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Sentiment and Song in the Sunday School

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Among the most potent and abiding of early religious impressions are the hymns sung in childhood, which were imbibed at a mother's knee or learned in the Sunday school. It has often been remarked that the religious influence of a hymn-writer is greater than of a theologian, since men are moved more powerfully by the emotions than by the understanding. This is especially the case in tender and impressive infancy and youth. The historical and doctrinal lessons imparted to us in the Sunday school may be forgotten, the faces of the teachers themselves may fade out of mind, but the hymns of our childhood abide with us through the years, an unfailing source of religious quickening and cheer, a well-spring of affectionate and holy memories. As when the learned critic and lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, on his death-bed passed from intoning his sonorous Latin chants to crooning a little child's hymn taught him by his mother.

Often in later adult life, amid the trials and cares, the vicissitudes and sorrows of our career, the joyous and trustful hymns we sang as children in the Sunday school will recur to us again, stirring the depths of our religious nature, flooding the spirit with happy, holy memories, and bringing us new encouragement, faith and resolution. Surely, this is a religious experience known to not a few.

The heavens above us are dark, it may be, with heavy clouds of anxiety and care. Our mind is depressed and saddened. Our faith sinks low to the ground, like the swallow before the approaching storm. But lo, in the midst of our morbid brooding and fear, there wells up from the heart's depths a snatch of old-time and happy child-song. It reminds us tenderly that

"Every cloud has a sunny side,
 Though dark the cloud may be,
 For just behind the sunlight waits
 To shine forth gloriously.
 Then courage take and breast the wave,
 Though storms sweep o'er the tide,
 There is no cloud, however dark,
 But has its shining side."

As we listen to this cheerful and reassuring song, whose bright music rises and falls in waves of melody in our breast, we go back in tender recollection to the days of our joyous youth, when all life was beautiful, when faith was easy and hope and courage

undimmed. Something of our childhood's happy trust and confidence is born anew in us. Again, as of yore, we

"——hear a sweet voice ringing clear,

All is well!

It is our Father's voice we hear,

All, all is well!"

In such a moment, amid such associations, the little Sunday-school song brings a deeper comfort, inspires a profounder faith, than would the stateliest measures of a Cathedral choir. In it our religious past speaks to us. Our childhood's faith reawakens, and once again we sing, as in our more believing youth:

"He leadeth me! O blessed thought,

Oh, words with heavenly comfort fraught!

Wherever I go, wherever I be,

'T is His own hand that leadeth me!"

Such soul experiences disclose to us, if such an assurance were necessary, how powerful and abiding are the impressions produced by Sunday-school song on the religious sensibilities of children. Far greater than we imagine is the moral and spiritual influence it exerts on the establishment of their faith and the foundation of their character. When they sing in tuneful accord:

"Cheerfully, cheerfully, let us all live,
Slow to be angered, and quick to forgive,
Singing and hoping, at work or at rest,
Cheerfully, cheerfully doing our best."

—this sentiment is penetrating into their spirit's core, and molding their young lives into sweetness and beauty.

If they sing together:

"Dare to do right! Dare to be true!"

or that stirring appeal:

"Courage, brother, do not stumble,
Though thy path be dark as night!
There's a star to guide the humble;
Trust in God and do the right!"

—by such utterances conscience is aroused and the will stimulated to brave testimony and service.

We believe that the singing of patriotic hymns by the children in our public schools arouses and confirms their love of country. Shall we not equally believe that their hearts will be inspired with tenderness and trust when they sing in the Sunday school:

"Kind words can never die,"

or

"Never forget the dear ones
Who cluster round thy home"?

Such sentiments, intensified by the music, make for affection, for

character and faithfulness. They may be quite as effective in promoting virtue, unselfishness and reverence as the exhortations of a parent or the instructions of a teacher. We may be pardoned, therefore, if we paraphrase a well-known saying and declare: "I care not who prepares the lessons of the Sunday school, so that I may compose or compile its hymns." For no portion of its worship is the source of more innocent pleasure to the child, none conduces more to its spiritual nurture, or is of more lasting influence in its life than the songs it learns to sing in the Sabbath school and the home.

