

"THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AND TEACHINGS OF THE YMCA AND YWCA"

PRESENTED TO THE FLORIDA PASTORS' CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 16, 1980

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INTRODUCTION

When I was first assigned this paper - "THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AND TEACHINGS OF THE YMCA AND YWCA," I thought I was under "synodical senate" investigation because my church's volleyball team had won first place in the Orange Park YMCA Church Volleyball league. I come here today, trophy in hand, prepared for long hours of interrogation and possible plea bargaining. If necessary I am willing to use my "UNC'S" connections to obtain at least leniency, if not outright vindication.

With that mediocre attempt at humor and sarcasm, both of which are out of character for me, let us begin again.

When I was first assigned this paper - "THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AND TEACHINGS OF THE YMCA AND YWCA," I thought I would approach it as the numerous volumes written about lodges and scouting have. I would simply gather together the official pronouncements of these two organizations and then compare them to Holy Scripture. The task, however, becomes complicated and difficult upon closer investigation. The problem does not lie in the fact that the Word of God is unclear and takes no stand. Rather, it lies in the fact that both the YMCA and the YWCA are extremely vague in some of their pronouncements and out and out contradictory in others.

The reason for this is twofold. First of all the very "genius" (as the directors of these two organizations like to refer to it) of these organizations is to be vague in their teachings. The organizations themselves feel they find their strenghts in appearing generally Christian, but specifically non-committal. The second reason is that both organizations in regard to their religious purposes and practices reflect the turmoil and changing ideas of many religious denominations in America today. Even some of their own directors are lamenting the considerable difficulties and differences of opinion they are experiencing from within their own membership as to their reason for existence and the direction that they will take in the future. Added to this is the fact that each local organization of the YMCA and the YWCA are totally autonomous, which lends itself to even more diversity in purpose and practice.

Therefore, with fear and trepidation, I stand before you to present this paper:

"THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AND TEACHINGS OF THE YMCA AND YWCA"

- I. Historically
- II. Change through the years
- III. During the 1970's and into the 1980's
- IV. A Postscript

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"THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS AND TEACHINGS OF THE YMCA AND YWCA"

I. HISTORICALLY

The Young Men's Christian Association had its beginnings in London in 1841. It was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England and London was full of young men who had left their rural and family surroundings to work in the cities new factories. Among these men was a certain George Williams who had come to London to work in a drapery factory. He lived in a dormitory provided for the factory's workers. There he found conditions incompatible with his Christian upbringing. His fellow workers were un-Christian in their beliefs and their lives. George felt uncomfortable with all but one or two in the whole dormitory. Then the idea struck him to form an organization in which he and other new city-dwellers that felt as he did could enjoy each other's Christian company. The idea caught on and George Williams and his companions began holding meetings in which Bible studies, prayer, and Christian fellowship were the order of business.

The success of the organization was amazing. Attendance at the meetings grew rapidly, special space was set aside in the dormitory, and workers in other factories began forming their own groups. By ~~1841~~ 1844 all the separate groups in London united into one organization called the Young Men's Christian Association. Religious meetings and personal counseling to young men coming into the city were the primary activities.

Membership in the organization was limited in those days to those young men of an Evangelical, that is, Protestant persuasion. In 1855 in Paris the YMCA which by now was a world-wide organization formally established its requirements for membership in a document called the PARIS BASIS:

The Christian Associations have for their object the union of those young men, who regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Savior according to the Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their faith and in their life and to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom among young men.

Any differences of opinion on other subjects, however, important in themselves, but not enhanced by the specific designs of the Associations, shall not interfere with the harmonious relations of the confederated societies.

Meanwhile in the United States the YMCA organized its first Association in Boston under the energetic labors of a crusading sea captain, Thomas Valentine Sullivan, who was interested in improving the spiritual condition of the Boston waterfront. This first YMCA and the others that organized in other American cities later followed the same general purposes and activities of the English Associations. Again their membership was limited to Evangelicals. In 1868 the American YMCA's proclaimed:

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That, as these organizations bear the name of Christian, and profess to be engaged directly in the Savior's service, so it is clearly their duty to maintain the control and management of all their offices, in the hands of those who profess to love and publicly avow their faith in Jesus, the Redeemer, as divine, and who testify their faith by becoming and remaining members of churches held to be Evangelical and that such persons and none others, should be allowed to vote or hold office.

