

Pastor and People.

LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S SUNDAY SCHOOL CONVENTION.

That a convention, to which so many ministers had come from other lands, should attract so few in our own, was a surprise to the delegated ministers as well as to their lay brethren in this country. And this may fitly suggest the first lesson to be learned.

How much more important a position the Sunday school occupies in America than here!

(a) There it is an integral part of the Church.

(b) The minister is at its head—not merely nominally or in theory.

(c) It is the ministry of the Church in the direction of Bible teaching, as distinguished from the preaching services in the sanctuary.

(d) The Church is vitally, habitually interested in it—not spasmodically or on anniversary or some few other occasions, when the Church is reminded of the claims of the Sunday school.

(e) It freely supplies all the money needed for carrying on Sunday school, regarding all the necessary wants as furnishing as valid a claim on the church finances as the minister's salary.

It does not, therefore, lay upon the officers and teachers who are doing the work of the Church, and who are often persons of humble means, the additional burden of financial care and anxiety.

(f) It encourages all classes to attend the Sunday school, and as the children of the better educated and well-to-do members are in the school, their parents are naturally anxious that there should be found as teachers those of the ripest experience and richest culture. Mr. B. F. Jacobs, of Chicago, said at the Convention, concerning his own land, "The Lord Jesus Christ has practically skimmed the Church and poured the cream of it into the Sunday schools."

The lesson for us to lay to heart is that ministers and church officers must see to it that more of the cream of the intelligence, culture, ripe experience of our churches be poured into our Sunday schools.

The more elevated platform which the Sunday school in America occupies secures the following results:

1. That the Sunday school is not a place merely for the spiritual instruction of children, to be left as soon as possible, when advanced ideas of what is manly or womanly begins to develop; and

2. That the Sunday school is not a place merely for children of the humbler classes, whose parents have not the ability or the disposition to teach them.

The Churches in our land, by not recognizing that the Sunday school is the place of religious instruction for all classes and for all ages, have limited the attendance to children of certain classes only, and those only to the period of girlhood and boyhood.

We may not have the advantage of a mixture of classes in the day school, but, at least, let us have the advantage of the mingling of the children of the rich and the poor in our Sunday schools. In the great social problems that are before us, in the dark days ahead, whose skies may loom with heavy portent if the yawning gulf which separates class from class shall go on widening, and if the distrust with which the poor regard respectable, well-to-do Christianity shall become hard and cynical, it may be too late to preach that Jesus Christ knew no distinction of classes, and that His Gospel is the best, safest and happiest rule of life for all.

But if the rich and the poor shall meet together in our Sunday schools, shall sit beside one another in their classes, shall meet on equal terms in social intercourse at the house of their teachers, or of the wealthier members of the churches, fired with the love of a common brotherhood, there may grow up such a mutual respect that shall never wear wholly off.

The rich man's son, learning something of the poverty and straitened circumstances of his class neighbour, realizing, as he never otherwise might, what loss of work through unfavourable weather, what sickness in a crowded room, what convalescence in an unwholesome atmosphere, and with but a limited supply of food of any kind, and an utter absence of all that might be suitable or tempting, may mean, shall regard with brotherly sympathy him whom God has placed in a lowlier lot, and shall learn for his own sake as well as for his, who shall become the object of a loving ministry, the meaning of the divine ordinance, "The poor always ye have with you."

The poor man's son, made to feel the reality and tenderness of the truth taught in the class, that we are all children of the same loving Father, shall learn that riches can be divinely used as they are divinely entrusted, and that comfortable circumstances need be no barrier to the manifestation of brotherly love. If there shall thus grow up—as assuredly there will—in the hearts of both, at an age when the noblest and best in them has the best chance of asserting itself, before class prejudices and the maxims of mammon have hardened and encrusted them, by-and-by in altered relationships, perhaps, when they stand to one another as employer and employed, they shall yet cherish for one another feelings of mutual respect, which may help them to remember that lesson so hard for us all to practise, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of another."

The circumstances of the Convention surely have a lesson for us all; and perhaps some facts connected with the Convention may help to impress on our minds the growing importance of the work it was called to consider.

