

# The New Testament, the Theological College, and the Church

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TWENTY-TWO theological college students were asked the question, 'Of what do you feel most afraid? Over one third replied, 'I feel most afraid of transgressing the rules of the college.' A college course is, for many of our students, a traumatic experience. They arrive as travellers in a strange country; then after three years we return them to their old way of life, which, in turn, may have become unfamiliar to them because they have lost touch with it. We make them strangers twice over. Nevertheless, they learn much of value from the life of the college community, and the patterns of life learned at college are often carried over into their parochial ministry. It is therefore of the first importance that the pattern of life in our colleges should reflect the Gospel and be the kind of thing we want to see reproduced in the life of the church. This general principle of correspondence between a certain set of values and the life lived by the people who hold these values is recognised in Mao's China and in western universities alike.<sup>1</sup> England in the last century furnishes a good example of the kind of relationship which can exist between a certain pattern of ministry and a certain pattern of theological college. The parish priest was regarded as a father-figure and as a supreme authority in all departments of parochial life, before whom the people adopted a passive role. The colleges were similarly structured, with a father-figure principal of senior status, attended by two or three obedient junior staff, around whom clustered a small, tightly-knit, introverted student body. This hierarchical pattern was not only an administrative form, but also a basic habit of mind.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that this never was a correct pattern, either for parish or for college, because it falls far short of the richness of Christian community life delineated in the New Testament.

There might be several fruitful approaches to the question of what patterns of life should be adopted in our colleges. We might consider the present crisis of authority in the student world, with its demands

for student power, and conclude that our colleges should conform to the contemporary mood. (I recall that within the last three years more than one of our East African theological colleges has faced major problems of authority and discipline.) Or we might consider traditional patterns of life in African society, as President Nyerere has done in his 'Socialism and Rural Development', and conclude that these are the patterns to which our colleges should conform. Or we might favour the pragmatic approach and ask what is the most efficient pattern for mobilising and equipping the whole church for ministry. Our present purpose, however, is limited to discovering from the New Testament those patterns of life which are consistent with the Gospel itself, and to considering to what extent those patterns can be adopted in our colleges, with a view to their being reproduced eventually in the life of the church in our three countries. To teach the Bible without practising it is far worse than not teaching it at all, and the question which I am most frequently asked by my students takes the form, 'The New Testament clearly teaches *this*, but our church regulations say *that*—as pastors, which are we to follow?' Leaving this question unanswered for the moment, let us turn to a consideration of the patterns of life found in the New Testament, and particularly in the Pauline churches.

### *Authority in the New Testament*

JESUS brought in a new age and spoke with a new authority (Mark 1: 22, 24, 27; 2: 5, 7; Matt. 8: 29). He did not need to be authorised by any ecclesiastical office or any particular spiritual gift because he was totally on God's side. The authority of Jesus, writes H. von Campenhausen in *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (A. and C. Black) (to which this paper is heavily indebted), 'continues to exist as a present reality'.<sup>3</sup> It does so in two specific forms:

1. In the apostolic writings. The apostles were both witnesses and plenipotentiary representatives of the risen Lord. Their apostolicity derives from their experience of the resurrection—therefore their witness is part of the early kerygma (1 Cor. 15: 4ff.; Acts 10: 41). Their authority is the same as Jesus' authority, with the exception that it is derived. Paul regarded his own person as of no significance or interest, because he was a witness to another (2 Cor. 4: 5; Gal. 1: 8). Because of the definitive significance of the resurrection experience, no successors can inherit this apostolic authority. 'The apostolic word and witness finds its most definitive form in the New Testament Canon. It was the latter which in a certain sense became the real heir of the apostles' authority.'<sup>4</sup> In this sense the authority of Jesus, transmitted through the apostles, has received unchanging, static definition in the

apostolic scriptures. Although static in a certain sense, 'Scripture must always be a message for the present time',<sup>5</sup> and hence when used in the church brings an ever fresh word from God to the ever-changing human situation.

