

## **Cultivating Community in the Seminary.**

Theological education is most easily and comprehensively achieved within a worshipping and learning community such as that created by Jesus and the disciples – at least, that is the accepted wisdom of history. Institutional theological education has been criticised in recent years and colleges need to respond to the criticisms, but the difficulties faced by those who try to deliver comprehensive student formation without such a community are great. However, with the idea and practice of community undergoing a radical change in society today, college communities are also changing, often diluted and occasionally dispensed with altogether. The old model of a college where students and lecturers live, eat, worship and minister together is increasingly rare.

Not that the practice of the past is always a good guide. We may well look back with regret, even horror at the use to which college community was put, at times, in the past.

This happened in some early versions of the Bible college ideal. The tendency in such colleges was to make community life as hard as possible for the students – physically and emotionally, because they saw this as the best training for Christian work. It was actually said of one college earlier this century by the head of a mission, to a potential student “If you ever get through that college, you will get through anything you will ever encounter in mission or ministry anywhere in the world”. And where did I get that quote? It was in the college literature commending the college to prospective students!

There was a college in England between the wars called the Missionary Training Colony. It was designed to train pioneer missionaries. They were offered a nice manor house to do this in but turned it down for a few temporary huts which the students took down and put up when needed. Each day began very early with physical exercise and then a long run, after which was a cold shower. That may not mean so much in Kenya but in England in the winter, it is very hard. One student wrote that they prayed for the temperature to go below zero because then the water in the pipes would freeze and they couldn't have the shower. And so the day went on. They called it GMT, good missionary training. In fact, it was an abuse of the idea of community.

The key issue about community, however, is not that it forms human character, although it does, but that it provides the conditions for spiritual growth – it is the glass house for the growing of the seedlings into mature spiritual life (which is actually the origin of the term seminary). In particular, it has historically provided the spiritual atmosphere within which theology and biblical studies are best done. The community should be so ordered that it delivers simply that. It is in this context - that it provides the atmosphere for spiritual formation to permeate all that is done in the seminary - that we look at community this morning.

## THE RETREAT FROM COMMUNITY

However, we are seeing a retreat from the sense of importance of community and a change in the nature of community in theological education today. Why is that? Our growing academic interest is one reason. Academic objectives seem less demanding of community and a growing variety of courses being taught on different days with students (and staff) coming in and out for their lectures is now standard in medium sized colleges, making regular prayer and corporate worship difficult. Neither Warfield nor Bonhoeffer, who both wrote on this subject from experience, could conceive of a theological college without every day morning and evening corporate worship and devotional times, yet some colleges today struggle to achieve this more than once a week. Sometimes the model of the university student affects the way our students see themselves and increasingly, students and staff live and work in a number of intersecting communities, only one of which is the college.

A growing interest in non-institutional delivery systems of theological education such as Theological Education by Extension, In Service Training and Distance learning (nowadays usually involving the internet) has reinforced the idea that physical community can be dispensed with altogether. As colleges locate more and more into urban situations, residential places seem increasingly expensive and unnecessary. On top of this, there is a general tendency among Christians today to see their spirituality as an individual private thing. This belief has been reinforced by our more recent re-discovery of the western Christian spiritual tradition which, though itself is not particularly individualistic, has been mostly used by contemporary Christians to develop their personal spiritual lives rather than their corporate worship patterns.

Above all, however, and undergirding this retreat, is a sociological shift taking place in society. The individuality of the Enlightenment was no friend to community except perhaps in a strongly structured form enshrining, as Bauman says, the “entitlement to manage people”. Post-modernity as a reaction against this, can be seen as a re-discovery of community, but not on the same terms. The community which students look for today is not one where rules are imposed by those who know best, not one where unthinking commitment is asked for, but rather a commitment based on their own profit or loss in the situation. It is not one which asks them to all act in the same way but celebrates difference. It is not even one defined entirely as a geographical entity (a nation or college) since students may well belong to communities on the internet. Staff from a previous era may need to realise that imposing the type of community they experienced at college will not easily work.

A college in the UK recently tried to organise their alumni and set up a beautiful, expensive website for them to log onto and keep in touch with the college and their ex-classmates. It was mostly ignored. However, there is a large, lively spontaneous, ex-students group from that college on Facebook, an internet social

networking site. Colleges will not be able to organise their way out of the lack of community.

We must state here that there are very many valuable theological education programmes that do not depend for their effectiveness on a typical seminary type community. In service training, even up to masters level is now common and has a number of real advantages. Theological education by extension is widely practiced. These programmes are much cheaper and they do not remove the student from his or her ministry situation. We can even see the justification for such programmes in the way Jesus responded to people. To some he said stay home with your people and testify to what great things God has done and to other he said leave your home and come follow me.

