

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES AS SCHOOLS OF RELIGIOUS EFFICIENCY¹

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By virtue of the inevitable movement of life, many of the theological seminaries of the United States have been compelled to appoint successors to men who have for a generation been leaders in theological instruction, and still others are facing similar necessities. Nor is this succession of change merely one in personnel. During the past five years, there has been an exceptional interest in the curricula of theological seminaries throughout the United States. Who of us has not been at the mercy of faculty committees armed with questionnaires? We have answered questions regarding Hebrew and Greek, sociology and religious education, financial aid and dormitories for married students. He who thinks that the world of theological seminaries is an educational Nirvana gives evidence of not knowing the seminaries.

In this transformation, however, it is not as clear as we could wish that the reorganization of the curriculum of a seminary has always been based upon genuinely educational principle. It too often appears to the observer that changes in the curriculum have been at least limited by an over-sensitiveness to inherited prerogatives of some department of instruction. Only in a few cases would it appear that the committee having in charge the reorganiza-

tion of a seminary course has proceeded to ask fundamental questions as to just what is the essential vocation for which the seminaries are training men. It is this question that I would ask this evening. What is the chief function of the theological seminary? And my reply is unqualifiedly this: *the preparation of men for efficient leadership in religion.*

I

Such an answer naturally gets its full meaning from the definitions of the various terms used, but even if we approach it without attempting such precise thought, it will be evident, I trust, that the minister's vocation today is less that of the prophet and more that of the apostle.

The difference between the prophet and the apostle may fairly well be described by saying that while the prophet uttered the divine message and left it in the hearts of his countrymen, the apostle not only uttered but institutionalized the divine message in a group of people who accepted it as true. When one compares the influence of the prophets upon the Hebrew people and the influence of the apostles upon the Roman Empire, this difference is at once apparent. It would be difficult to find a group of people who had less immediate influence than the prophets.

¹ An address delivered at the inauguration of Dr. C. A. Barbour as the President of Rochester Theological Seminary.

Although they spoke the truth, the people at large were indifferent to that truth. After all allowance has been made for the influence of the prophetic thought upon the literature and the ceremonial life of the Hebrews, it is true the Hebrew state went to its doom despite prophetic warning. The reason is simple: the prophets founded no church.

Very different from this was the work of the apostles. Destined like most prophets to martyrdom, Paul and the original twelve seemed never to be content until they had organized believers into groups. Their message was the nucleus of a church. They were religious leaders in the fullest sense of the word. That so many of these groups disappeared beneath the waves of Arabian and Mongolian invasion does not destroy the fact that the churches thus established were able to withstand the cataclysms of five hundred years and emerge as a well-integrated *imperium in imperio*.

It is the ultimate task of the seminary to insure a true apostolic succession, to train leaders of churches. Incidentally, of course, it may very well provide training for other types of religious workers, but its chief function is the preparation of clergymen who will be at the head of churches. In other words, the function of the seminary will move parallel with that of the church.

True, if the seminary does not realize clearly that its function is to provide leaders for the church, it may provide other sorts of people and let the church take its chances. It is conceivable that a seminary might regard as its primary function that of preparing

men to be defenders of an inherited orthodoxy. Incidentally such champions might be pastors of churches, but the task for which they would be pre-eminently trained would not be that of leadership, that is of organizing individuals into efficient religious groups, but the establishment of the truth of certain authoritatively given doctrines. It goes without saying that any man who is to be a religious leader must be trained to expound and defend religious truths, but a church that seeks only doctrinal precision will soon cease to be religiously significant. Orthodox persons are not always dominated by evangelical religion.

On the other hand a theological seminary might conceive its fundamental task as that of sending out men to expose the follies of inherited religious systems, bound first of all to destroy mistaken orthodoxies. I do not know that any seminary ever consciously set such a view as this before itself, but it is at least conceivable that the teaching in a seminary might be so concerned with the necessity of ridding the minds of men of theological error that unconsciously its attitude would be theologically negative. Again, it must be admitted that it is impossible to think deeply upon religious matters without confronting difficult questions, in seeking to answer which one is very likely to discover the insufficiency of inherited formulas. You cannot progress without abandoning some positions. But even when this allowance has been made, no seminary has any right to exist which persistently mistakes illumination for religion. An engine does not pull the train with its headlight.

