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Scripture Teaching in School

BY THE REV D. F. HORSEFIELD

THE subject is "The Teaching of Scripture in Schools". The very title needs some sort of definition. The word 'Scripture' limits us, I suppose, to the Bible; which indeed must be the foundation, but is certainly not the whole, of all religious teaching—a term which should include, for example, missionary biography, Church history, and at least some exposition of doctrine. And what are we to understand by the phrase 'the teaching'? Does this mean a discussion of method? Or of scope and content? Or of the arrangement of syllabus and timetable? Or the history of Bible teaching? Or the controversies—political and sectarian—of the past? To cover these comprehensively would, of course, be an impossible task: I therefore propose to be as practical as possible, and to speak as an old artificer to those whose pastoral duties include the exercise of the teacher's craft.

I

In the first place, telling people how to teach is, to my mind, like telling them how to have measles—they either get it or they don't. Either you can teach, or you can't. If you can, you know it; if you can't, the children know the fact a good deal better than you do. Besides, too much method in a teacher is like too much mildew in a cheese: it is an infallible sign of old age; and while a strictly limited amount of it adds a kind of fruitiness to the general flavour, it must be kept carefully in check, or it will lead inescapably to the scrapheap. Probably, therefore, we shall do well to eschew any detailed methodology, and to consider further one or two facts. It is, however, to be noticed that you cannot *teach* unless you yourselves *know*, and your pupils *listen*. This is important.

First, you must *know*. And this is attained only by constant reading and thinking, so to speak, all round the subject. A fact known in isolation is not really known at all—all knowledge is inter-related. You can never build up either a working machine, or a working corpus of knowledge, from a bare knowledge of individual bits alone, without any understanding of their relations to, and their reactions upon, one another. That is to say, you cannot properly teach Scripture unless you know something of History and Geography at least. I should add certainly some branch of Physical Science, and anything that you can pick up of Archaeology, and of Anthropology. Also you must acquire a certain amount of political and social science, of economics and of civics. And, above all, you can never rightly teach Scripture unless, like Nathanael of old, you can say, "We have found Him of Whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth".

Secondly, your pupils must *listen*: and their listening will depend, I think, not so much on your teaching as on you. I have vivid memories of one former colleague of mine, whose record was (so to

speak) stiff with Certificates and Diplomas of Education. I believe that he could, in fact, teach like an archangel, but he was handicapped by the fact that he could never get the boys to listen to him—they were too busily occupied in throwing books at one another. He gave it up in the end—and took Holy Orders.

I would say, then, that the degree of attention paid by your pupils depends less on your teaching than on you. Be punctual—beginning and ending; be eager and enthusiastic, cheerful and keen, obviously interested and obviously Christian; and make them enjoy themselves. To this end, it is vitally important to make, and maintain, contact with your class. You should know your story so thoroughly that at least 75% of your thought and attention can be devoted not to what you are saying or going to say but to drawing out the minds and directing the thoughts of your children. You will be ready at any moment to ‘switch over’ to a new line of thought, and to follow any train of ideas that you see has been started in the mind of one of your pupils; and to be quick enough to realize and to seize upon this, your own thoughts must be absolutely undistracted by any sort of anxiety as to the course of the narrative. If you do not teach so, the fruits of your instruction will be in danger of coming under that condemnation of a clever teacher once given by the prophet Ezekiel: “Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not”.

II

Let us at this stage ask the question, What exactly is the aim, the purpose, of the teaching of Scripture? There are various answers to the question, with some of which I will briefly deal.

Is it to be taught for its literary value? Not mostly, I think. School children can hardly appreciate the archaisms, and the obscurities, of some of the language of the Authorised and Revised Versions: this will come later. I know all about “The Bible designed to be read as Literature”; but it was not so designed in the first instance by its Divine Author, nor by those “holy men of God” who “spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost”. Amos the farmer, Peter the fisherman, even the scholarly Paul whose zeal constantly outran his grammar—these men were concerned not with literary effect, but with the delivery of the message. No doubt they *produced* literature of undying worth—“GOD saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good”; but this was not their aim in writing as it should not be ours primarily in reading or teaching.

Do we then teach the Bible for its sheer interest? Yes, in a measure, if we know how to set about it. But merely as an interesting story, remember that the Bible has many competitors in the current literature of to-day, and it may not compete on equal terms. If our aim in teaching the Bible is to get it known, we shall find that disappointment awaits us. Our pupils will never, I fear, know the Bible. Do *you* know it? Such a result would be possible only on an extremely small and partial scale.

