

The Influence of the Sunday School in the Formation and Development of Christian Character.

Address delivered by E. B. Ware before the State Sunday School Convention, at Santa Rosa, Cal., and published by request of the Convention.

It is not the purpose of this address to discuss the various influences which are brought to bear in the formation and development of character.

I am aware that they are many, and I have no doubt but one of the most powerful is to be found in the natures we inherit. Nor would I be understood as ignoring any of these potent influences which are essential to the formation and development of Christian character. I mention especially the home influence, one of the most important of all. Joshua knew something of the home influence in the formation of character, when he formed the solemn resolution, to "let others do as they may, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." In this firm resolve of this man of God we have a worthy example for all Christian households. Furthermore we would not be understood as being indifferent to the influence of the church in this great work. Fears have been expressed, by some, that the Sunday school is being exalted at the expense of the church; that the friends of the school seek to appreciate the school by depreciating the church.

Such fears are as groundless as they are ridiculous; they are the outgrowth of denominationalism, and are founded upon denominational bigotry or an ignorance of the true character of the Sunday school work. It would be quite as sensible to say that the exaltation of the citizen is degrading to the State—that to encourage one branch of science or philosophy is to discourage all others—that to preach obedience is to weaken faith.

The answer to these objections is found in the fact that the friends of the Sunday school are the greatest lovers and supporters of the church.

Beyond their highest joy,
They prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion solemn vows
Her hymns of love and praise.

For her their tears do fall,
For her their prayers ascend,
For her their cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end."

It is simply the object of this address to notice the influence of the Sunday school in the formation of their principles which form the basis of the Christian life, and its influence in the development of that life when formed. We notice then

I. The influence of the school in the formation of character.

Webster tells us that the word character is derived from a Greek word which signifies to cut into furrows, to engrave; hence the definition "a distinctive mark, a sign." The third definition which he gives is "the sum of qualities which distinguish one person or thing from another." The fourth definition is "good qualities or the reputation of possessing them." The word character is often used as synonymous with reputation, but there is a vast difference between the two. Character is what a man really is, reputation is what others think he is. A man may have an extensive reputation and yet a poor character, or he may have a good character and a limited reputation.

Christian character is our real standing before God, Christian reputation is our standing in the eyes of men. Hence the formation of Christian character consists in the engraving upon the tablets of the human heart the fundamental principles of the Christian life.

There are two periods of existence in all organic bodies. 1st. The formative. 2nd. The development. Upon the work of these two periods depends the state of perfection to which all organic bodies attain.

Within the tiny shell of the smallest acorn we witness the formation of the

infant oak, and from this infant oak, in the process of time, we witness the development of the monarch of the forest, in all his stately majesty, and in all the beauty of his wonderful perfection. If the formation is imperfect the chances are that the body formed will never reach maturity. Fruit, imperfectly formed upon the most healthy tree, soon withers and falls to the ground; so with Christian character, if there be radical defects in the formation of it, those defects will, in all probability, continue through life. The experience of the world has proven how hard it is to change the mind and conduct of men when once fixed in a certain channel.

"Man on the dubious waves of error tossed,
His ship half foundered and his compass lost,

Sees, far as human eyes may command,
A sleeping fog, and fancies it dry land;
Spreads all his canvass, every sinew plies,
Pants for it, aims at it, enters it, and dies."

But if there be a perfect formation and an imperfect development, the result will be the same, an imperfect body.

You have seen the trees along the sea coast where they are reached by the trade winds, their forms are bent, and bowed to the earth, their branches are twisted and snarled, and their heads all pointing in one direction. There was nothing wrong in their formation, but the surroundings have been unfavorable to their development. From the day that they first put forth their heads from beneath the virgin soil, they have been influenced by the winds, which have beat upon them, thereby preventing them from attaining to that state of beauty and perfection to which under more favorable circumstances they might have attained.

So with Christian character, the formation may be perfect, but if not properly developed, the result will be spiritual decay and death.

Christian character has its formative and its development periods. Those principles which form the basis of the Christian life must be cut and engraved in the heart, if we would form a character which time cannot efface.

Now at what period in life can this formation work be most easily and effectually accomplished.

If a sculptor should undertake the moulding of a beautiful statue, he would not select for his material a form that had been spoiled by the rough hand of some inexperienced workman, but he would prefer the pure white marble, fresh from the quarry, and untouched by other hands. So in the moulding of Christian character, the material upon which to work is the plastic mind, and the heart that is pure and tender, before it has been corrupted by the constant habits of sin.

