

# Sunday Schools

by J.C. Philpot

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*The sermon warns of the dangers of Popery and secular education, and emphasizes the importance of Bible-based education in Sunday Schools.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 4:9, Psalm 34:11, Psalm 78:4, Psalm 119:11, Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 19:14, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:15

**Topics:** "Christian Education", "Sunday Schools"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot discusses the importance of education and the dangers of misusing it, highlighting the shift from ignorance to knowledge and the potential threats of Popery and secular education. He emphasizes the need for proper education in Sunday Schools, focusing on teaching children the truths of the Bible without promoting hypocrisy or false piety. Philpot warns against turning Sunday Schools into nurseries for the church and advocates for using hymns and teachings that align with the gospel and do not lead to misinterpretation or inappropriate appropriation.

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## Transcript

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Education is one of those questions which have fought their own way into general acceptance. The benefits and blessings of ignorance have lost their numerous advocates; and though, as Laplanders wonder how any can live out of Lapland, preferring their own murky sky and oil-lit snow huts to the suns of Italy and the palaces of Venice, so there are those still who, in a moral sense, love darkness rather than light; yet it is a generation scanty in number and weak in influence. The Laplanders are fast passing away. It is true that there is a party, more numerous, perhaps, and influential than is generally thought, who, with the architecture of the middle ages, are seeking to restore the darkness of the middle ages. Let us not be deceived on this point. It is not merely the arches and windows, the porches and pillars of bygone ages which the Puseyites, lay and clerical, are seeking to renew, in all their exact detail, in the new churches that are everywhere studding the land. These are but symbols of a yearning after mediaeval times, when superstition debased the people and exalted the priest; when amid the thick darkness that brooded over Europe no object was allowed to be seen but the illuminated dome of St. Peter's; when men were not allowed to look into the word of God for instruction, or to the Spirit of God for light, but a living oracle was set up as Christ's vicar on earth, a feeble old man at Rome, cradled in monkery, and fed up from childhood

with the subtle policy of Italian wiles.

The weather-vane is but a piece of tin, but it shows the direction of the wind; the whirl of dust is but the movement of a few grains of sand, but it is the herald of the approaching storm. Coming events cast their shadows before. The barn-like churches and chapels of the last century showed the ascendancy of Protestantism, whose distinctive feature is to prefer the substance to the shadow, the word of God to form and ceremony. The recurrence to mediaeval models shows the desire of recurrence to mediaeval times. Thus, as in the turning vane we behold the changing wind, and in the whirling dust view the lightning stroke, so may we see in the tracery of a Gothic window the setting in of a flood of Popery.

It is our wisdom not to disregard the signs of the times. The child playing on the sands does not see how steadily and stealthily the tide is rising to engulf him, and gathers cockle shells until escape is cut off. Thus slowly and stealthily does Popery seem to be advancing, while most seem unaware of its progress.

But we must acknowledge that at present the danger does not seem immediate. Against an enemy like Rome it is well to be warned in time, for far-seeing is her policy, deep-laid her plots, unscrupulous her measures, innumerable her agents, and undying her determination. That she is bent upon what she calls the conversion of England is unquestionable, and that to achieve it she would wade up to her knees in blood is undeniable. That too she has made great advances of late must be admitted. Many of the aristocracy, more than is generally known, especially of the female portion, have already received the wine cup of Babylon from Puseyistic hands, and though not professedly Catholics are really more bent upon restoring the palmy days of Popery than many actual Papists.

But admitting all this, if we regard the spirit of the age, the spread of education, the diffusion of knowledge, and the power of the press, the conviction is forced on our mind that, things continuing as they are, a return to the Popery of the dark ages in this country is impossible. The arrogant pretensions, the lying miracles, the persecuting spirit, the intolerant bigotry, the priestly ambition of Rome, as carried out in former days are so diametrically opposed to the spirit of the times, that it seems next to impossible that Popery, unmitigated Popery, the Popery of the dark ages, should ever wave its banner over free Protestant England. The eyes of England must indeed be put out and her noble heart crushed before she can lick the dust of Rome as in the days when monks lashed the naked back of our second Henry at Becket's tomb. The light of ages must indeed be quenched in our native land, her schools closed, her printing presses burnt, her parliaments silenced, her railways ploughed up, her armies scattered, her ships sunk, her looms burnt, her factories and workshops closed, and she a French province, sunk down into Ireland's rags and Ireland's ignorance, before the proud priest of Rome shall put his foot on her neck. What England may become we know not. The glory and riches of the modern Tyre may pass away like those of ancient Tyre. But England as she now is never can become a Popish country. English freedom and English intelligence, such as we now see them, must be utterly overthrown before Popery can be in this country what it is in Spain, Italy, or Ireland.

