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What Does Religious Education Mean to the Church?*

GEORGE H. BETTS

Because of the magnitude of the problem and the brevity of time I will ask your permission to use the method of the classroom rather than that of the platform—seeking to be brief and analytical rather than eloquent and illustrative.

What does Religious Education mean to the church? First of all, and perhaps including all the rest, *Religious Education offers the church the only instrument through which it can successfully perform its primary function in the world.* I say *primary* function because the church has certain functions that may be called secondary and other functions that are primary.

The secondary functions of the church are not secondary because unimportant, for they are of the highest importance. They are secondary because they must rest upon and be an outgrowth of the primary function if they are to be significant and fruitful. Among the secondary functions of the church are: To build and maintain churches; to provide for public services in the churches; to promote philanthropic enterprises; to publish and distribute religious literature; to encourage and engage in social reforms; to organize and carry on missionary enterprises.

In its briefest form the primary function of the church is *to make effective in present-day personal experience and social relationships the ideals of character and action set forth by Jesus in his life and teachings.*

The church has been fulfilling its secondary functions with fair success. Men build church edifices of imposing and often beautiful structure as visible symbols of their faith. They assemble in considerable numbers to enjoy and participate in the public services. They support with reasonable liberality the church's program of philanthropy. They engage more or less effectively in social reforms. They organize and promote missionary enterprises in foreign lands. All of which is praiseworthy and good. Except, however, the primary function of the church is well accomplished its secondary functions can not be of very great significance. Unless churches are built and maintained, services are conducted, philanthropies carried on, reforms promoted, and missionary enterprises conducted in the spirit of the plain and simple teachings of Jesus and in accordance with his philosophy of life they are sure to prove but empty enterprises of doubtful value.

Is the church succeeding in its primary function, that of *impressing upon its own constituency and the world the simple and practical meaning and supreme value of the message of its Founder?* The question can not be answered by an unqualified Yes or No. It is undoubtedly safe to

* Read at the Seventeenth Convention of The R.E.A., by George H. Betts, Ph.D., professor at Northwestern University.

say, however, that the church has been least successful in fulfilling its great primary function.

First, the mass of our people, even those within the church, do not know in any thorough and complete way the personality and teachings of Jesus as set forth in the gospels. To many he is little more than an historical name. Investigations made among students in colleges and universities have shown that a large proportion of even these picked men and women of our day possess only a very fragmentary and incidental knowledge of the Christian system. They are frankly ignorant of the concrete details and the deeper meanings of Jesus' message and life, and hence cannot but miss much of their dynamic.

Second, much is still to be desired in bringing men to such a deep and compelling appreciation of the personality, character and way of life of Jesus as will grip the deeper loyalties and create the purpose of making his life the personal standard. The difficulty lies in the fact that there is so general a tendency to treat the Christ character as a unique personality, a beautiful but impracticable ideal—something to wonder over and praise in song and story, but hardly seriously to accept as a concrete standard and pattern by which to model our own lives. Much of the appreciation directed toward the person of Jesus is such as would be rendered toward a remarkable picture or statue—the work of a master artist—with no thought of attempting to copy it. Such an emotional response as this lacks the compelling quality that insures the personal appropriation of the admired qualities.

Third, the church has probably been least successful of all in bringing men actually to put the principles of Christianity into effect in individual conduct and in social relations. It is this failure to make religion carry over at this point which accounts for the sin, unrighteousness, injustice, oppressions, strain and hatred that still prevail to so large an extent among men, institutions and nations. This prevalent divorcement between religion and life is the most vulnerable point in the church's program today.

Going back now to our original proposition, religious education is able to put into the hands of the church the only instrument by which it can remedy these conditions through fulfilling its first and most fundamental function, that of bringing men *to know, accept and practice* the basic principles taught by Jesus. Religious education is not a panacea. There is no magic in religious education as a process any more than in any other kind of education. This fact some of its promoters need to bear in mind. On the other hand, those who are luke-warm or in opposition should realize that religious education does not seek to substitute education for religion, nor training for a vital religious consciousness. Religious education believes in and seeks to make use of the divine element in spiritual development as completely as could be desired by the most zealous of the evangelical group. The difference lies in the fact that religious education provides a way for the divine influence to impinge on the growing life constantly from the dawn of consciousness on through

maturity. And this constitutes a very fundamental difference; it is a commonplace in biology that the environmental influences which modify structure and lead to growth of new functions are the influences which are *constant* and habitual in their application; the accidental or the occasional produces no deep-seated effects.

