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Letter from George Sibley to William Russell, October 24, 1834

George Champlin Sibley
Lindenwood College

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Lindenwood 24th October 1834

To Mr. Wm. Russell,

Dear Sir,

Mrs. Sibley has just now put into my hands a letter of your to her, dated the 1st inst. In which you express your wish that your Daughters Ann, & Mary Lewis may be excused from attendance at the Sunday School, and also excused from "committing to memory portions of the Bible &c." – These requests you accompany with some of your reason therefor, but at the same time, you say, that if they should "interfere with the Settled rules of your School, or "principles upon which you receive Scholars, in that case I must and do abandon them" – Considering this to be a matter well worthy of attention; and it being a subject that has not by any means escaped my serious reflections, and that the obligations of friendship demand from me a free & candid reply to your letter; I am sure will readily excuse me for what follows. I am the more disposed to address my sentiments to you on this occasion, because it affords me an opportunity to correct some misapprehensions of facts that for some time past have been too much entertained I fear, if not by yourself, by some others. Mrs. Sibley must herself apologize to you for the delay in answering your letter. My answer to it would have been given promptly at any time, if it had been sooner shown to me.

As to Sunday Schools – I am entirely convinced of their great utility, as they are at present conducted, - inasmuch as they afford means of instruction in the first rudiments of education, to very many, who would otherwise be entirely deprived of that blessing, and they hold out inducements to many to attend them, who could scarcely be persuaded to accept of gratuitous instruction in any other way. It is true that these Schools are in the hands of the professors of the Christian Religion of various denominations, and that the undisputed doctrines of that religion are inculcated with care, and more or less of zeal, which so far from being any objection in my mind, is rather a recommendation. At any rate it is very certain that unless these Schools are conducted as they now are (By the Christian Churches) they will be soon abandoned,- and the Public will thus lose this very important auxiliary to the cause of Education. If under this system many thousands of poor and vagrant children are taught the art of reading (as is the well known fact) who would in all probability have otherwise remained all their lives in ignorance of that art; surely it ought not to be urged as an objection to the system, that the Bible is used as a text book therein. With some, it might appear to be just as well, to use some other work, and doubtless this might be done, without in the least impairing the efficiency of the institution so far as it regards instruction in the art of reading. But these Christians who are the [/projectors] proprietors and managers of the Sunday Schools, cannot consistently with their belief employ their Sabbath in any species of labour, or business except such as is connected with the duties enjoined by their religion.

If I thought that the teaching of children, the principles of the Christian Religion, was injurious to them in their prospects here or hereafter, I should be seriously inclined to condemn and surpise, as far as I could, the Sunday Schools – But such an idea never once occurred to me, and I confess my utter incredulity, that any well informed person can entertain such an opinion – It does not by any means follow that a good knowledge of the fundamental principles of any System, must necessarily produce in the mind convictions of its truth. One can hardly be called "well educated", who has not a thorough knowledge of the most prominent Religious and Political Systems that govern the inhabitants of the earth, - to acquire this knowledge is not only quite easy, but affords to the Student one of his greatest pleasures. A Son or Daughter of our great Republic who claims a right to a place amongst the

“educated” would feel not a little mortified to be found ignorant of the Religious belief of the Chinese, the Turks, Hindoos &c., not simply the name of their religion, but their principles and foundation and origin – It is important for the Scholar to be instructed in these things, because they aid essentially in explaining the character of the People, and of their Civil & Political institutions and Laws, are all based on the Principles of the Christian Religion? – No one can, at this day, claim the rank of an accomplished Scholar, Lawyer or Statesman, who has not studied the Bible of the Christians as a classic. Independently of its high claim to our respect, as the first promulgator of the rights of Man, and of the plain principles of civil liberty, it well deserves a very high rank in the annals of History, and by far the highest of all others in the Scale of Sublime literary & Poetical productions, to say nothing of its pure moral tendency. And when we remember how many of the best, most learned, wise and eminent men of past ages, as well as of the present, have not only considered this sublime work worthy of their first attention, but have declared their assent to its doctrine. And still further, when We observe that there is not one of us, who cannot number among the avowed friends and converts of this religion, either a Parent, Brother, Sister, Wife or other relation or friend, whose Judgement and sincerity we dare not question. When we reflect upon these facts, does it not seem strange that any of us can be so unreasonable as to imagine that any human creature can be harmed by acquiring a complete knowledge of the Christian Religion, or that such knowledge is not, to say the least, extremely desirable, as a Mere Classic?

And yet we do actually sometimes meet with people who whilst they profess the greatest respect for the Bible, retol its sublime sentiments and language, and will not venture to deny the truth of the Religion it teaches, repress the most decided repugnance to it being placed in the hands of their children, lest they should receive some unfair and injurious bias. I admit very freely, that the old practice among zealous Christians of obliging their children to read the Bible without any proper explanation of its object and tendency; must have produced in thousands of instances, a distaste for the Book, which could not fail to be more or less injurious. This effect was by no means the necessary consequence of reading the Bible – It was the obvious result of the injudicious manner adopted by those who thus urged its study on their children. This objection is, if I am not much mistaken, entirely obviated by the plan of instruction adopted by the Sunday Schools. So that if the pupils receive no benefit, it is not probable they can derive any harm from the illustrations and explanations that are usually given in the lessons they learn. Now if this Sabbath day exercise be neither burthensome in itself as such, or in the least interfere with the regular studies of the week (which I assure you is the fact as regards the pupils at Linden Wood) it really appears to me that these schools so far from deserving reprobation, are entitled to the Public patronage, inasmuch as they afford useful instruction to children of all conditions – to those in poverty, they impart the first rudiments of english learning, thus putting it in their power to advance of themselves to the very summit of human knowledge – Such as are more advanced, and whose circumstances give them access to other schools, are here enabled with scarcely an effort on their part, to acquire correct ideas of the Religion of the Country; an acquisition which, as I have before remarked, no person should be deficient in who pretends to [have] even a pretty good education. Some object to these Sunday Schools, from an apprehension that the plan of instruction is calculated (if not properly designed) to produce a Sectarian bias in the minds of young persons, on the subject of Christian Religion. If I am not misinformed as to this matter, there can be no reasonable ground for any fears. The System that is in practice in all these Schools, has the sanction of all the principal Protestant Sects, and is so arranged as to avoid every point of Sectarian controversy, so that nothing is taught that is not in accordance with the well defined interpretations and settled belief, of each and all of the Protestant Christian Churches. It is, I am well aware, next to impossible for any Teacher in any branch of learning