The danger that more immediately threatens us is from the other quarter. We are not now threatened with the dethronement of intellect--but its deification. The peril now before our eyes is not that superstition should restore the reign of ignorance, but that education should supersede religion, and the schoolmaster abroad should strangle godliness at home.

Time was when Sunday Schools were unknown, when the children of the poor ran wild in the streets uncared for by parent and instructor, and grew up semi-barbarians, without being able to read or write, or

possessing the common elements of education. If ignorance, according to the Popish saying, be the mother of devotion, how devout must these uncombed specimens of humanity have been. Devout indeed that generation was not, but most devoted it was--to cock-fighting, the skittle ground, the ale-house, and the race-course. Read they could not, but swear they could; they could not write their own names, but were thorough masters of the vulgar tongue.

Now, to take these young barbarians into the Sunday School, subject them to its quiet discipline, teach them to read and write, accustom them to attend a place of worship, detach them from the gross sensual vice of their fathers, did no other effects follow, must be excellent. Kept in its place, limited to its true object, the Sunday School is a most admirable institution. But when, as is too often the case, the Sunday School is made the nursery of the church--great evil arises.

It is a great evil to consider the Sunday School the nursery of the church. Let that principle once pervade a church, and the big boys and girls will clamor to be let out of the nursery and sit at table with the family, as much as the growing sons and daughters of the squire at the hall expect at a certain age to leave the nursery for the dining-room.

Thus is the standard of religion lowered, and the new birth slurred over, the work of grace tacitly set aside, and that deceptive thing called "early piety" set up.

The next step is to turn the Sunday School teacher into a minister the leading feature of whose ministry will be to trace the beginning of all religion to the Sunday School, instancing himself as a example of youthful piety, and holding it out as an encouragement to the elder boys that they, if very pious, may become ministers too. And who shall say that the taller girls, when they see a well-dressed lady looking up so admiringly to the pulpit, may not think within themselves, "Was not she once a Sunday School girl, and why should not I become one day a minister's wife too?" When such are the rewards of piety, who can wonder that the land overflows with it?

It has been stated that we are opposed to Sunday Schools. This is not the case. We approve of them highly when applied to their proper use. It is their abuse that we are opposed to. No man who has children can be opposed to the education of children; and no one who is a friend of the poor can be opposed to what is often the only means of educating the children of the poor. The last man to depreciate education as education is he who has known the advantages of it.

But education has its perils as well as its benefits. In past ages Satan worked by ignorance; in the present he works by intellect. Before Luther and the printing press, Satan, as an angel of darkness, shrouded his movements by the diffusion of universal ignorance. In modern times, as an angel of light, he works by the diffusion of knowledge.

The spread of education presents two sides, both destructive of vital godliness. On the one hand, intellect working by secular education threatens to swallow up external revelation by infidelity; and on the other, working by religious education to swallow up internal revelation by Sunday School piety. As the church always partakes more or less of the spirit of the age, the people of God are thus exposed to two temptations; those whose heads are active and hearts cold to be seduced into a pursuit of knowledge apart from godliness, and those whose heads are dull and hearts warm to mistake creature piety for spiritual, supernatural religion.

Few people, we believe, in a profession of religion have stronger leanings than ourselves to pursuit after and love for natural knowledge. But we know its snares and temptations, and how unsanctified knowledge hardens the heart and deadens the soul. If one lesson more than another has been impressed on our conscience, it is the spiritual, supernatural character of vital godliness, and the utter worthlessness of everything in the kingdom of God but the special teaching of the Holy Spirit! Natural knowledge is one thing, spiritual knowledge is another. A wide gulf is fixed between them. Nature at its best is but nature still; and education, whether elementary as at the Sunday School or learned as at the University, does not and cannot sanctify the natural heart, or transmute the old Adam into the new. If this broad line be not maintained, the Sunday School may produce more harm than good.

What then should the education be that is pursued in the Sunday School? Should the education be wholly secular and worldly? Should the children be merely taught to read, and should all religion be discarded? Should the Bible be set aside, prayer neglected, the voice of singing not be heard, the name of God not be mentioned? If so, how would the Sunday School differ from the socialist meeting? Because we cannot regenerate the children, are we to banish the name of religion, and as it were ignore its very existence? Is there not a medium, and we believe a scriptural medium, between fostering hypocrisy and practicing heathenism? Timothy knew the Scriptures from his youth. Lois, then, and Eunice must have made him read the Scriptures. This indeed was the express injunction of God in the Old Testament--"Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but teach them your sons, and your sons' sons; especially the day that you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children." (Deut. 4:9, 10.)

