

BRIDGE BUILDERS

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

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TO THE OFFICERS, MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL AND BAPTIST TRAINING UNION CONVENTION OF MARYLAND :

We extend greetings on this Twentieth Anniversary of the organization and we express our heartfelt thanks for your excellent cooperation during the past year. The reports of the officers of the Convention have given a survey of our accomplishments since the last annual session. I shall not touch upon these things, but will address myself directly to the subject announced :

BRIDGE BUILDERS

An old man traveling down a road came, in the early twilight, to a deep ravine. He crossed the ravine with little difficulty, but after crossing, turned back and brought logs and stones with which he began to build a bridge across it. A stranger, passing by, saw the old man at work and asked him why was he building a bridge. "You are old" said the stranger. "You will hardly pass this way again. You are spending time and energy foolishly." The old man listened and then facing the stranger, said :

"Dear Friend, there cometh after me today, a youth who soon must pass this way.

This danger which has been as naught to me, may to him a pitfall be.

He too must cross in the twilight dim.

Dear Friend, I'm building this bridge for him."

Human existence is a series of entrances and exits. Man is born into the world. He lives and works for a period of time and then passes out of the world. Shakespeare expressed the idea of life in dramatic terms when he said that all the world is a stage on which each man comes and plays his part and then makes his exit as the curtain falls. Shakespeare's concept would have been more inclusive had he added that while the individual man is playing his part, another individual, young and immature, comes upon the stage to be trained by the older player so that he, the younger one, may take the elder's place when the curtain falls and he makes his exit.

If man had perpetual life, there would be no need for the entrance of young life into the world. But since nature has decreed that man's life shall cover only a brief period of years, it is necessary that there shall be a constant re-peopling of the earth in order that the chain of civilization shall be unbroken. This re-peopling of the earth is further made necessary because men become cautious, conservative and set in their ways as they grow older. They lose the zest for adventure and for change which are the bases of a progressive society. They grow wise in counsel, but they become weak in power of physical and mental endurance, thus the world needs the romantic and daring spirit, the clear vision and the strong physical and mental powers of youth combined with the wisdom of the elders to insure a balanced and continuous program of advancement.

The child, the heir to all society's accumulations, comes into being without any knowledge of the great world which he must eventually manage. The laws by which he must abide, the institutions by which he must be directed, the culture—education, religion, customs, habits—which he must imbibe are already set out for him. Between him and the adult life lies a great gap which must be bridged in such a way that this immature child can make a successful crossing to the point where he, in turn, may play his part as an efficient citizen. The bridging of this gap involves the passing on to the child the knowledge, skills, ideals, attitudes and appreciation which form the basis of our civilization and which will insure for him an effective life. Every adult whose relationship to the child affords direction on this journey becomes a builder of the bridge over which youth must pass in his travel to adult life.

Nature has provided certain unique circumstances to aid the child in crossing this bridge which his elders must build. It has given the child a long period of infancy in comparison with that of other animals because he must be prepared to function in a more complex environment than theirs. This period is characterized by great plasticity of the nervous system which, through its readiness to respond to stimuli and its capability of retaining impressions, enables the child to acquire with ease the knowledge, skills, ideals, attitudes and appreciations of which our civilization is made.

The period of infancy is further characterized by freedom from economic responsibilities. During the years of immaturity, the child is fed, clothed and sheltered by parents, thus leaving him free to give himself fully to the acquisition of the tools of his social environment through and by which his development is directed. In the light of these characteristics of infancy, it becomes quite clear that the child who, through neglect and indifference, is denied an education or the child who, by untoward circumstances, is forced to assume economic responsibilities and thus cut short his education is put at a great disadvantage in the race of life.

The way in which the builders shall construct the bridges for youth is determined by the way in which children learn. Nature has not only given the child the power to learn through plasticity of the nervous system, but it has also given him avenues called the senses—eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin, muscles—by which impressions are made and the inner forces stimulated. Among the inner forces is the Will-To-Learn which operates through an inherent impulse called curiosity and which motivates the child in his learning.

