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DANGER: SEMINARY

By Chaplain ROBERT OERTER

(Reproduced from 'HIS', the organ of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of U.S.A.)

WHEN I went to seminary, I was cautious. Kind friends had warned me that *the* peril of seminary was heresy; so with watchful eye I surveyed the campus for the hobgoblins of heresy. Finding none strutting openly, I examined the theological bushes to see if minor heresies lurked there. By the time I tired of chasing hobgoblins, I realized that *the* danger of seminary is not heresy. It is the danger of dissipated devotion.

Dangers abound at seminary. When a young preacher develops that ungodly sepulchral tone, the danger of affectation has raised its ugly head. Or, perhaps unconsciously, the student fails to see each person as an individual for whom Christ died; here's the danger of professionalism. And here is the danger of seeking a position rather than a task.

Such dangers are real, but they can be overcome. A man may be used in spite of affectation or professionalism, but the danger that destroys usefulness is the danger of self. Constantly we are faced with the possibility of spiritual deterioration. We always remain our greatest problem.

Often we watch young men at seminary change before our very eyes. They come with a devotion sharp and deep; they go with a devotion smooth and shallow. They come with a love sincere and undivided; they go with a professional concern.

When we see such changes in promising men, we are apt to blame the seminary. Be careful. It may have been the man's own fault that he drifted from deep devotion to surface spirituality. Perhaps he was guarding the citadel of his mind but he forgot his life. The flame of devotion to Christ that once burned freely now smoulders, close to extinction. The flame cannot burn apart from the clear atmosphere of persistent prayer and private study of the Word, above the demands of the school work. With his broader knowledge and expanded ability the student speaks more easily, perhaps glibly, but his heart is a stranger to the Lord he once knew because his devotion to Christ is not pure. He is trying to do spiritual tasks without a cultivated spiritual life!

What I'm talking about is personal piety. I hesitate to use the word because it has fallen into evil days. When you say 'pious' today, most people think of a slimy unctuousness. They think of spiritual 'put-on' not the deep-rooted reality of a life hid in Christ. Piety means godliness in life. Meaningful piety has a clear theology: it is interested in what we think and believe, but these ideas are held always in relation to the Person, Jesus Christ. Piety is the dutiful, glad obedience to our Lord, making us good men, filled with the Holy Spirit. Personal piety is the most poignant need of the seminarian. He may know the difference between an Arminian and a Calvinist, but if he does not know his Lord in daily obedience, he knows nothing as he ought.

Such devotion is never easy. It is particularly difficult at seminary. It is a common and natural supposition that the atmosphere of a theological seminary is peculiarly favourable to the cultivation of piety. I wish to warn against any such idea. Human nature is just the same there as anywhere, and one's own nature will be just as strongly inclined to assert its evil there as elsewhere. Never for a moment can one safely lay down the shield of faith or curtail his watchfulness for the fiery darts of the wicked one. Temptation will approach insidiously and assail relentlessly there as in any other walk of life.

Seminaries are not immune to temptation. Watchful prayer is still needed. Reading of the Word each day cannot be forgone. The tongue needs a bridle still. Malicious criticism must feel the pull of the reins. Spiritual ingratitude must be crushed as a sin against love. Crowded hours can never be allowed to force Christ to the far end of the day. Constant familiarity with things spiritual must not rob them of their wonder. There is no holiday!

In a plain talk to theological students back in 1884, Dr. D. C. Marquis spoke of personal piety this way: 'You will be tempted to self-indulgence, to uncharitableness, to censoriousness, to ambition, to envy, to jealousy, to

avarice, to an exaltation of self, self-comfort, self-pleasing, self-glorification — above the Lord and His cause. Your safety lies in discerning the danger and watching against it with determined and sleepless vigilance. In order to be sensitive to wrong in motive or conduct, you need to keep your mind in contact with the mind of Christ, your heart in closest sympathy with Him, and your whole being constrained and controlled by daily fellowship with Him. In addition to your hours of Bible study you should read the Word of God every day with a view to its bearing upon your own thought and life. With earnest prayer, seek the power of the Holy Spirit for your guidance, remembering that it is the Spirit's engagement to be with you, and that it should be your constant aim not to grieve Him by disobedience or neglect. Remember that the church needs learned men — well furnished men — to be its teachers and leaders, but still more does it need spiritually-minded men, Christ-like men.' God, give us good men, filled with Thy Holy Spirit!