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Christ's Boys and Girls

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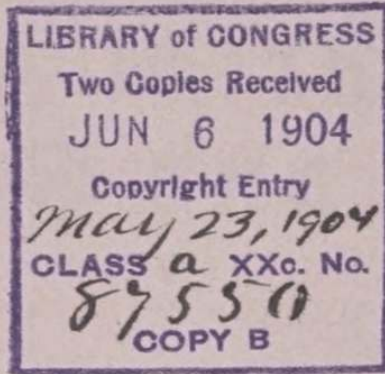
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Christ's Boys and Girls

THE TEXT.—And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls, playing in the streets thereof.—Zechariah 8: 5.

I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.—Luke 10: 21.

These are but two of the many passages which might be selected from both Old and New Testaments to show the sympathy of good men in all ages with the natural joys and spiritual intuitions of youth. Not that even the best men have equally realized what the ancient prophet and the Messiah here expressed. Our Puritan forefathers, for example, did not as a class appreciate the relation of the Bible to life in its first two decades; but there were exceptions even to their austerity, and their biographies reveal to us some very delightful pictures of kindly Christian homes. As a rule the

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grave problems with which they had to deal naturally led them to take the most serious views of duty, since duty came to them so often as the

“Stern daughter of the voice of God.”

But even if they often lost sight of the more cheerful aspects of religion, and were consequently unable to freely interpret the gospel into terms of youth, the truth remained deeply imbedded in the Word. The Bible has always had a tender and a loving regard for boys and girls, for adolescence and youth, in their natural and playful propensities.

It is delightful to see how much happiness Zechariah had in the vision of a recovered, restored and rejuvenated Jerusalem whose blest security and prosperity should be borne witness to by the abundant presence of youthful companions in the streets. The very temple of Jehovah seems not to

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have occupied so prominent a place in the visions of the seer as this youthful life which was bright with smiles and exuberant with laughter. Doubtless these young people had their share in the songs which their elders lifted up about the reconstructed altar; and they, too, would bow with their parents when prayers were offered in the synagogue; but whatever their religious exercises their religion did not forbid or lessen the joys appropriate to their years. The man of God was glad to know that the happiest children in the world were the children who were under Jehovah's immediate care. He stood smiling by. He was not eager to forbid their sport or reprove their loud halloo.

Many of the most charming chapters of the Bible are those in which the life and achievements of youth are presented. Although by dint of many hard knocks David was developed into

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a poet and a king, the real founder of Israel's devotional literature and military empire, he is most engaging to us in his youth. God loved him when as a lad he met a lion and a bear coming out of the wood and slew them single-handed. It was as a youth he faced Goliath. It was as a youth he refused to lift a hand against that tyrannous king who thirsted for his blood. It was as a youth he formed an attachment to Jonathan, which constitutes one of the most beautiful stories in any literature. After he becomes a man of middle life and matured powers he almost fades from the page of Holy Writ.

In the same way we may recall that no one knows Moses' sepulchre, but we all know his cradle. It was not Joseph on the throne of Egypt who was most attractive to the sacred historian, but Joseph in his father's house, Joseph a boy slave, pure notwithstanding all the

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allurements and temptations of a dissolute court. It was to Samuel, the child ministering at the altar, that Jehovah revealed the coming events in the history of the nation. No other book claiming so high and divine an origin makes so much of childhood as does the Bible.

Yet it is only when we turn to the life of Jesus that we fully realize this. The gospel story opens with pictures of children. The Saviour first appears in the temple as a child intent upon the service of Jehovah. It is the youngest of His disciples who, later, leans upon His breast at supper. He makes a little child the symbol of those graces which are most acceptable in the sight of heaven. It is a youthful ruler that He "loves," and a child that He takes into His arms with tender benediction. He illustrates spiritual realities by reference to the plays of children. Not only did He make the

