REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVINITY CURRICULUM

THE ideal of an educated ministry is one that has always been closely associated with Scotland. And for the contention that Scottish standards of ministerial education are high in comparison with those of other countries, there is still much foundation. It is true that the Continental Divinity student has a knowledge of Hebrew and of Old and New Testament Exegesis far beyond that possessed by the average Scot. That, at any rate, is the impression of Scotsmen who have studied at such universities as Marburg, Basel or Zürich. But this deficiency in specialised training is in part at least compensated by the fact that unlike his Continental counterpart, the Scots student has put in not less than three years in a University Arts Faculty and may indeed have gone through a very stiff honours course before ever he began his theological studies. And when contrasted with those of other British Churches, the educational requirements of the Church of Scotland seem even more formidable. It is clear from the Interim Report of the Archbishops' Commission on the Training for the Ministry that the Church of England, for instance, does not ask of all its candidates that they should graduate or attend a university or even that they should always pass a University Matriculation examination. But most entrants to the Scottish ministry meet the first of these requirements and none can evade the last two.

The existence of these relatively high standards of theological education is a highly gratifying fact and one that must be kept in mind in any discussion of the subject. But it makes it all the more difficult to account for a slight but quite perceptible wave of criticism of the Divinity curriculum which is apparent in Scotland to-day. If criticism had only come from the Assembly's Commission on the Interpretation of the Will of God it would be less remarkable, for that otherwise admirable body seems to suffer from an almost excessive determination to find deficiencies in the organisation as distinct from the personnel of the Church. But in addition the Presbyteries, sometimes at the instigation of the Commission and sometimes independently, have been discussing the Church's way of training its students. And finally the relevant Assembly Committee,

that on the Education for the Ministry, has been working on the subject for the last three years. It should be noted that there is no great unanimity among these bodies as to what exactly is wrong with the curriculum and what precise alterations are necessary. But while the feeling of dissatisfaction is vague and certainly must not be exaggerated, it is nonetheless real enough. What is it that has given rise to it?

It is the contention of the present article that three factors go a long way to explain both the existence of such criticism and its failure to crystallise into any concrete and generally accepted suggestions for improvement. First of all there is a good deal of confusion of criticism of the curriculum with what is not really criticism of the curriculum at all but criticism of the way it is taught and the people it is taught to. A second factor behind the present dissatisfaction is that the Church, while always aware that it had a duty to see that its students were properly *trained*, has persistently failed to take up a like responsible attitude in the matter of *selecting* them. Thirdly, the aim of all theological education is to try to help the candidate to carry out his function as a minister properly. But to-day there is no general agreement as to what a minister's function in the community is. Hence inevitably there is disagreement as to what form his training should take. Before going on to discuss these three points in detail, one ought perhaps to make it clear that any attempt adequately to deal with them brings us up against certain issues, partly ecclesiastical, partly economic, and partly theological, which at first sight seem to have very little to do with the actual Divinity curriculum. But in actual fact it is our (generally unconscious) attitude to these apparently irrelevant issues which determines the view that we take as to what is, or is not, a sound education for the ministry. Sometimes, too, the attempt to face up to these issues leads to rather delicate ground. It is undertaken here with considerable diffidence and is inspired only by the modest hope that a frank statement of the various issues which lie behind the problem may be of some help in leading to its solution.

I

Our first point is that any profitable discussion of the subject must begin by distinguishing what in the strict sense

of the word is criticism of the curriculum from what is not that at all but rather criticism either of the professors or of the students. The present writer has a vivid memory of a very distinguished professor, since deceased, remarking that the curriculum was the heritage of the ages and therefore probably basically sound; but that whether it was always adequately taught was another matter. It is certainly a matter on which students sometimes have grave doubts! Fortunately student criticism of the professoriate is irrelevant to the subject of this article and we need only say that it ought to be received neither with complete lack of sympathy nor with undue seriousness. Scotland has been singularly blessed with great theological teachers. The influence of men like A. B. Davidson, James Denney and H. R. Mackintosh, to name only three, has been profound and incalculable and these men have worthy successors to-day. But it is perhaps too much to expect the same high level to be kept up everywhere and it is certainly too much to expect even the no doubt relative imperfections of the professoriate to escape the unduly critical eye of youth. Such student criticisms are mentioned here simply because indirectly they have in two respects a certain relevance to our problem. That they occur at all is, one suspects, due to a feature whereby our system differs from that which prevails on the Continent. There, while theological examinations are much stiffer than those which are held in Scotland, and while every student must attend a certain number of lectures and seminars, no student is compelled to attend the lectures of any particular professor. The result is that while in Germany or Switzerland the dull professor, or worse still, the professor who does not keep himself up in his own subject, soon finds that his students have betaken themselves to other lectures and other universities, in Scotland his roll book and our system of compulsory attendance will always secure him an unwilling audience who can only work off their disgust by thinking up acid (and sometimes very clever) comments which in due course are passed up through the proper channels to the Education for the Ministry Committee. One direction in which reform of the curriculum might be possible and desirable may lie in the direction of tightening up examinations, while making attendance at lectures (though not at seminars) less rigidly compulsory. One other respect in which students' complaints are relevant to our subject is that undue

