THE NATURAL LINE OF ADVANCE IN SUNDAY-SCHOOL LESSONS.

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THE great body of the Sunday schools at the present time are on a uniform lesson basis, or one in which all classes, from the youngest to the oldest, study the same short portion of Scripture. This method of study was a vast improvement on the former indiscriminate study of all kinds of lessons. It gave great satisfaction for many years, but its limitations are now so keenly felt, and the present dissatisfaction with it is so deep and widespread, that the demand for something better cannot be long resisted. There was never before so much inquiry regarding better methods of study, nor so much determination to secure them. The main question is: What is the best possible method of Sunday-school Bible study, and how is it to be obtained?

All advanced thinkers on this subject are agreed that the ideal Sunday school is one which has a regularly graded course of study, with separate lessons for each year, so that a scholar beginning at any point in it can move steadily forward in his biblical and religious education as long as he remains in the school. The educational arguments in favor of such a system are overwhelming. To most of the enthusiasts whose eyes are opened to its advantages there seems to be no reason why it should not be introduced at once. The difficulty is that the change from the uniform to the class-graded basis involves such a complete revolution of ideas concerning the purpose of the Sunday school, and such radical changes in Sunday-school organization and methods of instruction, that but few schools are ready for it.

We must remember that the Sunday-school world includes a very large number of people and a great variety of interests;

that in this, as in other reforms, large bodies move slowly, and cannot be transferred at will from one position to another far in advance, but that they must move, if at all, one step at a time, and along the line of least resistance. Sudden and revolutionary changes in the Sunday-school world are impossible. If we wish, not merely to secure the transfer of an occasional school from the uniform to a class-graded basis, but to provide for an advance of the whole Sunday-school army in that direction, we must utilize the forces already existing and start from the ground now occupied. It becomes us therefore to note carefully the principal elements of strength in the present system, to see how far any of these can be used, temporarily at least, in connection with the advance desired, and to introduce new elements into that advance only so fast as they can be received and assimilated by the great body of the schools.

The chief pillar of strength in the International system is its unity of impression on those using it. That there is great value as well as convenience in this is beyond dispute, since otherwise it could never have become the basis of a world-wide system of study. Whether it is as valuable as that better training of the individual which results from a class-graded system is wholly another question; but the idea that this unity of impression is the thing of principal value in Sunday-school instruction has been so fostered by the uniform lessons, and has taken such deep hold on the schools, that it will be many years before any large number of them will be ready to give it up in favor of the better instruction of the individual. This, then, is the special element in the present system which we must conserve as far as possible, and use within reasonable limits, in making any advance which shall command the attention of the great body of the schools. On the other hand, as above stated, the goal of Sunday-school advance should be the class-graded system. The pressing question, therefore, is how to preserve unity of impression as long as it shall be needed, and at the same time to introduce a process of differentiation between the lessons used in different parts of the school which shall prepare the way for the class-graded system and move steadily toward it.

The gap between uniform lessons and class-graded lessons is so great that it must be filled temporarily, and probably for many years, by department-graded lessons, that is, lessons in which each of the three great departments of the school—primary, main school, and Bible classes—has lessons especially adapted to it. These in their natural subdivisions furnish an easy line of advance, beginning with lessons least removed from uniformity, and proceeding, as rapidly as the need of further advance is felt, to lessons farther and farther removed from it, until at last class-graded lessons are reached. There are three well-defined steps of progress in this department-graded advance, each of which must be taken in order to secure the best results. These may be called department-graded A, B, and C; or section-graded, book-graded, and miscellaneous-graded. I will speak of each in turn.

1. *Class A, or section-graded lessons.*—The important relation of this kind of lessons to the great forward movement in Sunday schools requires a somewhat full description of them. We must remember that, in order to carry many schools with it, any system of study which moves progressively away from the uniform lesson must move slowly and along the line of least resistance. This is the secret of the success of the Bible Study Union lessons. From the first they were planned in such a way that they could be used successfully, when desired, on a class-graded basis. They are now so used in many schools. But had they at first, or at any time since, been placed exclusively on the class-graded basis, they would never have had a corporal's guard of followers. The schools ready to adopt that idea are not numerous enough to support any system of lessons, nor will they be for a long time to come. Many, however, are ready for an advance step which shall combine unity of impression for the school with a steadily progressive course of study for the individual. Schools can use such a system without any serious disturbance of their old habits of thought, and yet with a delightful sense of progress in Bible study to which they were previously strangers.

