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Reflections upon the present Curriculum of Theological Colleges

MUCH attention is being given today to the curricula of the theological colleges. Changing patterns of human society in which the church is bearing its witness, new realms of human knowledge exposing some limitations of Christian doctrine, the renewing of non-Christian religions exerting pressure upon the Christian minorities in their midst, the decline of church attendance in Britain necessitating a fresh appraisal of the formulation of our message and of the methods of its proclamation—these are some of the reasons for the continuing consideration of the training of ministers.

In the United States a detailed and careful survey of the varying theological seminaries was made by a group of workers under the leadership of Dr. H. Richard Niebuhr; their conclusions were published in 1956-57 in a series of volumes. All these volumes are important; the most stimulating and the more universal in its application is the volume about the purpose of the church and its ministry. To its thought I acknowledge my debt.

Reflections about the curricula of theological colleges are of little value when they derive from considerations of expediency or are limited to the immediate and rapidly changing situation of the present. We must proceed rather from the following basic considerations:

1. The nature of the curriculum in a theological college is to be determined by the purpose for which the church exists.

This statement at once suggests the distinction of a college from a university. In its proper conception a university is a community of people engaged in the pursuit of learning by methods of free enquiry without the necessity of personal commitment to any conclusions that may be reached. But the members of a theological college are committed persons who have already accepted certain conclusions about the nature and meaning of life. On this ground I have heard a University professor argue that theology is not a proper subject within a university syllabus. I should not accept that judgment but it does focus sharply the difference between a university and a theological college.

Again, a theological college is distinct from the normal conception of a Bible school or a training institute, where courses of in-

struction may be offered reflecting strongly a dogmatic point of view and unrelated to specific Christian tasks or communities. A theological college exists within the life and fellowship of a particular section of the church. It is related to the witness of that section of the church, serves some of its needs and probably exercises some kind of leadership within it.

A theological college has neither the unrestricted and uncommitted freedom of a university nor the unrelated dogmatism of other institutions preparing people for full-time Christian service. Its ultimate purpose is the same as the ultimate purpose of the church whose life and fellowship it shares.

2. In this context the word church has the three meanings of the local congregation, the denomination, the whole fellowship of Christians.

We have to note these three meanings because the work of a theological college is related to them. It is obvious that the college with its function of preparing people for the Christian ministry must be closely related to local congregations and must continually bear in mind the needs of such congregations. Yet the function of the college is not to be restricted to the needs of local congregations. The college shares the life and witness of a denomination so that it must reflect the traditions of its community and at the same time subject these traditions to continual review so that it may exercise leadership in the thinking of its community.

Yet again, the theological college must not be limited to a denominational position. It can rightly claim to share the total Christian heritage in all its richness; indeed, it should continually enrich the life of its own community by imparting the treasures of Christian devotion, knowledge and service in whatever community they have been gathered. To do this, it must keep all its work in the context of the whole worshipping and witnessing church.

3. The purpose of the church in all forms of its life may be defined as the increase of love of God and of man.

This phrase is taken from the book *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* in which Dr. Niebuhr writes: "No substitute can be found for the definition of the goal of the church as the increase among men of the love of God and neighbour." (p. 31.)

Limitations of space and theme prevent any consideration of this definition. It is offered here to underline the assertion that in any consideration of the theological curricula the purpose for which the church exists must be clearly conceived since it is a primary and determinative factor. Other definitions are possible; this one has the merit of being comprehensive and of expressing the purpose in terms of personal relationships. Both are essential elements in any valid definition of the purpose of the church.

4. The function of the ministry is that of leading the church in the fulfilment of this purpose.

If the whole church exists to minister according to the pattern of the Son of Man who came to minister and to give His life a ransom for many, as T. W. Manson so cogently argues in his book on the church's ministry, then the function of ministers is that of the spiritual leadership which enables the whole church to fulfil its ministry. This is the conception of ministry which appears in the letter to the Ephesians where 4.11.12 in the New English Bible read, "And these were his gifts: some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The ministry exists for the life of the church so that the church may exercise its ministry of love to God and man.

We have now to move from these basic considerations to the immediate purposes of a college curriculum, asking the question: What are the implications of these considerations in terms of the life and work of a college? Three implications suggest themselves.

(a) The college must prepare spiritual leaders.

The chief concern of the college is with persons; it has to be concerned with curricula largely in terms of persons. The growth of the Christian person as a potential leader in the ministry of the church is what matters above all else.

Here some searching questions must be faced by all engaged in the work of the college. Are we giving too much attention to courses and insufficient attention to students? Are we thinking too much about imparting knowledge and not enough about growth in wisdom? Are we tending to train men for jobs rather than enabling them to develop capacity for spiritual leadership?

This concern about persons must provoke much thought concerning two aspects of the life of a college:

- (i) there must be concern about the daily motives, attitudes and relationships which prevail in the college, and about the activities in which these are expressed, for it is just this element of college life which is so influential in the persons of those who belong to the college community.
- (ii) there must be concern about the motives, attitudes and relationships which the colleges, as corporate bodies, manifest in the life of the denomination with the activities in which they are expressed for this, too, shapes the thought and attitude of a student.

The total environment in which a student lives matters more than the courses of study which he pursues; this must be clearly per-

ceived and firmly accepted if a college is to prepare spiritual leaders.

(b) The college must prepare leaders suited to the churches.

This may appear to be an intolerable limitation to the work of a college; in fact, it is a wise acceptance of the conditions in which so many human activities have to be conducted. A college is not really serving the purpose of the church if it sends out leaders whose thoughts and views are far removed from those of the church. Leadership ceases to be leadership if real contact with the followers is lost.

