

We were looking for a suitable title for the Indonesian version of Isobel Kuhn's *By Searching*. An Indonesian Christian colleague suggested a quotation from Psalm 34: 4, 'I sought the Lord', but in Indonesian the phrase could as well be present or future as past tense. We wondered if so direct a title would not deter prospective readers. 'Not at all', said our Indonesian friend, 'many people in this country are seeking God today, and this will appeal to them.'

What an encouragement to the desperately hard-pressed missionary team!

What a call to faith, endeavour, initiative and dedication, to show the way to those who seek — the only way to God, through Jesus Christ!

What a challenge to Christians the world over to share in harvesting this amazingly ripened field!

## *Teddy's Button and All That*

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RECENTLY, at a primary Sunday-school party, fifty small children between the ages of three and seven were told that if they were very good they would be shown some film strips after tea. Their behaviour having reached the required standard, the excited children were ushered into a darkened room and the 'show' began. First they were shown an attractive little 'Jungle Doctor' fable, which they clamoured to see again; and then 'the Story of Cinderella' was announced as the next item. But if they thought they were to see the age-old tale in all its exciting detail, they were sadly mistaken. Instead, to the accompaniment of doggerel verse, the story itself was lightly sketched over and the whole weight of the entertainment rested on the shoulders of the douce-looking fairy godmother, who told her youthful audience that it was jealousy which made the ugly sisters so unkind. Jealousy was a bad sin and if children found it in themselves, they must ask the Lord Jesus to take it away, which He would do by the help of His holy Word. The children in the audience showed their disappointment quite openly, 'That's not the story of Cinderella', said one clearly — and the whole incident led more than one of the adults present to think again about the whole subject of the entertainment offered to the children in our Sunday-schools.

Film strips are, of course, a rarity in Sunday-school life: but the same question is raised on a much larger scale in considering Sunday-school prizes and the books that are given to reward and encourage those who attend faithfully, Sunday by Sunday. There is a school of thought which would

say that such prizes should not be given and that virtue should be its own reward. In these days, however, other attractions are peculiarly compelling, probably more so than they have ever been. The television, the increased standard of living, enabling many families to own a car which can take them off on a Sunday outing, and above all the way in which the church is no longer even remotely a factor to be reckoned with, all these things demand a considerable effort from a child and its parents to make it attend Sunday-school regularly. Christian parents are, of course, not controlled by such things, but their children are surrounded by them and must sometimes be influenced by their attractiveness; so it would seem to be only right that in this godless and materialistic age, children should be encouraged to come to church and rewarded for doing so by being given a present at least once a year.

Usually, except where very small children are concerned, this gift takes the form of a book, and it is here that the trouble begins. What books should be given? Upon what principles should they be chosen? What is our purpose in giving a particular book to a particular child? Such questions arise, of course, in the more general consideration of the literature which Christian parents provide for their children; but the Sunday-school teacher's problem is more specific in that he has no knowledge of, or control over, the child in general, and it is to his particular problem that this article is directed.

There is undoubtedly a very large school of evangelical thought which insists that such prize books should contain a 'message'. We often laugh at the Victorians and the books which they offered to their unfortunate children — *Eric, or Little by Little*, *Teddy's Button*, *The Wide Wide World*, *A Peep Behind the Scenes* and so on, books which, beneath the very thin guise of a story which was meant to entertain, actually attacked the child's moral consciousness through his emotions. The good child who was frequently given a touching death-bed scene, the bad child who either reformed or came to a terrible end, the moralizing aunt, or the adult who was brought to better things by a stalwart infant — all these characters avowedly taught a lesson and the story was the jam to make the pill more palatable. Yet, though we may smile now, there is much of this left among us — it is not enough just to let them have the story of Cinderella, the moral must be drawn too, however awkwardly or reluctantly it may be dragged out. On Christian bookstalls, large numbers of books may be found, adventure stories, school stories and so on, but all having a 'message'. The jam may be better cooked than it was in Victorian times, but the pill is still very much there. Many of the books, though they may be mediocre and sentimental, are given as prizes because they purport to include the gospel, but surely the whole situation needs to be rethought seriously. There is no doubt that such books are produced from the very highest motives — the desire to evangelize the child (and possibly any parents who may read the books) — but is this really effective? It is probably true to say that the vast majority of children read only the story part of the book and skip lightly over the passages where the hero's heart-searching is described, or where he or his friend have a serious talk with someone on Christian things. Like the little girl who liked the Bishop 'because he has no morals', children know when they are being indirectly got at, and either resent it or shy away from it. In a way, the whole idea is a form of unfair attack upon

the child's emotions, because one of the principles behind it must be, to put it baldly, that one 'softens up' the child by means of the excitement or appeal of the story and then drops in the message at the psychological moment. Furthermore, as was suggested earlier, these books are often poor from the literary standpoint — the style is poor and the plot thin and raggedly constructed — and as such are surely not suitable to give to the children for whom we are responsible.

What then should we give them? If we want them to have literature which will help and influence them from the Christian point of view, it would seem to be better in every way to give them books which are directly and openly written on Christian subjects. There are a good number of these available and experience shows that children will read them and enjoy them. Such books are those by 'The Jungle Doctor' already mentioned, simply and clearly written missionary biographies, and lives of great Christians, such as Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury, and some excellent little books produced by many missionary societies for most age groups, describing the lives of children in other countries and their contact with the gospel through missionaries. A great help, too, to the Sunday-school prize-givers in these days are the Narnia books of Professor C. S. Lewis, which can be read simply as first-class adventure stories until the older and more spiritually minded child can begin to grasp their allegorical significance. These books are not directly evangelical, but are excellent as literature and so are good for the child in every way. For the older boy or girl, the immortal *Pilgrim's Progress* should never be forgotten and even the younger child, with a helpful parent in the background to read aloud and omit the theological passages, can thrill to the story of Christian grappling with Apollyon or losing his burden at the cross. Curiously enough, Bunyan's incomparable language can grip even young children. A small boy was being told the story of Christian's escape from Doubting Castle by a well-meaning but bowdlerizing adult and when she told him, 'then Christian took the key out of his pocket', he corrected her indignantly, 'He did not, he plucked it out of his bosom.'

The other solution to the problem, which also has much to be said in its favour, is, instead of giving second-rate 'Christian' books, to give first-rate secular ones, books which children can enjoy and which, because of their style, story and generally high standard of writing, it would be good for them to read. Many Sunday-schools, knowing that their children are taught the Christian truths faithfully Sunday by Sunday, do not insist upon their being given them again in their prize books, so they give the classics of children's literature: books from *Little Women* to Arthur Ransome, from *The Tailor of Gloucester* to *The Wind in the Willows* and *Alice in Wonderland* and so on through the fascinating realms of the writers who know how to capture and to keep the child's imagination. In these days of so much trashy and obscene 'literature' we must, as Christians, keep our children's standards high, and one of the best ways of doing this is surely so to delight them with the good that they will recognize the bad for the poor stuff it is.