Have you seen the little child lying in the cradle staring at space? Have you noticed him at another time screaming, jumping, biting his hands and toes, putting all kinds of things in his mouth? Have you seen him later in life opening watches, peering into doors, wandering off into streets and lanes? Have you heard him asking countless questions? Have you seen him dress, talk and act like mother, father, teacher, older brother or sister? Have you followed him as he read whatever books he could find in the home or the school library? These activities constitute the path-to-learning which the child takes, impelled by the impulse of curiosity and kindred inner urges. These activities also set the course which the bridge builders must follow in guiding the child safely across the hazardous, but significant gap of immaturity into a well rounded adult life.

The child in the home must be surrounded, as early as possible, by the kind of environment which will consciously and unconsciously lead to the formation of correct habits and attitudes. The habits of neatness and orderliness; the attitude of obedience and cooperation; the willingness to share responsibilities and to respect the personality and rights of others are the foundation of good citizenship as well as the basic principles of Christian living. The family prayer, the giving of thanks before meals, the bedtime prayer, the family Bible reading give the child a reverential attitude which acts as a pilot in later life. These principles and practices can be deeply embedded in the child when the home sets the example in the earliest stages of life.

According to recent statistics regarding marriage failures and juvenile delinquency, many homes are falling short of their duty in building wisely and safely for youth. These statistics show that about one of every five marriages is a failure. Here we have the results of a lack of feeling for moral responsibility and the lack of preparation for marriage and parenthood which should have been a part of the home training. J. Edgar Hoover says that our nation today is facing a potential army of six million criminals. He attributed this crime wave to a recession of moral fortitude, laxity in parental control, lowered moral standards and certain social and economic conditions. "Every home in

America," said he, "must become a sanctuary for good citizenship and not, as in many instances today, a breeding place for criminals. The home is the most important factor in the prevention of juvenile delinquency."

The public schools of America have made a great contribution to the development of efficient citizenship, but the nature of the organization of the school system has, to some extent, minimized the value of religious teaching, thus lessening the influence of one of life's greatest controls. Through the work of the schools, we have grown most powerful in scientific discovery, in commerce and in industry, but we are exceedingly weak in our willingness to practice the principles of Christianity as we deal with others in these areas. The public school has not been allowed, openly, to teach these principles.

The Christian Church, through the ages, has stood as the hope of the world. It is the embodiment of the values which insure successful living for individuals and nations and cannot be by-passed by those charged with youths' welfare. The church gives a sense of direction to life through arousing a desire to follow an ideal and a great cause outside of oneself. It is obvious then that those who give the child religious guidance in any department of the church are putting into this bridge of life the most important of all materials contained therein.

A careful analysis of the work of the church today shows a possible danger, that the church, in many places, may lose its influence upon the youth because:

1. The leaders do not understand youth—their needs and their development. As adults we are prone to feel that youth must sense religion in terms of adult life. We want to take the marbles from the child when he joins the church and the movies and other forms of recreation from the youth. We fail to see that religion is not a thing apart from life, but it is a force which permeates all life and gives directions to the individual as he engages in the activities of which life is composed—to the child in his play, to the youth in his romance, to the adult in his business and professional life

Again, as adults, we do not understand the impulses which drive youth to action—their curiosity, desire for activity, desire for recognition—hence we often misjudge their action and thus discourage them in their efforts to serve the church.

2. The leaders, too often, fail to practice the Christian principles which they preach and teach. We teach sympathetic cooperation and mutual helpfulness, but we are unwilling to give youth a chance to assume responsibilities and to learn, under our guidance, the principles of organization and administration. We teach justice and fair play, but, too often, we use cheap political tactics to get measures passed and to elect individuals to office in the church. We teach young people in our church schools and training unions how to recognize and shun evil and yet when these young people recognize evil in our actions and remind us of it, we become disgusted and chastise them. When youth observes the failure on the part of their elders to practice religious principles they preach and teach, they tend to discount religion as a practical pursuit and desirable way of life.

3. We do not follow democratic procedures. In too many of our church organizations, Democracy is only a slogan. The chief officer or a few selected ones make and execute all plans without enlisting the collective thinking of the whole. This selected few feel that no questions must be asked nor any suggestions given. In short, nothing must be said or done, but to follow directions. Our youth attend the public schools where participation in planning is sought, questions are welcomed and freedom and initiative encouraged. The church can do no less than this, for Christian religion itself is Democracy in action.

