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SUGGESTIONS

IN

VINDICATION OF SUNDAY-SCHOOLS,

BUT MORE ESPECIALLY FOR THE IMPROVEMENT

OF

SUNDAY-SCHOOL BOOKS,

AND THE

ENLARGEMENT OF THE PLAN OF INSTRUCTION.

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The importance of the general diffusion of religious knowledge, seems now to be universally admitted. No longer is it pretended, that ignorance is the mother of devotion; or that real knowledge can be injurious to any portion of the community. Experience teaches, that the more ignorant men are, the more liable are they to be hurried into acts of violence and excess; or to be seduced into vice by the persuasions and example of the wicked. Most malefactors, who are condemned by the laws of the country, are exceedingly ignorant of religious truth: the mob, often influenced and led on to acts of shocking outrage, is every where composed of the least informed of the people. An ignorant multitude is always liable to be misled by designing demagogues, or seduced by artful impostors. A regard to character, and a respect for the opinions of others, is greatly strengthened by an increase of knowledge, and this is one of the strongest barriers against infamous vice. Conscience, the most powerful of restraints, possesses force in proportion to the light of truth in the mind. Superstition may, indeed, be promoted by ignorance, but true religion, never. Fanaticism also is closely allied to ignorance, but the most effectual remedy against enthusiasm, is genuine piety. Skepticism, it is true, is often associated with a considerable extent of knowledge; but the cure of infidelity must be found in a correct acquaintance with the truth; and the best preventive of this evil is, early religious instruction. It cannot be doubted, that the manners of men are polished by education. Where do you find manners the most sordid and brutal, but among those who have never been instructed? Ferocious passions naturally spring up

in minds entirely uncultivated. And it need not be feared that instruction will render the poor more miserable, by making them more sensible of their humble condition. Sound religious knowledge will teach them, that happiness may be enjoyed as fully in a cottage as in a palace; that contentment with our condition is the duty of all; and that want and affliction furnish a very salutary discipline, by which faith is tried, virtue improved, and the soul prepared for a better world. The discontented, envious poor, are not commonly those who have been religiously educated, but the ignorant and profligate. It can admit of no doubt, therefore, that the diffusion of knowledge, and especially of religious knowledge, among all classes of people, is a thing to be desired; and that no pains and labour can be considered too great, which are the means of accomplishing this end.

But how this can be most successfully effected, is a question which demands the serious consideration of every friend of man. God has, indeed, appointed the preaching of the gospel as the great instrument of the instruction and moral reformation of men, and nothing should be allowed to supersede this; for God is wiser than man; and will, moreover, honour and bless his own institutions. Let it be admitted, then, that the faithful preaching of the gospel is the GREAT MEANS to which all others should be subordinate. But God has also directed Christians to give mutual instruction to one another, and “to hold forth the word of life” to those who are in darkness. Private instruction is as much authorized as public preaching; and, in its place, is as necessary. Indeed, without private instruction, public preaching will be in a great measure useless. One who is totally uneducated, cannot understand the purport and connexion of a sermon. The people must, by some means, be prepared by elementary education, to profit by the public teaching of the church; and the want of this elementary knowledge, is one great reason why so many hear to so little profit. They hear, but they understand not; and thus the good seed is lost. This preparatory instruction ought to be given in every family; but alas! I need not say how commonly this is neglected, or so imperfectly attended to, that our youth are, in many places, growing up in shameful and dangerous ignorance. But if parents

and masters will not perform their duty in this respect, can no remedy be devised? can no substitute be proposed? Yes; God, in his kind providence, has directed the attention of his church to a remedy which may be considered effectual, if it be diligently and universally used. This is the SUNDAY SCHOOL system of instruction. Although this method of teaching the young and ignorant is so simple, yet it deserves to be ranked second, to no discovery of our age. I do not know that the beneficence of providence has been more manifest in any thing which has occurred in our day, than in the general institution of Sunday-schools. Other benevolent institutions provide the means of religious instruction; but the Sunday-school makes the application of them. Indeed all others require this for their successful operation. Bibles and tracts cannot be useful to those who cannot read; but in these humble seminaries the ignorant are taught to read. Pious youth are wanted to be educated for pastors and missionaries; and where will you go to find them, but to the Sunday-schools? Here will often be seen the first buddings of that piety, which expands in the performance of faithful missionary labour in some heathen land. A large majority of the missionaries now in the field, were nurtured in Sunday-schools. Here will be sown, in many a heart, the precious seed which will germinate in a thousand benevolent efforts, and bring forth fruit unto eternal life. While the civilian is earnestly employed in devising plans for prisons, and dungeons for solitary confinement, let it be the noble object of the patrons of Sunday-schools, to render all such institutions, if possible, unnecessary. And this is not a vain hope, if all the children in the country could be brought under the regular influence of this mode of instruction. Scarce any of those taught in these schools have ever been disgraced by a condemnation for crime.

We are, as the voice of experience teaches, never less liable to lose the fruit of our labour, than when we instil religious instruction into the susceptible minds of children. This precious seed is seldom entirely lost; for although it may lie long buried, as it were, under the dust, it may spring up at a late day, and flourish long after the hand that sowed it, is laid in the

grave. Besides, we are not aware how much positive evil is prevented by the impressions of religious truth on the minds of youth. In the Sabbath-school the little boy is taught the Ten Commandments; it is moreover inculcated on him, that God is angry with the wicked, and that his curse will follow the evil-doer. Also, he learns there, that the evil of sin is so great, that God's own Son came into our world, and died on the cross, to make an atonement for it. In his Bible, which he here learns to read, he finds it written, that "*the wicked shall be turned into hell;*" and that the ungodly shall not inherit eternal life. Now, when this boy goes into the world, and meets with dissolute companions, who tempt him to steal, or murder, or bear false witness, will not these solemn truths which he has learned at school, rush upon his mind, and operate as strong restraints to preserve him from the commission of crimes, under the power of which he would easily fall, were it not for these salutary impressions?

