inability, unwillingness or lack of time on the part of the parent, systematic religious instruction is not given from one year's end to the other. The fact is that the Sunday school is left in complete possession of the field. "Her right there is none to dispute." Let us see now whether she has risen to a full sense of the momentous task she has undertaken, or at least which has been imposed upon her. To carry out her sublime mission there is one session of the school held per week, viz., as a rule on Sunday afternoon. One hour and a half per week, gives not more than about half an hour's actual instruction.

In any case let us as teachers and pastors face this question with a mutual determination that we will by the grace of God shoulder our responsibility in relation to the young, lay ourselves out for their benefit, and we may be sure of an "ample recompense" in gathering "fruit unto life eternal" some 30, some 60 and some 100 fold, and this will be rich reward.

"Open wide the garden gate
Let the little wanderers in,
Let them now no longer wait
Till their lives are stained with sin.
There is room enough for them
In the perfume-laden bowers;
Room for many a sparkling gem
'Mid the Gardener's living flowers.
Take them from the storm-tossed flood,
Moor them at the Eden isle,
Sprinkled with the atoning blood,
Their's shall be an angel's smile.
Shield them from the world's stern care,
Guide their little footsteps right,
Let them breathe the heavenly air,
Let them see the living light.
Suffer them to come to Him,
Shepherd of the cherub band,
He can light the valley dim,
Leading from this desert land.

Natured with a kingly care,
All the weeds of sin kept down,
Precious fruit their lives shall bear,
Till they win the sparkling crown,
And with golden harps in hand,
Gladning all that blest abode,
They shall shine a star-gemmed band
In the coronal of God.

And let it be borne in mind that this is a subject for which, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the children have no natural aptitude or inclination. Apart from the stories and biographies of the Bible, religious instruction possesses little interest to the average child. Further, for five days out of the seven, our scholars are under the moulding influence of the public school teacher. Such influence has a tendency to strengthen their faculties, broaden their perceptions, and to make them critical and above all rational. In some way or other some crude interpretation of the Bible is brought to their notice, which conflicts with the facts and principles instilled into their minds in the day school. They cannot give up those facts and principles; and equally impossible is it that they can hold on to those crude interpretations at the same time. The inevitable result is to cause them to look upon the Bible as a book of fables and they come to the Sunday school on the Sabbath with no taste for a book which to them is a series of contradictions and absurdities. And we devote the short space of half an hour or so to the task of undoing the mischief which has been wrought in their minds by a day by day contact with a rampant agnosticism, which is the environment of many, if not the majority of the youth attending our Sunday schools. And not only so, but as I have already pointed out, they are outgrowing by the simple force of education the crude, antiquated, superstitious and bigoted views of religion which are being presented to them at every turn; can we say they are being educated into an intelligent perception of it? If so, where? and by whom? During the few moments we have them under our influence in the Sabbath school? and by the class of teachers and methods of instruction in vogue in many of our Sunday schools to-day? He would be indeed a bold man who dare assert that. Perhaps what I have said may be sufficiently clear to indicate what I intend shall be the main scope of this paper. That as the the 20th century dawns upon us, our rallying cry may be "A forward movement in Sunday school work." Twentieth century funds are all right, but by all means let us take a broader view of our obligations, let us have more development of the latent talent of the church and more adaptation in our methods. What I would like to see is a forward movement in the teaching of the mere letter of sacred truth. Without a knowledge of the letter, how can we expect our children to catch the spirit which the letter contains? The spirit is bound up in the letter. The letter is the doorway into the temple, and if the doorway be not opened, access to the holy place becomes impossible. The use of the International Sunday School Lessons form a capital basis for a more efficient system of instruction, inasmuch as it assures a gradual and uniform effort. The use also of the Banner and other publications of like nature are most com-