

The Child and the Church

By Rev. George G. Webber,
Okotoks, Alta.

"NO one will deny that the weakest point in our campaign for bringing the world to Christ is the relation of the Church to the young. Here is our nearest opportunity; here the problems are least complicated, and the difficulties smallest; yet here we are least awake, least aggressive." Is this indictment of Dr. George Albert Coe's true? Is this a fair representation of the Church's attitude, the Church's success in its work among the young? I think we will not have to look long before we find there is all too much truth in the statement. And yet there would seem to be brighter

agreement. We are all quite prepared to acknowledge the salvation of all children who have died, but are our views so definite with regard to the relation of the normal living child to Jesus Christ? It is of far greater importance that we should have definite and accurate conceptions concerning the relation of living children, than that we should have a restful theory of the state of those departed.

What has Jesus to say concerning the child? The record of what Jesus said directly to, or of, the child is limited to but a few verses in each of the gospels

moved with indignation and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God. (To such becometh the Kingdom of God, R.V.). Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein. And He took them in His arms, and blessed them, laying His hands upon them." The teaching here seems clear. Jesus recognized the child as a member of the Kingdom of God. To Nicodemus, the ruler who came to Him by night, Jesus said, "Ye must be born again." To the disciples he said, "Except ye turn and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." But of the little ones he said, "To such becometh the Kingdom of God." Should we not willingly and eagerly accept that teaching of Jesus on this question? His statement seems clear and authoritative. The teaching is simple, and one cannot but wonder that we have been so long in really discovering it. But the attitude of the Church in the past seems to have been to treat the child religiously as an adult, and lay an unwarrantable emphasis upon conditions that, after all, were really intended for the adult, not for the child. An illustration of this may be found in the hymns published in a collection intended especially for children and issued in 1852. Let me quote one hymn, which was entitled, "Motives to Early Piety."

"Almighty God, Thy piercing eye strikes through the shades of night,
And our most secret actions lie all open to Thy sight.

"There's not a sin that we commit, or idle word we say,
But in Thy dreadful book 'tis writ, against the judgment day.

"And must the crimes that I have done be read and published there?
Be all exposed before the sun, while men and angels hear?"

"Lord, at Thy feet ashamed I lie, upward I dare not look.
Pardon my sins before I die, and blot them from Thy book!"

Can we recognize this as a fair interpretation of the attitude and teaching of Jesus? I think not. In fact, I think we would be rather inclined to doubt that such a conception of God's relation to the young could hold any incentive to early piety. That is not the thought of God that Jesus gave to the world, nor the thought of Jesus concerning the relation of the little children to His kingdom. Jesus said that the child and the childlike belong to the Kingdom of God.

Just here we might say that this teaching can hardly be taken to mean that the Christian worker can stand at the gates and claim the new life in masses by means of some magic or charm. Each child must be treated as an individual, and each representative of the new generation must be retained for the kingdom, greeted in the all-prevailing name of Jesus, and brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The point we wish to make clear here is just this, the new life is to be claimed for God and retained for the Kingdom. As the late Horace Bushnell once said, "What is the true idea of Christian education? I answer in the following proposition, which it will be the aim of my argument to establish, namely, That the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise."

Recognizing, then, the relation of the child to the Church, what must needs be the relation of the Church to the child? How can the Church do her part to make these ideals vital factors in the Kingdom



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hopes in this direction than ever before. The Church is being awakened to a sense of the importance of the problems that confront her in her attitude toward, and her work among, the young. There is a growing sensitiveness on the question, and in this fact there is much hope.

What is the relation of the child to the Church? Is it not a strange and sad condition that, even after 1900 years of Christian teaching, there should be so little agreement, and so much difference of opinion on this question. On one point the Church seems to have reached an

of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but that teaching is most expressive and suggestive. Probably the most representative of that teaching may be found in Mark 10: 13-16, where the Evangelist gives an account of the scene when some parents, attracted to Jesus by some unique charm, brought their little children into His presence, that he might give them His blessing. The disciples so completely failed to understand the spirit and attitude of their Master that "they rebuked those that brought them." Mark tells us, "When Jesus saw it, he was

"The love of goodness is to the child always the love of a good person."