Dr. Kirkland on College Problems

In A Series of Chapel Talks on College and Fraternity Life, He Impresses on Each Student that "You Are Your Brother's Keeper"

During the latter part of January chapel was unusually well attended. The occasion was the series of lectures on student problems delivered by Chancellor Kirkland. The special subjects to which the attention of the students was directed were: The Recent Changes in College Life; Fraternities and Fraternity Houses; The Non-Fraternity Student; Athletics; and College Morals.

Dr. Kirkland spoke not only from a general standpoint but with particular relation to the students of Vanderbilt. He urged upon the students that they accept his remarks as suggestions for further thought in order that they might be of aid in the solution of the problems which confront both faculties and student bodies of to-day.

He pointed out that in recent years there have been great changes in college life. The old college had a very small attendance; funds were meagre; the library very poor and little used by the students. There were no laboratories and no gymnasium. Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, together with a small amount of English and History were the only items of the curriculum. Sciences as we know them were unknown to them.

The students were all preparing to enter some profession. They were younger than the student of to-day and subject to much greater restraints. They rose early in the morning and closed the day with religious services at night. The schools were conducted with strictly religious and professional aims. Since that time there have been great changes in all manners of life. The press of outside subjects demands recognition. In 1800 the total amount invested in college properties was less than half a million dollars. In 1830 Yale with 346 students and an investment of $17,000, was the largest school in the country. Harvard now has a total of $25,000,000 and Columbia $27,000,000, and each of them has from 5,000 to 6,000 students.

Instead of a home, the college is now a state. Faculty discipline has disappeared. As a result we now face new problems. The student bodies are largely self-governing and for this reason their opinion is very important. College life is now a bigger thing with larger opportunities and consequent larger responsibilities than ever before.

We can trace many of the great changes to the expansion of the curriculum and the consequently necessary elective system—a thing which has brought with it a large train of evils. It is the tendency of many men to seek the path of least resistance. Hence the lazy or indifferent students hunts for snaps. At the same time the diligent student learns a little of everything and (usually) but little of anything. The average college graduate of to-day can converse lightly on nearly every subject but deeply on none.

This habit of election has brought students face to face with the proposition as whether or not it is worth while to study at all. There are so many outside interests which distract a student's attention that the "main tent has dwindled into insignificance and there is nothing left but the multitude of side shows."

The college professor is also affected by this system. He is glad to get rid of the mass of students who are uninterested in his work. He has brought from his University high ideals of scholarship. He is possessed with the idea that he must publish something and so desires to conduct

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special investigations. His absorption in this cannot but react on his class room work.

Remedies have been proposed to raise scholarship in our schools. Princeton has been trying the progressive system. We here at Vander-bilt, have adopted two plans: First, to make it impossible to represent the school in any contest without a basis of scholarship; and second, to divide the classes into small sections. This latter has proved very expensive. But it is undoubtedly the best thing to do.

Fraternities began with the organization of the Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 at William and Mary's College in Virginia. It entered Union College in 1818 and it was here that in 1825 the class of 1826 organized the Kappa Alpha Fraternity. This was followed by many others. In 1880 a man gave publicity to the secrets of the Ma- onic order. His mysterious disappearance gave rise to a wave of public sentiment against secret orders. As a result the Phi Beta Kappa abandoned its secrets but has continued always to maintain its high ideals of scholar- ship. The membership and affairs of the others were kept secret—but this secrecy had nothing to do with their aims and ideals, which were de- signed in every way to be helpful to students.

Fraternities came soon to supply the social wants of their members. We can see the advantage in the mutual responsibility of twenty picked men—men of high scholarship. They were also brought into relation with a great national group. There is often a great variation in the quality of a fra- ternity for this always depends upon the personal influence of its membership.

There is no place of machinery which gives upper classmen so much power—more or less than I have—and it is to be regretted they often fail to use that power properly. But I have known men to make students work and at times to force them to leave school because of their deficiencies.

I have known national organiza- tions to threaten to take away the charter of some chapter. There are some fraternities that have regular reports from the college officers on the scholarship of their members. But on the other hand I have known men to protect and shield each other even to extremes.

There are two definite evils of fra- ternity life: First, the rushing season. This must be handled by the Pan-Helu- Council and in this connection the provisions at Amherst are worthy of note. In recent years I have not-iced a sort of mutual distrust among the fraternities here. Second, the ex- pense of fraternity life. This must be kept down.

Now, we must meet these evils frankly and not try to deny or evade them. It is the duty of the fraterni- ties to inspire scholarship. In the last twenty-five years there has entered a new period in fraternity history. It is that of the fraternity house. The movement has swept over the entire country and they have acquired vast wealth. The universi- ties of the country admit that it fills a need unsupplied by dormitories. Further, it is not a far, for no move- ment could become so large and wide- spread unless it possessed real merit. It has made unnecessary the building of new dormitories, but it has added to the expense of fraternity life. This extra expense must be borne either by the alumni or the students themselves.

But there are more serious sides than this. Life in these houses is more homelike than in a dormitory. The possibility of individual living is destroyed. The rooms are common, pianos and other more or less musical instruments create much more noise, and there is a wealth of conversation—numerically speaking. It is almost impossible for anyone to do real seri- ous work. Also, conversation being unrestrained may become indecorous.