Sunday-schools were originally instituted with a special view to those unhappy children, who through the ignorance, or profligacy, or carelessness of their parents, have no religious instruction; but on the contrary, are brought up under the influence of evil counsels and worse examples; and such children ought still to be considered the direct object of these institutions; but it has been found, that they may be rendered highly useful to children of every description. Often it happens, that well disposed and pious parents are poorly qualified to communicate religious instruction to their own children; and not unfrequently, children are more attentive to lessons of morality and religion coming from others, than to those which they learn from their own parents. From these they are so accustomed to hear advice and reproof, that they are very apt to contract a habit of heedlessness when admonished by them; but when another, who claims no authority but that which is founded on kindness, speaks affectionately to these children, they are mute with attention, and seem to be tenderly affected with what they hear from their beloved Sunday-school teachers. The good order and solemnity maintained in these schools, has a great effect in predisposing the youthful mind to be attentive and serious;

and also the gentle emulation which is properly excited, gives a spring and alacrity to the spirits which is favourable to improvement. There are few parents, I believe, who can instruct their own children as well as they may be taught in many of our Sabbath-schools.

But the good effect of this institution is nearly as conspicuous, in regard to the teachers, as the pupils. It has been long a maxim, that to know a thing accurately, the best method is to teach it. And with respect to religious knowledge, it has ever been found very difficult to induce people generally, whether old or young, to give such patient attention to divine truth, as to become well acquainted with the doctrines and precepts of the Bible. Now this difficulty is happily obviated in regard to the teachers in our Sunday-schools. The necessity which they are under of teaching the lesson, furnishes a motive sufficiently strong, to induce them to study it with diligence, and by the aid of all the helps to which they can have access. Thus many of our intelligent young people are actually becoming accurate Bible theologians. They are acquiring divine knowledge, in that way, which leads them thoroughly to understand what they learn, and to fix it indelibly in the memory. I do not know any better school in which these persons could be placed for their own improvement, than to enjoy the privilege of teaching the children in Sunday-schools. The advantages of this situation, I am persuaded, have not been overrated. The good resulting from this benevolent employment has not been confined to mere improvement in sacred knowledge, but in many instances, has issued in the conversion of the heart to God. There can, I believe, be no doubt, but that a larger proportion of Sunday-school teachers, have become truly pious, within a few years, than of persons of any other class or description. God fulfils his own gracious promise, that they that water shall themselves be watered. The benefits derived from these blessed institutions to teachers, are, themselves, a rich compensation for all their labour, and for all the expenses incurred, in keeping them up.

But Sunday-schools have not only been beneficial, in a high degree, to the pupils, and the teachers, but also to the parents,

and other relatives, of the children. Many parents are so hostile to religion and to religious men, that they can scarcely be approached, in any other way, than through their children. All such persons view religion, distorted and deformed, through a medium of dense prejudice; but when their children repeat their lessons in their hearing, and read to them from the sacred Scriptures, new light often darts into their minds, and speedily a great change takes place in their sentiments. Sometimes, also, ignorant or profligate parents will accompany their children to a Sabbath-school, who can by no other means be induced to enter the walls of a church. When there, their attention is rivetted, while they listen to the answers of their own children; and thus the truth finds access to minds long estranged from God, and deeply buried in ignorance.

But it is not the ignorant and vicious parent only, that derives benefit through the attendance of his children at Sunday-schools; many well-informed and respectable people are led by the inquiries of their children, to search after many things which they never knew before, or had forgotten. In families where much attention is paid to the lesson for the week, all hands are set to work to find out appropriate answers to the questions. Commentaries are consulted, and I have no doubt, that, in many cases, the exercises of the Sunday-schools have been the means of bringing these valuable books into families, where they would not otherwise have been found. And it is much to be desired, that we had a commentary, sound and concise, evangelical and practical, adapted to Sunday-schools. If such a book were placed in every family from which children come, how extensively would Bible knowledge be diffused in a short time?*

It may, moreover, be mentioned as one of the minor advantages of Sunday-schools, that they promote neatness and decency of dress and personal appearance, among the poor. The moral, pious, and industrious poor are generally remarkable for cleanliness, and for being tidy in their dress, when they go out from home: but the idle, intemperate, and profligate, are usually disgustingly

* It is understood that such a work is in the course of preparation.

filthy; and their children are squalid in their whole appearance. Now, how close the connexion is between neatness, and purity of mind, I shall not attempt to determine; but that every step in civilization is favourable to virtue and religion, there is no room to doubt: and whatever will have the effect of inducing parents to exercise some care and industry, in attending to the personal appearance of their children, so as to put them into decent trim, has, in my opinion, a very salutary result.

But my object in this essay, is not, merely to descant on the utility of Sunday-schools: I wish to enter somewhat particularly into the principles on which these institutions should be conducted; and the improvements, which may, without difficulty, be engrafted on the existing system. Not, that I mean to give any precepts, relative to the minute regulations of these institutions. My experience does not enable me to judge, or direct any thing on this subject: and it is one on which teachers and superintendents are better capable of directing, than other persons. But although I have had no experience in the management of Sunday-schools, I have not been an uninterested spectator of their origin and rapid progress; and the more I reflect upon the subject, the more important does the institution appear. I confess, therefore, that I feel no small solicitude, that nothing should occur, which would have a tendency to retard its advancement, or prevent it from attaining to that perfection and accomplishing that measure of good, of which the system is capable. My zeal in the cause of Sunday-schools, therefore, together with the request of some respected persons who are devoted to this object, must be my apology, for offering my opinions, freely, to the public, on this interesting subject.

1. I have observed, with pleasure, that the system of Sunday-school benevolence, in its most prominent features, is catholic. It willingly embraces all who receive the Bible, and are willing to use it. It has, therefore, been considered a desirable object, to combine as many religious denominations, in this enterprise, as possible; and it is not perceived, that with prudent management, there can exist any ground of unpleasant collision. The AMERICAN SUNDAY-SCHOOL UNION, as a society, professes no creed but the Bible; although the individuals who are cou-

cerned in its management, belong to several distinct denominations, to the forms and peculiar opinions of which respectively, they adhere. But, in conducting Sunday-schools, they know no sect but Christianity; no creed but the Bible.