Then too, and this probability is much stronger than that just mentioned, a seminary might come to conceive itself as existing for the purpose of sending out men whose first business is social service or social reform. The two are not identical, and social service is sometimes the enemy of social reconstruction. In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, the churches of today need to guard themselves against zeal for good works. But both social service and social reconstruction fall within the scope of the Christian church. A seminary that overlooks this fact is certainly making a serious mistake. At the very least it should teach its students enough of sociology to keep them from bolting social panaceas, and from indiscriminately meddling with other people's affairs in the name of the gospel. But the fundamental task of the church is not to preach sociology, and the fundamental task of the seminary is not to produce sociologists. I do not myself think there is any great danger that our seminaries will succumb to this sort of temptation, but it is essential to mention it, for all of us who are teaching theological disciplines are increasingly coming to see the social significance of our work, and many pastors are coming to rely frankly upon the institutional features of their work more than upon their message. Our future ministers should have clear convictions as to how far the church should undertake, for instance, to go into charity operations—feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and establishing bread lines. They should be helped to see how far churches in communities lacking the good sense to attend to their own wel-

fare should, in dealing with the young, supply them with opportunities for amusement, like basket-ball, gymnasium work, swimming, dancing, and opportunities for courtship. We must consistently hold that whatever is the duty of the church in such matters sets the duty of the seminary. It is true that such a view may seem to add new burdens to the already overloaded shoulders of the seminary, but I do not see any escape from the conclusion that whatever it is the function of the church to furnish it is the function of the seminary to train men to furnish.

But even if this general principle be recognized, it must immediately be apparent that the church is something more than a charitable institution on the one side and the Young Men's Christian Association on the other. Even less is it to be a mere means of entertainment. Some entertainment, of course, is legitimate, but whoever undertakes to make religion amusing is likely to find people more interested in the amusement than in the religion. The Kingdom of God is no more laughter than it is eating and drinking. Joy in the Holy Ghost is certainly not to be confused with vaudeville entertainments, be they never so piously organized in order to permit the surreptitious introduction of religion between acts. When the success of a church depends upon a paid choir or a moving-picture machine, that church is ready either for regeneration or burial.

There is one other conception of the preparation a theological seminary should furnish future ministers which, far less readily than those already mentioned, must be judged imperfect. Just

because the fundamental task of the seminary is that of preparing men to lead the church in the performance of its fundamental task, the dominant characteristic of the seminary cannot be scholastic—I had almost said, scholarly. I am aware of the delicacy of the ground upon which I am treading. I am not at all sure that most of you will agree with me. But I feel certain that, taking the world as it is, there can be no surer method of producing inefficient religious leadership on the part of pastors than to train them for years in theological, exegetical, and linguistic technicalities. If God has given to any man the gift of tongues, whether Greek or Hebrew, I should be the last man to say that he should not give expression in them, at any rate if there is an interpreter present. But still following the Pauline injunction, I should advise these men, while not abandoning this gift, to seek a more excellent way.

The fundamental elements of the curriculum of our theological seminaries are, first, a knowledge of the Bible, second, a knowledge of the doctrines which may be founded on the Bible, third, a history of the church as an exponent of these doctrines, and, fourth, the methods of preaching and embodying these doctrines (or, better, truths) of the Bible in individuals and society. These four cardinal points have, however, been so interpreted as to emphasize the study of the languages of the Bible, a discussion of theology apart from human experience, and a history of our religion, both doctrinally and institutionally, almost entirely dissociated from social evolution. In all this there has been very little of the study

of religion as an actual human experience, and even less study of the world into which the student must go. The result has been that the seminaries have tended to produce clergymen who have been educated out of sympathy with the modern world with its indifference to the finer elements of culture. Consequently, in too many cases they have been slow to appreciate the fact that religion, as we Christians know it, however much it may be aided by scholastic training, really does not depend on such training for efficiency. We have committed the mistake of making religion highly literary in word and sentence. The rise of training schools or institutes for men who have not had college education not only indicates that the church has fewer seminary trained preachers than it can use, but they are also the expression of the conviction of men not in sympathy with scholastic religion, that efficient Christianity is less in need of learning than it is of training, less in need of knowing what to think than in being taught how to be saved.