2. In the Church. Jesus is present in his Body with his own authority. Thus in the exercise of discipline, the 'power' of Jesus is present in the assembled congregation, which is to be directed not necessarily by the apostle, but by his word (1 Cor. 5: 4f.). The decision of the congregation is the decision of Jesus. In Matthew 18: 18 the 'total identity between the judgment of the Church and the judgment of God could not be stated more emphatically . . . the Church's acts are the present acts of God.'<sup>6</sup> In the exercise of spiritual gifts, all are inspired by the presence of Christ by his Spirit, who also imparts to the congregation the power to test the spirits and the 'capacity to discern right from left' (1 Cor. 12: 11; 14: 29; Didache 12: 1). In the ordering of its life and the exercise of authority, there is an emphatic discontinuity between the world and the church. 'It shall not be so among you' (Mark 10: 43). 'God's congregation is different from the world around it; it possesses a life that is genuinely new.'<sup>7</sup> Hence to model the life and discipline of our theological colleges upon prevailing patterns in other educational institutions is to abandon the essential nature of Christ's community and to betray the spiritual nature which is the basis of our very existence.

From this inadequate and over-simplified summary, we must turn to some of the questions which confront us in our colleges.

### *The Renewal of the Mind<sup>8</sup>*

THIS must be our starting-point, because it is the starting-point of the life of the Christian. Too often we have failed to respect men's minds. Here in Africa this may be partly a legacy of the colonialist mentality, but even more it is probably a legacy of the paternalistic mentality which is inherent in most of our churches in Europe and Africa alike. Such paternalism and condescension was never characteristic of Paul. He respected even 'darkened' minds, being prepared always to argue, reason, prove, convince, persuade (2 Cor. 5: 11). But the minds of Christians have been renewed by the Gospel (Rom. 12: 2; Col. 3: 10). They may have been for the most part a slave-rabble, yet they had come to faith in Christ through the exercise of their minds (Rom. 6: 17), and Paul expected them henceforth to use their minds as the basis of all their spiritual growth ('Do you not know . . .?'—Rom. 6: 3, 11, 16). Not that the mind is in any way a rival to the Holy Spirit—on the contrary, 'Argumentation and the operation of the Spirit are not in competition with each other. In trusting the Spirit, Paul in no way spared himself thinking and arguing.'<sup>9</sup> Paul had boundless confidence

in the work of the Spirit in men's minds and never wearied of repeated references to knowledge, wisdom, understanding, etc. (Col. 1: 9f., etc.). I suggest that the Christian's mind is the most powerful of the resources at the disposal of the Christian minister. Yet how often do we say (or think) of our students, 'They cannot understand.' But if we do not respect students' minds in college, they will not respect the minds of Christians outside college. They will fall back upon the type of authority which says, 'Do as I say because I am the pastor and have been to college.' We should demand from our students the constant exercise of their reasoning faculties—if we do not do so, perhaps our greatest fault is not that of being neo-colonialist or of being paternalistic but of despising the Spirit of Christ who renews the minds of his people.

### *The Exercise of Spiritual Freedom and Responsibility*

ALTHOUGH Paul undoubtedly believed himself to be possessed of a unique and divine authority, it is amazing that he does not develop this authority in his dealings with his churches. In the course of his struggle against the tendency of some Christians to revert to paganism, and of others to adopt judaistic practices, he does not lay down series of rules and regulations for the ordering of Christian life, but explicitly refuses to do so (2 Cor. 1: 24). He prefers to reason with them, working from what he regards as the basic principle of 'the nature and responsibility of the new being' in Christ.<sup>10</sup> He constantly led them back to this starting-point—thus one of his favourite words is 'remind' or 'recall' (Rom. 15: 15). What they already know or have experienced must be the basis for their way of life—but they must work this out for themselves under his guidance. This feature of Paul's leadership was its chief strength, and contrasts markedly with the legalistic and paternalistic attitudes which prevail in some of our churches. A bishop wrote to a theological college principal about one of the finest pastors the college had produced, complaining that he had failed to use the prescribed words in introducing the reading of the Epistle! Are our churches in danger of having a largely legalistic religion, where 'offences of ritual or ethics are always regarded as worse than deviations from dogmatic doctrines?'<sup>11</sup> Such religion places no confidence in the individual's exercise of freedom, whereas Paul constantly affirms his confidence in his readers (Rom. 15: 14; 1 Cor. 10: 15; 2 Cor. 7: 16). He expects great things from them, and perhaps this was a large part of the reason why they responded so positively to his ministry. Christians of all kinds have a deep psychological need to be trusted, so that they can freely exercise their renewed minds and live their new life. If we do not place such trust in them, we stunt the growth of the new life and freeze the mind into inactivity, and make them always children.