The object of Sunday-schools, is, to communicate that knowledge which is common to all who hold the fundamentals of Christianity. There is, undoubtedly, in our time, some approach to the spirit of unity and catholicism; and, certainly, this spirit, when genuine, should be cherished, as pertaining to the gospel of Christ. In whatever institutions, therefore, christians of different denominations can combine their benevolent and pious efforts, with an increase of strength, and without compromising their peculiar tenets, they ought to unite; and it partakes of the nature of schism, to break this union, on account of narrow sectarian feelings and interests. While schemes of close connexion between those who differ in matters viewed to be of some importance to the purity of faith and worship, are only adapted to produce collision, and greater alienation than before existed; it is delightful to see those, who have long been too far apart, drawn near together, by the power of their mutual love to Christ, and by the sweet bands of brotherly love. Why should those who are so soon to inhabit one house in heaven, treat each other as aliens and enemies? or, spend their time in building up high walls of separation? Let each section of the church catholic, maintain, with becoming firmness and zeal, what they honestly believe to be the truth of God; and no imputation of bigotry can justly be charged upon them, while they pursue this course: but, as the points of difference between evangelical Christians are trivial, compared with the important and fundamental truths in which they agree, brotherly kindness ought not to be interrupted on account of their differences; and whenever any occasion offers, on which they can cordially unite their efforts, it is manifestly their duty to receive one another as Christ has received them; and to show to a world which is ever cavilling on account of the dissensions of christians, that real christians can love one another still; although partially separated by names and forms.

It is manifest, from an examination of the constitution of the Sunday-School Union, that all its articles are catholic: no preference is there shown to any one denomination. And it is equally evident, from a consideration of the character of the gentlemen who compose the board of Managers, that no partiality has been exhibited. It would scarcely be possible to form a board, with a more equal respect to the several denominations concerned in this enterprise; and, as far as is known to me, the same impartiality is manifest in the proceedings of the board, both in the selection of their officers and committees, and in the books selected for publication.

I have been led to make these remarks, because it has been objected, by some, to this society, that while it professes catholic principles, it is, in fact, merely an instrument for building up one denomination. But how is this possible, when no one denomination has a majority in the board? Will all parties, retaining their peculiar sentiments and attachments, concur, in promoting the separate interests of a society different from their own? And I would ask of those who make this objection, what single act of the American Sunday-School Union has even the semblance of partiality for a particular sect? I am verily persuaded that no such act can be pointed out. It may be true, indeed, that some denominations enter more zealously and generally into the enterprize than others, but this argues no fault in the constitution, or partiality in the board; or in their agents. The remedy is—and it would be a most desirable one—that all denominations emulate each other in zeal and energy, in promoting Sunday-schools, in their respective churches. Here is a wide field for a noble, a holy competition. But surely, there exists no ground of complaint, and no reason for objection to the constitution or administration of the Society.

2. But while the American Sunday-School Union have been scrupulously careful to maintain impartiality, as it relates to the several religious denominations united in this scheme of benevolence; it is probable, that they have not been sufficiently aware of another objection, which has recently been made by some warm friends of the institution. It is alleged, that there is danger, lest the American Union should establish a system of

religious instruction every where, independent of the regular and authorized pastors of the church. It is said, that their agents penetrate into the parishes of every denomination, and there establish their schools without the consent, or concurrence of ministers, or other church-officers; and that by this means, the religious instruction of the youth is likely to be taken out of the hands of those to whom, according to the economy of Christ's house, it has been regularly committed. And, moreover, that we have no security for the soundness of the doctrines inculcated by the teachers of a society, which may propagate just what opinions it pleases; and so it may happen, that the children of a parish may, in the Sunday-schools, be taught doctrines directly repugnant to those held by the minister, and by the church to which he belongs. I bring forward this objection with all its force, that its weight may be duly appreciated by the Managers of the Union.

Now, in answer to this, it can be truly stated, that the Managers of the American S. S. Union have ever been solicitous to obtain the co-operation of the clergy in their respective spheres of action and influence; and they have not only invited their aid, but have even, in some instances, given offence to some clergymen by one of their standing questions, which they regularly call upon the schools under their care to answer; which is, "How far are the ministers engaged in promoting the schools? Have you taken any steps to interest ministers in your vicinity to promote Sunday-schools?"* But if ministers, generally, have paid little or no attention to the subject, and the schools have gone forward without their aid or inspection, surely the blame does not lie at the door of the American S. S. Union. If the clergy of the different denominations will not take hold of this thing, and give it a direction within their own parishes or preaching districts, it is impossible for the American S. S. Union to compel them to perform their duty. And if the minister of a parish

* The following is one of the duties enjoined in the commission which the Managers give to their agents:—"It will be your special duty to wait on all ministers of the gospel, and make known particularly to them, the nature and objects of your mission, and use your influence to interest them in promoting Sabbath-schools in their respective congregations, towns, and counties."

will not come forward and lend his aid and counsel, must the work stop? Must the Sunday-school agent make no effort to provide for the instruction of those who are willing to be taught within those bounds? Surely, no sincere friend to the rising generation would affirm this. And candour compels me to declare, that when at the late meeting of the Delegates of Auxiliaries with the Board; in Philadelphia, this subject was brought up and discussed, the Managers discovered every disposition to adopt any resolution, or take any measures, which would have the effect of enlisting the clergy of the several denominations, cordially in this work: and when a resolution was proposed and voted by the Delegates of the Auxiliaries, to urge this matter again and more earnestly on the pastors and other church-officers, it received the decided approbation of the Board of Managers of the American Sunday-School Union. But the aspect of the question which is most important is, not who have been remiss in the discharge of duty in time past, but what can be now done to avert the danger and prevent the evil which it has been seen is imminent. In observing on this subject, I beg leave respectfully to say to the ministers of the gospel of every denomination:—

Dear brethren, I scarcely know a pastoral duty of higher responsibility, than to lend your utmost aid and influence to give efficiency and a right direction to Sunday-schools within the limits of your parishes and your vicinity. You have known and felt how difficult or rather impossible it is, for one man to instruct effectually all the youth of a large parish. If you should do nothing else, it would still be imperfectly done. Under these discouraging prospects, some of you have probably been driven almost to despair of effecting any thing; while others have endeavoured, by occasional catechising, and by paying an annual pastoral visit to the families under your care, to accomplish what seemed practicable: but you know, that unless parents, guardians, and masters will do their duty faithfully, in the domestic instruction of their families, these occasional exercises never can be effectual to feed the lambs of Christ's flock. O! how much would many of our fathers in the ministry have given for a half a dozen faithful co-adjutors in commu-

