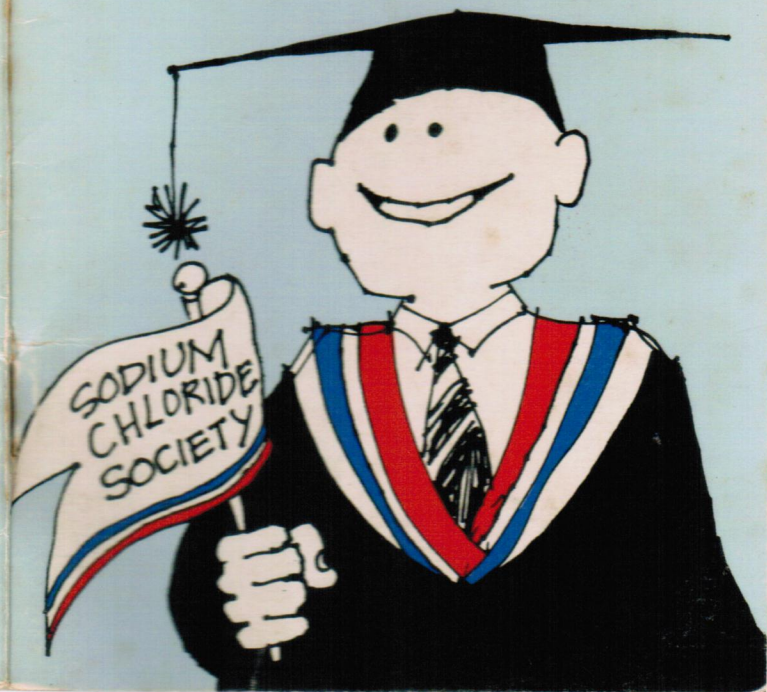


SALT IN THE CAMPUS

A CALLING TO BE A STUDENT



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Salt in the Campus

a calling to be a student

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"As Christian students, our presence on campus is no mere chance. God wants us here because he wants us to be salt and light to others for him. Let us take our calling seriously and prove ourselves worthy of the trust he has chosen to put on us."

What a sense of achievement and excitement to have made it to a tertiary education. Optimistically, we hope the next three years or so will be fun and fruitful. For some, campus life is only a transitional phase in preparation for the responsibilities and challenges of a life-time career. There is a desire to make the most of our student days. It is therefore important to maintain a sensible balance between active participation in campus activities and setting aside time for serious studies. It is good sense not to bulldoze unthinkingly into the campus milieu but to stop awhile, to ponder, and take stock of our new environment, to decide and prepare our approach to student life.

Time to find the ropes

We need time to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings. The tertiary campus is very different from the more controlled school or college environment and the even more regimented army camp. There will be new schedules; a new lifestyle with no school or army uniforms, but room for personal expression in our dressing. A new terrain to explore: where are the canteens, the library, the right lecture theatres? It takes more time to be familiar with tertiary campuses simply because they are spread over a huge land space, made all the more confusing by the high density of students and faculty members.

Foreign students will have greater adjustments to make. It takes a while to get accustomed to the different ways the English language is spoken and to get used to food prepared differently from that of home. The absence of family and old friends or settling into a new room may also create stress. We need to allow ourselves time to settle into a new environment.

Do not make the mistake of rushing into too many activities during this crucial period of orientation. It will surely create unnecessary stress. Instead, go slow, weigh the odds before accepting responsibilities and get to know the ropes. It will pay off bigger dividends in the long run.

Getting a grip on the ropes

A common source of pressure lies in the realm of studies: just how much studies should we actually do? Many factors contribute to this problem area. Apart from personal ambitions to do well, there are also the high expectations from parents to reckon with. Then there is the need to graduate with good grades to become the favoured candidate for the more enviable jobs. But as every student knows, he is competing with others who are as good as or better than he is. It is a humbling fact, but it is important to quickly see and accept that many are average and only some will be among the best. We still need to work diligently but with a realistic recognition of our academic strengths and weaknesses. We only cripple our confidence when we continually fall short of personal academic goals that are set unrealistically.

