

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE SPHERE OF THE SABBATH SCHOOL.

BY REV. F. R. BRATTIE, BALTIMORE.

In this age of activity in Christian work, when so many agencies are used, it is often not easy to tell the purpose each serves, or see the relation they bear, to each other. Observe, in addition to the Church in its various branches, we have Bible Societies, Evangelical Alliances, Young Men's Christian Associations, and Sabbath schools, all professing to do work for God in the world; and to get proper views of the place and purpose of each is no easy task, whilst to have wrong ideas of these things is to incur serious danger.

To discuss this general question is not within the scope of the present paper, so I shall only emphasize a remark which applies equally to all the agencies above named in their relation to the Church. The remark is this: That the Church stands first, if not alone, as the great agency for teaching and saving men; and Bible Societies, Evangelical Alliances, Young Men's Christian Associations, and Sabbath schools are ever to be subordinated to the Church in the attainment of spiritual ends. These agencies will have usefulness and power only when kept in their proper place, and when seeking to do their own proper work. In proportion as the work which belongs to the Church is done outside of and apart from the Church, will the idea grow that regular Church organization is not at all necessary to attain spiritual ends, and indeed might as well be dispensed with altogether; an idea, I need scarcely say, as dangerous and disintegrating to the Church as Socialism or Communism is to the State. Yes, the Church stands first; to her the great trust is committed; to her the sure promises are given; and she, on her part, should realize her high purpose, and seek ever to be faithful to her charge, and above all careful, lest the need for other agencies be not a rebuke of her unfaithfulness.

Of these agencies we have at present to deal with the Sabbath school, and what I wish specially to treat of is *the Sabbath school in a regularly organized congregation*, and my aim is to define its sphere.

In taking this aspect of the subject, I do not forget that it may often be quite proper, sometimes even necessary, in certain circumstances to have Sabbath schools organized outside a congregation; or it may sometimes be quite expedient for several congregations of the same or different denominations to unite in carrying on mission schools in neglected places, in town or country; but even in such cases the work ought to have as close church connection, and as direct church control as possible in order to efficiency and permanency.

Now let us bring before our minds a regularly organized congregation, with its Sabbath school in good working order, and let us ask what is the proper place or sphere of the school in the church, and what purpose is it to serve?

1. The first general position laid down is this: *The Sabbath school is a necessary and integral part of church work.* Its work is part of the work of the church, and a part of the church's work is that of the Sabbath school.

The great work of the church is to *teach* all within it, irrespective of age, with a view to salvation—to give sinful men a knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus so that they may be made wise unto salvation. The means by which this is to be effected is the regular and faithful administration of word and ordinance. Then, since there are in the church various classes and different ages to be instructed, received and sanctified, the church must adapt the form and manner of her teaching so as to meet the need and suit the capacity of each and all. The preaching of the Word may be most suitable for grown up people, and the teaching of the Sabbath school will be best for the young; though sometimes there may be too much *preaching*, and too little *teaching* in the sermon, and too much *teaching* and too little *preaching* in the Sabbath school, especially where too much mechanical appliance is used. The great end to be aimed at in all church work is *instruction with a moral purpose in view.* The intellect is to be enlightened so that the conscience may

be touched and the heart moved. If the intellect be enlightened and nothing more done, no moral end will be gained; whilst on the other hand, no touching of the conscience or moving of the heart can be followed by lasting results unless the intellect be also enlightened. Both extremes—*intellectualism* and *emotionalism*—are to be avoided, and the two ought to be blended together by bringing the Word to bear on all the parts of our complex nature. In order to attain highest spiritual ends in the case of both old and young this should never be forgotten.

The Sabbath school, therefore, as a teaching agency is an integral part of church work. The Sabbath school is the church doing her duty by the young within her pale. It is not, as some tell us, the children's church, but it is the church teaching the children. I fear that views prevailing in some quarters, and finding expression in calling the Sabbath school the children's church are dangerous, and cannot fail to lead the young to think the public service of God's house is not for them at all. No! there is but one church for young and old, and the Sabbath school is the agency by which the church seeks to train up the young for God and heaven in a way suitable to their age and capacity. Thus the Sabbath school is not an institution co-ordinate with the church, but it is a department of church work having special relation to the young; and in their case to serve substantially the same ends as the teaching of the public service of God's house serves to grown up people. In both there is instruction and worship; in both knowledge and faith to go hand in hand; and the church embraces and fosters both. And here we may not forget in our Sabbath school work the relation in which all baptized children stand to the church. They are within its pale by birthright, and, by virtue of their covenant relationship, have a claim upon the tenderest care of the church, and a right to all her privileges, unless by their own act they place themselves beyond. The church should, therefore, warmly cherish the Sabbath school as her own nursery, and she should be diligent in promoting its interests in every possible way, that those under her care, and within her pale, may be trained up for God, and made meet for heaven.

2. From this general position we can deduce *the relation which the Sabbath school bears to other things in church organization and work*, and thus further define its sphere.

