

Toward an Anabaptist Perspective On the College: A Community of Persuasion

Myron S. Augsburger*

Education is the enriching of lives. It is the broadening of awareness and the deepening of understanding. By its very nature it is a dynamic process. Truth is not static in that ultimate truth is always related to personality. Persons, not things, are ends in themselves, and persons are involved in the dynamic of life. Manning Pattillo has said, "Knowledge should be valued for the effect it can have in the development of person."

The exposure to truth is a call for understanding, assimilation and action. No person faces truth in its larger sense without change. In this confrontation one either says "yes" and discovers in the response the expanding horizon of Universal Truth or one says "no" and finds the diminishing returns of negation. It is imperative that truth be presented, in whatever field we undertake the study, in such a way as to persuade the student to follow it.

In the attitude of the scholar, truth is approached in humble, reverent response. We do not sit as judges upon it, feeding our ego upon the thrill of a pseudo-freedom in which we manipulate truth to our ends. Rather, in the wisdom that discerns truth as greater than gathering fragments of knowledge, we follow its beckoning hand to greater vistas of understanding.

In a very essential way the college is a community of persuasion. In his address to the Council of Protestant Colleges, Albert Outler encouraged the Christian college to be a community "in which truth is

* President of Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

sought in all its 'fullness'--but where it is never simply imposed."¹ This concept offers a synthesis between the liberating influence of the arts and the deeper freedoms of evangelical truth.

If one views Christian education from the background of the Anabaptist tradition, this element of persuasion is especially significant. Affirming a freedom of the individual, we must recognize that persons are not coerced into a position by cultural or social pressure. Rather a person is called to a quality of faith and life by the persuasion of truth itself. This greater freedom lays a responsibility upon the teacher for intellectual competence in presenting truths in such a way as to persuade students to discover ultimate truth, to make the option of belief in Christ clearly and adequately understood.

In an address at the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, 1968, Dr. Irvin Horst affirmed that we may be wrong in judging Anabaptism chiefly in terms of historical contribution and that we can find in the movement implications for the teaching mission of the church. *First*, instruction among Anabaptists was "to bring the pupil into contact with an authority and reality outside himself, that is, a divine reality." *Second*, we must recognize that "teaching which leads the pupil to a knowledge of God and His will is a work of the Holy Spirit," a prophetic dimension in education not fulfilled simply by a teacher passing on factual knowledge. *Third*, "The pupil learns to know God and His will through knowledge of the Holy Scriptures." This calls for factual knowledge, but more than that, a knowledge of how to interpret the Scriptures. *Fourth*, "The life of Christian discipleship in obedience to Scripture is a way of knowing the truth." Menno Simons held that "one who will not obey will not have one spark of the Spirit." This position assumes the affirmation, "I obey in order to understand." In a similar vein the sixteenth century reformer, Martin Bucer, said, "In true theology one knows as much as he practices." *Fifth*, "The Anabaptists did not have a schizoid attitude toward preaching and teaching," for both functions operate from the same principles of seeing the gathering of the religious as occasions for instruction or exhortation.

For the sake of this discussion I want to draw on two of Dr. Horst's summary observations. First, the Anabaptists were more Hebraic than

1. Albert C. Outler, "Quid Est Veritas?" Council of Protestant Colleges and Universities, Kansas City, Missouri, Jan. 5-6, 1959, p. 16.

Greek; hence they directed their teaching toward the *will* and not just toward the intellect. Second, the Anabaptist emphasis on voluntarism is not to be watered down to become mere religious tolerance. From my own studies I concur with these two summary statements. A community of Christian learning is a community of persuasion! We want students to test our presentations of truth, but let it be done in honest, intellectual interchange, not in coercive patterns of ego-tension. We expect students to recognize, and at times resist, the persuasion of truth, but not to deny the teacher the right to present the case nor the Holy Spirit the freedom to speak to one's will. On the other hand, students are committed in a greater or less degree--in a Christian college, and one's own commitment calls him to test both his limited presuppositions and the quality of his teachers' participation in truth. Affirming that we aim at the will calls for equal involvement of teacher and student in the pursuit of the "abundant life."

