

SCRIPTURE TEACHING IN SCHOOLS.

At a meeting of the Wellington Branch of the N.Z. Educational Institute, the following resolution was moved by Mr J. H. Parkinson:—

"That with a view to checking the present tendency towards sectarian divisions among the people of the Dominion, the Institute prepare and submit to the various churches a statement setting out the opportunities that the Education Act allows for moral and Scripture teaching, and explaining the advantages of the Nelson system for the carrying on of this work; and that teachers (while not taking any part in the actual teaching) be recommended to co-operate with representatives of the churches in establishing the system wherever such co-operation is desired."

After discussion, an amendment to leave out all the words after "Scripture teaching" was carried. It was also resolved that the resolution be forwarded as a remit to the annual meeting of the N.Z. Educational Institute.

The following article on the Nelson System was contributed by Mr Parkinson:—

THE NELSON SYSTEM.

A good deal has been heard recently of the demand for some form of religious teaching for the youth of the Dominion, other than that which is provided for them by the home and the Sunday School; and some of the churches have definitely embarked upon a scheme of church schools to meet this demand. They are to be commended for their earnestness, but there are certain points of view from which their action is to be greatly deplored. The public schools are the nurseries of the nation, in which, with few exceptions, all the children of the nation have for forty years been brought up together, irrespective of class or creed, and have thus grown up almost wholly free from the sectarian divisions and class distinctions that have marred social life in the older countries. This happy state of affairs cannot exist unimpaired if the movement for the establishment of church schools attains any considerable dimensions; and it is important that those who regard this question seriously should know, for very many do not know, that under the present Education Act opportunity is given

for a great deal wider range of religious teaching in the public schools than can ever be attained by any probable extension of the church-school movement.

The method by which this can be brought about is by adopting what has been generally called the Nelson System, or some modification of it to suit particular localities. It has been the custom of certain assailants of the education system to say that it is a Godless system, and that it bolts and bars the doors of the public schools against the Bible. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the work being carried on in Nelson, Timaru, Oamaru, Waimate, Dunedin, Gisborne, and other places, amply proves. In 1914 it was estimated that 15,000 children in the public schools were then receiving regular moral and Scripture lessons in their own class-rooms and in the usual school hours,—not before or after school, but within the regular school hours. The lessons are given by visiting clergy and other approved workers, and in most, if not all, cases embrace the classes from the first to the sixth standards, so that a regular course of lessons extending over six years can be arranged for. The system is strictly in accordance with the law, and depends on the fact that the Education Act requires schools to be open for four hours a day, while the regulations of the Education Boards require five hours a day. Outside the legal hours, the four hours, the school buildings are under the management of the School Committee, representing the parents, and in section 49 of the Act there is this provision:

Provided that nothing in this section or in any by-laws of the Board shall prevent the Committee from granting as it deems fit the use of the school buildings as aforesaid for the purpose of moral and religious instruction.

There is thus one school hour per day outside the requirements of the Act, and the Nelson System consists in making use of a part of one of these five weekly hours for the purpose of religious teaching. In practice, the first half-hour of one morning per week is all that has been used so far, and it is sufficient for the present to say that half an hour's instruction is given per week. On the morning of the lesson the opening time of the school is put back half an hour. This allows those who do not wish to at-

tend the lessons to be absent without any disturbance of the classes. In practice it is found that the number of absentees is about one or two per cent. of the class rolls. On the morning of the lesson the appointed workers take the classes in their usual rooms,—the ordinary teachers are not in charge, though probably they are in the building—and give the lessons to the ordinary classes. There is no separation of the sects, so the children are not indoctrinated with the virus of sectarianism. At the expiration of the time for the lesson the ordinary teacher takes charge of the class, the absentees come in to their places, and the work of the day proceeds. There is ample testimony that wherever the system has been used with earnestness the results have been entirely satisfactory.

The two main objections to this system as usually stated are that it is subject to the whim of School Committees, and that it can reach only a small proportion of the children of the Dominion. As to the first of these, a great deal more is made of it than it is worth. The Committees represent the people, and if the people desire that willing workers should have the opportunity to form classes there need be very little trouble about the Committee. There have been cases of refusal, but it is hard to find anyone that can quote one. The other objection is sound so far as it goes, but even allowing its force, the Nelson system could reach, probably already reaches, a far greater number of children than can be reached by church schools. And the system is only in course of development. It is easy to imagine almost unlimited extension if only its possibilities were known and appreciated.

There are two great considerations that recommend the Nelson System. In the first place, it preserves the sanctity of sacred things, and fosters the feeling of reverence for them. The Scriptures are read and expounded by those who are known to be specially fitted for that duty,—not treated as ordinary class readers, nor committed to the handling of those who may be unwilling or careless in the use of them. The increased influence that the lessons acquire from this fact can hardly be calculated. In the second place, it avoids the division of the young people of the nation into sectarian camps. They are thus enabled