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child in "its modest stillness and humility" to stand higher than the blustering man, but He did not hesitate, when His enemies twitted Him upon the youth and insignificance of His converts, to thank God that a child could oft times understand things hidden from men of "a mature mind." As is seen in the second of the two verses which jointly constitute our text, Jesus boldly declared that those whom the philosophers and wise men sneered at as "babes and sucklings" had, by virtue of a spiritual intuition, oft times a profounder knowledge of divine truths than learned men. To the famous metaphysician and scientist the Power behind the visible world may be still "The Unknown God," but to millions of little children who will fold their palms upon the coverlets of their beds to-night, He is the Heavenly Father, the most real Being of the universe. More than one pastor, called

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upon to "examine" some timid little one upon the subject of personal religion, has been compelled to acknowledge the situations ought to be reversed. He has found that the child was the seer, the child was the prophet, the child was the evangelist; and he has whispered to himself as did Wordsworth in a situation somewhat similar:

"Dear child! dear girl! that walkest with
us here,
If thou appearest untouched by solemn
thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the
year;
And worshippest at the temple's inner
shrine,
God being with thee when we knew it
not."

But on the other hand we must not forget that if the Bible is tender toward children, children are drawn toward the Bible. They are always capable of appreciating what is most

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vital in the Word of God when it is presented to them in the right spirit. It is a serious mistake to think that a child loves Mother Goose better than Saint John. It is not necessary to exaggerate the simple fact and to declare that children "cry" for the Bible; but parents need to be on their guard against underestimating a child's capacity for spiritual instruction. Christians of many years' religious experience, looking back, can seldom discover a time when they did not love the Bible, when they did not feel for the Bible a reverence and an affection very different from that called out by any other book. Long before they could understand the gravest problems of duty and responsibility the Bible possessed for them a conscious charm. There was something in their souls which responded to its teachings as quickly as April violets respond to April suns. There was a fascination

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in its great revelations concerning creation and redemption from which they could not, from which they would not, escape. There was a sweetness in its biographies of which they were never weary. Jack-the-Giant-Killer and Cinderella were soon outgrown; but not so with Moses, not so with Ruth, not so with the Babe of Bethlehem. Happy the boy or girl who has been introduced to this goodly fellowship before all the bloom was brushed from the child's spiritual nature. And happy the "mature mind" which can see in this attitude of the child toward the Bible and the truths of the Bible the most precious witnessing to inspiration. There is a certain class of observers and writers who can find in "youthful piety" only something weak, only something to excite a jest, only something to be apologized for and deprecated. But Jesus saw in youthful piety something for which to give

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thanks to God Allwise. It was a testimony that He craved. It was far dearer to Him to be approved by the boys and girls He met in the market place and in the open fields than to be endorsed by proud and selfish and cynical men in theological schools and royal palaces. We say of this or that kindly soul, "He is a good man; children love him and he loves children." We may say with equal truthfulness and consistency, "It is God's book. It leans toward children and children love it."

It is therefore not the reproach of the gospel, but its glory, that most men and women who know Christ at all become His followers when boys or girls. The newspapers have been repeating with great gusto of late the reported saying of some minister that "Most persons who become Christians do so during their giggling and gum-chewing period." State the fact as

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contemptuously as you will, Jesus gloried in the fact that most of His converts were converted in their youth. Early piety is the rule, not the exception, in the Christian church. If it were not so it would not be divine. We have no clearer thinker, no saner reasoner to-day than was Jesus Christ; and it was to Him a supreme joy that His message appealed triumphantly to the human soul before it was overgrown with selfish interests or all its generous instincts were drowned out by a flood of worldly cares. He never once boasted that His mission approved itself to "men of clear, cold intellect." He never published in the papers that fifty new disciples had joined Him—"three-fourths of them adults!" He never compassed heaven and earth to make one proselyte of accepted social standing and acknowledged intellectual leadership; but He warned the grown-up and the learned and the

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cultured, that it were better for a man to have a mill-stone about his neck and to be cast into the sea than to give occasion to trustful children, by sneers, innuendoes or flippant speech concerning their "early piety," to fall away from Him.