However, a close spiritual community is a great asset for all those learning to live for God and in every training programme we run, we should try to make what use we can of this powerful tool. The title of my talk this morning is about the communities in the seminary as tools of spiritual formation and we will concentrate on that.

### **THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY**

We need to be salesmen for the power of a spiritual community, to our staff and students, we need to pass on a clear and strong vision. How do we do that? Why should we fight to preserve and develop our theological education as working though community?

Firstly because it creates a combination of learning, worship and ministry which brings great pleasure to both God and ourselves. It is this blend of such fine and lovely things coming together at a time in a person's life, experienced together with God's people which gives the greatest joys of Christian fellowship. When ex-students are asked about the vital impact on their lives made by college, they generally speak first in community and fellowship terms, not about the theological or training functions of their college.

However, the issue lies deeper. We are re-discovering today that it is not just a pleasant thing to gain knowledge and find truth together, but that it is essential. As Paul says in Ephesians, it is "together with all the saints" that we comprehend the extent of God's love. Theology is thinking in and with the church. It presupposes and requires a commitment to both God and his people. It is not a disinterested, objective search but, as Parker Palmer reminds us, it is an act of love together.

Community also moulds us spiritually and in our character in contact with each other. Just as pebbles on the sea shore are round and smooth because they have been thrown together by the sea, so, when we are thrown together with fellow Christians, however hard at first, the roughness and sharpness gets worn off and we become easier to live with us. A similar point is that community provides strength from each other. Students often are carried through difficult times by those they share their lives and those they pray with. The power of encouragement is also one of the strongest tools in theological education when wielded

carefully by staff and students. Through all this, spiritual community prepares for ministry. Missionary society executives and those responsible for ministers need to be listened to by colleges. One of their most frequent questions is, “Do we teach our students to live and work happily with others?” Community, and only community, can do that, and so prepare for service because service is almost always with others.

Some of the early Bible colleges were called missionary testing and training homes. The thought was to put the students in close community and see how they behave together, how they cope, how they maintain their spiritual lives, how they forgive. And then send away those who do not do well in this. Nowadays, a high drop-out rate is bad news for an accredited programme. In those days, it was a sign that the college was doing its job.

A good college community also provides a safe place to grow, where mistakes can be made without consequences, where all the questions can be asked – neither of which are usually possible in the local church. As we have seen, Nouwen talks about the creation of a free and friendly place without fear which makes sharing and growth possible. Indeed, that is one of the functions of community. Berger talks about communities as “mediating structures” set between us and the world. They remove much of the burden of diversity and choice – we do what the rest do and think what the rest think; they enable us to belong – an instinct stronger in human beings than the desire for an individual personal identity; and they lend comforting social confirmation to our views and chosen way of life – others also believe the same way and live the same way.

It is questionable, however, whether colleges should be comfortable places. Theological education is by its very nature, painful. Students need to face the scriptures with open mind and heart and let the cold light of truth expose the inadequacies of their previous assumptions and practices. This is also part of the job of the teacher, but it is to be done gently and lovingly. Certainly we must afflict the comfortable but we must also comfort the afflicted. A father helps his son leave behind his childish notions but at the pace he can manage, helping him with the necessary pain. And he shows his son the immovable rocks on which he can stand in building his understanding of the world and his life. It is those rocks, evangelical gospel basics, which form the foundations and boundaries of the learning community.

In these ways then, a winsome, working spiritual community is a powerful tool for the spiritual formation of the student and the staff.

## **A THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY**

We have said that concepts of community are in flux today. But we are not looking for just any type of community, or for one defined by the contemporary mood. We require a specifically Christian community, a theology of spiritual community in theological education. We have also said that it is not possible to organise our students back to community, so we have to set before them a vision. How can we construct that theology, that vision? Below are a few elements of such a theology of spiritual community.

**Community in theological education is a mediate community.** This is proposed in a little book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together* which came out of his experience as the principal of a pastors' training college in Germany for the "Confessing Church". He was killed by the Nazis a few years after he wrote the book. He said that there are two types of relationship in a theological community, immediate relationships (I like you, you like me - or don't like me, as the case may be); then there are mediate relationships, where, because you are bound to Christ and I am bound to Christ, so we are bound to each other. Bonhoeffer says that Christian communities usually go through a stage where immediate relationships are found not to be enough to keep things together because they rely on our work, our emotions, to succeed. True Christian community is found in the second, a commitment to love one another because Christ has loved us. We belong to each other and that belonging is prior to the first day of college, it predates our first meeting in the classroom.

