

# The Gospel and the Child

BY HUGH H. HARRIS.

**T**HE question of how the gospel may be most effectively presented to the child is forcing itself with increasing emphasis upon the Christian Church. The cause is not far to seek, for we are learning how dependent are both Church and State upon right training in childhood. The success or failure of the gospel of to-morrow lies with children of to-day. It is a hopeful sign that we Christians are asking, "What shall we do to save the child?"

## THE LAW OF EXAMPLE.

One may best gain a clear conception of our problem by letting his mind run back over his own childhood. How did the gospel press itself home to your heart? What forces were at work determining your character and making you the Christian that you have since become? Purposely exclude unusual cases, such as those found in our slums or among heathen people. Consider yourself, for the moment, as typical of a great mass of Christians who throng our churches, and then answer these questions. Very likely you came from a Christian home, or at least either father or mother was a Christian. No doubt you early began to imitate the religious life of your elders, as you did their gestures, their speech, their very tones. Without asking why, you prayed, you sang, you joined in family devotions, you attended church. If they were reverential in attitude, you were reverential, too. If they were kindly disposed toward their fellows, so were you. And unless unfortunate and ill-considered pressure was brought to bear, you did these religious acts joyously. To be sure, you did not always interpret these acts as did your parents. A little child who first became conscious of grace at table began to repeat, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," as rapidly as possible. But such imitation, far as it seemed to be, was for that child fundamental to a more intelligent religious faith.

## THE LAW OF HABIT.

Now, out of our repeated imitations grow habits. And out of religious imitation grows religious habit. Before the age of reflection was reached you had already habituated yourself to certain religious acts. You prayed at night as habitually as you undressed for bed. You bowed your head at prayer time as habitually as you smiled at your mother. You did not say, "Now I need communion with the Unseen," or "There is a lack of adjustment between my attainments and my ideals and therefore I will pray." You did not even feel any such subtle force. You had prayed, you were accustomed to pray, you did pray.

## LAW OF PERSONALITY.

But presently reflection awoke. Adult life was hastening its approach. No longer satisfied with the ready-to-hand answers, you demanded fuller explanations. You were dissatisfied with habitual religion. Emancipation from custom, religious as well as secular, clamored for recognition. You determined to be your own very self. Religious reflections asserted themselves and doubts must be settled. Did there come to your life a seismic shock, an eruption that created for you a new heaven and a new earth? It may be; or perhaps religious selfhood arose more gradually above the dead level of the sea of habitual religion into the joyous light of full manhood's day.

## METHOD OF NATURE.

Now, it seems beyond peradventure that the gospel will most effectively present itself to the child's mind when it labors along these most natural lines. First of all clothing itself in Christian fatherhood and motherhood, it will address itself to the child's instinctive instincts. Day by day it will walk before the child in Christian manhood and womanhood. The gospel will impress itself upon the child's plastic mind as day after day, "like father and mother," he prays and sings and does the numberless things that constitute the round of religious duties. And so, before many summers have passed over his childish head, habit, that dread yet beneficent master of our destinies, will begin to assert itself and the gospel will have gained its first victory in the battle for the child's soul.

## WITHOUT CONVULSION.

You smile. You think that the religious habits of childhood are ephemeral things. Too long have we spoken lightly of child religion; too feebly have we emphasized the fundamental importance of religious habits in childhood; too constantly have we left the child to contract bad habits, allowed him to alienate himself from things religious, and then attempted to reform him (and incidentally to excuse our own negligence) by means of one grand outburst of revival con-

vulsion. The child who faces the problems of life and of religion with irreligious habits is looking for the sunrise with face to the west. No matter how striking such experiences as St. Paul's, the resultant characters root themselves in such childhood habits as his. Jerry McAuley is reported as saying that he despaired of a man who could not look back upon a godly mother. And long after later years have eradicated many things from our minds the religious habits of our childhood are blessed memories, oases in the desert of later irreligious years.

## DUTY OF THE CHURCH.

Again, the gospel presses itself home through the organized church. In his early childhood days, its services lend uncon-



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scious influence in acquiring religious habits. Its school upon the Sabbath day places before his mind, couched in mental images of his own, certain ideals. Moreover, the church aims to cultivate habit by means of opportunities for Christian service. The pulpit and the school, if faithful to their trust, labor to help him in later childhood to interpret his longings and desires, his conflicts and victories, and even his defeats. Finally, by holding up that matchless character, by making goodness personal and justice lovable in that Personality, by insisting upon the fruits of the Spirit as alone sufficient evidence of a truly filial relation to the divine Father, the gospel presses itself home through the Christian Church—*Northwestern Christian Advocate*.

"Child thy soul seldom, cheer it often," says a quaint old writer. Many a fault in ourselves we see, many a mistake we make, and must regret. Much of self-blame we needs must know if our ideals of life are high and we are honest with ourselves; nevertheless the advice of the old writer is wise. No one can thrive under constant criticism and censure from without or within, and the sensitive soul grows morbid and depressed by continued self-deprecation. We know what we meant to do, what we are sincerely trying to do and to be, despite all slips and failures, and God knows also. Let us be just to ourselves and give the poor, tired soul its need of encouragement.—Great Thoughts.