

THE SPIRITUAL BASIS
OF
SCOUTING

AN ADDRESS BY

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AT THE BIRMINGHAM CONFERENCE

1930

THE BOY SCOUTS ASSOCIATION

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The Spiritual Basis of Scouting

It is not an easy subject on which I have to speak to you to-night – the question of the practical problems that arise as between Troops and Churches. To deal with the practical problems would appear to be fairly easy, but I found, as soon as I began to think them over, that it was necessary to get down to fundamentals in order to build right foundations for practical policy. Therefore I am driven to speak about some of the deepest things of Scouting. I want, if I can, to blaze a trail of thought, through the rather uncharted ground of the relationship of Troop and Church. It is difficult ground – forgive me if I go astray – and, of your charity correct me.

WHY CO-OPERATE?

Perhaps we can best start by thinking together over the practical question: “WHY SHOULD SCOUTS CO-OPERATE WITH THE CHURCHES AT ALL?” One meets numbers of excellent men, really good men, who would never get up at this conference and say so, but who, meeting over a cup of tea, will say, “It is a pity the Movement has anything to do with Churches. We can stand quite well on our own feet!” Why, then *do* we co-operate with the Churches? I will tell you why: all too often because the Church happens to possess the only place that is big enough for the Troop to meet in and we want it! I suggest to you that any kind of superficial co-operation between Troop and Church can rarely be satisfactory and is generally mischievous. If the parson simply wants a Troop in order to fill his choir, he has no business to have Scouts at all; if the Scoutmaster only wants to co-operate with the Church so as to get free use of a hall he has no business to be connected to the Church.

THE RIGHT BASIS

What, then, is the right basis of co-operation? I propose to look for the answer to this question by considering the deepest side of Scouting, the moral and ethical side, and that we shall best explore by considering how we feel about Scout Law. Scout Law is, I believe, the basis of Scouting, but experience up and down the country leads me to feel that there are two very definite schools of thought about the Law. To some Scouters the Scout Law is something akin to “good form.” I should say that this conception of Scout Law tended to be dominant in the early days of Scouting. “Some things are done, and some things are not done.” A book published some time ago about Scouting in schools stated that everything in the Scout Law is an accepted tradition of every public school with the exception of the 4th Scout Law, which is a mistake. And that is the attitude of mind of many Scouters towards Scout Law – simply the accepted conventions of right living. Conventions, we may note, are the fossilized forms of old convictions. There are many splendid Troops who accept Scout Law on that basis, and of many splendid Troops I have personally known some of the finest *on the practical plane* have been Troops where Scout Law had that significance, that bias. *Such* Troops have little need of co-operation with the Churches beyond perhaps an occasional Church parade. They are developing the mental and physical side of their Scouts, giving health and hobbies – teaching swimming and sport, and how to play the game. Let me say at once and emphatically that such Troops are doing priceless service, in many cases the best service of which their particular Scoutmaster is capable, and one dare not condemn them. They have their place.

But there is a growing feeling and I think it is dominant in the Movement now that this conception of Scout Law as simply an accepted way of good living does not go deep enough and we want something more if Scouting is to do its finest work. To this view Scout Law is a blazing ideal: living, vital, capable of changing the whole face of the world if we can but get it into the minds and hearts and lives of our boys. Need I say that this was Roland Phillips' view. What is the history of the Law? We know it came from the genius of the Chief, and we can never be too grateful to him for giving it to us. But the Law found its origin in chivalry, in knighthood – and chivalry drew its inspiration from religion. We have to go back to the deep roots of things. I feel that the Law must be to us not a cold expression of good form, but a living, vital reality with the force and sanction of religion behind it if it is to grip and rule the lives of our boys.

RELIGION THE DYNAMIC FORCE

I cannot help feeling that our whole Movement has suffered at times from an optical illusion, the illusion that you can take an average boy, teach him the Scout Law, administer the Promise "I will do my best," and then expect the boy to go on steadily developing the strong virtues of honour, loyalty, unselfishness, clean living and discipline. Now we have reached the point of cleavage and what I am saying may divide you, my brother Scouts, into two camps. But I must stand on one side of the line. Honour, loyalty, unselfishness, clean living, service are *not* natural fruits of the human tree. They come from a living, vital faith – all history and experience show it. To make the Scout Law live in the hearts and minds of boys we need the dynamic force of religion.