respect for them may be at the back of the view sometimes expressed, that we have too many professors and too many colleges and that all our students ought to be educated at Edinburgh or Glasgow or even at only one of these places. There is much to be said against such a proposal. Leaving aside the not unimportant point whether in a Christian country like Scotland, universities of the antiquity and standing of St. Andrews and Aberdeen ought to be without Divinity faculties, it is doubtful whether it should be impossible for Scotland adequately to staff four theological faculties. The Swiss, at any rate, who have a smaller Reformed population and an equal number of faculties, seem to have no difficulty in providing their universities with excellent professors. And while it is true that in recent years St. Andrews and Aberdeen have had too few students, it is equally true that Glasgow has had too many and an adjustment could be made. That, however, is to anticipate a point which is best made later in the article. But perhaps the decisive factor is that it is becoming increasingly imperative for Christianity to define its position over against the clear-cut attitude of rivals such as Communism and Humanism, and at the same time increasingly difficult for the "working minister" to find time from his multifarious activities to attempt any such task. We cannot do with fewer theological professors.

If students occasionally criticise their professors, they are not spared criticism themselves. In the nineteen-thirties there was an abnormally large intake of students into the Divinity Halls of the Church of Scotland. Perhaps inevitably there have been those who maintain that in these years the quality was hardly up to the quantity. Whether such misgivings are justified is a delicate point. That they are mentioned here is simply because they form the basis of one of the main arguments for altering the Divinity curriculum and in particular for jettisoning compulsory Greek and Hebrew. For at this point criticism of the student material which is not in itself criticism of the curriculum tends to pass into the latter. Starting from their conviction that we do not in fact find the best type of student entering the Divinity Faculty, the critics go on to argue that the reason for this is to be found in the present Divinity curriculum. In it, and particularly in its demand for compulsory Hebrew and Greek, is to be found the barrier which keeps

the best men from coming forward to the Church. The men whom we need above all others, the man with a first class in economics, the scientist, the business man with great qualities of leadership are—so it is maintained—just those who simply will not face up to the demand to get up two new languages late in life. And it is further argued that we have no right to make such a demand of them. To this first criticism of the Divinity curriculum on the ground that it keeps away the best men, there is generally added the further one that it is not even suitable for the weaker brethren whom we do in fact get. Here again compulsory Greek and Hebrew are the targets for attack. It is maintained (by some of those who teach them and therefore ought to know!) that most Scottish Divinity students of to-day have so lamentable a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek that it is sheer waste of time to teach them the Old and New Testaments on the basis of the original text. Far better to base the lectures on the English Bible. Hence the feeling among some (though by no means all and probably not even most) Divinity professors that it would be better to make Hebrew and Greek optional.

When put in an extreme form, as for the sake of clarity has been done above, this argument is obviously open to several criticisms. For one thing its two halves contradict each other. If the standards of Hebrew and Greek insisted on are so low as to verge on the farcical, they are hardly likely to deter able men with a real vocation for the ministry. And on this latter point, the argument undoubtedly takes an unduly gloomy view. Whatever the defects of the present curriculum it does not exclude *all* the best men. A well-known professor who has had experience of teaching in both countries has given it as his opinion that for every one good student he had in America (where Hebrew and Greek are optional) he had five in Scotland (where these languages are compulsory). And the writer, in whose year at New College, Edinburgh, there were five men with first class honours degrees in non-linguistic subjects, can testify that from none of them was heard any complaint about the necessity of having to get up Hebrew and Greek. Yet we cannot dismiss the argument outlined in the previous paragraph as easily as all that. For it rests on the thoroughly sound conviction that no matter how happy one's own experience may be, there is no room for complacency about the standard of men

coming forward for the ministry. We can do with more good men and we ought to encourage them. Only if we do justice to the truth behind this conviction have we any right to point out that the desired end can be achieved without any such drastic alteration as the abolition of compulsory Greek and Hebrew. And that brings us on to our second point, the question of the selection of students.

