Theological Education, the Church and the World: A Reply to the Rev. K. N. Jennings

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In the July issue of this *Journal* the Rev. K. N. Jennings of Bishop's College set forth his views on 'Theological Education and Training for the Ministry in a United Church'. While his specific proposals were directed toward the rôle of Bishop's College in a future United Church, his sketch necessarily involved a general philosophy of theological education. It is this broader issue which I feel requires comment in reply.

Jennings feels that the distinctive rôle of a theological college is to provide a place of 'withdrawal' where the student can 'wrestle with his vocation and learn the life of prayer' (p. 93). He points to the importance of 'taking seriously for the first time the spiritual training of ordinands', feeling as he does that 'none of us are doing that at present . . .' (*Ibid.*). To meet this need he proposes a 'basic minimum' of four daily occasions of corporate worship which he feels so strongly about that he is 'prepared to move heaven and earth to make it generally accepted that this is the very minimum that any Christian minister would take as the basis of his life of prayer and devotion' (p. 95).

Jennings puts heavy emphasis on the practical and professional task of the theological college, and in emphasizing this practical and professional function he argues that a theological college should be wedded to the Church. He puts it this way:

> 'I would therefore urge that in a United Church the theological colleges should be institutions of that United Church, and not independent organizations. They must be married to her, for better or for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health' (p. 90).

But while he seeks to put the theological *Colleges* in closer relationship to the Church, he proposes at the same time, to re-

move the major part of theological *education* to the secular Arts/Science College. The plan is this:

The first year of training will be in a theological college and 'will be primarily devoted to spiritual growth, together with a testing of his vocation'. Then will follow a three-year course in a general college where the student will do the bulk of his theological study. 'His final year will again be a year of withdrawal, in a theological college, providing him on the one hand with time to think round and through those questions which have remained unsolved or unassimilated, and on the other hand to grow in the life of prayer and devotion, and to prepare himself for ordination' (p. 91).

By wedding theological colleges to the Church, one does, indeed, insure an 'existential relationship' with the life of the Church. One's ministerial training is carried out with a clear sense of whose one is, and whither one is bound. It is also true that if the theological college's life and work were not directed toward the practical and professional task of providing ministers for the Church then its theological study would become arid, and its usefulness as an institution would cease.

But does this practical and professional emphasis give us the essential perspective on the nature of a theological college? I think not.

A theological college is—I suggest—first and foremost, an academic institution. Its central activity is academic work. It accepts students in terms of academic qualifications, and it dispatches them with academic degrees. It is not a community for all and sundry. There are many Christians whose faith is stronger than that of many theological students, and whose piety is deeper, but who, nonetheless, do not qualify for membership in a theological college community. The kind of thing done there is an academic kind of thing. This is a limited goal, but it is primary, and to my mind it is right and proper.

If the theological college is not related to the Church in a serious way it is cut off from the creative context of its work, and the *raison d'être* of its existence. Theology is not an abstract science. Karl Barth was fundamentally right in scrapping the early beginnings of his theological enterprise, which was a *Christliche* Dogmatik, and beginning over again with a *Kirchliche* Dogmatik. I would further agree with Barth, and with Anselm before him, that theological work is not an intellectual search for faith, but an intellectual articulation of a datum that is already given, a faith already believed in. Without venturing a definition of the Church, I would agree that theology is a discipline of the Church, for to be a Christian at all is to be part of the body of Christ.

For this reason the question of the nature of a theological college is largely a question of the Christian *vocation* of the theological student as he prepares to serve the Church. The usual

assumption is that his vocation is the Christian ministry. This anticipates too much, and overlooks his present task. Our students are presently studying for the ministry, and it is this task which constitutes their present vocation. The student's vocation is a high and holy calling, and has too often been given too little thought. All too soon the vocation of our students will be that of the ministry; but that will come in God's good time. Now they are students, and their present task is to learn and to think.

All Christians are commanded to love the Lord with heart and soul and mind and strength. The command to love God with all one's mind is primary for the Christian student. It is, so to speak, his point of entry into the total love of God with heart and soul and strength. For those with a different vocation the point of entry is different. For the workman it is physical strength; for parents it is the affections of the heart; for the saint, the dimensions of the soul. But for students even though they may also be workmen, or parents, or even perhaps saints—as students, they come to the total love of God through their vocation as thinkers and learners.

