

The Bible Student.

CONTINUING

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Improvement in Sabbath School. For some years there has been manifest a growing interest in the development of the Sabbath School, partly due doubtless somewhat to the general movement in the direction of Young People's societies and the special emphasis thus placed on this particular class as the subjects of the church's trust and the object of its prayers. Whatever movement brings the young people eminently before the thought of the church must speedily find some expression in its attitude towards the Sabbath School. When, therefore, the churches recognized the need of a special representative and leader of the Young People's Movement in their respective organizations, it was inevitable that such representative should in his office and work bear direct relation to the Sabbath School interests, indicated by some such title as "Secretary of Sabbath Schools and Young People's Societies."

The creation of such a department has given a great impulse to Sabbath School work and directed special attention to its needs and its opportunities. The representatives of this work came into instant and great request; invitations for the holding of conferences, conventions, associations or institutes came fast from every quarter and every such Secretary im-

mediately found opportunities opening the filling of which would require the time and the energies of a score of men. Such discussions would naturally furnish occasion and vehicle for the expression of views long maturing in the minds of those whose experience in the work would invest their opinions with great importance and impart great value to the suggestions emanating from them.

Not a New Idea.

The main service of the movement in this particular direction has been to call out and unify existing sentiment. There has not been wanting for years an appreciation of the need of improvement. Occasional and somewhat casual indications of such appreciation have been frequent; many have felt deeply and some have expressed forcibly this need years ago. Sabbath School conventions are of long standing, and it was a rare convention or association in which some member of humorous turn did not find or make occasion to display his wit in satire upon prevalent defects in the management or the instruction in vogue; some of the jokes currently told have long been veterans and years ago deserved discharge from service; of the authenticity of much illustrative anecdote used on such occasions most thoughtful peo-

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF POVERTY.

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By the sovereign ordination of God, poverty is constituted a perpetual fact in human history. The authority of Jesus Christ delivers to us the divine decree that the poor shall remain with us always. Radical speculatists and dreaming doctrinaires may boastfully publish with blatant advertisement economic and political schemes which rashly promise the speedy removal of the curse of poverty, and yet the hard facts of human improvidence and thriftlessness and misfortune, conjoined with the Biblical doctrine of express divine constitution, render it certain that poverty is to remain in all the future, as in all the past, an essential part of man's history on this globe. We may, and we ought to seek by all proper method, either of individual enterprise, or of legislative action, to diminish the number of lives and homes over which the dark, cold shadow of poverty rests, and yet we must transform human nature and revolutionize the ends of God's disciplinary government before it be banished altogether from our world. There can be no economic or political remedy, which administered like a pill to the body politic is to cure all of all its distempers, including poverty, while the curse of sin remains, bringing as its necessary result ills individual, social, national and universal. The great prophet of the olden dispensation speaks out of the very bosom of the law declaring "the poor shall never cease out of the land;" and out of the very heart of the new order issues the authoritative voice of Jesus saying, "Ye have the poor always with you." We have, then, the certain perpetual, and divinely ordained fact of poverty staring us in the face; originating in man's sin it is true, and yet taken up into God's disciplinary government and serving wise and gracious ends.

I. Note then, first, the Moral and Spiritual Uses of Poverty.

God's government over our world is disciplinary and educative, certainly so far as his children are concerned, and for their sakes the world exists and is run by its divine author and governor; the end thereof being the development in their character of all the graces peculiar to the distinctively Christian life. One chief part

of this discipline is given through the contact of soul with soul. Under God, we educate one another; and are effective teachers from our first breath to our last dying gasp. The little infant smiling in helpless dependence upon its mother's breast, and the mature octogenarian equally helpless upon his dying bed, are both in a sense educators; and all others from the idiot with his grin, to the great scholar with his stores of learning, are all of necessity engaged in the same enterprise. From birth to death we are all giving and receiving the discipline through which God puts us in the effort to make us men. As the diamond is polished by being ground in its own dust, so the friction of life upon life in the competitions of business, in the quieter contacts of home and society, and in the necessary relationship and work of life, is a large part of the process through which God educates a man into gentleness and generosity, sympathy and patience, humility and self-sacrifice.

The reciprocal influence of class upon class, of the poor upon the rich, of the well-to-do upon the needy, deserves signal emphasis in the study of life's discipline and education. The blessed ministries by which the needs of the poor and unfortunate are relieved, develop in those privileged to share in them compassion, sympathy and liberality in the use of means and these heavenly graces could not so well flourish in the soil, even of renewed human nature, did not poverty and distress furnish the occasion for their existence and exercise. The immortal Bishop Butler in his *Sermons on Human Nature*, has drawn with a masterly hand, the distinction, on the one hand between a passive sensibility, which is weakened and finally destroyed by exercise, like the transient feelings aroused by stories of distress upon the novelist's page, or the pictures of woe upon the stage, which eventually lose their power to arouse feeling or awaken interest; and on the other hand an active emotion which is strengthened by exercise, like the helpful sympathy which expends itself in practical relief for the needy and distressed, and which use only strengthens, until like a majestic river, gathering volume as it goes, it flows with enriching blessing through every life which it touches. And God designs that by the occasion which others' poverty furnishes there should gush out of our hearts the healing streams of compassion, sympathy and beneficence, to which the

unfortunate condition of God's poor invites us. How could God's rich children so plainly show and develop their compassion, sympathy and liberality had God no poor children in this world of his, in which he allows his richer children to love and minister in his name to their poor brethren.

