

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. VI.—THE DECLINE OF SUNDAY-SCHOOLS.

THE value of Sunday-schools to the Church of England does not need demonstration at this period of their history. Our Nonconformist brethren are only too well aware of their importance as a nursery-ground to the chapel. They not only collect and train future members for the sect, but keep together, in touch with the minister and elders, the young men and women of the congregation. All this is equally true, or should be so, of the Church and its parishioners, and anything like a decline in the numbers or efficiency of Church Sunday-schools is a circumstance to be viewed with the gravest anxiety.

The study of the statistics of the Official Year-Book of the Church of England for 1901, suggests matter for serious consideration. In the year 1898-99 the number of infants attending school was 657,237; in 1899-1900 it had decreased to 647,313. The number of boys attending has decreased in the year from 806,480 to 805,453. That of girls, curiously enough, has increased from 931,187 to 934,914. This number, however, is 10,000 less than the total of 1897-98, and upwards of 2,000 less than that of 1896-97. A similar down-grade meets us in the teachers' statistics. Male teachers have gone steadily down from 1895-96 to the present date. The latest estimate is 55,453, as against 58,057 five years ago. Female teachers have fluctuated in number during the same period. They rose gradually till in 1898-99 they were 150,250; but in 1899-1900 they descended to 148,449.

We are thus brought face to face with a state of things which is, to say the least, disquieting to all Churchmen who look beyond the present moment. To find a remedy which will arrest the deterioration of this most useful agency must be the earnest desire of all actively engaged in the struggle; and the first step towards this desirable end is to ascertain the causes which have produced the failure.

First and foremost, I am afraid the self-indulgence of the age is accountable, to a great extent, for the decrease in the number of teachers, and that decrease explains at once the falling off in the scholars. Anyone who has had much to do with Sunday-schools knows that a good Superintendent and capable, regular teachers, can always keep up the numbers of a school, or get one together if starting; while a scarcity of teachers invariably means the gradual diminution of the school attendance. If classes are too large they cannot be properly taught; the discipline is bad; there is not sufficient time after hearing the lessons to make the subject of the day interesting; then the children, missing the individual atten-

tion which they like, become irregular, and finally go somewhere else, or join the army of juvenile Hooligans who make Sunday afternoon hideous with their yells and mischief. It is scarcely probable that the number of serious-minded young people is smaller now than it was a few years ago; the change seems to be in the standard of conduct. Formerly they frequently, we might say generally, when we speak of the gentler sex, regarded it as a duty to give Sunday afternoon in some form to religious observances. They also believed it incumbent on them to make some sort of effort for the spiritual welfare of their fellow-creatures. Now they seem to consider attendance at Church (and perhaps at Holy Communion) entitles them to pass the afternoon in idleness, or in any form of quiet diversion which suggests itself. "Sunday is a day of rest," they plead; "teaching troublesome children for an hour in a close schoolroom is really too much to expect of us."

The growing habit of regarding the Lord's Day rather as a holiday than a holy-day enables young people at once to find many more inviting ways of spending Sunday afternoon than Sunday-school teaching. Sunday at homes, Sunday lunches, and promiscuous Sunday callers are becoming increasingly the fashion, not only in society, but among the middle classes. Mothers intent on marrying their daughters object to their going to school, because that is the time when young men, their sons' friends, come to the house. The young ladies are required to entertain the callers. No doubt, also, Sunday bicycling has much to answer for in the way of hindering teachers. A young man or a girl has bicycled twenty miles or so into the country, or to friends. He or she arrives in time for church and attends service, but after lunch, naturally the charms of a garden, a quiet stroll, or in some cases even an easy chair, are irresistible. Besides, of what use is a teacher who only comes once a month, perhaps, or for a few weeks in the summer? On the other hand, the cyclist declines to take a class in town, because he is often away on Sundays, and irregularity is so undesirable. Week-end tickets also account for many absentees. They have undoubtedly great advantages, but it may be questioned if they always help young people, from a religious point of view, and assuredly they make it more difficult for them to help others. In cases where sons and daughters employed in town go regularly from Saturday to Monday to their parents, of course there is no obstacle in the way of teaching; but when a girl has many friends, and goes to a different place every Sunday, perhaps for weeks together, however well-disposed she may be, it is manifest she cannot be of use in a Sunday-school.

Sunday-school teachers have always made sacrifices of times of rest, and of brain-power; but when there was absolutely nothing to do for a decidedly religious person but to sit at home, read religious books, engage in devotional exercises, or go to sleep till the welcome tea-bell announced that it would soon be time to get ready for evening church, many of the young found it really agreeable to have a definite employment, an excuse for a walk, and a meeting with other teachers at school, even at the expense of a little exertion and a few unpleasantnesses incidental to the work. All this is changed now. You see the grown-up children even of Evangelical clergymen reading novels on Sunday without any sense of incongruity or twinges of conscience. They do not feel obliged to refrain from their ordinary week-day pursuits, of a pleasurable character, by duty towards God, and often select Sunday as their special day for letter-writing. For them to give up the afternoon to the children of their poor neighbours manifestly requires a much greater sacrifice of inclination than was called for on the part of their fathers and mothers. It may be said that teachers influenced by such inferior motives would be of little use, even were they secured; but that is a different question altogether. There can be no doubt that hundreds of just such young people used to teach who now refrain. For my own part, I am inclined to think that it is not undesirable to employ young men and maidens of this description. It does them good by obliging them more or less to study the lessons. It fosters a sense of responsibility and tends to unselfishness, while, with regard to the scholars, they are clearly better off than with no teacher at all, which seems to be the alternative.

Another hindrance to Sunday-school work lies in the vastly increased amount of brain-work required now of young women in the week, which renders it advisable, if not absolutely necessary, for them to enjoy as much mental rest on Sunday as possible. High School mistresses, teachers in National and Board schools, accountants, clerks, and students all fall more or less within this category. Scarcely any of these professions existed for women fifty years ago; but the numbers engaged in them are rapidly increasing year by year. Connected with this is a cause of decline which is the direct outcome of the great improvement in the quality of teachers now recognised as desirable. Formerly, anyone who could read was considered, and considered herself, competent to teach. Now, systems of lessons, teachers' classes and examinations, and the general tone of public opinion demand much more than a benevolent wish to do good. Girls ask themselves if they are equal to the task, and shrink