

ARTICLE VIII.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION.

NO. II. — THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM IN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES.

THE elective system is a scheme of studies in which each student chooses the studies he pursues. The system has been adopted, with limitations, by many of the principal colleges of the United States. It has not, however, been introduced into the theological seminaries.

In behalf of the introduction of the elective system into the theological course of study, we shall first suggest a few of the many arguments that might be presented; secondly, attempt to answer the objections urged against the scheme; and thirdly, suggest the conditions of its introduction.

1. Some students need more extensive study than the seminaries can under the present system provide. The large majority of theological students enter the ministry, and throughout their life perform the ordinary duties of clergymen. But every seminary has a few students whom God has by natural endowment or by training designed to occupy a different position in his church. They are peculiarly fitted to become either professors in the theological school and of metaphysics in college, or authors of works upon the relations of theology to the other sciences, or public lecturers upon certain departments of theology. The work to which they are called obviously demands more extensive study than ordinary ministerial work. Opportunities, therefore, for this additional study should be provided. These opportunities are provided by the elective system. This system allows the student to select, and to devote all his powers to, those studies which will prove of the greatest use in the peculiar work to which God calls him.

2. Some students need to dwell longer than others on particular departments. They now have a greater variety than their minds can endure. Their attention is divided among studies which are not fitted to each other with the design of supplying their intellectual needs. In the department of theology of the German university (as in all of its departments) the courses are optional, and are intended to supplement each other. A symmetrical knowledge and training are thus obtained. But by the present system of study in our seminaries the attention of the student is distracted; and those students who need to dwell longer than others on special departments cannot. By the elective system the attention is concentrated upon those studies upon which students should dwell most intensely.

3. Some students need a discipline which others do not in other than theological studies. The students of this class are, to a great extent, those who have failed to receive a college education.¹ Every professor in the theological seminary is aware that he has students under his instruction who need to devote special attention either to logic, or to the elements of philosophy, or to psychology, or to rhetoric, or to elocution, or even to English grammar. To supply these deficiencies the students lack either the time or money to attend other schools than the theological. If, in consequence of these defects, they are debarred from the privileges of the seminary, the church may be deprived of efficient evangelists or home missionaries. If these defects are not corrected, the usefulness of the students in the ministry will be seriously impaired. If without correcting these defects they enter upon the theological course of study, they fail to derive that profit from it which they ought. Many a professor of theology numbers among his pupils those to whom his lectures are comparatively profitless, simply because either they cannot apprehend the philosophical principles upon which his system rests, or their minds are not so disciplined as to appreciate his reasoning. They *half* understand him; they *mis*-understand him; they seldom so understand his system as to apply it correctly in their work as clergymen. The elective system is the most effective instrument in giving that special discipline which these students need. By its means the time and mental energy which they are now wasting in taking notes of lectures which they can neither apply correctly nor appreciate may be devoted to special training in logic, metaphysics, rhetoric, or similar branches.

4. Some students have an incapacity for one class of subjects, and a remarkable capacity for another class. If the incapacity is comparatively absolute, no attempt should be made to correct it. If it is only partial, special attention should be devoted to that class of studies fitted to remove it. If, on the other hand, the student has a remarkable capacity for a certain class of studies, he should cultivate this capacity most assiduously. Is not the whole church grateful that Tischendorf began so early, and continued for more than half a century, to cultivate his extraordinary powers in a single branch of knowledge? If he had divided his attention between New Testament mss. and German philosophy, what a loss to the Christian world! If God has endowed any theological student with a remarkable capacity for a certain class of studies, he should cultivate that capacity most constantly. The elective system is the method by which this special cultivation is attained.