nicating elementary knowledgē to the young? But in their time, such aid could not have been obtained. No young person, nor scarcely any elderly one, could have been persuaded to become teachers. Such a thing was unknown and uncustomary, and no one thought of it. But, now, Providence has provided you with a piece of moral machinery, which, if rightly directed, will be of as much avail to you, as the labour-saving machines to the mechanic in our extensive manufactories. It will not answer for you to leave it in the hands of others. They may direct it well, or they may not; but as it is to operate on the youth of your charge, for whom you have an account to give, you ought yourself to attend to its operation. You ought to be solicitously attentive to, and be found in the midst of, all Sabbath-Schools within your own charge—watching, from week to week, with that deep interest and anxiety which you cannot but feel, the course of instruction—the conduct and character of teachers and scholars—and the progress and prospects of the school; admonishing in love and pastoral faithfulness the labourers who may seem to be remiss—giving encouragement to the faithful and a word of exhortation to all. Thus you will make one of their number,—you will be intimately acquainted and connected with all their plans and proceedings, and may exercise over them all the kind care and salutary influence which belong to your place and duty, and for which they will return kindness, confidence, and gratitude. It is this faithful, constant, official inspection, which the officers and managers of the American Sunday-School Union greatly desire to see exercised over their schools by every minister of the LORD JESUS CHRIST;—they feel as if this was the right and province and duty of ministers, and they have often mourned over the distance which has seemed to separate the chief labourers in the vineyard from those whose design, responsibility, and success are so nearly allied to their own. Others may perform the laborious parts of the service, but it belongs to you, and it behooves you, to inspect these schools, and see that nothing is inculcated which is contrary to sound doctrine, and that no spirit of wild fanaticism is introduced by ignorant zealots. As a watchman on the walls of Zion, you cannot, you must not remain an indifferent spectator

of this powerful system. It will go forward whether you lend your assistance or not; but it is your incumbent duty to give it direction, so far as its operation affects those under your care. Why is it that some of you, my brethren, have so little discerned the signs of the times, as not to perceive, that a mightier moral engine has not been set in operation for ages? That it affords to the faithful pastor greater facilities for the instruction of his people than any thing before discovered? And is it possible that any of you have paid no serious attention to the progress of Sunday-schools, and have given no effectual aid to their establishment in your parishes? or that, having them there, you are contented that they may take their course, (and whoever will, may have the superintence of their instruction?) I respectfully ask you, who have hitherto neglected this subject, what you could desire in the way of aid to your arduous pastoral duties, more convenient and effectual than Sabbath-schools in every district of your congregation? By their means you enjoy the assistance of ten, twenty, thirty, or forty persons, every Sabbath, earnestly and diligently engaged in giving religious instruction to the children of your charge; and giving it to multitudes whom your instructions would never have reached. And your young men and women, instead of spending the Sabbath idly or unprofitably, are now, many of them—if Sunday-schools abound with you—in a train of useful learning and improvement, which will every year be rendering them more capable of being useful and respectable members of the church, and will qualify them for becoming heads of families with a good prospect of being able to teach them the way of life, and to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. I am acquainted with one large congregation, where the pastor, until lately, neglected Sabbath-schools, and they languished until they were near extinction; but now he feels their importance, and devotes himself to promote their prosperity, visiting one of them and lecturing to children and parents every Sabbath, and the whole aspect of this congregation is changed. The desire of learning has extended itself to all ages; and there is, throughout the congregation, a lively attention and alacrity in relation to sacred things, which is very different from

the apathy and lukewarmness of their former condition. I confess, I do not see how any man having the care of souls, can reconcile it to his conscience, or how he will answer it to his Master, if he continues to be indifferent to this important concern. But it is not sufficient that you approve the institution, and speak well of it, and give free consent to its introduction into your parish: much more than this is incumbent on you, and expected from you. It is a duty, the obligation of which you cannot evade, to give your personal aid and counsel to carry on this important work. Many ministers begin to have their eyes opened to see this business in a far different light from what they formerly did; and begin to look upon Sunday-schools as the most important auxiliaries to their great work of rescuing immortal souls from everlasting destruction: and I hope the time is at hand, when every clergyman and every church-officer, will be found taking an active and a leading part in the affairs of this institution, so far as it is connected with their respective churches.

And, here, I beg leave to state, that the American Sunday-School Union prescribe no standard of doctrine to the schools in their connexion. Their object is to bring their scholars to a knowledge of the BIBLE, the great repository of all religious truth. The Sunday-school teacher who seeks wisdom from on high, and draws his instructions from this pure fountain, will not be likely to be misled, or to mislead others, in any matter of importance. But it behoves the pastors of the churches to see to it, that nothing is inculcated on the youth under their charge, which is inconsistent with that form of doctrine which he himself esteems and teaches to be truth. And it is a fact too well known to be here repeated, that the catechisms of different evangelical churches have been frequently and willingly used as books of instruction, whenever this has been requested by parents, or others having the right to direct the religious instruction of children. And if this long approved method of instruction has been less attended to than its importance demands, the reason may be found in the diversity of religious denominations, which are frequently mingled in the same school; or, where this does not exist, in the inattention of the clergy to the schools

established within the precincts of their pastoral charges. For, I may venture to affirm, that no evangelical pastor will ever meet with any difficulty in having the catechism or form of doctrine adopted by his own church, inculcated on the youth of his own parish. I am, at this time, acquainted with a large and flourishing Sunday-school, containing above a hundred scholars, in which the catechism of the church to which they belong is made an object of attention and instruction on one Sabbath in each month. But in schools unconnected with the pastoral charge of any minister—of which there are many—the superintendents and teachers must of course pursue that mode of religious instruction which to them appears best: and as long as all the books of instruction used in Sunday-schools are published, and may be examined by all who feel an interest in this subject, there can be no danger that error will be circulated by means of this institution.

3. Another important subject connected with this institution, is the publication and circulation of books. As much has been said of late respecting the character of the books issued from the Depository of the American S. S. Union, I will take the liberty of expressing my opinion of the manner in which this department of the business should be conducted.

Although the preparation of books was not originally contemplated as a part of the Sunday-school system; yet, in the progress of the enterprize, it has grown up to an importance which is fully equal to that of any other department. Indeed, when we reflect upon the recent origin of this Institution, and upon the smallness and obscurity of its commencement, we cannot but be astonished at the extent of its operations in the circulation of books. If we except the book establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church, I believe, there is no other society in this country which supplies so large a portion of the population with its reading. And, certainly, they who select and distribute the books which are perused and studied by the people, and especially by the young, will have a greater influence in forming the character of the nation than any other persons, let them use what other means they may.

