

No. 24.

SABBATH SCHOOLS:

THEIR

RELATION TO THE CHURCH,

AND THE

OBLIGATIONS OF THE CHURCH

IN

THE MANAGEMENT OF THEM.

BY

REV. C. H. READ, D. D.

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THEIR

Relation to the Church, and the Obligations of the Church in the Management of Them.

IT may be assumed that it is now, as it has always been, the solemn duty of the Church of God to see to it that the children and youth of her families and congregations are instructed in the knowledge of God, and in the way of salvation.

Upon the Christian Church of this age rests the injunction of God, by Moses, with undiminished force; "Hear, O Israel, * * * these words which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart, and thou shall teach them diligently unto thy children."

It is believed that the systematic religious instruction of the young, indicates the standard of true Christian piety in any particular Church, and in the Church at large. This obligation rests *primarily* with *parents* and *guardians*; and no agency should

be adopted, or tolerated, as a *substitute* for the solemn personal responsibility and care of parents and guardians, toward their own children and wards.

The agency of the Church, in the premises, should be so employed and directed as to encourage and aid the efforts of faithful parents and guardians, and to meet the *necessity* which arises from unfaithfulness or incompetency, where it may exist. THE SABBATH SCHOOL, properly organized and managed, co-operating with faithful parents and guardians, and supplying the deficiencies of the negligent and incompetent, is a legitimate agency of the Church of God in one of its most important and inviting fields of effort.

That there have been serious and alarming *abuses* of the system of Sabbath Schools, is painfully true; indeed, it would be passing strange if the Spirit of Evil had not attempted to corrupt or neutralize an agency of so much power for good; but "*there is a blessing in it,*" and it is the duty of the Church so to foster, control, and direct the establishment, organization, and management of Sabbath Schools within her own bosom, and in judiciously selected mission stations, as to remove, so far as possible, existing defects, and to secure the largest amount of good from this necessary and valuable agency. In order to the realization of these results, the following principles and suggestions may be profitably considered, and practically applied:

1. THE DESIGN OF SABBATH SCHOOLS.—This design is the *religious instruction* of such persons as may be gathered in them, with a direct reference to *the salvation of souls, and the education of minds and hearts for the service of Christ.*

The principle should always be kept in prominent view, that the instruction of the Sabbath School *cannot and must not be made a substitute for parental fidelity, or a release from parental obligation.* The faithful parent and the faithful Sabbath School teacher, working for the same object in different spheres, and with the peculiar advantages of each, may and should encourage and support each other. Parents should know the teachers of their children; the teachers should know the parents of their pupils; and, so far as possible, a Christian sympathy in their aims and methods should be established and cultivated.

2. ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOLS.—The Sabbath Schools immediately connected with organized Churches should be under the supervision and control of the Pastor and Session; and should be fostered by them, as also by the Church generally, as an *agency of the particular Church to do her legitimate work within her own field of duty.*

The minister being the chief teacher and bishop in a particular Church, should exercise a general superintendence of the school in that Church; he should counsel with the officers and teachers, and

cultivate as close a contact and sympathy with the school, its management and numbers, as his other duties will permit.

In cases where the Superintendent is not a member of the Session, (as it is desirable he should be,) it is proper for him to make regular reports to the Session of the condition of the school, and to be invited to take part in their deliberations relating to it.

It is obviously due to parents, who are invited to repose confidence in the Sabbath School of the Church, that the Pastor and Elders should exercise the proper care that such sacred confidence is not misplaced. The officers of superintendence and teaching should be worthy of highest estimation. The teachers should be made to feel that their responsible position and duties are warmly appreciated. The whole Church and its school should be warmly and practically united; and the entire organization, its objects and its working, should be made the subject of frequent and earnest prayer.

3. SABBATH SCHOOL LIBRARIES.—There is no department of the Sabbath School which demands more care than the supply of *suitable books*.

That Sabbath School books should be *religious and evangelical, strictly so*, admits of no reasonable debate. That they should be wisely adapted, in language and style, to the presentation of such truth to the capacities of children and youth of different

grades of development, is equally clear. To provide such a sacred literature for children and youth, to be carried by them into so many families, is a matter of unspeakable importance, demanding wise and watchful supervision. The enemy of truth and souls has shown great subtlety in the corruption of the popular literature of the age; and much care is needed to prevent the introduction into our Sabbath School libraries of books which are positively pernicious. It is not enough to exclude palpable error in sentiment, such as is to be found in some of the so-called Sunday School publications of the day; we must see to it in all our Churches, that we have *evangelical truth*, and *that* in a style adapted to sanctify, elevate, and invigorate the mind and heart.

This subject demands and deserves the vigilant and habitual attention of Pastors, Elders, Superintendents, teachers and parents.