I cannot believe that either of the parties to this controversy is altogether wrong or altogether right. If there be danger in the unthinking enthusiasm of the training school, there is also danger in the scholastic interests of our seminaries. If the seminary is prone to mistake thought about religion for religion itself, the training institute is in danger of thinking that thought and religion are inherently antagonistic to each other. If the seminary is in danger of mistaking eddies of contemporaneous speculation for the main current of human thought, the institute is tempted

to oppose all freedom of thought for fear of losing an external authority.

But each of these two types of theological training has its contribution to make to the religious training of the future. Each needs to learn from the other that the efficiency for which both are training their pupils is fundamentally but intelligently religious, and that all other matters of training, of formula, and of point of view are secondary to this. If the church is to succeed it must succeed as a religious institution. If it does not succeed as a religious institution, it will cease to be significant, and die of being ignored.

II

Let us then insist that the church is to be primarily a religious institution, and therefore that the business of the seminary is to train men who can lead it into a religious efficiency. Certain conclusions immediately follow.

In the first place, a theological seminary should tend to deepen and enrich the religious life of the student himself. He must not only be told how other people can be made religious, but he should be helped to be religious himself. This form of training, as everyone connected with a theological seminary is likely to admit, is not to be regarded as a matter of course. No one who has attended state conventions and ministers' meetings on Monday has failed to observe that whatever may be the private religion of ministers, to neglect the gathering of themselves together is certainly the custom of some. Despite basket-ball and tennis, the life of a theological seminary is not altogether normal. The constant discus-

sion of religious matters with a scientific rather than a devotional interest is fraught with danger to religious zeal. No one of us can analyze and discuss his finer feelings without danger of losing the warmth of the feelings themselves. Furthermore, the analytical and critical attitude of mind which any thorough-going scientific method involves, while indispensable for frank thinking, tends to make theological students think of their message as a problem rather than as an answer. To be for three years subjected to a type of religious thinking which must of necessity tend to remove college-trained men from sympathy with the common lot serves also to induce a state of mind in which the emotions of religious life are, to say the least, cooled. They are in danger of coming out experts in thesis-writing rather than experts in religion.

How to meet this danger of inducing a professional rather than a personal and vital interest in religion is something to which every theological seminary repeatedly addresses itself.

But I cannot believe that the last word is spoken even by chapel services and class prayer meetings. The individual must himself develop religious initiative for his own life, if he is to furnish such initiative for other people's lives. It is true that when a man gets into a church, vocational ambition often produces a glow of religious feeling, particularly when he is in the pulpit or in some particular religious undertaking. But the theological seminary should make the cultivation of the religious life of its students a part of its actual educational process. To do this, its curriculum must aim at training total

personal efficiency in religious leadership rather than at scholarship. It must recognize expressional activities as well as receptivity of mind. So long as a course in a seminary is regarded as exclusively a search for truth, just so long will the expressional religious life be dwarfed. Every seminary should train its men to the expression of their own religion. Just how to do this each seminary will have to determine in its own wisdom. In my own opinion, nothing is so valuable as practical religious work in which the student is brought face to face with the sorrows and temptations of actual life. This will evoke in him a religious attitude, give him a sense of religious need, and arouse a confidence in the gospel which will be invaluable in his own life. I venture to say that the most effective ministers have been those who began their work in student pastorates. Scholastically they may have suffered, but, if I am correct, the chief business of the seminary is not to send forth scholars, but religious leaders. Study is only one element in a seminary course. It is hard to doubt the power of a gospel that saves sinners. A man becomes a religious leader by leading people into religion.

The advantages of practical work are very numerous in themselves, and many of its dangers can be obviated if this practical religious work is so correlated with the curriculum as to become, as it were, laboratory practice. But even here we need to restrain our analogies. A soul is too precious to be treated as a laboratory, and as long as seminaries regard ministry to souls as merely practice, they lose something which a sincere interest in human life gives. I

admit the difficulty in the situation, but my conviction is clear that a seminary can afford, if need be, to reduce the number of classroom hours for the purpose of training its students in the actual cure of souls. I would repeat; if the chief business of the seminary is to produce religious leaders, such leadership is not to be identified with scholastic attainments, splendid as such scholastic attainments may be. It must come through the power of the minister to minister intelligently to the religious needs of men, women, and children, and to organize them into an efficient religious group. Such power can come only with practice, and should be brought to a first pastorate.