The reception of the ministries of their brethren, who are more prospered in this world's goods, is intended to develop, on the other hand, a gratitude and humility which is the best adornment of the station in which God has placed them. The envy and the dislike which the unfortunate are sometimes tempted to feel for the more fortunate is to be displaced by a gratitude which recognizes the kindly sympathy that prompts the relief, and a humility which does not disdain to clasp the hand of a stronger and abler brother. And so the great social bonds of sympathy and gratitude are intended to unite in one organism two of the great classes into which men may be divided. These sympathetic ties binding men together create society; the mere juxtaposition of multitudes would not result in a social organism, as for example there is no real society in hell, however populous the multitudes with which it is peopled, because the individual atoms repel instead of attracting each other. Heaven is a perfect society because each spirit is bound to every other by the bonds of perfect comprehension, confidence and love. This earth contains an imperfect society, because the ties by which society is constituted are only imperfectly realized; and the moral and spiritual uses of poverty are largely found in the peculiar moral qualities developed, on the one hand in those who help, and on the other in those who are helped; and the existence of these qualities is the necessary condition of the real union of men, under the circumstances in which they live in this world, in the bonds of a living and genuine social organism, such as the Church ought to be in one of its aspects, such as the whole human race would really be if it had fulfilled its divine ideal.

II. Consider, second, the Duty of the Well-to-do Toward the Poor.

1. The first duty is to preach to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the faith of John the Baptist was shaken by his confinement in the gloomy dungeon in the very prime of his powers and

at the zenith of his usefulness, our Redeemer steadied and confirmed the faith of this noble prophet by pointing to the miraculous credentials which authenticated his divine mission, "Go and shew John those things which ye hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." The crowning authentication was not the splendid miracles of unsealed eyes, unstopped ears, cleansed lepers, or heaving graves from the rising dead awoke to life, but the glad proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace to the poor—to the masses of the people. Jesus Christ acted upon two truths, which amount to discoveries so far as all other men are concerned; *first*, that all true and permanent reformations begin with the masses of the people, and *second*, that preaching is the most effective method of producing this Reformation. The Church of Christ, whose mission it is to represent her Lord in the world and to continue his work, accomplishes this high end by preaching as did he the Gospel to the poor. This explains the work of Foreign Missions in which the energies of the Church are enlisted in the august enterprise of carrying the glad news of salvation to the vast masses of men, more than a thousand million strong, whose poverty, temporal and spiritual, has not yet been transformed by the grace of God. This explains the work of Home Missions by which the Church is pledged to give the Gospel to those of our own race and blood, in our own land, who are too poor to support the ordinances of the Gospel for themselves. This explains the great cause of education by the Church, through which the men are provided and prepared whose disciplined minds and trained lips are to herald the tidings of salvation to all the lands. This explains that oft-time neglected, some time despised cause of colored evangelization, through which the Church endeavors to reach our poor "brother in black" with a pure and simple Gospel. This explains the Bible Cause, by which the inspired Word, "whose leaves are for the healing of the nations" is translated into all languages and scattered upon the wings of every wind.

There are two kinds of churches that ought to be revolutionized; first, a church composed exclusively of the poor, unless no other class is accessible, and second, a church composed exclu-

sively of the well-to-do, unless it be that they are the only class within reach. Both classes ought to be included in the encyclopaedic embrace of the church to illustrate the Catholicity of the Gospel, and because the disciplinary contact of these classes with one another is necessary to develop some of the choicest graces of the Christian character.

2. A second duty to the poor is to relieve their necessities as far as may be possible. It is well never to forget the valuable lessons taught by a suggestive and dramatic incident told by a minister of his visit to a poor woman lying sick on a scanty pallet on the bare floor, to whom without sufficient inquiry as to her condition he began to talk about the necessity of faith, the grace of Christ, the glories of heaven; and the half-starved woman lifted herself upon her elbow and with a convulsive effort dragged out the words, "I want bread, I want bread." Spiritual attentions may seem irrelevant when the body is perishing with hunger, or the frame is racked with torturing pain. Pious prayers must be translated into practical relief brought by willing hands and feet. "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit?" A Barmecide feast will not stop the pangs of hunger, and pious prayers that empty stomachs may be filled, may go unanswered, unless those who thus piously pray send the necessary food to fill the painful void. If one were lying under a thin coverlet with the biting cold chilling the blood, emaciated with disease and the lack of wholesome food, would not the offer of spiritual remedies alone, seem cruelly irrelevant to the imperative physical wants. The Gospel of Jesus Christ will feed a starving soul, but it takes bread and meat to feed a starving body.