Further, then, shall we teach it for its ethical content—to make the

lesson a kind of indirect sermon? To this I would say Yes: such a purpose must be in the mind of every good teacher. But I am equally clear that it must not be in the forefront of the mind of the children: they would feel that an unfair advantage was being taken of their compulsory presence, and they would resent (if they were healthy-minded) being preached at. But I repeat that this certainly is, or should be, one of our major aims.

We may add, as our next aim, to trace the workings of GOD in human history. This is obvious, and easy, but it must be kept clear and not allowed to be overclouded; and it postulates a sufficient knowledge of history to enable the teacher to trace that same directing Hand in other events and other ages than those recorded in the pages of Scripture.

Almost more important, I think, is it to give our children a taste for the subject, and guidance in their approach to it and their study of it. For to a child, Scripture is a 'subject' like any other. It figures on the timetable and in the syllabus, it is taught in classrooms, it begins and ends with a bell. Now we all know how many school subjects are dropped, and forgotten, as soon as the child gets out into the world; it is our part so to stimulate interest and love for the study of the Scriptures that it will become a lifelong hobby of later days. For after all, put succinctly and baldly, the purpose above all in the teaching of Scripture is simply this: to lead the learner somehow through the word written to the Word Incarnate, so that in and through the Book the reader may come to know the Author's mind, to learn the story of His love and to respond to His call. On such an aim I will not dilate—but it stands supreme.

I must now draw attention to three features which, in the view of some people—though in my judgment the view is erroneous—tend to limit, and hamper, the teaching of Scripture in schools.

(i) First is the necessity for conforming to whatever syllabus is in use. This is really no limitation at all, except that it has the wholly desirable virtue of preventing freakiness. It certainly in no wise limits the usefulness of the subject. Those purposes which I have rehearsed above as being among our positive aims can perfectly well be achieved whatever part of the Bible is being studied.

(ii) Secondly, the limitations of time. This is indeed a difficulty if it is considered necessary to get through a given amount of the book in a given time. But speaking generally, while it is good to be *directed* by a syllabus, there is no need to be *tied* by it. It is pleasant at times to ramble, and to digress, and to wander: the actual amount of ground covered is of secondary importance. I would, however, add this obvious warning, that children want movement rather than detail. They like to get on with the story, and therefore you should neither moralize too much, nor deal too meticulously with a narrative that is best taken at large.

(iii) The third difficulty—which might be a real one to the inexperienced teacher—is that in these pagan days of ours you cannot assume any standard of knowledge on the part of your hearers. You cannot expect, for example, the experience that I once had with a little

new boy. In answer to my inquiry as to his favourite subject he said, "Mathematics, Sir". "Good," said I. "Have you ever done any Algebra?" "Oh yes," he said, "I've nearly finished it". Very few children, I fear, would claim to have "nearly finished" the study of Holy Scripture when they first come to School. It is more likely that they will be ignorant even of the most familiar stories and the fundamental facts. This does not matter at all if you teach properly, without assuming anything; but unless we keep the situation steadily in mind, we shall all too often be talking into the air.

There is, of course, a difference, both in principle and in method, between the teaching of the Old Testament and of the New, and most of us will have a personal preference one way or the other. Those who prefer the former probably do so because it is more exciting, or because its story moves more after the manner of 'secular' history, or because it is more objective and can more easily be treated purely factually. Similarly, in dealing with the New Testament, many would choose the Acts rather than the Gospels.

There is, however, a better way than this of considering the matter. The Old Testament, like the New, is a dense wood or thicket through which the way can, and indeed must, be found, but only at the cost of most careful search and striving. In the Old Testament you will find innumerable paths running in all directions: it is indeed easy enough to get on a path. But you ought to face quite frankly the question whether it is, in fact, leading the class anywhere, or whether (say) the stories of King Arthur, or Robinson Crusoe, or even a modern history book, could be made to serve equally well. If the answer is affirmative, or even dubitative, you are on the wrong track, even though you are in the right climate. The New Testament has but one path—difficult to find, and (in a sense) somewhat obscurely hidden; but once on it the Way is plain, and it leads to the Kingdom. So long, therefore, as you find the right path, it does not matter whether it runs through the pages of the Old Testament or the New; providing only (and this is essential) that in due time you have traversed both.

