The Sunday School

The Ideal Sunday-school.

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For more than thirty years we have been seeking for it, for more than thirty years we have been studying methods of attaining it, and to-day the golden goal seems as far off as ever; the heights to which we would climb are still inaccessible, the success we would achieve lies still beyond our reach, and perhaps will never be realized. What is an ideal? Is it not something that exists chiefly in the imagination? some flight of fancy that is unattainable and impracticable as well? Webster quotes that, "between the ideal and the practical there is a wide distance." And yet were it not for the high ideals we set before us, impossible and unreal as they may appear, were it not for the prize at which we aim, though we despair of ever winning it, were it not for the soul-inspiring, heart-uplifting, ever on-urging influence of some far off ideal, the great achievements of humanity would never have been realized, the wonderful discoveries of this twentieth century would still be shrouded in the mysteries of the unfathomed and the unknown. Ideals have been man's inspiration from his earliest history.

Let us, then, consider briefly, what is an ideal Sunday-school? Or, rather, let us first ask what is the object and purpose of the Sunday-school? what it's aim and end?

As I understand the question: it is to impart a knowledge of the Scriptures, and to lead the unsaved to the Saviour. And the Sunday-school that most nearly accomplishes this purpose, that most successfully reaches this end, whether it meets under the vaulted roof of the vast cathedral, or beneath the bare rafters of the little log school house, whether the instruction falls from classic lips and minds trained in the highest schools of learning, or comes from hearts untaught save by the guidance and inspiration of the Great Teacher, I say that the school that most successfully attains this end is the ideal Sunday-school.

The ideal Sunday-school, however, is not a school for little children only, and I think that here is where, in city schools especially, we have made a great mistake. The Sunday-school is a school that has no graduating class, that awards no diplomas, that has no commencement days. It is a school we enter at the cradle and we leave at the grave, and then only to become enrolled in that only ideal school "where they no longer need our poor instruction, and Christ himself doth rule."

The ideal Sunday-school is not an appendage to the Church, an excrescence hung on the outside of the church, nor a useless piece of furniture consigned to the basement. The ideal Sunday-school is not a school run by the lay element of the Church, from which the ministerial dignity holds aloof or looks on, in cold criticism, if not supercilious scorn. The ideal Sunday-school is neither a playhouse nor a prison, a show room nor a monastic cell, and yet the ideal Sunday-school is one where attractions must hold an important place, where the whole school is in the church and the whole church is in the school—where the utmost harmony and sympathy exist between church and school, between pastor and teachers, where the humble efforts of the latter are directed and encouraged by the wisdom and experience of the former.

How shall we attain so desirable an end? By what methods shall this result be accomplished?

A Sunday-school consists of a pastor, superintendent, officers, teachers, and scholars, and a place in which to meet. Its working materials or tools are, first, the Bible, lesson helps, maps, tact, and brains. Its attractions, music, books, papers, and picnics. Its resources, prayer and study. Make all these elements perfect in their several parts, and you have the ideal Sunday-school. First, then, we will consider the place in which the Sunday-school meets. I hope and trust and pray that the day when churches are built with cellars underground, basements so called, in which to hold the Sunday-school, will soon be reckoned with the barbarities of the past. Underground stables are not fit for cattle, and much less are underground basements, with their smoky furnaces and atmosphere tainted with the odors of decayed wood, hot in winter and damp in summer, a fit place in which to put little children to teach them of the light and beauty of the Upper Sanctuary, unless you wish them to conclude that, like the sanctuary over their heads, with its cushioned seats, its frescoed walls, and carpeted floor, that it is only for the "grown ups" and no place for little children. I am aware that we must adapt ourselves to circumstances, and that all churches cannot have elegantly appointed Sunday-school halls, but the best the church affords should be at the service of the children. They should not be made to feel that the church is too good for them, and that the basement, the shed, or anywhere is good enough for a Sunday-school. Where the construction of churches is under consideration, the Sunday-school hall should be equally provided for with the church auditorium, the church parlor, or the minister's vestry.