II

Concern for the quality of men entering the ministry is only justified if it is based not on any invidious and probably subjective judgment upon individuals who have entered in the last decade but on the recognition that the present system—if it can be called a system—of selection must inevitably discourage good candidates and encourage weak ones. Just what proportion of good students we have had in the last few years is doubtful. What is certain is that we have had a great many more than we deserved. For it should be noted that to enter the ministry calls for a considerable amount of sacrifice from the good student. It means financial sacrifice—he will certainly not earn as much in the ministry as he would in another calling. It means that he must spend three years at a Divinity Hall where all the lectures are compulsory and are necessarily and inevitably framed for his less bright brethren and therefore often incredibly dull to him. Finally, if his gifts are of the academic character, he will speedily discover when he completes his course that they are not of the slightest advantage to him as they would be in other jobs. Quite the reverse in fact! During the glut of 1933-1939, when for every vacant charge there were at least forty applicants and preaching matches of eight to fourteen candidates were common, the probationer with an honours degree very soon learned to conceal the fact. Now all these factors are not mentioned by way of complaint. No one wants men coming into the ministry for what they can get out of it. It is all to the good that the good student—whether his gifts lie in the academic sphere or elsewhere—should have to make some sacrifice in order to enter the ministry. What is not nearly so satisfactory is that no such sacrifice should be demanded of the mediocre, the indifferent or the frankly weak student. If looked at from the material point of view the ministry

can only appear to the latter as definitely a good thing. Compared with teaching and the lower ranks of the Civil Service, the only other alternatives open to him, it offers certain very definite advantages, a better salary, a complete freedom from any excessive supervision and the opportunity of early marriage. It is perfectly true that the weaker brother may not think of any of these things. But the Church ought to realise that his vocation is not tested as is that of his more gifted fellow.

Looking back over the years from 1933 to 1939 when the Church of Scotland has suffered from an excess of students, one feels that the great weakness in the Church's policy has not been in forcing students to adopt a wrong type of curriculum but in failing to exercise powers of selection. In the matter of selection, the Church adopted—if adopted is the word for so negative an attitude—a policy of *laissez faire*. Anybody who passed a not very difficult entrance examination and in addition possessed seven " D.P." certificates from the Arts Faculty[1] along with a —in some cases very easily obtainable—certificate of fitness from a presbytery was allowed to begin the study of theology, without any real attempt on the part of the Church either to test his vocation or to ascertain whether there was likely to be a job for him at the end of three or four years. There was an abundance of bursaries, examinations, to put it mildly, were not difficult—we have seen that some Divinity professors maintain that the standards in Hebrew and Greek have become almost farcical. But once he passed through college the candidate for the ministry found that his outlook was not so rosy. The Church which had spoon-fed him as a student left him to beg for his bread as a probationer. In view of the Church's complete indifference to the question whether it might not be training more ministers than it needed, it is not surprising that every year the probationers' roll became longer. Forty was the usual number of applicants for any charge, preaching matches where any number up to fourteen candidates competed for the popular vote came to be the rule. This is not the place to criticise the popular election of ministers which prevails in the Church of Scotland. There is indeed much to be said for it. It at least enables the ecclesiastical authorities to say to a congregation, " You have chosen this man, now it is up to you

[1] A certificate that the student has " Duly Performed " the work of a class which he has attended.

to support him ". It also carries with it the negative advantage that if a congregation chooses the chaff rather than the wheat—and how many congregations do!—the error automatically carries its own punishment with it. But while the system works tolerably well when there is not an excess of ministers, where the supply is in excess of the demand the balances are heavily weighted in favour of the stump orator and the wire puller. Those who doubt that ought to reflect on the fate of men like John Oman and the Scottish Probationer who were condemned to live the life of wandering " guinea pigs " simply because congregations lacked the wit to recognise their gifts. Their fate has been paralleled in recent years in Scotland and the present writer knows some of his own contemporaries, some of them men of sterling though not shop-window gifts, who have become frustrated and embittered because year after year they have been unable to find a church of their own.