II. It is clear, then, that this form of religious expression ought to be tenderly cherished and sagaciously employed in the religious education of the young. It should be made an object of peculiar solicitude and study. But alas, it is not usually so regarded by those who are in charge of our Sunday schools. Far less attention is given it than is bestowed on the formal instruction of the school or on its administrative features. By most superintendents and teachers it is looked upon as simply "a sanctified form of relaxation" from the sterner work of instruction and discipline. It is not regarded as an integral part of the worship, but as a mere appendix to it, a concession to the restlessness and wandering attention of childhood. It is evident that before there can be any large improvement in Sunday-school song there must be a higher conception of its educational character and religious importance. It should be made the subject of more enlightened and careful study, both as regards the child-nature and the materials for child-song. The conclusions which have been arrived at by modern psychologists with respect to the child-soul and its development must be taken in mind in the selection of both words and tunes. The old, haphazard ways must be laid aside, and a thoughtful and prayerful preparation made for the musical, as for every other part of the services. It is absurd and wrong to carefully study the Sunday lessons, responses, and prayers, but to leave the selection of the hymns to the chance suggestion of the moment, or perhaps to the caprice of the children themselves. As an important and integral part of the service they deserve equal and perhaps superior attention. There can be no totality of impression, no youthful zest and life in a Sunday school in which the singing is conducted in a thoughtless, spiritless and haphazard manner.

III. The most important element in Sunday-school song is not the music but the words of the hymn. The tune exists for the sake of the words, not the words for the sake of the tune. It is the words chiefly that convey the sentiment and aim of the song. This is fundamental. To merely choose a pretty air and mechanically write or fit metrical verses to it, as is too often done, results in a hymnody poor in poetic quality, lacking in

spontaneity, and without the appeal to heart and life which all true popular songs should possess.

The hymns of the Sunday school should be simple, but they should not be childish. Their language should be within the comprehension of childhood. But between the infant class and the older pupils there is a wide range of understanding and emotion. Such a classic as Sir Henry Wotton's

"How happy is he born or taught
Who serveth not another's will,
Whose armor is his honest thought,
And simple truth his highest skill."

can be understood, and should be sung and committed to memory by every manly boy in the Sunday school.

Above all, false sentiment should be avoided, as when the children are made to sing:

"The Sunday school, that blessed place,
Oh, I had rather stay
Within its walls a child of grace,
Than spend my hours in play."

Hymns dealing with death and judgment to come, or which disparage this life and utter an ardent longing for heaven, are by their very nature unfitted for childhood. Such lines as

"Hold thou the cross before my closing eyes,
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies,"

should be left to maturer years. No healthy, happy child desires to die. The realistic picturing of angels, harps and crowns may give it a passing delight, but no child wants to die and be an angel.

"'T is life of which their nerves are scant,
More life and fuller that they want."

Again, theology has no place in a child's heart. Doctrines may be mechanically sung but will have no abiding place in its affection or memory. With subtle alchemy it knows how to separate the pure gold in its religious instruction from the dross. Sunday-school hymnology should exhale a natural, healthy sentiment. It should delight in nature, in God, in Christ, in home and country, and cherish the larger love of mankind. It should be cheerful and joyous like childhood itself, but always chaste, reverent and devotional.

The words of a child-hymn should have a distinct poetic quality. Its imagery should be natural, clear and striking. It should be full of life, movement and color. Its moral instruction should not be too obtrusive. Imagination and sentiment should predominate in it over reflection. To write a successful child's hymn one must have more or less the heart of a child. But such poets are born, not made, and their lyrics are infrequent. Therefore in compiling hymn-books for Sunday-school use it is best

