

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### THE SABBATH SCHOOL AND THE CHURCH.

The following paper, on the Reciprocal Relations and Obligations existing between the Sabbath School and the Church, was read at the Annual Convention of Brant County Sabbath School Association, by the Rev. James Ballentine, of Paris.

The subject I have to introduce to the Convention is much too large for exhaustive treatment in the allotted space of fifteen minutes. I can only hope to present you with a sufficiently bold and suggestive outline. Proceeding by comparison, no one here requires to be told that there are "reciprocal relations and obligations existing between" husband and wife, parent and child, master and servant, king and subject, pastor and member. Yet the actual persons in these varied relations, with their consequent moral obligations, may be, and often are, very poor illustrations of the Divine ideal. But however the said relations may be disturbed, and their respective obligations gained, or even repudiated, they are nevertheless real and abiding, and society, good or bad, refined or barbarous, permanent or transient, is the fruit of their neglect and denial on the one hand, or of their recognition and acknowledgment on the other hand. I doubt not that indifferent Sabbath schools are to be found in Ontario as well as indifferent Churches, which fall far short of the standard of Scripture. Sabbath schools, moreover, which are doing their work outside of our various (less or more) admirable Church systems. Sabbath schools, that is to say, that have "no vital connection with the living organism, but are merely attached to it externally." Now, to know the relation in which two persons stand to one another, is often all that is necessary to understand their mutual obligations. But I am not aware that the precise relation of the Sabbath school to the Church has ever been fairly taken up and definitely determined by any Church Court.\* Yet this, surely, is a point of fundamental importance, namely, the position of the Sabbath school, as one has put it, with reference to the general Church organization. The Sabbath school is spoken of, indeed, as "the minister's best instrument," "his right arm," as "the Church's happiest appendage;" again, as "not so much a supplement to the Church, as a part of its necessary machine;" still farther, as "only the Church working by a new method adapted to the times;" and yet again, as "one of the most important of all the meetings of the Church." For the purpose I have in view, I shall consider and define the Sabbath school as simply an important agency of the Church for teaching and impressing upon the young the great truths of Holy Scripture. I have said an important agency of the Church; for it must not be forgotten that there are other important agencies, e.g. the home school, the pulpit, and the sanctuary. I trust, moreover, that by-and-by, in all the day schools of the land, every boy and girl in the Dominion will be made acquainted with the Word of God, the sacred oracles being there read and studied as they now are in our Sabbath schools. Christianity is, undoubtedly, the cornerstone of true national greatness. "Let the conviction," wrote Dr. Charles Hodge years ago, "fasten itself upon you, that you can in no way do so much good, in no way more effectively promote the salvation of your fellow-men, than by educating them by the Bible." But I now proceed to state, as briefly yet clearly as I can, the mutual relations and obligations of the Sabbath school and the Church. Beginning with the Church, I have to say that, on its side, three things are required:

1. That it should intelligently appreciate the great value of the Sabbath school. When I speak of the individual Church, I mean its minister, officers, and members. They should make themselves acquainted with the whole Sabbath school movement—with its origin, its progress, and its triumphs. They should study its nature, its aims and objects, its motives and its methods. They must not approach it in the spirit of the minister who said, "We must take care not to make the Sabbath school too attractive, lest we lead the children to elevate it in their affections above the religious teaching which they receive at home." In

\*I must be understood to speak here as a Presbyterian; for it would seem that the Methodists are in advance on this matter.

the light of the Master's appointment, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations," the Sabbath school wears a crown of special honour, as a teaching institution, where the truths taught are spiritual and eternal. They are doctrines that take precedence of the best maxims of philosophy and the richest inductions of science. What is the knowledge obtained by dissecting beetles and analyzing fluids compared with the knowledge of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, and of the great doctrines of redemption, the atonement, the resurrection, and the eternal judgment? And there is the doctrine of the priceless value of one immortal soul. The Sabbath school has its best explanation and vindication in the passion of Christ—saved men and women to win souls for Christ. That poor boy, that wandering city arab, has beneath his tattered vesture a soul that will exist when thrones have gone to dust, and great empires have passed away. And Jesus loves him—Jesus died to save him—such are the convictions and such are the noble impulses of all true-hearted workers in our Sabbath schools. The Sabbath school movement is not a movement for keen, sour, and jealous criticism; but for intelligent appreciation and healthy, cordial, generous sympathy.

2. That it should efficiently organize and maintain the Sabbath school. To my mind, an efficiently organized Sabbath school includes the pastor, as superintendent, a converted man; the superintendent (where the pastor cannot act) a converted man, and the teachers all converted persons. But whilst piety is the first requisite, we also want intelligence. "Have right doctrine in the heart," writes one, "and then set the soul on fire, and you will soon win the world." I do not sympathize with the tall talk in certain quarters about the march of education in our day schools, and the consequent necessity of an elevation of the standard of teaching in all our Sabbath schools. I think it very possible that a teacher who does not know the difference between Bethesda and Bethsaida may yet be a more successful winner of souls to Christ than the "advanced thinker" who stickles for grammar and pronunciation. There are some white-neck-tied and kid-gloved exquisites in our Sabbath schools, whose intolerable self-conceit and affectation do a thousand times more harm than the homeliest utterances of our ill-cultured but warm-hearted and devoted teachers. On the other hand, intelligence adorns piety, and makes it more effective every way. We ought, undoubtedly, to seek to elevate the standard of teaching in our Sabbath schools; but in doing so we must take care not to frighten away some of our best teachers by our learned talk about higher culture, sacred criticism, philology, collation of manuscripts, and I know not what else. Let the teachers be supplied with the usual Lesson Helps. (These, with some good commentary (Henry's), and some work explanatory of Oriental manners and customs ("The Land and the Book"), are amply sufficient for all the ordinary purposes of Sabbath school teaching. Indeed, the teacher as well as the pastor must beware of overloading his brains with other men's materials. Let his own mind work on the lesson during the week. With such helps as he can command, let him seek to get the lesson, and then, on Sabbath, as a St. Louis minister has put it, let him endeavour to impart it and impress it.

