



THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHER AS A CONVERSATIONALIST.

BY JAMES H. KELLOGG.

MERE mechanical questioning is the dullest of all formalities. Routine lecturing in Sunday-school classes is a system of "pumping in," constrained, awkward, and at best but partially successful. Extended moralizing is as dreary as a desert to the average pupil. Exhortation is but a part, certainly, of the teacher's work, and a true one only when it helps to make impressions and apply truths. Illustration is a necessity, and must be fresh, well-chosen, and abundant. Manner and style,

in the model teacher, are forceful, earnest, thoughtful. Intense energy, coupled with wise direction, and a watchful solicitude and thoughtful tenderness, belong also to the true instructor in the Sunday-school.

We would add to these, and all other excellent traits, the grand accomplishment of a good conversationalist. To achieve this will be no mean undertaking. Let us not be mistaken. Wordiness, verbosity, gabble, is not conversation. There may be a wilderness of talk, and no real exercise of the talent we are considering. The noisiest, the most talkative men are never conversationalists in any truthful acceptance of the term. They belch forth adjectives and nouns and pronouns as freely as a cannon's mouth dispenses grape-shot in a distant, scattering fire; as freely as a line of soldiery shoot away into vacancy. But, if it takes five hundred pounds of lead to kill a man, it is more likely to take five hundred thousand words, fired from such mouth-pieces, to hit a mind or start an idea. Garrulousness is not power in speech any more than mere

numbers, raw recruits, are strength in an army. "Talking against time" never injured time or affected any thing or any one so harmfully as the operator who thus foolishly wasted wind and words. Those teachers who study simply how to "kill time," to "get through" the lesson, to bridge over the hour of the school session, can have no interest in the great art of which we are speaking. They may tell remarkable stories, and be very amiable and very indulgent, and very calm and dignified, but they can know nothing of the charm, the magic, the subtle power of the teacher who is a real conversationalist.

"Conversation," says one, "is the music of the mind—an intellectual orchestra, where all the instruments should bear a part, but where none should play together. Each of the performers should have a just appreciation of his own powers, otherwise an unskillful novice, who might usurp the first fiddle, would infallibly get into a *scrape*. To prevent these mistakes, a good master of the band will be particular in the assortment of the performers: if

too dissimilar, there will be no harmony; if too few, there will be no variety; and if too numerous, there will be no order; for the presumption of one prater might silence the eloquence of a Burke, or the wit of a Sheridan, as a single kettledrum would drown the finest solo." We see, then, that conversation is as dependent for success upon its being really *a mutual thing* as is the music of a choir, or the exercises of any associated body of individuals.* Any thing short of true mutuality is certain to degenerate into formalism, and become a dull and dragging matter of the merest routine. The true teacher, then, will aim to *draw out*, not merely what the pupil knows, or elicit the fact of ignorance, *but invite him to inquire frequently and eagerly after the truth*, to question the teacher in turn, to suggest difficulties and his own personal views of the lesson, and thus really, in a sense, repay the teacher in the very exercise of class instruction. The benefits in real teaching are reciprocal. No mature mind can come in contact with earnest, thoughtful minds in youth, and wisely guide

them, without feeling the reflex influence of the exercise.

In good conversation on the lesson the teacher will study true simplicity in language.

“A very ingenious French author” (says the “Spectator”) tells us that the ladies of the Court of France, in his time, thought it ill-breeding, and a kind of female pedantry, to pronounce a hard word right; for which reason they took frequent occasion to use hard words, that they might show a politeness in murdering them. He further adds, that a lady of some quality at court, having accidentally made use of a hard word in a proper place, and pronounced it right, the whole assembly was out of countenance for her.” All extravagances in language will be avoided by the true conversationalist. He will address his class in words which are clear, simple, and thoroughly expressive. When “hard” words are used they will, if necessary, be carefully explained, and well-fixed in the memory. There will be nothing pedantic here—words will assume their proper places as vehicles, merely, of the

thoughts which are the meat and marrow of all real conversation. Commonplaceness will be left to the dull formalities of so-called "fashionable" life, and thoughts which burn will clothe themselves in living, stirring words, worthy of the Book we study, and the sacredness of the day and place for the Bible services.

The conversational teacher will encourage questioning on the part of the pupil and wait for it.

This is essential to real freedom on the scholar's part, and it affords a key, also, to the views and wants which belong to him. *Mutual* inquiry, free interrogation, will characterize the intercourse between teacher and pupil. "Leading questions" will be, of course, most carefully avoided by the teacher, and various indirections used for "drawing out" the scholar. When questioning is put upon its true basis it will prove the grand agency in instruction which it was designed to be, and which its proper use has always proved it. When its use becomes general among the members

of a class we may expect to see a true spirit of inquiry greatly developed, and a profound feeling of interest awakened in every mind.

