

**THE LESSON SYSTEM: THE
STORY OF ITS ORIGIN
AND INAUGURATION**

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The Lesson System: The Story of Its Origin and Inauguration by Simeon Gilbert

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SIMEON GILBERT

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BY SIMEON GILBERT,

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
THE ORIGIN OF THE LESSON SYSTEM.....	5
THE SCHEME NOT AN ABRUPT RESULT.....	6
ANTICIPATORY BEGINNINGS.....	9
PARTIAL APPROACHES AND PREPARATIONS.....	10
THE LIMITED LESSON SCHEME.....	11
INVENTIONS MORE THAN FRAGMENTARY GUESSES.....	12
STAGES IN THE PROGRESS.....	14
SUNDAY-SCHOOL CONVENTIONS.....	16
THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL INSTITUTE.....	17
ADVANCED THOUGHT AND WORK IN ILLINOIS.....	24
THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHERS' QUARTERLY.....	26
THE NEW LESSON SCHEME.....	27
THE FORMAL DECISION AT INDIANAPOLIS.....	51
THE NATIONAL SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHER.....	61
PERPETUITY OF THE PLAN.....	63
THE BEST LESSON SYSTEM.....	64
ONE THING MORE.....	67
THE LESSONS FOR SEVEN YEARS.....	68
ABSTRACT OF DR. VINCENT'S ADDRESS (London, 1878).....	74
THE CHAUTAUQUA IDEA.....	77
THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL A CENTER OF VARIOUS AGENCIES.....	81
THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL AND REFORMS.....	82
"C. L. S. C.".....	83
APPENDIX :	
The Methodist Episcopal Church, and Uniform Lessons for the Whole Country.....	87
Addresses on the International Lesson System.....	90
Question Books.....	95
Mr. Orange Judd.....	96

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

101

102

103

104

105

106

107

108

109

110

111

112

113

114

115

116

117

THE LESSON SYSTEM.

ITS ORIGIN.

THE adoption of the Uniform Lesson System by the Sunday-schools of the country, in 1872, will mark a distinct epoch in Church history. That this is no extravagant statement will appear from what follows.

It was an event equally notable as marking the progress that had already been reached, rendering its adoption possible, and as making possible the immense progress in Bible study which swiftly followed, the wide-reaching influence of which is only now fairly begun.

The new movement was strikingly opportune. It came as something that had been waited and hoped for. It could not have appeared earlier than it did, because the way had not been prepared for it; it certainly did not come a day too soon. The Churches needed it for their own sake. They also needed it in order to the legitimate forth-putting of their proper influence upon the world about them. The spirit and progressive methods of true scientific inquiry—disposed to face fairly all facts, classify all its knowledges, and examine minutely the parts, but estimate them rationally with a view to their relations as a whole—were beginning imperatively to demand that some worthier methods of Bible study and

of religious teaching should be pursued in the Sunday-school. Here, too, the malaria of morbid doubt was abroad on every side, and must, somehow, be effectively met. Moreover, the strong drift toward extreme secularism in our public school systems was ominous of disaster to society, unless some other instrumentality, immeasurably reinforced, should come forward to do what manifestly the secular schemes of popular education either could not, or would not be allowed to do.

The combination of influences which brought about the Uniform Lesson System, making its adoption practicable, and thus making its large experiment successful, has a distinctly defined history. That history has never yet been written. An accurate and authentic story of how this grand idea came to be entertained, and to be put in operation, must furnish, I have thought, a chapter of religious history of both present and enduring interest.

THE SCHEME NOT AN ABRUPT RESULT.

First, it is to be noted that the scheme did not spring into idea and operation abruptly. It was like all vital products—something subject to the law which our modern scientists are pleased to call struggle for existence, natural selection, and survival of the fittest. And, of course, it is presupposed that God himself is the prime inspirer of all good thoughts, as of all holy affections.

The Sunday-school itself is only a recent institution; we must wait a year or two yet before we can celebrate its first centennial. By common consent Robert Raikes is accounted the founder of the modern Sunday-school. But, perhaps, it would be more appropriate to say that he was the *finder* of it. But what, precisely, did he find? He found a want, a

supply, a time and a practicable agency for bringing the want and the supply together. He found an existing destitution of moral instruction and religious influences, such as stirred in his generous soul the profoundest pity. He found a day as old as the traditions of a paradise, a remedy as old as Christianity; he found Churches indoctrinating with some carefulness their catechumens—the children of religious parents, training more or less faithfully their own children at home; but he found whole streets full of children, girt about by ignorance and vice, poverty and rags, wholly exposed to all the worst influences that were abroad. He found, one Sabbath day, as he walked the streets of Gloucester, a sight that touched his heart irresistibly, and at once a voice—was it not from God?—bidding him “try” what could be done. He found certain others, notably certain women, as ready as himself to make trial of the thought which had so seized and possessed him. He found a newspaper, happily his own, and so at his disposal, through which to proclaim and explain and recommend what he had found and successfully tried. He found a state of mind prevailing among earnest Christians in all parts of the kingdom, quick to accept the divinely given hint and to take up practically the great idea, the new scheme. He found a diamond in the rough, infinitely more precious than he knew; but he guessed faintly its worth, and, like one possessed by a thought mightier than himself, began telling of it to others, until they, too, caught the contagion of it, and began doing more than he himself had dared hope could be done. It may be impossible to ascertain across whose mind the thought first fitted, of the possibility of gathering the great masses of children into strictly religious public schools on Sundays; and we know