

The Bible School Movement

When D. L. Moody was dying, he was asked: "Do you consider the Bible Institute a success? If you were starting over again, would you follow the same plan?" "Yes," said Moody, "it has been a great success and a wonderful blessing. I would do the same again." (1)

Indeed, the Bible School movement has been "a great success." In the 1880's, there were only two Bible schools in the U.S.A., and now there are more than two hundred on the North American continent. Especially in the last two or three decades, the schools have experienced a rapid growth. Sixty colleges dot the nation. The enrolment runs from approximately 8 students to more than 700. The schools do have an enormous influence upon evangelical life in Canada. They are the backbone of sectarianism, fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Hundreds of pastors, missionaries, and evangelists have graduated from these institutions. They have given training to over half of all Protestant missionaries of North America. There are between one million and a half and two million evangelicals in Canada. In order to come to some understanding of their manner of thinking and way of living – a look at the Bible School movement is important.

Canadian Bible schools all have problems with their philosophy of Bible education. They have problems in discerning between Christian and non-Christian ideas. The philosophy of education is not an integrated whole, but an assortment of theories, based on the nature and grace scheme. Christian theology with its supernatural frame of reference is confined to one compartment and the other fields of learning are placed in a completely different compartment. This dilemma is reflected in the field of apologetics, which is being taught in a nature and grace framework. The students in the Bible Institutes do have to learn the proofs for the existence of God and get acquainted with various evidences for the Christian faith. Philosophy, if it is taught, has no Christian framework. The student is not given a Christian basis from which to approach philosophy as such.

For many years, Bible Colleges have been considered as inferior, sub-standard, and as third rate. Some schools have been and are indeed guilty, but certainly not all. Some of the small schools have a rather low academic standing. One prospectus states for example: "We do not offer, as an inducement to attending here, anything in the way of scenic surroundings, modern conveniences, sports, ease or worldly honour. We do promise you hard work, discipline, criticism, a real Missionary training and one of the happiest times of your life, if you enjoy an atmosphere of Bible study, prayer meetings, wholesome Christian fellowship and a limited amount of sports. We make no profession of qualifying by courses or degrees which the world will recognize. There is no professional prospect or material advantage in store for the student who attends here."²⁾

Others are of notable academic quality. The trend of today is the upgrading of the academic standing. Many colleges are becoming more degree conscious and seek accreditation and/or affiliation with a university.

What is actually a Bible Institute/College? How does it differ from a seminary?

Generally, Bible schools operate as post-high school institutes, while seminaries are on the post-college level. Seminaries are usually affiliated with a denomination and serve as preparatory schools for Christian ministry. Bible schools do serve as preparatory schools for various types of Christian ministries such as Sunday School directors, evangelists and so on. Dr. S, A. Witmer gives this excellent definition: ". . . a Bible institute-college is an educational institution whose principal purpose is to prepare students for church vocation or Christian ministries through a program of Biblical and practical education." (3)

The Bible school movement originated shortly after that momentous year 1800. Darwinism was taking its toll. Many scholars had succumbed to this evolutionary hypothesis, popularized by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Higher Criticism was becoming popular and undermined the faith of many. German liberal theology made its inroads in England and eventually infiltrated into Canada, with an Anglo-Saxon coat of arms.

Bible Institutes and Colleges are to be classified in three ways. First, The denominational school. Toronto Baptist Seminary is such an institute. It is controlled and operated by the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, a member of the Association of Regular Baptist Churches (Canada). Second. Schools which are organized independently, but are in communion with and are identified with a particular denomination. Central Baptist Seminary is such a school. Its directors and most of the instructors are members of the Trans-Canada Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches. Third. The non-denominational school. Some of these institutes are among the largest in enrolment. They are supported by Christians from various denominations.

The Bible Colleges are conservative in theology, and uncompromisingly so. The Rev. Oscar E. Feucht, Secretary of Adult Education of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, paid this tribute to them.

"The Bible Institutes have been one of the citadels of strength for the preservation of Biblical theology when modern religious liberalism made serious inroads on many Protestant churches." (10)

Bible schools have made a vital contribution to the life of the Canadian churches. They have been instruments to keep the orthodox Christians together. However, the schools founded after the 1920's have fostered a very strong individualistic trend in Canadian theological thinking. Thus, the strong emphasis on individualism in Canadian church life can be traced back to the types of theology propagated at the Bible Institutes. The stress is on personal evangelism.

The emphasis in itself is quite acceptable. But, in their emphasis upon personal faith and dedication, the whole concept of the church has been lost. "We believe that the true Church is composed of all persons, who, through saving faith in Jesus Christ, have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are thus united together in the body of

Christ, of which He is the Head." (11) One Bible school expresses its feelings about the church in this way: "Amongst us there are differences of race and country, differences of creed and denomination, differences of education and social status. They are all disregarded and forgotten when we meet around the altar of God in prayer and worship, disregarded and forgotten, too, when we open His Holy Book and study its sacred truths together. It is Christ who makes this wonderful oneness possible. This precious truth was graphically set forth in the fly" leaf of a well-worn Bible which had been the treasured possession of a deceased saint of God. On looking into the Bible, friends noticed the diagram of a wheel with the names of various denominations on the spokes. On the hub of the wheel was the one word Christ. Underneath the wheel were the words: "The nearer to Christ, " the nearer to each other"(12).

