

THE PRESENT STATUS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION.

BY GEORGE E. HERR, A.B., D.D., PRESIDENT OF NEWTON THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE, NEWTON CENTER, MASS.

The theological seminary, as it is known in America, is a recent institution which has not yet passed out of the experimental stage. Up to the time of the Reformation the main concern of the universities was theological, but the new interests and the new point of view, that originated in the revival of letters and culminated in the Reformation, terminated the primacy of the theological discipline and remanded it to the position of a department of university instruction.

In this country the organization of separate schools for theological study arose from two causes: First, the evolution of the colleges into universities. In this process other disciplines were established before the theological, and, in many instances, the college development did not embrace a theological course. In the cases of Harvard and Yale, however, this was not true, and the theological faculties in these universities became an organic part of their systems.

A second reason for organization of separate schools was that the strong spirit of denominationalism made it impracticable for the college to organize a theological faculty, which would command the hearty support of its entire constituency.

The type of theological school, established under these conditions, was strictly confessional, with a strong apologetic cast in relation to other denominations. The purpose of the school was to train its students for an effective ministry in the denomination to which it belonged. Its curriculum recognized five leading departments of study: the Old Testament, the New Testament, Systematic Theology, Church History and Homiletics. In evangelical seminaries the Bible was, of course, regarded as the inspired Word of God, and there was no appeal

behind it. The average student would not be likely to find that the studies of his seminary course had changed materially the religious convictions which had been instilled by his family life and the instructions of his home church. It had only broadened and deepened them.

In those days seminary students were not, to the extent that prevails at present, college graduates, though the A.B. degree was held as most desirable for matriculation in the seminary. The student, however, in passing from the college to the seminary, was not usually conscious of any change in the methods or ideals of the two schools. The college and the seminary had a common outlook upon the world.

Furthermore, in those days the student, in passing from the seminary to his work as pastor, generally entered upon a situation that was entirely familiar. The industrial and social life in which he served was the one in which he had been brought up. He had the enormous advantage of working in an environment which he understood thoroughly.

It must be evident to anyone who recognizes this account of former conditions as even measurably true, in what a different situation the theological seminary of today is placed. I would like to call attention to three principal forces which have been influential in this change:

First, the method of study in every department of human knowledge has undergone a profound modification. The inductive method has been slowly winning its way in every department of human inquiry since the days of Lord Bacon, but it received a most powerful impulse from the series of discoveries which signaled the nineteenth century. The decade 1870-80 is marked by an intellectual revolution that has no parallel this side of the Renaissance and the Reformation. In this decade the scientific method became supreme in most departments of human thought. This was not the method which had controlled the theological discipline, and many students found in passing from the college to the seminary that they had not only entered a different psychological climate, but that the outlook upon the world and upon life and the tests of truth that prevailed in the seminary were quite different from those to

which they had been accustomed. Gradually, however, the new temper and method entered the seminaries. Today in the best seminaries the young man is conscious of no break between the method of the college and that of the theological school, but he becomes aware of certain limitations of the scientific method, which are too commonly overlooked or neglected in the college. He comes to see that the verifications of experiment in the material world are not the only validations of truth—that there are the verifications of human experience in many ranges, and that the appeal to the spiritual intuitions and to the religious constitution of human nature may be as valid as the appeal to the logical understanding. If the seminary has had much to learn from the scientific spirit in the colleges, the colleges are now beginning to see that they have much to learn from the seminaries, and the question is now frequently put: May not the aridity of our literature, and our dearth of great achievements in art and poetry be traced to a neglect in our educational system of sufficient recognition of the fact that there are other avenues to the human soul besides the five senses strengthened by instruments, and that the method of the laboratory, however satisfactory it may be in its own sphere, does not afford the only tests of spiritual truths? The evangelical seminaries, at least, are performing today an invaluable service, quite apart from their distinctive function, in inculcating an appreciation of the higher values.

