

such cases, might not the average "few remarks" of the member who rises simply because he feels that he "cannot give a silent vote on this question," be cut down? The omission of introductions and conclusions and personal references would tend greatly towards shortening debates and would at the same time add materially to their dignity and strength.

It is no secret that an ever-growing number of our younger ministers take little interest in our Church Courts. They attend as a matter of duty, but never conceal the fact that they have no relish for that kind of Church work. Everybody knows that many elders who are active and prominent men in business take no part in the business of the Assembly. Is there no remedy for this state of things? One fact is clear—men of manly instincts and self-respect will not long take much interest in Assembly proceedings if they are supposed to sit as mere spectators while a few run the ecclesiastical machine.

THE FORMATION AND INSTRUCTION OF HIGHER CLASSES IN SABBATH SCHOOLS.

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We are all agreed that classes for thorough Biblical instruction are specially needed at the present time. Many reasons might be urged in support of this position. The Bible as God's gift to man deserves the utmost attention; but it is, to a lamentable extent, an unknown book. Very many forces in business, in social life and in the educational movements of the age turn away the young from the systematic study of sacred truth. They therefore go out into the world ill prepared to resist its seductive blandishments and to judge correctly its hollow pretensions. Family instruction, persevering effort to impart a comprehensive knowledge of the facts and principles of Scripture, is not an obtrusive feature of our households. And there are those who deem themselves competent judges who think, whether correctly or otherwise I shall not wait to determine, that the teaching functions of the pulpit are not now what they used to be, and that it is unsafe to depend on this instrumentality for the moral and religious instruction of the masses. Expository lectures and catechetical exercises have almost wholly gone out of fashion. They have had to give place to sparkling eloquence and well rounded rhetorical periods upon all sorts of subjects. The demand has repeatedly come from the press and the pew for "a popularized Gospel," and the pulpit has—in some instances—responded by delivering just as little distinctive Gospel truth as serves to give sermons a Christian name; and the discussion of grotesque and startling topics which draw the multitude does little to stem the tide of ignorance and vice and to impart to the perishing the knowledge of saving truth. In great centres of population like London, Glasgow and New York, in spite of all the churches and sermons with which they abound, it is easy to find thousands who are profoundly ignorant of the Way of Life, as degraded as the pagans of Central Africa, and far more dangerous to human society. They are deeply skilled in the contents—the plots and romances—of popular novels and of the thinly veiled immoralities of the common theatre, but know nothing of the doctrines of Christ and His apostles. To what extent, it may be proper to ask, are the causes which bring about this state of things operative in our own country? Possibly city missionaries, booksellers, and the managers of lending libraries and of various places of resort, could, if they wished, make startling revelations in this respect. Amid the rush of business and social amusements God and His Word are not much thought about. It is easy to form clubs and societies throughout the country for every imaginable purpose. Hundreds of young people can be drawn together to witness scenic performances, to discuss politics, to carry on mock parliaments, to run races and perform feats of strength or attend frivolous tea-meetings. But the study of the Bible is quite another matter, and by no means so attractive or so easily managed. Hence from ministers and superintendents, from Sabbath school associations and conventions, local, provincial and international, as well as from many Christian homes, the anxious question comes, "What are we to do to retain the larger boys and girls in Sunday school classes?" This is surely a confession of weakness somewhere, of partial failure, an intimation that there is something fundamentally wrong and requiring an immediate and a vigorous remedy.

Now, I have no wish to be thought an alarmist or a pessimist. I am wholly out of sympathy with religious dyspeptics who are constantly projecting their own weakness over everything they touch and groaning about imaginary defeats of the Gospel. I believe that Christianity is far stronger now than ever before, and that, upon the whole, its work is being done in a more practical and efficient manner than in past ages. There is a most significant sense in which the Gospel is never defeated. God's truth never returns to Him void. Just as Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, did not fail in His mission, did not return to the Father who sent Him, baffled and defeated in His great purpose of redeeming love, so no lesson of truth is ever lost or useless.

But while steadfastly holding this, and seeing no reason for discouragement or dismay in any department of Christian activity, I do not hesitate to say that it is my deliberate judgment that so far as Sabbath school work is concerned it is weakest just where it should be strongest. I believe that there is more success achieved in the infant and junior classes than in those of a higher grade. The fact cannot be denied that the latter often melt away to nothing in the hands of anxious, well-meaning teachers. Yet it is here precisely that masterly efforts are needed and that the finest opportunities of doing decisive and permanent good are offered, because it is here the pupil reaches the transition period, the crisis in his intellectual and religious history, when he is either to be gained or lost to the Church of God and Christian service. I know it is often said that parents should not devolve the responsibilities peculiar to this critical period in the lives of their children upon the Sabbath school. Quite true. I go even further and say that Sabbath schools should not interfere with the faithful discharge of parental duty in any respect. But who does not know that there are a hundred things which parents and others should not do which they will, nevertheless, persist in doing, and as Christian workers we must take things as they are and not as they should be, and seek to make the best of them. And, certain it is, that in addition to parents who are ever ready to lay their own duty upon others, there are many who are not fit to instruct their offspring, and surely it is the business of the Church of God so to use her abundant wealth of talent and grace as to meet these deficiencies. "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak," and the more apparent and appalling the weakness, the more urgent is the call to do so.

