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How Should we Teach the Bible to the Child

I propose to answer this enquiry strictly from the standpoint of a teacher. I shall not be misunderstood if I say that here I am on my own ground. As in the course of my public ministry I have often said I was never trained to preach, my training was for the work of teaching; and across the years my interest in that high art has never abated. If the Bible is to be taught intelligently and successfully, the subject of how to do it must be approached from that standpoint. I have lived long enough to see the whole conception of teaching undergo complete revolution and change. I submit therefore that today we must make use of all the light that has come to us on this subject. It is not within the province of this lecture to discuss all the details of the change, but rather to recognize the principle. In the days of my boyhood teaching was largely conceived of as the impartation of knowledge, irrespective of the ability to receive it. It was a great day for teaching when the truth was discovered that it is not enough for the teacher to be familiar with the subject taught, but it is absolutely necessary that he or she should understand the mind of those taught. Of course to carry this out to its ultimate would mean that in the last analysis, every individual requires separate treatment; and here I may say in passing, is the point at which, in Bible teaching, the Sunday School can never perfectly take the place of the home. It can do much, but there are things that can only be done by those who are able to watch each individual child. Our present consideration however is concerned with the teaching of the Bible to the young generally.

Whereas I have spoken of this as a comparatively modern discovery, it is really nothing of the kind, for it is recognized in the Old Testament. I propose therefore to begin by asking that without prejudice, we come back to one of the most familiar verses by constant quotation, to be found in the Old Testament. I refer to Proverbs 22:6:

"Train up a child in the way he should go,
And even when he is old he will not depart from it."

Now I have said we need to approach this without prejudice. The truth declared I think is generally accepted. I am not so sure that it is as generally understood. Certainly the old idea used to be, to put it baldly, that parents were to decide the way in which the boy or girl should go, and then by every kind of discipline, to see to it that they went that way.

There was the fundamental mistake in understanding. Let us take a moment or two with the text itself.

The first word is arresting, - "Train." I think that word is perhaps as excellent a translation of the Hebrew as we could possibly have. That Hebrew word is only rendered "train" in one other place in the Bible (Genesis 14:14) which speaks of Abraham and his trained men. The word occurs in other places, but is translated to direct or dedicate. The thought suggested is that of the setting apart to some specific and definite purpose, and then the employment of the means which enable the one so set apart, to fulfil that purpose. In its application then, to teach, it takes in two things, education and instruction. I am using the word education in its first sense, that of drawing out which is already there; and instruction in its true sense, that of supplying what is not there. That is the twofold function of all teaching.

We now pass to something else of vital importance in the text. As we have it in our Bibles, a phrase reads, "In the way he should go." In the Hebrew there is no such verb as "to go." There is nothing at all about going. There is one little word which in English may be written *peh*, which means according to. Therefore the statement is, "Train up a child according to his way." We may definitely say then that it means that it is our business to see the child has his or her own way. Such a statement I can understand will cause almost a shock. Let us however pause a moment. What do we mean by the child's own way? If we are thinking of the word "way" as synonymous with wish, or desire, we are entirely wrong. A child's wish or desire may be influenced in a hundred ways at any given moment, and may run counter to the highest interests of the child. The truth realized is this, that in every child there is a way, or in other words, in every child there is some capacity, potentiality, possibility, peculiar to itself; and if we are to train the child, we must know that, somehow discover it in order to lead out to fulfilment. I admit for the moment we are dealing with a much greater subject than that which is necessary to our consideration. Nevertheless it is important to face it. To put the whole thing in a brief way. We standardize motor cars, but we cannot standardize human beings. Once more, here is the tragedy of the breakdown of home life.

Speaking however now of children generally, it is of the utmost importance if we are to communicate knowledge that we understand the general facts in the development of children. This of course brings us face to face with what is now spoken of, and correctly so, as psychology. It does not come within the province of this lecture to enter into all the details and nuances of such a subject. I shall fall back upon an old-fashioned definition of personality, namely Kant's, in which he declared that in personality there are three faculties. I realize that the word faculty is dismissed from modern psychology, and I have no quarrel with the dismissal of the word. We may describe what Kant described as faculties, elements or phases. The three he mentioned are intellect, emotion, volition. These are certainly present in all human beings, and with equal certainty they are found in all children at all ages; but there are stages of development and of inter-relationship, which are of vital importance. I submit that the child in development from those earliest months when it begins to run about until it reaches the age of about seventeen, passes through four stages. Let it be said at once that there can be no hard and fast age division indicated, as some children develop more rapidly than others; but we may in general terms indicate the stages by reference to ages.