But a rediscovery of the Pauline emphasis on the exercise of Christian freedom must begin in our colleges. The church's life will never blossom until we stop treating our students as children. For example, little supervision of students should be necessary—they will not, after all, be supervised in their parishes. They should be treated as those who are new men walking in the sight of God. Those who are treated in this way must also of necessity carry their share of responsibility also. Their every need should not be catered for by the paternalistic institution or by Baba Principal. If they want extra facilities, let them contribute to their provision, probably by manual labour. This principle has long been a commonplace of American universities and is strongly advocated by President Nyerere for Tanzania.<sup>13</sup> This brings us on to financial affairs, which should be seen as the concern of the whole college, all of whose members should have a sense of personal responsibility to God for the way they use his provision. How often do students (or staff, for that matter) pray that God will supply their monthly allowance? It is much easier to apply automatically to the Treasurer, who will tap some never-failing source of supply. But the college authorities are themselves to blame, because they have for too long conducted financial affairs in strict secrecy, as if it is no concern of students. It is not surprising that a free and responsible body of Christian students in our colleges eludes us.

### *The Use of Spiritual Gifts*

HOWEVER many theories may have been propounded about the New Testament forms of ministry, there can be no doubt that it was a team ministry, and it was this which led to the rapid expansion of the church (Acts 11: 19ff.; 1 Thess. 1: 8). A real team ministry is the only thing that can cope with the present expansion of the church in East Africa. This is a practical necessity both in the ujamaa villages of rural Tanzania, and in contact with the new generation of educated young people. Cuthbert Omari, when he was Chaplain at Dar-es-Salaam University, wrote that many people 'do not attend religious meetings . . . because the conduct of these meetings is outdated and the issues discussed are irrelevant to their lives' and because the clergy are incapable of dealing with their questions.<sup>14</sup> If this is the situation, then educated Christian laymen will have a vital part to play in the church's ministry. All possess gifts and have a responsibility for their proper use. But unless recognition of the diversity of gifts begins in the theological colleges, we shall lose the capacity for recognising them and the faith that they exist, and the church will not function properly (Eph. 4: 11-16). A fixed pattern of life will stifle the free exercise of gifts, and we shall suffer from the malady of many modern professions, where for example, the best nurses do not nurse and the best teachers

do not teach—because they have been ‘promoted’ to administrative work where their gift is lost to society.

### *Discipline*

WE have already noticed the teaching that in the sphere of discipline, the divine decision is given through the presence of Christ in the congregation. But we should also notice that ‘the point of it all is the winning back of the erring brother . . . nor is there any question of punishment or expiation’.<sup>14</sup> (See 1 Cor. 5: 5; 2 Cor. 2: 6-11; the context of Matt. 18: 10-35.) There are only two possible results of discipline—either repentance and salvation which involves immediate and complete reinstatement, or rejection of the sinner, which involves his consignment to the area ‘outside’ the context of salvation (Matt. 18: 17; 1 Cor. 5: 5). Such power is vested in the local congregation. This suggests to me that the disciplinary activity in our colleges should be confined to, on the one hand, reasoned argument and persuasion on the basis of the new life in Christ<sup>15</sup> and on the other, dismissal from the community of those who show themselves unable to live in accordance with the principles of that new life. In the discipline of the primitive community there was, apparently, no middle position. In other words, there was no place for the imposition of a legalistic system of commands and punishments such as might be appropriate in a secular or heterogeneous society, such as the state. It is shameful if a student ‘finds himself having to “Behave” so that what is lurking in his mind is the problem of how to “keep the Rules” rather than “what to do to make life at the College more meaningful to all concerned”. . . . It is not surprising that a frightened little theological student becomes the authoritarian in the parish . . . he perpetuates the same patterns in the parish; only now he himself replaces the authority figure, to become the one who must be listened to and obeyed.’<sup>16</sup> A legalistic system is of course much easier to administer. It is not easy to spend hours reminding a man of his condition by grace and urging him to behave appropriately to that condition. But the latter method respects his mind, bears fruit throughout his life and is a practical demonstration of pastoral ministry. The authoritarian method has none of these virtues, but has positively harmful effects on a man’s future ministry.

### *College Government*

STAFF and students should be involved in the government of the college, for the biblical reason that Christ is present in the assembled community as such (or in its appointed representatives), and for the practical reason that, in the words of Robert Chester, ‘the university

cannot hope to foster critical habits and personal autonomy, and yet itself remain immune to critical scrutiny.<sup>17</sup> But according to New Testament criteria, it is axiomatic that any such decision-making body should subject itself to the apostles' doctrine, to which even the apostles themselves were subject (Gal. 1: 8). Without such subjection, there can be no claim to Christ's guiding presence (1 Cor. 5: 2-5).