A great thinker has compared the mind to a sheet of pure white paper, upon which are made up the records of life. Oh, how important it is that the very first records imprinted there be of a religious character, for when once made they can never be effaced, they will go with us to the judgment bar of God. You take an ax and thrust it into the side of a young and tender oak, time may serve to heal the wound, but it can never remove the scar.

It is an old adage that the first impressions are the most lasting, and it is as true of religion as anything else.

A learned Catholic bishop once said, "Give me a child till it is twelve years of age, and the world may have it afterwards; it will remain a Catholic." The history of Catholicism the world over has proven the statement only too true.

We dwell upon these facts for the reason that a realization of their great importance is essential to a full conception and a proper appreciation of the mighty power and influence of the Sunday school in the formation of

Christian character.

I have heard Christian parents say that they did not think it best to bother the minds of children about religion when they are young. I have heard preachers say that the wickedest men generally make the best Christians, when converted. It would be a fruitless task to try to impress such persons with a proper idea of the influence of the Sunday school work, while they maintain such absurdities. But it is a happy omen for the church that these hurtful theories are finding fewer advocates year by year. While the grand army of faithful workers is

"Marching on with shield and banner bright,
In the work of the Lord and are battling for the right."

Let us look at some of the elements which enter into the formation of Christian character.

1st. The moral principle must be laid broad and deep.

2nd. The principle of faith.

These two principles form the ground work of the Christian life. No man has ever advanced very far in the divine life where these principles were not well formed and largely developed.

But we must ever be careful that we don't teach the former to the exclusion of the latter. One of the most destructive forms of infidelity to-day is that which makes morality everything and faith nothing. Faith is the mainspring of the Christian life, once planted in the human heart, in all its power and loveliness, the gates of Hades are unable to prevail against it. I speak not of the mere assent of the mind to the truths of Christianity, but rather that principle of trust in God and in Christ which causes us to feel that in him we live and move and have our being, and leads us to cry out in the hour of suffering and trial, "Though he slay me yet will I trust in him."

In conversation with a brother preacher, a few days ago, he remarked that one of the things which he had learned to do in the time of trouble is to hold on to God, that God had never disappointed him yet. Such a faith is worthy of imitation, and is generally the effect of early impressions and constant training. We have a beautiful illustration of this principle of faith and the influence of early training in producing it, in the life of the beautiful queen Esther, who, when called upon to risk her life for the salvation of her people, said, "I'll go in before the king, and if I perish I perish."

Another forcible illustration of this principle and its durability, when planted in the heart of the young, is found in the life of the little Hebrew maid, who was carried away captive, from her native land, by the Syrian hosts; though in a foreign land, in the midst of an idolatrous nation, brought in contact with those who were worshipping false gods, she did not forget the God of Israel; but had faith enough to say to the wife of an idolatrous general, "Would to God my Lord were before the prophet in Samaria, for he would recover him from his leprosy."

This principle, if once planted in the heart of the young, can seldom, if ever be eradicated. No class of people understand this fact better than the Catholics, hence their great efforts, worthy of a better cause, to gather the children into their schools and nunneries.

As an illustration of the influence of early and constant training, in the formation of Christian character, I will refer to a circumstance which came under my observation. There was a Catholic child, of eleven years, who had just been taken from a convent, where she had been for six years; she commenced, through the influence of a Protestant sister, to attend our Sunday school; the Priest heard of it, and forbade her doing so. I called upon her and asked her to

come again. She said she would like to, but could not. I asked her what difference it would make if she should disobey the Priest. She replied, "He would not let me come to mass." Suppose you don't go to mass; I asked, what then? She replied, "He will excommunicate me." I asked again, suppose he should excommunicate you, what then? She replied, "Then I couldn't be buried in the Catholic burying ground." What difference would that make? I asked. She answered, "My mother is buried there, I want to be with mother." Thus a chain of links was formed which bound that child to the Catholic faith, that no argument nor reason could break.

If the minds of children can be thus irrevocably fixed in the principals of error and falsehood, may they not be equally fixed in the principals of truth?

We will know that the Bible is our only text-book in the formation of these great principles. To live in ignorance of the Bible is to become a moral and spiritual dwarf. "The Bible (said John Quincy Adams) is the book of all others to be read at all ages, and in all conditions of human life."

The sweet singer of Israel understood the value of the word of God when he said, "The entrance of thy word giveth light, it giveth understanding to the simple." And again, "The law of the Lord is perfect converting the soul."

