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The Church and the Epworth League

THE words "church" and "league" have each a twofold meaning. When we speak of the church we may refer to either the whole connexion or the local congregation. When we talk of the league we may mean the general denominational organization or the individual young people's society. But in either case the relation of the church to the league or of the league to the church is the same in principle. The local society of young people should do exactly the same for the church with which it is connected as the general organization does for the whole body. The General Board occupies as direct a relation to the entire young people's work as the local executive does to the league of the individual church to which it belongs. So that the whole church may rightly expect from the league as a denominational organization what the local congregation has a right to look for from the individual society. Let us determine, in part at least, what this is.

The Epworth League fulfils its first great mission only in proportion as it develops an *intelligent Christian life* in its members. This is the primary purpose of its existence, and must be ever maintained as its supreme object and aim.

We cannot emphasize this too strongly, for the fundamental need of the Church is here stated—Christians not in name only, but men and women consciously alive, who know that they are Christians, and in whom the thought of Christianity as life is no mere hazy speculation or ill-digested theory, but a vital and familiar experience. However diverse and varied may be our doctrinal views and statements on theological questions, we must always endeavor to bring our young people into a union with Christ so real, so intelligent, so living, that there shall be no lingering doubts in their minds as to their personal relation to Him as Saviour and Lord.

And this cannot be done by simply cherishing a sweet sentimental regard for Christ. Vital Christianity is not mere sentiment. It is based on knowledge, and the secret of knowledge is study. The first clause in our pledge recognizes this. We cannot know our Heavenly Father's will by any secret process of special intuition alone. The commitment of ourselves to daily Bible study is essential. And when the knowledge gained by personal application is fused into character by the additional influence of prayer, it becomes wisdom. Only in this dual way,—Bible Study and Prayer,—can we develop an intelligent personal Christian life in both holy character and wise conduct. The former brings the power of the Truth revealed in the Scriptures into exercise for the growth of strong convictions, the latter transforms the character of the student into spiritual beauty and loveliness. For our knowledge is not only acquaintance with a Book, but with a Person. With the Book we may become intellectually familiar by reading, but with the Person we become spiritually intimate only by communion and intercourse. The one can never supplant the other, nor is either complete without the other. Bible study will give an intellectual ground for faith, but unless it be accompanied by prayer, it cannot produce Christlike lives. So that the church has a right to expect the Epworth League to cultivate these essential habits in its members, and for their cultivation the pledge stands.

But the Epworth League is a denominational as well

as a Christian society, and stands for the cultivation of loyalty to the doctrines and polity of Methodism, in addition to personal faith in and love for Jesus Christ. Let us not undervalue this position.

A man to whom all churches are alike is generally alike to all churches. It is not in the spirit of narrowness or bigotry that we write these words. Loyalty to Christ is supreme, but church loyalty is by no means unimportant.

Our Leaguers must know what the Church of their fathers has meant, what it means to-day, why they are Methodists,—and the honor of the Church must be second in their esteem only to that of their Divine Master. He who refuses church membership, or holds it as of little value, will not be the Christian he should and might be. We fear that many young people of our congregations have the injurious thought that they can be as good Christians without joining the Church as if they unite themselves with it. And some who want to be considered Christians permit themselves to practice things that even they sometimes apologize for, and yet condone because they say, "I'm not a member of the Church." The Epworth League exists primarily to grow Christians, but if it fails to make loyal Methodists, it has only measurably succeeded. And when the projected union of churches is realized, the Methodist section of the United Church should have carried with it such a spirit and habit of connexional loyalty, that the people formerly called Methodists will gladly take up the work of the larger body and prosecute it with increased rather than diminished vigor. We need have no fear of the future because we train our children and youth to-day in the essential spirit of personal love for their own Church. They should know the past, with all its wealth of doctrine and hymnology, its store of history and biography, its heritage of precept and example. But while thankful for the days gone by, they should be even more grateful that the past has made the present possible, and a still more glorious future sure, if we are but true to our principles, "for Christ and the Church."

In this relation we may add that the Church may reasonably ask all our leaguers, not only to acquaint themselves with the history of past problems and the way our fathers solved them; but to study the pressing questions of to-day, and the best manner of their solution. The great union movement should be studied by our young people, that they may know what it means, and so be able to enter it, when in the Providence of God the call comes, with a humble pride in the Divine Leadership that opens up greater spheres of labor than the past ever knew. When union comes, it must not find our Leaguers mere automatons, moved by some power foreign to their own intelligent volition; but, knowing both the "why" and "what" of the whole movement, and prepared right loyally to help work out the glorious destiny the Lord has for His Kingdom in this great and growing country. We must ever emphasize and encourage a healthy spirit of intelligent and aggressive Church loyalty, and the Epworth League that fails to do this is incomplete in its programme of work.

How this loyal and hearty spirit can best be developed must be left to a future article.

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