

Lessons for Today from a Great Lady of Yesterday

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6 NKJV)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10 NKJV)

On the beautiful Stanford University Campus in Stanford, California, the Stanford Memorial Church has been called "the stunning centerpiece of Stanford's main quad." And that it is.

It is not only the centerpiece of the campus. It was the central love of the founder of the university. In 1917, in a conversation with Dr. John C. Brannar, then President Emeritus of the university, Mrs. Jane Stanford said, "But, Mr. Brannar, while my whole heart is in this university, my soul is in that church."

In a time when religious education and belief in God were thought to be commonplace, it was surprising to discover that Mrs. Stanford's greatest concern about her university was that "institutions and educators were spending relatively too little time on moral and spiritual instruction....

Students are required to take certain studies; those who are to be engineers must take mathematics; those who are to be chemists must take chemistry, and the geologists must take mineralogy, and so on; but not a single department requires a student to be clean in his life or to study subjects that will help strengthen his moral character, or help him to have or to cultivate a proper attitude toward himself and toward mankind. You try to fit men to do their professional work, but you lose sight of the very important fact that neither you nor anyone else wants to employ a man who lacks sound moral principles, no matter how much he may know about some particular subject. ...

For no amount of learning can take the place of decency, and no amount of science can take the place of backbone. And as the moral and spiritual life is more important than the life of our bodies, so moral and spiritual instruction is more important to young people than instruction of any other kind. That is why I think the church should be the heart and center of this university."

She had expressed to Dr. Brannar great disappointment in the moral failures of some students and a few professors - even though the attempt had been made prior to their coming to the university to make sure they were all of high moral character.

Dr. Brannar concluded his comments on their visit by saying,

"To Mrs. Stanford the church stood for highmindedness, uprightness, unselfishness and for what are generally known as the Christian virtues, and it was as the teacher of these virtues that she wanted to pass it and its influences on to the members of this community, living and yet to come."

Today, the sentiments and concerns expressed by Mrs. Stanford are truer than ever before. If the founder of this great university gave such great relevance to the moral character of those who made up the student body and faculty and was aware of the lack of practice of Christian principles in such, how disappointed would she be today in the degradation of the moral character of the nation in which that university resides?

For now, nearly one hundred years after her comments, not only is moral character in America declining, but the very presence of church and Christians are often shunned, banned or ridiculed.

Mrs. Stanford said,

"The church is the only institution today that makes or has made or pretends to make a stand against immorality in all its forms. Education does not... In fact, I do not believe in a university education for all men for that very reason. A man with an education and without morals is liable to become - indeed, he is almost sure to become - simply an abler, shrewder criminal whose ability to prey upon society has been increased by education. Like any other force education needs intelligent guidance if it is to serve any good purpose. And where shall we look for such guidance if we look not to the sound and unselfish principles taught by Christianity?"

Mrs. Stanford was a prophetic voice in the early 20th century. America, the home of her beloved university, in the early 21st century is experiencing what can happen when Christianity and the church are removed from society. God help us.

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:20 NIV).

October 2015

© Stephanie B. Blake

The quotes from Dr. Brannan and Mrs. Stanford came from a book written by Willis Lincoln Hall, published in 1921, *Stanford Memorial Church, the mosaics, the windows, the inscriptions*. The book is in public domain and available free in PDF online through Hathitrust.org. The 1921 version (there is a 1917 version) contains Dr. Brannan's conversation with Mrs. Stanford.

Over the years, Mrs. Stanford collected inspirational sayings. Some of them (28) now decorate the church as beautifully framed inscriptions. Next month's devotional will highlight a few of these.