In the first period, beginning as I have said, when the little one begins to move about of its own volition, and lasting until it's about eight years of age, these three faculties or elements are all present. I take it no one will deny the intelligence of a child. Certainly none can refuse to believe in its emotion, and it is equally certain that those who know nothing about children, will not call in question its volitional power! Thus they have all the essential elements of individuality and personality. But these elements are not working together. They are not cohesive. They are not consistent. The activities of the child are influenced by each in turn. One side is dominant at the moment, and suddenly, with no apparent reason, another passes to the ascendant, and as quickly, the third gains the mastery. The restlessness of a child's mentality is revealed in its physical restlessness. A very simple illustration from my own circle of friends may help me at this point. A young mother some while ago had visiting her, a bachelor brother who was a Don in one of our English Universities. She had occasion to leave the home for a few hours, and among the children, left behind a sweet girlie of about seven years old. As she left, she asked her brother if he would keep his eye on Gladys. He said he would, and taking a chair into the garden, sat down to red and fulfill his mission.

When a little time had passed, Gladys came to him and said, with her eyes wide open, telling of her intellectual activity, "Uncle, why is that rose red and the leaf green?" Perhaps a little surprised at the intelligence of the child, but delighted, he being able to give a scientific interpretation, said, "Well, dear, if you will sit quietly down I will explain it to you." As he prepared to deliver the learned explanation, he noticed the look of enquiry had passed from her eyes, and they were filled with merriment as she attempted to suppress her laughter. He said, "Gladys, what are you laughing at?" To which she replied, "I am so sorry, Uncle, but really you have such a funny nose." She had passed swiftly from the intellectual to the emotional. And I may add in a moment more she had forgotten both, as she suddenly decided to leave, thus missing the rebuke that her uncle was inclined to give her for frivolity!

Now somewhere round about seven or eight years of age a change takes place in the child which is very marked. Account for it as we may, the fact remains that the volitional side passes into abeyance, while the emotional develops by leaps and bounds, and intellect becomes sometimes almost alarmingly active. Between eight and twelve the normal child will ask more questions than at any period in its development, until it reaches the age of sixteen or seventeen, when the questions will begin again, but will be of an entirely different character. This period will continue until they reach the age of twelve or thirteen.

Then perhaps the most revolutionary change takes place that occurs in the whole process of development. I confess that I never approach the consideration of this without a sense of grave responsibility and solemnity. What is it that now happens? Suddenly, and sometimes so suddenly to amaze parents and teachers, intellect seems to stand still, emotion is repressed, but volition comes swiftly to the very centre and core of life, and overmasters everything. This period is characterized very largely by the cessation of questions. One reason may be that during this time they do not desire that anyone should think that there is anything in the heavens or the earth beneath, that they do not know it. In passing I may say that is always a sign of arrest of development of intellect in a man or child. It is equally true in that period that emotion is suppressed. The boy is not going to let you see him cry, or the girl either if she be healthy. They lose also very largely their sense of humour; but they have discovered the power to choose, to elect, to decide.

I referred to my sense of solemnity when I consider this phase. This is the point where we either gain or hold, or lose our children both in the home and in the school. Again a personal reminiscence may help in the way of illustration. It was in the beginning of 1918 that I had been lecturing in Wales, and in returning to London, found myself in the train in company with three other men. Two of them were officers in his Majesty's uniform, the other was a civilian. The three were friends, and were talking together. I was the odd man; but in the small compass of an English carriage, could not avoid hearing the conversation. Presently it drifted on to the subject of boys, and I became at once interested. The civilian said to his friends, "I have a boy, and I don't know what has come over him recently. For the last three or four months he has suddenly developed the most obstinate will. Heretofore neither his mother nor I have had any trouble with him, but he has now become more like a mule than a human being." Think of the tragedy of it, a father who did not know that what he was observing was perfectly proper and natural, and a necessity to the development of personality. Then he went on, "I don't know what I shall have to do with him, but of course I must break his will." At that point, stranger as I was, I could not be silent, and addressing myself to him, I said, "You will pardon me, I am a stranger, but what did you say you were going to do with your boy's will?" He looked up with a surprise that characterizes every Englishman, if he is addressed by someone who has not been introduced to him. However he repeated what he had said, that he felt he had to break his boy's will. I said to him, "Well sir, may I say to you, that I sincerely hope by the grace of God, before you succeed in breaking your boy's will, somebody will break your neck." The look of surprise on his face I remember to this day; and I also remember that being an Englishman he said, "I beg your pardon." Thereupon I looked at him again, straight in his eye, and said, "I will repeat the sentiment in the words of the King Whose uniform I wear, and tell you that rather than cause a little one to stumble, it were better for you that a great millstone should be hung around your neck, and you be drowned in the depths of the sea." I need not prolong the story. Suffice it to say that before we got to London we were good friends. I shall always hope that I helped one boy.

