

## THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL CURRICULUM

### II. TEACHING AS DETERMINED BY THE NATURAL DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS MOTIVES

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-Sunday-school pupils are graded. God graded them by nature. We find it out every time we talk over their heads or offend their respect by treating them as though they were younger than they really are.

But grading is a complicated affair. It is fourfold. Pupils are to be graded by classes, studies by courses, and teaching by methods (e. g., simple fiction calls for story-telling, and history for narration and geography, simple sums for mental arithmetic and more difficult problems for figuring); teaching is to be graded also according to the different moral motives to which we must appeal.

Some moral motives are too elementary, to be sure, to require grading at all, as the love of accuracy for mathematical study and spelling, and sincerity for good diction. Social dealing and worship, however, have several motives, more or less interdependent and supplementary. One is the root, another the stalk, and another the fruit of both. They develop in order. They rise and ripen in different periods of childhood. A motive which takes its rise later than another must be cultivated, nevertheless, before the prior motive matures. If neglected at its proper period, a religious motive forever compromises the development of others. "Add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity."

The study of human society and religion is peculiarly involved in courses in history and literature, the characteristic forms of Scripture, and the staple studies of the Sunday school. How shall we grade the motives of moral action in teaching history and literature? This is a primary question of pedagogy. It concerns the teachers of these

studies in the day school and Sunday school alike. Discussion of the subject has been far from thorough.

We may seek inspiration from a consideration of children themselves, the experience of parents and school-teachers, and the history of the Hebrew race, its experience being analogous to the religious development of the individual. It will be enough for our purpose to argue from child-study, parental experience, and the rise of the religious spirit of the Hebrews.

#### I. CHILDREN THEMSELVES

Jesus himself referred us to child-study. He held a little one in his arms and bade his disciples learn of such, and beware lest they wrong the little ones. In child-study modern educationalists have returned to a principle of Jesus. We have to concede, however, that in the Sunday school this injunction of Jesus has been more conspicuous in the breach than in the observance. In most Sunday schools boys and girls have been taught unconnected stories after they have attained history age; and when they have felt babied and complained that they were "too big to go to Sunday school," their Sunday-school officers seldom have listened to them with the respect due to the God-appointed authorities that children are regarding the tastes and capacities of child-nature. Further, the church has been accustomed to grade children according to those who have moral responsibility and those alleged to have none; and too many Sunday-school teachers, so far from "entering the kingdom of God as little children" themselves, have been insisting that an understanding of certain metaphysical propositions defining the Godhead, the divinity of Christ, and the atonement (a feat possible only for those *not* little children) was the only way by which to make a formal choice of the kingdom. In order to put the matter beyond dispute, orthodoxy has labeled these definitions "the essential doctrines of salvation." Fifty years ago it required no less a religious genius than Horace Bushnell to come to the defense of children in this strait. And it is not every Sunday-school teacher today who would vote him a place in the Hall of Fame, for relegating to a secondary place doctrines which Jesus himself did not find it necessary to formulate in order to teach us in what Christianity consists.

## II. THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS

Our second inspiration is the method of parents in the home. And no wonder, for what did Jesus say Christianity was but the life of the divine family of God and his children? Besides, parents have to train their children in self-defense. They have to live with them. And "necessity is the mother of invention." Parents instinctively grade their children according to moral rather than academic capacity. They know that to be just and kind is to be Christian; but they require that their young children shall be both out of implicit obedience. They do not find that trust in God and John 3:16 avail much before a child is of school age. By that time they depend mostly upon obedience for reasons given, for the practice of justice and kindness. Right and reciprocity avail more than the blessedness of sacrifice for sacrifice' sake as a motive, until children reach adolescence. Some parents are woefully disappointed with their children because this is so. But their children are simply like other children; and they are expecting too much of them considering their age.

The dawn of adolescence is the beginning generally of chum age, when children discover the blessedness of sacrifice, if only when practiced in the behalf of a chum, who is generally, by the way, of the same sex. For the decade beginning with twelve years of age all Christian parents, at least, appeal vigorously to the affections, which develop prodigiously during this period. Jesus is naturally the most appealing ideal for adolescents. This is the period when most Christians enter upon full membership in the church. At home children learn religion by doing. "Learning by doing" is a phrase of modern education. It is Christian: "Whosoever shall do the will of God shall know of the doctrine."

Sunday-school teachers have not taken this leaf always out of the Christian home. They have been prone to forget Jesus' principle of evolution: "first the blade, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear," and have urged faith in God as an argument to infants in their period of unreasoning obedience. They often urge love as a motive of action for somewhat older children, when loyalty to right or law would be more effective. "The law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ;" "First Sinai, then the gospel." Both, gospel and law, it may be said, should be urged more or less together. Yes, but conscience should

be cultivated as entirely as possible before adolescence, or else even a kind character thereafter will prove flabby.