It is foolhardy to persist in a discipline that we know ourselves to be weak in. Some handle numbers with ease but fumble with words, others may be at a loss working with their hands but have the capacity to store volumes of facts. We have to

recognise our limits in order to know courses to avoid and areas where we must work harder. Unlike the set curriculum of the school environment, happily at tertiary level there is room to match one's abilities and interests with the subjects available. The idea is to get a grip on the new academic environment and recognise that the rules are played differently here.

The idea is to
get a G-R-I-P....



We need to adopt a different approach when tackling tertiary studies. The course material will of course be more complex than what we have been used to, and there will be little supervision from instructors. Much independent work will be expected. Essentially, new demands are being made. Some old methods of collecting information and study will not do and must be adjusted.

Reading Lists and Lecture Notes

It is usual for lecturers to distribute long reading lists and course requirements. Many students are overwhelmed by them and forget that they are only guidelines to help, not homework assignments to be slavishly followed, unless the course instructor has indicated otherwise. These lists, when calmly analysed, should indicate major areas of emphases in the course and also throw light on how much reading, writing or practice is likely to be needed to fulfill the essays, projects and examination requirements. They are supposed to help a student to work out his year's study plan by mapping out the heavy portions which require greater concentration and the lighter ones that need less effort. The reading list is a sample of the tools available to him for research. He must work through the list by skimming through the various volumes, selecting only the useful ones to focus on. The same list becomes a cudgel if each and every item is going to be painstakingly studied.

Every discipline is built on a set of presuppositions and held together by a body of essential principles. They are often basic to the subject but not always obvious to the uninitiated; nonetheless they are necessary to a student's understanding of the material and for further study. It is vital to get a grip of these important basic principles. They will form the yardstick whereby to judge what are important facts to study and what are the less important ones.

There is a limit to how much the human brain can remember. It is pointless to absorb indiscriminately every shred of information. It is more important to prepare a broad perspective of the subject matter so that we could be more selective about the sub-topics to spend more time on. In other words, we have to learn to distinguish the important from the unimportant.

A discriminating mind is essential to tertiary studies. There will be less emphasis on memory work. Instead, there will be an increasing demand to demonstrate the ability to analyse, synthesise and interpret the significance of material gleaned from readings and lectures. How do the various facts relate to one another? What impact do they have on yet other findings? What is one's personal opinion of an issue? Thinking is an activity synonymous with tertiary education. A student has to make sense of the multitude of facts presented to him. Mere accumulation of facts is futile. Facts must be learnt in context, that is, in their relationship to the whole picture. Analytical thinking is a skill that has to be cultivated regardless of whether one chooses to specialize in business studies, mechanics or philosophy.

No student can manage without the ability to take down significant notes and to maintain a good filing system. It is worthwhile to hunt around for some manuals that teach such skills if one is deficient in this area.

Discussion or study groups are beneficial in helping to clarify doubts and woolly thoughts. They help us to be sure that we have really mastered our material. It is only when we are able to articulate our thoughts and to answer probing questions that we can be certain we know our work.

Lecturers and senior students are good resource people. Some lecturers are open to helping students make course selections and to advise on study methods. They are the best advisors as they know the exact course requirements. Senior students often have useful tips that a freshman will find helpful, such as where to buy books, where best to eat, how the buses run and a million and one other things that will come to mind. Do not hesitate to ask questions. Facts are much better to work with

than rumours. In a large institution with so much going on, information can be easily misrepresented or be plain wrong. Go to the people with the right authority for accurate information. Do not rely on rumours.

Orientation

Imparting necessary information is what orientation programmes are mostly about. Orientation week is planned to help new students find the ropes in a fun and recreational way. They are meant to provide a feel of campus life. Participate in them to meet fellow freshmen and seniors. These activities are not meant to answer every question nor will they provide a ready circle of friends but they are useful as a way of easing one into the rhythm and routine of what is going to be the expected lifestyle for the next few years.

Orientations, especially to the relevant faculty or department, the library or campus grounds, are well worth the invested time. Just as when travelling in unknown terrain, we find security in a well-drawn map, so the unfamiliarity of a huge sprawling campus becomes manageable once we know where most things are. Knowing where to look and what to do in the library can do wonders to our morale, and help us to get our act on the road. When we know where to find things we feel in control of the situation and are less likely to be swamped by a sense of insecurity and depression.