The plan of connecting libraries with each school, and esta-

blishing depositories in convenient situations, is characterized by wisdom. It has long been a *desideratum* to have congregational libraries for the use of the people; and, frequently, attempts have been made to establish them; but with very little success. The people have not taken a lively interest in these institutions, and where they exist, do not, generally, make much use of the books. The reason of this seems to be, that the authors selected for such libraries, though valuable, are not suited to the taste, nor level to the capacity of common people. Few have leisure or inclination to go through ponderous volumes, or to peruse books of deep reasoning, and replete with learning. The experiment made by the American Sunday-School Union, evinces, that small books, written in a lively style, and rendered interesting by pleasant narratives, are the kind of reading which is adapted to the taste of a large part of our adult as well as youthful population. For, although the libraries are intended particularly for the use of the children, yet it is found, that when the books are brought into the families to which the scholars belong, they are read with avidity by persons of all ages. By this means, the books published and distributed into every nook and corner of the United States, by the American Sunday-School Union, are producing a great effect on a vast multitude of people. The management of this business has been committed, by the Board of Managers, into the hands of a publishing committee, who have, without the least prospect of personal emolument, devoted to it their time and attention, with an untiring assiduity, which demands the gratitude of all who are friendly to the universal diffusion of knowledge. The caution exercised by this committee will be manifest, when it is understood that no work is sent to the press to which any of the committee objects. The demand for books, however, has increased so rapidly, and the call for variety, as well as numbers, has been so urgent and incessant, that it may not have been practicable for the publishing committee, in every instance, to furnish the most suitable works. They have done, perhaps, the best that could be done in their circumstances; and while they have merited our warmest commendation for their disinterested labours, there seems to be no just ground for censure, because they have not

done what it was impossible to do. I think it necessary to enter thus far into a vindication of the publishing committee, since much has been said respecting the character of the books published, under their inspection; and complaints are still abroad on this subject. But while I would cheerfully award unqualified commendation to this respectable committee, I do not mean to say, that they have fallen into no mistakes, in managing this momentous concern. But it should be kept in mind, by those inclined to find fault, that this responsible business has devolved upon them unsought and unexpected. Indeed, there is something wonderful in the rapid increase of every thing connected with this Institution. The persons who now have the management of this great concern, began their labours in obscurity, neither desiring nor seeking the notice of the world; but God has abundantly prospered their humble and disinterested efforts; so that now they find themselves, without having aspired to it, placed at the head of one of the most useful institutions in the world. They feel their responsibility to be great beyond expression, and are deeply sensible, I trust, of their need of wisdom from on high; and, at the same time, will be thankful for any suggestions which the friends of the cause are disposed to make to aid them in their arduous work. I am not apprehensive, therefore, of giving any offence to the Board, or their committee by the freedom of my remarks.

The principal objection in regard to the books issued from the Depository is, that, too generally, they were of a light and fictitious character. Now, I am not sufficiently conversant with all the publications of the Union to judge correctly on this subject, but I am inclined to believe, that there has existed a mistake on this point. Too many fictitious stories, and some of them containing few lessons of moral or religious instruction, have been put into circulation. The tendency of this is to vitiate the taste of the rising generation, so that while they are greedy after fiction, they will have no appetite for solid, instructive reading. And, I believe, the committee themselves have for some time been turning their attention to works of more substantial value.

But, it is evident that no course which can be pursued in this

business, will unite the suffrages of all good people; for some object to all fictitious writings as having in the main a bad tendency, and as incompatible with the simplicity and sincerity of the Christian religion. It seems necessary, therefore, to say a few words on this subject;—but it would require a volume to discuss it fully.

I would, then, observe, that we cannot proscribe all writings in which fictitious personages are introduced, without passing a sentence of condemnation on various parts of Sacred Scripture, and particularly on the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ. These must fall under the denomination of fictitious discourses; or discourses in which unreal personages are introduced, and represented as speaking and acting, that by this means important truth might be conveyed to the minds of men, in such a manner as to be understood, to obviate prejudice and to create interest. The Song of Solomon, also, a canonical book of Scripture, is from the beginning to the end a spiritual allegory. This method of instruction seems also to be dictated by nature; for fables or apologues and allegories, are in use among all nations; and the severest moralists have never supposed that there was any thing inconsistent with the strictest regard to truth in the introduction of fictitious personages: for where there is no purpose to deceive, and where no one is deceived, there can be no violation of truth and sincerity. Words are but the signs of our ideas, and it matters not what language we use, if it fairly conveys our true meaning to others. When a man employs words ironically, the literal sense is absolutely false if the irony be just; and yet the meaning of the person is as clear, and more forcible, than if the truth were simply uttered.

Again,—a fictitious narrative, used as a vehicle for important moral instruction, bears a strong analogy to the use of general terms in common speech. We know, that all things in existence are particular or individual things; but finding a great many individuals which bear a striking resemblance to each other, we give a common name to the whole. In like manner, there are many individual persons of similar character; there are many courses of conduct, which, with their causes and attendant circumstances, are of usual occurrence; and it is important to col-

lect these features of human life, and so embody them, that they may be useful to those who are yet without experience. Now, this may be done in several ways, as by general maxims or aphorisms; by narratives of real facts; or connecting those common matters of observation and experience with fictitious personages, which, as it leaves the moral instructor at liberty in the selection of circumstances, possesses some advantages over the simple narrative of facts in the order, and with the circumstances, in which they occur. When, however, the picture of human manners or character is fairly taken from nature, it is, what may with propriety be called, *general* history; it is a representation of what often actually happens, without the peculiar circumstances of any single case; and the difference between a judiciously constructed fictitious narrative, intended to convey moral instruction, and real history, is no greater than between the use of a proper name and a common appellative, when we speak of any individual. In this way much might be taught, which, in common, is learned by painful experience. And this mode of instruction being capable of being rendered highly interesting to the young especially, ought not to be relinquished, or given up to those who will employ it for the mere indulgence of fancy and feeling, and frequently to the real injury of the reader. It is impossible to suppress all fictitious writings, or to restrain young people from reading them; is it not then the dictate of wisdom to provide them with such as are not only innocent but instructive? Is not this the most probable method of weaning our young people from the fondness for novel-reading? the effects of which are sometimes so fatal, and most commonly injurious. But, I am aware, that the land of fiction is a dangerous ground to travel over. There is no species of writing so liable to abuse; and none so difficult to execute with judgment. The imagination, when indulged, is prone to extravagance; and is as liable to become wild on religious subjects, as any others. A vivid fancy is often without the guidance of sound judgment and correct taste; and when a writer begins to feel a deep interest in the personages of his own imagination, the great end of writing is apt to be forgotten, and the narrative be so woven, as to create interest and afford pleasure, rather than to convey

moral instruction. It should also be remembered, that fictitious writings should never be permitted to form the principal reading of the young; and they should be prepared with much judgment and care, and used with great caution. A judicious parent will not refuse to indulge his child, occasionally and moderately, with wholesome sweetmeats, creams, and comfits; but who would think it wise to feed him with nothing else? Just so, writings of this description may be useful to interest young people, and to form a taste for books in those in whom it does not naturally exist, and to convey moral instruction in a grateful vehicle; but the books commonly used, should be of a more solid and didactic kind.