Religious education is the most effective and often the only way of leading men into a vital religious consciousness, just because full, religious experience depends on the three factors, *knowledge, attitudes, and applied skills*, through the process of slow spiritual growth—that is, of education.

(1) *Religious knowledge.* "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." If the child is to love God and desire him as a father and friend, he must come to possess a true, rich and appealing concept of God; he must *know* about God. If he is to feel drawn to the Christ as the revealer of God to men and of man to himself, he must know in rich and fruitful detail what Jesus did and taught when among men; he must *know* about Jesus. If the child is to be interested in the Bible and come to look to it as a source of guidance and inspiration, he must come to *know* the Bible. If he is to believe that God works through the lives of men and nations toward the consummation of a great plan, he must have evidences of God at work in these ways; he must *learn about* religion at work in the lives of men and in the history of nations. If he is to be effectively loyal to the church and its program, he must come to *know* about the spirit and the enterprises of the church.

Furthermore, all these different forms of religious knowledge must come to the child as a normal part of his education. The various religious concepts concerned must grow by the slow process of an unfolding experience, just as other concepts must grow. The religious truths taught and facts learned must come one by one through the months and years of childhood and youth, line upon line and precept upon precept, so that they may be built firmly into the general body of knowledge as it develops from experience and instruction. If fruitful religious knowledge comes to the child in this natural and gradual way, it will so become a part of the mental constitution of its possessor that it can not be cast aside, but will inevitably function in shaping purposes and action. But if the acquisition of religious knowledge is neglected until the most favorable stage of learning is past, and until the general body of information and knowledge about the world is well formed, then whatever religious truths are gathered and whatever religious concepts are finally developed will tend to be a thing apart from every-day experience and therefore fail to become a true functioning part of conduct and character. New religious concepts can no more be grafted successfully on a mature body of general knowledge than a fresh shoot can be grafted on an old tree.

(2) *Religious attitudes.* The same principle holds for religious attitudes—the ideals, loyalties, devotions, appreciations, volitions and the expanding consciousness of God in the life. These things cannot

come in a day. It is as impossible to take a person who has grown to maturity unresponsive to spiritual values, and then, some day by a sudden act of reconstruction, create in him a fully developed religious nature as it is to take a person who has grown to maturity ignorant of music or literature and then some day make him musical or literary by having him listen to an oratorio or read a literary masterpiece. Only that which grows up with one ultimately becomes a true part of his constitution and a dynamic in his life.

Nor is this any attempt to substitute mere growth for a divine influence acting on the life. The ideal is to provide a way to prevent the life from ever breaking connection with the Divine, rather than to require the Divine Power to reclaim a soul who should never have been allowed to go astray. Religious education, by supplying the young life constantly through its formative period with religious direction and stimulus, builds its program on conservation rather than reclamation.

(3) *Carrying Christian ideals over into practice.* When it comes to the problem of bringing religion to expression in the common run of daily living the case is even stronger for religious education. For life is a great and unbroken unity. We do most naturally and effectively what we have grown accustomed to doing. We easily and of necessity fall into routine; habit governs most of our actions.

To ground childhood and youth in right religious habits is therefore to go far toward insuring worthy character and achievement. The person who has continuously through his earlier years been led to think and act in terms of Christian standards will hardly lay these standards aside in later years. One who has formed the habit in childhood of naturally and inevitably turning to God for help, strength and comfort will not fail to seek this source of help as he comes in conflict with the demands of mature experience. Those who have throughout the years of their preparation for life learned to share their money, their time and their sympathy in helping and serving others will not fail as older members of the church to support its program of helpfulness. In short, men and women who have early built the practice of the Christian religion into their system of habits will find those habits a safe anchor for conduct and character in the stresses and tests of daily living.

The church must, then, use religious education as the instrument by which to put the Christian program into effect. *It must work primarily upon childhood:* First, because only by so doing can the Christian motive be made an integral and inseparable part of thought, feeling and action, reaching to every avenue of experience; Second, because if the claims of religion are not recognized by childhood and youth, half the life is at best lost to the finest type of personal experience and to the finest type of service to others. Nor, can the reclaimed life ever be what would have been possible without the necessity for reclamation. It is always too late to be what we might have been.