whatever, to impart his ideas to his pupils entirely clear of the bias of his own mind. It is for this reason, of the utmost importance that parents should be careful to ascertain the character and principles of those to whom they commit the education of their children, I am thoroughly convinced, that there is far less danger of any such bias being received by the children of the Sunday Schools on the Subject of Religion than, there is in other Schools, upon other subjects of Study. But, after all. What is this great Bugbear Sectarian influence? If we adopt the Christian Religion as the true, & only true one, we must necessarily associate ourselves with some one of the christian sects, and in my humble opinion it matters not which one of those Sects one belongs to, either as it regards his own individual good, or that of his country. And whilst we remain incredulous as to the truth of the Christian Religion, and support it merely for the Sake of its moral influence, and its intimate connection with all out Systems of Government and Laws, it appears to me there is still less reason to fear any evil from it – the very fact of the existence of Sectarian controversy, ought in my mind to allay all apprehension of evil from Christian association.

I have probably detained you longer than was necessary on this subject. Having carefully considered it, and having deliberately made up my mind in favor of the Sunday School System, as a most valuable auxiliary to the great cause of Education in which cause I profess to feel much interest, I could not well omit to give you the principle reasons for my persuasion. I am decidedly in favor of every plan of education that is not incompatible with the principles of civil liberty, and the services of our Government.

The other point mentioned in your letter, “Committing to memory portions of Scripture” is not to be noticed. If I mistake not, you do not object either to this or the attendance on the Sunday School; except in so far as they may interfere with and interrupt other Studies; and produce a distaste for the study of the Bible, at a more mature age. As it regards any improper influence upon the young mind, I have already said enough to shew. There can be no cause of alarm. And I repeat the assurance, that neither the Sunday School lessons or the morning recitations of three or four lines from the Bible, do or can in the least degree interfere with, or retard the other studies of the pupils at Linden Wood. So far from this being the case, I am warranted in assuring you, that the effect produced by these momentary relaxations from the prescribed exercises of the School room, is decidedly favourable to the advancement of the Pupils in the latter. And they are at least as good exercises for the memory, as the reciting of so many lines of Poetry would be. You are aware that Mrs. Sibley has united herself to the Presbyterian Communion of the Christian Church. And I doubt not you will readily concede, that this act of hers was the result of reflection, investigation and conviction. And I need not tell you that every honest Christian endeavors to act in all things conformably to their Christian duties. – It does not follow however from this; that Mrs. Sibley believes herself in duty bound to employ her time & talents as a teacher, for the purpose of converting her Pupils to a belief in the tenets of her own faith. This would be inexcusable to say the least, for it would be practicing a deception on those who place their children under her care & instruction. I feel it my duty to assure you, that those who entertain this notion of Mrs. Sibley’s course, are entirely mistaken, and have suffered themselves to be unnecessarily alarmed. But it is equally my duty to State to you most explicitly; that in her domestic regulations, of whatever description, Mrs. Sibley has hitherto, and always will in future, be governed entirely by her own sense of duty and propriety. In the School room, and during the proper hours of study, a strict regard is paid to the advancement of her Pupils, agreeably to the expressed wishes in the family circle, whenever it is applicable. The truth is Sir, that the Pupils here are engaged in the ordinary exercises of the School,

many hours more every day, than at any other school I ever saw, and besides, they often bring those exercises into the family sitting room. And yet there is no fatigue of the intellect, no distaste of study produced, for the simple reason that one study often serves as the best relaxation from another, and all experience proves that children will advance much faster in three or four branches at once, alternately attended to, than they will, if confined to one. For instance, Ann will become mistress of her Grammar at an earlier day, by alternating the Study of Geography, Arithmetic, and writing, than she could if she were confined exclusively to her Grammar.

These are my reasons for favoring the Sunday Schools, and for approving our Morning recitations of Verses from the Bible. They are presented to you with no other view than to set forth the ground of my own impressions on the subject and to explain the true reasons why those exercises have been adopted as in some sort auxiliary to the plan of instruction at the little School at Linden Wood. They are not however any part of the settled plan of instruction here, for altho' they do not in the least interfere with the regular course, nor in our apprehension produce any injury whatever, yet we do not pretend to dictate any particular studies, or any particular modes of relaxation from study, that shall be uniformly attended to by the Pupils of Linden Wood. Even if parents were to desire it, we could not and would not venture to give instructions in Theology, further than the mere outlines as they are taught at almost every School of good character. Where no objections are expressly made however, by Parents or Guardians, the course hitherto pursued, will be adhered to, as to the exercises in question, and with regard to those Pupils whose parents or Guardians desire the discontinuance of those exercises, they will be exempted from them. As you are the first and only one who has ever suggested a wish for a change (I say perhaps except your Brother James) and believing as I do that you are under a mistake as to the nature, effect, influence and design of the things alluded to, as your Daughter Ann, and Miss Mary Lewis.

I remain very truly yours,

G. C. Sibley