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**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

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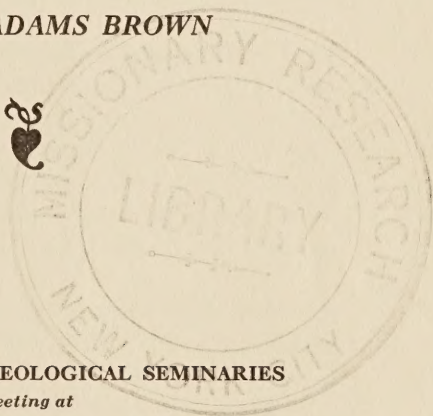
**WORLD MISSION OF CHRISTIANITY**

**THE SEMINARY CURRICULUM**

**WHAT IT IS AND WHAT WE CAN DO  
TO IMPROVE IT**

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

**WILLIAM ADAMS BROWN**



**CONFERENCE OF THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES**

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# THE SEMINARY CURRICULUM

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO IMPROVE IT  
SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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THE purpose of this paper is to introduce the discussion of the following questions:

(1) How far our existing curriculum meets the needs of the present generation of theological students as brought out in preceding discussions.

(2) What we can do to improve our present curriculum so far as it is deficient.

It will be easier to write such a paper three years from now, when our proposed study of theological education has assembled the available data on the subject and presented them in a comprehensive and authoritative form. In the lack of such exact information I must rely largely upon impressions which because of the shortness of time I have been unable to verify in detail.

In discussing the curriculum I shall have primarily in mind the subjects to be studied, only secondarily the methods to be followed in studying them. This is not because method is unimportant but because I believe that in recent years our emphasis upon method has been overdone, or at least wrongly conceived. Of all the questions of method, none is more important than that which has to do with the choice and proportion of subjects studied and no condition of success in teaching is more fundamental than a first-hand acquaintance with the facts to be known.

On this point I find myself in full accord with Professor Woodbridge, who in his recent Report as Déan of the Faculties of Political Science, Philosophy and Pure Science, of Columbia writes as follows:

"I must believe . . . and who can thoroughly read Plato without believing it . . . that there is a point in the educational process where subjects become vastly more important than anybody who studies them, when the question of what is good or bad for a person becomes absorbed in the steady and disillusioned contemplation of the way in which forces and ideas work in this complicated world. Somewhere in the scheme of education, its god should stop providing and begin to see."<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE PRESENT SITUATION

A word first as to the conditions that we face (1) in the educational world in general, (2) in the seminaries.

(1) We may sum up the general educational situation by saying that whereas we are confronted by a rapid and almost staggering increase of knowledge about the universe and human life, an increase that has modified our view on almost every subject that used to be taught in the old curriculum, that increase has been accompanied by no corresponding clarification of view as to the relation between the different things we have been learning and their bearing upon the central convictions which have been the spring of human activity in the past. On the contrary while there has been an enormous increase of proficiency in the technique of research there has been a corresponding decrease of interest and a still greater decrease of confidence in the utility of philosophical

<sup>1</sup> Bulletin of Information, Thirtieth Series, No. 3, October 19, 1929.

studies. American philosophy today, in the person of many of its leading representatives, has broken with the older philosophical tradition which through all variation in detail has consistently sponsored the thesis that it is possible to justify man's faith in an ultimate unity between the ideal and the real. That thesis is today widely called in question and we are told that philosophy should confine itself to the more modest task of interpreting and systematizing the work of the sciences. Whatever goes beyond this is either unnecessary or positively harmful.

(2) The seminaries have reacted to this general educational situation in two ways.

Some have maintained the older curriculum practically unchanged, adding certain subjects, to be sure, such as religious education, history of missions, and the like, but leaving the teachers of the existing subjects to deal with the new conditions as best they may.

Others have followed the example of the colleges and universities in greatly increasing the number of subjects taught, cutting down the time given to linguistic, exegetical, and historical studies, introducing a constantly increasing number of courses dealing with method, and relegating the philosophical group (systematic theology, philosophy of religion, etc.), which in the old seminary constituted the heart of the curriculum, to the position now occupied by philosophy in the university of a group of subjects among others which must fight for their right to live.

The effect upon the product of the seminary has been that in spite of the great increase in the number of courses offered, or perhaps because of it, many men are graduating from our seminaries with so one-sided

and ill-balanced a training that they are unable to give effective help to men and women facing the perplexing problems of the modern world or to furnish the Church with the leadership which it needs in this time of divided counsel and challenging need.