not to make too large use of poems whose principal recommendation is that they are new, or to invite poet-asters to send in original verses which, even if unsuitable, cannot well be rejected. There is already existing a gradually formed, well-approved body of sacred lyrics for children which Palgrave, Whittier and others have collected, the classics of child-song, we may call them, which are far more worthy as literature and more ennobling in their religious influence than the doggerel, weak, if pious, which too often is admitted into the Singing books of our Sunday schools. Above all, let us get over the mistaken notion that a poem or a tune are no longer available because they are old. Usually they are old because they are good, and have in them some quality which enables them to meet a universal need, to stand the test of time, and sift down through the vast accumulation of literary musical materials produced by the centuries. Even if a hymn is old to us, it will be new to the generations of children ever appearing on the scene. It ought to become a part of their religious education also, and will inspire their hearts as it has strengthened ours. Our true ideal in this respect is not the crowds and shoals of song-books ever produced anew by American composers and publishers, but the wise restraint and culture of Germany, where the various hymn-books for children contain practically the same body of songs, carefully winnowed and collected through the years, with few innovations—the whole forming an unrivalled and precious collection of sacred poetry and song.

IV. The choice of tunes to be sung should be secondary to the selection of words, and yet is a matter of great importance. Only by a union that is natural, and as it were, inevitable, can a perfect harmony exist between the words and the music, and a totality of impression be produced. The object of this musical setting is to give expression and add intensity to the words. The airs employed must first of all have life, color, movement in them. They must correspond to the free, active and joyous temperament of youth. They must be melodious—this is very important—appealing readily to the ear and retained by the memory. Simple, strong, broad harmonies should underlay them. They must be cheerful, bright and lively. Minor keys should be sparingly employed.

On the other hand, the music of our schools should be chaste, reverent and devotional. This rules out the religious ballad music which under the name of Gospel Hymns, has for three decades demoralized our American churches and Sunday schools. Now and then a pleasing and fitting melody has sprung from this source, but very rarely. There is a still lower deep—the “Opera Bouffe” tunes and “rag-time” music, which has crept into our American homes from the dramatic stage and even invaded our

Sunday song. "Children like these dancing tunes," we are told, but, they also like sugar candy and other things not good for their digestion. Should parents not be as solicitous for the souls of their children as for their stomachs? Vulgar, frivolous music vulgarizes and lowers the moral tone of those who habitually sing it.

There is evidently need for better hymnals in our Sunday schools, which shall be an improvement on all that went before, and be a worthy counterpart to the usually admirable song-books of our public schools, the best of which are also based on German models and melodies.

V. In conclusion, a word may be said concerning the instruction and conduct of sacred song in our Sunday schools. The best collection of hymns and tunes may be made of no effect in careless and incompetent hands. The spirit and success of Sunday-school song depends very much upon the manner in which it is taught and conducted. A few practical suggestions may be of service here. The superintendent, or leader, should exercise the greatest thoughtfulness and care in his choice of hymns. They should not be selected hap-hazard or because the tune is pretty, well-known and popular with the children. Nor should a hymn be chosen simply because the superintendent likes it. It may be a favorite with him, and yet be quite unsuited for children. Let the hymns be selected because they are of poetical and musical worth, because they inculcate valuable moral and religious lessons, and above all because they are relevant to the service, the address or lesson-topic of the day. Sometimes, especially when a new hymn is to be attempted, its words should be read over slowly, verse by verse, by the superintendent and children, its meaning commented upon, and the proper expression of the music made clear to them.

Every school should have, if possible, a musical leader, unless the superintendent himself is gifted in song. Besides the piano, a violin may profitably be employed.

For practice in song a children's choir might be formed and meet out of Sunday-school hours for instruction and drill. On Sundays, however, it should not sit together as a chorus, for this discourages the singing of the general school, but be dispersed among the pupils. To such a choir, simple instruction in the proper use of the voice, the system of notation, the use of the different parts in singing, might be given, and a more skilful and impressive rendering of sacred song assured. A chorus of children thus instructed and led in simple, chaste and devout song, is capable of the most elevating and even overpowering musical effects. The composer Haydn, taken to hear the Charity Children sing in St. Paul's, declared: "I was more touched by this innocent, reverent music than by any I ever heard in my life."