There are other than academic pressures on campus which tend to shape our lives, and these also are forces of persuasion. Many of these, because they involve matters of personality, appearance, and acceptance by our peers get magnified out of proportion to their true significance or become the focus of an ego-struggle in a deeper rebellion. Being away from home and the home church, associating with less inter-generation interchange, it is easy for students to persuade one another to make changes which satisfy the desire for security in their world and fail to be a sanctifying influence in the world for God. As Christians we are first of all members of His Church, of His kingdom.

Many areas of life are in flux today, not primarily denominationally but in the total, secularized society. We should weigh changes carefully before moving, cast our anchor deep in the grace of God, and be certain that we are being guided by His Word as we shape our lives. The administration and faculty should give itself to make the program of the campus the most meaningful academic and spiritual experience within its power. We want nothing shoddy, and where we together can validly and properly expose weakness, we must then also work together to correct it.

Consider with me now some of the implications of the concepts introduced.

I. Education comes by exposure to broader areas of life and knowledge in such a way as to persuade one to seek understanding. Learning takes place by involvement and discussion, involvement in analysis and insight, and discussion, in association and interpretation. Little learning takes place in isolation. Learning is enhanced by the stimulus of a community of learners. In this stimulus there is a strong

element of persuasion brought to bear upon each of us. Competition is a healthy part of the learning experience so long as humility accompanies the new synthesis which emerges from the fusion of ideas.

Persuasion is an essential element of good teaching. As a faculty we are not interested in simply passing our notes on to others. It is of basic importance that we persuade a student to achieve for himself, to study, to think, to discuss, to analyze, to pray over and to assimilate discovery in a developing life. To persuade one that there is personal satisfaction in moving beyond one level of understanding to a greater is an essential dynamic of the teacher's ministry. Do not judge a teacher so much by the facility with which he can talk about knowledge as by the degree to which he stimulates one in this quest. A faculty urges students toward their goal of graduation, toward good grades, but, even more, watches for the evidence of individual initiative and dedication to the full meaning of His truth.

II. Education in the Anabaptist/Christian tradition aims not simply at the head but *at the will* in a deliberate attempt to persuade persons to vital discipleship. We are educating persons, not parrots, and in aiming at the will we acknowledge first of all that it is the student's will which we touch. The teacher does not seek to make the pupil's will an extension of his own, but to stimulate the pupil to "will" the very best. There is nothing cheap or second-rate in the life of faith. In calling persons to discipleship we are persuading them to involvement in the most meaningful quality of life and service. While we may persuade some students by our own emphasis or achievement to pursue a particular course in graduate study, our greater satisfaction is in persuading them to engage in Christian vocation, whatever their work may be, to be agents of reconciliation between man and God and between man and man.

This persuasion calls for an academic freedom to look at all sides so that the persuasive influence is valid and fair. But this freedom does not mean the negation of the right of the college to call one to discipleship, nor does it permit irresponsible behavior that prevents an honest confrontation with commitment in a community of disciples. The voluntarism of our faith respects one's freedom to say no, but it does not mean that the learner is free to deliberately limit the exposure of evangelical truth in the learning experience. Voluntarism in our tradition has had to do with whether one chooses to join the community of disciples or not. The Christian college asks for a voluntary decision, that one comes to study because he wants to. One's freedom to leave and go elsewhere without our being insulted is respected, but when one chooses to come, it is expected that he participate in the course which the total educational community--faculty, board, and fellow students--have committed themselves to pursue.

III. Education with Christian priorities recognizes both "discursive

truth" (that of creation) and "evangelical truth" (that of the Creator), and persuades the learner to be involved honestly in both. A Christian college should prove that sound learning and Christian discipleship belong together, that the best education has a Christian perspective at the center. This approach of interrelating discursive truth and evangelical truth is supported by the theological premises of creation and redemption. The Scripture affirms of man in creation that God has "put all things under his feet." We are responsible for the understanding and the care of His creation. But the study of creation shows its perversion, and here man is to be confronted with the truth of a redemption wrought by God. We live by faith with respect to salvation and by wisdom and intellectual pursuit with respect to creation.