III

I desire now to offer one or two practical hints for classroom work: and you will, I am sure, forgive their somewhat obvious and didactic nature.

A. How To Teach The Old Testament. In what follows, I omit altogether reference to the great Old Testament stories of David, Elijah and so on—not because they are not important, but because they present no special difficulty.

First, narrate the story rather than read it. I always tell Senior boys that I do not propose to teach them what they can equally well learn for themselves, viz. the bare bones of the actual narrative and history. I am there to give the background of underlying causes, ideas, and developments of thought: to trace contemporary history, and the movements of religious, political and social outlook. I try to make constant comparison with the modern world. Have you ever thought, for example, of comparing Canaan at the time of Joshua with 18th Century Canada, Assyria with Russia, or post-exilic Israel with

African Dependencies? There are countless such comparisons—or sometimes contrasts—which I find invaluable in provoking thought and discussion, and in illuminating the somewhat shadowy pages of Kings and Chronicles.

Moreover, the method of narrative enables the teacher to pick out a reasonably balanced and consecutive story; and of course it has the practical advantage of disposing of difficulties associated with some of the embarrassing incidents and language. This narrative method gives matchless scope for the presentation of the vital points of the story, and avoids the confusion and occasional tedium which might be caused by too meticulously wading through each chapter. And it is, of course, always worth while explaining to your class that whereas the New Testament is dealing for the most part with the history of only a comparatively few years, the Old Testament covers centuries almost at a glance: consequently the whole treatment of the books must be different.

On the whole, never 'read round'. What may be gained in 'seeing that they attend' is more than lost in the destruction of rhythm and poetry. Certainly read aloud yourself occasionally if you can do it really well: but unless you can induce that breathlessness of attention and silence which the good lector expects—a silence not of repression, but of eager listening—do not repeat the experiment.

Remember, further, two things: first, that children love tabulation. Lists of names, and events—tedious and comparatively unimportant as they may seem to be—may bring the fascination of achievement to those who can master them. Do not let them be burdensome, but it is surprising how many Seniors as well as Juniors feel a thrill of triumph when they can repeat some sequence of names, or tell you the dates of some of the great historical events. It must not be forgotten, however, that this very fact has its danger, lest those who have mastered the historical details should think that thereby they have learned the message of the Book.

Secondly, remember that children love to discover. The Book may be to your class a veritable *cache* of hidden treasure. But you must tell them what to look for, and must guide their search—not selfishly depriving them of the pleasure of finding it, nor unfeelingly leaving them undirected to look for they know not what. Join with them in the hide-and-seek, and your reward will be as great as theirs.

For example, if you are reading Genesis—the Book of Beginnings—look out for the beginning of all sorts of things: of life and sin; of arts and crafts and languages; of industry, law and commerce; of religion true and false; and of the framing of mankind into a Society. Through it all, find the first beginnings of Revelation, man seeking God and God seeking fallen and frightened and rebellious man.

Then, Exodus to Samuel: the grand story of the evolution of civilization. The individuals develop into a family—a tribe; the tribes coalesce into a mob, the mob becomes a nation, and the nation a state. You can compare this story with the task of building up a school tradition; for the law, after all, is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

Then, the Kings and the Prophets. Here we see the tensions

resulting from the determination to exchange theocracy for monarchy, and the subsequent development in the organization of a state. What a fascinating field of inquiry it is to compare the ideas of kingship held respectively by Saul and Solomon, with all the repercussions on the life, habits, and outlook of their subjects! Watch the progress of internal growth and external relationships; modern parallels will occur to your mind at every stage. See how the prophets first appear as supporters of the dynasty, then are forced into silence, and reappear later on as critics or even opponents of the régime. Emphasize, and illustrate, Isaiah's insistence on neutrality, Jeremiah's calculated "defeatism", the steady insistence of Micah and Amos on the more urgent need for internal moral reconstruction, insisting (of course) the whole time that the prophets are the mouthpiece of God speaking at sundry times and in divers manners unto the fathers. Pick out from these prophecies the relevant political, historical, and social passages, and make them alive. The same treatment applied to many of the Psalms will yield equally attractive and remunerative results. And sometimes the more detailed study (in its historical context) of such a book as Habakkuk arouses immense interest and teaches simple and most valuable lessons.

