

THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS' FELLOWSHIP

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Editorial

IN UNDERSTANDING BE MEN

On the last evening of the T.S.F. Conference one man was heard to say: 'The most striking impression I shall carry away from this Conference is the need for me to get down to some serious theological thinking.' A resolution is easily made; let us hope that half a term or so back at college has not seen it reluctantly set aside to await 'that leisured tomorrow which so often never comes'!

For the resolution was a thoroughly sound one. It is our profound conviction that a monstrous lack of clear, compelling theology is one of the greatest weaknesses of the T.S.F. at the moment, and in fact of the whole of the Evangelical cause. Why is it, for example, that we are willing to hob-nob with Liberals at every turn, instead of standing firm for the 'truth'? Is it not because we do not really appreciate the theological differences between us, regarding them as minor and secondary instead of fundamental and primary? Has not our theology become as woolly as theirs? But let us look at this matter from the point of view of its relevance for us as individuals now and in the future.

The theological student must have in his mind a clearly formulated theological position if he is to carry any weight for Evangelical truth in his college. Contacts with a number of colleges during the past year have made it plain that in many cases the ineffectiveness of the witness may be traced to weakness here — often it is not zeal or devotion to the Lord which is missing, but simply the appreciation and presentation of a Conservative theology which will command attention. A defensive wall has been built, against which it is hoped that the breakers of false teaching will hurl themselves in vain; but one finds little sense of being stewards of eternal truth which has been received from the Lord Himself. Can we not abandon our apologetic tone and with a background of sure theological knowledge maintain humbly yet definitely a positive witness to Evangelical truth?

The academic theologian is a strange creature, Evangelical specimens of which are rarely found today; the dusty libraries in which it finds its food are not the Evangelical's natural habitat. It is hardly surprising that, faced by a world waiting to be evangelized, few of our number are moved to commit themselves to such a life as this; even for those who have some definite gifts which might lead them in this direction, the element of sacrifice is probably still very great. Yet who would care to deny the enormous influence wielded by the top-line scholar? What he says today will tomorrow be taught in our theological schools and faculties and the third day preached from the pulpits of our churches. Is the challenge not worth accepting?

The working minister often seems to think he can get on quite well without theology; indeed, many pride themselves on an almost complete lack of it. 'Theology may be all right for the theologian who

wants to bury his nose in books all his life,' we are told; 'but just let him try to unload his jargon on a working-class congregation and see what happens!' I hope that the extract from Baxter elsewhere in this paper will help to kill the idea that the only essentials in preaching are a three-point Gospel and a good fund of stories. Both in evangelism and in the exercise of pastoral care the minister will be greatly hampered by a lack of theology in the true sense of that word — namely a deep and detailed understanding of man's nature as sinner and as saint, and of the unchanging principles which govern God's dealings with His creatures. Thus much of the shallow preaching which today passes for biblical exposition is really due to a failure to view each individual text in the light of a thorough and comprehensive scriptural theology. Is it not here that we should look for an explanation of the weakness of present-day preaching when compared, say, with that of the Puritans?

But our original problem remains. Such a theological understanding of man and of the ways of God can only be acquired by reading far more widely than our college course demands; but how can this be undertaken within the setting of the life of a theological student? No doubt one theological college differs from another in many respects, but they all seem to have one characteristic in common — they aim at jamming as much knowledge, 'spirituality' and experience into a man as he can possibly take during the brief years he is in their hands, and consequently give him little or no chance of developing independently along the lines of his own peculiar aims or interests.

There is of course no simple answer to our problem; but the first essential is that there should be in the mind of the student a clear picture of the kind of man he wants ultimately to be, and a determination to take advantage of every opportunity presented to him to progress towards that ideal.