Upon the whole, then, I would give it as my opinion, that while fictitious works should not be altogether proscribed, they should not form a large proportion of the books issued from the Depository; and that in the selection of those to be put into the hands of children, the utmost caution should be used. It would be a real loss to the rising generation, to call in all the delightful and instructive little stories of Mrs. Sherwood and Miss Edgeworth. Who would object to the "Shepherd of Salisbury Plain," or other stories of Miss Hannah More, in the "Cheap Repository," because they are not real histories? For a long time it was commonly supposed, that that tract of unrivalled excellence, "The Dairyman's Daughter," was a fictitious story; and now, when it is known, from the best authority, that it contains a history of real facts, its effect is probably no greater than before; although it affords us much pleasure to be assured, that the persons in whom we have taken so lively an interest, did actually exist. One thing, in my opinion, ought faithfully to be done by authors: they should inform their readers whether the personages and occurrences of their narratives, are real, or fictitious; for whatever be said of the lawfulness of fictitious writing, it never can be consistent with truth, to palm on the public a tale of the imagination for historic truth.

It may occur to some, that there does not exist sufficient security, that the books selected for publication will uniformly be of the proper character. It may be alleged, that the committee of publication, consisting of gentlemen engaged in secular busi-

ness, who can only devote their leisure hours to the examination of books, there is reason to apprehend, that an injudicious selection will often be made. And, moreover, it may be thought, that as clergymen, as a class, are better acquainted with religious books, and better judges of their adaptation to be useful to the rising generation, than any other description of men, that it would be wise to submit all contemplated works to them for their opinion and advice, before publication. To which I would reply, that several of this committee are men of liberal education, and are so situated as to have it in their power to devote much of their time to this interesting work. Moreover, they have constantly, the aid and advice of the Corresponding Secretary of the Society, and of the Editor of the Magazine, who are not only pious, but literary men, whose whole time is devoted to the interests of the Union. But still, I am pleased to find that the public mind is awake to the importance of this subject, because it is evident, that the same power of multiplying and distributing books which is calculated, under a wise direction, to be the means of so much good, is equally capable, under a different guidance, to become an engine of incalculable evil. It gives me pleasure, therefore, to have it in my power to state, that the committee are so deeply sensible of the high responsibility of their office, and of their own liableness to error, that they have been in the habit of subjecting those works, concerning which there could be any doubt, to the judgment of men in whose opinion the religious public repose the greatest confidence. And it is still their wish and purpose, as far as possible, to avail themselves of the suggestions and counsels of such men, both of the clergy and laity; so as to secure, as far as human frailty will permit, the selection of those books for publication, which will be best adapted to promote the edification of all who read them.

I will now proceed freely to inquire, whether the system of instruction in Sunday-schools admits of any improvement or enlargement. And here, before I go farther, I would remark, that my observations on this subject must be considered theoretical, rather than practical: but the benefit of theory is, that it often suggests what, in practice, is found to be easiest and best.

Again, I would observe, that it is not contemplated as practicable that the whole system which I am about to delineate should be every where introduced; or that it should be carried into complete effect, any where, immediately. Improvements in such institutions require time and experience; and I doubt not, that, in some respects, better plans and arrangements than those here specified will be discovered. My object will be accomplished if improvements be commenced; and in some measure answered, if I can succeed in turning the public attention to the subject.

It appears to me, then, that the system of Sunday-school instruction might be greatly enlarged, both as it relates to the pupils received under their tuition, and as it relates to the subjects of instruction. In regard to the former, my plan would be so large as to include all persons who need instruction, from the infant of two years, up to the man of a hundred years of age. Infant schools are now in a rapid progress of being established, and they are filling the minds of the Christian and philanthropist with pleasure and surprise. And there is no reason why there should not be Sabbath-schools for infants as well as for children of greater age. In giving instruction, age should make no distinction. Infant schools should therefore be a regular part of the Sunday-school system. It is true, they are kept through the week; and so are other schools; but their teachers, during the week, may give them no religious instruction. If the American Union does not gather these tender little ones under her fostering wing, they may fall into the clutches of those who will seek to devour them; their infant minds may be made to imbibe the poison of error, instead of the sincere milk of the word.

Again,—the Sunday-school system ought to embrace all those youth who are included in Bible classes. There never can be any definite line of distinction drawn between the appropriate studies of Sunday-schools and Bible classes. In practice, all distinction is already confounded; and why should the instructions of Sunday-schools stop at a particular point? Why not instruct the pupils as long as they are willing to remain? The objections that might be conceived to this amalgamation will, I trust, be

obviated by the plan which will be submitted immediately for consideration.

But I would not confine the instruction of Sunday-schools to youth; I would have it extended to all who are willing to be taught. The fact is, that multitudes of adults need instruction as much as the youth; and many would be delighted to have the opportunity of learning. Pride and false modesty would prevent some from coming forward, lest their ignorance should become manifest; but I would spread a mantle over their weakness, and devise a method of instruction which would require from adults nothing else but to hear, with the privilege of asking questions as often as they might be disposed to do so.

