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IMPLEMENTING THE CHILDREN'S CHARTER-- NEXT STEPS

From the Standpoint of the Church

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One is tempted to take a moment to express profound admiration for "The Children's Charter," with its clear and impressive expression of the things which ought to be provided for the young of the human race by the various agencies of society, but which have been so sadly neglected, leaving millions of children, even in our own land, so cruelly robbed of their birthright.

Some years ago it was my good fortune to listen to an address by a nationally famous educator, an address full of thought and also thought-stimulating. But with one opinion expressed in that address I found myself hopelessly in disagreement, and that was the thought that the school should not shoulder the task of moral guidance, if the home and the church should fail. While there is, in the carrying out of the provisions of the Children's Charter, a sphere where the school should function, and one which is peculiarly the province of the home, and one which belongs particularly to the organized community forces, and one which the church should occupy, these areas of responsibility are certain to overlap to some extent, even if all are doing their share faithfully; and if an agency fails, as any one may do-- will do in some cases-- the others should do their best to make up the deficiency, so far as this may be done.

What is the peculiar responsibility of the church in implementing this Children's Charter? One would say, quickly and easily, the responsibility for moral and religious training, of course with other agencies aiding and cooperating.

But what, more specifically? And how meet the responsibility if it can be more clearly defined?

Perhaps in the sphere of morals we need to face the fact of changing standards which have been so much in evidence, especially since the World War-- and we who are older need to remember that today's children were all born since that war, and even our late adolescents were all born so recently that the World War was no more known personally by them than the Civil War by us.

We may not need to go extensively into the reasons for the change which has come about in current morals. A new psychology is part of it. The teaching of hundreds of millions to hate and to kill broke down morals as well as morale in the parents from whom the children and young people of today have acquired their moral ideals or lack of them.

New science has made the recognition of our kinship with the beasts a commonplace, and has led to the acceptance of beastly ideals by many of our generation and of the generation which is as much a menace in these days as our generation was a generation ago. Some of the things once recognized as moral requirements are now admitted to be only conventions; and many of the young people of today are doing what the second generation of Sophists did, and holding all morals to be but conventions.

But whatever we may assign as the reasons, the facts are clear. There is the new education in the scientific field, as in other fields. There is a new freedom of thought which would have been shocking to our ancestors. And there is a new freedom of conduct which would have been even more shocking. And whether we would or no, we can't turn the clock back.

What can the moralist do, what can the church do, with a generation which will not take its politics, its economics, its morals nor its religion ready-made?

Really, it is not a new problem. Always men have been reaching the age at some time in life when they had to think their own thoughts, reach their own conclusions, make their own decisions. They are simply reaching that age much earlier now than they used to do.

There is still a period, much shorter than it used to be, when the moral control must be largely from without, as the moral standards must be provided from without. But the church should realize, as it seeks to provide these standards, that they will be called upon to justify themselves, not as in earlier generations, when men and women have reached a fair degree of maturity, with characters definitely formed and relatively stable, but in early adolescence or perhaps even earlier.

Which means for us that we need to be sure of our own ground; sure that we can justify to our own minds and hearts our moral codes; sure that we are not protecting greed or selfishness by a false assumption of a moral basis; sure that what we put on moral grounds actually belongs there.

And we can early bring the young to see that they cannot wisely throw away one form of sanction without providing another and a better. Even a child can recognize the undesirability-- the impossibility-- of moral anarchy. And the church which functions in a truly intelligent way will not find it an unattainable goal to develop early in the life of the young person, self-control in the place of any former outward controls. It is not impossible to develop in the young man or woman such an attitude as this: "If I do not accept any man's moral standards which he would hand to me ready-made, I am under obligation to have better standards of my own. If I refuse to accept what another man thinks, I am under deeper obligation to think things through for myself. If I refuse outward control, I must provide myself with better and surer and safer inward control."

We have nought to fear from the examination of our standards insofar as these standards are right. I do not fear if men seek to assure themselves that the product of seven and nine is sixty-three. The more they investigate, the surer they will be. And I have no fear of disaster to our codes of morals from honest thought

about them. On the other hand I believe that young people as well as older will be able readily to see that "Thou shalt not steal" is sound morals, not because of any arbitrary standard, outwardly imposed, but because of laws deeper than any mere statute. They can be helped to see that respect for the lives and the property of others is right, not because parents or the church or the law-books or biblical precepts say so; but that these authorities on the subject of morals uphold such a standard because it is basically right. They will find monogamy to be morally right rather than polygamy, not because somebody says so, but because man is what he is, not essentially a polygamous animal merely, but a being whose very nature finds its highest joy and its highest development in such a life-- and even a child can be made to feel this, and the youth can come to know it without any disastrous experimentation, any violation of the seventh commandment of the decalogue, any destructive trespass on other personalities.

And this is again the peculiar province of the church, this emphasis on the supreme value of human personality. Whatever else is of value, the child and especially the youth needs to be brought to see that here is the supreme value in this life of ours, human personality, his own and others.