But if the church is to work upon childhood, *it must work through religious education.* It can not substitute preaching intended for adults,

nor even preaching intended for children. There must be study, just as in other education; there must be instruction, just as in other education; there must be avenues open for expression, just as in other education. The church can not substitute appeals for decision to accept Christ, though such decisions will as a matter of course be made, not once but many times if the system of religious education is well carried out. The church can not substitute special effort for conversions, though conversions will as a matter of course often occur in connection with the envolving religious consciousness. In short, the church can not work successfully by any method that ignores the fundamental laws of growth and development which operate as inevitably in the spiritual nature as in the physical.

Certain results will follow as night the day from an effective system of religious education. 1. Religious education *can take the church back to the method employed by its Founder and successfully used by the early church*. Jesus was first of all a teacher. The early church was primarily a teaching church prior to the time when it took over from the universities the system of expository preaching which has since come to characterize its instruction. Powerful a factor as the pulpit is and will remain, it is proving increasingly inadequate, even with the help of the Sunday school, either to hold in compelling strength the loyalty of its constituency or to ground them in the essentials of the Christian system. The method of the pulpit is not adapted to childhood and youth, and the church which fails to reach childhood and youth is doomed to defeat and decay. Only as the modern church becomes a teaching institution, making the religious nurture and training of youth its first care and obligation, standing out above all other interests and enterprises whatever, will it be able to take its place as a regenerative agency in society.

2. *Religious education can vitalize and give dynamic force to the spiritual life of the church*. Every church is today concerned because of the relative lack of this spiritual fire. This religious energizing may best be permanently accomplished by incorporating religious thought and feeling into the developing life of childhood in such a way that the spiritual becomes a natural and effective controlling factor in every-day experience—the warp upon which the fabric of personality is woven. Once this is accomplished—as it can be accomplished through an effective system of religious education—a new vision will arise of the function and power of religion in the world.

3. *Religious education can give the church an intelligent, trained and loyal membership*. This membership, coming up through years of religious instruction and leadership, will possess a working knowledge of the Bible and a responsive interest in its teachings. It will understand and respond to the meaning of religion in the personal life and in social relations. It will have an intelligent understanding of the church and its program of activities. It will possess a background of information and interest for the appreciative reception of the message from the pulpit,

such as will make preaching more effective both on the part of preacher and congregation.

4. Religious education *can cure narrow sectarianism, while at the same time grounding more deeply true allegiance to religion and loyalty to the church.* This is to be accomplished by supplying our people with a common fund of religious thought, feeling, belief, and ideals. The like-mindedness on the great essentials of the Christian faith thus resulting will prove a powerful social bond for the harmonizing and unifying of the diverse social groups and interests constituting the discordant world of today.

5. Religious education *can make it possible for the church to take the offensive for the moral and religious regeneration of the world.* Important a power for good as the church has been and now is, it has scarcely yet begun to exert its full influence as the leaven in society. The church is still fighting too largely on the defensive. In our own Christian land it does not directly touch the lives of half our people, and its membership is at present falling off as compared with the growth of population. While the church makes itself felt in all moral and social reforms, it does not yet exert the influence which its divine commission warrants. It has had a part in banishing liquor, in lessening political corruption and in securing social justice, but this part has not been sufficiently compelling to satisfy its adherents.

The church owes it to itself and the world to be the one great invincible, conquering agency for righteousness whose voice shall be heard above every other voice and whose spirit, being the spirit of the Christ, shall rule in every other social organization. *This great commission can be accomplished only by universal religious training intensively carried on among all the church's constituency from earliest childhood to maturity.*

WEEK-DAY INSTRUCTION IN ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Under an arrangement with the city board of education pupils of the Jefferson Junior High School, upon written application by parents, may be excused every Friday afternoon, from 12:50 to 2:10 to attend a school of religion conducted at the North Presbyterian Church. The class, at present numbers thirty pupils, the average age being twelve. The promoters of the plan regard this as an experiment, conducted at a single center, with a small number of pupils, in order to demonstrate the feasibility of week-day religious instruction. The junior high school is situated about two blocks from the church. The school period to be used is that devoted to English.