

## PARENTS AS EVANGELISTS.

BY A. L. VAIL, D.D., PHILADELPHIA, PA.

What is the first religious duty of a parent to a child, aside from prayer, which is assumed? This question may be answered in three general ways. These answers result from different definitions of words and different doctrines of the nature of a child. The words to be defined are "educate" and "instruct" or "teach". The doctrines are those of the child's natural state in relation to God, whether that state is one of depravity separating the child constitutionally from God, or one of natural adaptation to filial relations with Him.

The first answer is that the parent's first duty to the child is to educate it, using the word "educate" in its exact sense of educating, drawing out that which is already in one. Many persons use this word in this connection in a popular but inaccurate sense, which is more properly expressed by the other word, "instruct" or "teach". Those who use educate accurately, thinking of a human child as naturally a child of God, not needing regeneration but only education along the ways in which it is originally qualified to move, are numerous, and presumably becoming more numerous among those who are commonly called evangelical. This conception, however, is consistent only among the unevangelical.

A book carrying this view lies before me, *The Religious Education of an American Citizen*, by Professor Peabody of Harvard. From it, I quote this: "A normal child has in him the germ of a religious nature, he is not a child of wrath, 'conceived and born in sin'—but a child of grace, to whom it is as natural under favorable circumstances to be religious as it for a flower in a garden to bloom" (page 2). If this is true, then all that the child

needs is education; or, to hold our statement strictly to Dr. Peabody's illustration, the child, so understood, does not need any education at all, for he will educate himself as the flower blooms of itself. But the author's illustration is considerably modified by its context, which indicates that many gardens are not favorable to blooming at all. However, it might be injudicious to expect a highly educated and informed writer who does not recognize the difference between "religion" and "Christianity" to get very far without confusion; and we need not help him out of the dilemma into which his theology leads him when he continues his discussion into the field of facts in American homes. It is enough for us if we get clearly the thought that by nature a human child is so empowered in relation to God that he needs only education to make him a Christian, or that by nature he is religious in a way and to an extent that makes him a Christian naturally as far as he needs to be one essentially. In this understanding of the child's natural capacity, all that he needs from his parents, or anyone else, is education. But we do not so understand him, for we hold this view to be incompatible with Christianity.

In the second place, the first religious duty to a child is understood to be instruction in the truths of Christianity. This may or may not involve education as a consequence. Whether it does depends on whether the instructed one is already a Christian. Viewing him with spiritually enlightened eyes, we will not see him as a child of God at the early stage in life in which we are now thinking of him, that is the stage at which he is first able to respond intellectually to instruction in the facts of revelation. The only reliable evidence that he is a Christian is in his spiritual response to the instruction. The same tests that are in order here are in order when dealing with a more mature person who may be under the same instruction. Natural age is of no significance.

Young or old, everyone needs this teaching which may be an element in evangelization. Some knowledge of the facts of Christianity seems to be necessary as preliminary to saving faith for every soul. Responsibility for not accepting Christ cannot justly be laid on anyone who knows nothing about Him, whether that ignorant one be nine or ninety years old. The parent's duty at the first opportunity is to instruct, as a part of the process of inducting the instructed into the Christian life prior to education in that life. But in essence the instruction is distinguishable from the evangelizing whether or not the practical line can be clearly drawn between the two in the same field. Thus we fail to secure anything distinctive in the duty to instruct as distinguished from evangelizing on the one hand and educating on the other.

This brings us to the consideration of the parent as an evangelist and his or her duty and privilege to bring the child into a saving knowledge of the Saviour. This is here and now affirmed to be the first religious duty from the senior to the junior of these two. More or less, this is recognized, but at a later stage. What is now proposed and urged is that it be placed prior to all else. The difference involved in this distinction seems to me to be of much significance. Before education, essentially, and before instruction, practically, guidance into personal fellowship with Jesus appears and insists on having recognition.

"The psychology of conversion" has been loaded with some very bad stuff in the teaching of some religious leaders who have set their psychological philosophy against the New Testament. They have so exaggerated considerations of adolescence, on a natural basis, that they have practically set the possibility of the early beginning of the new life in Christ out of the reach of little children, have demanded that the solicitude of parents and teachers for the salvation of those less than twelve

or fourteen years old, as well as the purpose and power of the Holy Spirit, shall be subordinated to times and seasons of natural development, physical as well as mental. Their philosophy has become a juggernaut under which the little children have been ground to powder. This has operated to paralyze the efforts and suppress the faith of those who might have led many into the Christian life when the dew of youth was on them.

(A distinct modification of Baptist thinking on regeneration in recent times has been indicated by a corresponding change in Baptist concentration of evangelistic effort, or a substitute for it, on the period of adolescence. Some of our churches already may not be easily distinguishable from Episcopal or Presbyterian churches in this particular, although they may still hold to a difference in terminology and ceremonial symbolism. The tendency is toward substituting a feeble test, about the period of puberty, for effort to save either the more mature or children prior to that period. Hopes for the older impenitent are much abandoned and any hopes for the younger children are suspected of lacking seriousness. These statements are made not sweepingly, or as applicable to a static situation, but to a tendency, which will be checked soon or go on until Baptist churches will stand practically no more for a "regenerated membership" than pedobaptist churches do now, possibly less.)