4. Our church organizations too often fail to keep pace with the times. The church must realize that times are changing: that scientific

inventions and discoveries have made a world far different from the one in which our fathers were reared. The average child who today sits in the pews of our churches knows more about many things than his forefather of a generation ago. He analyzes and evaluates the sermons, the Sunday school and training union procedure, and the general church administration in terms of his mental and social development. We cannot expect to hold him with the same type of Sunday school teaching and the same type of sermon which held his father. We often sing the song, "That Old Time Religion Is Good Enough for Me," but we must remember that this old time religion must be clothed in the language and thought of today if it is to be appreciated. Christ is a savior for the day of airplanes and atomic energy as well as he was for the day of camels and handpower, and the beauty of life to a Christian is that God is an ever-evolving force and we have the great divine thrill of recognizing Him in each new invention, discovery or phenomenon of any sort which influences the life of man. It thus becomes the duty of the Christian leaders to interpret these things to the youth in such a way that he will see the Creator as a great evolving force working in the lives of men.

As Christian leaders, we must attract to the church the growing number of educated youth in our communities. Some leaders publicly decry education and even discourage the educated members in their desire to serve in the church. But intelligent leadership in our churches is more necessary today than ever before. The problems involved in the proper organization and administration of the modern church, the necessity for counselling, child guidance and other social services, call for the most intelligent, consecrated leadership that can be found. Graduates as well as students of our schools and colleges should be encouraged to ally themselves with the church both, for what the church can do for them and for what they can do for the church. There is no conflict between education and religion and where conflict seems to exist, some one has given wrong guidance.

In the process of bridge building youth must be as understanding of age as it is possible to be. Youth must remember that the experiences which have come to parents, teachers and church leaders through the years have made them valuable guides. They are old pilots who know the rocks, reefs and the whirlpools in life's ocean and are in position to give the warning signal of "danger ahead." This is the reason why youth comes upon the stage before the adult leaves—to receive from the adult the benefit of his experiences, including the paths to be followed and the dangers to be shunned.

As we center attention upon our activities of Christian building for the coming year, I wish to make the following observations with their subsequent recommendations.

1. Since the last annual meeting of this organization, the presidency of the parent body has passed from the hands of Rev. Geo. A. Crawley. His leadership during the period of the present administration of our convention meant much to the effectiveness of the work.

I recommend that the Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Convention express to Dr. Crawley its highest appreciation for the stimulation which he gave to this branch of the State work during his administration; for his interest in its growth and effectiveness and for his counsel and encouragement as evidenced by his attendance at Board meetings and all other affairs of the convention.

2. Orchestral music in the church school is not only an attraction, but it affords an outlet for young people who are musically inclined and who will use their talent in the service of the church.

I recommend that step be taken leading to the formation of an

orchestra class at the Baptist Center, composed of young people of the various churches who are interested in musical instruments. This class would be under the direction of an efficient teacher and would serve to stimulate orchestras in the churches and it would also be the nucleus for a convention orchestra.

3. The issuance of some type of publication designed to keep the churches of our convention informed about each other seems desirable and necessary for effective work.

I therefore recommend that the publication of an official organ be resumed on a greatly modified scale which may serve as a newsletter for the member organizations of the convention. The details of such publication to be worked out by a special committee to be appointed by the president.

4. I recommend that this convention adopt a form of membership certificate to be given each member at the next Fall mass meeting.

5. We look with great favor and satisfaction upon the interest being shown by the churches of this convention in the National S.S. and B.T.U. Congress as evidenced by the growing number of persons attending the Congress.

I recommend that continued effort be exerted to keep alive and to extend the interest now being shown in this national body.

6. Audio-visual materials are now considered to be one of the finest aids in learning. Religious education, as well as public education, can increase the efficiency of its instruction by the use of these devices. We commend the schools and unions which now use them and urge others to do so. In order to facilitate the movement.

I recommend the appointment of an Audio-Visual Committee on Religious Education Materials to keep abreast with the latest and best pictures, transcriptions, phonograph records suitable for church use and to give information and suggestions regarding this material.

7. I recommend that this convention go on record as reaffirming its belief in the necessity for professional training for effective leadership in religious education and that it adopt as a slogan the following expression:

"A trained worker in every Sunday School and Training
Union position in every church of this convention."

Finally, my co-workers, let us remember that only as we, by precept and example, build the kind of bridge over which those entrusted to our care may pass to a life of usefulness and consecrated service, can we be worthy of the glorious task of Christian leadership assigned to us.