### III. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HEBREW RACE

Our third inspiration lies in Scripture or the record of how God taught religion to the Hebrews. This reveals a heavenly Father's method with his children, or his "son," as the prophets called their nation.

The earliest religious stories for the training of the Hebrews were those in which God is represented as exacting implicit obedience of his children. The command in Eden was without reasons. Abraham obeyed his call, "not knowing whither he went." He led Isaac to the altar without questioning why. The laws of Sinai and Kadesh-barnea are so unaccompanied with reasons that the modern investigator is left to discover the significance of almost all ancient Hebrew customs as best he may. In their infancy God taught the Hebrew race to obey him upon bare authority.

The subsequent history of Israel was written for a later age, or stage of development. Its books were penned in the spirit of the prophets. Obedience was argued. It was reasonable to obey Jehovah, and unreasonable, because disastrous, to disobey him. This lesson was for the middle childhood of Israel, or the period of conscience-building.

With the Second Isaiah emerges the motive of sacrifice, a teaching for the youth period of Israel. This was enriched and emphasized by Jesus. Virtue with sacrifice became the spirit of godliness, and love and kindness the controlling motives of religious life.

The Bible is obviously the natural textbook of religious education. It is not a scrapbook of pious texts, but a textbook for the development of piety. It is not a modern discovery perhaps, but a rediscovery certainly, that the Bible is doubly inspired—inspired in content and in method.

As literature the biblical writings are an expression of life, according to progressive degrees of religious culture. The child repeats in general the culture periods of the Hebrew race. When he needs the ideal of an implicit obedience Genesis furnishes him the material to live vicariously the lives of the patriarchs. When he needs to exercise reasoning obedience to develop conscience, he can enter vicariously into

the lives of the just and valiant David, the unoppressible Jereboam, the justice-loving Amos, the merciful Hosea, and the pious and heroic statesmen, Isaiah and Jeremiah. He can rebuke his own sinful impulses by repenting vicariously of the sins of Bible characters, and thus forestall his committing their iniquities himself. In youth he should live vicariously the high martyrdoms of Jesus, Peter, and Paul.

But the solution of grading the biblical material of the Sunday-school curriculum is not as easy as though we could prescribe simply Genesis for infants, Old Testament history for middle childhood, and the New Testament for youth.

Our children must be Christian in spirit from their earliest years. When Jesus called God "Father," he was able to direct us to a child's simple faith and love to learn how to enter the kingdom of heaven. The stories of Jesus are also for young children. Children have a story age until about nine or ten, during which they enjoy the stories of Jesus even more than those of Genesis.

Moreover, our children must progress in the lessons of religion about one hundred times as fast as did the ancient Hebrews. To do this they need not only to be environed from their cradles by a Christian atmosphere, but they must know the spirit of Christ, and God through Christ, for the sake of spiritual stimulus.

We must engender the spirit of love in infancy even if love will not prove, generally, as controlling for them as obedience upon authority. This is equally true, of course, for middle childhood. The stories of Jesus should be given more time during infancy in the primary grades of the Sunday school than those of Genesis and the similar stories of Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and Daniel. In this way children will be furnished beforehand with a Christian conception of God and morality as a standard by which to judge Old Testament history. And a little later, during the study of the Old Testament, they will require many sayings, parables, and discourses of Jesus and passages from Paul, which should be read and expounded, and many of them committed to memory.

By this means children can exercise their moral judgments and condemn, for instance, the lying of Abraham because un-Christian, the massacres of Saul, David, and Jehu as un-Christian, and approve the verdict of Hosea concerning massacre because consistent with the

loving character of God as revealed by Jesus. They can argue with Jesus as to the un-Christian character of some of the laws of Moses and some of the acts of Elijah, such as the latter's calling down fire from heaven upon enemies, concerning which can be cited Jesus' rebuke of James and John for wanting to imitate Elijah's example in this particular. An approving judgment, on the other hand, will be exercised in numerous instances. Old Testament history furnishes a wonderful opportunity for the exercise of Christian judgment, and, not only as to the acts of the Old Testament characters as such, but in regard to the opinions, expressed or implied, of Old Testament historians, which are by no means always according to Christian standards either of morality or of the character and desires of our heavenly Father.

Old Testament history is not a study to exclude the teaching of Jesus from the curriculum for the time being, as some evidently would have us believe, when they mingle New Testament with Old Testament courses, for fear of keeping children from contact with the gospel for more than half a year at a time. If Old Testament study really eclipsed the study of Christianity for any time, it should have no place in the curriculum of a Christian Sunday school.

