

THE TEACHER TODAY

It is a pleasure to me to be able to bring a message to the teaching force of our Church-school. The fact that you are teachers denotes a genuine interest on your part in the church and in the Kingdom of God that that church is set to build. Your task is the same as that to which our Master gave himself with such unstinted and constant diligence. Jesus was preeminently a teacher. I know he was more than a teacher, but he gave the very heart of his three brief years of his ministry to teaching. Those whom he gathered about him were called disciples. That means that they were learners in the school of Christ. When he went away he committed to us the task that he had begun. We are to make disciples of all nations and to teach them.

How are we to make the best possible use of our opportunities? Of course it is true of teaching as it is of preaching that no one ever really arrives. I have had more than one dismal hour during which I questioned with my own soul whether I knew how to preach for this present day. I suppose every teacher has moments like that. I have seen preachers who succeeded yesterday but who are completely out today. Ours is a difficult time. Our world was never in greater confusion. But we are convinced with others that the worse the world is the better the church ought to be. We as teachers are set ⁿ then not to the cure of the ills of yesterday, but for the making of the best possible out of today in order to better tomorrow. We are to take all the love and care we might have given to the child of yesterday and bring them to bear on the child of today. This is the big hope for the child

of the future. How then shall we make the best of our teaching?

I.

1. In order to teach successfully we must be interesting. This is as true for the preacher as it is for the teacher. It is a fundamental necessity for both. I know that to some this will seem like getting the cart before the horse. It will seem like majoring on minors. But when we look at it more closely, I think you will agree with me that the first and primary necessity for any teacher is that that teacher be able to win and hold the attention of the one that he or she is trying to teach. Of course, what is taught is of vast importance. But without attention nothing is taught. What we say may be as fundamental as the Ten Commandments. It may be as true as the Sermon On The Mount, but if nobody is paying any attention we are wasting the time of ourselves and of those who sit in our classes.

The teacher that strolls right on through the lesson regardless of whether anybody is listening or not is not only wasting his own time and that of his class, he is doing positive harm. He is cheapening the truth that he is undertaking to teach. By being listless himself and by allowing others to be listless he is virtually saying, "Go ahead and think of something else, nudge each other, talk, write notes, for what I am saying is of no value anyway." It is possible to take the priceless values that are represented by our gospel and to handle them in such a fashion as to make them appear as worthless trifles, cheaper than the gaudy tinsel that we hang on the Christmas tree.

Not only does the uninteresting teacher waste time and cheapen his gospel, but he does another evil that, if possible, is greater than either of these. He teaches his pupils the habit of inattention. I preach to a great many different congregations. At first blush I think we would be inclined to believe that the congregation most eager to hear a really interesting preacher would be that congregation that has been accustomed by being bored most consistently by its own pastor. But such is

not the case at all. The best listeners everywhere are those who are accustomed to listen. The worst listeners are those who have been trained in inattention. Sometimes those in the congregation think me harsh when I refuse to let certain young people talk. I am doing them a favor. There are few more pernicious habits than the habit of not paying attention. When that habit keeps us from paying attention it works tragedy instead of supreme good. It is the first and fundamental duty on the part of the teacher, therefore, to be interesting.

III.

This naturally brings up another question. How can a teacher be interesting? Of course I cannot give a full answer to that question. If I could answer it fully I could write a book that would sell far more widely than, "How To Win Friends and Influence People." Why does one minister interest you while another bores you to tears? Why does one teacher have the eager eyes of every boy and girl, every man and woman fixed on them while another teacher is met with yawns? There are many factors that enter into this. Some are so hidden and subtle that we can hardly describe them. But others are as plain as a full moon on a clear night. How then are you as a teacher to be interesting?

1. If you are to be interesting it is fundamental that you be interested. There are some folks that are gifted with a gripping, vivacious, and winsome personality. We are drawn to them by their sheer attractiveness. But we may be vastly lacking in these qualities of charm and yet attract others if we are sufficiently interested in them. You have noticed it with regard to yourself more than once. "I heard a beautiful compliment on you the other day," one friend says to another. "What was it?" comes the eager answer. Then that friend tells a lovely something somebody said. And when you learned who said it, that commonplace individual takes on new winsomeness and new charm.

