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Youth Leadership

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Youth Leadership*

(With special references to colleges and universities)

Difficulties of Middle and Late Adolescence

To offer a satisfactory summary of the problems which confront young people, particularly those of the late high school and college age, would require at least a semester's work, and therefore we can at best point out only those features of guidance which seem to require the most attention on our part. Let it be stated at once that the most difficult phases of work in the early stages of adolescence cannot be discussed at this time, partly because the amount of time at our disposal will not permit a satisfactory rehearsal of the most significant points, partly because most of the embarrassments of this period have been left behind by college students, particularly the girls. That is, the awkwardness and lack of co-ordination of bones and muscles, which are so marked in the immediate postpubertal age, have disappeared, and at least a certain amount of nerve control and poise have replaced them in both sexes. There is apt to be another source of mortification remaining, namely, that of an inadequate elimination of the sebaceous glands of the skin, so that young people, especially young men, will suffer with acne, a condition which may make them keenly self-conscious. It is self-evident that the leader of youth, understanding the temporary character of the affliction, will meet the difficulties associated with the situation with kindness and tact.

But the first great group of difficulties confronting the leader in a college situation is found in the intellectual development of the young people, chiefly the middle adolescence, but also after the

* Abstract of an informal lecture presented to the Conference of University Pastors. The members of the Conference will readily understand that more formal presentation is required in the written summary than in the informal discussion before the group.

teen age. Middle adolescence is essentially the second romantic age, with the imagination of the young people being developed in a most amazing degree. The amount of factual information stored up during the years of elementary and high school training is far beyond that of the previous generation, but life experiences have not measured up to the needs of the individual. Besides, proper maturation is apt to be delayed by the paternalism of a large part of modern high school training, without a corresponding regard for life situations. This combination of circumstances may cause the imagination of adolescents to run riot. If we add to this the emotional instability of the teen age and the caprice of many young people in attacking problems, we have a condition which may give leaders grave concern. Then there is the factor of the abnormal form of living indulged in by many young people, late hours with the attendant evil of inadequate sleep, improper food at irregular intervals, and the final surge of physical adjustment. Small wonder that this combination of circumstances leads to a nervous tension which is the sworn enemy of calm judgment and poise. Out of all these factors develops the adolescent opposition to dogmatism. Older folks frequently make the mistake of parading their superior learning and experience instead of cleverly using it as an incentive to stimulate the energy of youth and thereby guiding the young people into the realm of steady mental growth.

Many of these factors are influential also in another field of adolescent difficulties, namely, in the field of religion and morals. The mental and intellectual difficulties are transferred to the field of the young Christian's religion, to his God and his Church. Middle and late adolescence is apt to be the period of religious storm and stress, when the faith of childhood may be undermined by the alleged superiority of human wisdom. One can hardly expect a young person in the average college to appreciate the warning offered by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 1:18-25. The impression of great erudition received by young people as they come in contact with men and women teachers and other leaders of society causes them to entertain doubts concerning the simple truths which they learned during their elementary school years and especially in the catechumen class, and many leaders of the young find it extremely difficult to exercise patience in dealing with young people whose false sophistication may go so far as to have them advocate extreme forms of Liberalism in doctrine and life, like the young student who declared that free love would solve the question of the relation between the sexes. If the practical impossibility of maintaining such extreme views is brought home to the young person, or if a life situation presents an in-

surmountable obstacle to the fruition of such adolescent dreams, there is danger that at least some young people may give way to morbidity which may lead to introversion and thus to frustration. This attitude may easily lead to agnosticism and atheism, to a denial of the faith of childhood. (See *Problems of Adolescence and Youth*, 99.) On the other hand, young persons with extravert tendencies may permit their opposition to dogmatism to become a hypercritical attitude which may deny, in order, the miracles of Scriptures, including the Virgin Birth, the goodness of God in permitting suffering, the efficacy of prayer, and finally even the resurrection and immortality.

Then there is the ethical side of the situation. The intuition, the instinctive tendency of adolescence, is that of breaking away from the restrictions of childhood. The idea of an independent existence looms ahead, the necessity of standing on one's own feet, of earning one's own living, of forging ahead in life. For that reason the natural selfishness of the postpubertal period tends to discard the idea of consideration for others, and arrogance and snobbery are substituted for the spirit of humble consecration and unselfish service. To many a young person the challenge of life is that of the cynical attitude: Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. And as for interferences with what they consider their liberty? Breaking away from the restraints of conventional behavior is regarded by many young persons as their inalienable privilege. Hence we almost invariably have the dine-drink-dance-gamble group, of whose membership some one has rightly remarked that the individual may consider it his privilege to plunge into perdition, but he (or she) has no right to take anyone else along with him into that destruction of body and soul. And all too often we find men and women in administrative positions who condone such loose behavior with the plea that universal social usage has sanctioned such conduct, in spite of the fact that their attitude directly contradicts clear statements of Scripture. Cf. Rom. 12:2; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Cor. 6:19 f.; Eph. 5:7-12.