It is probable that someone would like to know how. Quite briefly I may say I gave him a formula that I would give to anyone. When the hour comes that will be bulking big in the development of your child, quit commanding and begin communing. Necessarily in the interest of the home, there will be laws and regulations that must be observed, and as the head of the house you will insist upon their observance; but in cases where the child is face to face with a purely personal matter, do not seek to impose your will, but rather in fellowship direct its choice. Where this plan is adopted I do not hesitate to say that in ninety cases out of a hundred, children will accept your view. In the other cases tell them that they are free to go their own way, and they will find you, if for any reason they want to come back and reconsider. By that method we hold the confidence of our children, and prevent them becoming clandestine in their actions.

Once more, somewhere round sixteen or seventeen years of age, the final change takes place. If for the sake of illustration, we may speak of these different faculties or elements in the terms of bulk, I would say once more than intellect, emotion, volition become equal as they were at the very beginning; but with this significant and tremendous difference. The three are now acting together. Volition passes to the centre and becomes the arbiter, but it acts under the influence and suggestion of intellect and emotion. There are times when it may have to decide a battle between these two, but it will never act apart from them. Thus personality is becoming unified. If then, the light that is in intellect is light indeed, and the emotion has been touched only to fine issues, volition will decide, and a character of destiny and blessing is the result.

It may seem that I have wandered far from the theme of teaching the Bible to the child. As a matter of fact I have done nothing of the kind. If the Bible is to be taught, the one supreme necessity must ever be that we remember that the child's interest must be held. Let us therefore go over the ground from that standpoint. The one certain thing is that the old idea of an International Lesson which is graded to meet all in a Sunday School is utterly wrong. That is being recognized today, and different lessons are being prepared for different departments. All that I now say is in the realm not merely of theory but of experience in my own work.

There is only one thing to be done in the first period. It is that of taking from the Bible its stories, and giving them to the children. In this connection let me say that there can be no greater mistake than that of attempting to explain the story. Let it be told and left. A story told to a child will be forgotten in thirty minutes, but remembered in thirty years. That is the mystery of the child mind. The story you tell sinks away, but holds, and in the most remarkable ways recurs oftentimes long afterwards and produces an immediate effect. In that department of the Sunday school two children to every teacher is the ideal. The difficulty may be raised of securing enough teachers. The reply is that the young people of the Bible Classes can teach in the primary if necessary; the only necessity being that some other hour shall be found for their Bible class work. Someone may say, well, if that is all, anyone can do it. Let me say at once that that is a profound mistake. For the doing of the work, Normal Class training is necessary, and this here, and indeed in every department should be an integral part of the work of the Sunday School.

Now as to the second period, and again we may be helped by noticing something that is full of interest, and universal. By this time children are beginning to read with some kind of interest, and almost invariably they love a magazine with a story "to be continued in our next!" That is to say they need today something more than a complete story, the element of continuity. In my own work we met this need by taking the children during that period, across the great biographies of the Bible. Here we have a rich field.

Now we come to the most difficult period, that which begins when volition is bulking big. It is no use to hope to hold and grip the young at that time by telling them stories. Moreover they have enlarged their outlook so as to have interest in more than a personal life story. Again to illustrate from the facts as revealed in the experience of the child. Just at the point when volition bulks big, the consciousness of inter-relationship and companionship breaks upon the child. In my own judgment the discovery of this fact has been the prime secret of success of the Boy Scout and Girl Guide Movements. Now they are longer occupied merely with the personal, but with the social. Here I confess is perhaps the most difficult task in progressive teaching. I can only submit that which I found in my work to be a successful solution. During those four years we took our children across the Bible from the standpoint of its history. In doing this of course we showed the inter-relationships between man and man, tribe and tribe, nation and nation. It gives us the great chance to impart to them, without so naming it, the Biblical philosophy of history, which is that there is One Throne which has never been empty, which has never trembled; and that all earthly thrones rise or fall according to their right or wrong relationship with that Throne.

Now when that period comes when the faculties or elements become cohesive in their action, young life is ready for those great portions of the Bible which have of necessity, been largely postponed, namely the didactic portions; the Laws of Israel, the poetic literature, the messages of the Prophets, the teaching of Jesus, and the Apostolic writings will be those to be specially taught.

Appended will be found Lessons for three series- Primary, Junior, and Intermediate. Courses for Bible Classes covering five years are given in a Booklet called The Bible in Five Years. It should be said that these lists are not helps, except as they give possible courses. Those using them will have to prepare their lessons themselves.

In every course thirty-nine lessons are prepared for a year, thus leaving Sundays free for the great festivals of the Church, and summer vacations.

I close by repeating that the work of teaching the Bible to the child is at once most delicate, difficult, delightful, and dynamic that the Church is called upon to carry out. It is the greatest work that we can do in the interest of the individual, of the family, of the city, of the race. It has its immediate value, its value for the coming age, and, indeed, for all the ages.