

SCRIPTURE TEACHING

BY H. E. WIX.

THE method of teaching Scripture in the Parents' Union School is so simple and will, I think, sound so easy, that it may seem dull. And yet there is no subject which takes so much preparation beforehand, no subject which is so hard to teach when the moment comes, and I think no subject much harder to talk about.

We have four lessons a week—Old Testament history on Mondays and Thursdays, and New Testament on Tuesdays and

[p 591]

Fridays—and books set for Sunday reading. Each lesson lasts twenty minutes, and Scripture is always the first lesson of the day. This is important, because it helps to give to Scripture a character of its own. This one lesson stands by itself as it were, and though in all their lessons the children must naturally behave well, still in Scripture their behaviour is to be extra good. A reverent attitude helps the mind to be reverent also, and most people will agree that a good beginning to the day affects the rest of the morning's work.

As to the methods of teaching, I think as my time is limited, I will take Class I, that is the babies, and Class III in most detail. Class I, that is children from 6 to 9, is divided into two divisions, *a* and *b*, *a* being the younger class. In this class they use Dr. Paterson Smyth's books, that is, his books are set in the programme for the use of the teacher to help her to prepare the work. The lesson itself is simple and short. A few questions link on the coming story with that of the last lesson, a short introduction may be necessary, a picture or two to help the children to visualize the surroundings, a map perhaps, and any point in the wording of the story which might be difficult enough to interrupt the thread of the story, is explained. Then the verses from the Bible are read to the children. There is much in the way they are read; simply, slowly, and clearly, in such a way that the children may remember not only the tale but also the words themselves. There are no interruptions in the reading, everything has been prepared beforehand, and now all that the children have to do is to listen attentively. The reading finished—and we only read once—the children "narrate as far as they can in the words of the Bible." We use this form of narration in many subjects in the P.U.S., and in none with greater success than the Bible lesson. The simple words appeal to child-like minds. The narration finished, and it is generally so accurate and spirited as to surprise the mere grown-up, there comes the "discussion" part of the lesson. I can't think of a better name for it. Perhaps a particularly vivid or interesting paragraph from Paterson Smyth may be read to the children; and his books appeal to the imagination in a really very wonderful way. Or perhaps a poem or hymn bearing on the lesson may be read, or another picture or two shown, or the blackboard may be used for some explanatory diagram. But whatever is done in this part of the lesson, the teacher does not dominate it, but having,

[p 592]

for example, shown the picture, she lets the children look at it quietly; they will understand very well if only she doesn't talk and explain all the time. Some simple idea to inspire their daily life may end the lesson, the children often discovering it for themselves. We also have hymns and parts of the Bible learnt by heart, a few verses being chosen each term from the chapters set in both Old Testament and New Testament. In this way, by the time the children go on into

Class II, that is when they are about 9, they know quite a fair amount by heart, and all the stories of the earlier books of the Old Testament and of one of the Gospels and the Acts. I think I am right in saying that it is generally S. Matthew or S. Luke that is taken.

In Class II they are taught in very much the same way; but they now read the Bible themselves, aloud, of course. They take things in rather more detail; the stories are now linked together into a more continuous narrative; the earlier books of the Old Testament, up to the reign of Solomon, the three first Gospels, and the Acts about covers their work. Narration in the Bible words is, as before, the ground work of the lesson, with enough information from books, pictures, etc., for them to get the setting of the story right. By this time, or even earlier, children want to know why the morality of the Old Testament is so odd. Moses killed a man, and yet he is called the "servant of God." Surely to kill is very wicked, but Moses was a good man. Well, these are the questions which need preparation beforehand to answer. We can tell the children that Moses lived long ago when the world was young, and knew but little of God and His Goodness, and that God never expects more of us than we can give; also that it is in order to help us that we are told of the sins of great men. We have to help the children to understand, and not in such a way as will have to be contradicted when they are older, for that would indeed be hindering, not helping them.

Having reached the age of 12 they go into Class III. In this class we take the children further on; they learn of the Kings, the Captivity, the Prophets, and when the various prophetic books were written and under what conditions; and in the New Testament they read S. John's Gospel as well as the others, and they learn about the 'Acts' of the Apostles and their writings, so that they know, for example, when and why the Epistle to the Ephesians was written, etc.