The social impasses which we have reached today come through man's unbalanced approach to life, through his rejection of the truth of redemption. A Christian college should persuade persons to a course in life that would serve our fellowmen--binding up the wounded, building bridges between the estranged, creating a sense of brotherhood among all peoples--send persons to serve in creation with strong faith in the truth of redemption. From the study of human history we are convinced that "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."

There is a delicate balance to be achieved in what is here proposed. On the one hand, if one emphasizes faith and disparages liberal studies, the consequence is a Christian anti-intellectualism. But on the other hand and equally, if not more, dangerous is the elevation of reason to an anti-Christian intellectualism. The Reformation took place with a scholarly interrelation of discursive (or analytical) truth, and evangelical (or Biblical) truth. The liberal arts colleges and universities had their rise under this philosophy until the Renaissance overcame the Reformation, and in the nineteenth century the balance was lost as analytical truth became the dominant motif of the academic community. As the Anabaptists rejected the State Church as a "fallen Church" so we reject any dominance of Renaissance mentality and in true Reformation conviction seek a Christian intellectualism which can be genuinely humane without being a whit less faithful to evangelical truth. John Wesley said, "Unite the pair so long disjoined: Knowledge and vital piety; Learning and holiness . . . Truth and love . . ."

A Christian college is concerned with truth in its two distinct dimensions--discursive truth, which will not suffice as the sum of needed knowledge, and evangelical truth which cannot simply be added to discursive truth. As a Christian community of inquirers, we are as concerned with discursive truth as is any other community of learners. But, being a Christian college, we are concerned with what the New Testament means by

truth-*aletheia*. This word, *a-letheia*, means truth without a veil, truth which presents itself, truth otherwise inaccessible. This is what Jesus meant in His words to Pilate, "The reason why I was born and the mission which sent me into the world was this: to bear witness to the truth."² Pilate's question, "What is truth?" was the inquiry of all men who recognize honestly that there is no discursive, analytical answer to the question of Ultimate Truth. Ultimate Truth is that which presents itself to us in Christ through Word and Spirit.³

Today as man is literally staring at the fringes of human history on this planet, there is a new interest in religion evident on college and university campuses. In the bulletin "Religion as an Academic Discipline," released by the Commission on Religion in Higher Education of the Association of American Colleges, there are two basic reasons given for such study. First, "The study of religion as an academic discipline is essential to the full understanding of man." Second, "The consideration of religious questions is important for understanding of one's self."⁴ This is a limited approach, but it is all that they as secular schools can honestly outline. As a Christian college we also can explore these two values in religion, but beyond this we would introduce each student to the persuasion of *aletheia*, of evangelical truth. We do this honestly and with conviction, but respecting the freedom of persons who may respond as did another Roman, Pilate's intellectual counterpart. "So soon do you persuade me to be a disciple?" Persuade we would, that each student find the fullness that will enable him to make the greater contribution in life.

"These two dimensions of truth," says Outler, "must not corrupt each other. The aim of the Christian college is to be a community of rigor and reverence, of inquiry and worship, of competence and compassion, truth and love. In such a place there would be an 'atmosphere' which could prompt men to acknowledge their need for faith and yet would protect their right to withhold commitment until honestly persuaded."⁵

2. John 18:37

3. John 14:7-16

4. "Religion as an Academic Discipline," a statement by the Commission on Religion in Higher Education of the Association of American Colleges, Washington, D. C.

5. Albert C. Outler, "Quid Est Verita?" Council of Protestant Colleges and Universities, Kansas City, Mo., Jan. 1959, p. 16 and 17.

The four years of collegiate study are momentous ones for a young person. Step by step, idea by idea, decision upon decision, a student's life is changed. One of a student's most serious concerns ought to be with respect to the spirit and commitment of the faculty--what is their perspective, their motive, in what way are they seeking to influence and direct the learner? In turn the faculty is deeply interested in the student's motives, commitment, achievement, and total life. Together, in study, in fellowship, in worship and in prayer such persuade one another to know His Truth.