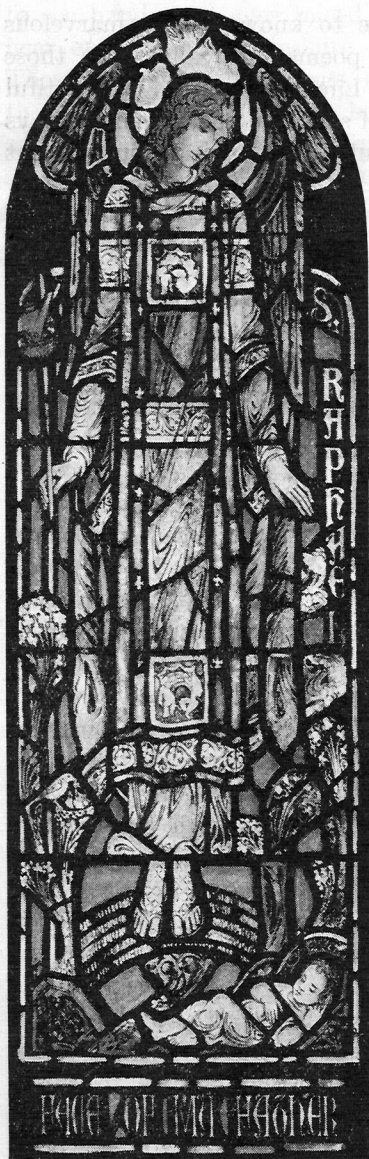


# Light and Color in the Church School

Charles J. Connick

Window pictures by courtesy of Mr. Connick



**A**t rare intervals appear creative artists, whose work stands out with compelling appeal assuring for them a place of permanent leadership. Charles Connick has won such a place among skilled craftsmen in stained glass. Adopting a symbolic rather than a realistic approach to his art he has combined beauty of design with spiritual values. From his studio in Boston have gone forth windows that are widely recognized as masterpieces of stained glass and religious symbolism. ¶ No one cares much for colorless, impersonal art. Mr. Connick puts himself into his craftsmanship. It is to him far more than a means of livelihood. It is a means of self-expression through which his devout and poetic spirit conveys its message. ¶ This article will be of interest to all who are anxious to create an atmosphere of light, color and beauty for the Christian training of youth.



**M**Y EARLIEST memory of Sunday school is made happy by a fountain. Around it are ferns and flowers, whistling birds in cages, and singing children. Of course, I know that if the glamor and shifting lights were carefully removed from this picture, the events that I remember would be labeled "A Children's Day Celebration in a Country Sunday School." The fountain itself would be reduced to a crude contraption of barrels and garden hose.

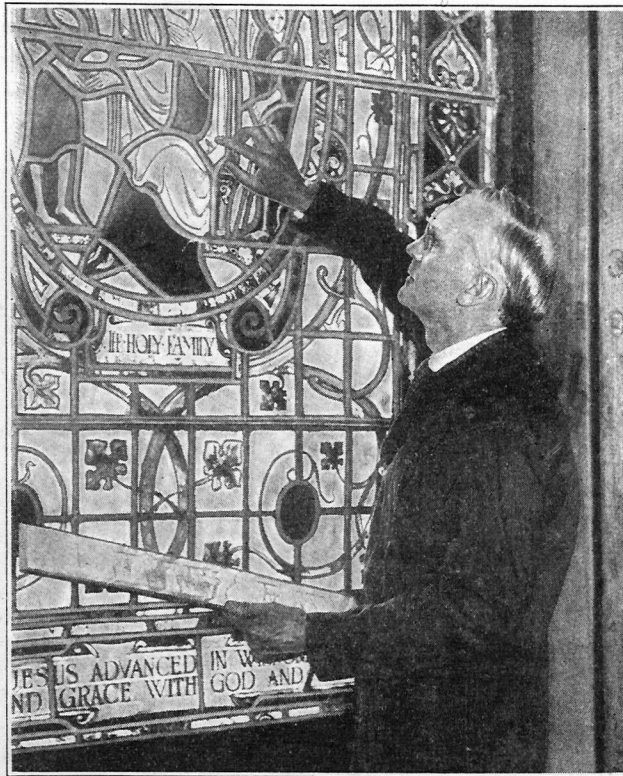
But as I see the shining eyes of the little fellow (myself), his reaction to the small makeshift fountain contrasts distinctly with half-erased memories of dates of wars and births of kings, printed on lesson leaves that he could not read.