**it is an inclusive community** in its very nature because of this previous point- that the community is founded on the grace of God in Jesus Christ to all its members. Christian community reflects what is to come when all God's people stand together round the throne, so we are commanded by Paul in Romans to "accept one another as Christ has accepted you". The church is made up of Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free, and disputing about opinions should not be a bar to fellowship. Personalities, secondary issues of doctrine, intellectual attainment, ethnic or denominational origin; these, instead of dangers, are enrichments in Christ. They make possible the sacrament of the other – the biblical view that God comes to us in and through others. He speaks to us through their words or life and when we minister to the least of these, we do it to Him. In whatever ways we constrict the community, in that measure, we constrict the ministry of Christ to us. Ethnically homogenous, denominational colleges working at a high academic level with students drawn from the middle classes have big problems to solve in this area.

**Community is a reflection of the Trinity in the college.** There has been considerable work done by such people as Moltmann and Gunton in describing and developing the idea of Christian community in the church as a reflection of the life of the Trinity, but it is equally applicable to community in a seminary. Different member of the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit - perform different functions but are of equal worth. Status is not the issue, but function. Every member of the community has value. Furthermore, there is, in the Trinity the delightful idea of harmony. The three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are in perfect fellowship – of thought, of feeling and of action. So, one part of this picture is always true.

We are a community of equal status in the eyes of God. We do not need to work for that, it is true. We only need to act on it. The second part, the perfect harmony, that is a longing we never finally achieve. But we try.

**The community is missional.** As Barth insists, God in Trinity is a missional entity, with the Father sending the Son at the heart of its life. So college life exists for something outside of itself, it has a teleology, it points beyond the community to a different purpose. The community does not live for itself. We are a sending community so a college, rather than being isolated from the world, has a close relationship with the world – it knows the world, it serves the world, it is a community that sends into the world.

**The community is purposefully participational.** It is not a concept, but an action. Christian community is not only a *koinonia* of sharing a common salvation, it is a *koinonia* of sharing a common life. It is a loving of God but also a loving of the brother. It is a taking of the bread of life and giving of a cup of cold water. As such it is expressed as a commitment to community that issues in all sorts of small faithfulnesses and practices. It comes out of the lecture room and, if feet do not need to be washed that day, sweeps the floor. No theology of community can stay in the realm of ideas.

#### **Patterns of community within a seminary**

Spiritual community in a seminary is not just expressed in one simple form and, in fact, our title today talks of communities in the plural. It is a complex phenomenon so, what are we talking about?

1. The whole community together – corporate worship and prayer. With the fragmentation in some colleges of the student body into different courses taught in different curricular patterns, with students coming in only when they need, daily corporate worship for all has become a thing of the past in many western institutions. However coming together daily for worship, prayer and the Word should still be expected.
2. Tutor groups. Often nowadays, those students who are personally tutored by a faculty member come together regularly for prayer and social events, forming a small community within a larger college. It is a community which is not based on the students' choice or friendship and so is especially valuable as they seek to make it work.
3. Prayer triplets (if three, or "prayer squares" if four). These seem to be the heirs of the Methodist class meetings where a small number met to converse about the state of their spiritual lives and pray together. It has proved immensely valuable and supporting for students who commit to this pattern with 2 or 3 others. This is usually a chosen community of friends.
4. Spontaneous community expressions. In the common room round a guitar or a discussion of baptism.

5. Not forgetting to be human together. I see this as so important. Volleyball is not spiritual and need not be justified on any basis other than our humanity. Going for coffee with a few friends is not godly but it is important. We need to give both time space and conceptual space for these sort of things. Ask our students to read Ecclesiastes now and then and learn how to be joyfully human and, in doing so, please God.

## **WORKING FOR COMMUNITY**

Such is the vision. But reality is generally less than theology. How can we work towards true and lovely spiritual community in our colleges? Let me list a few things;

**Setting out a vision** of true spiritual community and its joys and results, to staff and students – along the lines of our discussion above.

**Creating, where possible, plenty of residential places** – for staff as well as students. Being physically together makes community more possible. Worship together often, prayer, living together as Christians, all is only possible in residence. There is a tendency to reduce the proportion of students in residence and of staff in residence on campus, and we must work against this trend if we want close community. There will be programmes which, of necessity, because they are part time or in service or at a distance, cannot be delivered all the time within community. But let us give our students a taste of this as much and as often as we can. As we saw, one of the ways in which Jesus provided a full, integrated preparation for the disciples was in the everyday life they shared together.

**Selflessness of members in the community** - we must teach students and staff to show deliberate love and preference for the other person in community. This is the *agape* that we are required to show to our brothers and sisters in Christ and which is set out to us for an example by Christ and his self-sacrifice for us. If each member lives for himself, community will die. If each lives also for others, the community will live. This will show itself by deeds of love, help and encouragement, but also by prayer. Prayer for each other can be seen as the invisible cement between the living stones of Christian community. No-one knows whether you pray for your students, or your fellow staff member – unless you tell them. It is, in the words of Jesus, “done in secret”. But it is community.