Keeping track of time

Time is closely related to responsibilities. There are responsibilities accompanying every social role, be that of a daughter or son, sister or brother, student, girlfriend, boyfriend, committee member and so on. It requires time to carry out such social responsibilities. Some of us get ourselves into situa-

tions where we hold too many responsibilities and end up either failing to meet all our commitments or performing our duties poorly. We complain there are insufficient hours in a day, when in fact we are accepting more obligations than we can faithfully handle.

There are some inescapable obligations such as those that stem from kinship and our responsibility as students to study. Those studying away from home need to write to keep in contact with loved ones. Unless special time is set aside for letter-writing, it never gets done. Priority should be given to these known and expected responsibilities. Whatever remaining time we have left after meeting our necessary responsibilities can then be used for other involvements.

Priorities and Values

Deciding on priorities is a rather difficult issue. They really depend on our values. What things, people or issues are most valuable or important to us? The answer is likely to change as our life situation change. A single person, for example, upon marriage, alters his values to include the well-being of the spouse and further changes these values when he has children. Our values also change when our perception of life gains deeper insight. The world of a young child is uncomplicated by some of the "traumatic" questions of puberty that an adolescent may be bothered by. The adolescent, becoming more aware of himself begins to be more conscious of his appearance and so spends more time and money improving it.

Like the adolescent, we will be asking ourselves questions about life that may not have been necessary to ask before: not questions about puberty but questions about life's goals, ambitions, status symbols or money and a host of other things depending

on our particular campus experience. Some may have been struggling with these issues even before entering tertiary education. Others may be experiencing their first taste of independence away from their immediate family and having to make decisions on their own. For the first time, they are facing the full weight of being accountable to themselves alone. Whatever the case, we can all expect changes in our perspective on life with tentative opinions becoming more firm and fixed in the years ahead.



A challenge to our current values will probably come from the wide range of people we meet on the campus. Unlike at school or college where everyone falls into step with the common ethos, the tertiary campus allows tremendously more room for individual expression. Student activities are managed and organized by interested members of the student population. As such we are more likely to encounter sharper differences in values and lifestyles previously made inconspicuous under the

uniformity of school rules and a common dress code.

Unprepared students have been known to balk at women undergraduates smoking. This is but one illustration of a host of minor "culture shocks" experienced by some. While one student may recoil from what is uncomfortable, another may throw caution to the winds and relish every untried experience. Both responses are extreme. Both have missed the challenge that such encounters pose to our preconceived notions of what is right and acceptable; why is something irksome to us and yet perfectly usual to another? We have to distinguish real values from prejudice. The latter has been defined by some to be irrational dislike or disapproval based on inadequate facts. If we spend some time on self-reflection, it will amaze us just how much prejudice we have actually picked up unconsciously from our environment. Such self-realization is in itself a measure of personal growth. While it may not take away the discomfort we sometimes feel with people we are wary of, at least it will help us to appreciate and respect the different ways of doing things. When we reflect on our values, we reaffirm our beliefs and convictions. Our faith is strengthened when we understand it in greater depth. We also broaden our horizons when we are able to keep an open mind and are willing to learn from others who may differ from us in thought and lifestyle.

Widening Friendship

Although two years of co-educational college life has lessened the problem somewhat, there are yet undergraduates who find difficulty in relating to members of the opposite sex. Some are unsure of the proper etiquette to observe; others believe that only members of the same sex make good friends and deep friendships with the opposite sex must

have romantic implications. There is a need to correct such inhibitions and misconceptions. Apart from books on etiquette, we can learn social graces by observing friends who are confident and handle themselves well. At any rate, always remember to be polite and considerate. It is the basis of all good etiquette.

Shyness with the opposite sex is often due to a lack of interaction with them. It may be overcome by a conscious and deliberate attempt to meet more members of the opposite sex and make many friends. The tertiary environment is not only an opportunity to stretch ourselves and mature our faith, but also an appropriate meeting ground to improve and widen our social skills. In addition to the diversity of occasions to make friends through informal and personal interactions, there are also multiple clubs, societies and activities that provide further learning opportunities. Time spent in widening our social life is not a waste but a worthwhile investment.