It was decided at that time in 1868 that the word, "Evangelical," would not be defined but would derive its meaning from popular understanding of the term. That resolve lasted only one year. Then at the National Convention in Portland, it was decided to remove the vagueness of "Evangelical" and a committee of 2 Congregationalists, 2 Presbyterians, and one Episcopalian drew up the "PORTLAND TEST" by which the YMCA officially governed its membership for 62 years.

We hold those churches to be Evangelical which maintain the Holy Scriptures to be the only infallible rule of faith and practice, do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (the only begotten of the Father, King of kings and Lord of lords, in whom dwelleth the fullness of the God-head bodily, and who was made sin for us, though knowing no sin, bearing our sins in His own body on the tree), as the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved from everlasting punishment.

In order not to favor the creeds of any one denomination only Scriptural statements were used, and no denomination was named.

With this PORTLAND TEST the YMCA now became the outreach arm of American Protestantism. The Associations were hailed by enthusiastic clergymen as the "greatest tool of the Gospel," and the most obvious example of Christian faith in action. The YMCA supported missionary work, tract distribution, street preaching, and mission Sunday Schools, much like the Salvation Army does yet today. And in World War I it was chosen by the government to represent Protestantism in the camps and on the battlefield.

At the same time the Young Women's Christian Association was growing along similar lines. The YWCA was originally the union in 1855 of a prayer society started by Emma Roberts and a housing project directed by Mary Jane Kinnaird. The purpose was to provide housing with a Christian atmosphere for young women flocking to London and other large cities in England. In 1858 the first American Association was begun in New York. As with the YMCA the membership was limited to interdenominational Evangelicals, and the main activities were entirely religious: Bible study, prayer, and Christian conversation. A directive sent out in 1865 read:

That every YWCA shall have a gospel meeting or vesper service on Sunday afternoon is an accepted fact.

The fellowship principles of the early YMCA and YWCA were simply this: a confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and leading a

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Christian life. and this was indeed fitting when a person considers the make up of these two organizations. For the most part, the membership of the YMCA and YWCA was chiefly lay-persons from conservative Protestant denominations. For example, at the YMCA convention of 1869 the doctrinal differences separating Christendom were called "peculiarities of denominational polity," "shibboleths of sects," and "minor differences in creeds (that) must be ignored by us." Needless to say, the Lutherans of that day did not look favorably on the YMCA or YWCA. One YMCA writer of that period mentions in passing that "it was extremely difficult to obtain a favorable recommendation from Lutheran church bodies."

II. CHANGE THROUGH THE YEARS

In the beginning the theological stand of the YMCA and YWCA was what could be termed "conservative." When faced with the traditional trinitarian stand, the budding liberalism and Bible criticism, and the rationalistic, anti-trinitarianism of the Unitarians of the late 19th century, both the YMCA and YWCA remained trinitarian as this YWCA proclamation of 1922 reveals:

The stand of the YWCA is that of the Christian faith in God, the Father; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord and Savior; and in the Holy Spirit, the Revealer of truth and Source of power for life and service according to the teachings of Holy Scriptures and the witness of the Church.

A later writer and his evaluation of this statement indicates the change that lay ahead. He described the Associations at that time as "naively supernaturalistic" in their religious stand.

The decade of the 1920's saw a basic shift to the liberal modernistic view. The impact of evolution and other science-based attacks on biblical events and doctrines took their toll. In the ensuing battle between fundamentalism (which many of the lay leaders of the YMCA and YWCA considered unreasonably narrow and confining) and modernism, it was modernism that won out. One YMCA writer indicated the following as the reason for this:

Naturally the YMCA was more congenial to such viewpoints and attitudes (that is, those of modernism) than to the rigidity of fundamentalism, because of its own pragmatic mood, its refusal to be drawn into theological debate, its dislike of creedal statements and its lay character.

Soon the trinitarian confession of earlier years was gone. In its place came the watered-down "STATEMENT OF PURPOSE" of 1931:

The Young Men's Christian Association we regard as being in its essential genius a world-wide fellowship united by a common loyalty to Jesus Christ for the purpose of developing Christian personality and build-

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ing a Christian society.

We recognize and consider it healthy that diversity exists among our Associations in the manner in which this purpose is to be achieved.

We welcome as members of our Associations persons of all religious affiliations who wish to join and cooperate in support of the Christian ideals and values for which this purpose is to be achieved.