But that which should be deeply impressed upon our minds by a study of this theme, whether we be parents or children, is that youth is the period in which decisions are naturally made.

One of the sorrowful experiences of every pastor is to encounter the question as to "the age at which children should be taught to mind." The observant minister, when such an enquiry is addressed to him, suspects very justly that the particular child whose conduct has prompted the appeal is already past the period of useful discipline. The child has often decided the gravest questions of conduct before the parent has waked to

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the fact that there are problems to be presented. Most children who are lost are lost before the fathers or mothers have learned to think of them as "morally responsible."

There never was, I suppose, an age in which there was so much "child study" as to-day, and such gross ignorance of the child. I have a dozen or so of volumes upon my bookshelves, all published within the past three or four years, upon *The Child and Pedagogy*, and the *Psychology of Adolescence*, most of which appear to have been written by authors who have handled only "Babes from Toy-land."

I have yet to find in one of them a serious and reverent study of that which chiefly distinguishes the child from the adult, and that is the tender conscience and clear spiritual intuition and resolute moral nature of the child. The most characteristic element of childhood is the moral; and the writ-

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ers of to-day, for the larger part, deal with the child as though it were a ball of putty. The impression seems to be that the child is a mere "giggling and gum-chewing" animal, without brain, without purpose, without ethical force or moral volition. We have grave studies of the "Play of Children" and the "Folklore of Children," but if there has been published of late one serious and reverent study of the child's moral consciousness and deep religious nature it has not reached my well-stocked table. And yet that is just what gives to childhood its supreme importance in the eye of prophet and Christ.

It is this laughing, merry, light-hearted period which is the period of vital decisions. It is this dimpled girl with a sparkling eye and a musical voice and a dancing step, who never talks to her mother or her Sunday-school teacher about religion, who

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never forgets religion. Many a night her pillow is wet with tears as she recalls the mistakes, the faults, the sins of the day. The hasty word, the spiteful rejoinder, the deceitful glance lie heavy upon the youthful conscience and prompt the heart-breaking confessions and prayers which she pours out "when none but God can hear." Youth is not a period of drifting; it is a period of decisions, and many a child of ten is giving to the moral problems of life more thought than most parents at fifty. And the child that seems as volatile as thistle-down can not only make a decision but stand to it like Casabianca on "the burning deck," though it cost a life.

If there is any one toward whom my heart melts with inexpressible tenderness, it is the boy who is forever "studied" but never understood. He of all God's creatures does not "wear his heart upon his sleeve." Beneath

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all his diffidence there lies a seriousness which is, to the wise, the real explanation of his apparent neglect of religion. The fact is that religion is with him so real, and so vital, and so pregnant, that he cannot talk about it with everybody. He avoids the subject, not because his conscience is callous, but because it is abnormally sensitive. Like the psalmist, he is "so troubled" that he cannot speak. As a rule no one understands him less than his father—unless it be his Sunday-school teacher, or, alas, his pastor. His "don't-care" manner is assumed to cover a restless mind, a perplexed judgment and a disturbed conscience. He is painfully conscious of the immaturity of his intellect; but no one has ever understood him better than the poet who wrote:

"The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

He is lonesome in the midst of a

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crowd; despondent in the center of hilarity, and most burdened when supposedly most free from care. For the first time he is face to face with the great problems of duty and destiny; and he knows it. He realizes it. He is fighting his battles, but fighting them all alone. His parents assert, when the pastor desires to speak to him of confessing Christ, "He is too young to think about such things yet." But God knows he thinks about little else in the waking hours upon his couch. He does not know how to approach his dearest friend regarding that which lies nearest to his heart; and his parents still regard him as "our little boy." But meanwhile he has "a great fight of afflictions," to endure which an angel might dread to encounter, and there is, so far as his earthly relations are concerned, "no eye to pity and no arm to save." "He is too young to think of

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joining the church yet," says the complacent father. "It will be time enough by and by," says the fond mother. And the boy is left struggling against a mighty, adverse current all alone because he is "only a boy." His father is deep in his paper when not at the office, and his mother is absorbed in social functions when not worrying about her servants; and before anybody but himself has given a thought to him as other than a child he has become a man, but a lost man! No one better understood the possibilities of youth than he who wrote

"There are gains for all our losses
And a balm for every pain,"

but when youth departs

"It takes something from our hearts
We shall never see again."