This is accomplished as follows: The International uniform

lesson consists of ten or a dozen verses selected mainly for their homiletic value, with such study of connected passages as the lesson writer or teacher sees fit to make. The Bible Study Union, on the contrary, bases each lesson on an *entire Scripture section*, comprising all that the Bible has to say on that particular subject, or perhaps groups of more or less closely connected subjects. The difference is very great between studying a short passage as the lesson, with some desultory reference to connecting material, and studying the whole section as the lesson ; and yet it is the shortest and most natural step away from the uniform lesson to something better.

It provides, to begin with, for a division of the material according to the needs of the different departments, which, through scantiness of material, is not possible with the International lesson. Thus each section is likely to have in it some story or great truth adapted to children. This is taken as the lesson for the primary grades, and is studied for its own sake, as an individual story or truth, rather than with reference to its connection with other parts of Scripture. This is in accordance with the educational principle that children care very little for connected biography or history, and very much for independent stories and truths.

But when we come to the classes in the main school, the case is wholly different. The time has now arrived in the mental development of the pupil when he should study connected biography or history; hence the entire section is made the lesson for the main school, and is studied more or less completely according to the grade. This method of presentation is so different in purpose and manner from that of the International uniform lesson as to awaken new interest, and to promote enthusiasm where there was none before ; yet it is not so different as to repel by its strangeness or to discourage by its difficulty.

In the Bible-class lessons another idea becomes prominent. It is assumed that the pupils are now mature enough for a broader outlook on the spiritual contents of the section than is possible in earlier years. Attention is therefore concentrated upon the practical and doctrinal teachings of the lessons which

are presented in the form of topics for discussion, with such questions and notes as are necessary to open debate and guide thought.

We have thus one Scripture section covering an entire subject, or group of connected subjects, studied with a different lesson and for a different purpose in each of the three chief departments of the Sunday school. This, through the general unity of impression which results from the study of one Scripture section, preserves the most valuable characteristic of the uniform lesson; and at the same time, through the different courses and grades in the several departments, adds a real gradation of material and methods, thus uniting the best features of both uniform and graded systems. This makes the step of progress from the old to the new so easy that any school can take it with perfect success.

2. *Class B, or book-graded lessons.*—The next step of progress is to a system in which the lessons for all departments are taken from the same general portion of Scripture, though not necessarily from the same section. This may be called department-graded B, or book-graded, from the fact that the lessons for all departments are from the same book or books. This differs more widely from the A class than that does from the uniform lesson, since the lessons in the different departments have no relation to one another excepting that which comes from their being from the same books of Scripture, as, for instance, the gospels, and from their naturally following the same chronology.

This system is decidedly better educationally than that in which the lessons for all departments are taken from the same section, because some sections, which are indispensable to a complete biography or history, contain nothing of special value to children, while other sections have in them two or three stories, each of which would furnish an excellent lesson for children, yet on which older people ought not to be required to linger. But, as a matter of fact, schools generally do not appreciate this until they have had practical experience of it. Some series of the Bible Study Union system belong to the A class and some to the B class, and although the educational argument in favor of

the B class is vastly stronger than that for the A class, yet the A class has been decidedly the most popular with the Sunday schools. What I say on this subject, therefore, is not merely a matter of opinion, but of experience. The attempt to carry schools over from the uniform basis to the book-graded class will not ordinarily be a success until they have first learned the limitations of the section-graded class by using it. People have become so accustomed to getting something that could somehow be used in all departments of the Sunday school from the ten or twelve verses of the International lesson that they cannot believe but that there is something perfectly suited to all departments in any Scripture section of a chapter or two, until they have found out the contrary by the study of lessons arranged on that basis.