Up until 1931 many local Associations were finding it extremely hard to live with the "Evangelical" limitations of the old "Portland Test." This was especially true of those Associations located in parts of the United States or the world where the Evangelicals were in the minority. There the "Portland Test" was played down, or some other steps were taken, for example, in Mexico in 1907 the Catholic faith was declared "Evangelical" (before this time Catholics were excluded from membership in the YMCA and YWCA). Even though the "Portland Test" remained "on the books" until the new "Statement of Purpose" in 1931, many local Associations simply disregarded it and opened their membership to all Christian denominations. After 1931 even the liberalized Statement of Purpose which still contained a pledge of loyalty and faith in Christ was winked at, as local Associations began opening their doors to all people of the community, including Jews, other non-Christians and even people who professed no belief in any god at all. Local autonomy would become more and more an issue in the changing religious stance of the YMCA and YWCA.

The consequence of the growing liberalism in the YMCA and YWCA both in teaching and in membership was the diminution of their religious aspects and teachings. These two Associations that had so vigorously shunned religious debate and doctrinal differences from the beginning, was now beginning to shun religion altogether. Specific religious activities such as Bible study and worship services were dropped, and the Associations sought instead to help churches of all persuasions, even non-Christian, in "mutually acceptable ways." In the place of religious education the Associations substituted education in general.

During the 1950's and 1960's there seemed to be those within the Associations themselves, especially in the YMCA that wanted to reinstate the Christian emphasis and fundamentalism of the early YMCA and YWCA. One of these "critics-from-within" was Everet Johnson, an Assistant Membership Secretary of the YMCA. He put his feelings into words in a 1958 Christianity Today article entitled, "The Confusing 'C' in YMCA."

....I know of no other Christian movement which tries so desperately to define its Christian content in such general and inclusive terms, yet conclusive enough to say, "We are Christian."

In most cases there is some pride that we, the YMCA, were able to produce such respected men (as George Williams and Dwight L. Moody) and

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that our movement is known for its religious color, its humanitarian impact, and its leadership in the Christian-social world. But while these beginnings are revered, they are also explained away as representing "immature" Christianity. It is implied that men who took the Scriptures literally and established a movement to win "lost souls to Christ" had yet to learn that other religions and other interpretations of the Christian faith had validity too.

In the article, "Catholics and the YMCA," in the Catholic periodical The Liguorian, Lewis Miller complains that the YMCA does such a "good job" of avoiding sectarianism that it actually breeds Christian indifference. Some Protestants agree that the YMCA seems so concerned with avoiding Christian doctrine and theology that it even neglects the most basic Christian truth, that of Jesus Christ and his claims on the human race. This reduces Christian emphasis to hollow forms of worship, emphasis on good morals, ethics, service to something (Christianity), but not to somebody (Jesus Christ), and to the externals such as Christian art, proper placement of Bibles and some special services such as "dial for inspiration." Of basic matters only worship remains; evangelism, propagation and instruction are omitted.

The rejoinder in most cases is that this responsibility is not the job of the YMCA but the role of the Church. But when the YMCA removed from its program the basic truths of Jesus Christ, once our earlier emphasis, we ceased to be Christian except in statement and form. "A common loyalty to Jesus Christ," as expressed in our North American YMCA purpose, actually pictures Jesus Christ more as a superior Scoutmaster than as Lord and Savior.

(The YMCA is) an opportunistic movement. It reacts to environmental and community pressures and at least to some degree conforms, depending, of course, on how moral or ethical the pressures are....Our YMCA was growing up into a mature organization and fellowship when liberalism was in its heyday. As an opportunistic movement, it reflected this environment, the impact of which remains in the type of Christian emphasis we generally have today in our YMCAs. In other words, the YMCA became affected by cultural Christianity instead of being biblically Christian. Here is an example....When the YMCA speaks of the "Christian way of life," I think it means a man may be a Hindu or a Jew, but if he is a Christian in behavior, he is following the Christian way of life.

(Mr. Johnson listed four stumbling blocks to the YMCA being truly Christian:)

1. The YMCA has reduced Christianity to one of the religions of the world, rather than accepting it as "truth" and "fact" from God the Creator.
2. Though we are "Christian," we are not biblically-centered. Thus the term "Christian" has a broad, ineffective, almost nondescript meaning as it is used in our name, the YMCA.
3. Few staff men really know the Scriptures.
4. Few staff men have convictions on the great doctrines of Christianity, such as the conditions of men, Christ's atoning sacrifice, his resurrection, ascension and second coming, and the apocalyptic teachings.

