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The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 14TH, 1933

A TESTIMONY FOR THE TRUTH IN THE BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

MANY years ago, at a meeting on behalf of some cause that wished to capture university students, I heard a speaker declare that he had been going through the pages of *Who's Who* and making a calculation. He added up the number of men and women whose names were sufficiently well-known to be thought worthy of a place in that interesting publication, and counted those who had taken a university course and those who had not. He then estimated the probable number of undergraduates in the preceding fifty years, and the total population of the country. I forget the exact figures, but the result showed, if I remember rightly, that the university men and women were about two hundred times as likely to find a place, eventually, in *Who's Who*, as members of the general population. It is beyond question that the leaders of thought, the men who will be listened to, during the next generation, are mostly to be found amongst the graduates and undergraduates of some university or other to-day.

If this be the case, it is a matter of first-class importance that these young men and women should be given an attractive, strong, fair presentation of the truth as it is in the Word of God. If they can be won, their testimony may be very far-reaching in time to come. It is difficult to think of a class more important to work amongst. History shows that the great mass of men have the rank and file mentality; a very small number are born leaders and change the course of nations or the outlook of whole sciences. Paul was such an one. Probably there are a few, preparing for their life work, somewhere to-day.

It may sound at first hearing a difficult or impossible proposition to reach undergraduates effectually with the gospel. Experience shows that this is not the case. The three to five years which a student spends studying for his degree usually coincide with a period of mental re-arrangement. Few go out with just the same opinions and outlook that they brought in.

Class studies, general reading, contact with other minds, and especially the conversation of their fellows, work changes. Often these winds blow away the little chaff of conventional religion with which they started, and leave nothing behind. A few who did run well are stumbled. But the change can be and sometimes is toward faith, not away from it.

Work amongst students can be done far more successfully by students than by anyone else, except of course that a certain number of suitable older men and women are necessary as speakers and advisers. It is immensely valuable if there should be one or two such on the teaching staff, or more or less closely connected with the college. After all, the undergraduate's life is only about three years, so there are quick changes of personnel, and a promising work may be ruined by misdirected enthusiasm or weak-kneed surrender. An older man on the spot may sometimes prevent serious mistakes. But if he is wise, he will keep in the background and leave the responsibility and the work, in ordinary, in the hands of keen students to witness in their own way.

It has been my privilege, one might say thrilling privilege, during the past fourteen years to be a spectator, sometimes at close range, of what is in my opinion one of the most encouraging if not the most encouraging of movements in Christian work in Britain. Before the War, the situation was disquieting, almost calamitous, except at Cambridge, and at a few of the London medical schools. A most excellent work had been done in the eighties and nineties of the last century. The going out of the Cambridge Seven to China, the meetings held by Prof. Henry Drummond in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the Student Volunteer Missionary Union, of those who felt called to go to the mission field, and the international itinerary work of men like R. P. Wilder had been spiritually blessed to many, and had broken through the armour-plated notion that the Christian message was out of place on university premises. The early camp conferences of the Student Christian Movement, at Keswick, under the wing of the well-known Keswick Convention, then at Conishead, Matlock and Baslow, had been real times of spiritual help, as I can testify from warm personal experience. Practically all the universities, colleges and medical schools in Great Britain were occupied. Then, unhappily a leavening process, introducing less definite bases of belief, and modernism, crept in. The declaration of

faith necessary for membership was altered, in the hope of attracting students with no very clear Christian faith. The spiritual temperature dropped. Meetings for Bible study became occasions when the faith of those who came up to the University believing in the Book was undermined by questions they were too inexperienced to answer. Some of them gave up membership and kept their faith, others gave up faith. One saw this happen with one's own friends in case after case with painful repetition.