Having developed my plan for the enlargement of the system, as respects the pupils, I will add, that the execution would require a correspondent enlargement in regard to teachers. It would require that the pastor and his coadjutors, by whatever name called, should all become active teachers in these institutions. My idea is, that the whole church should form one great Sabbath-school, and that all the people should be disciples or teachers; or sometimes the one and sometimes the other, according to circumstances. Knowledge, like wealth, is not acquired merely for ourselves; it should be like the light of a candle, for the benefit of all in the house. Every man and woman is under sacred obligations to teach those more ignorant than themselves. There is no good reason why the instruction of Sunday-schools should be confined to a few young people, as is commonly the case. Let the aged fathers and mothers, who have been learning for more than half a century, impart of the rich stores of their experience to the young. Let the learned, if there be such in the parish, not disdain to instruct in the higher branches of liberal knowledge; and, especially, let the pastor consider the Sabbath-school as one principal field of his labours. Here the whole work of catechising, and of instructing Bible classes, may be advantageously performed. Here he may preach to the young, far more effectually than from the pulpit.

But it is time that I should develop the proposed plan, as it respects the enlargement of the studies pursued in these schools.

This has already been hinted at in speaking of Bible classes; but I will now enter more into detail. After mature deliberation, I am of opinion, that all the pupils who can ever be taught in Sunday-schools, might be conveniently arranged into six different classes; and supposing a child to enter the first or lowest class, and to go through the whole system, he would rise, by regular gradations, through the whole of the six classes in succession.

The first class would include infants and others, who were learning to spell and read.

The second class, such children as were able to read, but not sufficiently advanced in age and intellect, to study the lessons contained in the prepared books of questions. These children should be furnished with a simple, historical catechism, containing questions and answers; and also plain moral precepts, with a reference to the retributions of eternity.

The third class should embrace all children and others who are capable of learning the select lessons: in short, most of those who now attend Sabbath-schools.

The fourth class should comprehend all those who have gone over the selected lessons which relate principally to historical passages; and they should be furnished with a similar book of selected lessons relating to the doctrines and moral precepts of the Bible. Their answers to these doctrinal questions ought to be in the words of Scripture. After which, they should learn the catechism of the church to which they belong, with such explanatory lectures, or exposition, as might be provided.

The fifth class would consist of such young persons as are commonly included in Bible classes, who would be instructed in the emblems, figures, parables, types, and most remarkable prophecies of Scripture. This would include Biblical antiquities, and many other interesting matters which do not fall under that denomination; especially a short system of sacred geography, and a concise and perspicuous view of the collateral history of the Bible: by which I mean, such historical facts as are referred to in the Scriptures, or may serve to elucidate the sacred history.

The sixth class should be instructed carefully in the evidences of divine revelation, external and internal; in the nature and

proof of divine inspiration; and in the history and canonical authority of all the books contained in the Old and New Testaments; together with the reasons for rejecting apocryphal books of every description.

The obvious objection to this system is, that it is too much extended: but is there any one thing included in it which every intelligent Christian ought not to know? Is there any part of this system, which, in a regular course of Christian instruction, can be dispensed with? And if we cannot communicate as much religious instruction as is desirable, that need not hinder us from forming a complete system, and from carrying it into effect as far as we can. It cannot, indeed, be expected that all, or even a majority of scholars, will go through the whole course; but some will be found willing to do so; and as the value of Biblical knowledge comes to be more highly appreciated, the number of thorough, persevering scholars will increase every year.

Another objection to a plan of instruction so extended is, that competent teachers cannot be obtained to communicate instruction on all the points mentioned. The answer to this objection has already been given in part, when we spoke of the part which it was expected the pastor and other well informed persons in the parish would take, in the instruction of Sunday-schools. To which I will now add, that with a proper apparatus of suitable books, on the subjects mentioned, some of which are now in readiness, and others are in a course of being prepared by the American Sunday-School Union, there will be found no great difficulty in carrying the plan into full accomplishment.

Moreover, if we create a demand for teachers of higher attainments than are now needed, many of those already in office will take much pains to prepare themselves for this work; and thus the extension of the plan of instruction will have a most favourable effect on the improvement of many young persons of both sexes, who are now devoted to this employment.

Besides, it would be one advantage of this plan, that those teachers who should instruct the three lower classes, might be scholars in the three higher, if such an arrangement should be made as would allow of the lower classes reciting in the morning, and the higher in the afternoon or evening.

If, for example, in villages and the country, the Sabbath-

schools should meet at 9 o'clock in the morning, at which time the three younger classes would be instructed, and at which the attendance of the pastor ought not to be expected. Supposing, then, the public service to commence, as is usual, at 11 o'clock, the children might all attend in the church, under the inspection of their teachers; but let the afternoon be devoted entirely to the instruction of the higher classes and of adults, at which time let the pastor and his assistants attend, and aid in the instruction of the school. And it may here be remarked, that however numerous the schools may be for younger children in the morning, it would generally be expedient that all the teachers and advanced scholars should meet together in the church, or some other central place, in the afternoon; because this description of learners will be less numerous than the younger, and the minister cannot instruct in more places than one. This arrangement would, it is true, exclude the afternoon sermon where such a service is usual; but it would furnish a substitute far more effectual for the instruction of the people. In cities and large towns this plan may not be considered expedient, or where the people have always been accustomed to a regular afternoon service in the church; but if once the instruction of adults as well as children was made a part of the exercise of Sunday-schools, it would be found, on trial, to be far more beneficial to all concerned to attend these, than to hear an additional sermon; and especially as the usual service of prayer and praise might be as solemnly performed in the Sabbath-school as in the church. And on all these occasions there ought to be some kind of lecture delivered by the pastor. But in regard to the particular arrangement, every congregation could determine it best for themselves. All that I mean by the above observations is, to show that the plan proposed may, without any great inconvenience, be reduced to practice, as in cities and large towns the evening might be occupied with the exercises of the Sabbath-schools, if that was preferred to the afternoon.

In regard to the instruction of adults, several methods might be proposed, which would render the service both pleasant and profitable. They might meet, on some convenient time in the week, in little knots, or on Sabbath morning, and converse freely on the subject of the lesson prescribed, whatever it might

be; and in the time of the regular meeting of the Sabbath-school, such as were willing might be questioned by some elderly person, or by the pastor, and the others might be permitted to hear and to learn. Having studied the lesson, they would be nearly as much instructed by the examination of others as by their own; a plan of this sort is now in operation in a very large and respectable congregation in New-Jersey. But should none of adult age consent to be publicly catechised, it need create no discouragement; for the pastor, or other teacher, might propound the questions and answer them himself, allowing all persons freely to make any inquiry, or ask for any explanation. It is scarcely conceivable what a spring this practice would impart to the minds of the people, which are commonly left to stagnate; and as it would undoubtedly increase their knowledge, so it would add much to their happiness, by leading them to shake off that inertness which is so unfavourable to real enjoyment. It is not necessary, however, to establish any uniform method for the instruction of adults; what would be well suited to one people, would not be adapted to another: a judicious pastor would be able to regulate this matter in his own flock. Let the experiment be fairly made, and if it do not result in much good, I shall confess myself disappointed.