We forget, however, that "no position" is a position. The position of "no position" can be just as offensive as the dogmatic positive position. As a result of our passiveness, we often encourage unbelief."

During these years the National Boards of both the YMCA and the YWCA strove to re-establish and reassert the Christian character of their organizations. Despite open membership the National Directives urged Christian control:

We have confidence in the integrity and responsibility of local Associations to determine the quality of commitment of non-Christians to the ideals and values for which the YMCA stands and believe that the accep-

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tance of this principle would not, in practice, result in the control of Associations passing out of the hands of the dedicated Christians who represent the essential genius of the YMCA.

One of the Executive Secretaries of the YMCA, Mr. Paul Limbert, while lamenting the lack of Christian emphasis in the YMCA and warning against diluting the Christian faith to the lowest common denominator, did himself dilute the Christian faith in his solution to the interfaith challenge facing the YMCA at that time:

....If the Jews are attracted to our Associations, we should respect their traditions so much that we do not assume that they can accept a Christian statement of purpose. They in turn should not expect the YMCA to change or conceal its Christian basis. We should welcome the Jew to all activities in which he can take part with good conscience. The YMCA may play a distinctive role, in American society and throughout the world, as a place where Christians and those of other faiths, as well as persons without any religious commitments, can share with one another their deepest concerns.

The change in the religious aspects and teachings of the YMCA and YWCA through the years could be described as FROM CHRISTIAN AND EVANGELISTIC to SOCIAL AND ECUMENICAL. To put it another way, from the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God's Word as the infallible rule of faith and practice to the social gospel and liberalism.

III. DURING THE 1970'S AND INTO THE 1980'S

During the 1970's the religious aspects and teachings of the YMCA and YWCA became farther and farther removed from their early beginnings. There was more emphasis placed on social reform and community involvement. This does not mean that these organizations were not socially minded in the beginning. Their respective histories are rich with efforts toward social reforms, especially in regard to working conditions. These Associations pushed for laws to insure minimum wages and shorter hours for children and women. Both Associations have also provided inexpensive housing for young men and women. But now the emphasis was such that the Christian purpose was being obscured as well as the Christian motivation for such reform.

Instead of promoting the Christian faith these organizations were emphasizing "Christian" as their heritage whereas their purpose was now to break down the barriers separating one religion from another. More and more Christianity was seen as a set of moral values and principles common to all. This is apparent from this Statement of Purpose issued by the YWCA during this decade:

The Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America, a movement rooted in the Christian faith as known in Jesus and nourished by the resources of that faith, seeks to respond to the barrier-breaking love of God in this day. The Association draws together into responsible membership women and girls of diverse experiences and

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and faiths, that their lives may be open to new understanding and deeper relationships and that together they may join in the struggle for peace and justice, freedom and dignity for all people.

"Peace and justice, freedom and dignity for ALL people" became the watchwords of the day. How the local Associations carried out these in their local communities depended on the local directors, local economic and social conditions, etc. How far a local Association was allowed to go can be seen in the example of the University of Washington YWCA in Seattle. In 1971 this YWCA began to sponsor forums on sex and sexuality, and these eventually grew into what became the Aradia Clinic. At the clinic entrance hung a huge, hand-lettered poster that listed Aradia's prices for various gynecological remedies and birth-control pills and devices beside a list of regular drugstore prices. In a small office at the front of the building was the Women's Divorce Co-operative, where a counselor was available to help women who wanted to arrange an inexpensive, do-it-yourself divorce or simply needed advice and a sympathetic ear. Nearby were the desks of the staff and volunteers who ran the free abortion-referral service, one that was so successful it virtually eliminated the private, profiteering referral agencies of the state of Washington. Down the hall, in a small side room, was the Lesbian Resource Center, the only such facility in any YWCA at that time. Here Seattle-area lesbians could get together for coffee and a sharing of problems. When Edith Lerrigo, the then Executive Director of the national YWCA, was asked why this Seattle group was not only tolerated but also encouraged in its programming by the national YMCA, she said, "They may be a little ahead of the rest of us, but maybe we have a lot to learn from associations like theirs."