Such practical training, however, should be regarded as only one phase of a curriculum demanded by the effort to increase the student's efficiency in religion.

It cannot be too strongly stated that our theological seminaries make a fundamental mistake in the same proportion as they introduce the student into the study of the Christian religion through the avenue of philosophy and linguistics. The proper introduction to religion is religion itself. Take, for example, the doctrine of God. How frequently is it the custom to approach this problem as if it were one phase of philosophy. We seek for Absolutes and prove the existence of Infinite Personal Being, ontological, and other arguments. But just so far as this method is successful is it attended by danger lest the student shall find philosophy intruding itself either as a non-conductor between him and religion, or as a disintegrator of religious faith. To approach the doctrine of God

from the point of view of religion is to come to him first of all prayerfully and then through a study of the actual concrete expression of human faith as it is found in prayer, service, ritual, the history of religious organization, religious biography, thought, and worship. The doctrine of God has its metaphysical aspects, but in these the minister is not primarily interested. Indeed, he must see that they get value only as they help the religious life. So to set forth the Trinity that the God of Jesus is hidden behind a Greco-Roman philosophy or essence is untrue to the purpose of Athanasius and akin to the bewilderment of agnosticism. The Trinity was and must be a religious, not a baldly metaphysical, element in Christianity. The minister goes to a world of sin, not as a lecturer upon Infinities and Absolutes, and Cosmic Wholes, but as a herald of an eternal and loving Father-God, who is so personal that we can know him as Spirit and Word. As a teacher of theology, I protest strongly against the belief that theology is to be subsumed under philosophy. If one—unlike myself—hesitates to regard it as an independent discipline, it belongs rather to biology. It studies religious life as it has been lived by successive generations of mankind in the effort to get personal help from that outer and awful world on which they have felt themselves dependent. I fancy that one reason why the unlettered man has often a warmer religious appeal is that, thanks to his ignorance of philosophy and linguistics, he has approached God vitally and speaks the burning words of actual religious experience.

I would not belittle the philosophical theology of the past, for I appreciate its great service and the extraordinary precision of much of its thinking. I believe religion needs metaphysics as truly as does biology, but no more. Ultimately we know God as we know the outer world, actively and trustfully. Naturally we want a theory of knowledge to justify us in holding fast to what we already believe to be true, but religion does not rest upon theories of knowledge. It precedes them. Epistemology is not necessary to salvation. Should not the approach to theology therefore be through the experience of salvation? Any other approach to the doctrine of God leads to a reversion of method. It puts our knowledge of God on a fundamentally false basis, is metaphysical rather than religious, of Aristotle rather than of Jesus. In religion, a definition is the last resort of a faith that is losing its momentum. In religion men live, rather than argue, trust rather than investigate. Whether we can ever build up a theology that shall not deaden religion or at least quiet it into sedate syllogisms, I do not know, but I do know that it is a venture upon which we teachers of theology should enter. Only as we approach the science of religion through religion itself rather than through thoughts about religion shall we quicken our students religiously. Neither they nor we can be enthusiastic over a God constantly under investigation.

I feel the same way about the study of the Bible. I believe thoroughly in the most scientific study of the scriptural languages and that students should be trained in the methods of historical criticism. But we should not make

these the first steps in biblical study because we cannot efficiently lead men into the religious treasures of the Bible through the avenue of language and technical criticism. We are in danger of preparing students who can preach the good news of Pentateuchal analysis, rather than the gospel of saving God revealed through the sacred books of the Hebrew nation. We are in danger of sending forth students with an amateur knowledge of Hellenistic Greek, convinced that the first duty of a leader of a church is to aid deacons in the choice of the best theory as to the origin of the Synoptics. I respect men who have such critical theories: I have several myself. But they are not the first avenue of approach to a knowledge of the gospel.