My opinion is that, if the great body of the Sunday schools could be—as I believe that with sufficient co-operation among those most interested they easily might be—transferred from the uniform lesson to the A class, as above described, within the next five years, they would not as a body become ready for a further advance to the B class for fifteen or twenty years at least. At all events, it would not be until the better adaptation to the needs of each department found in the A class, as compared with the uniform lesson, would presently educate them up to the need of the still better adaptation found in the B class. I am trying to look at things as they are, and not as I wish they might be. In the great Sunday-school world there are too many persons to be considered, and too many interests are involved, to secure rapid movement in any direction. Stagnation is the thing most to be feared; slow progress is the most that can be hoped for. If the schools ever advance to the B class, it will be a long time before they will, as a whole, make any further advance. For the material from any given book or set of books is so ample that suitable topics for children, young people, and adults could easily be found in it; and it would be only after much experience with this kind of lessons that the schools generally would become in turn wearied of its limitations, and be ready for the next step.

3. *Class C, or miscellaneous-graded lessons.*—We now come to

the highest form of department-graded lessons, which I have called department-graded C, or miscellaneous-graded, from the fact that the lessons from the different departments are from a great variety of sources. They consist of one set of lessons for the primary department, another for the main school, and another for Bible classes, no one of the three having any connection with the other two, except that they relate more or less directly to the religious education of the pupil. The object here is to secure for each department the lessons best adapted to it, without regard to the lessons in the other departments. Up to this point in the advance we have maintained a considerable degree of that unity of impression which is the main feature of the uniform lesson. In the section-graded class this unity is fully equal to that in the International system, perhaps even better, since it is based on a complete Scripture section instead of on a disconnected fragment of it. In the book-graded class this unity exists within certain limits, since the lessons for all departments are from the same general portion of Scripture, as, for instance, the gospels; but it is much less marked than in the A class, because the lessons in the different departments are often from different Scripture sections. But in the miscellaneous-graded class we part company with all unity of impression in the school at large, and in place of it substitute the better instruction of each department. For this class of lessons permits the different departments to have lessons on the widest possible range of subjects, whether from the Bible, from nature, from church history and biography, or concerning ethics, doctrines, missions, or anything else relating to the religious education of the pupils.

The mere statement of the ends sought and the means used in this method of study shows not only how far removed it is from the simple uniform lesson now in general use, but also how long a step it is in advance of the B class. Each successive step in this line of progress is, indeed, longer than the preceding one, but not difficult to take in its proper order. There is no doubt but that this is educationally the best kind of department-graded lessons, since the gradations for each department are unhampered by the requirements of any other department, and are made solely

with reference to the highest interests of the department for which they are designed. Whether the lessons for each department are selected annually, so as to be treated in the current religious papers, as the uniform lessons are now, and as all department-graded lessons easily could be, or whether they are selected in one or more of the departments for permanent use, as has been proposed by some, they afford a freedom of treatment and selection vastly better than either of the methods described as A and B.

The idea of such lessons is, indeed, so attractive that many are urging its immediate adoption. The trouble is that the step from the uniform lessons to lessons of this kind is so long that but few schools can be induced to take it. There is great danger in offering such courses at the present time, lest their failure through being too great an advance shall react to hinder any advance whatever for years to come, and to leave the schools in a worse condition than before this particular advance was attempted. Large bodies move slowly and cannot jump creeks. They must have roads and bridges. They cannot afford to abandon present good till something better takes its place.

However much we might wish that there were a shorter way for securing the desired result, it seems clear that, while a few schools can move more rapidly, the only line of advance along which the great body of the Sunday schools can march to the music of graded lessons will be substantially that above marked out, namely: A movement *first* to a graded system in which the lessons for all departments shall be from the same Scripture section. This preserves unity of impression throughout the school, and adds a gradation of material which, though not the best possible, is yet a great advance on simple uniformity. The *second* step will be to graded lessons in which the lessons for all departments are from the same books of Scripture, but not necessarily from the same Scripture section. This secures unity of impression in each department, and to some extent in the whole school, and gives a better gradation of material than is possible in the section-graded class. The *third* step is an advance to a system in which each department of the Sunday