It is therefore the contention of the present article that one of the greatest services to Scottish theological education would be to give drastic powers of selection to a central body such as the Education for the Ministry Committee. Such a central body would simply reject the type of student who offers himself because he has found two years of Medicine rather stiff and thinks Divinity would be an easier proposition. It would test the vocation of the indifferent or doubtful student by asking him to do a difficult piece of club work or to study at some other university than the one that is most convenient for him. By the latter means it could correct the tendency to have too many students at some centres and too few at others. Perhaps most important of all, by refusing to accept more students than there are jobs for in four years' time, such a body would keep the good student from wasting years either without a church or, what is almost as bad, in one for which he is not suited. Any system that will cut down the number of square pegs in round holes will increase the effectiveness of the Church in Scotland.

There is, further, something to be said for giving such a central committee discretionary powers to enable it to modify the courses of particular students. There is, for instance, no reason why all complaints about Hebrew should be treated in the same way. Students may find difficulty about passing the entrance examination in that subject for various reasons; one man because he has been engaged in business up to the age of thirty;

another because he has been doing an honours course in philosophy; a third because in the attempt to obtain an ordinary M.A. degree with the minimum amount of trouble he concentrated his linguistic energies exclusively on Portuguese for no higher reason than the fact that at his university the lecturer in that language is an eccentric gentleman who has never been known to fail a student. These three cases surely ought not to be treated alike. The first man might be given complete exemption from Hebrew, the second ought to be admitted to his Divinity studies forthwith but given special tuition in Hebrew and exemption from Apologetics—a subject he probably knows quite enough about already. All that is needed for the third man is a frank statement from the committee to the effect that if he really wants to enter the ministry it is up to him to get up a respectable amount of Hebrew. This will admittedly involve him in a certain amount of drudgery but then the man who is unable to tackle drudgery is hardly likely to become a successful minister.

While there is thus much to be said for exempting *deserving* students from regulations which may be unduly burdensome in specific cases, such exemption would have to be given with discretion. For when all is said and done, to allow even the best student to take any but the best course is surely a form of mistaken kindness. The good student—and we are using the adjective in its widest sense—just because he has gifts and enthusiasms, is perhaps inevitably impatient with the humdrum side of theological teaching. But it is a different matter five years after ordination when he has found that his gifts cut little ice with an unresponsive congregation and his enthusiasms have begun to flag. Unless we have given him something to fall back on at that critical period of his ministry, we have served him ill in our planning of his Divinity curriculum.

III

And so in the last resort we are forced back to the ultimate question, what is a minister's function? For the best curriculum is the one that best prepares to fulfil that function. Like so many other issues confronting the Church to-day, this question is a theological one. For the minister's function in the community

cannot be defined in purely "this-worldly" terms. In the modern secular state there is no place for him at all and perhaps the most crushing condemnation that can be passed on the ministry to-day is that so many of our number are quite content to accept the current secularist assumption that a minister is an amiable nit-wit, only of real use to the community when he is doing some job other than his own. But no Reformed Church worthy of the name can accept the Humanist view which relegates a minister to the rank of a welfare officer any more than it can accept the Catholic and magical idea of the priesthood. Clearly then one of the most urgent tasks before the Church of Scotland is an attempt to define what a minister's function is.

Such an attempt, involving as it does a thorough discussion of such theological issues as the Word of God, the sacraments and the work of the Holy Spirit, obviously cannot be undertaken within the limits of this article. All that can be said here is that if the Church of Scotland is willing to reaffirm the classical Reformed view of the ministry, many of the problems connected with the Divinity curriculum will be solved. For, on the Reformed view, a minister is a *Minister Verbi Divini;* his primary function is to interpret the Word of God to his contemporaries, to translate the Bible into the language of to-day. Now translation is impossible unless the translator is familiar with both languages and hence the aim of theological teaching in a Reformed Church is to give the student a knowledge, first of the Bible and secondly of the world in which he is to preach it. It is on the first of these heads that we come to the real justification for Hebrew and Greek. These languages are not taught for their own sake but simply because they enable the Divinity student to understand the Bible better. The minister who has no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek has no access to the best commentaries. And preaching without proper use of commentaries is perhaps the worst possible kind of preaching. Old fashioned Scottish preaching was sometimes accused with truth of using the Bible as a quarry for proof texts. Perhaps with equal truth more modern preaching could be charged with using the Bible as a quarry for edifying and sentimental stories. The most dreadful thing about this unobjective preaching, unbased on commentaries, where the preacher's pet ideas are not really tested by what the Bible actually says, is that it allows almost any kind of "ism" to be put across from Christian

