The Ragged School of Gloucester

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Great excitement in Gloucester, England, in 1781! A new medium that would affect the entire Christian world for the next two hundred years and more had burst forth. The birth-throes were in a pin factory where many of the children of the town, as well as others from neighboring places, worked long hours during the week. There were no child labor laws in 1781. On Sunday they roamed the streets, their clothes filthy, their language often profane, and their conduct coarse. In this manner they attracted the attention of Robert Raikes, a printer and newspaper publisher. He had been working for prison reform and rehabilitation, but seeing the children, he decided that there would be greater benefit in working with them before they got into trouble and later prison.

Thereupon he hired several women to open a “ragged” school, as it was soon called, to teach reading, writing, and God’s Word. Going out into the street, Raikes personally persuaded many of the children to attend the classes. Thus the Sunday School was born two hundred years ago. Today some thirty-five million young and old are enrolled in more than 170,000 Sunday Schools in the United States.

But now read the whole story in the pages that follow in this bicentennial anniversary edition of The Reformed Review.

I have been in Sunday School both as learner and teacher for fourscore years and more. And I am still learning and teaching. From all these years, as well as curriculum consultation abroad and writing and editorial direction at home, I offer some personal observations for this Autumn edition.

I - A Simple Definition of Christian Education

For more than thirty years as I travelled, I said: “Christian Education is presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to people, beginning with little children, for the largest possible good they may do for others, and for the greatest possible enrichment of their own lives.” The privilege of doing this begins with parents by the telling of Bible stories to their children; by teaching them to pray, and by observing Christian standards in the home. In time the church comes to the aid of the parents. And the Sunday School, both as it touches the life of the congregation, and reaches out into the unchurched of the community, is one of the means to fulfill this privilege and duty.

II - The Right and Privilege of The Learner

Much emphasis is being placed these days on the right of the child, as in the recent “Year of the Child.” A great deal of this was, and is, socially motivated. In Third World lands the focus was largely on hunger and disease. With us it centered mostly on child abuse (two and one-half million reported incidents in 1979) and teen-
age pregnancy (the most critical public health and social problem in this country today"-Mary S. Calderobe, M.D., President of the Sex Information and Education Council in the U.S.). In the foreground for us in the church must be the observation of Dr. Luke that "Jesus grew both tall and wise, and was loved by God and man" (2:52-LB). Thus, early I was taught that this was a foursquare ideal for which to strive. Thus, Jesus in both his childhood and manhood became mightily important to me. Later, as a teacher, I came to see that the learner, whatever his age, is also essential to Jesus. The worth of a person to our Lord is often forgotten in our teaching. He challenges both learner and teacher with his question: "Why is a person of more value than a sheep" (Matt. 12:12)? Reading his High Priestly Prayer, we must note that he prays for his own. His ministry was built largely around the training of The Twelve. His disciples (learners) are all whom he has to do his work in the world. They are of infinite worth to him. He prays and works that they will grow, or else they will die. As John Ruskin once wrote: "One reason why preaching (teaching) is so ineffective is that it calls on men to work for God more often than to behold God working for them."

III - The Teaching Methods of The Great Teacher

As one reads and studies the Good News he quickly discerns the teaching methods of Jesus both by word and example. Jesus presented essentials only and reached definite conclusions. He sought always that at least one point or factor would be clear and understandable. Frequently he used object lessons both from the natural world and of himself. The teacher in the Church School today must not only have consecrated willingness but also knowledge gained through biblical study resources and training classes in approach and method. And not to be forgotten is the growing modern means of communication. The teacher and the teaching church must be contemporary in order to reach people. This does not mean that the church school is in the entertainment business. Its business is teaching and training in biblical truth and principles by every means available.

In this connection we are reminded of the basic Sunday School curriculum since 1872- the International or Uniform Series. Today some eight million student and teacher outlines are presented annually. I sat on the Uniform Lesson Committee for a dozen years and am still teaching adults on this basis. Over a long period of time the use of these outlines gives a firm grounding in the Word of God. But the use of electives and the option of other sources as presented in the Covenant Life Curriculum since 1950, and its presently emerging successor, the Joint Educational Development series with its four approaches, is not only welcome, but an increasing necessity.

IV - A Stronger Emphasis on "Life Long Learning"

The dictum that "one is never too old to learn" is educationally well established. Here secular education is well ahead of the Church School as evidenced by the present interest in adult education. A survey by the Adult Education Association says that last year some forty million adults were involved. The average adult biblical study group, whether midweek or meeting on Sunday, is much too small with respect to the size of
the congregation. If one looks for reasons one may find that Christian faith in many is merely nominal, or that the desire for learning has lost its stimulation. Perhaps often the lack of in-depth preparation on the part of the teacher adds to the problem.

The United States Census Bureau reports that beginning with 1980 we are entering the “decade of adults.” Now more than twenty-five million persons in our nation are sixty-five years of age or older. The forecast is that by the end of the century there will be thirty-two million in this age group. This has great economic and social implications. The business world is rapidly changing from “pills for the decrepit old ones” to a recognition of the buying power of the strong bodies and intelligent minds of the senior citizens. The church must no longer be far behind in helping to maintain a sense of self-esteem, encouraging the use of talents and experience for the good of all. “Life long learning” will hold up the principle of worthy stewardship as set before us by the Apostle Paul: “That God’s people will be equipped to do better work for him, building up the church, the body of Christ, to a position of strength and maturity” (Eph. 4:12 LB).

V - A Fuller Realization By Teachers That What They Are Is Equally, and Often, More Important Than The Content Of What They Teach.

I vividly remember my first Sunday School teacher. Her name was Lizzie Frens, now long since gone to her home in glory. But the impressions she left upon a growing boy of both moral and religious values remains with me to this day. Teachers, especially of children, must fully know that they set ideals before impressionable minds, and that to many they are model persons. Children “fall in love” with their teachers who are what they teach. As Toynbee said: “There must be no moral or spiritual gap between pupil and teacher.”

Now read on. What follows will be to your great profit and edification.