

Sunday-School Reform.

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WHATEVER may be the issue of the present controversy upon religious education in our day-schools, the importance of our Sunday-school work, and our responsibility for making it as efficient as possible, must increase.

This is being widely realized outside, as well as within, the Church of England. I am not fond of ecclesiastical comparisons, but I think it will be generally admitted, at any rate by those who have studied the facts, that, even relatively to some of the Nonconformist Churches, our own Church has not laid that stress upon the importance of Sunday-school work which it deserves, nor have Church-people generally been prepared to make the self-sacrifice, either in personal service or in money, on behalf of the work which they should have done.

Certainly, in the North of England, and especially in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, the importance of the Sunday-school has been much more clearly recognized than in the Midlands and the South. Consequently the people have taken a far greater interest in its work. There has been a greater readiness, especially on the part of those who have been educated in it, to provide both the personal service and the funds necessary for its maintenance. There are working-class parishes both in Lancashire and in the West Riding where, on "the Anniversary"—the local name for the Sunday on which an appeal for the Sunday-school is made—a sum of £150 to £250 will be collected in the offertories in the Church.

Fortunately, at the present time there seems to be a widespread feeling that we must look more closely into the working of our Sunday-schools, that we must take steps to find out what they are actually accomplishing, and how their efficiency may be increased. As one proof of this movement I would draw attention to the very full and careful inquiry which has been made under the auspices of the Congregational Union

into the condition of the Sunday-schools belonging to that body. The results of this inquiry have now been published, in a small volume entitled "Our Sunday-schools: As they are and as they may become."¹ This volume I would very earnestly commend to the study of all who are really interested in Sunday-school work; it is a mine both of information and of wise suggestions.

The scope of the inquiry was made very comprehensive, because it was clearly recognized how many and how various are the factors entering into the efficiency of the Sunday-school. It included several questions upon each of the following subjects: The number of scholars over and under fourteen years of age; the nature and the suitability of the buildings; the equipment—*i.e.*, furniture and teaching apparatus—of the schools; the teaching arrangements—*e.g.*, the "grading" of the scholars, and the course of instruction adopted; the nature and the equipment of the teachers; the bond between the Church and the school; the Sunday-school and Church membership; the missionary and philanthropic work of the school; also the means adopted for raising the funds necessary for carrying on Sunday-school work.

Into each of these various matters the most careful inquiries were made, and a very large number of schools in different kinds of neighbourhoods—town, country, suburban—in all parts of England were personally visited. The results of the whole inquiry were then most carefully tabulated and summarized.

The following points among these results strike me as of more particular interest: There is evidently a very general conviction that what sufficed even a few years ago is quite inadequate to-day. The Sunday-school, like every other institution, if it is to maintain its position and serve its purpose, must move with the times; it must supply present needs. There is a demand for more suitable buildings, and a fuller equipment—blackboards, pictures, models, lesson-books—and

¹ Published at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, E.C.

the scholars must be more intelligently graded according to their attainments. There is a strong feeling among the more earnest workers that the ability to teach efficiently does not come by nature, but must be acquired through study and practice ; so, if possible, each school, especially each large school, should have connected with it a small class in which young men and young women are being trained how to teach. Then, again, there is evidently a widespread conviction of the need of more union between school and school ; that associations of schools must be formed, and must be made a real power for good. Another, and a most important, point brought out is that evidently much greater interest should be shown in the work of the Sunday-school by the congregation than is usually the case. This interest at present is too often confined to those members who are actually engaged in Sunday-school work ; the average "Church member" does not sufficiently recognize the importance of the work that is being done or that might be done in the Sunday-school. Lastly, the work is too often hampered, indeed starved, by lack of sufficient funds. An efficient Sunday-school, although the services of the workers are voluntary, must cost a considerable sum ; yet by many Churches the amount of money devoted to this object is wholly inadequate.

From my own knowledge of Sunday-school work, gained from experience in various districts—I have worked in five dioceses—I should say that the deficiencies revealed in this report exist to an equal, in some cases to an even greater, extent in schools belonging to the Church of England. In many parishes far more importance has been attached to the work of the day-school. Much money and a great part of the energy of the clergy and others have been devoted to its maintenance and its efficiency, and quite rightly so. But the greatest possible care and attention bestowed upon the day-school will not compensate for neglect of the Sunday-school. The two are not capable of doing exactly the same work, and indeed the inefficiency of the Sunday-school in any parish

tends to make the work done in the day-school largely inoperative and futile. The really efficient Sunday-school will *carry on* the work done in the day-school. Hard-and-fast tests are liable to be misleading, but the *proportion* of scholars in a Sunday-school who are over fourteen years of age is not a bad indication of its usefulness and its influence. It is at about this age (when parental control can no longer be compulsorily exercised) that we must trust to the attractive power of the teachers and the school to insure attendance.

Then, too often, the influence of the Sunday-school for good is regarded as coterminous with its influence upon the *scholars*. This is altogether too narrow a view to take of its possible beneficent effects. We must also think of its use, and of its value to the *teachers*. Any institution, or any movement whose aim is moral and spiritual, and which finds practical work for the members of a congregation, which calls forth practical self-sacrifice from them, must be for good. In this, I think, our Nonconformist friends have often proved their wisdom. In many ways, and especially by the multiplication of offices, they have given their members a larger share in the active work of Christianity. Recently, at a Sunday-school Conference, I heard a country clergyman boast that he had no difficulty in finding Sunday-school teachers. "I do all the teaching myself," he said. "Every Sunday afternoon I instruct about eighty children." It is quite possible that he was better qualified than any of his parishioners to teach these children; but was he not doing a wrong to those of his people who possibly might wish for an opportunity of serving Christ in this way? Would he not have been far better occupied in giving up an evening once a week to training such persons to do this work?

If our Sunday-schools generally are to be made more efficient, the congregation must be made to feel more strongly their importance. The claim of Sunday-school work for both funds and personal service must be constantly and plainly put before them. Then, much greater effort must be made to retain the elder scholars. There should always be a class of boys and

another of girls who are looking forward to Confirmation. In these two classes the instruction should be distinctly preparatory for the instruction they will receive from the clergyman for this. As soon as these are confirmed they should be drafted into Bible-classes, upon which the greatest care and attention must be bestowed. Further, the teachers should be encouraged by every possible means to submit themselves to training, and the clergyman should most carefully qualify himself to give this training. Much attention is often given to teaching the teachers *what* to teach, but comparatively little to showing them *how* to teach. Many so-called uneducated teachers—working men and women—know enough to teach small children much which will be useful to these; but very few know how to impart this knowledge, how to get and maintain attention, and how to preserve discipline. Personally I have found an occasional lesson on the psychology of teaching—the thing without the name—very highly appreciated by the teachers in our Sunday-schools. But such a lesson must be preceded by a very careful study of the best books upon the science and art of teaching. To these lessons those of the elder scholars who show earnestness and intelligence should be warmly invited. It is well, whenever possible, to have some always looking forward to teaching, and gradually being trained to do it.

Among these various suggestions the two upon which I would lay most stress are the first and the last—viz., the need of impressing congregations with the importance of the Sunday-school, and the necessity of teaching our teachers *how* to teach. It is well not to attempt too many reforms at the same time. We shall often accomplish more by concentrating our energies upon a few definite purposes than by dissipating them over many. If we are content to bend our efforts upon these two most important objects, we may in a few years not only reform, but transform the present condition of our Sunday-schools.