In regard to the teachers, this, to my mind, is the all important part of the Sunday-school; the point where the greatest weakness is found; the place where each teacher is a law unto himself, a sort of go-as-you-please system, composed of every sort of style and manner, comprising the preaching, lecturing, catechetical, conversational, on down to the teacher who reads the questions from the quarterly, and answers as well, while the class tell stories or go to sleep. And how should this be otherwise. These teachers have had, as a rule, no training. Elected by an indifferent vote of a quarterly board that knows little or nothing of the necessary qualifications of a Sunday-school teacher, or chosen by the school or class itself from some personal whim, how can these persons, picked at random, be expected to make efficient or successful teachers?

Where, then, lies the difficulty, and how shall it be overcome? The trouble lies at the fountain head. The church of to-day has given all its attention to preaching, and teaching has been ignored. Our theological colleges have bent all their wisdom and energies towards turning out preachers, and they have succeeded well. Our pulpits to-day are filled with a class of men unequalled even in the grand old days of the past. For eloquence, for profound reasoning, for unravelling the deep and hidden mysteries of the Bible, they are unsurpassed, but all these energies, all these high attainments, have been confined to the pulpit, and teaching has been neglected.

I claim that our theological schools should train teachers as well as preachers. I know there is a feeling in the pulpit that a man is called to preach. Who ever heard a young candidate state that he had received a call to teach? Preaching is the ambitious, exalted mark at which they aim. Teaching is subordinate work, a sort of religious drudgery to be put off on the laity. And yet we read of Him as the Great "Teacher," not the grand preacher. Preaching is like a general volley on parade, and often with blank cartridge, too. Teaching is rifle practice, with a mark for every shot. Preaching is general, promiscuous firing, sometimes over the head, sometimes under the feet, often wide of the mark. Teaching is direct personal contact, concentrated effort, with an opportunity of driving every shot home. Teaching, to our mind, is the higher mission of the two, the one most productive of real results. I advocate for the ideal Sunday-school a ministry trained to teach, who in their turn shall train the other teachers, and for this purpose I would suggest in connection with every school a teachers' library, containing all the standard religious works, complete sets of maps, both ancient and modern, histories, encyclopaedias, Bible dictionaries, and all the latest, newest, and best Sunday-school helps. Something to work with, and not expect "bricks" of teachers if you give them no straw. In connection with this library I would have a teacher's parlor in the church, heated and lighted at all times, where the teacher could go at any spare moment and study the lesson. Once a week there should be a teachers' meeting, presided over by the trained pastor-teacher, who would not only assist in the study of the lesson but in the method of teaching it as well.

One word to the teachers. Let the teachers, as far as possible, be known for their sweet piety. Let the lady teachers at least, always put on their daintiest dress, their best bonnet, and their sweetest smile when they come before their class. I knew a little boy who, fifty years ago, attended a Sunday-school, and though to-day he recalls not one word that teacher said, yet the memory of her lovely face, her faultless attire, her kindly smile, is still before him, and the music of her gentle voice is still ringing in his ears, and has been to him a talisman all through his life that has warded off many an evil inclination, and helped to hold him to the narrow path.

Let the teacher be alive to the importance of the work. Until the Sunday-school class is of more importance than a Sunday dinner we will never reach the ideal Sunday-school.

As regards the officers of the school, these should be men or women alert, courteous, prompt, applying the same business methods to their work as they do to their secular affairs.

Regular attendance is one of the inexorable demands of the ideal Sunday-school. Not only on the part of the scholars and teachers, but the officers as well. The superintendent should be alive, there is no room in the superintendent's desk for statues or mummies. He wants to be in touch and accord with every scholar, teacher, and officer, and especially the pastor. His qualifications should be a love for God, a love for the Bible, a love for the word, and a love for little children. He should be gifted with a certain amount of executive ability, quick to plan, and prompt to execute. He should be young, yes, young, the snows of many winters may be settling on beard and hair, the lines of care may be cutting furrows in cheek and brow, but the heart must be young, young enough to be in sympathy with the young around him. And when the laughter of youth grates harshly on his ears, when their pleasant talk and happy ways seem frivolous and insipid to him, when he finds in his heart a desire only to sing psalms, draw long breaths, and groan amen, he may be very useful in some places, but he is no longer fit to run a Sunday-school.

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