Surely that was one secret of the spell that Jesus cast over men. Here they

feel is one who cares. Here is one who is interested in me. He thinks I am a splendid creature, capable of doing and of becoming something vastly worthwhile. Love teaches love, and interest begets interest. All life is a bit of an echo. What comes back to us is pretty largely what we ourselves have given out. I know there are exceptions. I am not forgetting that the friendliest Man and the most interesting Man that ever lived died on the cross. Yet, the rule is that if you are deeply interested in others they will be interested in you.

2. Then not only should the teacher be interested in folks, but he should be interested in the lesson that he is undertaking to teach. We are going to assume that that lesson is a lesson in religion. The teacher of the Church school is preeminently a teacher of religion. He is a teacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel of ours is a many sided gospel. But every lesson ought to bring home some truth of religion. Other forms of knowledge our pupils may get elsewhere. But many of them are never taught religion except for one brief half hour a week in the Sunday school.

Not only should he be interested in the lesson he should be so interested that he will be present in order to teach it. There is a type of teacher that never takes his work seriously. If he treated his business as he treated his religion he could not hold a job for a week. If there is nothing else to do he is present, but the most trifling thing can turn him aside and keep him away from his class. This is a two-fold evil. It not only causes your class to be taught by somebody who has perchance not had an opportunity to study the lesson, but its another forceful way that you have of telling them that this matter of religion is after all a very trifling matter. Sometimes bigger than anything we can do or we can say; sometimes greater than any lesson we teach is the lesson that we press home by being there.

Here is a story that comes out of my native mountains. There was an earnest and cultivated woman who taught a class of young men in a backwoods church far up

in the mountains. The class at its largest was never more than four or five. But she journeyed there each Sunday morning to teach them. On a certain Sunday the rain was coming down in torrents. She debated with herself as to whether she should go or not. At last she said, "somebody might come." So she sat out and walked four rugged miles in the rain. When she arrived she found one young man, a member of her class. She taught him the lesson the best she could. It was war time. That young man went away to the conflict. The day before he embarked he wrote this teacher a brief note. "I was not quite sure," he said, "how much your religion meant to you till you met me that rainy morning. Then I said anything that will make a woman walk four miles through a storm is worth having. I wrote this to tell you that I have accepted the Christ that you taught me to love." That young man went away and never came back. If we are to be interesting we must be interested. Certainly interested enough to be present.

3. Not only must we be present, but if we are interested we must prepare the lesson. Here, I am convinced is one of the besetting sins both of the preacher and of the teacher. It is so easy for us to assume that we already know. It is so easy for us to postpone preparation. Then we stand before our class to let empty buckets into empty wells and draw nothing up. Of course, we persuade ourselves that we get by without anybody discovering our lack of preparation. But I think this is seldom the case. When I was a small boy we had a circuit rider who at his best was a good preacher. But he was fundamentally lazy. Now and then he would come into his pulpit so grossly unprepared that it was greatly evident. Under such circumstances he tried to atone for it by yelling to the top of his voice. I used to sit and listen with childish contempt. "You don't know what you are talking about that is the reason you are shrieking your lungs out."

For thirty years now I have been a minister. In a thousand ways I have been unworthy and failed. But here is one way I think that I have been scrupulously honest. I have never made a deliberate failure. Never once have I gone into the pulpit with-