There is an adage often quoted by time management experts, "Do not fall under the tyranny of the urgent." Make a distinction between the urgent and the important. Complete the important tasks first and the urgent ones will take care of themselves. To make the most of the limited free time available, careful and wise time management is an indispensable pre-requisite. To achieve that we need to know ourselves, our values and attitudes. Above all, we have to exercise self-discipline so that we can keep to a time-schedule. There are many books on the management of time available in the book shops and libraries. They provide invaluable hints that will help us to employ our time to maximum benefit.

Opportunities or problems

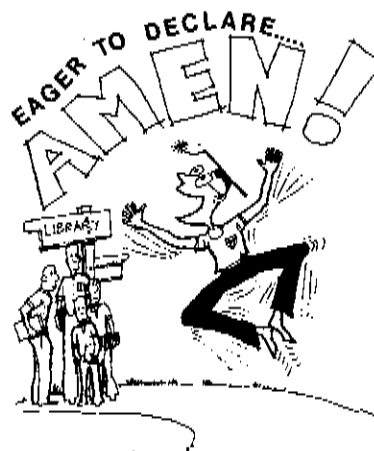
In a sense, tertiary education is a rather over-

whelming experience. The studies are demanding and yet necessary to improve our analytical prowess and to train our minds. We are cultivating new skills, experiencing new situations, discovering ourselves and maturing through the whole process.

The possible changes that affect our views of life could be rather traumatic. It is never comfortable to re-assess old ideas and traditions and to re-organise ourselves. We can pretend that higher education is merely for the sake of acquiring more specialised skills and marketable knowledge and spare ourselves the pain of self-evaluation and growth; or we could seize the opportunities provided and work on character development and self-improvement. Much depends on our attitude.

A distinctive attitude

Whether or not a student feels that he has been called by God to spend the next few years on campus has a distinctive effect on his attitude towards



tertiary education. The belief that he has been called will give a sense of purpose. He will see his campus adventure as a gift from God; and will want to seek out others who share the same sense of calling. He will be eager to declare his Christian commitment through his role as a student.

In the book of Genesis (45:1-15), when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in Pharaoh's court, he believed that even though he had been sold by them into slavery, the betrayal was nonetheless part of God's ultimate plan to preserve their lives during the famine. Joseph saw beyond the human events to another reality, that of God's sovereign purpose to "preserve a remnant" (verse 7) through him. There was no room for coincidences or accidents with Joseph; to him, God directs human beings in their daily 24-hour routine on earth. His faith in a God who is personally involved in human affairs, made him see his life as part of a Divine Plan in which he had to be in Egypt at the opportune time to save his family.

While we may not be called upon to solve the world's food distribution problems, yet as Christians, we believe in the same God as Joseph. Our tertiary career is therefore no more a coincidence than was Joseph's presence in Egypt. We have crossed many hurdles and invested a fair amount of hard work to arrive here. We have survived competition because God has willed our presence on the campus. We have every cause to congratulate ourselves, but we owe God our thanks and gratitude.

Just as Joseph was a diligent steward of his God-given responsibilities in Egypt, likewise we need to pay careful attention to our work as students. Some think of work as paid employment. That is not necessarily so. One example is the case of Adam. His work was to exercise dominion over the world and he began by naming each of the animals God

made. We have also been exhorted to imitate the diligence of the ant. The ethic of work is very much a part of Scripture teaching.

As students, God has entrusted us with the responsibility to study and we ought to put in our best effort to please him. Do not confuse attitudes with results. Some work very hard and yet turn in poor grades. Others only study at the eleventh hour and somehow manage to score top marks. The point is not the grades obtained; rather, it is the way we regard our studies. Do we give it top priority? Do we set aside sufficient time and put in enough effort so that, regardless of the grades received, we can honestly say we have performed to the best of our ability. Working diligently at our studies is our first-fruit offering to God.

It is obvious that higher studies is not an end in itself but a preparation for some future work. Just what the end goal of that much desired paper qualification will be depends on the individual concerned. Each and everyone of us has to wrestle with God to discover where he is leading us to next. Some may be pondering the issue right through campus life. Others may not give the future much thought until graduation is just round the corner. God will answer each person in his own time. The important thing is to keep our minds open and our hearts obedient as God guides us to the next phase of life after tertiary education.