IV

B. How To Teach The New Testament. Again I make no comment on the actual narration of grand incidents and glorious parables. I refer rather to the teaching of the message as a whole.

First, then, the Gospels. Here again I suggest that you generally tell the story: let your imagination play, freely but with all reverence. Don't be too fanciful—don't invent characters or incidents—but fill in the background by constant reference to local geography, national life and customs, costume and practice and law and tradition, and so forth. Remember—whatever else you teach—that you are telling your class about God Incarnate, and of One Who would be both their Saviour and yours.

What shall I say about the interpretation of parables and incidents? I doubt if it is often a fair question to ask the class "What do we learn?" from this or that. You see, if they have learnt anything *worth* learning, they may for that very reason find it all the more difficult to put it into words. Alternatively, you may produce the type of prig who will demurely tell you that the lesson is "Love your neighbour", while at the same time he gleefully, and with angelic countenance, inserts his pen-nib deep into the fleshy part of his neighbour's leg.

But if you *do* ask the question "What have you learned?" then you really must accept the answer that you are given. Let me conjure up for you a brief dialogue to illustrate what I mean. The subject has been the Parable of the Good Samaritan. "Now, so-and-so, what does this parable teach you?" "Please Sir, it teaches that you could get put up for twopence a night." "No, no, you naughty, lazy, stupid, inattentive, sinful little boy! Don't you see it teaches us to be kind and sympathetic and gentle and loving to others? Go and stand in the corner." In other words, if you ask the child what he has learnt,

and he tells you, don't contradict him. If he has learnt something wrong, blame the teacher, not the scholar. When some time ago, I found that the whole of one class had learnt some wildly impossible forms of their French subjunctives, I merely told them that no doubt they had misunderstood Mr. So-and-So ; but I also told Mr. So-and-So that I thought he had better look out for another job.

Of course, if a child imagines—as in his simplicity he will sometimes do—some lesson or meaning which in the mouth, or even in the mind, of an elder person would be irreverent or even blasphemous, the impression must be gently corrected : not, I think, by contradiction, but by a kind of simple dialectic in which others—and perhaps the boy himself—will join until they triumphantly see the fallacy and correct it. But if it is a lesson which can by any means be squeezed out of the passage under consideration, don't tell the child that he has not learnt it—if indeed he has—just because it was not the lesson that the one-track mind of the teacher was contemplating at the moment. Never *crush*—either by weight of contradiction or by the still more brutal weapon of sarcasm. It is good to become as little children in these matters, and even to join in thanksgiving if certain things hidden from the wisest and most prudent of certificated school teachers may perchance have been revealed unto babes.

Second, the Acts of the Apostles. The main topic of the book is the work of the Holy Ghost in inspiring and directing the growth of a world-wide Christian Society—the gradual attainment of the threefold ideal of self-support, self-government, and self-propagation. Here again constant reference may be made to a well-organized school, with a strong corporate tradition. Reference to the Epistles will, of course, come in their proper place, from time to time : and at least those to the Thessalonians, Corinthians and Philippians will both illustrate the narrative and be themselves illuminated.

V

I close by adverting briefly to three questions on which opinions may well differ, but in each of which the guidance of experience may be useful.

(i) What about learning by heart ? I think Yes : the tedium of the process is well repaid by the lasting satisfaction of a well-stored mind, enriched by its knowledge of some of the most majestic passages in the literature of the world, as well as by the consolation ministered in time of stress by the recollection of the most comfortable words of Holy Scripture. But I beg you to do your utmost to minimize the tedium : not because I believe in making everything easy but because (as I said at the beginning) the main purpose in the teaching of Scripture is to give your pupils a desire to pursue in after life the study of it. Choose short, easy, familiar passages, and do not keep the children at it for very long—certainly never for a whole period. And afterwards, in your ordinary teaching, keep on referring to the passages so learnt. The children will delight in the triumph of recognizing, and completing, your quotations. Let it all be very reverent, very happy, and on the whole infrequent : thus the good without the harm will eventuate.