In his marvelous and mournful autobiography John Stuart Mill tells us of this critical period in his own youth,

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when the absence of the right counsel at the right time made of him a skeptic when he might have been a believer.

But if youth is preeminently the time of moral decisions, it is, according to the words of Jesus, a period favorable to wise, moral decisions.

This could not be if religion were primarily a matter of philosophical deduction or logical acumen. If religion were something chiefly of the intellect it would need for its rational acceptance surely the gravest consideration of a mature mind. But, according to the Word of God, religion is not more a matter of logical understanding than it is of spiritual intuition. The youthful heart has its own canons of judgment, and upon their findings Jesus set the stamp of His divine approval. For my part I am weary of this continued talking up to the thinking man and down to the

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feeling child. Wordsworth was wiser than this when he wrote that

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy,”

and Hazlitt when he said that “To be young is to be as one of the immortals.” The father who is drumming with his fingers upon the arm of his chair, seeking to decide whether the policy is justifiable which he has half determined to carry out in his office, dare not leave the final decision to the fair-haired girl playing at his feet, because he knows that the child in questions of duty is nearer heaven than he is. The fashionable mother who takes pains to conceal from her adolescent daughter her “innocent flirtations” with her husband’s married friends, realizes that the daughter’s moral discernment is clearer and cleaner than her own. The “practical statesmen,” who, after eighty years of shrewd political compromises, led the nation into

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Armageddon, into the very jaws of Death, into the very mouth of Hell, out of which the twenty-year-old boys of the nation had to fight a way to freedom, may have statues erected to them in the Hall of Fame; but if the government of the republic had been left to the average Sunday-school class it would have been more moral and diviner, and could not have been more disastrous. The fact is, that there is more true wisdom in the moral intuitions of an unsullied, unperverted, unselfish childhood than in all the cunning trimming and plausible subterfuges and self-deceiving humbuggery of later life. And if a child "decides the most momentous problem of life before its judgment is ripe" it is because the value of that decision rests upon its moral rather than upon its logical premises.

It is true beyond controversy that "most of those who join the church

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join before they are twenty-one, and few, if any, after they are twenty-three." But the reason is not because the later judgment is more sound; it is because the earlier morals are more correct. Those statistically inclined tell us that "ninety percent. of all the members of evangelical churches have united with those churches before they were twenty-three." I should have put the percentage much higher. It has always been high. Some years since I ascertained by a very careful personal investigation of hundreds of cases that the fathers and mothers of the present generation joined the church at the average age of seventeen, while the young people of the present generation at their first communion average sixteen. Yet the oldest member of my church of several hundred communicants had united with the church at a younger age than had any of her children or grandchildren. People are not

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“joining the church much younger than they used to do,” as any one may discover who chooses to investigate the matter adequately. The vast majority of Christian people have always become Christian in childhood and youth. Whether permitted to approach the communion table or not, they came to Christ early, and he who would discourage that now must oppose the experience of the church and the express approval of the Master. Even the heathen poet Horace, when he wrote upon the gravest moral problems connected with the state, addressed his appeal *Pueris Virginibusque*, “To the Boys and Girls” of Rome, because he recognized that their consciences were more alert and their moral natures less perverted and their ethical judgments more sure than the consciences of their elders. Many a man of sixty would give all the material accumulations of his life could he

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approach the question of religion to-day under conditions as favorable to a wise decision as they were when he was sixteen. He cannot restore, much as he would desire to do so, the conditions of the past. He has fed his soul on doubts for forty years; he has indulged his appetites; he has sacrificed veracity to worldly interests. Is it any wonder that he says with Hood, as he looks the facts squarely in the face:

“I'm farther off from heaven to-day
Than when I was a boy.”

