

## The Religious Education of Church Members.

THE theme of this article is the Church's task of training its members in Christian thinking and living. It leaves on one side educational work among children, partly because so much is written concerning this and so much is well done, but principally because the equally necessary work of educating those who enter into the fellowship of the Church has received comparatively little stress.

Our work is only begun when a young man or woman surrenders life to Christ. The New Testament words which describe this experience all imply beginnings. Conversion indicates a new road to be traversed. Redemption suggests a new owner, whose conditions of service must be learned. Regeneration is a birth into a new and unfamiliar environment. Hence training is inevitable. To go on to any fullness of Christian life is no automatic process. The implications of the Gospel in Christian experience and character are not known instinctively. They have to be thought out and lived out. Much thought is given to the education of our children, and to preparing them for church membership, but less thought is given to the nurturing and strengthening of the new life into which they have but entered.

It will be well to make clear what is our aim in religious education. Our purpose could be summed up by saying that our task is to produce truly Christian men and women. We are concerned with persons, and concerned with them for their own sake. We are not concerned primarily that they should do this or that, but that they should become the Sons of God, living in increasing measure the life that Christ lived and which His Spirit makes possible for us. Our question is not what we have taught them to know, or trained them to do, but what we have helped them to become.

Our purpose is redemptive through and through, and always evangelistic. It is to make God real, to quicken the sense of His presence so that communion with Him becomes the habit and principle of life, and the saving experience of God becomes more vital and abiding. We aim to equip our Church members by personal religion for all the demands which life makes upon them, to establish Christlike living in all human relationships, to enable them to know the truth in Christ, and to be strong to act upon

it in every detail of life, to live in such spiritual communion with Him that His vitality, purposes, and character become their own. Our aim is full-grown men, thoroughly furnished unto all good life and all good works. That process is clearly continuous and never completed. We see what men are. We see, too, what they may be, knowing that to as many as receive Christ He gives power to become the Sons of God. The Christian life is always one of becoming.

Few will deny that there is need for us to give more time and thought to this task. Ignorance outside the Church is not at the moment our concern, but it comes, sometimes, as a shock to discover the ignorance of those who have been for some years in the membership of a Christian fellowship. The questions which both younger and older members ask their minister, when the stage of mutual confidence is reached, often reveal this. Young Christians who have sincerely surrendered their lives to Christ are often far from realising what that surrender involves. Their dedication is often indefinite in content. Surrender to God may be separated from devotion to man, and they have yet to be shown that Christian living affects the whole of their life and every relationship, that, e.g. it concerns honesty in business and the consecration of the sex instinct. Others hold for years unchristian conceptions of God, largely based on Old Testament ideas, harbouring fears and resentments and misgivings towards God which hinder their joy in religion all the more because such feelings are rarely voiced. Many believe in prayer theoretically, but have ceased to pray, not through lack of faith, but because they have never learned how to use time for prayer wisely and profitably. The Bible is an unintelligible book to many. They do not know where to begin nor how to get profit from it. There is a mistiness about Christian doctrines which makes them a prey to any definite dogmatic assertion. The ranks of new religions like Christian Science are largely composed of former members or adherents of Christian Churches.

It may well be that we who are ministers forget too often that what is accepted and commonplace to us after several years of theological training and more years of regular reading of the Bible and of devotional life is often almost completely unknown ground to those in our care. It is salutary to go back to our earlier days and realise how little we knew, how vague was our knowledge of the Bible, of Christian truth, and of the implications of our faith, when first we entered on the Christian way of life.

The Church has two great assets when she attempts the work of religious education. The first is *the widespread desire for knowledge and for guidance*. There is a hunger for truth which can be held with the strength of mind and emotion, and a

wistful longing for a deeper experience of spiritual life. The second is *our freedom to follow our own line*. Education in our secular schools is often hampered by the lack of this freedom. Whatever may be the desires of the head and staff of a school, they are limited by the wishes of the parents that their child shall reach a certain examination standard, and behind the parents are employers who often demand some such qualification. But we are free to organise our Church life for the development of personality, and to use any means and methods which we believe will further the process of growth.

