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Impressive Facts in Religious Education

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Religious Education

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Impressive Facts in Religious Education*

WILLIAM CHALMERS COVERT, D.D.

Pastor The Forty-first Street Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Ill.

A statement of the purpose of this association was framed by some one in words apter than he knew, when he said it strove to inspire the educational forces of our country with the religious ideal and to inspire the religious forces of our country with the educational ideal.

Surely it should be the burden, by chartered purpose and good conscience, of some organized body within our nation to do something like this. With educational curricula generally unmoral and religion generally unpedagogic in method and inadequate in teaching agencies and materials, some well contrived, persistent personal work must be done if the goal of this organization is to be reached.

The President of the United States, in speaking to the association, urged with vehement sincerity the dominance of spiritual ideals in all modes of modern education lest we grow rich and yet remain poor in all that makes true wealth. The President was strong and far-seeing as he spoke of the necessities that have brought into existence the Religious Education Association.

The convention made several very distinct impressions upon every one that heard its speakers and caught its spirit:

AN ORGANIZATION OF ENERGY, BREADTH AND GRASP.

I. Its thorough organization is an unmistakable sign of continuity of purpose and real effectiveness. A convention is a mere incident in the program of an organization built for quiet, persistent, well-defined work as is this.

There are seven general officers, with Professor Francis G. Peabody of Harvard University president, and Mr. Henry F. Cope of Chicago general secretary. There are sixteen vice-presidents, including leading educators of the country. There are eighteen members of an executive board, with men like President Edmund J. James, Mr. William Shaw, Bishop McDowell, President Judson and others enrolled.

Twenty-five men in various parts of the nation are known as directors-at-large, including President Eliot of Harvard, President French of Huron College and President Stewart of Auburn

*This careful study of the character and work of the R. E. A. was written by Dr. Covert at the request of the editor of *The Interior* and appeared in that journal Feb. 27, 1908.

Theological Seminary. With these are twenty-one state directors. The forces are well articulated and responsive, and thoroughly represent those accustomed to doing idealistic things in a materialistic world.

II. The conservative disposition of the convention surprised me. The reputation for radicalism that was born with the association has been lost. The program and papers of this convention were sane and wise and saturated with a character-saving evangelism. The dominant note throughout was service through a consecrated, well-developed life. The convention speakers invariably took the great religious principles for granted and pushed on towards their effective application to the education of men and the salvation of the world.

III. The width of this enterprise is a comment on the religious statesmanship of somebody. There were fifteen departmental sessions, each reaching into a distinct field of inquiry and service. There were discussions of religious education in its relation to universities and colleges, theological seminaries, pastors and churches, Sunday schools, secondary and elementary schools, fraternal and social orders, teachers, Christian associations, young people's societies, the home libraries, the press, foreign mission schools and religious art and music.

These departments under the leadership of men recognized as devoted students, presented a remarkable width of view and variety of theme with a wealth of brilliant discussion by seventy-five men. The whole effect left no doubt in the observer's mind as to the destined influence of an organization able to view things so broadly and to command such educational abilities.

IV. The union of scholarship with religion represented in the personnel of those participating in the program was assuring. Educators of national reputation, religious workers in high esteem throughout the country and men eminent as authors and teachers took three days out of crowded lives to come with their messages to this convention. And they came with positive, faith-inspired messages. It would be a sad day for religion if our educated men were on the negative side. I have not in any religious meeting caught echoes of deeper, truer consecration to Christ and his work on earth than I heard from the lips of these skilled workers and recognized scholars. The church should hear of this and be glad.

WORKERS OF REVERENT SPIRIT AND SAVING ZEAL.

V. The painstaking and conscientious efforts of those at work on the problem of religious education were easily apparent and very impressive. There was no mediocrity in the program. Men invariably read what they brought and what they brought bore evidence of the most careful and tireless labor. Often indeed it showed itself the result of life's greatest work and chief enthusiasm. When workers like President King, President McLean,

President Doggett, Professor Peabody, Dean Hodges, President Stewart and others equally noted for thoroughness and penetration rose to read papers, the audience was fairly tense with anticipation. Whether the hearer coincided or not with the positions defended, he could not restrain his sincere admiration for the scrupulous scholarship and sound processes of which the signs were unmistakable.

VI. The general interest of the people-at-large in the movement represented by the association was another surprise. To me as to others the general impression has prevailed that the association was an academic and seminary company; that interest in it was limited to a few theoretical spirits who looked out of quiet student retreats upon the tumultuous and perplexing life conditions of the times and told us how things should be done. Not only was it satisfying to learn that these who spoke here are in the main submerged in conditions for whose betterment they are prescribing—thus making them practical men—but I was much impressed on discovering that more than 2,000 people all over the country belong as active members to the organization whose purposes they desire to see achieved. While there was nothing approaching the spectacular type of popular meetings in connection with the convention, there was a surprising evidence of its being a movement whose main strength lies out in the active, vigorous working world of men.

VII. The call to a unity of ideals among all interested in the matter of religious education was not voiced so much as it was felt. The constant survey of the fields of human activity untouched by distinct religious influences kept before every thoughtful hearer the urgent need of a clearly and mutually understood purpose among all religious and educating factors in the work of keeping spiritual ideals in education where President Roosevelt put them. When the forces at work in the realm of religion and the forces at work in the realm of education conspire to make more educative the first and more religious the second, the end sought by the workers who have wrought to erect the form and sustain the spirit of the Religious Education Association will have been reached.

VIII. The great character-building function of all religious and educational contact was the dominant note in the entire program. The subjection of all acquired knowledge to the law of life in Christ was the most conspicuous and controlling notion throughout. The man-saving element in all truth was the objective of every teacher and speaker. How to serve both God and man with what we know, or rather how to serve man with what we know of God, was an ever present touchstone with which the speakers were testing their teaching, preaching, reforming methods and materials. So one hoping for the coming of the kingdom of God on earth turned away from this conference with a steadier hope and a more optimistic faith.