A second force which has contributed to this change has been the conception of the world, including human history, as an organism. There have been many definitions of evolution, and many of those who have antagonized one another most sharply with reference to it have had very different conceptions of the theory. But the central pith of the doctrine of evolution, as Dr. John Fiske has pointed out (*Essays*, II:273), is that the changes that are going on throughout the universe are not chaotic or unrelated, but follow an intelligible course from one state of things to another, and more particularly the course which they follow is like that which goes on during the development of an ovum into a mature animal. The doctrine of the unification of nature, and not any theory of

natural selection or of the derivation of species, is the heart of the evolutionary philosophy. Now it is only fair to say that this conception of a unified nature is absolutely dominant in the world of thought. The genetic conception has superseded the mechanical, and done it so thoroughly that the language and symbols of the man educated fifty years ago are almost unintelligible to the men who have taken their degrees within ten or fifteen years.

The effects of this changed point of view upon theology and upon the theological discipline of course have been prodigious. It is only the latter consideration which concerns us in this survey. Two of these effects are readily discerned. For one thing, the range of theological studies has been enormously broadened. Take for example the history of Israel. Under the new reading of history, whatever our theory of the providential training of the chosen people, the life and institutions of Israel have profound genetic connections with the development of Babylon and Egypt. So as to Christianity itself, its relations with Judaism must be vital, and it can be understood only from the point of view of the preceding history. The real issue between the radicals and the conservatives is not as to the validity of this method of genetic study. The real issue is as to the possibility of accounting for the unique message of Israel by its historic antecedents, and of accounting for Christianity by Judaism.

It is clear that when history or doctrine is studied from this point of view the range of inquiry is enormously broadened. The whole field of Semitic life, literature and institutions must be thoroughly mastered in order to a correct apprehension of the history of Israel. But this is only one field. What is true of it is true of every line of inquiry. In the near future every branch of knowledge will be studied comparatively.

Another result of this conception of unified nature has been to compel the theologian to fundamental thinking. It has thrust metaphysical and philosophical questions into the foreground. The doctrine of evolution, as I have defined it, is essentially metaphysical, and it points forward to some theory of monism. The Scriptures are based upon certain great postu-

lates. They assume the being and personality of God. The doctrine to which we are referring compels inquiry as to three fundamental truths. Is the force behind the mighty on-going of the world process personal? Is there a purpose in the cosmos? If so, is it beneficent, and if beneficent, is it beneficent for the individual? Can we vindicate the great assertion of St. Paul, which, in a single sentence, answers all these questions: "All things work together for good to them that love God"? (Rom. 8:28.)

Jonathan Edwards gave the first impulse to fundamental theological thinking we have had in America. His temper was perpetuated in his great successors, Hopkins, Bellamy and Emmons. Compared with Edwards, Chauncy is as a pleasure yacht to an ocean liner. Edwards does not stay in the sheltered coves or hug the coast. His prow turns to the high seas for a long voyage, fearless of billows or tempest. The theology of America has never lost that note of depth and thoroughness which first sounds in Edwards' treatises on Virtue, on the Will and on the Affections. But in the period before the decade 1870-80 the stream of thought had become much shallower. Since that decade the great vital questions raised by the doctrine that the world is an organism have compelled a return to fundamental thinking, and our seminaries have been compelled to grapple with the deepest philosophical problems.

In doing this the seminaries have labored under two disadvantages which have not yet been overcome. Under the elective system, which prevails in most of our colleges, it is possible for a student to come to the seminary with the A.B. degree and yet be innocent of philosophical training. This state of matters compels the seminary to give instruction in the elements of philosophy. For the most part these courses are concealed in the department of Systematic Theology, but their segregation in seminaries not affiliated with universities is imminent. On the other hand, it often happens that the philosophy inculcated in the college is irreconcilable with the Christian point of view. Then the task of the theologian is quite as difficult as though the student had not studied philosophy at all. These considerations suggest one of the most important problems in theologi-

cal education, the proper correlation of college with theological studies.