(ii) Should Scripture be an “ examinable ” subject ? I say Yes

most emphatically, and for three main reasons. First, because the child (as I have already said) thinks of it as a subject—a lesson; and a well-taught child loves to have knowledge tested. Secondly, because if the subject is never examined the commercially-minded scholar—especially when nearing School Certificate age—will think that time spent in Scripture classes is wasted. “Please, sir, may I drop Scripture? I shan’t need it in my exam.” And the answer that he may conceivably need it in *life* is not wholly convincing to the omniscience of adolescence. And thirdly, because it is so particularly good for the soul of the teacher—especially the pious teacher—to find out how little you have taught and how much of that little has straight-way been forgotten. But I do suggest that you make the examination objective, and factual, and not on the whole ethical: you can best discover whether your pupils have learnt the real lessons by watching their lives, just as by your lives you will teach them best.

(iii) My third question relates to what is vaguely known as ‘Criticism.’ What are we to do about this? Let me venture to lay down a few propositions which may help us here.

1. With small children the question does not arise. Everything is real and there is no difference at all between history and picture; all characters are equally vividly alive.

2. The teacher must be sound on Inspiration. Unless the Bible is indeed the very Word of God to man it is not worth teaching.

3. You must recognize that Miracles do in fact occur. The Resurrection was a miracle; if this can happen, anything can happen: there can be no *a priori* argument of impossibility.

4. Keep an open mind. The last word has not yet been said by Science and Archaeology, and on the whole the trend of modern inquiry is in the direction of confirming rather than of refuting the biblical narratives.

5. There is a real difference between truthfulness and accuracy. The latter, for example, relating to quantities may yield to hyperbole, or estimate, or the convenience of round numbers, or the Jewish love for three and four, with their sums, products, and multiples. Remember, too, the long processes of oral tradition, the uncertainties of language, the hazards of transcription, the age of manuscripts, and all the vicissitudes of time.

6. And lastly, we must recognize, and welcome, the fact that the Oriental mind deals in pictures. “He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust”: to ask whether this is fact or imagination is to propound wholly artificial alternatives. And so it is, I think, with so much of the Old Testament. It is all true, vitally and eternally true: the thread of the narrative also is literally and historically true. But remember that to an Oriental the meaning is everything, the incident in which the meaning is (so to speak) wrapped up is nothing. I wonder if I can make this clear? To a member of the Jewish race in particular, history has virtually no importance at all as a record of past fact, but is of the utmost importance as a key to the meaning of the present and the future. The Jew has been upheld all through his centuries of trouble not by dreams of an uncertain future so much as by the sure warrant of past

history. And so, conversely, as long as the *meaning* is clear, the reader will dismiss as wholly unimportant and irrelevant any critical considerations of the details of the narrative in which that meaning is embodied. The pious Jew, with the simple profundity that sees (as a child sees) much that is hidden from more sophisticated folk, *knows* that the story is true, and would consider this as far more important than trying to answer the question, "But did it actually happen in such a month of such a year, and in such a fashion?" I think that if the teacher has really absorbed this point of view, and will gradually communicate it to the children, he will do much to answer their questions and to establish them with all firmness on the impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture.

Finally, remember that in the teaching of Scripture, and indeed of any subject, you are moulding a plastic material which presently will set so hard that only God Himself can change it, and perhaps even He only by breaking it. Your impress will be permanent; see that it bears, in every point, the sign of the Cross. And do not forget that every time you take a lesson in school, you are fulfilling the parting command of our Master, "Go ye therefore and teach . . .". Happy is that class, and that school, in which this command is so perfectly fulfilled that in every lesson, and indeed in all the contacts of life, the teacher may continually be saying, less indeed by word than by action and example and prayer, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord".

Old Testament Study

BY THE REV. CANON J. E. FISON, M.A., B.D.

I WANT to draw attention to three or four recent books on the Old Testament which have impressed me very much. First of all no Christian should neglect the two works of the great Jewish mystic and thinker, Professor Martin Buber: *The Prophetic Faith* (Macmillan, 1949), and *Moses* (East and West Library, 1946). Secondly, no one who wants to keep abreast of Old Testament scholarship should miss *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (edited by H. H. Rowley, Oxford University Press, 1951). Thirdly, for detailed study, combining real scholarship and spiritual discernment, it would be hard to beat C. R. North's *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah* (Oxford, 1948).

I

There can be no doubt at all that no one can claim to be up to date in any way with his Old Testament studies who does not realize the immense change which has taken place in the whole 'climate' of Old Testament scholarship between 1920 and 1950. It is as great a change as that between 1870 and 1900. And in a nutshell the result of the best scholarship of the last thirty years has been to reassert the simple and generally conservative attitude to the Old Testament which