

Training for the Ministry.

WHAT is the function of a Divinity Hall? Stated in the most general terms, it is to prepare men for the efficient carrying out of the many and diverse tasks of the Holy Ministry in the modern world. Those four last words need rather special emphasis, because quite clearly the whole system of education for the ministry should be closely examined and revised from time to time, in the light of changing social conditions and new contemporary problems and needs.

The tasks of the ministry for which a divinity hall has to equip its students fall roughly into two main divisions: (1) Those belonging to the Teaching or Prophetic Ministry; (2) Those belonging to the Pastoral and Priestly Ministry.

(1) Obviously in the three or four years available for this specialised training, it is impossible adequately to cover the whole field of Divinity. There must be choice and discrimination. The question which those responsible for setting the standards and planning the curriculum have to face is, how can we, in the given period, best equip a man for his ministry in the modern world? What are the indispensable subjects?

As regards the academic side of training for the ministry, the policy at which we should aim should surely be uniformity in the central subjects, with much greater opportunities of diversity in subsidiary subjects.

Clearly certain subjects at once stand out as essential—a comprehensive knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, a sound grounding in Theology, and at least a good working knowledge of Church History and Christian Ethics. These have been, are, and doubtless always will be, regarded as the central lines of study for any man desiring to enter holy orders. We in the Church of Scotland have probably good reason to be satisfied with the way in which these things are taught, and the standard of knowledge demanded and achieved. (Incidentally, the recent lack of interest in theology in the divinity halls in favour of a greater interest in sociology and evangelism is both strange and regrettable. Because no evangelistic fervour or knowledge of social conditions is of any avail, unless a minister of religion has a firm grasp of the Christian Faith and a full understanding of the Gospel it is his privilege to proclaim. The thinness of many a parson's preaching is due to the inadequacy of its theological background.)

The mention of a knowledge of the Old and New Testaments raises inevitably a question which is being pressed by many to-day, as to whether the amount of time spent in acquiring a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew could not be far better spent in the study of subjects likely to be of more use to a minister in the modern world.

A very strong case can be made out for making Hebrew a voluntary, and not a compulsory subject, necessary for taking the degree of B.D., but not obligatory in the ordinary curriculum. If the study of Hebrew were relinquished, it would, among other advantages, afford greater opportunities for specialisation: for which in the Church of Scotland we have perhaps at present too little opportunity.

For example, a man whose interest lies in the direction of religious work in industrial areas should quite obviously give some study to the complicated problems of economics, wages, hours and conditions of employment, social conditions, housing, health, the use of leisure, and kindred questions which concern the day-to-day life of his future parishioners. Going thus equipped to his task, he will be able to exercise his ministry among them with much more understanding, sympathy and authority than if he could recite the whole Book of Psalms to them in Hebrew! So, too, those planning to exercise their ministry overseas should surely be afforded opportunities, while still at the divinity hall, of studying the whole history of the foreign mission enterprise in different lands, the problems of the particular field for which they desire to offer, and the special technique of evangelism likely to be most effective.

Consideration of the work of the ministry on the foreign field points to the need for the laying of much greater stress, in the teaching of church history, upon the conception of the Church catholic and ecumenical. More time ought surely to be found for giving to students of divinity some instruction in great contemporary

movements in the Church in many lands, especially movements towards reunion. We live, thank God, in a time when there is an increasing sense of uneasiness about the divisions within the Church, and a growing realisation of the importance of achieving, if not complete corporate reunion, at least much closer co-operation, and a much deeper spirit of unity and fellowship, between the different branches of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The history of the Christian Church and its missionary movements during the last hundred and fifty years is probably at least as important as, and a good deal more practically valuable than, a detailed knowledge of the decisions of the various Church Councils, or the Reformation conflict, or the struggle between the Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches in the 17th century.

While it is important to understand the historical circumstances and reasons for the origin of our own Communion, it is no less important to understand the distinctive principles, traditions, and customs of other Communion, and to realise that each has preserved certain spiritual and ecclesiastical principles of great value. There are still far too many Christians—clergy and laity alike—who are deplorably provincial in outlook. And if the Churches are to be able to give any leadership in the achievement of world peace and unity, they will need, above all, a new vision and sense of the Church itself as a great universal society, transcending all differences of nationality, language, tradition, and culture.

(2) The other main functions of the Ministry, for which the divinity hall is expected to train its students, are what may be called the Priestly or Pastoral functions. These obviously are many and varied, such as the administration of the Sacraments, the conduct of Public Worship, pastoral and parochial visitation, spiritual direction of individuals, and congregational activities of all sorts.

Such subjects cannot be taught only, or even best, in the classroom. In pastoral work of all kinds especially, reading needs to be balanced and illuminated by practical parish work. It is right and natural therefore that a divinity hall should usually be associated with some centre of Home Mission and Youth Work, often in the poorer and more populous parts of a great city. It ought to be expected that every student of divinity should give a fair proportion of his time to parish work of this kind, which should be as varied as possible, thus affording him opportunity to discover his own particular bent and gifts. It is coming to be felt throughout the Church that, in addition, at least one year's training as an Assistant Minister should be insisted upon for every man as soon as he leaves the theological hall.