pulpits and consequently fails to be what Christian preaching ought to be—a criticism of current ideologies in the light of God's Word. It is just for this reason that we ought to be suspicious of all demands that we should " modernise " the curriculum. For to be modern is often nothing more than to share in current fallacies and that can hardly be the end of an adequate theological education. As ministers we can sometimes best serve our day and generation by refusing to act as " yes-men " to its politicians, journalists and scientists turned philosophers. Just for that reason we do our Divinity students—and their future congregations!—an ill service if we direct their attention to the works of the latter more than to those of the prophets and apostles. If one test of theological education be the extent to which it helps a preacher to compose a sermon in times of crisis, one can only speak from experience and say that on the Sunday after the fall of Paris, when this country and all it stood for seemed on the verge of extinction, a knowledge of the Psalms was more helpful than a knowledge of Bertrand Russell, Professor Macmurray and not a few other writers who were the last word in modernity in one's university days. The same is true of other countries. It goes without saying that when Hitlerism crashes, the " German Christians " who in 1933 strove in their own way to " modernise " their Christianity will have no message for their fellow-countrymen. And while the relations between American Big Business, Isolationism, Pacifism and Christianity in the nineteen-twenties and thirties have never been clearly worked out, one cannot help thinking that it must be difficult for some American ministers who preached pacifism and pretty well nothing else, to have a message for their congregation in wartime. Surely of both Germany and America it is true to say that those ministers who are of most use to their fellows are just those who have not fallen victim to the seductions of a " modernised " theological course, i.e. those who have not tried to reduce Christianity to a mere dotting of the " i "s and crossing of the " t "s of fashionable political and social ideas.

And yet there is a very real sense in which the curriculum has to be modern. If on our Reformed view the task of the minister is to translate the Bible into the language of to-day, then clearly he must know that language just as well as he knows the Bible. He must know, that is to say, how the ordinary

man speaks and thinks and feels and the economic forces and social philosophies that make him speak and think and feel as he does. For unless our ministers can relate their message to these factors their gospel is irrelevant and as well unpreached. There are no short cuts to this knowledge of one's fellow men and it may seem almost grotesque to suggest that a theological college is the place to provide it. Yet with imagination we can realise that something is being done and more can be done to help our students in this vital matter. We can recognise, for instance, that in Scotland we are fortunate in that all our Divinity students have first passed through another university faculty and so have been brought into contact with men and women of equal intellectual abilities but possibly very different points of view. And the fact that our colleges are themselves faculties of the national universities helps to maintain this contact during the years of actual theological training. We can recognise, too, the part that Divinity residences play in giving men social adjustment and ability to mix with their fellows. In the actual curriculum the two subjects most suited for giving men a knowledge of the contemporary world are Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology. The former subject obviously requires greater prominence. In an age of militant Marxism, secularism, and racialism, Divinity students should be taught a great deal about these rival faiths and how the Christian way of life differs from theirs. With regard to Pastoral Theology one can only say that the professors of that subject are at a disadvantage in that they are the only professors who cannot keep themselves up to date in their subject by means of a library. The only valid criticism the present writer ever heard of one of the greatest theological professors Scotland ever had was that he prepared his students for a United Free Church of the year 1905—a Church that no longer existed. Such a criticism is at once penetrating and inevitable. A man who has been a professor of Pastoral Theology for more than ten years cannot have the knowledge of current practical problems that an ordinary working minister has and in our training of Divinity students we might do well to make far greater use of the latter individual as a part-time lecturer and discussion leader. There seems absolutely no reason, for instance, why students should not be taught about the work of a country minister by one who at that moment actually is a country minister or why men of five

years' standing as ordained ministers should not be asked back to their old colleges to talk for an hour apiece in a series entitled, " Things that have caused me difficulty in my ministry ".

With these points, however, we come to the realm of detailed practical suggestions and the aim of the present article is not to bring such forward. It is rather to point out that the question of the Divinity curriculum has deeper implications than is generally realised and that any mere tinkering with it is likely to do more harm than good. One of the greatest Secretaries for War this country ever had, Lord Haldane, has related that during his years at the War Office his constant aim was to get down to first principles and that any reforms of the army he made were based on these principles. Perhaps it might not be impertinent to suggest a similar course to those in our Church who feel dissatisfaction with the present Divinity curriculum.

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