Problems of University Adjustment

Let us briefly summarize the thoughts presented above with reference to specific problems of university adjustments, although the same difficulties are present also in the commercial and industrial fields. It is evidently not an easy matter for the average young person in middle and late adolescence to make proper life adjustments, first of all, because of the impression made by the erudition of highly trained specialists occupying important chairs at colleges and universities or holding correspondingly influential positions in civic affairs. The young person is overawed by the

learning of the specialist, of the research worker; it seems to him much more profound than that of the pastor who taught him the simple words of the Catechism. So the adolescent loses his sense of values and begins to prate about the "assured results of science" and similar shallow deductions. And there can be no doubt that the cocksureness of evolutionism and atheism in many of our universities and in quite as many editorial sanctums have led many young persons away from the faith of their childhood. Even if they continue to hold membership in a Lutheran congregation, they may lose the inner conviction which is so essential for functional Christianity. They fear to expose themselves to the ridicule of their acquaintances in the circles in which these views are generally held, and so the lack of confessional fortitude gradually leads them to a virtual denial of the truth. (See Fairhurst, *Atheism in Our Universities*, and Gilbert, *The Fifth Column in Our Schools*.)

There are other dangers which confront our youth in institutions of higher learning as well as in the commercial and industrial world. New ideologies and isms have been introduced by fifth columnists, not only in the political, but also in the moral field. The tenets of state socialism, of totalitarianism, of fascism, of rank materialism have been spread far and wide in our country. We are fully aware of the fact that the Christian religion has in the past flourished and may still exist and grow under an absolute monarchy. But Christianity stresses the value of the individual soul and of the participation of the individual Christian in the building of the Church. History has shown and is even now giving a practical demonstration of the fact that totalitarianism and communism are opposed to the principles of the Christian religion and will hesitate at nothing in subverting its truths.

Nor may we underestimate the influence of syncretism and unionism as fostered by the institutions for higher education in our country. Most of the universities and colleges which were established under strict denominational supervision and operated under the restrictions imposed upon them by the doctrinal and ethical tenets of their founders have long ago discarded these inhibitions or permit them to maintain only a very tenuous hold on the institutions concerned. The distinctions between the various denominations have long lost their significance in this respect, and the shadings of doctrinal certainty, together with the levels of doctrinal and Scriptural loyalty, are practically nonexistent. The sacredness and the inviolability of Holy Writ are constantly being ignored in the interest of expediency. The condemnation of Luther's attitude at Marburg in hindering, as the critics declare, the union of all Protestant bodies, is not only being accepted in wider

circles, but is even being extended to apply to those who staunchly uphold every part of the Scriptures and of the Lutheran Confessions.

And not the least of the problems confronting the leaders of the Church at the present time is that brought on by the impact of the present war. It is stated that youth is bewildered, confused by the situation, that our young people find an insurmountable contradiction between the principles of the Prince of Peace and the arguments for an "all-out" war of aggression. If this is true, it is certainly not the fault of the Bible or of the Lutheran Confessions, for these speak very clearly on the duty of the Church in the spiritual field, with the implications in the social field, while they teach just as clearly concerning the Christian's relation to the State, also in times of war. If there is confusion, it is in the minds of those whose duty it is to study and to teach the whole truth of the Bible. If the proper teaching has not been done heretofore, it is high time that the leaders of the Church everywhere, and in particular those who are concerned about the spiritual welfare of our Lutheran college youth, make good this defect and not make confusion worse confounded. But this leads us to the next step in our discussion.

The Leader in the University Group

There surely is not much need to emphasize the factor of personality and the attributes connected therewith, as they are listed in most books on the psychology of leadership (Kleiser, Bogardus, Tralle, and others). For example, we have the attributes which make for general ability, such as observation, concentration, memory, imagination, judgment, reason; those that are important for reliability, such as honesty, loyalty, sincerity, ambition, enthusiasm, optimism; we have those required for specific situations, such as decisions, punctuality, orderliness, courage, initiative (with originality and individuality), and tact. While not all leaders of the young possess all these attributes in the same measure, they should discover the ones in which they are most proficient and then make every effort to cultivate them by assiduous application, for, as Link has pointed out, personality can be developed, if one applies himself to the task with wholehearted endeavor.