At Cambridge the situation was different. There had been an evangelical movement among the colleges for many years, beginning perhaps with the preaching of Charles Simeon in 1783, when he took up his ministry at Holy Trinity Church, continuing with the assistance of Isaac Milner, and giving origin to the University Prayer Union in 1848. In 1877 the Cambridge Inter-collegiate Christian Union was commenced, largely at the instance of Sholto Douglas (Lord Blythswood). All these were working on conservative evangelical lines. The Student Christian Movement, when it reached Cambridge, found the C.I.C.C.U. already there with a twelve years' start. For a time they were merged, but about 1907-8 the distinctive evangelical features of the S.C.M. became less and less prominent, and a modernistic attitude to the Scriptures increased. After much heart-searching and amid much criticism, in 1909, the leaders of C.I.C.C.U., one of whom was H. W. K. Mowll, afterwards Bishop in China and now Archbishop in Australia, decided that it was necessary to separate in the interests of sound doctrine, such as the authority and inspiration of all scripture, the Deity and vicarious atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ, the necessity for the new birth, and the hope of the Second Advent.

Amongst its activities are a daily prayer meeting in the Henry Martyn Hall, which has been kept going now without intermission for many years, even during the War, and an undergraduates' service every Sunday night in term-time. A representative can generally be found in all or nearly all the Cambridge colleges, and the total membership is usually in the neighbourhood of two hundred.

In the London medical schools the students are all studying the same curriculum and are therefore thrown more closely together; their opinions are apt to be strongly held and expressed, and unless a man believed his beliefs pretty tenaciously he would

be likely to seek safety in what the naturalists call Protective Coloration, and keeping away from all religious meetings. So the groups who met for prayer and Bible study were small, but keen evangelical believers.

Just before the War, realizing that the real message of the gospel of forgiveness of sins in virtue of our Lord's atoning death—"Who His own self bare our sins in His own Body on the tree"—had almost died out in the provincial universities, a few of us arranged short series of meetings on Sunday nights for Bristol students, which were attended by about a quarter of those who lived near enough to be able to come. We shall never forget the first meeting, held in much fear and trembling, nor the inimitable way in which Dan Crawford of Central Africa, sitting on the table and dangling his legs, captivated their attention and got in his message. Then for five years everything was submerged.

It is since the War that the miracle has happened. In university after university, college after college, hospital after hospital, a little candle of testimony has been lighted by a few keen students, often in great weakness and amidst opposition, and the little flame after a few years burned up bright. They little dreamed how their acorn would soon grow into an oak. Often the start was made in ignorance that anyone had done the same elsewhere. The basis of membership was strangely alike in each case; denominational differences did not matter, but there must be a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour, Lord and God, faith in His Atoning Sacrifice for our sins, and an acceptance of the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. Some of the unions, especially north of the Tweed, preferred to draw up a fairly long and detailed confession of faith, but the practical difference was not great.

It would take too long to tell the story of how each college made its start. In Dublin, a young medical student, now a missionary in Central Africa, invited students to meet in his room in Trinity College, without any definite membership, and when he left, the room and meetings were kept going by others. At Cardiff, a bold student put up a notice on a board, which was probably not strictly within college rules, inviting any student of this University who knew the Lord Jesus Christ as their own personal Saviour to meet in such and such a room! The notice was scribbled on and torn down, but eight students met and

began a lasting testimony. The writer visited Glasgow about ten years ago, and found two groups of men meeting separately ; about a dozen of them belonged to the people called Brethren, and another larger group of Presbyterians had separated themselves from the S.C.M. in the interests of sound doctrine and were holding meetings and missions in the slums. We pointed out to the one that it is not possible to work on denominational lines if anything useful is to be accomplished amongst students, and to the other that during the few years of undergraduate life there is a priceless opportunity, that will not recur, of reaching other students ; also that in all probability if there are twenty or thirty keen Christian men in a University there will also be some women. Within a few years the membership of the Glasgow Student Christian Fellowship reached nearly 250. So, by degrees, keen, courageous, sensible, spiritual young men and women have made a start in every University in Great Britain, and in most of the town colleges.

London is a problem to itself. There are scores of colleges and medical schools, where all sorts of subjects are taught, and with no corporate life. To meet this need and to encourage the weaker ones, the London Inter-faculty Christian Union has been brought into being, which arranges occasional conferences of leaders and joint meetings.