Meanwhile, there is the responsibility of living out our present calling. Apart from our attitude towards studies, we need to demonstrate our Christian commitment through our daily encounters with others on the campus. We have to come down to brass-tacks. It is always discouraging to hear of Christian students jumping queues, being rude to librarians when breaking rules or being selfish with their notes and time. These may be small matters of conduct but they are big question

marks on the credibility and integrity of Christian students who claim personal knowledge of the God who is love. The law of God must compel us and the Holy Spirit empower us to be in all aspects faithful to our claims made before the watching world.

Daily Quiet Time

It is vital to safeguard our personal relationship with Christ to fulfil our calling on campus. The daily personal quiet time is the heart of our Christian commitment. A sense of calling and purpose is a personal issue and can only be dealt with in prayer and meditation before God. Growth and maturity in the faith can be stunted through unconfessed secret sins and faults. A deepening relationship with God can only come from a more intimate knowledge of him that is acquired through a disciplined daily personal quiet time. The stress here is daily. Our relationship with God will be superficial if we decide to spend time with him only when the mood strikes. A genuine commitment to God is manifested in our desire to habitually seek him in individual prayer and meditation. Our faithful persistence will be rewarded by a greater sensitivity and awareness of his constant presence and guidance.

A Balanced Knowledge

A challenge to every student is to relate what he learns from the Bible with what he learns from his textbooks. They sometimes contradict. The contradictions often seem only one-sided though. Students tend to doubt the credibility of the Bible and are more ready to accept as true the things learnt from their textbooks or coursework. We are usually more familiar with arguments against the validity of the Bible and the reality of Christianity

than the defence of the Christian faith. Many of us have only a foggy idea of the facts of Christianity. The fault lies in an imbalance in the development of our academic and spiritual knowledge. Frequently, effort is readily put into increasing our understanding of schoolwork but little energy is spent in thinking through and analysing the truth and implications of Christianity and the Bible. While our academic knowledge may be of a tertiary standard, our comprehension of Christianity remains at the level of Sunday School only. This intellectual gap has to be corrected if we are to relate biblical truth to secular reality; and it can be done if we deliberately study the Christian faith with the same rigour as we would for any other subject that is of interest to us. We have a responsibility to seek a reason for our faith, to explain to non-believers why and what we believe.

We have, however, to accept that as human beings we will never be able to comprehend all the mysteries of our faith to resolve every question we have about our world. Only God holds the monopoly of the truth. He has chosen to reveal only that which is sufficient for a rational faith and not all mysteries we are curious about. A common mistake lies in our expectations and claims of the Bible. It is the Word of God to tell us how man may be saved. This is a very important point to remember because many ask questions that the Bible was not written to answer. Just as we will not look into a book on botany to find out how to achieve an aesthetic floral arrangement, so we should not go to the Bible for what it does not pretend to teach. The Bible does not give a scientific account of how the world began. The discipline of scientific research was not yet pioneered at the time Genesis was written. The Genesis writer, however, wants to tell us God made the world. He relates poetically that God is the sovereign Creator of the world. We

understand by the help of the Holy Spirit that as our Creator he has the sovereign right to judge our sin or to save us from its penalty. How did the world begin? There have been many theories suggested. We may never know exactly, but what the Scriptures want us to be clear about is that God created the world.

Faith in God, however, does not mean that we have to throw away our thinking caps. The Bible can take intellectual scrutiny if it is approached rightly, that is, from the angle of a theological discipline. We have to be willing to invest in good Christian literature. Biographies and testimonies may be read for edification and encouragement, but more substantial material such as those on understanding the Bible, the history of the Christian church, apologetics or Christian ethics is necessary if we want to convince ourselves, and others, of the rationality of our faith. Unfortunately, many shun the "dry and heavy stuff" because too much time and effort are required. This is where we need to change our attitude and be willing to work as hard in deepening our understanding of Christianity as we would in grappling with our other studies.

A distinctive community

The Christian does not work out his faith alone. The metaphor of the body of believers used by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians and in his first letter to the Corinthians illustrates the common identity Christians share in Christ. God has united us into a family of believers. Ours is a communal faith and we are part and parcel of the body of Christ. All Christians have a common bond in Christ. Paul also teaches that this bond crosses national and racial barriers. It is therefore understood that we all share a common identity with our fellow Christian students. This spiritual truth was

realised a long time and Christian students have been gathering to encourage one another spiritually. Today, Christian fellowships are a common feature on most campuses.