[p 593]

A lesson for Class III needs much preparation beforehand; one has got to be ready for any question, and P.U.S. children ask many, for they want to know, and often, for all one's pains, they understand better than the teacher. They have, of course, by now reached the age when they "wonder why" about all sorts of things. It is called the "difficult age," but is really the "I wonder age." The child has discovered "thought," and how wonderful it is, as dangerous if uncontrolled as the Sun God's chariot when the boy Phæton drove it. So the teacher's work is really to help them to drive that chariot of light safely for themselves and others; for at this age, the Scripture lesson is a tremendous training in disciplined thought, and the world is, after all, pretty well divided into people who think and people who do not, and our aim as a Union is undoubtedly to turn out thinking men and women. So we encourage them to ask questions, and with a little help they often can answer them themselves. For example, suppose we have just read the parables of the Finding of the Pearl and the discovery of the Hidden Treasure. The teacher may say that she thinks these two parables are very much alike, but supposes they must teach different lessons, or they would not both be there side by side. The children will probably look at the verses again, and pretty certainly one of them will exclaim, "Oh, yes, I see, they're *quite* different, the merchant was hunting everywhere for the pearl, he was willing to give up everything he had for it, but the other man just came across the treasure by chance." From this point it is easy to lead the children to think of characters in the Bible who have found either the Pearl or the Treasure, and then again of people they have read of in history.

The Scripture lesson at this age is no longer simply a connected lot of stories, it is the history of a singularly placed nation; the writers of this wonderful history were inspired by God to show all through His Guiding Hand, His Goodness, His marvellous Patience with unruly man, His Justice and righteous punishment of wrong. The children see that history still goes on, that we are making it always, that although modern history books are not inspired, yet with a seeing eye we can still recognise God's hand, and when we can't see it, we must simply believe. As to the verbal correctness of the Bible, it is very easy for the children to see that as the writers were merely human, mistakes and inaccuracies were bound to occur, especially as so much was probably not even written down till generations after the event.

[p 594]

By this time the children are almost old enough to understand too the great teaching of the New Testament, the gold thread of it all—that is, the truth of Eternal Life—the greatness and worth of the unseen, the unbreakableness of Life, the little worth of earthly things. Much of this may have to be left to Class IV., but there can be no hard and fast rule; much must depend on the exact portion of Scripture set for the term's work, and of course upon the temperament of the children.

Some people seem to think that the Scripture lesson is the golden opportunity for talking seriously to children about their faults. This may be allowable on very rare occasions, but if often indulged in may lead the children to dread the lessons, and to agree with a girl I once knew of who said, "I think our Bible lessons are rather personal, don't you?" I do not mean that in the P.U. School we do not help the children to see the wonderful teaching of the Bible as applied to their daily lives; we do. But the teaching is objective; children are persons, and it is not fair to anyone to discuss his faults before another.

Class IV works far more alone. The Bible is, of course, as it must be for always, the ground work and basis of all their study. But they now have books set for their reading, to help them in connection with the part of the Bible they have to study for their term's work. These books are, for the most part, written by our great thinkers and teachers; some will increase the reader's mere knowledge, others are set for Sunday reading, for quiet thought and meditation. I will read you the work set for Class IV this term, and you will see what I mean (*read from programme*).

SCRIPTURE.—*The One Volume Bible Commentary*, by T. R. Dummelow (Macmillan, 7/6); (a) *Isaiah*, pages 421–453 with the notes, using the Bible; (b) pages 3–63 of *The Saviour of the World*, Vol. V. (P.N.E.U. Office 2/6), with the Bible text (see Index) and notes from "Dummelow," (d) [sic] *The Acts*, pages 813–832, and *The Epistles*, I., II., III. of *St. John*, pages 1053–1062. For Sunday reading: (i.) *Stanley's Sinai and Palestine* (Murray, 1/-), pages 125–195, (ii.) *The Saviour of the World*, (iii.) *Maurice's Prophets and Kings* (Macmillan, 2/8): three sermons on *Isaiah*.

During the lesson time in Class IV teacher and pupil read, as it were, together. We do not ever believe, in the P.U.S., in working into or at our pupils, they have often so much more wisdom than we, but in Class IV this is especially the case. The teacher is certainly older than her pupil, and has, we may suppose, a little more experience, and has, of course, prepared the

lesson beforehand, and all this gives her a just and right advantage, and so she aims at being guide, counsellor and friend to the girl to the best of her ability.

[p 595]

I have hardly touched on the difficult question of Higher Criticism, and have not mentioned the subject of historical research. This latter we make use of in a simple way even from the early stages. Some knowledge of the wonderful discoveries in Egypt and Mesopotamia are a great help in teaching small children. The Assyrian account of the flood helps to throw up the beauty of the Bible account, and so on. Anything that will help our children to a better and deeper knowledge of the Bible, that we may use, but we may not use anything that might ever prove a stumbling block. Having from their early childhood read and learned and loved the Bible, having discovered gradually that far from being simply a collection of “lovely” stories, it is rather an inspired history of a God-guided nation, and yet again that it is the story of God’s gradual self-revelation to man, that it is indeed an inexhaustible mine of wisdom—so much more precious than mere knowledge—surely it will take much more than the modern spirit of criticism to shake their faith?

There is so much I have left out that I fear I have given you but a poor idea of how Scripture is taught in the School. But for all my talk, the way Miss Mason wishes us to teach can be expressed so very shortly. The children read from the Bible, and narrate from the Bible. We take them to the Fountain Head in the hope that when they pass beyond our guidance, having tasted of the Waters of Life they may never know thirst.