The primary duty religiously and the highest privilege spiritually of a Christian parent is to lead the child at the earliest possible age into the love of God in Christ, starting the infant feet in trust and love toward the Saviour intertwined with the beginnings of trust and love toward the parent. The parental relation is unique in this particular: the same affectional capacity, rising above and running ahead of the same in all other relationships, opens the way for this. How much does a child need to know about the science or philosophy of hu-

man life before it loves and trusts its parents? No more does it need to know about the science or philosophy of the infinite before it loves and trusts Jesus. Every human child is depraved so that it needs regeneration by the Spirit of God. Yes, but who dares say that the Holy Spirit would fail in a single instance to put the regenerating power into the word of life from believing parent to trustful child at the earliest dawn of capacity to love Jesus spontaneously as it loves the parent spontaneously? Not I. On the contrary, this result seems to me highly rational as grounded in the divine plan. I venture to assume tentatively that that plan originally was to produce a "godly seed" by way of natural generation through marriage and the spiritual union of parents. Sin frustrated the original plan and grace, not thwarted nor surprised, provided another whose fullness appears in Christianity. Those Christians who try to preserve some incompatible fragments of the older and now abandoned method, in their theology and ecclesiology, do greatly err. For instead of the natural transmission through physical birth, the nearest approximation to it harmoniously with the Christian scheme, seems to be just here, through the parent evangelizing the child, as all saved souls are evangelized through some bearer of the word of life. That process of adaptation to affectional and intimately confidential relations between the evangelist and the evangelized which usually appears, being now operative along the line of the natural relation between parent and child. The primary and distinctive duty of the parent, then, is to present Jesus to the child as the supreme object of affection and faith, love and trust, on the basis of the minimum of instruction. This accomplished and the way opens promptly and easily to instruction and education in divine things through all channels and methods appropriate to the intellectual capacity and other conditions of the little one's whole life. Let the Baptist parent place

this primary preaching of Jesus where the pedobaptist places "christening", as nearly as possible. No call will then be heard to the incongruous and perilous practice commonly known as "infant dedication" or anything of that sort.

Two reactions in Baptist thinking from the view here maintained have appeared. The earlier one reacted from a sounder doctrinal scheme than the later. It comparatively distrusted precocity in religious consciousness and discouraged the hopes of children in Christ by discouraging them in seeking church membership. Its desire for trustworthy evidences of regeneration failed of satisfaction partly through its insistence on the same evidences in children which were properly required in adults. The insistence on the same condition was right, but the insistence on the same evidences of the condition was wrong. The difference involved in these two is the difference between a child and an adult. The later reaction arose and continues on a less satisfactory doctrinal basis. It comes from a relaxation of the demand for regeneration as the necessary prelude to the Christian life and consequently admission into the church. The strenuousness of this demand being lost carries with it the strenuousness concerning the evidence of it in both children and adults. As the distinction between regeneration and conversion is lost, the importance of that for which the two terms are used synonymously disappears; and this process moves toward the indiscriminating recognition of human children as naturally children of God and fit therefore for church relations, infant baptism.

Where is the middle line of truth between these two errors? It seems to me to be along the line which this writing has been pursuing, that at a very early age every child of Christian parents should be evangelized, brought into personal relations with the Lord Jesus Christ, through the presentation of Him in a way adapted to the

heart and mind of a little child; and that as the pre-eminent actors in this service, Christian parents hold a unique relation to their own children and insurmountable advantage over all others. We are not thinking of church membership or systematic theology or doctrinal education or teaching; but only of bringing the child into such contact with the most primitive, the simplest, presentation of Jesus as will provide a channel through which the Holy Spirit can consistently do His renewing work, thus laying, as He only can lay, the essential foundation for all the other things to come in their due order along all lines of spiritual education, growth, character, evidences and relationships.

It is perhaps not necessary for the writer to protest that he is not ignoring the kind of evangelizing here advocated as it has been practiced in the past. Much of it has been done, and of that much a considerable part perhaps has been done without any formal or even conscious recognition by the doers of some things here presented. Numerous testimonials have been recorded by Christian leaders, widely observing and profoundly discriminating, that the most dependable church members are often those who came into membership early as a result of a still earlier coming into conscious fellowship with Christ, many of them being unable to locate the date of their entrance into the Christian life by any specific experience of joy in salvation or penitence for sin. Such characters constitute the most impressive approval of the present discussion. The need is for many more parents who, with or without theory, shall practically prosecute this kind of evangelizing of their own children as their highest spiritual service, the most important home mission work to which they are called and in which they are pre-eminently honored. The tides are setting strongly the other way in some quarters of great influence. We hear on every hand of the decay of "family religion", the aban-

donment by believing parents of their first ordination as preachers of the gospel. They send their children to the Bible school, or somewhere else, that others may do for them what their parents should have done before the children were old enough to go on the street alone. Such parents need to reform, and this not along the way of teaching forms of prayer but of giving God an opportunity to reach the spirits of the children through saving truth in such intimacy and power that they will pray their own prayers out of the new life coming to them from Him through His ministers in the home. For one word to God from a little child out of its own love for Jesus is worth more to Him than a million words repeated under command or coaxing but destitute of the initiative of personal love. Liturgical formality in the nursery is apt to become the forerunner of the same in the church; but spontaneous prayer, born of the Spirit in the nursery, however ignorant of systems of thought that prayer may be, leads the way to the supremacy of the spiritual in all the subsequent life, in church and everywhere. Therefore, let all parents who know the Lord understand that they have the first and highest and most hopeful ordination as preachers of Jesus to their children; and that greater opportunity and responsibility attach to no other ordination on earth; and let them "in season and out of season", be diligent in this sacred service.