5. The elective system would be of peculiar advantage to those clergymen who desire to prosecute their studies further than they were able to

¹ Of three hundred and seventeen students, members of Congregational theological seminaries, seventy-four have not been connected with any college. (Congregational Year-Book, 1879, p. 71).

prosecute them in the ordinary curriculum of the theological school. If such clergymen become resident licentiates of the seminary, they receive, under the present system, very little benefit from the curriculum; for they have completed the regular course of study. No express provision is made for their instruction in particular branches. The licentiates are few in number, pursue, as a rule, no studies in common, and are not influenced by that scholarly enthusiasm which arises from the common pursuit of common studies. By means of the elective system regular instruction in new and advanced studies would be provided for them. The many clergymen, moreover, who would be profited by residing in European universities, but cannot afford to go to Europe, might, in case of the introduction of the elective system, substitute a residence at one of the theological seminaries. The "Summer School of Philosophy," which Mr. A. Bronson Alcott is announced to hold at Concord, suggests the need of the elective system. If the studies which will be pursued in Mr. Alcott's school were introduced into the theological seminary, these clergymen would be attracted rather to New Haven or Andover than to Concord.

6. Every student ought to possess sufficient knowledge of each department to enable him to prosecute his studies by himself. But some students should obtain a special knowledge of particular departments. Students of a metaphysical habit of mind should possess so thorough a knowledge of theology that they can investigate its relations to other departments of philosophy. Students interested in philology should be so versed in the Hebrew language that they can examine its relations to the cognate tongues of Chaldee, Syriac, and Arabic. The elective system allows the student to obtain sufficient knowledge to pursue after graduation each department of theological study by himself, and also to make special investigations in particular departments.

7. The introduction of the elective system into the theological seminary would increase the enthusiasm of students in their studies. This has been the effect of its introduction into the colleges. At Harvard, for example, the elective system has lifted the department of philosophy—a study which in most colleges is disliked by students, and is pursued with only a modicum of the advantage which should be derived from it—into one of the most interesting and profitable departments of the whole curriculum. The elective system substitutes attraction for constraint; it draws, not impels, students. It attracts students to those studies in which they excel, or in which they need special instruction, and in which, therefore, they are specially interested.

8. The elective system increases the enthusiasm of professors for the studies which they teach. It effects this result in two ways: (1) It either wholly relieves professors of those students who are specially inferior in the studies in which they instruct, or places them in classes designed for their particular needs; (2) and it also assures them that those students

selecting their departments are specially interested in the topics examined. No class of professors is more enthusiastic than the German. One reason of the enthusiasm is that the German professor is conscious that his auditors either are specially fitted to appreciate his lectures, or are particularly interested in the subjects discussed. "He [the German professor] lectures only to those who are willing and able to hear. He is sustained by the consciousness that his words are not scattered by the wayside, but that they fall upon soil prepared to receive them, and will bring forth new fruit in turn."¹

9. The elective system will allow subjects which ought to be taught in the seminary, but which now are not for lack of time. At least three new departments of study should be established in the theological seminary: The relation of theology to other sciences, a professorship of biblical theology, and a professorship of missionary instruction. A chair in the first-named subject has recently been founded in Andover Seminary; but without the elective system it may be doubtful whether students can pay due attention to this department, and not neglect others no less important. In other seminaries, however, the need of instruction in this field is not supplied. A distinctively biblical theology, such as is indicated in the works of Dr. Schmid or Dr. Martensen, should be taught in the seminary. The importance of thorough instruction in systematic theology it would be difficult to overrate; but it is certain that when instruction in biblical, is combined with instruction in systematic, theology, neither department can receive the attention it deserves. Moreover, a professorship of missionary instruction should be founded in the seminaries. In behalf of its establishment the Rev. Dr. Happer, for more than a quarter of a century a missionary in China, has argued most effectively in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* for July 1876. Now in these three departments instruction is needed in nearly every one of the one hundred and twenty theological seminaries in the United States. But under the prescribed system the student's attention is so occupied with philology, history, homiletics, and theology that he would have no time to spare for the study of three additional subjects. Therefore the elective system should be introduced, to allow him to devote his attention to those studies alone which will prove most remunerative in intellectual and spiritual results.