Right social attitudes are inevitable if this is clearly apprehended. Exploitation becomes unthinkable to one who properly values the personality of another. Child labor would be so repugnant that no man could profit by it if he could properly realize the value of the personalities he was marring, while at the same time doing his own personality irreparable harm. Slavery could not stand before the realization of the harm done to the personality of both black and white by exploitation of the black by the white. A better social order waits on this realization. War will become impossible whenever the peoples come to realize that the human personalities debauched, degraded and destroyed by it are of more value than all the wealth which could be dreamed of as possibility as the result of war-- and modern war can bring only financial ruin to all nations engaging in it.

Well, the church has for one of its larger tasks this one of bringing into the thought life and the emotional life of childhood and youth a realization of the superiority of human values over all other earthly values.

But after all, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" is the second commandment, not the first. And the attempt to divorce morals and religion has always failed, and is doomed to failure. Man needs the upward reach as well as the outward. "Man is incurably religious." St. Augustine had learned a great truth when he declared that full human satisfaction is impossible till a man finds God. And certainly man's highest self-realization and service to others can come only as he lives in touch with God.

And this is the real, the basic task of the church, getting men and women, and especially young men and young women and boys and girls, into touch with the living God, and helping them to find a continuous life in contact with that divine source of life and light and power.

This getting of children into vital touch, into living relation-

ship with the source of all good is the task which every church should set for itself. This change in the life of the child need not be, and if the church has done its duty will not be cataclysmic. It may come to the child as quietly and as naturally as falling in love comes to children of a somewhat older growth. But come it must if the child is to have his full spiritual heritage.

And instead of being harder than in an earlier day, it ought to be easier. Every day the modern child "tunes in" through a radio set, and hears the voices of speakers and singers hundreds of miles away, or thousands. If we ourselves will truly believe, if we ourselves are truly "in tune with the infinite," we can help those children whom we have the opportunity to influence into a place where the power of God really rests upon them.

Thus ministered to by the church, in addition to what has been done for them by the home, the school, and the community, the child moves on toward the fulfillment of God's ideal; a character strong and self-controlled, on the basis of self-accepted and self-enforced standards; an altruistic outlook steadily maintained and constantly developed; and a living relationship with God which keeps up a constant inflowing of power from the source of all power and goodness.

Such I believe should be, such I believe are the aims of the church as it faces the problems of the childhood and youth of America. But as to the means, the "next steps" -- ah! if I could speak with real wisdom here, I should certainly deserve well of the church, and of childhood. As it is, I can only offer some suggestions which, compared with the magnitude of the problem will seem "a pin-point against the shield of Pelides." But here they are.

First, let the church genuinely recognize its task, the moral and spiritual ministration to the childhood and youth of the country. When every member of the church feels responsible for every little ragamuffin in town, we shall be a long way toward the solution of the difficulty. But so long as we feel well satisfied to minister, in a fairly competent way, to our own children, letting the rest of the childhood and youth of our communities go to the devil-- or wherever else it is they are going-- we shall not get far, though the best methods which men or angels could devise were cleverly set before us. "Bless me and my wife and my son John and his wife, Amen!" is the attitude which has led many a man and many a church to die of dry rot. Such an attitude would have left the world Christless till humanity destroyed itself utterly. *yes four and no more,*

Then this task of ministering to childhood and youth should be recognized as the task of the whole church, calling for a measure of cooperation far beyond anything thus far realized among various divisions of the church. We hear much about certain communities being overchurched. My own little town with nearly a score of religious denominations in it and only 3,000 population, is perhaps as open to this charge as any. But there's work enough for all of them, and if they could adequately reach the young, to say nothing of the middle-aged and the old, they'd have every church plant crowded, and the present personnel "worked to death" and yelling for help.

This cooperation would enable the church forces in a community to do things big enough and attractive enough to get the attention of

young people. I've no quarrel with the little Sunday School class per se; but there needs to be something far more arresting.

The daily ^avaction Bible school, especially when conducted on a genuinely united community basis, adequately financed and properly manned--as well as womanned-- is a step in the right direction. The week-day school of religious education, properly and unitedly handled, is another. The children's service in connection with and in addition to the regular church service, is another. And the good old Sunday School can do much, as it has-- if it is really a good Sunday School. But if it is like some -- Let us blush, and confess our sins. Here is a superintendent drafted into service because nobody else would take the job, giving little more thought to his task than those who refused it. Here is a vinegar-faced old maid voicing "clear flat platitudes" to half a dozen living dynamos called boys for short. Here is a simple, ignorant girl trying to teach what she does not know and to lead where she has never been. We demand training of those who would handle our machinery. We demand long years of specialized education and internship of those who would heal our bodies. How little we demand-- and receive-- of those who minister to the moral and spiritual natures of our children. Let's quit fooling. Let's admit with our minds and our hearts and our wills that here is the biggest task on earth. And let the very best of us accept our responsibility in the church, and with convincing earnestness lay the responsibility on the best and strongest and ablest men and women in the church, that the church may not fail in its share of the task of implementing the "Children's Charter."