Moreover, it is not very surprising that even parents well qualified to instruct their children and mould their characters should be inclined to relegate the duty to others. We must not forget that indolence is natural to all, especially in spiritual matters. To do nothing is always easier than to do something. And is not the Sabbath school now made so prominent in Church life and activity as to warrant the belief that it is deemed sufficient to meet every phase of spiritual education? If it is not so, and if parents are expecting from it more than it is fit to accomplish, there is all the more need for careful attention to the formation and instruction of the higher classes. Let us, therefore, ask how are they usually formed and is there room for improvement in this respect? Both questions deserve consideration. It may be said at once that the methods followed in the formation of Sabbath school classes are peculiar and widely different from those adopted in secular education. This may be to some extent inevitable. At any rate, the fact is that the age, the size and wishes of pupils, rather than their attainments are usually the guide in this matter. Sometimes the desire of the superintendent to give employment to those who are no longer willing to be learners and are ambitious to become teachers—the restlessness of senior pupils and their irregularity in attendance indicating that they must be either promoted or disappear from the school—and similar considerations govern the grading of Sabbath schools; and the results, viewed from an educational standpoint, are far from satisfactory. Classes are mixed—pupils of the most diverse ability and attainments are placed together—and teachers left to toil on while some of the most essential conditions of success are wholly disregarded. I do not say this is as much the case now as some years ago. We have made gratifying progress in the right direction. We have been favourably influenced by the general advance in the science and art of education; but there is much

more to be accomplished. We have not yet reached the true ideal. We have still to overcome the inertia of those who think it wrong to take leave of the old ways and who regard as deplorable, if not even sacrilegious, all attempts to introduce into our work the order and exactitude observed in the pursuit of secular knowledge. They look upon all such efforts as somehow incompatible with true piety; and imagine that if we become scientific and skilful we must neglect the souls of children and fail to bring them to the Saviour. They strangely ally godliness and spiritual success with ignorance and confusion. Against all such superstition I utter my earnest protest. It must not be allowed to obstruct our progress. While thankfully recognizing the very humblest workers in the good cause and freely granting that God may own and bless them to the furtherance of our great enterprise, I am fully persuaded that in trying to make the Sabbath school what it should be, and especially in the formation and development of superior classes, we should move upon strictly educational lines and systematically introduce senior pupils to fields of inquiry and methods of study which at present are wholly neglected.

Three things are specially necessary:

(1) A proper grading of classes so as to secure a regular order of sequence in our courses of study. Elementary, intermediate and senior work should be clearly defined and the one made to lead naturally up to the other. The International Scheme of Lessons may be used during the preparatory period, but will be found wholly unsuitable for the higher studies to which I shall presently refer. While in the junior classes pupils should be required to commit to memory our Shorter Catechism, but teachers should abstain from elaborate efforts to explain the doctrines there beautifully and accurately formulate. That should come at a later stage. Meanwhile let memory work be insisted upon. It will afterwards prove of the utmost utility. I believe we should spare no pains to recall the good old practice of getting boys and girls, as early as possible, to commit large portions of Scripture to memory. It will give strength of character and amplitude of knowledge when by the exercise of maturer powers they discover the force and meaning of the Word.

(2) Pupils should be promoted to the senior classes by oral and as far as possible by written examinations. I am aware that this is in some degree a new departure, but it should not on this account excite alarm or be regarded as impracticable. It will require lapse of time and the exercise of wisdom for its introduction, but it is surely coming, and our best superintendents and teachers are quite competent to give it effect. To my mind it is one of the great desiderata of the moment. We require far more effectual means than are now employed of testing and ascertaining what is being done in our classes. Teachers should therefore be encouraged to examine far more than they are probably accustomed to do, and this will pave the way to what I propose. There should be some time devoted to sharp pointed questioning before the lesson is taught. This serves many useful purposes. It shows that the teacher is ready for business, that he has himself mastered the lesson, and this inspires his class with feelings of confidence and respect. It also helps to empty the pupil of conceit and fancied knowledge, which an eminent philosopher declared to be the greatest hindrance to the acquisition of real knowledge; and it enables the teacher to discover precisely where ignorance begins, which is the starting point of instruction, and thus saves him from wasting time and strength over what is already well known. Questions should be very freely used during the process of teaching in order to arrest attention, stimulate mental activity and make clear, forcible and of a truly educating character, what might otherwise be obscure, feeble and worthless. Questions should be asked after the lesson has been taught so as to ascertain results, correct misapprehensions, remove uncertainty and fix in the memory and heart the knowledge imparted and the impressions made. In addition to this constant and indispensable use of questions we have already quarterly reviews which purport to be of the nature of public oral examinations and which should be made more systematic and of greater utility than at present. All these things point in the direction of what I think should be realized. Let us go forward on the lines already entered and we may ere long reduce what is too often a form to a