

THE CALVIN LIBRARY

Henry Zylstra

A library is first of all a building, that is, a place where books are kept and where they are studied. Calvin's Hekman Memorial Library is an attractive building, is in fact quite the show-piece of our modest school plant. It is convenient and is reasonably well furnished. But it is too small, much too small. There is not room enough for the books, and there is not room enough to study them. The building served 400 students well a few years ago; it cannot serve 1,200 students well now. Every inch of stack space, that is, of shelving for the books, has been used; even doorways and aisles have had to give way to shelves. We have almost reached the point at which acquiring a new book commits us to discarding an old one. As for study space, there are chairs in the reading room for 140 students, as closely packed as spoons in a box. During the busy hours of a regular school day, each of these chairs is occupied. Even so, some students must study, elbow on chin, under the campus trees, or slumped against their lockers in the basement of the main building.

A library is also a collection of books. Do not at this point misapply Solomon about making many of them. Books, and many books, are necessary at a college. The collection at Calvin must serve the faculty and students of a four-year college of liberal arts and sciences, and the faculty and students of the Seminary, a graduate professional school. Our needs at the college are mainly for the great books, the principal conveyors of the traditions of man, the primary sources, the books of all time. Materials for specialized research, first and rare editions, collectors' items, books that are transiently contemporary, and merely technical applications of the arts and sciences, these Calvin cannot afford to have, at least not for the time being. But the standard works, that is, the works of original power and pervasive influence, these we need at Calvin, and of these we have not enough.

The books a man has in his personal library are as revealing of his interests and temper of mind as his language: look at them and you are likely to know much about the man. It is so for an institution also, and it is so for Calvin. A principle of unity is evident in our library. The books are not of one man's choosing. The several members of the faculty have done the selecting through the years. The library is therefore of corporate growth, and presumably it should continue to be. But it has its own quality, its Christian and Reformed character. So, for example, our collection is comparatively strong

in theology and philosophy. In philosophy, again, the ontological and moral is more in evidence than the empirical and aesthetic. The Dutch is prominent. There is no Spanish, and no Italian, and there is very little of the Oriental, except in its Old Testament and missionary bearings. About half of the journals received are religious publications. Moreover, a small beginning has been made towards assembling "special collections" in such areas of interest as Reformed missions, Reformed church history, and Calvinism (although even in this field



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Calvin's holdings constitute only a fraction of those at a major American university). We try to obtain the works of Calvin graduates, and hope to serve as unofficial archivist for documents of importance to the whole life of our church.

Calvin's collection of books, then, consists of approximately 32,000 volumes. That seems a lot. (The Harvard College Library has 4,702,000) and it is a lot. But it is not enough, not half enough. Comparison of the number of our holdings with that of other colleges similar in kind and scope shows up the inadequacy. The representatives of accrediting agencies regularly point it out needling and warning us to see to this matter. And we know it ourselves. We teachers are periodically embarrassed for want of sources. We make a shift, do what we can: we use Inter-Library Loan service, borrow from the Grand Rapids municipal library, make trips to universities, or ourselves buy the books we need worst. Sometimes we do without, leaning on textbook and secondary sources. It is at that point that the teaching begins to suffer.

A library, finally, is also a service. Unless the book and the borrower can be brought together promptly, the building and the collection are of little use. At this point another need enters in: the library staff. The work of ordering, purchasing, recording, classifying, cataloging, repairing, and shelving books properly, and of serving stu-

dents with counsel and aid in the book needs, is work for which the best trained in library science and the most professionally minded are not too good. Such work requires a high order of skill and competence, and requires love for the service besides. Calvin's librarian is highly trained, is devoted to her work, and she has good assistance, but the opportunities for service are infinite and the hours are limited. Plainly, money spent for an adequate staff is money well spent, for it is the book in use, the book in circulation, the book and the reader brought together in the moment of need, that is the end of it all.

So we do what we can with what we think is a serviceable little library. Meanwhile we plan and work toward better things. Immediate and pressing is the need for more stack and study space, for an enlarged building. Constant and quite as pressing is the need for more books. We aspire to larger annual allotments for the purchase of books, to ampler special collections, to equipment for exhibitions and displays, and—dare we hope for it?—to a spot of comfort and a bit of luxury in an overstuffed chair or two, say, to curl up in with a good book. We need, too, the freedom to spend for the library service. Moreover, we should like to think that the library could sometime serve those members of the faculty who want to study widely and intensively, and to publish studies in their fields. These things we need and work towards, for we feel that the library is very close to the center of our main work of teaching and learning at Calvin.

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