Besides this, there are the social functions. The Dean of the Univer- sity of Illinois regards the loss of time devoted to social functions of fraterni- ties as one of woeful consequences. President Jordan of Leland Stanford says that chapter house men have a low scholarship which is in inverse ra- tio to their social brilliancy.

The life in chapter houses affords the greatest possible danger to a stu- dent's morals. Concealment is made possible and the student has sympathy and often aid in his wrongdoing. Mr. Birdside, who has written much on such subjects says: "In many of the larger schools a considerable part of the life of the home is rotten. Some of the worst conditions prevail in the smaller denominational schools. But each insti- tution must be judged by itself." Such conditions show an absolute ne- cessity of organization. You cannot afford to dip out the solution of these problems each year. You should post house rules and brook no violations. There can be no introduction of li- quors into a fraternity house—what- ever your views on the question of prohibition.

Lastly, I wish to emphasize the great power of personal influence on the part of leading men in the fra- ternity and their consequent great re- sponsibility.

My talks would by no means be complete should I not deal with the subject of non-fraternity men, for at least half the students of Vanderbilt are of this class. Some new students consider their fraternity life as the most important part of their college career. Some students come here with no friendships or other connections with fraternity men. It may thus hap- pen that such a man may be over- looked in the spiking season. It is no disgrace or reflection on a man that he should not be invited and should decline to become a member of a fraternity. Many men are not fraternity men be- cause of their financial conditions. Others who are not invited often assume an unwonted attitude towards fra- ternities—an attitude which some- times becomes partisan in the extreme. The result is that the non-fraternity men organize themselves into a secret society of the worst kind. But this attitude is generally due to the conduct of the fraternities at the time.

The non-fraternity man has to give up society to a large extent, but he has an equal opportunity and even better advantages (because he has the time the fraternity men devote to society) in other fields of student activity. But I would say to the non-fraternity man: "Let society go and engage in these."

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When it comes to the selection of college representatives no favor is shown. The dormitories because of their size occupy a position far more important than any other college home. These halls occupy a large place in the affections of old students. Not a room in them but is a sacred place—a place where are formed the most sacred associations of college life. This is a sweet and glorious sentiment.

But there are in them the dangers of noise and little privacy which tend to destroy the possibility of individual living. For this reason they are built to protect this individualism in large measure. They are often called the "Home of the People." It is there that the college atmosphere is strongest, that public opinion has the greatest sway, and that the strong man comes to the front. Student government is tried in these dormitories more than anywhere else. If it fails there then it fails throughout the school. It is hard, however, to get strong men to take the leadership—the great weakness of Democracy is the hesitancy of the individual to come to the front, the difficulty of getting a public opinion strong enough to rouse the individual. But if you cannot govern yourselves, the world will never be able to govern you. College life is a failure unless the dormitory life be clean and pure and strong. It is therefore the great opportunity of man to mold public opinion that will uphold the best in college life.

Referring to athletics Dr. Kirkland dwelt upon the importance of exercise in the student's life and the necessity of making athletic contests a means to physical development and not an end. He outlined the great fight which had been made in recent years against professionalism in athletics and showed how great is the present day standard of athletics as compared with former years.

Coming lastly to college morals he pointed out that the temptations of college life of to-day are much greater than ever before. The dangers are greater and the freedom is more complete and the papers should either be made stronger or else go down entirely.

All education ought to result in character or else its failure. All education ought to be religious. Without regard to the church, the greater a school is the more religious and the less sectarian should its training be. For it is the work of a university to emphasize the great truths and religion is a fundamental fact in every man's life.

The appeal of the social world is for moral men. Moral character has a distinct value in dollars and cents. Insurance companies do not issue bonds to immoral men. They can't afford to risk their money on any such college graduate and they always investigate that graduate's college record. Whatever criticism may be made of President Roosevelt, he is due much credit because he laid such emphasis on the claims of moral purity in corporate life. There will come the time when ethics will have a place in politics. Even now we have a faint trace of it. Where will we get men unless from college?

The college waste-heap is worse than the commercial waste-heap. It is very sad; it is incurable. There are over one hundred college graduates in Sing Sing prison. Over one-third of the men seeking beds in the Bowery missions in New York City have been to college.

Now, in my talks I have tried to be fair and to place responsibility where it belonged. The faculty share in the blame for our college status—they have been so prone to deny all responsibilities to the student outside the class-rooms. We will have to go back to our old relations. We have discarded the old methods and have not devised new ones in their places. We are in a sort of transition period that is bad for the students and bad for the faculties. We are here in the form of a corporate body—the faculty and the students.

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students. I would impress upon you that you are your brother’s keeper. We must assume our responsibilities.

To the men of the Biblical Department I would say it has been a constant source of regret to me that over one hundred preachers have been gathered together on this campus and have had no more definite influence on the students at Kissam. Inaccessible, you say? Not any more so than men will be when you get out in life and the rooms of Kissam and West Side Row are far better fields for your work than the death-beds of your parishioners. I do not believe that your visits would be strongly resented as you think.

To all of you I would say be strong, be true, be straight, that you may build a character and a life that will reflect credit upon your Alma Mater, upon your loved ones, upon yourself, and upon your Maker.