After 48 years of opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, in 1973 the National Convention of the YWCA voted to lobby for ERA. At this same convention, the YWCA also called for low-cost abortions for all those who desired them. And the YWCA also resolved that it would not discriminate on its governing boards, or on its staff, against homosexuals. This resolution was adopted by the convention after a national board member, Jean Owens, ended a hot debate with: "We have participated in a traditional social system that has prevented the lesbian and homosexual from achieving a full measure of self-worth in our society. It is time for a new understanding."

Ecumenism was also strongly promoted by these Associations in the 1970's. This was amply demonstrated by the World Council of YMCAs that

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took place in Kampala, Uganda, Africa in 1973. Hymns were sung at the opening session by an African choir accompanied by drums. A German trumpet corps, strongly evangelical, led the singing at the sessions. Bible study was conducted each morning by Father Basil Meeking of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. And the next YMCA World Council President is a member of one of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

As for the 1980's, it is impossible to find one consistent opinion in the YMCA or the YWCA as to the purpose of the modern day organization or as to the direction in which they are headed. Add to this fact that each local YMCA or YWCA is autonomous and need only "reflect the spirit" of the national organization, and you have a great possibility of differences in policies and programs from one Association to the next. Local Association Boards completely control the local programs and policies, and they differ greatly from town to town depending on the membership of the local board and the neighborhood and conditions that each local Association finds itself in.

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IV. A POSTSCRIPT

The scope of this paper, as I understood it, was to state the religious aspects and teachings of the YMCA and YWCA. Yet I am sure there are some who would like to ask - "Ed, after all of your research, etc., do you feel that a Wisconsin Synod member could in good conscience belong to either the YMCA or YWCA?" Speaking of research that I have done I would ~~like~~^{like} to share with you the statements concerning the YMCA and the YWCA issued by the LC-MS Commission on Organizations in 1975:

As an agency which encourages wholesome sport, physical culture, and provides decent quarters for young men away from home, the YMCA deserves every commendation. Since, however, its primary purpose is to "develop Christian personality and build a Christian society," the committed Christian must inquire into its religious principles and practices in order to determine whether they are compatible with confessional Christianity.... The Christian who is concerned that the Gospel be proclaimed for the salvation of lost sinners cannot in good conscience give assent to misplaced confidence in a "social gospel" which obscures the personal work of Jesus Christ.

In conducting training classes in physical skills, in providing recreational and sports facilities, and in establishing hotels for young men the YMCA has functioned well. It is conceivable that the concerned Christian would encounter no incompatibility with his faith or Christian witness in participating in these phases of the program. Payment of an established fee for the use of specified facilities does not constitute endorsement of the religious tenets of the Association since the Association itself distinguishes between active membership and associate membership (for use of facilities). Use of facilities does not presuppose attendance at religious meetings. In many communities the religious aspects of the program have been wholly abandoned, to the chagrin of the National Council.

Basically, the YWCA is a female counterpart of the YMCA. It encourages the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, provides inexpensive and decent places to live for young women away from home, and attempts to satisfy the religious, social, and vocational interests of its members. The religious involvement of the YWCA is like that of the YMCA, namely, broad, unionistic, and anti-confessional. Participation in the religious programming would cause serious conflicts for the committed Christian.

Use of YWCA facilities for the payment of a fee does not constitute involvement in the religious tenets of the Association, for the YWCA permits this kind of membership.

To this I would also add that the Wisconsin Synod has not taken any official stand over against the YMCA or YWCA as it has, say, against the lodges and scouting. The reason is simply the vagueness of the proclamations of these organizations concerning their religious aspects and teachings. Therefore, I would encourage everyone of you, as the shepherd of the flocks over which Christ has placed you, to investigate the purposes and practices of your local YMCA and YWCA. Find out what membership in them really constitutes in regards to religious involvement. Then instruct and educate your people. Present all the facts to them and what God's Word says regarding these matters.

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Finally, concerning the references used in this paper. For much of the historical portion of this paper I am indebted to Norman Pommeranz and a similar paper he did for his teenage Bible class in Hemlock, Michigan. The quotations concerning the official purposes and policies of the YMCA and YWCA are from various official publications of those Associations. I also made use of the following magazine articles, either directly or indirectly:

Limbert, Paul, "World YMCA Meets in Uganda, Reaffirms Its Christocentric Character," The Christian Century, September 5, 1973.

Olsen, Lynne, "Revolution at Your Local YWCA," MS, February, 1974.

Fury, Kathleen, "Can the YWCA Really Swing?," Redbook, March, 1975.

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