**Each member committing to the idea of community**, knowing that they are not individuals with unlimited free choices but they must work to see the spiritual community prosper.

There is a story told by Aesop, an ancient European storyteller. A king was planning the wedding of his daughter. In the centre of the square of the town was a beautiful fountain that spilled out water into a trough around it, then it was pumped back up again and so on. And he decided that, for the wedding day, the

fountain should be full of not water but wine. So, he decreed that every house in the town should, the night before, pour into the fountain a barrel of wine. That night, one household met to consider this. They said, "Everyone else is putting in wine, so, if we put in a barrel of water instead, it will be alright; no-one will notice." Unfortunately, all the other households also did the same thing, and so the fountain ran with water as before.

Community is like that. One person can say "I will not bother. I will not attend chapel today. I will not do my duties this time. I will be a private individual today. I will not contribute to the community of the college." This is a real temptation for all of us at some time or another. But such a decision gives the right to others to do the same and then community collapses. Everyone has to play their part. Especially all teachers.

**Fifthly, conflict management needs to be practiced effectively.** For all our Christian-ness, we are still human and sinful. When we are under pressure and stress which often happens in a theological education community, we are more human and more sinful. Conflicts arise between people and they have to be dealt with lovingly by those who know what they are doing. In extreme cases, it may be that students must leave for the good of others.

Some years ago, a college I was associated with had to ask a student to leave. He was good academically, he seemed to be OK in his practical placement, but it was really based on one thing – he did not forgive. He lived in one of the hostels with other students and when disputes arose, or problems, they were all settled unless this student was involved. He would not or could not forgive, forget and move on. He had to go, because community is so important for effective theological education. And forgiveness is essential for Christian unity and community.

**Making and enforcing rules and regulations with wisdom and grace.** There are two ways of instilling discipline into a student's life. We can create a strongly structured environment full of regulations, times and duties that teach a pattern we hope the student will continue when he or she leaves. Or we can keep regulation to a minimum and so require that the student learn self-discipline while at college. The second is the most effective and often the only one today's students will (or should) tolerate. Some rules are essential. They do instruct as to what is good, they allow a complex institution to function and they provide a marker of our faithfulness in small things. Many of our rules do not.

**Creating community space in our colleges.** This can be done spatially - common rooms with coffee machines, temporally – time in the college day for interaction, and intentionally – being the type of college and staff which values being together and doing things together.

**Christian spiritual communities are ultimately built by the Holy Spirit, not by us.** We can strive as much as we can to make community, indeed we must if we want to pray with confidence for community, but it is God's work.



Bernard of Clairvaux, talking about monastic communities, said that Christian communities are like the wedding at Cana. We can fill the water pots, but only the Lord can turn the water we have gathered into wine.

Spiritual community is not a human construct. It is not even a Christian construct, if, by that we mean that Christians can construct it. We do all we can and then we must ask for the Holy Spirit to construct it. Let us not think too much of ourselves here. If we have good community, it is God's work. If we do not, let us ask for it. It is, in the end, a matter of the heart and only God can see and change the heart of man.

**The teacher's role in spiritual community.** Firstly, we need to be pragmatic. We must aim for the highest level of community we can as the basis and atmosphere in which theological education can be done well, but remember, that some courses and programmes, some situations, will not permit the ideal. However, we still work for it as much as we can. Introduce community building exercises in our classroom. Bring our in-service students together not just for lectures and so on.

Then we must be there. Our commitment to the community will not only bless us but serve as an example to the students to commit. We need to practice hospitality – literally, by inviting students into our homes but also conceptually. As we have seen one way we can live and work as tutors is within this motif of hospitality, welcoming students into a safe place where they are accepted despite their differences, where they are upheld despite their mistakes, where they are seen as people bringing real gifts and graces into the community rather than just those who come for free handouts of grace from us.

We will have to learn to wear two hats. There will be times when you have to wear the hat of the policeman, setting the rules and enforcing them, whether they be academic or practical rules. There will be other times when you take your policeman hat off and put on the same hat as the students, and sit with them in chapel, pray with them talk with them as fellow sinners, fellow recipients of grace, equal before God.

And lastly, we have to love students. This is the cement we can bring to spiritual community above all. It may be a strange thought, but teachers do not always love students. Some are always angry with them, for not doing this or that, or not being what they should be. Others are always disappointed with their students. Some are afraid of their students - that they will ask that difficult question and show up their ignorance. Some are indifferent - to such teachers, the students may just as well be a row of chairs as a row of students they are speaking to. They have no real connection with them at all.

In closing, let me remind you one more time of what Paul said about the Thessalonians among whom he ministered, which has become somewhat of a theme for our sessions together. "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the

Gospel but our lives as well because you had become so precious to us.” Real spiritual community that supports and stimulates spiritual formation comes from the staff responding to that scripture above all.

**G.C. August 2009.**