I well remember how when I first began to teach the New Testament I undertook to lead a class into a knowledge of Jesus Christ through a study of the chronology of his birth. I remember we wrestled with dates until we became utterly confused. I remember how, in the first flush of teaching the life of Paul, I kept an unfortunate class for a week pendulating between the rival North and South Galatia theories. I make these confessions with courage because I have long since felt that it is vastly better for a class to come into a knowledge of Jesus Christ through an actual interest in his life than through the stepping-stones of Chinese comets and imperial rescripts; and that a man can come to know Paul and his burning passion to bring the message of Jesus Christ to a lost world, even if he is not quite sure which part of Asia Minor housed the foolish Galatians. I have

known teachers of the New Testament to spend much of the time devoted to introductory matters in the endeavor, by means of a critical analysis, to distinguish sharply between the actual words of Jesus and the exposition of the evangelists. Such distinction must at some time be made if one wishes to get the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, but it is misleading if one wishes to get the Christian religion. That does not wait on the processes of historical criticism, but can be found in the New Testament as the actual expression of Christian experience. Meet the student at the door of the seminaries with the religion of Jesus and his apostles, and all else can follow—must follow in due time.

I do not wish to belittle scholarly research. I not only believe in it but, as committee meetings permit, I try to practice it. I am emphasizing what has become to me the categorical imperative of theological education: that first things should come first, that the man preparing to preach the Christian religion must in the first month of residence in a seminary be brought face to face with the power as well as the problem of the gospel. If the impression is once made upon him that his task for the ensuing three years is to master the prolegomena of religious theory rather than to grow in the experiences of religion itself, my fear is that he will develop a theological impartiality rather than an apostle's constructive zeal. The fisher of men cannot catch souls with interrogation marks.

If the Bible be studied as a trustworthy record of God's growing revelation of himself through human experience, it should be taught from the point of

view of such experience and revelation. To see the development of Christianity in its broad movement rather than in its details is to give men a positive introduction to religion. It will make them feel that the Bible was written for a religious purpose and will help them to use it religiously. Such treatment is by no means to be identified with superficial homilies upon the goodness of Abraham and the moral instability of Jacob. It can be made and should be made a severe mental discipline, but every step in that discipline should lead a student more deeply into the truly religious aspects of biblical life.

Particularly is this true, in the case of the New Testament. It is of course imperative that the student should know the time and place and purpose and occasion of the writing of the various New Testament books. In these days he cannot be left ignorant of critical problems and processes, but the New Testament should not be so taught as to become little more than a collection of critical problems. It should be taught for what it really is—the record of God in the life of his Son and his immediate followers.

And this brings one to a most important element in the teaching of church history. The more we know about life in the physical world the more we realize that a cell may literally project itself into successive organisms. Such a fact is more than an analogy for the student of church history. Church history is the study of the genetic working of Jesus Christ down through the ages. He touched his disciples, they touched others who in their turn touched still others. He lives on, the Vine in the

branches. Some time we shall see developed a method of teaching church history which in loyalty to a severe historical method shall lay emphasis upon the power of Christianity to breed true to itself. The test of the acorn is its ability to produce acorns, and the test of Christianity is its ability to produce men and institutions dominated by Jesus Christ. So long as church history tends to become a record of confused heresies and doctrines, so long shall we be in danger of having it divert students from religion to footnotes.

III

At the expense of taxing your patience, I wish to speak of one other element in the call to the seminary to train religious leaders of our religion; and that is that the student should be taught to see that preaching is a social task. Preach the gospel he must, for there is a steady demand for good preachers. The pulpit has not lost its power or its prestige. The minister who neglects his sermons will find his people neglecting church. But difficult as it is, it is easier to teach men homiletics than spiritual leadership of a social group. For the past few years there has been a growing desire on the part of our clergy to be prophetic. As near as I can understand this ambition, a prophetic minister is one who speaks out whatever he regards as true. Personally, I think that that is by no means always advisable. What one regards as truth is not always true. Very many good people do not have good sense. It often happens that a preacher under the spell of an unaccustomed opinion feels impelled to utter

something which he could much more safely write out and put in his study table's drawer to ripen. Too much of what passes today as prophetic utterance is miscellaneous denunciation colored by hasty generalizations and born of a superficial knowledge of human nature.