A campus Christian fellowship provides a more visible presence of God's people to others who have yet to know Jesus Christ. It is a distinctive community whose mission and aim is to be both salt and light to the campus population. It is quite different from other clubs and societies because beyond its constitutional membership, it is a spiritual community. It is the Christian student's spiritual family on campus.

The fellowship has much to offer to new students that could make their adjustment to campus life easier. The experience of generations of seniors will help each new batch of students to have a better headstart on how to get things done and to cope with balancing their faith and studies. The mutual encouragement found within the fellowship will ease the frustration of struggling with common problems which otherwise would have to be tackled alone.

The fellowship, by virtue of its years on the campus, is more effective and experienced about campus evangelism than a new student would be on his own. When we pool our resources together, we tend to be more creative and effective in our approach towards evangelism. We could choose to start from scratch on our own and fumble our way around or we could join forces with an already on-going group witness and learn to co-labour with others as an expression of our oneness in Christ. There are some who insist that an individual Christian is able to do all that a Christian fellowship could do and more. Perhaps so, but a mature Christian will not ignore a work which God has already established through the years and which continues to serve him on the campus. We need to



the church is HETEROGENEOUS

also remember that God has given us different gifts so that we could cooperate as one body (Eph. 4:1-16 and 1 Pet. 2:4-12). When we refuse to identify with an established body of believers, we are in effect denying the fact that we are already made one in Christ by virtue of our common salvation.

The campus Christian fellowship has a ministry different from the church. Whereas a church congregation is heterogeneous, the members of a campus fellowship is homogenous, comprising only tertiary students. Yet, because of the diversity of church traditions and the backgrounds of its members, the campus fellowship can be more dynamic and innovative in its manner of working. A church also has a more or less stable congregation. A para-church group, such as the campus fellowship, has a high membership turnover. This is because we have to terminate our membership when we graduate. Ultimately, no matter how supportive we are of the campus fellowship, our primary loyalty must still be with the church.

The interdenominational nature of a para-church fellowship provides invaluable exposure to the variety in God's Kingdom and the many legitimate ways to worship him. It teaches us to distinguish scripturally unchanging truths from variable traditions. People who are accustomed to having the bread and wine passed along the pews during communion may find the practice of kneeling at the altar to receive the sacraments an emotionally and spiritually uplifting experience. It enriches us when we are open to diverse experience. It can also humble us when we discover that others may have more enlightened and successful ways of doing the things that we consider ourselves to be rather familiar with. It may be confusing, and yet interesting to realize that there are so many modes of baptism, and views of women's roles and dressing in the church, even though we all preach the same gospel. It is good to have a realistic picture of the Christian community and it is a privilege to recognize differences and still be able to fellowship under the common Lordship of Christ.

Which Fellowship?

We may find more than one Christian fellowship within our campus. Generally, the differences among the groups lie in the different philosophies of work which usually stem from the unique history of each group. We should not expect to find a perfect group with everything tailored to meet with our expectations. Any fellowship that is alive to the Spirit does not strive so much to be perfect as to become more faithful. It is up to us to choose the group we feel most at home with and best able to contribute towards. It is unwise to believe we could gain more by having a finger in every group. We will end up either stretching ourselves too thinly or

failing to belong to any group. In either case, we will really achieve nothing in the long run.

It may seem like a good idea not to have any commitment to any group and to pick and choose the various meetings to attend at our convenience. Such an attitude is selfish, inconsiderate and unbecoming of a mature Christian. To allow others to work and reap the harvest at no expense to ourselves is worldly thinking. It is the surest way to destroy the effectiveness of a corporate campus witness. Unless there is a deep sense of commitment from individual students, there is no way in which we can make an impact in a secular campus. Good stewardship of the opportunity, time and talents that God has given to us means that we need to commit ourselves to a body of believers and help to fulfil the Great Commission. In the process of contributing our time and energy, God blesses by bringing us to a higher and deeper friendship with himself.

As Christian students, our presence on campus is no mere chance. God wants us here because he wants us to be salt and light to others for him. Let us take our calling seriously and prove ourselves worthy of the trust he has chosen to put in us.