This statement is quite consistent with the recognition of the fact that much excellent work is being done in our seminaries, that many teachers are alive to the need of philosophical studies, that in certain circles there is keen interest in theology as distinct from criticism, and that many useful men are going into the ministry. Nevertheless, I do not think it can be questioned that the tendencies I have described are at work and that they constitute a danger that we need to meet.

This brings me to the second part of my paper—what we can do about it.

## II. POSSIBLE WAYS OF MEETING THE SITUATION

The first question that we need to determine is whether it is possible for us to do anything about it. There are some of our number who believe that the present situation is inevitable, although they believe this for different reasons. Some are unwilling to admit any modification in our present curriculum which would mean increase of freedom for the student. Others are unwilling to admit any modification which would involve limitation of freedom for the teacher.

The first thesis I would suggest as subject of profitable discussion is this, that the old *laissez faire* system has broken down and that it is necessary for the faculty of those seminaries which have made large use of the elective system to regain control of the curriculum

not only as it affects those who study but as it affects those who teach. This can be done:

(1) By making a clear distinction between research students and those who are going into the practical ministry and making special provision for the former, which is different from the provision made for the latter.

(2) By providing a required curriculum for students looking forward to the ministry that deals with the subjects regarded by the faculty as most important, which shall cover the major part (say at least two-thirds or three-fourths) of the three year course, and arranging subjects within that course in the order which is pedagogically most effective.

Needed adaptation to the different needs of different individuals may be secured:

(3) By distinguishing between fields of study and individual courses and by providing variety of work for those taking the same course through papers, reading, etc.

(4) By making place under proper safeguards for a greater freedom of election for students looking forward to a specialized ministry, as well as for a limited number of students whose interests are cultural rather than professional and allowing the latter practically free choice of courses within the offerings of the seminary.

The point that I wish to make is that the present system of so-called free election works out in practice as a limitation of freedom in two ways: First, for the student, by preventing him from securing the benefit of a course of study which introduces him to the subjects that are studied in the most effective sequence.

Secondly, for the professor, in forcing him to teach students who, because they are not following such an order, are ill fitted for the work which they are taking and therefore cannot get the full benefit of the work he is giving them.

We come to the last and most crucial question. Is it possible to find a faculty that has the wit to make such a curriculum and the grace to live under it when made?

A few years ago I should have despaired of an affirmative answer to this question. But today I am not without hope. There is no teacher of the coöperative life like danger and the issue we face is serious enough to make some sacrifice of individual preference desirable.

Granted the need and the will, how are we to set about our task? Let me suggest a few possibilities which may serve as the basis for our further discussion:

(1) Group the different subjects to be studied about the three or four major interests forced upon our attention by the situation revealed in our former discussions, *e.g.*, the central Christian convictions that make up the Christian Gospel; the nature and significance of man, who is the recipient of the Gospel; the ideal which as Christians we ought to strive to realize in our corporate capacity; and the institutions through which we are to realize it.

(2) Begin where we are with the study of the existing state of Christianity in its great contemporary types—Catholic, Protestant, etc.—in the light of the forces that compete with it (other historical religions, humanism, secularism, and the like) and then work

backwards to their sources in the past. This would give us a clue to the subjects to be included in our course on church history.

(3) Group the subjects of study in large units, dealing with the wholes that meet us in life rather than with the abstractions into which we break them up in our scientific study. *E.g.*, let us study the Bible as a whole rather than the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Church as a whole rather than the particular denominational form of it with which we are connected, etc.

(4) Use the courses which deal with restricted fields rather as examples of the method the student must follow in his own study than as the means of supplying him with the knowledge that he needs. Teach him to turn to books and to informal discussion with his fellow-students outside the classroom rather than to the lecture courses that compete with one another in our overcrowded curriculum for filling up the outline provided by the more general courses.

(5) Relate courses on method more closely to the existing subject courses. Let them furnish clinical material to be discussed in connection with the major studies and in the presence of those who are conducting those studies.

(6) In the choice of subjects of research for advanced students choose as far as possible subjects that compel the facing of the major philosophical issues rather than questions of highly technical research that can be carried on by men who systematically evade them.

(7) See to it that every student when he enters the seminary is tested as to his ability to study and is given personal advice, not simply in the particular



subjects of his course but as to the basic reading and thinking which must underlie all effective study.

What has thus been said deals chiefly with the problem as it affects those seminaries that are facing a crowded curriculum; but it is believed that the principles which are here suggested are applicable to all seminaries and might profitably be applied with corresponding variations.

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