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Training in the Pre-College Years

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It has come to be a truism that young men and young women in college frequently pass through an intellectual experience which ultimately concerns their religious life, an experience viewed with delight by some, deplored by others, misunderstood by many, an experience which is as common among college students as the measles among those younger in years. It is unnecessary for our purpose to enter into a description of this time of readjustment, when the young person begins to think for himself, when the old is weighed and the new tested. We can shape our methods of training young people looking forward to a college course somewhat more with reference to this common intellectual experience, and, by so doing, make it less of a crisis, and more of a process. I suggest a few points for emphasis in the religious education of young people of pre-college age.

First, we must encourage them to think. Teaching them to "love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their strength," we sometimes neglect to teach them to love "with all their mind." Thinking is not such a terrible thing after all; it necessitates the balancing of alternatives, and this sometimes involves as an incident doubt, the bogey with which we frighten our intellectual children. Reverent thinking concerning "the faith once for all delivered" should be encouraged, even before the student enters college.

Again, we must guide them wisely in their initial attempts at thinking. There are similarities between learning to swim and learning to think.

There are two ways of teaching people to swim. One way is to pitch the pupil in, and trust that somehow the proper stroke will come; if it does, well and good; if it does not, he is pulled out, confidence gone, and the learning of the art by so much the harder. The other way is to employ an instructor to teach the rudiments, and lead up gradually to the time when the pupil shall attempt deep water. These two methods are in vogue in teaching young people to think for themselves. A good many of the disastrous results may be avoided if the young people are encouraged to think earlier, and guided more gradually and more sympathetically in their early efforts.

There are two or three ways of guiding them in their thinking. Send them to college with the beginning of a sense of perspective in religious thinking. Open their eyes, through a rudimentary view of church history, to the fact that Christian men have thought before this century, lest on arriving at college they begin to think that only at the end of these days has God let loose a thinker on earth. Suggest that thought, like all else, proceeds by evolution, not revolution, that the results of past thinking are worth conserving; that the law of "survival of the fittest" operates in religious thought, and that the fittest which survives, as in the animal world, has a long line of descent reaching back into the past, and is not like Melchizedek.

Give them the beginnings of a sense of proportion in religious thinking. To some the fact that the Bible is printed all in one size type seems to be taken as a divinely inspired indication that it is all of equal value, that an utterance of a proper after truth is of equal value with an authoritative word of Christ.

Having reminded them of the historical corrective to thinking, so we may point them to the practical corrective. In the atmosphere of a college community where everything is a trifle abnormal this practical corrective will not force itself on them. Cloistered thinking apart from practical everyday life is apt to be too fine spun, and to go to pieces when taken into the whirl of life.

Most important of all, we must impress upon young people that thinking is not the most important thing in the religious life. They are going to meet some people who have forgotten that. They will be taught that the kingdom of heaven cometh by speculation, and that men of keen powers of thought take it by force, that the balancing of evidence is the highest task to which a man can set himself, and so important and so difficult that he need expect to do little else for ten years at least. Christ laid down a fundamental principle of religious pedagogy, "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from myself." We wise people often reverse the order. We try to say,—He that knoweth God's will, shall will to do it. We want to box the whole compass of divine truth, before we set sail.