## Three Pictures

The truth is that the word "Sunday school" brings forth for me a rather drab background on which are

silhouetted three colorful symbols. The first is the fountain; the second is a flaming Christmas tree that made a glorious setting for two fat chickens. Because the little chap was hungry the trumpets and guns and toy wagons quite missed his consciousness on that occasion. An important part of the picture includes the warm-hearted, motherly neighbor who heard serious talk of the eatableness of chickens instead of chatterings about toys and candy. She arranged the luscious Christmas dinner that belongs to the Christmas-tree symbol.

Another picture follows so closely as to be almost a part of the earlier impression, although the event occurred years later in a more sophisticated city Sunday school. Probably the youngster I am talking about was twelve or thirteen. The vision is of a handsome man with waving white hair and genial, ruddy face—the superintendent of the Emory Sunday School of Pittsburgh. I remember his name, Joseph



Wide World Photo

Mr. Charles Connick, Master Craftsman

D. Weeks; but I remember, even more clearly, something that he said. With a few words, he took the psalm that we had been studying, out of our grubby lesson leaves, and announced it as a song, a poem, from the heart of a glorious old king. He added that it was a splendid example of Hebrew poetry, and that as we grew older we would love such a strikingly beautiful expression as "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of Glory will come in."

Then, in his clear voice he recited the entire psalm without once looking at the book. He emphasized the music of it, and the peculiar way in which the Hebrew poet had repeated phrases with slight changes, and so made them tell like strokes on a harp, or like the ringing of a bell.

Now I know that on that historic morning he introduced me to the golden world of poetry. That region of the imagination was later enriched by a Sunday-school teacher whom we called Professor Gage. He thrilled the same youth with the voices of Shakespeare, Tennyson, Browning, and a mighty host of singers, who

"Have made us heirs  
To truth and pure delight by heavenly lays."

From that morning the Bible has no longer been to me a collection of dry historical events, commandments and dates, to be learned and recited, but

gradually I have come to know it as a marvelous anthology of inspired poems. I realize that those poems culminate in a Life that is itself a beautiful poem, the inspiration of sensitive poets from the days of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to our present troubled times.

### Children Are Receptive Audiences

The most vivid thought I have brought with my Sunday-school memories is that the eager minds of children may be easily touched with lasting images of beauty. I think the poet was right when he said:

"Trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home."

I feel that church schools are wonderful places to perpetuate the lustre of those clouds of glory. Children are healthy lovers of beauty. Before they learn the cheap tricks of making fetishes and bludgeons out of opinions about art, they are receptive audiences for most talented creative artists.

As an artist I have discovered that great masterpieces of art and of the crafts, almost without exception, have something of the direct simplicity and freshness of a child. Also, that such masterpieces bring gratifying responses from the shining eyes of children. This is particularly true of my own craft. I have seen grown-ups go through that radiant treasure house, Chartres, without changing expression very much, but I have never seen a child look at the smallest example of beautiful color in glass alight, without seeing his own eyes come alight too. In fact, one of the choice stories to enrich the history of stained glass during the last hundred years is the story of a child. It is about young Viollet le Duc, who later became famous as an architect, and as the greatest exponent of the vitality and beauty of the craft, stained glass. His first visit to the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, was made when he was a child of seven. As he stood with his father before the north transept rose window, the organ began to play, and he said: "Oh, father, the window is singing!"

Those words might well serve as a motto in every stained-glass workshop, for a successful window does sing as it balances in varying lights. And how significant and interesting it is to know that Viollet le Duc, the man, is the one writer about glass who established its volatility of clamorous color in the exhaustive chapter, "Vitrail," he wrote for his *Dictionary of Architecture*. Wasn't the poet right again when he said, "The child is father of the man"?

When I have exhibitions of great windows in my gallery, children are favored guests. I always thrill



to see hands and eyes raised spontaneously, and to hear expressions of pleasure more or less coherent. Those squealings, chortlings, and chucklings are like the sounds I made years ago, before that little Sunday-school fountain. Also I know that such responses are related to the first appeal of light and color to grown-ups whose hearts are still young.

