
Graded Bible Stories

Mutch William James

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Author: Mutch William James

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Pastor's Study

Second Church in Newton

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KE 8465



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THE PROBLEM OF BIBLE TEACHING

The teaching of the Bible to children is so large an undertaking that it affords room for many varieties of failure, as well as several different kinds of success. If the failures have outnumbered the successes, it is doubtless because the wrong ways are more numerous than the right ways, and easier to find. The path finder, the road builder, the superintendent of motive power, and the traffic manager, have evolved, one after another, by a slow process of eliminating waste, applying principles, and organizing resources for efficient work. In much the same way the great business of education is slowly organizing its materials, its processes, and its principles for the elimination of waste and the effective accomplishment of those results which are best worth while in education.

Religious Education is one of the important branches of the larger business of education. And Bible teaching is a fundamental part of Religious Education. In things vital the whole precedes the parts; the whole determines the forms and functions of the parts; and the law of the whole is the law of the parts. It has therefore been necessary for the teaching of letters, science, arts and religion to proceed slowly and crudely, until education as a whole had discovered its values, its motives, and its methods. After a century spent in this latter occupation, it is high time for the law of the whole to be felt governing the parts. Religious Education must be consistently organized in harmony with the laws and ideals of all education; and so shall its aims, its practice and its materials be chosen; for all education must in the end subordinate itself to one set of laws and ideals.

The religious life of this generation has suffered from the overshadowing of other interests. The unity of the man has been overlooked; and his religious life has been thought

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of as a thing by itself, which it is not. If it were a thing by itself, then the other interests would also be things by themselves. On the mistaken assumption that every interest is a thing by itself, people have gone after the things which happened to please them, and neglected the rest. Several other interests won the preference over religion. It is a wonder that it has held its own as well as it has. But the assumption is false. No human interest is a thing by itself. Religion is not separate from other interests, and the other interests can have only a temporary prosperity apart from religion. Especially is this true of religion and education. The two are not identical, but each needs the other. The religion of our times is particularly in need of an educational basis for the spiritual life.

There is a demand rapidly taking form and expression for a new modern program of Christian nurture. The demand arises from those who confess to more or less defeat and failure in trying to get results by following the old program. They are aware of their failure, which is not the case with all. They are forced to admit that new conditions, customs and ideals, have made the old program ineffective and impracticable. The home, the school, and the church once dealt with the problem of Christian nurture, but now they do not. The present function of the church school scarcely needs to be named as an exception, for there are not many schools which really deal with this problem; and there are fewer still which succeed with it. The working out of the problem of Christian nurture has no doubt been greatly retarded by insistent demands for standardization and uniformity. Too often those who have set up the standards have not apprehended the problem. Great labor, expenditure and organization have been conspicuously in evidence, without producing the results of a true Christian nurture. Not only so, they have stood in the way and prevented other attempts to solve the problem.

Let us try to set up, first, the larger problem of Christian nurture, and second, the smaller problem of Bible teaching.

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(1) The new program of Christian nurture must call into action the home, church and school. It is not so necessary that they should all do the work, as that they should all be imbued with the ideals, and that they should furnish the children, the moral backing and enthusiasm, and the organization of resources necessary for a systematic Christian nurture. The importance of the enterprise can never be apprehended by the world, until these institutions are found devoting their best energies to it.

(2) The new program must be scientific. It cannot ignore the ascertained facts of human nature, its constitution and growth, its forces and factors. It must proceed in the light of modern Philosophy and Psychology, Biology and Sociology. It cannot have a method or a science peculiar to itself, for the reason that religion is an aspect of human life, and not a thing by itself.

(3) The new program of Christian nurture must be religious. It must provide for the inauguration and adequate culture of religious motives and ideals in the individual and institutions of society. It must reveal and evaluate the religious aspect of all human life, choosing its materials and methods with these aims in view.

(4) The program must be practically universal in its reach and application. It cannot accomplish its results by touching a scattering few, or if confined to provincial limitations. But like the common school arts it must become the heritage of the whole race, and be perfected and enriched by successive generations. There are various methods of teaching people to read, but everybody is taught to read. So it is not the method of Christian nurture but the result which must be universal.

The subject matter used in providing an educational basis for the spiritual life ought to be of several varieties. But the Bible is universally regarded as the chief subject. Without pausing here even to outline or name other good materials, let us try to name the factors in the problem of Bible teaching.

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(1) It is necessary to take the measure of the children. Those mental differences which are more or less characteristic of each successive year, and which form the basis of grading, must be ascertained.

(2) The interests of children must be understood and consulted. These natural interests change with advancing growth; and the teaching which ignores them is foreordained to failure.

(3) The aim to be accomplished must be well judged, clearly defined, and discriminatingly adapted to the changing conditions of age, interest and education.

(4) There must be a choice of biblical material based on all the varying conditions already named. The choice requires both scientific skill and spiritual insight, such as ordinary teachers do not always possess.

(5) The ground must be covered. There is so much material that it must be carefully and consistently organized on a single progressive plan, so as to economize the time of the children, not duplicating or omitting unnecessarily.

(6) A manner of teaching must be worked out, which will not be based on pedagogical fallacy. It must be simple enough to be used by untrained teachers. It must not bury the lesson in devices of methodology; but it must secure well defined and permanent mental images and moral values.

These are the main parts of the problem of Bible teaching, which is a major portion of the larger problem of Christian nurture. It is to the solution of this problem of Bible teaching that this work addresses itself. It will take only a few sentences to explain how this series of Graded Bible Stories attempts to solve each part of the problem of Bible teaching, as that problem has just now been stated.

(1) First, as to taking the measure of the children. During the last generation, a system of rating or grading has been evolved in nearly all countries where educational systems exist. The eight grades or school years beginning at the age of six are now pretty well defined and generally recognized. They furnish a convenient basis for classifying

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children in respect to their mental powers; and that scheme is adopted here.

(2) The problem of children's interests is not an easy one to solve. Every one thinks he knows what children are interested in, or at least what they ought to be interested in, which is assumed by many to be the same thing. But inquiries after facts have shown that there is no recognized test or standard of what they ought to be interested in. Yet there are classes of things which in general are found to be more interesting to minds of one school year, while other classes of things predominate in other years. No one has a right to say that this ought not so to be. The judgment on this point has to be based on experience, and on published investigations by experts. Guesswork and general impressions are not reliable guides to a knowledge of children's interests.

(3) The general aim in this form of Bible teaching is twofold. First, a mastery of the biblical knowledge suited to each grade, and second, to make the scripture an effective agent in molding Christian character. This aim dominates everything done in this connection. Elements which do not in some way contribute to one side or the other of this aim are rigidly excluded. The knowledge of the concrete material of the Bible is not hard to gain, if it is properly graded and gone about in the right way. But knowledge is a very poor result, if there is nothing else. There are general conclusions and principles which the Bible stories illustrate; there are religious concepts which they help to build; there are emotional attitudes which they correct and strengthen; there are ideals which they help to form. It is for the sake of such things as these that the materials are to be mastered; and these things are briefly indicated in connection with the stories. It is at this point that the personality of a living and respected teacher is most needed to vitalize incidents, and make them live again in the hearts of the pupils. There is a specific aim of this kind growing out of every lesson. Sometimes it is so obvious that it scarcely