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The Ideal Training for the Ministry.

A PART from an editorial suggestion, I should not have chosen to write upon such a subject. The ideal person to dilate upon it would be a newly-fledged minister. For one reason or another it commonly happens that the recently graduated student is in the mood to criticise the training from which he has just escaped, though these criticisms tend to be revised in the light of later experience. It is not improbable that Saul of Tarsus occasionally thought Gamaliel a little slow and heavy, although later, after some experience in teaching, he came to name his preceptor with pride and reverence.

However that may be, the church has no greater interest than the perfecting of ministerial equipment, and it is worth while to listen to criticisms and suggestions from every quarter. This article cannot claim to be the product of experience, but it may have the value which attaches to first impressions.

One criticism which comes from almost every type of student is that our systems of training lack elasticity. A rigid course of study is said to be prescribed for each man, irrespective of differing aptitudes or desires. Why must the non-linguist learn Hebrew (he doesn't!)? Why should the preacher who is capable of poetic flights be compelled to study the dry details of dogmatics? Should the gaze of the ardent social reformer be diverted from present-day problems to the unedifying proceedings of ancient Councils?

The answer is manifold. For one thing, few students enter college at a stage sufficiently advanced to allow of wise and profitable specialisation. The most necessary thing for the average student is the discipline of unwelcomed drudgery. A man must learn to apply to himself the Parable of the Treasure hidden in a field. It is beneath the surface of the unattractive subjects that intellectual wealth is to be found. I have studied with interest the "catalogs" of various American colleges where elasticity is the chief aim, without being deeply impressed. The method has been called one of "soft options," and seems to be one long inducement to take the path of least resistance. Should we breed a virile ministry in this manner?

One very practical consideration is that the possibility of adaptation to individual tastes and aptitudes is, in most of our colleges, limited by considerations of ways and means, whilst in

any case there are very few subjects of theological study which can well be treated as optional. The London B.D. syllabus, for instance, contains nothing of which a competent minister ought to be entirely ignorant.

When we consider the courses of study required for entrants to any other profession, we discover that there is the same insistence upon a practically uniform list of subjects. What freedom of choice is given to the would-be solicitor or the budding physician? I draw the conclusion that we must still continue to prescribe one pathway for students, and forbid wanderings in bye-paths till they leave college territory.

Another complaint is that of the apparent irrelevance of some theological studies to the pressing needs of the day. It would be well expressed in the words of H. G. Wells, in *The New Machiavelli*. He writes thus of a certain philosophical lecturer at Cambridge :

“All his woven thoughts lay across my perception of the realities of things, as flimsy and irrelevant and clever and beautiful, oh!—as a dew-wet spider’s web slung in the morning sunshine across the black mouth of a gun.”

It is a striking comparison, and every teacher needs to remember that his business is to render ineffective the threatening guns, and no cobwebs will do this. But is the criticism quite just? After all, relevance or irrelevance is a matter of standpoint. Is the student the best judge? A good deal of modern literature is erratic because authors have judged philosophy irrelevant.

A third criticism can best be put in words quoted from the *Life of Phillips Brooks* (vol. I., p. 318) :

“I shall never forget my first experience of a divinity school. I had come from a college where men studied hard, but said nothing about faith. I had never been at a prayer meeting in my life. The first place I was taken to at the seminary was the prayer meeting; and never shall I lose the impression of the devoutness with which these men prayed and exhorted one another. Their whole souls seemed exalted and their natures were on fire. I sat bewildered and ashamed, and went away depressed. On the next day I met some of those men at a Greek recitation. It would be little to say of some of the devoutest of them that they had never learned their lessons. Their whole way showed that they never learned their lessons; that they had not got hold of the first principles of hard, faithful conscientious study. The boiler had no connection with the engine. The devotion did not touch the work which then and there was the work, and the only work, for them to do.”