6. The only other subject on which I wish to make any remarks, is that of agents and auxiliaries. To carry into full effect the plans of the American Sunday-school Union, many prudent, industrious, and persevering agents, will be requisite. It has hitherto been common to look to the profession of the ministry alone for agents; but experience teaches, that they cannot be supplied in sufficient numbers from that quarter; and considering the want and importunate demand for preachers in the destitute regions of our country, they ought not, except in extraordinary cases, to relinquish the appropriate duties of their office to become agents for this or any other society. Here the question meets us, whether pious, active, and judicious laymen would not answer for Sunday-school agents as well, and in some respects better, than clergymen? Of this, I have myself no doubt. But, can they be obtained? Why not? There are scores of young men in our principal cities who have been long experienced in conducting Sunday-schools, and who take a deep in-

terest in their furtherance and prosperity. Undoubtedly some of these zealous men will cheerfully offer their services as soon as the door shall be opened for their employment. I know, indeed, that on their part it would require a sacrifice of worldly prospects for the sake of Christ and his cause: but, I ask, are they unwilling to make this sacrifice? I should be grieved to think, that that was the fact. Why should it be required of ministers alone to exercise self-denial, and make sacrifices for the promotion of the Redeemer's kingdom? Did Christ give one set of terms to ministers and another to private Christians? Or rather did he not require of every disciple the same disposition to deny himself and to renounce the world, by taking up his cross and following him? It cannot reasonably be supposed, that the employment of pious laymen on agencies will in any way infringe on the sacred office of the ministry. He will have nothing to do with the peculiar duties of a preacher. He must often, indeed, give public statements to the people, and it may often be convenient to use the pulpit for this purpose; but an exhibition of the views and plans of the American Union will no more interfere with the duties of those ordained to the sacred office, than speaking at the bar, or in the senate. And as there does exist a jealousy among the several denominations, or at least among some who belong to them, respectively, it might have some tendency to obviate the difficulty which has been felt on this point, if well qualified laymen should be commissioned as agents.

In regard to auxiliaries, it seems to me, that at present the organization of the Union is very incomplete. Their connexion with the parent, or central society is by far too loose and undefined, to enable the whole body to exert that energy which she would be capable with a more perfect organization. One thing is clear, that all the agents of the auxiliaries ought to be appointed by the Board of the American Union, and should be amenable to this body. Unless it is intended to carry on the operations of Sunday-schools by societies perfectly independent of each other, something ought to be done speedily to draw the bands of connexion closer, to enable the General Union to aid more effectively the exertions of the auxiliaries; and to render the auxiliaries in fact, what they are in name, AIDs to the parent.

society in her arduous and extended operations. But while local societies appoint agents to traverse large portions of country, and carry on their measures without consulting or even informing the American Union of their plans and operations, it is just the same as if there existed no connexion whatever. As far as I can learn, there is not even any systematized plan of increasing the funds of the general society by the numerous auxiliaries. It would require more wisdom and more time than the writer can command, to devise an effective plan of union and cooperation between the general society and its auxiliaries. All I intended was, to bring the subject before the public; and I do solemnly hope, that it will engage the earnest attention of the General Union, and of all the local Unions in the land.

And now I would appeal to the pious and benevolent of all denominations, to say whether this Institution, so extensive in its operations, so multiplied in its ramifications, and so beneficial to all classes of society in its results, shall be cramped or retarded in its career of usefulness for want of adequate pecuniary aid? Seldom, since its earliest existence, has the American Sunday-School Union made any appeal to the public for this species of aid: the operations of this society have been, not to draw any thing from the people, but to confer benefits upon them; and still it contemplates no other system; for while tens of thousands are, every week, deriving rich blessings from the Institution, those persons engaged in managing it give the strongest possible evidence of disinterestedness;—personal emolument, or advantage they neither expect nor are willing to receive. Now, it is evident that the principal burden of sustaining an institution in which the whole community have so deep an interest, ought not to devolve upon a few persons: but, hitherto, this has been very much the case. When it is considered how small a sum from every Sunday-school, or even from every auxiliary, regularly forwarded, annually, to the parent society, would enable them not only to carry on, but greatly to enlarge their operations, especially in the publishing department, I cannot persuade myself that there will be found any reluctance in the public to contribute the funds requisite for the energetic and extensive operation of this powerful engine for doing good. There can be no doubt, that the American Sunday-School Union is

highly in favour with all the friends of religion and sound morality in our country. Perhaps no other institution has so universally conciliated the affections of the people. It is with confidence, therefore, that I make this appeal to the public, to render promptly and liberally all the pecuniary aid which is needed. No permanent funds are contemplated by the society. Whatever sums may be received will be immediately applied to the important purposes of sustaining and enlarging the system of Sunday-schools. That I am not mistaken in supposing that the society needs pecuniary aid, is evident from the fact revealed at the last Anniversary by the worthy President of the American Sunday-School Union, that the Treasurer of the Institution was \$17,000 in advance for the Union. It is true, indeed, that the sums due to the Institution are considerably more than what they owe, but these are widely scattered, and the collection of them very slow. For their valuable building, the Union is indebted almost entirely to the liberality of a few devoted friends in the city of Philadelphia; but a large part of the purchase money of this property is still due. From this brief statement of facts, it will be evident to all the friends of Sunday-schools in our country, that the time has arrived when it has become an imperious duty for the Christian public to step forward and relieve the Board from their pressing embarrassments, and to take effectual measures to prevent the recurrence of the same in future.

In conclusion, I have only to say, that the more I reflect on the power and salutary influence of the Sunday-school system, the more am I convinced, that it has been raised up by a benignant Providence to be one of the most effective engines in overthrowing the kingdom of Satan, and promoting a general reformation in society, especially in that class of people who have evaded the influence of other means of improvement. If what I have written may contribute in some small degree to the furtherance of this good cause, I shall think that my time was well employed, and that I have received a rich remuneration for my labour.