The pastor will do well to help his Sabbath school teachers by making the lesson his theme of lecture on some week evening; and at the close let the teachers remain behind for examination, with a special view to the actual work of teaching on the following Sabbath.

The expense of Lesson Helps and Sabbath school papers for teachers and scholars should be cheerfully borne by the whole Church, as it is Church work of the most important kind that is being done in our Sabbath schools.

Sufficient and appropriate time for the work of the Sabbath school will, of course, be given. Suitable accommodation, moreover, for Sabbath school purposes should be provided by the Church. Poverty, no doubt, often prevents progress here; and truth, it may be borne in mind, has no special predilection for the pillared arches of superb cathedrals. Still, a protest may be entered against those dark, damp basements of churches, named by one "delightful dungeons," to which so many of our Sabbath school children are weekly consigned. Handsome, well-lighted, well-ventilated, and well-furnished rooms, with chairs or benches with backs, black-board, maps, pictures, and mottoes, are a pleasant advance on the old style of

things. Spurgeon himself admits the truth of an American visitor's description of his Sabbath school as a "sepulchre," or, in the words of an Irishman concerning a fine cemetery, "as a very healthy place to be buried in!"

3. That it should promote by godliness and prayer its highest success. As is the Church, so will be the Sabbath school. Gay, worldly Church members, who see no harm in the ball-room and the theatre, have a blighting influence on the Sabbath school. To such the success of the school means the successful picnic, social, or strawberry festival. Against these things in themselves, and as properly conducted, I utter no word of fanatical condemnation; but, emphatically, the Church must be careful, as an able writer has expressed it, to give the Sabbath school a spiritual atmosphere. Let it never be forgotten that the Sabbath school is simply a means to an end—the conversion of souls, the impressing on the hearts and consciences of our little ones the simple truths of the glorious Gospel. We may have the most elaborate system, and the best of machinery; but unless the Lord so bless us, our labour will be in vain. Whilst we talk about the charming innocence of childhood, and lose ourselves in amiable platitudes, these old oracles abide: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;" and "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one." We need the truth—the word read and preached, but we also need God's Holy Spirit. What avails to a blind man a whole heaven of twinkling luminaries? And what avails the whole panoramic splendour of redemption to a soul "dead in trespasses and sins?" "Open thou mine eyes," says the Psalmist, "that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law." Nor are any gifts more free than those of the Holy Spirit. "If we, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto our children, how much more shall our Father who is in heaven give His holy Spirit to them that ask him!" Let minister, officers and members, and teachers and scholars, unite to plead for the Holy Spirit. His "baptism of fire" is the grand secret of success. It is told of the great Welsh preacher, Christmas Evans, that on one occasion he tarried in his apartment beyond the time for setting out to service. The servant girl, who was sent to call him, came back stating that on approaching the door of his room she heard him talking with some one, and saying, "I will not go unless Thou wilt go with me." "That will do," said the farmer, whose guest the preacher was; "he will come, and that other will come with him, and great things will be done heretoday." I only add, that it was so. Brethren, pray more for the Sabbath school.

And now, in the second place, and still more briefly, let me say that on the side of the Sabbath school are also required three things:

1. A loyal regard to the Church's authority. Difference of opinion may arise where harmony of feeling is not disturbed. In such a case, as in that of husband and wife, it is well to have a recognized head as the constituted seat of authority. Now, it is clear that the Sabbath school is of the Church, not above it nor apart from it. It should, therefore, report its doings, as may be arranged, to the Church. The Church is doubtless responsible for what teaching is given to the young. No books should be admitted into the library nor periodicals into the school without the sanction of the pastor and of those associated with him in the spiritual oversight of the congregation. Nor in any doubtful matter should the teachers ever act independently. They should regard themselves, not as the mere members of a club, or lodge, or coterie—though even these have rules whose breach is dishonour—but as the Church's faithful and loving servants for Christ's sake. On the other hand, it is sufficiently trying to hard-working Sabbath school teachers to be interfered with, as they sometimes are, by Church officers, who perhaps have never evinced any interest whatsoever in the Sabbath school, and who never appear in its circuit but as carping critics and martinet rulers.

2. Pecuniary help to the Church's Mission Schemes. In Churches sustained by voluntary contributions, the children cannot be too early trained to give money to the support of Christ's cause. A better beginning cannot be made than by securing their interest in the Church's Home and Foreign Mission Schemes. We heard of one young person the other day who preferred to give to missions in the great North-West