Jesus has said that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." He who would be perfect in the Christian life and "thoroughly furnished unto every good work," can only attain to that exalted character through a constant study of the word of God.

I need not call your attention to the influence of the Sunday school in the study of the word of God.

A prophet of old foretold of a time when a "knowledge of the Lord should cover the earth as the waters cover the sea." In my candid judgment, the Sunday school has done more in the last half century to hasten that glorious time than all other human agencies combined. The Bible societies have printed their Bibles by the thousands, but the Sunday school has circulated more of them than all other agencies. Let us look at a few statistics in this connection, they will help to impress our minds with an idea of the magnitude of this work.

I quote from the report of the International Sunday School Convention, held at Atlanta, Ga., in 1878. The report includes only the United States and Canada.

There were at that time 83,441 Sunday schools in the United States and Canada; 894,703 teachers and officers, and 6,843,997 scholars, making a grand total of 7,738,790 who are engaged in the constant study of the word of God. No period in the history of the church has ever witnessed such a grand army as this engaged in a systematic study of the word of God.

And what adds to the grandeur of these figures is, that this great army of learners is not engaged in the study of the discipline, the catechism, the confession of faith, or any of the dusty creeds of the past, but they are studying the pure word of God, the fountain of eternal truth; and furthermore from this field of workers there had been gathered into the garner of the Lord 123,471 souls. Still these grand results should awaken no surprise, when we witness them, for one of England's greatest poets has truly said that

"Religion, if in heavenly truth attired,
Needs only to be seen to be admired."

We can not, in my judgment, overestimate the influence of the Sunday school, in laying broad and deep these great principles which form the basis of all true Christian character.

It is a fact that is well known that there are fewer backsliders from among those who come into the church from the Sunday school than from any other class of persons.

We can account for this only on the hypothesis that the previous training which they have received by years of study in the Sunday school has so fixed the principles of Christianity in their minds and hearts that they are less liable to be led away by the influences of sin. A child that has been brought up in the Sunday school has the principles of Christianity imbedded in its very nature. The worship of the Lord's house, the prayers, the hymns, and all that belongs to it become a part of its very being, so that when it is brought into the church it is not likely to be under the ephemeral influences of a protracted meeting, but from a sincere love of the truth and a desire to obey it.

(To Continue.)

A Democratic French Porter.

Few persons in Paris occupy a whole house. A family rents a flat, which comprises a sitting room, bedrooms and a kitchen. A dozen families may live in the same house; the only things common to all being the entrance and stair case. A *concierger* (porter) has charge of the door. He receives all bundles and letters, and allows no unknown person to pass without inquiry.

As a class, these *conciergers* are peculiar. Unusually taciturn for a Frenchman, they are democratic in their notions. An anecdote told of one of them by Mr. Henry Wikoff illustrates their application of the three words, famous in French politics, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

Decamps, a celebrated painter, occupied the fourth flat. One day a gentleman called and asked the *concierger* if the artist was at home. "Yes," said the porter, and added, as the visitor was about mounting the stairs, "As you are about visiting M. Decamps, perhaps you will be so kind as to carry up his trousers which I have just brushed."

"Certainly," said the stranger; "most happy to render you so small a service."

When Decamps answered the bell of his apartment, great was his astonishment to see the Duke of Orleans, the heir to the throne, holding out the trousers the lazy *concierger* had confided to him.—*Ec.*

The final examination of the New Testament Revision Committee is held at New Haven this month. The whole Revision Committee embraces fifty-seven British scholars, and twenty-seven American. Their great work was begun in 1870. No changes have been made for the sake of changes; and no change has been adopted but by a vote of at least two-thirds of the Committee. It will be, as it ought to be, an eminently conservative revision of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, we are assured by those who have the means of knowing, that the revised New Testament, when published will be found to contain changes that may be thought to be of a radical character. A reviser has said that where the manifest meaning of the original Greek is not expressed in our present version, the Revision Committee could know no other rule than to express that meaning in the English, of the revised version, and some of these changes would be found very important. The new version will soon be issued, and then we shall see what we shall see.—*Evangelist.*

The *World* says that Baroness Burdett Coutts will soon marry Ashmead Bartlett, her secretary and almoner, though she will lose £100,000 a year by it. When the Duchess of Stalbans left her property to Miss Coutts, she decreed that the heiress should lose her interest in the Coutts bank and other properties if she married a foreigner or a naturalized citizen. Bartlett is an American, but was naturalized a short time since.