But by far the biggest factor in the leadership of a Christian pastor is that of an adequate equipment of Scripture knowledge. Many men are apt to be just a little careless about this requirement. They rely upon the memory work of their elementary school life, of the catechumen class which they attended, upon their regular teaching in Bible classes and similar meetings, and especially upon their regular sermon preparation. But, as Amos Wells has pointed out, in one of his challenging books, most leaders, even

in high positions in the Church, possess a mere Bible dampness, which requires the pressure of an unusual affliction before it will yield so much as one drop of necessary comfort, whereas the true leader in church work will be truly Bible-saturated, so that he will know his Bible for every occasion, with dozens and scores of texts to be used for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, and for Christian consolation. Truly, such a leader begets conviction and confidence, as he reaches into the treasure of the Word and brings forth what is required in every situation of life. And how readily our young people respond to such instruction, since it bears within itself the power of the Holy Spirit. Three hours a day spent on preparations for sermons and for intensive delving in the Book is by no means too much for one who would truly be a guide to the young.

However, the leader of youth must also have a knowledge, an adequate acquaintance with the normal development of adolescence. He will do well to have at least some of the most important books on the psychology of adolescence in his library, and he should, if at all possible, study at least one new monograph a year on the subject intensively. There are always new viewpoints to be considered, new phases to be studied, new settings to be emphasized. The problems and difficulties of physical, mental, emotional, moral, and religious development deserve the most careful attention, for the true leader of the young is not satisfied with a mere academic understanding of the problems involved, but strives for ever greater sympathy and — to use a word which has recently been added to the vocabulary of psychology — empathy, that is, the ability to put oneself into the place of the person with whom one deals.

Naturally this includes also the approach in dealing with young people in the middle and late adolescent stage, as well as the methods which should be employed in guiding them. We certainly have left behind us the former authoritarian approach, which insisted on unquestioning obedience on the part of the young people. Co-operation under guidance is the great objective in democratic youth work, and therefore functional and co-operative methods are in order. The leader of youth should be familiar with at least eight to ten methods of this type, not only for work in Bible hours, but also in topic meetings and open forums. One noted professor of psychology stated a few years ago that he tries to use a new method of teaching during every new semester of his teaching so that his own alertness should not suffer. (See Brewer, *Education as Guidance*.) A successful leader of the young must be like a good craftsman, who is so thoroughly acquainted with his tools that he automatically selects the one which is best suited for the particular job which he has before him.

Looking Forward to Reintegrating the Graduate

This is a problem which should concern in particular the pastor who is dealing largely, or exclusively, with college or university students. Many of these students, under the modern system of research work, will be found to be working in the field of highly specialized studies, thereby confining themselves to a very narrow and circumscribed area of the field of learning in which they hope to make their living. Their work, of course, is under the guidance of the school, which may take the necessary precautions to prevent the graduates from becoming social misfits. But the university pastor's concern will lie in his attempting to keep his charges from becoming misfits in the church. College and university work should not wean the privileged few away from those in other walks of life, and hence the wise leader will provide for opportunities to have his charges remain in contact with fellow Christians engaged in other pursuits in life. Very much can be done even during the years of college life by arranging at least occasional meetings with other young people's groups, so that the consciousness of our common heritage and objective is not lost sight of.

For all this leads to a very natural conclusion, namely, that of keeping college students and university graduates in touch with the realities of church work. Just how much can be done during their stay at college is, of course, difficult to say. In some instances a certain amount of integration with a regular congregation is possible, even though college life tends toward professional segregation on account of the special interests which engage the attention of the college youth at this time. Through all the associations of the college pastor with his charges one thought should run and one consciousness be kept alive, namely, that these young people, usually with special talents, abilities, and capacities, together with special opportunities, really owe their God and their Church a special measure of loyalty and gratitude. As they settle in their home community, or in some other city to which their professional training calls them, they should make it a point to become active members of the congregation which they will, as a matter of fact, join. Even if their profession requires a good deal of time and energy, they must realize that their highest loyalty belongs to their Lord and Master. A college pastor has wonderful possibilities to fashion his career in such a way as to be of greater service to the college youth of our country, not only in keeping them with the Church, but in making them functional members of the Church.

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