It will be said that this linking-up of the Scout law with religion is not right. Does not many a man display the virtues of the Scout Law who has no conscious religious inspiration at all? I agree. But in almost every such case you will find that men who are living in accordance with the principles of the Scout Law have behind them that tradition of godly forefathers who have passed on to them that tradition of right living. One has the fear that England in the economic world is trying to live upon the capital accumulated by more industrious generations: it may be, too, that we are living on our moral capital, carrying on virtues that our fathers have built up instead of creating new wealth of character by going to the vital sources from which character springs. I put it to you as a personal conviction that truth, unselfishness and purity are not developed by a good resolution but by a good religion. Can we expect our boys – I do not mean the young boys who have not faced up to life, but the Patrol Leaders and Rover Scouts – to carry out into the world of business and affairs, honour and truth when untruth pays better; unselfishness in a community where selfishness is the general rule; clean living in a society where the conventions in these matters are steadily losing ground? Can we expect our boys to go out and keep the spirit of the Scout Law if they are not linked up to a stronger force than their own good intentions? I say No! The sobering thought for us as Scouters is that we can hold up that magnificent blazing ideal of the Scout Law and boys may respond to it and do their best to follow it – and fail. If we have not taught our boys both to see the ideal in life and to link up with a power that will make it possible we have done them ill-service, for a disillusioned boy is worse than a boy who has never had the ideal at all. We *need*, therefore, to lead our boys into touch with the dynamic force of religion, using the word "religion" in its broadest sense – into touch with God.

THE SPIRITUAL BASIS A WORLD NEED

You may, perhaps, think that what I am saying is local and personal. Let me give you some wider experience. Following the Jamboree at Birkenhead last year I had representatives of every Scouting nation at Roland House. The head of the Roumanian delegation with whom I discussed the matter said: "In Roumania we find that Scouting is very much inclined to become just a

tourist and open-air organisation. But I am quite sure that the testimony of Roland House is true and that only on a spiritual basis can we really build character.” One of the heads of the Polish delegation said: “I welcome the testimony that England is basing its Scouting on the spiritual, for in Poland we find that only a spiritual inspiration can really make Scouting live.” I had a Hindu staying with me – a representative of that splendid type of our fellow subjects in India whom we met during the Jamboree – and he said: “We find the sanction of Scout Law in our sacred books and we Hindus can only attempt to make the Scout Law real if we link it up with religion.” And so I could go on. I believe world-wide experience in Scouting is proving the truth to be the same in every land – as of course it must be.

I ask again, “Why should we co-operate with the Churches?” And the answer is: Because we ought to get from the Churches the spiritual dynamic which we need to make Scouting ideals possible – the force that will enable us all, men and boys, to live the Scout Law.

HOW CO-OPERATE?

Now we turn to the practical question: HOW SHOULD WE CO-OPERATE? As a first principle I should say, do not co-operate at all unless you can do so with whole-hearted loyalty. Half-hearted co-operation will never get you anywhere. You must realise that your boys *need* religious training and association, and plan your Scouting accordingly. If you have been able to accept my answer to the first question you will realise that it is not good Scouting to pursue the practical side of our work at the expense of the spiritual. Look back to your own boyhood and consider what would have been the effect upon your own spiritual development if you had been drawn by the lure of camping week-end after week-end away from the Church of your fathers and your religious associations? Weigh it up in the light of your own experience. I say to you it is perilous to snap the cords which bind a boy to a particular Church. There may be many things wrong with a Church, but if a boy’s roots are there and you, through your Scouting, break the fibres, the chances of his taking root elsewhere are slight indeed. Try, steadily and unselfishly, to see the parson’s point of view.