Our methods must, of course, vary, because individuals are individual, and communities differ so widely, but there are two primary ways in which men are trained in Christian life and thought. They are educated by the transmission of facts and by living in a fellowship. These cannot be separated. A strong religious fellowship cannot be built up without knowledge, and the imparting of information is of little value unless it is turned into the stuff of actual living. But here we can consider them in turn.

The imparting of the historical facts of our religion is an important part of our method of education. The Christian religion is based on, and bound up with, an historical revelation. It is not entirely subjective, but deals with a reality as real as that with which science deals. Our conviction is that in Jesus Christ the innermost nature of that reality is revealed. That revelation is a revelation in time, and can be studied in our Lord's life and teaching, and in the work of His Spirit in the Church and in the world. The beginner in the Christian life is no Columbus, sailing out into uncharted seas. He possesses the guidance of our Lord's life on earth, the experience of countless voyagers of the past, and the riches of their thought concerning their experience of God.

Hence part of our educational work consists in making available for our members the riches of our Christian history. They need instruction in our Lord's life and teaching, in the long preparation for His coming recorded in the Old Testament, in the record of His life in the early Church and in the history and progress of the Church to this day. They must be helped to understand the Bible, so that they can read it profitably, and to enter into that heritage of truth which past generations of Christian scholars and saints have built up out of their experience of God in life. Our task is to enlarge and deepen their understanding of the facts on which Christianity rests, the rich content of Christian experience, belief and doctrine.

Somehow or other we have to get this knowledge effectively imparted. Obviously the pulpit will have a share in this work.

Sermons are the only opportunity for instruction that many get. Yet it is not easy to maintain a teaching pulpit ministry. The capacity of hearers varies greatly. Sermons which aim only at instruction are apt to be impersonal and ineffective and lacking in the prophetic note. It is easy to kill the sermon without curing ignorance. Yet more might be done by brief courses, by the use of the Church year, by monthly lectures in place of the ordinary sermon. And there is always the question whether two preaching services is the best way of using those hours.

One reason why the pulpit is not an ideal method of conveying instruction is that it gives hearers no opportunity of question, contradiction or giving their own contribution. Knowledge is more effectively imparted if there is close co-operation between teacher and taught, and there is growing witness to the value of small groups where there can be free play of question and answer, the frank expression of difficulties and objections, and the knowledge of one can be supplemented or corrected by the experience of another. Our instruction fails unless we are winning a response and enabling others to think for themselves. Plutarch wrote: "The soul is not a vessel to be filled but a hearth to be made to glow," and our present methods often leave the great part of our membership passive and no fire is kindled. The advantage of groups is that we can win the co-operation of those we seek to train. They promote fellowship in thinking as in other directions and can be used to meet the needs of every type of mind and interest. To adapt familiar words, you can teach some of the people all the time. But you cannot teach all the people all the time. Yet the group system goes far towards achieving this. The Bible, theology, the Missionary enterprise, social and international questions, can all be worked at in groups.

But imparting information is only part of Christian education. The more knowledge we have the better, but Christianity is a way of living. There is a certain suspicion of education in some quarters, the impression that scholarship and devotion are not good yokefellows. That suspicion would be justified if we ever regarded the acquisition of religious information as a substitute for spiritual and moral vitality. If Christian training meant simply the imparting of knowledge, we should hold no brief for it. We are out to awaken a personal response to the Gospel in its fullness. Instruction alone is insufficient. It is in living out that teaching in the fellowship of the Church and in all life that men enter into the riches of Christian experience.