### Visions

And so I have often speculated as to just what I would do if I were free to design and decorate a church-school assembly room. The mere thought of such an opportunity brings with it a flood of ideas that resolves into visions of countless church schools. In one vision I see walls, ceilings, and furniture severely simple in ivory whites, blues, and grays with touches of orange, alight with many windows. Their luminous areas of silvery white leaded glass are touched here and there with little patterns delicately painted and stained a soft gold. They are small heraldic devices of stars, birds, babes and sages, of castles and ships, trees, and flowers.

Set in these windows of plain glazing are medallions of the most beautiful design and color I can imagine. They symbolize a child's delight in the moving beauty of his world, and they suggest my own feeling about the luster, sparkle, and dancing gaiety of a colorful fountain. So, naturally, one of the medallions is designed to glorify the spirit of a fountain and its implication of joyful sound and refreshing purity. A child with a flute and a singing bird on a little tree complete the pattern that is eloquent in whites, greens, reds, golds, and blues.

### Symbolisms

Both the design and the color scheme are true to venerable traditions in Christian art. The fountain is the symbol of baptism and the colors white, green, and red signify Faith, Hope, and Charity in the medieval symbolism of color. Gold is the color of heavenly riches, and blue (most eloquent of colors) symbolizes wisdom, loyalty, eternity. I do not feel a heavy academic expression in that symbolism of color—nor in any ancient tradition of Christian art, for that matter. But I do see vivid suggestions of the "character" of colors as they appeal to all of us—and especially to the eager-minded child in his world so near that of the poet's own region. For the craftsmen, artists, and architects who left us the rich heritage we call Christian art were poets in their own right, who had never lost their childlike pleasure in the simple things of earth which they made so significant of the spiritual world and its development.

So, as my vision persists, it is not strange that I see a development to include the fountain in a series of medallions to symbolize the four elements:

Water, Fire, Air, Earth. Naturally the psalmist, with his songs to include all growing things, and Saint Francis of Assisi with his Canticle to the Sun, appear with glorious opportunities. Then I see Christ's power over the elements and his poetic feeling about them and about seedtime and harvest, calm and storm. His followers down the ages who defied and tamed those same elements in service of him also appear. The army of martyrs, missionaries, pilgrims, and circuit riders stretches almost to our own doors and I delight in their stout hearts and in the power of my medium to symbolize them—their devotion, their courage, and their enduring faith.

I realize that I am finding in my dream of the church school a gratifying opportunity for a fresh development of the ideals of Christian art. But my enthusiasm is not an empty thing without foundation in experience. I have had some opportunities to peal forth these loves of mine to the eyes and hearts of young folks, and I have been happy to find them loving concepts of nature's moods and the spirit of patterned heroes and saints, eye to eye with me.

I have found that children, who soon tire of the mawkish and sentimental pictures so often served up to them, revel in the sound, clear beauty of good craftsmanship in any material. And while childish art is a disgrace to all of us, the element of true childlikeness is like a touch of gold wherever it



Detail from the Dante Window in Princeton University Chapel

appears. And it is to be found in masterpieces of every craft, including that of painting on wood or canvas. Always it seems to reflect a child's eagerness to share every bright vision or adventure with a straight enthusiasm quite beyond any mere effort to win praise or profit.

One of my first opportunities came to me through the good sense and good will of a warm-hearted woman, a grandmother whose love for children stretched far beyond all family ties. The project was a rest room in a children's hospital and a small chapel adjoining it. We talked of children's delight in the world of imagination and we shared quotations from Stevenson, Mother Goose, and Saint Francis of Assisi. Her son was the architect of the hospital and we three greatly enjoyed the development of that rest room in small figures and medallions that now serve to share our pleasure with convalescent youngsters. They respond variously to appeals of Joan of Arc, Sir Galahad, the Man in the Moon, the Shadowy Rider of Windy Nights, or Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

The small chapel we enriched with archangels as guardians of children of various ages (in windows flanking the altar) and in children of the Old and

New Testament in the smaller windows. All my helpers in studio and workshop caught the happy impulse of that gracious lady and her son. We all gloried in the thought that our windows should—in their honest functioning—bring smiling lights into tired little eyes, and that they might set alive some impulses to survive memories of sickness and pain.