The church is not apologizing for the fact, but glories in it, that “most of those who join its ranks, join before they are twenty-one,” especially if they are fitted to become leaders.

It was in this period, between boyhood and manhood, “where brook and river meet,” that Jonathan Edwards wrote the series of “Resolutions” looking toward a consecrated service,

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which is considered the finest outline of a holy life ever drawn. Dr. Isaac Watts was only nine years old when he made the choice that was never reversed. Matthew Henry was a professed Christian at eleven, and Robert Hall, the greatest of English preachers of the past century, at twelve. Dr. John Hall united with the church at fourteen and Dr. A. J. Gordon, the eminent revivalist of Boston, at sixteen. Among the late ministers of Chicago, Dr. John L. Withrow united with the church at thirteen and Dr. Simon J. McPherson at fourteen. President Thwing, of Adelbert College, addressed a letter to each of the members of the Board of Foreign Missions upon the subject of child conversion and received answers from one hundred and forty-nine, every one of whom was a prominent spiritual force in his community. One hundred and five of them had united with the

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church under eighteen years of age. All but thirty had joined before they were twenty. The greatly useful men in Christ's kingdom will never be the "waiters." The leaders in Christ's army almost invariably begin their service as youths or adolescents.

But that which should never be forgotten is that while youth is a time peculiarly favorable to a wise decision it is also a time when one may make a fatally unwise decision. Is it true that "almost nobody joins the church after he is twenty-three?" Quite true. But it is equally true that almost nobody becomes a drunkard after he is twenty-three. We have heard a great many sneers at, and not a few apologies for, "infant piety," as if it were something due to the weakness of immaturity. But what shall we say of infant depravity? Men and women do not choose virtue any earlier than they choose sin. Remember that. I

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have heard a great many prayers from the Lord's dear saints of all ages; but the sweetest prayer I ever heard was offered by a little five-year-old girl in the infant class of a mission school. I have heard far too much profanity, in the army, upon the sea, in cattle ranches and in mining towns; but the most blood-curdling curses I ever heard, I heard uttered by a five-year-old street Arab. If "early piety" is "abnormal," what of early vice? The judge who was called upon to receive the plea of the three murderers in Chicago who recently confessed to half a dozen bloody crimes, addressed them as "boys", and that is what they were. Although the world was aghast at their career as thugs, they were scarcely out of school. Some years since, in paying a visit to one of our over-crowded penitentiaries, the first thing which struck me was that it was a vast aggregation of lads and young

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men. Do you know that of the 82,329 prisoners in the United States at the last report, nearly one-half were under thirty, one-third were under twenty-five and one-eighth were under twenty? These were not "first offenders," you will see, but hardened criminals who could no longer be permitted to go at large as a menace to society. France has 4,718 boy criminals and 1,063 girl criminals between twelve and sixteen years of age. Out of 26,000 arrests in Paris in a single year, 16,000 were under twenty years of age. Gangs of young hoodlums infest all the purlieus of our American cities; and a few years since at a summer resort by the lakes, I found an entire "boy choir," composed of boys from respectable families, gathered about the gambling tables which were set out for them by an obliging proprietor. One of our daily papers recently contained a letter from a Chicago bar-tender, who said

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that the thing which most impressed him about "the trade" to-day was that it appealed to and secured "a much younger class of patrons" than when he began to sell liquors a score of years since. I have known a good many boys and girls withheld from the church because they were "too young," but I never knew a saloon to hold them out on account of their years. We may as well face the solemn fact that the choice offered our boys and girls is not between "early piety" and "the religion of a mature mind," but between early piety and early sin. The middle years are not going to be spent in indecision. Esau and Jacob were twin brothers. The one chose the religion of his fathers and the other the wild, turbulent life of Moab's hordes. But one made his choice quite as early as the other. The boy who does not go into the church early is simply going out of it early. The

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decision will be made long before manhood is reached. It will be made before the powers and faculties are a whit more mature than they are now. It cannot be put off. It never has been. He who discourages youthful religion only encourages youthful irreligion. That is all there is to it.