out careful preparation. No teacher has a right to do so whether you have one in your class or a thousand. To fail to prepare is often to do more harm than good. It is to cheapen your gospel. It is to cheapen yourself. It is another way too of telling your pupils that you are not interested in the lesson. Naturally they are not likely to be. In one of McGuffey's Readers there is a story of a young shepherd who was set to watch over sheep in a country that was infested by wolves. In case a wolf came he was to appeal to a company of men who were clearing a forest close by. This young man took his task seriously for a little while. But no wolves came. Then he made up his mind it would be a fine joke to tell the men that the wolves had come just to see them run. So he went over the hill, shouting, "Wolf, wolf!" The men dropped their task and hurried to the rescue. But the young shepherd laughed aloud at his practical joke. In fact it was so funny that he tried a second time. The second time the men ran hurriedly to his help. Hardly had they got back to their task when a ^{small} flock of wolves actually came. The youth hurried across the hill shouting frantically. But the workers paid no attention at all. He had been a false alarm so long that when he got in earnest he had missed his chance. The sloven preacher and teacher that prepares now and then will fail to get a hearing on the prepared lesson. They hollered wolf, wolf in vain too much.

4. In order to be interesting the teacher must be simple. The choicest people we know, the really great people are always the simple. Whenever you find a man who glories in position, who caters to rank, who is gracious only in the presence of the very wise or the very rich, you may put it down always that there is a small, cheap soul. The great men, the great women are the simple folks. The great music is simple music. The great art is simple art. The great preaching is simple preaching. And great teaching is simple teaching. Your pupils are not going to come willingly to your class Sunday after Sunday to hear you talk in a language they cannot understand. Remember that we are preaching to folks that have been ed-

educated largely by the movies. They are accustomed to learn what they learn with a minimum of effort. You must therefore be simple in order to hold their attention and thus to teach them.

5. Finally, your appeal to the class and their interest in what you say will depend most of all on what you are in yourself. If you are interested in folks, if you are interested in your gospel enough to be present with a prepared lesson, to be taught in simplicity, that implies that you are in earnest about what you are doing. And believe me, there is no greater secret of holding the attention of the people than desperate earnestness on the part of the teacher. No listless, half-hearted, flabby, indifferent soul is ever vastly interesting. The shabbiest shack can be interesting for a little while, if it gets on fire. But the most abidingly fascinating thing on earth is a soul on fire. No man or woman fails to be interesting who is deeply and sincerely in earnest.

III.

It is my conviction that the teacher of today needs broad and intelligent views of the task in hand and of the best means of performing that task. We are aware, of course, that the purpose of all our teaching is the winning of boys and girls, men and women, to Christ and the building them up in Christ. We are working toward the establishing of the Kingdom of God. All that we are, all that we say and do should look toward this high end.

The supreme agency toward the building of this Kingdom is the Church. We are members of the church, we belong to it as we say. That is, the Church has definite claims upon us. Claims that we have acknowledged by standing upon its altars and taking upon ourselves its solemn vows. We are to magnify the Church of which we are a part. We are to so teach and act as to lead others to magnify it. There are those who forget that the Sunday school is the Church school. There are often

teachers who seem to think lightly of the Church of which they are a part.

We are to magnify our church by the consecrated lives we live. We are to magnify it by our faithful loyalty to it. Few things are more futile than for parents to teach their children the superlative worth of the church while they themselves neglect it, and give it a fifth rate place in their own lives. How futile is this for the teacher. For years there has been a tragic gap between the Church school and the Church. This I trust is closing a bit. But we need to realize the essential oneness of the two.

Since these two are one I believe it is fundamentally important that every teacher in the Church school, so far as possible, should attend upon the services of the church. This they should do to set a good example if for no other reason. Those who attend church as adults are those who learned that art as boys and girls. In Newark, New Jersey a few years ago there were nine hundred stewards present at a district meeting. The superintendent ask how many of those present were accustomed to attend church as boys and girls. And all held up their hands except eight. Your task and mine is a high and holy task. We are dealing, all of us, with eternal values. We especially who teach boys and girls are dealing with the most sensitive something in all the world. Child minds and child hearts. We ought to study to interest these children. This we must do by being interested in them. We must be so interested as to be present. We must be so interested as to make it our business to equip ourselves in the best possible fashion. We must be so interested above all else as to live out and interpret all our own teaching in terms of Christ filled lives. Many of those who touch us get their one chance of God through us. Let us so live that those who have such opportunity may take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.

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