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The National Convention

An Address delivered at the Cleveland Conference

FRANK KNIGHT SANDERS, D. D.
Secretary Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society

The subject which we are to discuss this morning is the purpose and value of the National Convention of the Association and its future policy in this regard. Two of these have been held—one at Philadelphia and the other at Boston. The former was in many respects an experiment, yet was fairly successful. The latter, carried out under the best of conditions, was thoroughly so, arousing an interest which was widely felt.

At Philadelphia the Association discovered, through its incidental failures, how to properly adjust departmental programs to the general program. The result at Boston was a much more smoothly working adjustment. As a result of the experience at Boston, however, there is a very general feeling, at least among departmental officers, that the general theme of a convention program should not directly control the choice of themes for departmental programs. It was determined at Chicago in 1903 to place the program in the responsible charge of the president of the Association, making its arrangement and management his principal duty. This plan has since been followed.

No one can doubt the value of the two conventions already held. They have contributed in at least four ways to the development of the movement.

1. Each convention has impressively and unmistakably given indication of the resourcefulness, dignity and strength of the Association.
2. Each has imparted fresh vigor to the movement, arousing interest, confirming loyalty and generating enthusiasm.
3. Each has become a new point of departure in the active promotion of the work of religious education. This was particularly noticeable at Boston. After that great gathering

there was a flood tide of readiness for action, which we were unfortunately unable to utilize.

4. Each convention has made a distinct and permanent contribution to the literature of religious education, partly through its program and more fully through the valuable report of its proceedings.

A great convention has at least three distinct objectives:

1. *The missionary aim.* It is worth while to go where an interest is to be aroused.

2. *The educational aim.* It is worth while to get together, in order that the thinking of our very brainiest men may be brought to bear upon our problems.

3. *The inspirational aim.* A convention formulates in the most impressive way the ideas for which the Association stands.

There is no question, therefore, of the necessity of such great gatherings, nor of their value. Without them we can neither hold nor increase our constituency. Without them we cannot properly impress the country with the significance of our movement.

We need to consider the frequency, the location and the character of these gatherings. It was originally declared by the Executive Board that it would be wise to hold four or five great annual conventions until the country had been thoroughly interested in our work. Then they expected to consider with care the question of biennial conventions. They also considered in a general way the geographical limits of such conventions. It must be remembered that the great bulk of our supporters are in the East, and it may be that for some time no convention should go west of Ohio. Geographically the most available part of the country would be eastern or central New York.

The question of the character of a convention has been frequently discussed. Is it for the presentation of a theme, or for the discussion of practical methods? It will be remembered that the Philadelphia Convention discussed the Bible in practical life, and the Boston Convention the aims of religious education. The plan of these conventions produced in the report of the proceedings a very thorough and adequate treatment of these subjects. It would seem advisable to continue this general plan so far as the conventions are concerned. It is keenly

felt, however, by those who attend our conventions that we devote too large a portion of available time to set addresses, giving too little opportunity for suggestions from the floor.

On the whole, it is my judgment that we should hold at least two more annual conventions—one in 1907 and one in 1908; that they should be located where they will bring together the largest number of our own membership, and will serve to increase popular interest in the work we have undertaken; that a program should be arranged by the president on the same general principles which have hitherto obtained, but that great care should be taken to reserve as much opportunity as possible in the morning sessions for free discussion.

During these two years it will be feasible and wise to hold many subsidiary gatherings, one in each district, which will be gatherings specifically for the purpose of consultation. After these two years have elapsed, I should be definitely in favor of a biennial convention, it being understood that in the year in which no convention is held there shall be held at least two or three gatherings of the type which we are finding useful today—gatherings for consultation, for the review of the work actually done, for surveying the future and for adopting working plans of proved efficiency.