Dr. S. A. Witmer said about this phenomenon: "They, (i.e. Bible - schools), are evangelistic as well as evangelical. They look upon Christianity as a new life begun by regeneration. With few exceptions they hold to faith rather than to infant baptism. Most distinguish between mystical membership in Christ's body and formal membership in a visible church." (13)

These are anabaptist concepts of the church and certainly not Reformational. As a consequence, many schools are also pre-millennial in their view of the second coming. Two of the 48 even declare themselves as dispensational in their outlook. It is interesting to notice that all non-denominational schools have two peculiarities. First, in Systematic Theology, the schools have difficulties in teaching the doctrine of the church, and the sacraments. They are supposed to be non-sectarian, but this is of course extremely difficult. Most students who graduate from such schools have no notion what the church is, and what the sacraments are. Second. As a reaction to the lack of clarity on church and sacraments, evangelism and missions are stressed almost beyond proportion. For example, the Prairie Bible Institute's doctrinal statement says: "The Church's sole business shunning worldly alliances and looking for her Lord's return – to shed the light of the glorious Gospel continuously in all the earth." (14) It is therefore no wonder that Bible Institutes provide most of the personnel for non-denominational Faith Missions.

The great commission given by our Lord is the *raison d'etre* for Bible Colleges and Institutes. The fostering of evangelism and a wide program of missions are the aims of each Bible school. The curriculum, therefore, stresses evangelism and missions to a great extent. The students are taught to develop skills in the various modes of communicating the gospel. The means of communication are many: preaching, witnessing, journalism, visual aids, and music. In the majority of schools, chorals, quartets and trios play an important role, not only for the spreading of the Gospel, but also to drum up financial support, The Sunday School programs receive also a great deal of attention. The B.R.E. (Bachelor of Religious Education) courses involve all the various aspects of Sunday School as the evangelizing arm of the church.

Bible Colleges also seek to develop a Christ-like character in the students. The aim of Bible Colleges is to bring students into conformity with the image of Jesus Christ. This desire has led to very strong pietistic tendencies and concept of worldliness. Many Bible schools do maintain rigid rules. Just four examples are given here. "In harmony with the general rules of the Church of the Nazarene certain standards of conduct are obligatory upon all the constituency of Canadian Nazarene College. The use of alcoholic beverages and tobacco is strictly forbidden, also such recreation as dancing, card-playing, attendance at theatres or other questionable places of amusement. These rules are considered entirely salutary to the growth of vital Christian life and to the achievement of the college's religious objectives. Ignoring them is considered sufficient reason for expelling any student." ⁽¹⁵⁾ "The use of alcohol or tobacco in any form is not permitted, nor is attendance at theatres and dances . . . Young ladies' dresses and skirts must be of knee length." ⁽¹⁶⁾ "By decision of the Board of Directors, no young person will be allowed to become engaged or married while a student at New Brunswick Bible Institute." ⁽¹⁷⁾ . . . all dating, courting, engagements or marriages are not permitted while taking the course. Students who really mean business for God and precious souls will not find this regulation too severe. Those who expect to be pampered in this regard will be well advised to consider before coming here." ⁽¹⁸⁾

The rules are rather authoritative and leave little room for self-development. Dr. S. A. Witmer said: "Bible colleges have sometimes been justifiably accused of retarding growth by failing to delegate responsibility to students. For example, too little has been done to develop self-initiative in study. Students are not given the opportunity of becoming students in their own right. Too little is demanded of them, and throughout college they are treated to spoon-feeding in the classroom." ⁽¹⁹⁾

How are the Bible colleges supported? The denominational schools do receive their support from their own denomination. The non-denominational schools depend on advertising, tours of the instructors with quartets and trios, soliciting by mail, support from individuals and local churches. This makes it difficult to operate and to staff a Bible school. Great sacrifices are often made by the teaching staff in order to be able to present an academic program.

Bibliography

- (10) S. A. Witmer, *The Bible College Story: Education with Dimension*. p. 58.
- (11) Prospectus. Nipawin Bible Institute. p. 4.
- (12) *The Pilgrim Log*, Burrard Inlet Bible Institute. p. 2.
- (13) S. A. Witmer. *The Bible College Story: Education with Dimension*. p. C1.
- (14) *Prairie Bible Institute. 1968-1969 Catalogue Bible School High School*. p. 9.
- (15) *Catalogue 1967-1968. Canadian Nazarene College*. p. 8.
- (16) *Briercrest Bible Institute, Caronport, Sask., Bulletin and Catalogue, 1968-69*, p. 11.
- (17) *New Brunswick Bible Institute. Catalog 1968-69*. p. 8.
- (18) *Millar Memorial Bible Institute. Prospectus 1968-69*. p. 13.
- (19) S. A. Witmer. *The Bible College Story: Education with Dimension*. p. 175.