The Convention itself was impressive. It gathered together many of our best workers, clerical and lay, from all parts of England. Most of our religious societies, at least those not distinctively connected with the Church of England, sent delegates. Our colonies, Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, British Columbia, India, Australia, West Indies, sent their delegates. Germany, France, Italy, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and China were represented; Canada sent fifty-five delegates, of whom seven were ministers; and as for America, there never was such an invasion of the sons of the pilgrim Fathers to the old land, which they never cease to honour and love. They came to the number of 360,—leading ministers, learned professors from her colleges, busy professional men, wealthy merchants, men of humbler means, who had to practise economy to enable them to come, and of noble women there were not a few.

Of the American delegation ninety-five were ministers, more than one-fourth of the number from the States. Has that fact no significance? Has that no bearing on the question of the relative importance of the Sunday school in that country and in this?

Think, too, at what cost this delegation was obtained. Taking the 415 who came from Canada and the States, and estimating their expenses at the low figure of \$150 per head, we find that they spent over \$60,000 to come to the Convention.

But many did not come at their own charges. Some of the State Associates sent their delegates free, and deemed that, in the interest of their association, they were making a wise expenditure. Fancy any of our local Sunday School Unions or Churches acting similarly!

But they may. This Convention has enlarged our views and broadened our minds, and raised our ideals of what the Sunday school is destined to accomplish. It has brought us into contact with men—ministers and laymen, who are in dead earnest, who believe the Sunday school is the mightiest, most hopeful, and most successful evangelizing agent the Church has, who are convinced that time cannot be better employed than in perfecting its machinery, organization, and methods, that it must engage the manifest interest, the deepest solicitude, the most earnest prayers of the Churches; and that they must be ready to offer on its altar the amplest means and the most consecrated service.

The Convention further has taught us the marvellous growth and extent of the Sunday school. It has been quite a field day for statisticians. They plod away collecting their figures, making their comparisons, tabulating their results; but too often they are but the voice of one crying in the wilderness. They want some great occasion, when men's hearts are ready to take in figures, for if they get no further than men's heads they effect little results.

Mr. Hartley, told the Convention that there are now in England and Wales 5,733,328 Sunday scholars, a proportion of 20.29 per cent. of the population, or rather more than one in five; or if teachers and scholars are added together, as is done in America, the total number in the Sunday schools amounts to 6,350,206, or 22.05 per cent. of the whole population.

The large increase in the number of children attending day schools since the passing of the Education Act, so far from diminishing the attendance at Sunday school, as was predicted, has had a contrary effect, and there are now in England and Wales a million more scholars found in our Sunday schools than in our day schools, in spite of the compulsory powers with which the latter are entrusted.

But if these statistics fill us with encouragement, they should also deepen in us a sense of our responsibilities; here, at all events, is no room for lamentation that the Sunday school has lost its hold on the population, that the working classes are indifferent and antagonistic, that the attendance on religious education is decreasing with the increase of secular knowledge. More than one-fifth of the population—reckoning, too, a very large section of the people who think of the Sunday school as only intended or adapted for the children of the humbler classes—are in the schools, and the percentage of population is increasing rather than diminishing.

Then, whereas Wales shows as large a percentage as 30 per cent. of the population in the Sunday school, London has only about 12 per cent., so that there remains much land to be possessed.

The fact is that at either end of the social scale there are yet many to be gathered into the Sunday school, the children of the very poor and the children of the rich; and surely the Churches most able to reach these separate classes should not find it difficult to devise means. Then there are the well-to-do members of our own Churches; and the pastors and delegates of the congregational Union should be responsible for the children that are within the reach of their influence.

The lesson of responsibility that rests on us, concerning the large numbers of children that are already under instruction, is one that presses with serious concern.

What are we doing for these multitudes that are within our reach, and that come to us Sunday after Sunday? Large numbers of them come from homes where the sense of parental responsibility is either feeble or dead. What are the churches doing for these gathered in their names?

Are they doing all they can to provide the schools with the best teachers? Are they interesting themselves to procure the most suitable buildings and rooms for these scholars to be taught in? Are they careful to furnish the means best adapted to attract and to hold the scholars? Are they anxious that the schools should be so conducted as to become natural, easy and pleasant gateways to the churches? Are the pastors in full sympathetic touch with the young people, not only generally approving of the work of the Sunday-school, and appreciating the labours of the teachers, but in hearty, earnest, close relations with the teachers, helping, inspiring, encouraging them by a constant intercourse and communion? Are our pastors in constant intercourse with the young people of the schools? Do they make them feel they are indeed their pastors, their friends? Are they so closely identified with the Sunday-school as that the scholars shall feel that the ministers sustain a vital and interested relationship to them? Are they alive to the deep necessity that the teachers who have devolved on them so tremendously responsible duties should be qualified, fitted, adapted for them? Are they aware whether all the teachers are suitable men as regards general reputation, outward deportment or character?