The Chief Scout tells us it’s good Scouting to study the other fellow’s point of view. *You* want the boys to get religious training and grounding in the faith; *he* wants the boys (or he ought to want – and will if it’s put to him fairly) to get the outdoor physical benefit and comradeship of Scouting. Some day we may get all your “opposite numbers,” the parsons, together, and what must be said to them will be very different! I wish we could get the parsons to see our point of view – I wish they could see what tremendous value Scouting has for every Church. But my task to-night is to urge Scouters to do their part. I am perfectly convinced that very many Scouters have never made a really serious effort to see the parson’s point of view. They simply regard him as a person to be tolerated for reasons of expediency! See your parson and say to him, “I want to give the boys a certain amount of Scout training during week-ends – the only time available. You want to give the boys spiritual training and you have only the week-ends. What arrangements can we make so as to co-operate for the welfare of the boys?” If your parson does not respond he is no sort of parson. Try and agree on some definite obligations. I have found Roman Catholic priests very willing to meet the Scout point of view – perhaps because their obligations are so definite. The Roman Catholic Padre of one of my Troops went to the Court of Honour and sat down with the boys to discuss the programme of week-end camping. The boys said, “What do you require from us, Father?” and the reply was, “I want you at your own Church on the first and third Sunday of every month.” The boys asked, “What may we have for camping?” And the reply was, “The second and fourth Sundays.” A bright youngster put up his hand. “I say, Father, supposing there are five Sundays.” “You may have the fifth to make up for bad weather!” That bargain has never been infringed by either party. That is the spirit of co-operation that ought to exist, but too often we find the Scoutmaster making his plans and the parson his plans, and there

is not the real spirit of getting together to help the boy. Need I add that it is a Scoutmaster's primary duty when taking boys away for week-end or summer camp to ensure that their religious obligations are fulfilled when they are away from their own Church?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

See to it that you are showing the right spirit towards the parson and study the Church not from expediency but from principle. Make your arrangements with the parson

“Not as traffickers at marts,
But as fitteth honest hearts.”

Let it not be a question of how much I can offer in order to get certain concessions from the Church. Study the point of view of the Church. It may be that you as Scouters will be doing finer service for the up-building of the character of your boys if you take a Sunday School class or appear regularly at early Service rather than by running continual week-end camps. It is the example that counts. I know that many of the Churches are not too helpful. The Chief Scout says, “Look for the five per cent. good in every individual.” May I pass on another slogan: “Look for the percentage of good which you will find in every Church.”

Now I come to the heart of the practical difficulty and speak in a parable. Have you ever come out of your tent in the early morning and gone over to the camp fire of the night before? It is all cold and dead; life seems gone. Are the Churches like that? One fears that in some cases they are. And you bring to the Church the green twigs of young life and you cast them on the Church hoping that they will catch the fire of the faith. They do not catch the fire because there is not enough fire in the Church to warm them, and they sputter and smoulder and smoke. There is no fire and the temptation comes to you, “I will leave this old fire and I will take my young twigs away and I will build a new fire in a new place. The old fire is dead.” There is tremendous fun in starting new things. You take your bunch of twigs away and you build a new clean fire away from the fire of the old faith, independent of the Church. But who will attend to that fire when you are gone? It is so easy to take the best away from the Church and start some religious observation of your own. And then you are called away by business or death and the little fire you have built dies down and your boys are cold; they have left the fires of their fathers. It is better to do what you may in all humility to revive the life of your Church. Seek for the heart of the fire in your Church and try and bring your boys into touch, not with the cold and dead exterior, but with the vital faith which made it. Teach your boys not to grumble about the narrowness too often found in the Church, but teach them to find the heart of the fire that still lives there and catch the faith they need. Counsel of perfection, you say.

THE CHURCHES NEED SCOUTING

I have a dream, maybe a wild dream, but if only we can co-operate with the Churches, if we can but bring up within the fellowship of every Church a new generation of Christian men, strong in faith, broad in vision and sympathy through Scouting, bound together throughout the Churches by the common link of the great Scout Law, we shall be building better than we know. Look you, brothers! We can bring to the Churches what they are needing – youth, enthusiasm and the plain, simple and splendid code of the Scout Law, as a practical rule of life. Can you imagine it – a Church whose men and women, trained as Scouts and Guides, have the Scout Law and spirit engrained in their character – made living and vital by the dynamic of religion?

It is a dream, but a dream worthy of our best work. If we can bring up within the fold of the Churches men loyal to their faith and bound together by the link which Scouting forges, we may indeed be laying the foundations on which shall arise Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.