The church is a regularly organized institution or society. It has its laws and its office-bearers. There is the *pastor*, there is the *session*, and there is the *membership* of the church. What is the relation of the Sabbath school to each? Then, further, there is the *home*. What is the relation of the Sabbath school to it? The Sabbath school standing between the church and the home has close relations to both, and to define these we now proceed.

1. *The relation of the Sabbath school to the pastor.* The children are the lambs of the flock, and the pastor as their shepherd, is to watch carefully over them. He is to lead them out and bring them in, and give them their meat in due season. The good old system of catechizing the young as the pastor visits his people is of great value, not as a substitute for the Sabbath school or parental instruction, but as a help to both. It will be a great incentive to parents, children, and Sabbath school teachers, to perform their respective duties faithfully, and it affords the pastor the best possible means of making the acquaintance of the young people of the church. If catechizing the young be conducted by the pastor in a kindly way, it cannot fail to interest and instruct. Then, too, the pastor ought to be present as often as possible in the Sabbath school, and in every way in his power, he should seek to aid and encourage it in its work. He should try to induce all the young to attend the school, and he ought to endeavour to get to know all that are in the school. If in this way, pastor and children become acquainted, a strong bond will soon be formed between them, and much will be done to give the power to influence the young for good, and thus to answer that pressing question, How is the church to keep hold of her young people till they are brought into full communion? The pastor, too, ought to be qualified to act as superintendent of the school, and if circumstances permit, it may be well for him to do so. I have often thought that students in college ought to receive more instruction than they do in regard to how to organize and conduct the Sabbath school. They are taught how to make sermons, conduct pub-

lic service, and attend to pastoral visitation, and surely they ought also to receive such instruction as fully qualifies them for the work of the Sabbath school. In charges where there are two or three preaching places, as many in rural districts are, it is impossible for the pastor to be as much in the school as desirable, but he should by all his power, try in some way or other to make his power felt in the school, and to seek to remove as much as possible that fear which the children often have of the minister. If children feel like running to hide when the minister comes to the house, the probability is that in church where this is generally the case, in about two generations that church will be no more, simply because the old have passed away, and the young have gone somewhere else, or have been lost to the church altogether. The pastor, therefore, should tenderly watch and carefully feed the lambs of the flock.

2. *The relation of the Sabbath school to the session.* This is evident from the general position already laid down. The session is the governing body of the church; the Sabbath school is a department of church work; and hence the session governs the Sabbath school. It will not often be expedient, seldom, if ever, necessary, for the session to exercise a stern control; but it is always proper for it to exercise a kind oversight and an affectionate control. For the Sabbath school to think that the session has nothing to do with it, or that it is free to do and teach as it pleases, is a great mistake. The session has full control in all spiritual matters, and as little is the Sabbath free from the control of the session, as the membership is free from its discipline. If the pastor be not superintendent, it will always be well for an elder to be in that position, and every elder should be qualified for such duty. The superintendent and teachers should be appointed by the session; or if their nomination be made by the school in any way, it ought always be submitted to the session for approval. Both superintendent and teachers are to be held responsible to the session for the nature of their teaching and the general discharge of duty. It will also be the duty of the session to see that suitable literature is placed in the library, and that the periodicals found in the school are sound in teaching and healthy in tone. Nor should the session neglect to see that all needed and proper appliances for the school are promptly provided. Then the Sabbath school on its part should never forget that the session is over it in the Lord; and the session ought to be very kind and shew great common sense in its oversight, and then the school, like a piece of well formed machinery in its proper place, will do its work quietly and well, and be blessed in doing good, much good, for the young of the church.

3. *The relation of the Sabbath school to the membership of the church.* Here we need say but little. The Sabbath school being a department of church work and the nursery of the church, should evoke in the entire membership the deepest interest. The members of a church are not to think that the Sabbath school has no claim upon their sympathy and support. It has upon both. Every member ought to be ready to inquire how the Sabbath school is getting on, and to be able to rejoice in its prosperity. And, further, the members of a church ought to be as ready to support the Sabbath school as any other part of the church work, for little proof is needed to shew that the teaching of the Sabbath school has the same claim upon the contributions of the church as the teaching of the public service. Both have the same aim, but in relation to different classes. We believe in free public schools. Shall we not be ready to give our children free Sabbath schools, where they may be trained to holiness and prepared for heaven. And since the Bible, most unfortunately I think, is almost entirely excluded from our public schools, there is the greater need that the Sabbath school should be thoroughly equipped and liberally supported by the church. It is a shame if the Sabbath school has to exercise great ingenuity, practise all sorts of arts, or go abegging, in order to get what little money is needed to meet the expenses of the school. Most congregations, I fear, fail in this very particular. Oh! that these words would reach the careless and the stingy, and produce a new order of things.

4. *The relation of the Sabbath school to the home.* In the homes of a church there should always be three influences at work for good, viz.: Parental instruction, pastoral oversight, and Sabbath school training. Neither of these can take the place of the others, nor

* The word "church," for the sake of convenience, is used throughout the body of the address as synonymous with "congregation." "The Sabbath school of the church" is equivalent to "the Sabbath school of a regularly organized congregation."