I am afraid it must be admitted that in the past greater stress has been laid on equipping men for the teaching duties of the ministry than for the pastoral duties. It is perhaps an invidious distinction to make, but if one had to choose between the two, it is even more important that a man should be a good pastor than a good preacher. It is in this field that we have to acknowledge a weakness in our present system of education for the ministry. At present in our Divinity Halls pastoral theology is taught as simply one branch of pastoral training, and the professor of practical training is also called upon to teach Christian Ethics. When one realises that the phrase "practical training" includes such subjects as instruction in the meaning and ceremonial of the Sacraments, the principles and conduct of Public Worship, the visitation of the sick and dying, and all forms of ordinary parish work, it is obvious that a scholar who has specialised in Sociology and Ethics, and who perhaps may not himself have held a parochial charge for some fifteen or twenty years, may not be the person best qualified to teach these other, and very different, branches of ministerial duty.

A much greater place in the curriculum is required for the whole subject of Pastoral Theology, and in particular, a much more adequate training in dealing with individual souls and in offering moral and spiritual guidance on personal problems of all kinds by which so many people in our time are bewildered. In the Roman Church, great stress is laid on this field of pastoral duty, because of the immense opportunities of the Confessional. A good priest who wins the confidence of his people has wonderful opportunities both of judging of their spiritual state and of offering them spiritual guidance and help in their individual problems. This has been for some time a neglected line of pastoral duty and privilege in the Church of Scotland. The sad fact is that to-day in the Scottish Church the care and cure of individual souls is

almost one of the forgotten responsibilities of the ministry. Up till probably a hundred years ago, although there was nothing in the Reformed Church corresponding to the Confessional yet the ordinary parish minister, if a man earnest in his calling, had open to him at least two ways of knowing a good deal about the moral and spiritual character of those under his care: namely (a) through the practice of catechising the children, alike in the school and in the home, and (b) through pastoral visitation, (in the true sense of the phrase, which invariably included reading and prayer with a family in their own home). It is a significant sign of the times that the majority of younger ministers to-day seldom regard these things as a natural part of pastoral visitation. In fact, one frequently hears the value of all such visitation questioned or disparaged. If this invaluable personal ministry is to be recovered (and we have our Lord's own example for its importance) much greater stress must be laid in the divinity hall on the importance of the pastoral duties, and much more careful and elaborate instruction afforded by teachers specially equipped by experience and character, as well as by academic knowledge of their subject.

In one other respect at least, divinity students in Scotland labour under a real disadvantage. Since none of the theological halls is residential, the students have little or no experience of real community life. They know nothing of either the discipline or the inspiration of living together for a time as men all conscious of and dedicated to the same great vocation. Meeting only at classes and for a short time each day in a common-room, they cannot enter into the deep and intimate fellowship possible to those who sleep under the same roof, sit round the same board, kneel daily side by side at prayer, and partake together of the Holy Communion. To be deprived of the possibility of such fellowship is a very real loss, and marks something till now lacking in our provision for the best preparation for those entering on the Ministry, with its peculiarly exacting spiritual demands, burdens, and responsibilities.

We have in Scotland four divinity halls, in the four university towns. Even though it may not be possible to provide a residential college in each of them, might it not at least be possible to have such a College in one of the four centres, where every student, from whichever Hall, would spend at least one session?

Such a college, with the right warden at its head, would for the first time offer to Scottish students of Divinity the experience of a very close fellowship, and the invaluable discipline and inspiration of life lived in community with others sharing the same vocation.

But more than that, it would also for the first time offer adequate opportunities of training in the life of personal and corporate prayer and devotion. The function of a divinity hall must surely include the promotion of the devotional life of the students themselves. Theology should always be studied in an atmosphere of prayer. The whole intellectual training for the ministry is apt to become aridly academic, unless surrounded by a sense of the majesty of God, and the supernatural character of our Christian Faith and calling. A ministry is spiritually effective in proportion to the amount of prayer which lies behind and at the heart of it.

Many ministers who have passed through our theological colleges in recent years have felt that what was above all lacking was this devotional atmosphere and training. Probably the chief reason is that it cannot easily be created in a college where men do not live together, but only come together for certain hours in the week, to listen to lectures and then go their several ways, to pursue their several interests. In a residential college the fellowship would be at a much deeper and more intimate level. The personal relations between professors and students could be much closer and more vital. Above all, the sense of a common calling would find the highest expression in a common life of prayer and devotion. The chapel would be the centre of the college life. The mastery of theology would become no longer merely an academic achievement, but the understanding of a personal faith. The study of church history would be illuminated by the sense of living day by day within a Christian community. From such a college men would go out to their practical tasks with a deeper sense alike of the wonder of their calling, of the fellowship of their brethren in the ministry, and of the infinite resources of Divine grace and guidance.