The temptation, common in every-day talk, to exaggerate, to indulge in imaginative statements under the guise of fact, must be carefully avoided. "Truth," it has been well said, "is the first ingredient in conversation." In the easy flow of words care must be taken to make precise and reliable utterances, so that the same confidence will be inspired and maintained as in more formal exercises. This need not involve a stiffness of manner or repulsiveness in style. The teacher may maintain a suitable dignity and command, while he enjoys all the freedom incident to familiar conversational approach. Dignity is not awkwardness, and a commanding presence is compatible with the easiest courtesy.

The good conversationalist will be sympathetic as a teacher.

He will readily read the looks, and catch the ever-shifting expressions of the countenance, with eager watchfulness; he will note

the various difficulties of his pupils, and suggest to each a solution ; and he will not forget, while maintaining the utmost delicacy in treatment, to make the wisest, and the best, and most tender personal applications of truth, and impress it with all the fervency of personal sympathy and earnestness. Special appeals he will reserve for private interviews with pupils, where the power of Christian conversation, during the visit at home, will duly be heightened and intensified.

The true teacher will be enthusiastic in conversation.

He will be full of his subject, warm in his application of the lesson, fired with the truth, and truly and heartily zealous. He will not be "a wild enthusiast," but a genuine lover of truth, warm with holy and heart-filling impulses, and animate with the principles which lie at the basis of his instructions. His pupils will catch somewhat of his spirit, and it would not be strange if, speedily, the same fires of zeal and affection should be kindled on the altars of their hearts.

The conversational teacher will be appreciative.

He will carefully notice the remarks and analyze the views of his pupils, and, both mentally and in words, testify his appreciation of that which may be good and valuable. He will be neither conceited nor pedantic, and, while insisting upon the truth, he will court and insist upon a full and free expression of opinions. Nor will he shrink from the exposure of doubts and difficulties which may be stated on the part of the scholars. He will try to understand and weigh them all, and suggest the proper remedy for each.

Again, the good teacher will be cheerful in conversation.

He will make the "talk" a pleasant and delightful one. He will feel that there is no real "life," here or elsewhere, "but cheerful life." As there is warmth in his hand-shaking, so there will be sunshine in his smile, and cheeriness in his language. The "joys of God's salvation" are for him of present use, and not something only for the far-off future. There is

beauty and glory and comfort enough in the Gospel to give good cheer to all who study it.

Once more, the good conversationalist will hear well while he will talk well.

He will remember that his success depends as much, or more, upon this trait as upon the exercise of speech. He will cultivate this habit, encourage his pupils to talk, draw him into currents of expression, mingle his own thoughts with the thoughts of the scholar, and thus weave the threads of Christian influence and instruction into the warp and woof of the pupil's thought and life.

Social power is a necessity to the successful Christian. Conversation is its great vehicle. The religious teacher must acquire and cultivate this great art, and ply this mighty engine with strong, earnest, and forceful purpose. Dr. J. G. Holland wisely says: "The boat that refuses to pause in its passage, and throw a line to smaller craft, will bring no tow into port. So let me tell you, that if you have an honorable desire in your heart for influence *you must be a thoroughly social man.* You

cannot move men until you are one of them. They will not follow you until they have heard your voice, shaken your hand, and fully learned your principles and your sympathies. It makes no difference how much you know, or how much you are capable of doing. You may pile accomplishment upon acquisition mountain high; but if you fail to be a social man, demonstrating to society that your lot is with the rest, a little child with a song in its mouth and a kiss for all, and a pair of innocent hands to lay upon the knees, shall lead more hearts and change the direction of more lives than you."

The Sunday-school teacher, then, should prove himself a conversationalist not merely in the class, but at the homes of his pupils as he visits them, by the wayside as he meets them, all the while, as opportunity offers, exercising this excellent gift of sound and interesting Christian speech.

The Bible is eminently a conversational book. Its records of "talks" extend from Genesis to Revelation. The conversations, the observations, of apostles and prophets, of

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the wise and mighty of the earth, are given to us in the stirring language so peculiar to the book we teach. From the word of the Lord to Adam, in the garden, down to the numberless sayings of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament, there is a long succession of conversations. Many of them may serve as models for the thoughtful Sunday-school teacher, who desires to prove himself thorough and useful in this master art—others, in contrast, will suggest points to be avoided, weaknesses in speech which destroy influence and impair success. All are worthy of study and of careful and wise observation.

Many of the grandest truths, the sweetest promises, the loftiest thoughts in all the Scriptures, have been expressed in conversation. It is a royal power, a gracious gift, a pure and lofty accomplishment, to be fitted and furnished for sweet and precious converse of the things of the kingdom.

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