But in the academic community of both faith and scholarship, faith cannot be something that is simply *added on* to the life of scholarship. The idea of a Christian community is not something that exists *alongside* the idea of a theological college as an academic community. The two must be part of an integrated rhythm of work and worship, and this is possible in a theological college in a way that it is never possible in a secular college. I agree with Jennings' view that a theological college must be concerned with the Christian nurture of its students, but it must emphasize the particular and limited kind of nurture which is in keeping with its *primary task of theological education.* Jennings seems to me to separate piety from scholarship too widely, and hence impair the integrity of the student's vocation.

Now if theology is a serious venture, and if we begin with the realization that the student's vocation is that of a thinker and learner, then to speak of the academic aspect of a student's work in the first year as 'some introductory lectures to provide him with a good background and basic knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine' (p. 91) is a little superficial. It is precisely here that all the questions of faith are to be centred. If worship in a theological college is to have substance and relatedness to the Christian life, that worship must be a natural consequence of one's intellectual work, and vice versa. It is the weakness of too much of our teaching that we regard it simply as the supplying of information (as Jennings here seems to regard it). This, of course, is what our students too often want. They seem to be asking not only 'Tell me what I can use in the examination' but also 'Tell me what I am to believe'. Our students are not only too examination conscious; they tend to be incurably 'orthodox'. This would be all right if it were out of deep conviction, but too often it is the result of a simple lack of imagination and genuine

seriousness. Faith is not a matter of mouthing orthodoxies—and here, I am sure, Jennings and I agree. Faith is a *venture*, and the Church today is facing innumerable new problems about its own nature and the nature of its mission to the world. Unless we produce men who are capable of original and creative thought we are failing the Church in her great hour of need.

We are called to push our students out into the midst of those strong currents of conflict and perplexity which beset the Church in the modern world. The theological college cannot be content simply to supply the practical and professional needs of the Church. It stands mid-way between the Church and the world, and it must make its students aware of all those areas where the Church must meet the challenge of the world. We must force them to articulate their own faith in this context, to wrestle with and pray over the great Christian paradoxes of God's will and man's freedom, of the hope of a peaceable kingdom in the midst of a world at war with itself, and all the rest. And this is the time —the time spent in theological education—for this struggle to be centred in the hard work of Christian thinking. It is in the rhythm between work and worship that the problems of Christian history become the problems of our history, and the great clashes of Christian thought become the problems of my own thinking.

Does this mean then that the theological college places the desk over the altar? In a quantitative sense, Yes—since even the full worship time which Jennings suggests will not equal the time a student spends in lectures and in private study. But in a more important sense, the theological college integrates the worlds of desk and altar in a unique way. For if the love of God is not the deepest dimension of our learning then we are not being faithful to the vocation of the Christian student, which is to love God with all our minds.

Let me illustrate:

I know a theological college student who wrote a required paper in New Testament studies which did more than analyse the text competently. The paper dealt with the material in such a way that the text was understood truly as a word from the Lord, a word which had a claim on the student as a person. This was made possible by a high degree of technical competence, but the work was more than simply technically competent. The paper was returned with this comment: 'You do not need a Professor's approval to know that you have come within reach of the two-edged sword and fire of the gospel'.

There are many Professors who would not be capable of this kind of comment; and this is a judgment on many who teach. There are also many students who would not be capable of this standard of scholarly discipline and depth of faithful insight; and this is a judgment on many who learn. Nevertheless, this is the kind of thing that theological education constantly strives for. The task of theological education cannot properly be the total

preparation of candidates for the ministry. The Church, in its wisdom, requires its ministers to have a theological education, and it is the task of the theological colleges to give it to them.

I cannot share Jennings' conviction that four meetings a day for corporate worship is crucial for the faithful life of a theological college. I cannot even share his conviction that whether one has two services or four is a central issue. A theological college without daily corporate worship is unthinkable. But the centre of its task is properly (and inevitably) where the centre of its activity is, the work of studying and learning. Let the theological college see that it is faithful to this limited but crucial task and the Church will be more in its debt than it is today.

'The law laid hold of one that gathered sticks on a sabbath day and stoned him. This is the meaning of "the letter killeth". The Gospel takes hold on thousands of homicides and robbers, and baptizing them, delivereth them from their former vices. This is the meaning of "the Spirit giveth life". The former maketh its captive dead from being alive, the latter rendereth the man it hath convicted alive from being dead.'

—St. John Chrysostom on 2 Corinthians 3:6