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## THE WISDOM OF GOD AND THE INNOVATIONS OF MEN

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**T**he Scriptures of both Testaments lay great stress upon *the Christian rearing of children*. But it is noticeable that they never address this duty to any but parents themselves; and say not one word which looks towards the deputizing of this duty by parents to anyone else. I once heard Dr. Vincent, the secretary of the Am. Sunday School Union say, that Sunday schools were not designed by him to interfere with the family instruction of parents; and that he would rather they had never been invented, than see them work this result. He was right. As invented by Mr. Robert Raikes of Gloucester, they were precisely [?] missionary-schools. He went for his scholars, not to Christian families, but to the neglected children of the godless on the streets. How is this now?—Are not all the children of Christian families sent to Sunday-school; and is not the old, scriptural institute, the sabbath afternoon instruction of children and servants in the family extinct? It is believed by many good men, that this boasted “improvement” is working great and irreparable mischief to religion. “The foolishness of God is wiser than man.”

A bad experience has already disclosed two evils which the church has incurred in substituting man’s plausible plan of the Sunday school, for God’s plan of the instruction of children by parents in the “church which is in the house.” Our nineteenth-century advanced thought has been so very smart, that it has over looked a very simple truth, which God obviously kept closely in view; viz, That the parental and filial relation has two parties to it, and enacts reciprocal influences. Parents were appointed to influence children; and children were designed to influence parents. And as the parental is the purest, most powerful and most permanent of all the social affections, there is no exertions parents ever make, which re-acts so powerfully on their own character, as their efforts to do good to their own children. Doubtless God knew what he was about, when he ordained that *Parents* should teach their own children His law. He was planning the good of both. Doubtless this parental work for children’s souls was the most important of all means of grace for the *parents’* souls! In trying to teach their children they taught themselves divine truths; so that, the old-fashioned Presbyterian father or mother of a century ago, in teaching the catechism-lesson Sunday afternoon to his own children, in rehearsing the morning’s sermon to them (how would one of our modern “sermonettes” bear rehearsal by an old Scotch father of the days of “Little Joe Morton,” or Ashbel Greens’ parents? Would not the good man feel as if he were trying to build a hay stack of thistle-downs?), in memorizing Psalms with his children, in reading and explaining the Scriptures, probably learned more solid religious truth in one year, than our parents of now-a-days, with his Sunday-school for his children, and his afternoon reading of his secular paper followed by his nap of sleep, ever learns in five years. Not only was the parent’s knowledge increased; but the most vital spiritual affections and principles cultivated: love towards his children’s souls, the lively sense of divine things, fidelity to duty, zeal towards God, careful walking before his children. We, in providing a substitute for the parent, have deprived him of all these potent means of grace. This is one reason why the standard of religion is so much lower among adults, than it once was.

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The second loss the church has met is in losing all authority to enforce proper deportment and proper efforts to learn thoroughly on children. God, it seems had thought of that. He knew it was the nature of most children to be mentally indolent and thoughtless. He knew that the carnal mind was enmity against God, and the study of Gospel-truth distasteful to the natural mind. Hence he knew that a pretty strong authority would be needed to secure any faithful study from the average child. But he had given that authority to the parent, and hence he laid the duty of teaching on him. He expected them to do as father Abraham, and Major James Morton of Wilmington did: "*command* his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord." In Major Morton's "church in the house" the gospel-teaching was done by him with a good long hickory in convenient reach. The consequence was that all the urchins, black and white, made stable, intelligent Christians.

But the Sunday-school teacher has no power of coercion! All he can do is to coax. Since the task he ought to exact of the children committed to his care, the faithful study of gospel-truth, is one distasteful to their hearts, it might be anticipated how weak, shallow and perfunctory the exercise and instructions of the typical Sunday-school would become. No lesson must be either "long or hard," no real urgency must be applied to the lazy trifling childish mind, lest little Master and Mistress should be wearied and cease attending Sunday school. Attendance must be bribed with pick-nicks and Christmas-trees. The lessons must be made light and short until they are mere phantoms. The school must be limited to an hour; even that little space must be made amenable to the pupils by being thickly spiced with stories, oral addresses, and jingling little ditties set to silly songs with a homeopathic grain of gospel diluted with twaddle. By this system two or three doctrines are indeed very practically and effectually fixed in the childish mind. One is, that nobody is reasonably expected to do his duty, unless it is easy and amusing. If the task of duty becomes at all hard, or requires self-denial, it ceases to be obligatory. Another is, that people have a right to regard the gospel as irksome, and if much isn't done to relieve its tedium, to kick at it. A third is, that pretending to serve Christ for the sake of the future pick-nick, is Christianity. Don't the kind Christian teachers applaud and reward us for doing that very thing? Thus the church relying on its "Grand Sunday School System" cheats itself with the fallacious belief that its children are taught what be the rudiments of the doctrine of Christ, when in fact, they are learning little except levity and formalism. God's plan was best.

We speak of the tendencies, and the general aspects of this human device. We do not make sweeping charges of delinquency. Doubtless there are Christian parents, who send their children to the Sunday-schools, who are not neglecting their own personal duty of instruction. Doubtless there are conscientious teachers of other people's children, who do their best to teach in reality, and not in sham. All honor to them! It is probable that some of these manage to get real work out of their classes, though shorn of all authority, by special tact and talent of command. But it is surmised all such are conscious they are working under an adverse and absurd system. But that the general tendencies of this human device are toward those futilities an honest examination will show.

In a great Convention of Sunday-school teachers in Boston, a teacher was lamenting the lack of the fruit of godliness in the alumni of American Sunday-schools. He intimated that they did not enter the ranks of God's people, and with rhetorical point acclaimed, "Where are our former pupils?" A deep voice from the audience of teachers answered: "In the State prisons mostly."

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