Again, religious stories are not confined to the Bible. Fairy-stories should furnish much of the material to teach obedience on authority to children in the kindergarten and primary grades of the Sunday school. Other than biblical histories are to be drawn upon for material for the higher grades: hymns and other poems as well as psalms, the lives of Christian saints and other Christian literature than that which dates from before the close of the first century of the Christian era.

The study of doctrine meets an imperative hunger for a comprehensive view of life first keenly felt by pupils at about sixteen years of age. Doctrines may be taught before this in more or less detached forms; but this is the time for a comparatively complete view of religious truth, not necessarily in the form of a system of theology; but the evident facts and principles of religion should be grasped sufficiently to make an intelligent choice of a policy of life.

A formal espousal of the *cause* of Christianity is natural at the adolescent age. In middle childhood children should have passed

already from an admiration of the physical courage of Old Testament warriors to the more distinctly moral courage of the prophets. By about twelve years of age they advance naturally to a still more profound admiration for Jesus. But a formal espousal of Christianity involves more than a hero-worship of Christ. He must be followed, not by an imitation of his character and virtues by a self-imposed method of self-control, but in spirit by cross-bearing in the service of others. The impulse of cause espousal of different kinds ripens generally at about fifteen or sixteen years of age, or the middle or greatest crisis of adolescence—a period which is marked by a revolutionary development of the physical, intellectual and moral nature alike. All this argues for the study of the life of Christ by children twelve or thirteen years old, and for that of the life of Paul, as the first thorough-going advocate of the Christian cause, as the study for youth of about fourteen or fifteen. Adolescence furnishes the greatest opportunity for “conversion” to Christianity, because it is peculiarly the psychic period for a new religious birth or revolution of character.

Concern about the life to come is importunate in youth. The teaching of Jesus is concerned about the hereafter, although not primarily. Jesus’ phrase, “the kingdom of heaven,” applies essentially to the divine community on earth. This also was the subject of the visions of the Old Testament prophets. But to learn service in building the kingdom of heaven on earth is our education for the life to come. A “well done” on earth is the guarantee of a useful existence after death. A graduation to a heaven above is as inevitable as it is natural. To become essential to the universe is an irrefutable argument for immortality. If a Sunday school is a school of Christian service, it will be fitting its graduates for eternal life.

## SUNDAY-SCHOOL COURSES FOR ADULTS

### I. COURSES IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The mission of a Sunday school should be more than to consecrate its students to the cause of Christianity. Christian men and women have the world’s problems to solve as far as religion must solve them. This constructive work belongs to those over eighteen years of age, at which time the constructive imagination undergoes

a decided development. A Sunday school should have a graduation at the close of school age or the end of the high-school period, and, among other reasons, in order to emphasize the transition to the constructive period of life.

Graduate classes of adult students should pursue elective courses, not only of a critical study of biblical literature and history, but in the hard facts and religious principles affecting the practical, social, industrial, political, and philanthropic problems of their time. The world waits for the interpretation of society in terms of the gospel. This calls for study such as clergymen cannot accomplish by themselves. The educational department of the church should win recognition by real service in this field, and lay the world under obligation by contributions toward the evangelical reconstruction of human society.

This is a new function for the Sunday school. It is the greatest work ever undertaken by the church. It is the commission of Christ to his disciples. The Sunday school has a social gospel to teach; and its work should be measured largely by the results it achieves through the thoughtful labors of its brainiest and most consecrated men and women. This work will soon mark the rise or fall of every Christian church. Either the church must organize the forces of Christian social endeavor to cure the sores of the body politic, or else a social brotherhood indifferent to the church as such will achieve the redemption of the world. The very right of the church to exist hangs upon the issue; and the graduate department of the Sunday school is destined probably to turn the scale.

The Bible study for courses in social problems is obviously the teachings of Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles.

## II. COURSES IN SUNDAY-SCHOOL INSTRUCTION

The Sunday school must educate its own teachers. No less than the public-school system, it must have a normal department. To this department belong courses both in the subject-matter of instruction and in methods of teaching. Courses in pedagogy and the critical study of the Bible are necessary. Only by eighteen years of age do people possess the interest and capacity to study the Bible book by book, appreciate the divine library as textbook material for the educa-



tion of children, and discover a responsibility for the study of childhood. Religious pedagogy involves courses in child-study, methods of teaching, and Sunday-school organization and management.

We should call adult classes "Bible classes" no longer. The term is too academic. Bible study is but the means for teaching the young and revolutionizing society. The courses, although based on the Bible, should be social and pedagogical. Call them "graduate classes." The very term will flatter the best men and women of the time to appreciate their responsibilities both to their own generation, of which they are the divinely constituted leaders, and also to the one following, which they have to rear to succeed themselves when their own constructive work for the kingdom is done.