Let us briefly consider the structure of two areas of college government:

1. The college council. In some instances this consists solely of the clergy who lead the churches, with the result that it considers every question from its own limited point of view, and is responsible to no one but itself. There are at least three other groups who should be represented on the council:

(a) The laity. Since the college relies (in theory at any rate) on the Church for its funds, students, and general support, and its *raison d'être* is to train ministers for the whole church, it is astonishing that the recipients of this ministry can be totally unrepresented. Even in university councils 'outsiders have an invaluable levelling and corrective function to perform in the introverted and rarified circles of university debate. Councils do need . . . to enlarge their points of view; to see themselves as trustees'.<sup>18</sup> How much more is this true of our college courses which are 'needed by the few for service to the many'.<sup>19</sup>

(b) The teaching staff. Not only the Principal, but a large proportion of the teaching staff also should sit on the council—not in order to exercise control but to bring the light of specialist knowledge and new ideas to the discussions, which otherwise are likely to be conducted in the semi-gloom of ignorance of internal problems and of contemporary attempts to solve them.

(c) The student body. Some student representation is advisable, both so that students may appreciate the real problems that face the council, and so that they may see that their own difficulties are understood and constructively tackled. The student of today may be the teacher of tomorrow and the bishop of the day after, and the sooner he is introduced in principle to the business of running affairs the better, even if he is at first little more than a junior observer. In short, the whole system should express, to quote from the brochure of an English college, 'the principle of full interdependence and mutual responsibility between the College and the Church as a whole.'

2. The college meeting. The same principle of mutual dependence (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4) should apply to consultations within the College. Principal, staff and students should share ideals and responsibilities, and on this basis decide college policy in consultation together.

In closing, it is tempting to consider the reasons for the authoritarian pattern with us now. Is it fear of what might happen if the laity were given a free hand, or if the students were allowed to voice their opinion? There need be no such fears if the members of the college have been

touched by the realities of Christ and the Gospel. I think our chief trouble is our faithlessness. We lack Paul's rumbustious confidence in the Spirit. 'Paul knows of no activity on God's business which is not accompanied by the living demonstration of God's presence in power. . . . In his dealings with his congregations, he has no use for a prudent reserve which considers the possibility of miscarriage or failure, and so prefers not to promise too much either to himself or to others. . . .'<sup>10</sup> Those who believe in the Spirit's living presence in his renewed people have no excuse for failure to practise what they believe. It can be done, as was demonstrated in the infant church of the Murut and neighbouring tribes in Borneo.<sup>11</sup> Roland Allen's principles can be practised, but some of us feel the need to confess that we have failed to 'be what we are' and really to entrust to the Spirit his own church and people. Perhaps it is in the colleges that our works of repentance should begin.

<sup>1</sup> 'The university must ensure that staff and students are able to behave in appropriate ways and to feel committed to the central values and purposes of the institution. It must seek to achieve a pattern of relationships which expresses its values, and it must regard self-examination as a proper and normal part of its activities.' R. Chester, *Towards a Satisfactory Way of Academic Life*, SCM, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> 'Re-tooling the Clergy Factories,' J. I. Packer, *The Churchman*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> von Campenhausen, *op. cit.* p. 24. Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> See J. R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters*, IVP.

<sup>9</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 2, SCM, pp. 34f.

<sup>10</sup> von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> M. Dibelius and W. G. Kummel, *Paul*, Longmans, pp. 23f.

<sup>12</sup> J. Nyerere, *Education for Self-reliance*, pp. 16, 17, 23.

<sup>13</sup> C. Omari, 'Are we losing the elite?', *Sharing*, Vol. 3, No. 8, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> 'Christ, the Gospel, the preaching of the Cross—these virtually identical realities are to determine and transform through and through the life of the Christian who has been touched by them'—von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> S. Ntwasa, 'The Training of Black Ministers Today', *International Review of Missions*, Vol. LXI, No. 242, where he is specifically referring to the South African situation of tension between white teaching staff and black students.

<sup>17</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> N. Spurway, *Authority in Higher Education*, p. 24, SCM.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Nyerere, *Education for Self-reliance*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Shirley P. Lees, *Jungle Fire*, Oliphants.