And this brings the matter directly home to parents. There can be no doubt that the opposition which many parents have to an early confession of Christ upon the part of their children is due to a false pride. It is not that they, as adult Christians, deplore their own youthful decisions. They do not. It was Esau who in his later life sought vainly and "with tears" a reversal of his adolescent folly. He chose godless companions, and he lived to bitterly rue it. It brought sorrow to his mother's heart and a cloud to his father's brow and a sense of shame to his own soul. But Jacob who, with

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all his faults, longed to stand in the line of the world's redemptive agents; and when he lay dying, older than a century, he lifted up his voice in thanksgiving for his early resolve to follow his father's God. It is not because young Christians are more likely to "turn back" than those who are converted when "more mature." The lapses are as many from adult conversions as from youthful piety, if not more; and every pastor knows it. It is not Timothy but Simon Magus who is likely to deny his Lord and disgrace the church.

But in young Christians there will be, of course, petty blemishes and minor inconsistencies; and parents are foolishly, wickedly sensitive to the criticisms that may be evoked. What the boys and girls need, what the youths of both sexes need in this formative period, is a sense of responsibility together with the consciousness of

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divine shepherding and the comfort of sacred sacraments. The Lord's Supper was not given simply for the aged saint who is dying, but for the youthful disciple who must live. Chas. H. Spurgeon, whose church membership ran up into the thousands, said that he never found cause to discipline a member who had been admitted to the church in youth. May God forgive the parents who deprive their children of these safeguards out of fear that youthful Christians may commit youthful indiscretions. Surely if the Master will not quench the lamp that is but dimly smoking, it is not for our doubts or pride to put it out. If the Lord, before whom all must stand at last, will not break the reed already bruised and trembling, it ill becomes a parent to deny his child the privilege of seeking refuge in a Saviour's mighty grace.

At each returning communion season the church repeats its invitation

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and opens its doors to the boys and girls who would come to the arms of the loving Lord. The church needs the inspiration of their presence as much as they need the restraining power of its life. All truths are not revealed to the mature mind any more than they are all made known to the youthful heart. To do the work before it the church needs budding enthusiasm as truly as it needs ripe judgment. Perhaps the Master does not find it harder to bear with the levity of youth than with the melancholy of age. If the Holy Spirit grants to old men dreams it grants to young men visions, because the church needs both. And by the blessing of God not less than fifty thousand boys and girls, lads and misses, young men and maidens make their first confession of their Saviour at the communion table of our denomination every year. These constitute, as they grow up and take their

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places in its various activities, the joy, the strength, the glory of the church. The ministers, the elders, the Sunday-school superintendents and teachers of the future are to be found among Christ's boys and girls of to-day, and their usefulness in years to come will depend upon their fidelity in the day that now is.

"Sublimity always is simple;
Both in sermon and song a child can seize
on its meaning,"

says Bishop Tegner in the lines which Longfellow has translated as "The Children of the Lord's Supper." What a delightful picture is that he gives us of the Swedish pastor surrounded by the kneeling boys and girls, Christ's boys and girls, whom he had in their infancy consecrated to a life of faith and service. How beautiful the day, how sweet the air of spring-time, how lovely the village church dressed for the sacred feast. With de-

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lightful simplicity the pastor sets before his young charges the great mystery of the cross, the precious fact of redemption, the hope of eternal life. And then after their reverent assent to his loving words they confess their sins and offer themselves for the communion.

“Oh, then it seemed to me as if God with
the broad eye of midday
Clearer looked in at the windows; and all
the trees in the churchyard
Bowed down their summits of green;
But in the children there ran (I noted it
well; I knew it)
A tremor of holy rapture.”

May that sweet picture be repeated throughout all our land as Christ's boys and girls become at the next communion the children of the Lord's Supper; and, as they rise,

“With heaven in their hearts and their
faces,”

may they realize how the Good Shepherd takes them under His loving care both for time and for eternity.



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