

CLERGY AS MODELS FOR THE LAITY: An open letter to a specific,  
actual seminary-executive.....Elliott #1344

Dear.....--

You are anguished over the low spiritual and moral condition of your students, and have nightmares about the effects they will have on their congregations when you let them loose with licenses to corrupt the laity. I.e., you describe them as "corrupt in spirit" because (1) their commitment is primarily not to the Lord but to the self, and (2) they are spiritually and morally undisciplined in matters of money, sex, and entertainment....Whether this letter has any other benefit or not, it will help me sleep better, which is something in this sleep-disturbing world and time. So to my comments and advice:

1. Without making the strictures retroactive, adopt a code that clarified on the opening retreat with new matriculants. (By non-retroactive, I mean graduate all students under your present code, which does not exclude even the one-third of the student body who are practicing homosexuals.)

2. Sanctions (reasons, motives-incentives) for the code should be explained in the catalog and/or the student handbook, and given major time during the orientation retreat. Let me use homosexuality as an example--an especially important one, as your school is now disgracing the gospel in the eyes of the general community because of sexual laxity (promiscuity and homosexuality). (As background for the example, I enclose some thinksheets of mine on the subject: #816, #822, #892, and #1145.) Factors:

(1) Traditionally, Protestant clergy have been moral as well as spiritual examples and mentors, and sanctions against their moral wanderings have been severe--more severe than sanctions against their spiritual shortcomings: while Protestant laity have expected to learn from the minister's mouth how to be spiritual, they have expected their children to learn from the minister's life how to be moral. As yours is a Protestant seminary, and as there has been no change in the churches in this respect, it is more necessary that your graduates be good (having clean noses) than that they be pious (having devout hearts). "Clean noses" is, however, at the wrong end of the anatomy: what especially is expected is clean genitals.

(2) In all cultures, the genitals are the area of highest tabuization ("tabu" meaning the negative sacred, in relation to which punishment is both mindless and instant). In descending order in most cultures--certainly in yours, which is also mine--tabu acts against (a) incest, (b) homosexuality, (c) adultery, (d) fornication. The tabu against masturbation is (thank God) fast dying; and the tabu against fornication, though recently near death, is reviving in light of consciousness-raising about "the person" and consequently about "responsible relationships"--or, rather, that tabu is being replaced by the sapiential sanction against fornication (not mindless, but a mindful wisdom/folly preaching). Even more clearly the sapiential sanction is being successfully applied against adultery, which is more and more clearly seen as stupidly self-destruct as well as relationship-destruct. (Functionally, you have stated that fornicating and adulterous students can't keep their heads on study--i.e., on being students.) The tabu against homosexuality has been relaxed vis-a-vis the law (thank God), but I doubt that it ever will be significantly relaxed vis-a-vis pastoral leadership, where 1Cor.10.31 remains a guideline principle (though not a law). (Cf. Ro.14.15-21.)

(3) Homos should not be excluded from pastoring as long as they are homo-celibate (as the present pope has reiterated that the non-Uniate Roman clergy should be hetero-celibate [and of course homo-celibate!]). This does not change their "sexual preference": it just eliminates their sexual performance in the direction of their sexual preference, and it honors the sexual preference of the churches. (Why should "sexual preference" be seen only from the viewpoint of the individual, as under the influence of laissez-faire capitalism?)

over

(4) The question whether the homo-celibate pastor should be in or out of the closet is open; I suggest, out: while being out makes this pastor a target of homos of this sex, being in makes this pastor a target of a vastly greater number of folk, viz. the single heteros....but this is only an argument from number. A stronger argument is from simplicity: concealment is inherently artful, and so against simplicity, upfrontness, the mature naivete of the unguarded, undefensive spirit. [Needless to say, I have little but contempt for the other in-the-closetness, viz. the concealing for strategic reasons of aberrant sexual activity, whether the concealment is successful (as in Tillich's case) or unsuccessful (as in Wieman's case--the difference, in the case of these two teachers of mine, being that the former had a European wife and the latter an American). Besides, yourschool trains pastors, not professors; and a professor can more easily conceal concubinage and other forms of sexual behavior congregations consider deviant than can a pastor.]

3. For the above analysis I could as easily have used some sexual activity other than homosexuality as well as other than faithful marriage or celibacy, or I could have used either of the other laxities you mention: "materialism, sex and entertainment ....corrupt their spirits and send them forth as hirelings rather than as servants." The constellation of woes--mendacity, biblically unbound genitality, and dehumanizing use of leisure--all root in what Christopher Lasch in a just-published book calls NARCISSISM, what Tom Wolfe recently called ME-ISM, the cancerous capitalist notion that all things are to be judged from the standpoint of the so-called "individual," a dismal invention of the French Revolution and a fiction fostered wherever literacy overwhelms primitive community. I used the socially uncreative and disruptive use of sexuality, rather than of money or time, because libido is the energy hardest to control and therefore traditionally most subject to tabu (i.e., mindless social sanction) and precept (i.e., the mindful instruction of spirituality in the religions of civilizations, lit. of "city"-cultures). Thus, what the Virgin Birth is to a fundamentalist, genital activity in theological students and clergy is here: an evidencing, in public view, of conformity (or the lack thereof) to "spirituality," i.e. of the visible under the control of the invisible and the Invisible. Now, the Church and churches will have "spiritual" [in this sense] leadership even if they have to scratch the clergy and go anticlerical, with only lay leadership. From my many years of working with laity, both as pastor and as teacher, I am not worried about the future of the Church and the churches: I am worried about the future of clergy. Churches need "unspiritual" clergy as much as banks need clerks who can't add. I predict a sharp rise in anticlericalism, further weakening the institutional churches. In addition to the positive forces making for community, the negative forces you state --"disrespect for persons, for personality, for the property and rights of others"--are intolerable in society, which against such anarchy will raise up leaders of moral fiber, free of the character-enfeeblement of narcissism (as was the Rev. Jimmie Jones till he flipped into narcissism and then into messianism). The people know, deeply sense, that we are in perilous times; and they will not follow leaders, in their voluntary institutions at least, who exhibit the moral confusion instead of modeling and preaching a higher way. (Straw in the wind: The Moonies' severely uptight genitals; e.g., no bedding down, says "Father," till a month after the marriage!)

4. In light of the above, I wrote you my suggestion that your seminary "withhold the degree till the graduate has been three years in continuing education under seminary control" as well as under observation in ministry. The churches have the right to protection against clergy whose influence is corrupting rather than ennobling, and this right entails your seminary's obligation not to credential unworthy clergy.

5. The chief hindrance to our dealing coolly, rationally, humanly with all the above is the "liberal" tabu against (1) limiting the rights of "the individual" and (2) distinguishing between liberty [a political notion and goal] and freedom [a quality of soul and society].