4. SINGING.—Singing, in Sabbath Schools, is an element of great power; and, when judiciously directed, may be employed for great good. Some of the hymns and tunes, composed and arranged for Sabbath Schools, are evangelical, devout, and beautiful,—gems of thought, poetry, and musical expression; they will be embalmed, as they deserve to be, in the memories and hearts of our people—old and young; they may be sung in the Lord's House, on the Lord's day, with propriety,—the aged, middle-aged, and the young joining in them. But

who has not felt surprise and pain, in listening to the *hymns* and *tunes* which are sometimes used in Sabbath Schools, in the Sanctuary and on the Lord's day? Not a few of them are sheer travesties of words and sounds; the *sentiment* of them, if there be any, is sometimes secular and profane; the *music*,—if that be the name for the performance,—is unfit for the expression of religious thought or feeling.

A *Christian judgment and taste* is required to make proper selections, and to give a religious direction to this exercise.

In order that children and youth may be educated to take part in the public worship of the congregation, it will be of decided advantage to make frequent use, in Sabbath Schools, of the hymns and tunes which are often used in regular Church services.

5. MISSION SABBATH SCHOOLS.—There will be found districts,—some near at hand, and some more remote from organized Churches, in town and country,—where the agency of Mission Sabbath Schools is admirably adapted to bring the Truth of God to bear upon souls growing up in ignorance and sin. These fields call for systematic effort, in Christ's name, to save perishing souls; and, at the same time, furnish a theatre for the useful development of the unemployed talent of the Church. Every Church should be a centre and reservoir of Christian light and influence. Church members, each

and all of them, are, or ought to be instructed not only in the way of *personal salvation*, but also in the spirit and methods of *personal usefulness*. The exercise of Christian graces is essential to health, growth, and strength of Christian character.

Mission Sabbath Schools can be established and successfully maintained at small expense, in destitute districts, in town and country, where Church edifices cannot, for the time, be erected; and where regular preaching by settled pastors cannot be sustained. These are fields where many may be usefully employed, who may be constrained to confess that they are doing little or nothing, directly, for their Saviour, or for their fellow-immortals. In many cases such Mission Schools can be organized and managed under the immediate counsel and support of the Pastor and Session of a particular Church,—each auxiliary to the other. In such cases thoroughly evangelical books, sound doctrinal instruction, and proper forms of worship may be successfully introduced.

In some localities it may be found expedient for members of different Churches, holding to the same essential doctrines and rules of Christian life, to unite their efforts, where, otherwise, the fields might be left in spiritual darkness and death.

In the management of the Schools connected with particular Churches, and in different localities, the internal regulations of each School must, of course, be left to the wise discretion and responsi-

bility of those in immediate charge ; but an agency of such magnitude and importance deserves the habitual attention and fostering care of the judicatories of the Church.

In the General Assembly of 1868, held in Baltimore, the Committee in relation to Sabbath Schools recommended "That our Presbyteries be enjoined to see that Sabbath Schools in the Churches, and Mission Schools, under the care of the Churches, be established in all cases where it is practicable ; and also to send up annually special reports of the extent and character of the Sabbath School work within their bounds ;" and "that there be added to the Standing Committees of the General Assembly, a Committee on Sabbath Schools." These recommendations were adopted.

In the General Assembly of 1869, at Mobile, the Standing Committee on Sabbath Schools reported information from eighteen Presbyteries only,—thirty-six Presbyteries having failed to make any report to the Assembly.

The Presbytery of Nashville received honourable notice from the Committee, as having reported within their bounds 1,850 Sabbath School scholars, 226 teachers, and contributing during the year to the amount of \$1,464.44. That Assembly unanimously adopted the recommendation of the Committee,—“that the Sabbath Schools under the immediate

control of our Churches should receive the most prayerful attention, as it is from this great nursery of religion that our future membership and ministry must be derived ;" and, further, "that our Church members, every where, should organize Sabbath Schools, if practicable ; send for the books of our publication ; and adopt some systematic mode of benevolence by which our children may be early trained in the noble grace of giving."

The Synod of Virginia, at its meeting, in Richmond, 1869, recommended the appointment of a PERMANENT COMMITTEE by each of the Presbyteries, to take the oversight of the Sabbath School work within their bounds ; and to make an annual report of the condition of these Schools to the Synod.

A PERMANENT COMMITTEE of the Synod was also appointed, to which was assigned the duty of digesting the facts gathered from the several Presbyteries, for the information of the Synod, and the Churches ; and to make any suggestions which the Committee may deem expedient, with a view to the greater efficiency of the Sabbath School system.

It is gratifying to observe the growing and practical interest in this most important and inviting field of Christian effort. The logic of events is pressing upon our Churches. The day of the Lord is upon us. May God "*turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their*

fathers." (Mal. iv: 6.) May the prediction of Isaiah (liv: 13) be soon realized:—"And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children."

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