We want, of course, preachers who dare to speak out their opinions, but I think we need even more preachers who have sensible opinions to speak out. In the same proportion as a man regards himself as subject to the exclusive duty of uttering messages is he very likely to find his leadership less efficient than it should be. There are, of course, exceptions to such a statement as this, for there are many men who will go down in history as oracles of the spiritual life. But most of us need to get expert advice before we decide that we are to be classed with Chrysostom and Phillips Brooks. And Chrysostom and Phillips Brooks were administrators as well as preachers. Most ministers' success lies in their capacity to set churches into operation by spiritual preaching, and then to organize them by the grace of committees. Christianity never has been and never will be built up upon the one foundation of interesting or even inspiring talk. A church that will not work is a church that will die of lack of exercise. A minister who cannot organize his churches about a message will always be looking for providential openings where he can use his least unsuccessful sermons.

It goes without saying that a theological seminary cannot make great leaders out of little men. Theological seminaries are not responsible for the breed of men that go into the ministry. They

cannot send out a Paul when they are intrusted with a Demas, but it is amazing what a well-organized seminary can do with men whom it can inspire with a full sense of the apostolic significance of their calling.

The apostle Paul seems to have been a master in the handling of committees and church officials. The difficulty with too many ministers is that they do not know how to get along with strong men. They think leadership means "bossing" people. They are tempted "to bring things to an issue," so that one side or the other must win. I do not know whether it is possible for a seminary to teach administrative common-sense, but it certainly should make an effort to give its students not only an idea of their social and administrative obligations as leaders of churches, but also some intimation of the general line of procedure which will be least likely to lead to deadlocks and the most likely to lead to efficient organization. At least they can be taught that the noisiest saints are not necessarily the sanest leaders.

A course in pastoral duties is indispensable, but it is not enough. A man must know society, he must know how to study surroundings in the way of making surveys; if need be, he must know something of the organization of business concerns, reform organizations—in fact, any group which actually is performing its proper tasks. Most of all should he be given to feel that one reason why men do not succeed in their churches is that they do not know how to organize their members, and are too lazy to learn. He should be taught that the pulpit has been joined by God to the pew and that whenever he finds

himself saying "I like to preach, but I do not like committee work," he should repent and ask divine forgiveness. As a leader of religion, the minister's task is both to utter and to institutionalize his message so that the members of his church individually and co-operatively shall embody in the community the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Such a supreme task lifts the ministry from a chaplaincy into a power. A minister who can inspire his people with a message from the depths of his own spiritual life and lead them to carry that inspiration into social relations is a genuine social leader. Until he can thus legitimize his position as the medium and promoter of moral inspiration, he is a social ornament glued to real life by a salary. But if he is to achieve his great task, two things are indispensable: he must be trained to inspire and educate the individual to religious growth, and he must be further trained to bring spiritual inspiration and guidance to the course of human affairs. The two conceptions are by no means mutually exclusive. History, after all, is only a record of how folks act, and it is the business of a church to make the ideals of folk-action those of Jesus Christ. The theological student should be trained to see that the future grows out of the present and that perhaps the largest contribution that he can make to international morality, to industrial disputes, and to the entire course of social evolution will be a group of men and women who share in his spiritual enthusiasm and his confidence that Jesus has revealed how God is really at work in the world. The New Testament church gained its social significance, not because it had a program,

but because its members had a Christian attitude of mind. For a variety of reasons it did not undertake social reconstruction, but it embodied ideals which directed successive social minds. The church can render the same service today, provided only its pastors grasp the significance, not only of the gospel *about* Jesus, but the gospel *of* Jesus. Here is its supreme social task: not to publish programs but to beget in men the sacrificial social-mindedness that God displays in Jesus Christ. In this moment of storm and stress when civilization is being tested and Christianity itself is challenged, the cry is ever more importunate for a religious leadership that shall take Jesus seriously and believe that it is better to give justice than it is to fight for rights, because of the revelation in him that God himself so acts.

Let those of us who represent theological instruction face our duty with level eyes. It is no time for us to debate minutiae of scholarship, doctrinal precision, or ecclesiastical polities. Our task is set by needs of the church of Jesus Christ, and its task is set by the spiritual crisis of a world. Let us in prayer and spiritual discipline reconsecrate ourselves to the training of those in whose hands must lie the future leadership of the church. If we grow academic, their leadership will be less vital; if we exalt knowledge above love their enthusiasm will grow cold; if we fail to lead them into new experiences of God, their leadership will grow less religious, and the church, which should honor its Head by serving the world for which He died, will be weakened at the very moment when it should be growing strong.