school shall have lessons specially selected for it without regard to what is studied in the other departments. This does away entirely with unity of impression in the school as a whole, but retains it within each department and secures a better gradation of material than is possible in either of the other department-graded systems. The *fourth* and last step, in the remote future, is one in which, perhaps through the natural subdivision of miscellaneous-graded lessons within the several departments, and perhaps through the gradual introduction of special lessons designed for pupils of certain ages until all ages are covered, there shall be a system of lessons in which each class or year shall have a lesson specially adapted to it, without regard to what other classes are studying, excepting as each year's study is a link in a perfect chain. Here unity of impression wholly disappears, and in its place has come the best possible instruction for the individual class or scholar. Beyond this nothing remains except to perfect the courses offered and to improve each year's lessons to the utmost. This, it will be seen, provides for a steadily progressive movement away from the uniform lesson toward the class-graded lesson, each step of which follows the preceding one so naturally as to be taken easily in its proper order.

It is understood, of course, that in order to meet the needs of the schools in any part of this advance movement the lessons must be educationally sound; they must be interesting and instructive; they must be spiritually helpful, and must be adapted for use by ordinary teachers in ordinary Sunday schools. They must, in short, use the Sunday school as it now exists, with all its drawbacks and limitations, in such a way as to give young people a real familiarity with the Bible as a whole, and a good knowledge of all its principal contents. They must also be so well arranged, so comprehensive, so systematic, so progressive, that the very use of them for a term of years will solve the teacher problem by training up a generation of teachers who, through studying the Bible by correct methods, have not only become well acquainted with it, but have learned how to teach it. These phases of the subject, as well as the vast changes in

Sunday-school ideas, organization, and management that must gradually take place in the progress of such a movement, are worthy of long and careful consideration. We can, however, but mention them here.

There is, however, one further thought which must not be omitted. No general change from any one system of study to any other can be made at once. It must come gradually and can come in but one way. The new lessons must be placed beside the old ones and the schools left to choose between them. No matter how much better the new may be, the great majority of the schools will at first cling to the old. But if the two are given an equal chance, and the advantages of the new are persistently set forth in print and in speech, and if those who try the new find them better and recommend them to their friends and neighbors, the new will gradually supplant the old, and a revolution will be effected, which, though it be but the taking of a single one of the four great steps of progress above outlined, will be of surpassing importance to the Sunday schools of the country.

This is the work in which the Bible Study Union is engaged. Its lessons are now mainly of the A class, some are of the B class, and all are used more or less in class-graded schools. But this arrangement is not final. The lessons will be advanced into the B and C classes, and adapted better and better for class-graded work as rapidly as the schools are ready for the change. In carrying out this plan the Union invites the co-operation of all who are interested in improved methods of Sunday-school Bible study. It feels sure that by joining hands much more can be accomplished than by pulling apart; that along the way thus pointed out the transfer of the great body of the Sunday schools from a uniform to a section-graded basis can be easily effected within a few years; and that this movement, once begun, can, with reasonable foresight and unity of effort, be steadily though slowly carried forward from point to point, to the mutual advantage of all concerned and to a perfect mastery of Sunday-school Bible study in the future.

The following diagram illustrates the stages of advance as already described :

THE NATURAL LINE OF ADVANCE FROM UNIFORM LESSONS TO CLASS-GRADED LESSONS.

1. UNIFORM LESSONS. Lessons the same for all departments. The International system.
2. SECTION-GRADED, OR DEPARTMENT-GRADED A. A different lesson for each department, but all lessons based on the same Scripture section. Several of the Bible Study Union series are of this class.
3. BOOK-GRADED, OR DEPARTMENT-GRADED B. Lessons for all departments from the same books of Scripture, but not from the same section. Some of the Bible Study Union lessons are of this class.
4. MISCELLANEOUS-GRADED, OR DEPARTMENT-GRADED C. Separate lessons for each department without regard to what is studied in other departments.
5. CLASS-GRADED—THE IDEAL SYSTEM. A regular course of study. Different lessons for each year, all used simultaneously. Selections from the Bible Study Union lessons are used in this class.