Sometimes our colleges are criticised because it is said that they spoil devotion and exalt study. Adapting Phillips Brooks's figure, the engine has no boiler at all. None of us wishes to deprecate either devotion or work, but what is the use of setting any man in pastoral charge if he has not already learnt to blend these two essentials in his own life? In principle, the problem of combining these two things is not peculiar to the minister; it confronts the layman, too; but if the minister cannot solve it, is he fit for his calling? The sorry divorce between devotion and work is not a problem which any college can solve; it is a challenge which each student must meet, in the strength of God.

From the consideration of all these criticisms, I have come to the modest conclusion that the cause of most of the trouble lies, not so much with the colleges, or with the students, as with the pre-collegiate years, and it is worth while inquiring whether we cannot do more in the way of preparatory training. What a pitiful business it is when the student, who entered college six months before with pride and high hope, has to be told that he had better return to his former calling, since it has become evident that he lacks the mental capacity to profit by a college course! Apart from the disappointment involved, there is the very practical consideration in these days that often no place is open to him. He has burned his boats behind him. The colleges dare not let their compassion lead them into retaining such a man, for the tasks of the ministry are too sacred to be committed to the proved incompetent. Is there no possible way of testing vocation and aptitude beforehand, and so avoiding all this perplexity?

The only suggestions that come to me are that we might strengthen and extend the work of the Home Preparation Union, and that ministers especially should do more than is commonly done in the intellectual testing and training of the would-be student. Men come before the Selection Committees of our colleges for whom their own pastors seem to have done nothing beyond the writing of a perfunctory recommendation. In some cases, ministers have not even taken the trouble to hear the candidate preach, and frequently there has been no guidance in reading. It is not certain in every case whether the churches ought not to bear an equal degree of blame. I hasten to say that there are splendid examples on the other side. One Baptist minister known to me has for years been doing unrecognised but most fruitful work in teaching New Testament Greek to various students, and from such tuition men have come to college days fully prepared from the outset to take advantage of every opportunity. All honour to such a man.

Further, is it possible to revive, in a form suited to modern

conditions, something analogous to the old academies, such as those conducted by Cowper's friend, the Rev. William Bull, of Newport Pagnell, and by Sutcliff at Olney? Could the problem of the rural churches be partially solved if young men could serve a novitiate under ministers, from whom they might learn habits of study and (what is even more important) the secret of an inward life of sustained and habitual devotion? Such preparation would not be sufficient in itself, but it might serve a splendid purpose as a preparatory discipline. I hesitate to make the suggestion when I recall the satire of Mark Rutherford, who paints the Rev. John Broad as engaged in such activities. There is inimitable picture of Mr. Broad spending an hour and a half on Monday in private conclave with Mrs. Broad. "It gave them an opportunity of talking over the affairs of the congregation, and it added to Mr. Broad's importance with the missionary students, because they saw how great were the weight and fatigue of the pastoral office." Still, over against the satire, we may set the fact that so great a ministry as that of John Angell James sprang from such a training. The one drawback to the plan is that it does necessitate the abandonment of ordinary business life, with all the risks thus involved, in order to test (spiritually no less than intellectually) a man's vocation to the Christian ministry, and I see no way round that problem. It seems clear, however, that the churches must shoulder a greater load of responsibility for the discovery and testing of those who are called and fitted for the pastoral office, and for the giving to them of some training preliminary to their entrance into college.

There is very little to be said that is new or revolutionary about the college course itself, except to stress the demand that is being made in many quarters for the imparting of a really systematic and thorough knowledge of the contents of the Bible. Ignorance in this realm can have no excuse, but the remedy lies mostly with the individual student. In Spurgeon's College, two examinations are held yearly in selected books of the English Bible, at which no linguistic questions are set, nor are problems in interpretation considered, but the whole demand is for the knowledge of what the books set actually contain. No doubt much the same thing is done elsewhere; it is right and necessary. We are fortunate in possessing a wide variety of colleges, and we shall lose if they are ever too closely assimilated, though there is room and desire for growing co-operation.