And if in the education of children all religion is to be ignored, what means the New Testament injunction to bring children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? We cannot say with Chillingworth, "The Bible and the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants," for besides the Bible outwardly we need this blessed Spirit inwardly--but we can say, "The Bible and the Bible alone is the book of the Sunday School." The children should be taught that it is the inspired word of the living God--the word by which they will be judged at the great day. The truths too revealed in the Bible should be laid before them, such as the immortality of the soul, the creation and fall of man, the dreadful nature of sin, the certainty of death and judgment, the Godhead, sufferings, atonement, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the necessity of the new birth, and the awful consequences of dying in a state of unregeneracy.

A good Sunday School teacher will never be at a loss for a topic of oral instruction--the main course to be pursued. The parables of the Lord Jesus, the figures and emblems of Scripture, the customs, manners, seasons, feasts, rites of the children of Israel, the ancient prophecies, with their fulfillment, the history of Joseph and his brethren, the wanderings in the wilderness, the book of Ruth, the account of David and Goliath--but not to particularize, what a field of instruction is there in the Bible for the Sunday scholar, from the least to the greatest. Banish the Bible from the Sunday School! What will you substitute? The history of Tom Thumb and Jack Hick-a-thrift? Or dreary lessons of dead morality? No!--let the sacred word of God be the book of the Sunday School. We need not, to exclude hypocrisy, exclude the Bible--if so, the next step might be to exclude the Bible from the chapel. Because we cannot treat children as Christians, we need not treat them as heathens. So let them sing hymns; their little voices are sweet, and let them use them. But they should not be taught hymns that are couched in language of appropriation. What more grating to the ear of one that fears God than to hear the words, "My Jesus has done all things well," burst

forth through the windows of the Sunday School?

The late Mr. Gadsby, who was a sincere friend to education, and especially to Sunday Schools; having for many years a large one in connection with his chapel at Manchester, much felt the impropriety of allowing the children to sing hymns, which none but believers can, without hypocrisy, use. He therefore compiled a selection expressly for Sunday Schools. In the preface to this selection he thus expresses himself.

"As one part of the service connected with Sunday School Teaching is singing, I have often thought a little Selection of Hymns was desirable. It is true I have seen several designed for that purpose, but most of them contain Hymns that do not appear to me to be true, and, as such, I could not give them my sanction; and all of them which I have perused lead the children to appropriate some of the truths they contain in a way which none but true believers can justly do.

"The design of this Selection is to give a statement of the real truths of God, and yet in such a manner as to be a means, in the hands of the Holy Spirit (if it be his sovereign will), to impress their minds with the solemn reality of them, and the essential necessity of being quickened by, and taught of God, before they can enter into his glorious kingdom."

This principle, which we consider a sound and scriptural one, does not involve any serious loss. It is true that there are many hymns which are thereby, wholly or in part, necessarily excluded from the Sunday School, but many excellent hymns remain.

And here we may perhaps be allowed to give our views of what a Sunday School hymn book should be. As the Bible is the Book of the Sunday School, so should the Bible be the sole foundation and source of the Sunday School hymn book. Mere dead, dry, moral lessons about cleanliness and good temper in jingling rhyme, like some of the infant school sing-songs, should be discarded as worse than useless. Deep are the impressions; lasting the remembrance of songs learned in childhood; and, as many of the Lord's people know by painful experience, it is almost impossible to forget what rhyme and tune have so deeply burned into the memory. Who does not find some foolish, or worse than foolish, jingle, heard in ungodly days, haunting the mind? Looking forward, then, to the time when Sunday scholars will become men and women, the hymns should not be childish nonsense about clean face and hands, duty to teachers, and being good little boys and girls, but the solemn truths of the gospel, clear from the language of appropriation. Such hymns as,

"When Adam by transgression fell;

The fear of the Lord is clean and approved;

Whatever prompts the soul to pride;

The moon and stars shall lose their light;

Happy the men that fear the Lord."

are not only sweet and savory to the children of God, but eminently suitable for a Sunday School. They contain no language of appropriation which in unregenerate lips is little short of profanity, and yet clearly and experimentally set forth blessed truth. Nor should we limit the range of our vision to the Sunday School as if its present occupants were to be always children. A few years will make them men and women and send them forth into the whirlpool of life. The time, then, may come when the Lord may visit by

his grace some of these grown-up scholars.

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