It is a curious fact that nearly everywhere it has been much easier to get work going amongst men students than women. It is only in the last few years that the various unions have not been very predominantly masculine. One of the most encouraging features of the work is that quite a number of the present leaders were themselves converted in college. Another is that it is now the exception, where it used to be, in my experience, the rule, for a student who comes to college professedly a keen Christian, holding the fundamentals of the faith, to give up the faith during his or her term of study.

The link between the groups in the different colleges is one of fellowship, not of organization. At first, the students in one centre were only vaguely aware that there were any others like-minded. For a year or two, the China Inland Mission made a special point of inviting students to their January conference at Swanwick, of which we have happy memories. This formed a meeting ground. Then, two or three annual inter-varsity conferences were held in London, but the difficulty was to find

anyone ready to make himself responsible for such big undertakings. An immense debt of gratitude is due at a later stage to the self-denying labours of a medical student, Douglas Johnson, in keeping in touch with the various colleges and doing the donkey-work for united conferences. In 1926, a more suitable meeting-place was found at High Leigh, and the annual conference has been held there ever since. At the first eighty-two attended; now about 180 come, representing nearly every University in Great Britain and a good many overseas. The Presidents for the last three years have been Sir William Ramsay, Bishop Taylor Smith, and Sir Thomas Inskip.

The details of the conference, the publication of a magazine and other literature, and the appointment of travelling secretaries to tour the colleges at home and abroad, rest with a small executive committee, all of whose members sign a declaration of faith, which is appended to this article. This committee exercises no authority over the university evangelical unions, which are entirely autonomous.

There are now signs of spread across the seas. Howard Guinness has toured Canada, Australia, and parts of the United States, and in addition to starting new centres of testimony has put us in touch with bodies of students doing much the same work there. There are scattered points of light on the continent of Europe. Only a year ago it came to our knowledge, to our joy and surprise, that what has happened in this country has taken place also in Norway, Sweden and Finland, and that there also there are groups of students standing together for the truth.¹ They also have a holiday conference.

There are already a number of publications which may be consulted to give further information. Amongst these we may mention :

- (i) *The Inter-varsity Magazine*. This appears once each term and gives the current news, and helpful articles.
- (ii) *A Brief History of the I.V.F.E.U.*
Old Paths in Perilous Times. These pamphlets give the history of the work in each of the universities.
- (iii) Several pamphlets on apologetic and evangelistic lines, by Sir Ambrose Fleming and Professor Albert Carless, e.g. *The New Birth*; *The Christian Faith in Relation to Modern Thought*.

¹ We are informed that there is a similar testimony amongst students in Holland.

- (iv) *Effective Witness*. A small book or Christian testimony in strategic centres.
- (v) *The Bible and Modern Research*. A larger book on Christian apologetic and doctrine.

This article is written in the hope that it will not only provide interesting and encouraging reading, but also that it may stir up prayerful and sympathetic interest in work amongst students, for this is still the day of small things and much more ought to be done and could be done. Quite probably some reader may be sending a son or daughter to a university shortly, and may be glad to know where to find helpful Christian fellowship for them. All enquiries, for literature and otherwise, may be addressed to the Secretary, 43 Russell Square, London, W.C.1.

Bristol University.

A. RENDLE SHORT.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE I.V.F.E.U.

1. The full name of the Fellowship shall be : " The Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Christian Unions. "
2. Its objects shall be to stimulate personal faith and to further evangelistic work amongst students, by :
 - (a) Upholding the fundamental truths of Christianity, including The Divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.
 - (b) The unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.
 - (c) The universal sinfulness and guilt of human nature since the Fall, rendering man subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
 - (d) Redemption from the guilt, penalty and power of sin *only* through the sacrificial death (as our Representative and Substitute) of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God.
 - (e) The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
 - (f) The necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit to make the Death of Christ effective to the individual sinner, granting him repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ.
 - (g) The indwelling and work of the Holy Spirit in the Believer.
 - (h) The expectation of the Personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ.