

Religion and Education at Chowan:

A historical overview

The Founding Fathers of Chowan Female Institute had one primary objective in mind: the establishing of a "School of High Order," equipped to give the best possible instruction in the tradition of liberal education. To that end, the early collegiate curriculum was an adaptation of the curricula offered at the leading colleges and universities for men. Adaptations were made in the areas of the fine and useful arts: music, sewing, drawing, etc. The core of the curriculum, however, was as demanding as any to be found. For the freshman: French, Latin, Rhetoric, Mythology. For the sophomore: Geometry, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Physiology. When you advanced to senior status, you could look forward to Moral Science, Evidences of Christianity, and Natural Theology.

It will be noted that the curriculum made no provision for Biblical studies, as such. But this did not mean that the Bible and the exercise of religion played a minor role in the life of the Institute. Far from it. In a report to the Chowan Baptist Association in May, 1850, it is noted:

It has been regarded as of vital importance that the Seminary be of a decidedly religious character. As a means of accomplishing this most important object, the students are organized into bible classes, and meet every Sabbath for the study of the Scriptures. They are also required to attend divine service on the Sabbath, in one of the churches of the town. The daily exercises of the Institute are opened and closed by appropriate religious exercises, at which all the students are required to be present. (CM, 1850, p. 13)

Thus, liberal education for women was not an end in itself. It was a means towards achieving a much higher goal. Amos J. Battle, the first Steward of the Institute, expressed it this way in his report to the Chowan Association in 1849:

Female education is the mighty lever, by which society is to be elevated in civilization, and to advance the female mind under the sanctifying power of divine grace, will be to put into operation the mighty engine by which the world is to become converted from their idolatries, to the worship of the true God. (CM, 1849, p. 12)

Education had a religious end in view.

Whatever the shortcomings of the methods used for attaining that goal, it was pursued with determination. Reports from the Institute during the early years often make reference to the religious influences at work among the students. Frequent mention is made of revivals of religion among the girls. In 1851 classes were temporarily suspended due to the effects of revival upon the Institute. In 1855 it was reported that "every pupil in attendance last session, (who was) not a christian before, became one before its close." (CM, 1855, p. 11)

The college catalog for 1878 expressed the religious concern and commitment of the Institute in the following way:

Regarding the proper development and direction of the moral faculties as of paramount importance in the training of youth, the founders of the institution incorporated into its system of instruction and discipline the christian religion as a prominent and permanent feature.

All the pupils are required to attend morning and evening prayers in the chapel; also Sabbath School and public worship on Sunday.

Prayer meetings are held Saturday nights in the President's study, for the benefit of such as choose to attend. (CM, 1878, p. 19)

The expectations of attendance at chapel exercises have maintained to the present—with interesting variations. Chapel exercises continued to be held twice daily until 1885. In 1910 the chapel service was conducted daily at mid-day, when "the student body with the faculty leave the work in the lecture rooms and repair to the chapel, where fifteen minutes are spent in the worship of Almighty God." (WCM, 1910, p. 12) Such daily services continued until the closing of the school in 1943. No penalty for failure to attend chapel was noted during the early years. It was assumed that students would be present. As late as 1955-56, however, the college catalog stated: "No free absences are granted . . . except that a last semester sophomore whose name appears on the Dean's List may be granted three unexcused absences.

"Failure to attend chapel exercises will result in probation after the first absence is incurred." (CC, 1955-56, p. 20)

A second method of pursuing religious instruction has been through the academic program. As noted previously, there was no formal academic instruction in Biblical studies during the earliest years at Chowan. Those courses in Moral Science, Apologetics, and Natural Theology constituted the academic study of religion. In addition, juniors and seniors were required to attend Friday evening lectures of a literary or religious nature and examined upon the content of such lectures.

While a proposal to add the study of the Bible and Christian missions to the curriculum had been advanced as early as 1897, it was not until the session of 1908-09 that the first course in Bible was taught. Thereafter, it became traditional to require 6 hours of religion studies to qualify one for graduation—a requirement that maintains to the present day. By 1930, 4 different courses in religion were being taught: Old Testament, New Testament, Comparative Religions, and the Life and Teachings of Christ.

The catalog for 1939 listed another interesting religion course entitled "Practical Economics of the Bible" The course description noted: This course is a study of the Bible from the standpoint of business Ethics, and a careful study of God's ownership and man's trusteeship." The course was required of all Business students. (CC, 1939, p. 28)

The third area in which religion was noted as a significant part of the life of the campus involved the functioning of various student clubs and organizations. A missionary society had been formed as early as 1850. With the rise of Woman's Missionary Union, an increased student interest in the world mission of Christianity, and an increased emphasis upon denominational distinctives following World War I, other church-oriented clubs found their place among the students. Among these were Young Woman's Auxiliary, Baptist Young Peoples' Union, Baptist Student Union, and Mission Volunteer Bands. Participation in one or more of these organizations was a normal expectation. BSU, YWA, and the newer Ministerial Alliance have continued to be a part of campus life since the reopening of Chowan in 1949.

And who was to oversee the religious development and instruction of the students? Why, the President and the faculty, of course! With this function in mind, it is instructive to note that twelve of the nineteen presidents of Chowan have been ordained ministers, as well as

qualified educators. Some of these served as pastors of churches in the area—including the Murfreesboro Baptist Church—while also serving the college as president. Until recent years the president was responsible for and usually conducted the religious services on campus. Moreover, as late as 1919 it was reported that all the faculty members were christian—Baptist Christian. The implication was that the religious development of the youth entrusted to Chowan was in secure hands with such a faculty of Bible-believing Baptists.

Things are quite different at Chowan in these early years of her second century from what they were during her first century of service as an educational institution. The small woman's college has become a good-sized co-educational institution, wherein women are decidedly in the minority. Liberal education is still the primary goal, but with a welcome break out of the old classical mold. The academic community—faculty and students alike—represents a much broader cross section of religious heritage and commitment, though still largely within the Christian tradition. All of which changes present new challenges to attaining the ultimate of a Christian college—the elevation of society in terms of the vision of the kingdom of God.

Increasingly large and diverse student enrolments—coupled with the pressure to get into college somewhere—increase the risk and the danger that many students will never give the first thought to the religious functioning and purpose of the college they attend. While the classical mold of a liberal education was too sterile and restrictive for the needs of a modern world, it at least included academic subjects which took religion seriously: a tradition we are in danger of losing through the idol we sometimes make of the "autonomy of the disciplines."

And while the president and the faculty can no longer take the primary responsibility for the religious concerns of the student body—leaving that to the administrative management of a chaplain to the college—there is always the danger that the instructor will relinquish his own responsibility as a man of faith, now that he has a professional to take care of that responsibility for him.

All of which is to say that if you are a student at Chowan College in 1972, and if you can be serious at all about the fact that you are studying here rather than elsewhere, maturity in religious concerns and commitment will be a part of your education; otherwise, either you or the rest of the college community is being defrauded. If you are a member of the faculty-staff in 1972, but can exercise no personal concern or commitment to religious maturity—yours or your students'—you might rethink the conditions of the pledge you have made to the college as an institution of Christian higher education.

I doubt that one can readily improve upon the manner in which the catalog of 1910 expressed the purpose of education at Chowan. The words are probably those of President James D. Brunner:

The college endeavors to train the emotions and will of its pupils as well as their mind and body . . . Develop the body only, you may have an athlete; develop the mind only, you may have a skeptic; develop the heart only, you may have a fanatic; but educate the body, mind, and heart, and you have the noblest work of God, the very climax of creation—a perfected man or woman. (CC, 1910,)

So may it continue to be with all of us.