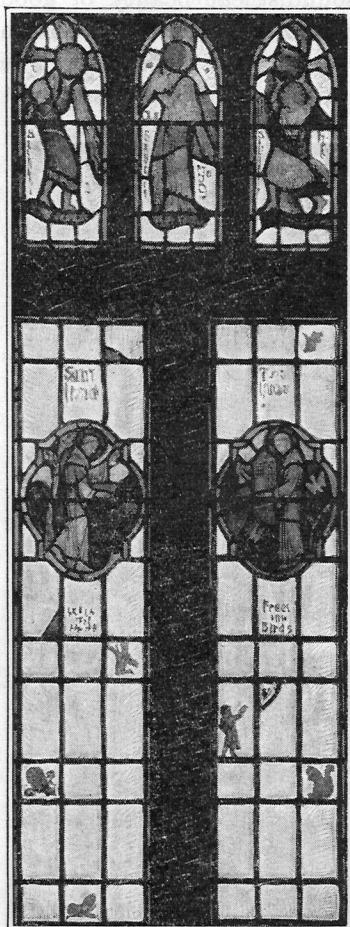
After that came a chance to celebrate Pennsylvania heroes in a series of corridor windows between a great city church and its church school. Then, in the same church vestibule were other heroes—the Circuit Rider, sowing little churches like spiritual seeds, Johnny Appleseed with his marching

armies of apple trees, Franklin arousing the Giant of the Lightning, and the Moravian Trumpeters persisting in their picturesque, romantic salutation to the Easter Dawn.

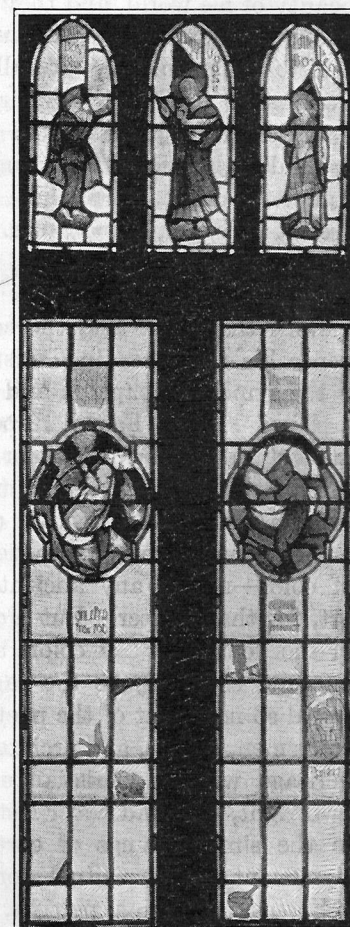
The series of windows with tracery in a great dining hall of a boys' college stirred all of us with its opportunities to reach a young audience. The architect knew of the rest-room windows and saw with us a vast company of small figures, made more definitely significant by medallions underneath them. The entire group was designed in silvery whites and brilliant colors, to symbolize the growth of English and American literature from the earliest days to our own time. How we reveled in the poets and their contemporaries—their visions and their flaming symbols!

A part of that splendid commission was the larger tower window devoted to the brave and hearty life of Philander Chase, pioneer, circuit preacher, first bishop of Ohio and Illinois. We entered heartily into his eventful life and were happy in forming incidents and character into a great colorful symbol.

All these efforts merge with the Princeton Epic windows in my thought of what my craft can do for the church school. Dante, Malory, Milton, and Bunyan, have, with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John glowing and colorful inspirations for boys and girls. When a professor of literature announced those great symbols as glorious and successful invitations to the warm hearts of gospels and epics together, I thought at once of their place in an ideal church school. I also thought with fresh enthusiasm of the craft of light and color in all its bright implications, and it seemed as essentially a part of the church school as the organ and its songs. It really belongs to the region of music and song, and whether it be developed in large windows or in small medallions that may hang in window-panes of clear glass, its vibrations are sure to quicken a glow in the eyes of children.



Saint Francis Window in Playroom of Children's Hospital, Cincinnati



"Rock-a-bye Baby" and "The Man in the Moon"