This point seems to have been in Spurgeon's mind when in 1856 he established his Pastors College. He stated that "no college appeared to me to be suitable for the class of men that the providence and grace of God drew around me." He wanted "ministers suitable for the masses" and he thought that they were more likely to be found "in an institution where preaching and divinity would be the main object and not degrees and other insignia of human learning." These judgments would not meet with universal agreement, but they do present clearly the important point that the colleges, though they must represent the best in the life of a denomination and must lead the churches, yet they must not lose close contact with the churches.

Thus again, questions present themselves. Are the colleges sufficiently involved in the life of the churches? Is the curriculum related closely enough to the needs of the churches? Are students prepared to be leaders in the actual situations in which they will exercise their ministry?

(c) The college must prepare men who will lead the churches in their true ministry.

According to this judgment we have to declare two types of men as inadequate for the work of the ministry. There is the man who is so competent in everything that he cannot allow others to share the ministry of the church at all. There is the man who is so absorbed in maintaining religious organisation that he is unaware of the secular society in which the church is set to minister.

The true minister is the man who is constantly bringing the members of the church into a proper sharing of the ministry of the church. He leads his people in worship, in prayer and in understanding of God's ways; he helps them to go out into the world, both individually and corporately, for witness and service. The minister, therefore, must combine growing insight into eternal and divine purposes with growing knowledge of temporal and human situations and needs. This seems to have been in the minds of those who formed in 1770 the Bristol Education Society when they wrote: "The principal design of this society is to supply destitute congregations with a succession of able and evan-

gical ministers." The minister is one in whom is developed a capacity for knowing both God and the world; so he will be able to lead a church in its true ministry.

When we try to work out these implications in terms of the curriculum of a theological college, we seem to be led to three conclusions.

- (i) The spiritual leadership of the churches must be theologically competent. Ministers need to possess a sound knowledge and manifest a personal acceptance of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. This clearly involves the study of certain basic subjects which must include the background and content of the Bible and the development of the life and thought of the church.

Within this general statement there is room for discussion but a few more detailed comments may be made here. In Biblical studies the emphasis needs to fall upon the content of Scripture. Such study is made more accurate by means of a knowledge of the Biblical languages, but this does not mean that all theological students should learn both Hebrew and Greek. The majority ought to have some understanding of Greek but probably Hebrew should be studied only by those who are likely to pursue academic work.

In the field of doctrine there is need for a systematic study in addition to the historical studies. A student who is familiar only with the historical development of Christian doctrine may lack a balanced understanding of the faith and may have made no attempt to integrate his knowledge of Christian truth with other forms of knowledge. The reflection of the Christian mind upon the facts and experiences of the gospel is a continuing process. Neither the Patristic nor the Reformation period exhausted all possible insights; consequently a more adequate knowledge of 19th and 20th century thought seems desirable. The student who knows something of Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, might also read with profit in Brunner, Barth or Tillich.

The development of philosophical thought is perhaps a more specialist field, yet it seems desirable that within the category of theological competence we should include at least an introduction to philosophical problems and the main attempts to answer them.

- (ii) The spiritual leadership of the churches needs to be responsive to contemporary needs, challenges and opportunities. The theological competence needs to be linked with a conscious and informed awareness of the society in which the ministry of the church is exercised.

Here it seems clear that an introduction to general psychology and to methods of psychiatric work will promote a more sensitive awareness of personal needs. This study can well be included in the normal curriculum of a college, though the introduction to the specialised field of psychiatry might call for short special courses to be undertaken during vacations.

The awareness of social needs might be awakened by special lectures or by a particular kind of field work, but I am inclined to the judgment that knowledge of the way in which to deal with these needs is more properly gained when a man is at work in a particular situation. A trained mind can acquire much information for itself! And much information is meaningful and interesting only as a situation in which a man is involved, calls for it.

The same judgment cannot apply to the relationship of the Christian faith to some modern challenges. This is the realm of apologetics and to this more attention needs to be given. Many theological students begin their ministries and some ministers seem to continue all their days without any apprehension that the scientific interpretation of the origin and nature of the universe, or the psychological account of the nature of man, or the communist understanding of history, present serious and fundamental challenges to the Christian faith.

- (iii) The spiritual leadership of the church needs to include variety of skill and knowledge. We have been tempted, perhaps, to develop too uniform a pattern of ministry. We need men in the ministry who will possess different skills and experiences so that some are qualified in youth educational work, some in meeting the problems of industrial society, some in the work of mental and spiritual healing, some in answering social challenges and opportunities, some in matters pertaining to the ecumenical movement.

On the foundation of the basic studies therefore, the colleges need to erect a structure of studies affording considerable variety. This may be achieved by the development of more short courses in special subjects as well as by increased opportunities of field work; but what must be avoided is the danger of all students wanting to take all the courses. The result would be a collection of men knowing a little about many subjects without being really educated.

The Christian Church, like the society in which it is set, is entering into a new era of human life in which radical changes are taking place and will continue to occur. The Church may have to exercise its ministry in different forms and with different

methods. Yet the patterns and methods of the Church's ministry cannot be imposed upon it by secular society; that would mean that the Church was being conformed to the world. The Church must also consider the patterns of ministry which derive from the nature of the gospel and which express the gospel. This inevitable tension of the eternal and the temporal is always the tension felt by a living church.

Thus the preparing of men for spiritual leadership in the Church's ministry must also share the tension. Changes in the curricula and methods of a theological college are to be determined neither by considerations of what has proved of value for generations nor by demands of a rapidly changing situation in themselves. Both elements must be given their full value. But changes there must be if the Church in the later part of the 20th century is to bear effective witness to the eternal gospel. We have to prepare now for the position of the Christian Church in the opening decades of a new millenium.

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