But when the college training in philosophy has been adequate the new point of view has brought into the seminary a whole group of studies to which our fathers were strangers, such as the Philosophy of Religion, Apologetics reaching back to the postulates of Theism, and Religious Psychology.

A third force contributing to this change has been the development of a marvelously complex social and industrial life in the United States. Fifty years ago, or even twenty-five years ago, students trained in our seminaries would serve in pastorates in which their work would be among the kind of people with whom they had been brought up and with whose outlooks and ideals they were absolutely familiar. They needed little familiarity with sociology, theoretical or applied. They knew the intimate life of men to whom they were ministering and they could speak directly, as Lord Bacon says, "to men's business and bosoms"; but within the last quarter of a century industrial and social conditions have been profoundly modified, especially in the North, and the transformation is gradually taking place in the South. In New England most of our ministers serve in towns in which from one-third to one-half of the population is of foreign birth. There are broad divisions between the farmers, the tradesmen and the factory workers, and a still broader division between the employers of labor and their employes who are represented in the trades unions. A more complicated situation could hardly be imagined. There has been an insistent cry that the pulpit should keep in touch with the community. No such demand was heard fifty years ago. There was no occasion for it. The pulpit was in vital sympathy with the life of the community. Now it requires a distinct effort and special training on the part of the minister to enter into sympathetic relations with these various groups which the church must reach and serve. It would be greatly to the advantage of most of our New England ministers—and what is taking place in New England is typical of what is occurring throughout the nation—if they could speak two or three lan-

guages; but, apart from that, they need to acquire a most thorough mastery of the modern sociological conception of society and be capable, through an all-embracing sympathy, of visualizing the position and outlook and ideals of the men and women whom they are to serve. This state of affairs has made it imperative that the modern seminary should incorporate into its curriculum a large variety of new studies. Some of our seminaries, in seeking to light up the situation, have established social settlements even, and thoroughly organized the work of giving their students a practical acquaintance with actual conditions.

It is evident from this rapid survey that the theological discipline has been somewhat radically transformed within the last few years. The seminaries have been adjusting themselves to the methods and postulates that prevail in other departments of the educational world. This has been inevitable, and the churches could not resist it if they would.

It may be proper in a closing word to indicate one or two of the perils that beset the present situation.

For one thing the enormous enlargement of the range of studies, closely germane to the theological discipline, tends to divert the student from his supreme quest of gaining through a study of the Scriptures a deep and comprehensive view of his spiritual message. One man cannot master everything. He must choose, and the range of choice is bewildering. There is real danger that the student, in following some attractive by-path, may stray far from the great central Christian truths. All have not withstood this temptation, and we have graduates of our seminaries who are accomplished archeologists, historians, philosophers and sociologists, but have not gained any real mastery of the distinctive Christian revelation. If a main function of the ministry is preaching, real preaching, and not mere lecturing, the seminary is remiss that does not, through its curriculum and through its insistent temper, make its work converge upon clarifying and intensifying the spiritual message of Christianity.

Another peril is that in response to the methods and temper of secular education the seminary may make the tests of the

scientist the only measures of spiritual truth. The supreme correction to this tendency is the personality of the teachers in the seminary. The point of view, the attitude, the spirit of the professor is of primary importance.

The most luminous pages of the New Testament may be studied in a way that makes them as barren of spiritual impression as a proposition of Euclid; or the investiture conflict between the popes and the emperors may be studied in a way that makes an appeal to the sense of the heroic and leads to a large recognition of the nature of the Kingdom of God. Appreciation of spiritual values, intuitions of the truth, cannot be taught by books or lectures. This kind only comes forth by the radiation of personality quickened by self-communion and prayer. Then convictions arise in the soul which are the expressions of personal life and growth. Without such convictions, the outcome of an inner experience rather than of the application of a scientific method to any set of facts, the work of the Christian ministry is vain and hollow.

The actual work of the graduates of American seminaries as pastors, missionaries and spiritual leaders warrants the judgment that these schools, in the face of great difficulties, have not been ineffective in fulfilling their great mission.