Many of us have reason to be deeply grateful to God for the religious training of our homes. That training consisted not chiefly in any formal teaching but in the fact that religion was really lived there. That which we received unawares was more

effective in our salvation than any definite instruction. What is true of a home is true of a school. The headmaster of one of our well-known schools replied thus to the question, "Where in your curriculum do you teach religion?"—"We teach it all day. We teach it in arithmetic by accuracy, in language by learning to say what we mean, yea, yea and nay, nay, in history by humanity, in geography by breadth of mind, in handicraft by thoroughness. We teach it in astronomy by reverence, in the playground by fair play. We teach it by tenderness to animals, by courtesy to servants, by good manners to one another, by truthfulness in all things. We teach it by showing to children that we, their elders, are their friends and not their enemies." If this reply seems to lack the historical element, it yet enforces the formative value of the life of a fellowship. Should not a Church exercise the same kind of influence as a good home or school, the unconscious effect of sharing in a community where a certain quality of life is displayed? Our task is to make our Churches the place where religion is real to our younger members because it is lived. We educate by the spirit of our worship, by the expression of our faith in acts of service, by sharing with one another our experience of the Christian life as it works out in the challenges and demands of life about us, by the degree in which truth, uprightness and love reign amongst us. Apart from this, our instruction has little weight. Like Penelope we undo in one hour the work we have done in another. Our work of education is ineffective if the life of the whole Church be less than Christian in temper and outlook.

The difficulties in the way are as obvious as they are numerous. It would seem that all we need is a perfect minister, perfect teachers and perfect members. The minister usually has his hands full, though not always profitably full. To be hard-working is good, but what we are working hard at is equally important. Yet we need more leaders. It is not a one-man task. And if a Church honestly set itself to the work of religious education, would not more leaders be forthcoming? There is often material we are not using.

Many will not desire to be taught. But some do, and these will become the leaders in Christian life and thought. The fetish of numbers has no authority over us. Jesus poured out His riches on twelve men, and one of these was a failure. Though numbers are few, if we have a long view we shall be prepared to spend considerable time and thought in helping to grow our own leadership.

In any case, whatever the difficulties, we need a policy. We get nowhere by the method of muddle-headedness. Many of us are just "carrying on" as our predecessors did. Our form of

worship, the organisation of our Church life, are much the same as fifty years ago, in spite of the tremendous change in habits, education and outlook. We are sometimes like the small shopkeepers in face of the multiple stores, rather bewildered and hurt that people do not patronise us and pass by on the other side. It would help us to review what is being done and to examine carefully what has been taught, and how it has been taught, for the last two years from the pulpit and in each organisation. Then, with the needs and standing of our membership in view, to decide what we want to achieve, and to hammer out some equivalent to the Five Years' Plan. It may be possible to do but little, but this need not prevent us from doing what we can.

Our vision has been expressed in unforgettable words—"He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ; till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

FRANK BUFFARD.

EDWARD WALLIN was second pastor of Maze Pond, the church formed in 1691 by those members of Keach's church in Southwark who disliked singing. He was called to preach about the end of the century, and in 1703, when he was 25 years old, he accepted the call to succeed Samuel Mee. The church was poor, and he was one of the many Baptist pastors who supported themselves by keeping a school. His ministry lasted thirty years, and in June, 1733, he was buried in the yard behind his meeting-house, whence in 1814 Walter Wilson published the inscription. His funeral sermon was preached by John Gill, and printed.

Edward had five children buried in the same vault. Also a son Benjamin, born 1711, brought up at John Needham's school in Hitchin. On 15 November 1733, in the parish of St. Mildred Poultry and St. Mary Colechurch, he married Sarah Heathfield, of St. Magnus, London Bridge, being himself of the parish of St. Edmond the King. In 1740, "by the unanimous desire of a few people he succeeded his father" as pastor at Maze Pond, and "for more than forty years rendered a large congregation happy."

Though the Wallins were of Swedish descent, they seem to have made no attempt to plant Baptist churches in Sweden; that did not take place till 1848.