10. The elective system has been introduced into law schools. In the Harvard Law School the system has been in use several years. During the last two of the three years of the course electives occupying in lectures eighteen hours a week are offered, from which the student is obliged to select fourteen. Experience teaches that it is impossible for the law student to obtain that specific knowledge of particular departments which his professional work demands without the elective system. The theological student needs a specific knowledge of particular departments as deeply as the law student. As, therefore, the elective system is essential

¹ Hart's German Universities, p. 268.

to the efficiency of the law school, so also is it essential to the efficiency of the theological seminary.

II. We now pass from the arguments for introducing the elective system into the theological course of study to an examination of the objections against the introduction.

1. Post-graduate courses of instruction would accomplish the same purposes as the elective system. Reply: (a) In the case of students of ordinary ability the regular courses of instruction plus post-graduate courses might be as productive of the results desired as the elective system. But in the case of other classes of students post-graduate instruction would not accomplish the wished-for results. Students who have a remarkable capacity for certain subjects should begin as early as possible in the theological course to devote special attention to these subjects. Those, moreover, who are specially inferior in certain studies should commence at the earliest moment to remove their inferiority. (b) As a fact, a very small proportion of students do avail themselves of the advantages of post-graduate study. A desire to begin the work of the ministry, a lack of money, or similar reasons, impel the graduate to make the months or weeks dividing the day of his graduation from the day of his ordination or installation as few as possible.

2. Students do not know their intellectual needs, and therefore will not under the elective system select their studies with discretion. Reply: (a) Theological students are more mature than college students. College students, as a body, select their studies discreetly; *a fortiori*, will theological students. (b) Students will choose their electives only after consultation with their instructors, who are qualified to judge what studies should be selected.

3. Students will select the easiest courses, not those they need to pursue. Reply: The moral and Christian character of the members of the theological seminary refutes this objection. If the law student or the college sophomore is considered able to resist the temptation of easy courses, how much smaller the temptation to the student of theology.

4. The variety of studies presented by the elective system is too great. Reply: Though the number of studies under the elective system is greater than under the prescribed, yet the student will usually choose fewer distinct studies. The elective system allows the student to concentrate his attention upon a few subjects *intimately related to each other*. If a student of remarkable capacity for philosophical studies is obliged to spend several hours a week during his middle and senior year upon Hebrew, after a thorough study of the language in his junior year, his attention is so distracted that he fails to receive the advantages he ought from his theological study. *Concentration, CONCENTRATION* is the essence of the elective system.

5. The work of instruction which the elective system demands will prove

too severe for the professors. Reply: (a) The lectures of the ordinary professor remain substantially the same from year to year. Once written they are revised from time to time, but their substantial form is retained. The ordinary professor, therefore, under the prescribed system of study has considerable time to devote to pursuits outside of the curriculum. This time may be given to the additional work demanded by the elective system. (b) The professor in the theological seminary of the United States delivers fewer lectures a week than the theological professor in the German university. We turn to the scheme of studies of a recent winter at Leipzig, and we read that Delitzsch lectures eleven hours a week. Luthardt fourteen, and Kahnis fifteen. The ordinary professor in the American theological school seldom lectures more than six or eight hours each week. The experience of German professors permits the belief that American professors can lecture a few additional hours without incurring the danger of overwork. (c) The professors in the seminary would be the last persons to present this objection. Not a few of them, we believe, desire the introduction of the elective system; and all of them, with scarce an exception, we feel assured, would be glad to perform the additional work necessitated by the elective system, if the introduction of the system would more thoroughly qualify theological students for the work to which God calls them.

III. The principal conditions necessary to the introduction of the elective system are these: 1. The establishment of courses of instruction of a more elementary character than now provided in Greek, history, homiletics, and theology.

2. The establishment of courses of a more advanced character in all the departments of theological study.

3. The establishment of special courses as the needs of students require.

4. A more precise division of students on the ground of their ability, attainments, and aims. By this division, work of a nature similar to that done in the *seminar* of the German university might be performed, and with results of corresponding excellence.

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