Are they doing all they can to help the teachers to qualify themselves for their work? With so far superior educational advantages, with so much deeper a sense of all that is demanded of a good teacher, are they doing their utmost to help them by addresses, by lectures, by preparation classes to make their work more effective?

It is a terrible thought how many tens of thousands of scholars are entrusted to incompetent teachers, many of them, if you will, not 'using all the advantages within their power, but many of them also faithful to their few opportunities, and their few single talents.

If this were a gathering of Sunday-school teachers it would be to the purpose to draw for them the lessons to be learned from the Convention, but as this assembly is composed mainly of pastors and officers of churches, not actively engaged for the most part in the Sunday school, though all interested in it, the lesson now to be learned is that responsibility for the incompetency of teaching and lack of power to impress or to hold the scholars will rest not only at the door of those who thus show themselves unfitted for their work, but with the pastors and churches whose work these teachers are doing. The pastor does not rid himself of responsibility for the souls of the young people of his charge, by devolving their training on Sunday school teachers; as shepherd he is responsible for the under-shepherds to whom the lambs are committed, and for the pastures into which they are led. And churches will not be held guiltless that are not doing their utmost for the efficiency of the Sunday school, but are leaving it unconcernedly to such officers and teachers as may offer themselves; or may be pressed sometimes reluctantly and as mere makeshifts, into the service of the school.

The "Report of the Convention," which extends to a volume of over 400 pages, and gives full accounts of all the meetings, needs only to be read to furnish many lessons which the individual reader, be he pastor or teacher, may apply to himself. But one cannot but glance over the programme, extending as it did, through four days, embracing in its twelve sessions so many and such varied subjects, without realizing, as perhaps one has never fully realized before, the breadth and comprehensiveness of the Sunday school system. At one meeting a resolution was agreed to *mem. con.* by a standing vote, "That every Sabbath school should be in fact and effect, a temperance training school, fitting the rising generation for active and aggressive effort in this and every other department of Christian work." A few years ago such a resolution would have been impossible. The growth of the Continental Mission and of the American Foreign Sunday School Association shows that the Sunday school is an important missionary agency, and will become increasingly such. The Convention resolved, "That an organizing secretary be appointed for Sunday School Extension and Work in India," and already there has come from that great empire a song of rejoicing at the prospect of the Sunday school being there developed and extended. The Sunday school has already shown by its Bands of Hope, Christian Bands, Young People's Societies of Christian Endeavour, week night classes, week-evening lectures and entertainments, young men's and young women's Christian institutes, clubs and gymnasias for lads, that its care of its scholars is not confined to the Sabbath; and the hearty reception afforded at the Convention to those who advocated extending the influence of week evening engagements proves that the Sunday school is able to adapt itself to the increasing needs and varying requirements of each generation. Without at all lessening the efficiency of the Sunday labours of teachers, without losing sight of their chief aim and purpose to lead their scholars to the Saviour, and to train them for Christian life and service, it may now be said that everything that affects the well-being of the scholars, or that touches any part of their life, comes well within the scope of the Sunday school. This large field of ministry that is now open calls for Christian workers from all our churches, and affords a sphere for the most varied Christian service. The teachers are doing their part on the Sunday and during the week, but many of them have but scant leisure and few opportunities. One truth emphasized over and over again at the Convention was that the Sunday school is an integral part of the church; and its workers sigh for a closer unity therewith. The true theory of the Sunday school is that it is the ministry of the Church to the young, and whatever may have tended in the past to prevent this true ideal being realized, we do not care to enquire. We now live and labour, and pray that the school may be so closely identified with the Church, that pastors, office bearers, church members, and those who are at work in the school, may feel they are united by the strongest cords of mutual sympathy and good will. We are certain that the Convention will tend in this direction, and we trust that this humble attempt to indicate some of the lessons will have some bearing in the same gracious direction.