How long ought the ideal college course to last? The answer varies with every individual. It ought to be as long as a man can remain; but there are limits set by the nature of our ministry. The training of a Roman Catholic priest begins at the age of twelve and lasts until he is twenty-four. Here is a completeness

of training which we may sometimes envy, and which is ruthlessly efficient in producing a well-drilled army of men cast in one mould. Yet the men whom we covet for the ministry ought to emerge, not from early and prolonged seclusion, but from actual contact with life, with character ripened and the will braced by the challenge of the office, the shop, or the factory. This means that we can scarcely hope to get our student until the early twenties, or to retain him for many years. How can we make up for this abbreviated training? By pressing for the prosecution of definite post-collegiate study. We ought to guard, with great strictness, the early years of the pastorate.. Said Phillips Brooks :

“It is the five years after college which are the most decisive in a man's career. Any event which happens then has its full influence. The years which come before are too fluid. The years which come after are too solid.”

During these early years the young minister has to discover the relevance of the apparently irrelevant studies in which he has been engaged, and he has to beware of the temptation to drop study altogether, even whilst he is spending long hours at his desk. For his own good it is well that there should be demanded from him evidence of the prosecution of a planned and exacting course of study, as a condition of his full recognition as a minister. A great deal of prejudice exists against this demand, partly in the mind of the student, who is naturally eager to concentrate exclusively on the tasks for which he has long been preparing, and partly in the thought of the churches, who are somewhat jealous of what they may consider a withdrawal of energy from pastoral duty.

I have said very little of ministerial preparation on the side of spiritual life, but that is not because the importance of it is minimised, but because it is a matter that belongs rather to the sphere of the student's own responsibility. There ought, however, to be provision for the student periodically to engage in the work of evangelisation during his college days. He should, at stated intervals, be in actual contact with the mass of indifference and even vice. This is essential for the sake of his own spiritual well-being, and because only thus can his ministry be humanised. One of Hugh Walpole's characters says : “People aren't better or worse. They are only different.” We dispute the ethics of this saying, but the psychology is sound. People are different, but preaching often seems to forget the fact. Mark Rutherford wrote : “Parsons are bound to preach by rule. It's all general. It doesn't fit the ins and outs.” The cure for “preaching by rule” is that men should often have to deal with the individual instead of the congregation, and with the individual

in his utter aloofness from the conventionalities of ordinary religious circles.

All the foregoing is a plea for ministerial training that begins earlier and lasts longer than the years spent in college. It requires the co-operation of the churches and the ministry with the colleges. Most of all, it needs God's grace and help, and we may be sure these will not be withheld, if we will only keep open the channels along which they may flow.

P. W. EVANS.

1704, July 29. A copy of an order which my Lord [Bishop Lloyd] sent to the rector of Upton upon Severn to publish in his church.

I am required by the Bishop to give you notice that his Lordship intends to preach and confirm in this church on Tuesday next.

I am likewise to inform you that his Lordship having heard that some of the Anabaptists in this part of his diocese have made offers or demands of a public dispute or conference with the ministers of the Church of England concerning the reasons of their separation, which by the canons of our Church none of us that are ministers can undertake without leave from the Bishop.

Therefore to the end that our declining such disputes may not give occasion to any of our adversaries to boast of any such offers they have made, his Lordship has ordered me to declare that if any of that sect of Anabaptists, or any other of the Separatists from our Church, desires to be heard what he has to say, either to justify his separation or to object against the doctrine or discipline or worship of God in our Church, he shall be fully heard and also answered by our ministers in this place, either on Tuesday next between 4 and 6 in the afternoon, or on Wednesday next between 8 and 11 in the morning: and my Lord Bishop will be present himself to see that everything shall be done with all possible fairness to the Separatists, and that they likewise keeping themselves within the bounds of a fair dispute without any reflexions, shall not suffer for anything that they shall say on the heads above mentioned.

The like order was sent to the rector of Severn Stoke, and to the vicar of Hanley Castle. The like order was sent to the minister of Pershore, and Thursday in the afternoon appointed to be in that church.

No Dissenters appeared to his Lordship either at Upton or Pershore.

Diary of Francis Evans, Bishop's secretary.