The Lord Jesus Christ has appointed his and our poor brethren as his representatives, and declares that the issues of the Final Judgment shall rest upon our treatment of these, his representatives, as the index of the attitude of our soul toward him. "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me." "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of the least of these, ye did it not unto me." Christ's poor may be ragged and soiled, offensive perhaps to every sense, and yet they

are clothed with this sacredness that he has constituted them his representatives and will judge us by our treatment of them, as an infallible expression of the state of our feelings towards him.

III. Consider, third, the Methods in which this Relief is to be Administered.

1. Oftentimes individually and personally. There are specific cases falling under the attention of all of us, which cannot wait for the organic action of the Church or for the kindly ministrations of some voluntary society, and where our knowledge of the need is God's voice calling us to bring sympathy and relief. In our administration of private relief we ought to remember the great principle, which has so many widely ramifying applications in so many different spheres, that the best method of helping men is to help them if possible to help themselves. It is far better to help a man to earn ten dollars, than to pauperize him by giving him ten dollars; nor should we forget the Pauline doctrine, "If any man will not work, neither shall he eat." God has provided no plate at the table for the man who can work and will not work. He must get dishonestly every morsel he eats. Let us take care that we are not parties to the violation of God's law by aiding those who are not entitled to such aid. Many good men and women are abettors of the tramp and the vagabond in escaping the operation of this law. The good soul who says as if it were a virtue, "I never can refuse any one who asks for food at my door," is very likely too lazy to take the trouble of examining into the case of applicants for aid, and is perhaps glad to be relieved of some of the prodigal surplus accumulations which vex the spacious expanses of overloaded pantry shelves. Our personal charities ought to be as large as our means and opportunities may admit, but we ought to be sure that we are not doing evil rather than good by aiding some vagabond who subsists by working the sympathies and deceiving the confidences of better men. Of course one cannot excuse himself from all charities by the danger of deception or the difficulty of discriminating in doubtful cases: we must discipline our judgment in the discovery of meritorious cases, and develop our liberality in the bestowment of gracious beneficences upon those we judge to be deserving.

2. The Church by organic and official action ought to provide for its own poor.

There is an order of officers in the Church, whose function it is to take charge of the offerings of God's people for the support of the poor and use them for this purpose. But the deacons however willing and anxious to aid the poor cannot create the means with which this noble end is to be accomplished; wise and sagacious as they may be creative power does not belong to them, and hence they can only use the means which God's people place in the treasury of the local church. But the treasury of the local church is charged with the numerous items necessary for the support of the local church, and in addition is often encumbered with debts, so that wise and prudent administration of the finances of the church must arrange for the payment of just debts and the prompt settlement of current expenses, and when these items are discharged the surplus left for the relief of the poor is either a minus quantity or so infinitesimal that a microscope must be used to discover it. Ofttimes it is the case that the people of God distracted by the just presentation of the great benevolences of the Church fail to appreciate the needs of their own local church, and do not realize that they may as truly worship God by presenting their offerings for the sacred cause of the support of their own church, as by presenting glad gifts to Home or Foreign Missions and in this way, we may account for the fact that unfilled church treasuries sometimes forbid the deacons to contribute to the necessities of the poor saints.

3. But there are poor outside of the pale of all the churches whose needs must be met by the wisest system of which the circumstances will admit.

In the larger cities voluntary societies for the relief of the poor are organized, employing a paid agent who gives either a part or the whole of his time to the examining of the needs of the poor and administering for their relief the funds contributed to the society. In the smaller towns or villages the employment of these paid agents would absorb too large a proportion of the amount available for charitable purposes, and so very frequently, the town or village is divided into districts, sufficiently small to be known and visited with ease, and each district is assigned to one or more persons (who give their services gratis) and who are charged with the duty of investigating all cases which seem to call for aid. Of course, neither of these plans is biblical in the sense of express

appointment by authority of Scripture, but either is biblical in the sense of being a decent and orderly method of wisely discharging an imperative duty imposed by the Scripture. Of course, mistakes will be made under either of these plans, by the most prudent district visitors, or the wisest paid agents. There is but one person in the world who claims infallibility, and he cannot open his mouth without belying his claims. If one is waiting to find perfect plans and perfect administrators of perfect plans, before he will co-operate, he had better go out of the world as speedily as possible. It is an obvious duty to co-operate with all institutions which on the whole do good, at the same time using wise and tactful methods of making them still more influential for good and beneficent ends. So that there is a wide field for this charitable work, either individually, or through one's own church, or by aiding in wise measures in every community for the relief of the poor.

It is well to be able to say with Job: "If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail; or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof; if I have seen any perish for want of clothing or any poor without covering; if his loins have not blessed me and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep—then let my shoulder fall from my shoulder-blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone."