

A HIGH CHALLENGE FOR TOUGH TIMES

**An address given at the Reformed University Students' Conference
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**Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall,
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

Ladies and Gentlemen - and seeing as we are here on account of Jesus Christ - brothers and sisters; I should like to thank you all for coming today. This is a time in which we should all seek to encourage, and strengthen and uphold one another, in prayer and deed, and I would especially like to thank all those who have been involved in the workshops, the catering, and organisation of this conference. I would particularly like to thank my old friend, Dr. Bruce C. Wearne for all the labour and effort that he has put into making this conference possible, and the Session of the Reformed Church of Box Hill for making the venue available to us.

Bruce and I go back a long way, although I feel obliged to say that rumours that we are a sort of response to Laurel and Hardy are greatly exaggerated! After all, neither of us is that good looking! It was Bruce who asked me to speak to you this evening. Thank you Bruce, I'll try and do the same for you some time!

I'm told that a number of Asiatic traditions possess a saying that is, in fact, a curse. The curse is this: "May you live in interesting times". The idea is that change is always painful. Yet for the Christian it is not really a curse to live in interesting times. We are not bound to a view of history that sees great changes and events as inevitably marking

decline and catastrophe - in fact, we who look for the full coming of the kingdom have, in this sense, a vested interest in change.

Yet we do live in interesting times. We in Australia are living at a time when higher education is in deep crisis, its scholarly and scientific calling eroded by the imperious demands of governments to act 'in the national interest' and engage in 'practical' research that will post a prompt profit on someone's ledger. We have had more than a decade of this policy - seven lean years have been followed by seven lean years - and the damage has been considerable - and (God is not mocked) I cannot say that I have noticed much of an increase in genuine employment and useful productivity either!

Moreover, not only is Christian higher education virtually non-existent in Australia; we also have to face the fact that we live at a time when many Christians will go to great lengths to avoid anything that looks like systematic reflection on the fundamental issues raised by the structure or content of higher educational courses.

We live in a time and place when many, even those who have professed to be the followers of Jesus Christ, have come to gaze out upon a landscape of disappointment and bitterness. Churches, governments, marriages, families, businesses, colleges, schools, and institutions of all sorts, often give the impression of just hanging over the edge of the great abyss by their fingernails. And those of us who are called to live in suburbs and labour in the fields of science, scholarship, training, study, learning and teaching, are not exempt from the present tribulations. And the churches and theological colleges are not at all free from this *malaise* either - quite the contrary - often they seem to be suffering from problems of even greater significance which they lack the willingness to address.

Yet we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the world has only recently gone sour. The truth is that God's people, and especially those who prophetically tell-it-the-way-it-is in God's sight, have always had their backs to the wall. It is well for us to think on this

when we consider our poverty in Australia and New Zealand in the fields of Christian higher education and post-secondary training.

In the time that remains I would like to discuss with you the position of the Christian student in the Australian secular university; and the necessity of Christian biblically-directed higher educational endeavour.

But first I want us to hear the word of the LORD by reminding you of an interesting passage in 1 Samuel 13:19-22 where we read that:

“Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said ‘Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!’ So all Israel went down to the Philistines to have their ploughshares, mattocks, axes and sickles sharpened. The price [Oh yes - there was a price - believe it!] was 2/3 of a shekel for sharpening ploughshares and mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening for [other work]. So on the day of the battle [Oh yes - there was a battle for sure] not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand, only Saul and his son Jonathan had them”.

These Philistine interlopers in the land the LORD had promised to his people were a Hellenic warrior people from pre-classical Greece. They served false gods; and had the advantage over the LORD’s people when the two inevitably came into conflict. They had used their God-given capacities in ways that God’s people had evidently neglected.

Now it is my thesis that many young Christians become disoriented, lose their way, and become casualties as far as their faith is concerned, in the modern Australian university. I’m not talking about administration and timetabling and the increasing pressure on library resources - although these can be trials in themselves. I’m talking about the cogency and power of ideas. It is here that many are lost - some forever.

How can the genuine Christian hold on to his or her faith in the face of the seemingly formidable array of theorising, hypothesising, and evidence with undoubted conclusions,

offered by academics and their departments? How does such a Christian student deal with the apparent ability of the university to explain just about everything without reference to the biblical teaching, and then - for good measure - explain away the scriptures as simply the literary remains of an outmoded and scientifically discredited supernaturalism?

The modern university or training institution is a spiritual battlefield, and, as in the ancient times just mentioned, a battle ground on which various forms of unbelief seem to possess most if not all of the weapons - except that in our time the weapons are theories and ideas and techniques of analysis and explanation. Moreover, in many subject areas the emphasis is put on methodology and technique - leaving the fundamental pre-suppositions which lie at the basis of the relevant procedures un-examined. This applies to both academic and professional training courses. It is behind this *facade* of seemingly innocent neutrality that the pre-suppositions basic to all theorising actually lie.

Moreover, I am prepared to argue that these pre-suppositions are always of a religious nature, in that they always entail a person, or factor, or entity that is regarded as divine and therefore not dependent on anything else, and upon which all else depends. For the Christian the LORD He is God, and all else is creaturely; all else is the creation that speaks to us of His glory and majesty in so eloquent a manner. But in the modern university it is very different. There, all too often, some aspect of the creation order is itself considered divine and therefore regarded as the unchanging absolute principle upon which all else depends. Hence we have physicalism, naturalism, vitalism, historicism, socialism, materialism, capitalism; a host of 'isms that are the theoretical expressions of what the bible regards as idolatry.

There are a number of pitfalls that the Christian student can fall into when confronted with the spiritual battlefield that is the modern secular university. **Firstly**, he or she may give up the struggle, and become a casualty by accepting the basis of prevalent outlook,

and by regarding the faith as a stage in one's life to be left behind as one enters the brave new secular world.

Secondly, and this is quite frequent, he or she may seek to retain the Christian faith by restricting its applicability to church, Christian/Evangelical Union with prayer and bible study, and matters of private morality; and resolving to make no serious effort to understand the encyclopaedia of the sciences - the subjects on the curriculum - from a scripturally directed standpoint.

Many students adopt this strategy, not least because it is implied in the teaching of most churches and much 'Christian' (I would say 'sub-Christian') literature. Under such influences Christian students ditch critical reflection - which no-one is training them to do from an authentically biblical standpoint anyway - and make a straight dash to pass all the exams and get the whole business over and done with as soon as possible.

Of course, what happens here is that that portion of the student's thought and life that is shaped by the secular institution is - in effect - lost to Jesus Christ. I fear that many devout church goers - who tithe and give and contribute, have been fundamentally compromised in this way. One's discipleship is curtailed to the areas of churchly and private life. Now that is not what God wants. It makes a mockery of that earliest and most basic of Christian confessions: 'Jesus is Lord'. Mind you, it fits very well with the sort of teaching that many have received over the years anyway, and so the debilitating syndrome is perpetuated. All the same, it is not biblical.

As Christ is ours in all his roles - our Prophet to teach us, our Priest to deliver us, our King to rule over us - so we are his in every aspect of our lives. As He is ours, so we are His. We have been bought with a price; we are not our own, but wholly the bond-servants of our risen Lord - who calls us to put at his feet even the ordering and content

of our theorising -the inner structure of our understanding - as a part of our whole-hearted discipleship.

Yet, for the reasons I have mentioned, many Christian students end up never even addressing the question of the relationship between the revelation that is given to us in the scriptures, and the tasks of science and scholarship. What is he or she to do? Take on the whole university department even though one is still as yet an undergraduate? And what about those academics on campus who are professing Christians and who adopt the 'sub-Christian' standpoint and reject any attempt to relate the Christian religion to learning as unprofessional - and not the kind of thing one does if one wants promotion; or even to keep one's job?

To the student who has seen that all theorising is based upon religious pre-suppositions concerning what is divine and what is not, I would advise care and caution within the modern Australian university. **Firstly**, because modern humanistic scholarship and naturalistic science have notched up some remarkable achievements - their questionable pre-suppositions notwithstanding. **Secondly**, because blanket condemnations are unwise and not for us to make. **Thirdly**, because our higher educational system is very much stronger than Goliath; and we are not all Davids. Students should not expect to win stand-up rows with professors.

Can't I be more positive than that? Yes I can! My word is this: 'Follow your calling with every capacity that God has given you'. If you are a student, then **be** a student - without apology - for this is what the LORD is calling you to do. This means that you read; not just textbooks, but anything your teachers may have published - so you may see where they are at; and literature that addresses the problems basic to the formulation of theories in your field; and especially works by Christians that discuss critically such issues from a Christian philosophical perspective. And do as much as you can to seek out and interact, in a scholarly and reflective way, with fellow students of like mind. Yet another round of

songs in Church on a Sunday morning is *not* going to deepen the quality of your Christian thinking - but the principle of ‘where two or three are gathered together’ - an allusion to the pre-conditions for the establishment of that great educational institution known as the synagogue - applies also to Christian scholarly endeavour.

Moreover, it should be said that it is just at the point of theory analysis that the Calvinistic Reformation has produced some outstanding long-term fruits. The gradual and remarkably tenacious movement of Christian intellectual renewal that started among the Reformed in the Netherlands last century, and that has since spread to North America and elsewhere, is now making an increasingly important contribution to discussions on the status and character of theorising; and on the implications of present trends in science and technology for our global future.

If this movement has yet to develop significant depth here in Australia (and also New Zealand), it is not for reasons that are beyond historical analysis - but I don’t want to discuss *that* at *this* stage. All the same, an immense problem in our circles is that of *scholasticism* - which is not to be confused with *scholarship*. The ‘*scholasticism*’ to which I refer has a number of features, but on this occasion I would like to focus on how it deals with the relationship between religion and knowledge.

In the western intellectual tradition, religious belief has been related to the academic and scientific task in three basic ways: (1) religious rationalism, in which religion must stand or fall on the basis of human rational inquiry supposedly not in need of any divine revelation; (2) religious irrationalism, in which religion is both an optional and a self-contained ‘extra’ wholly divorced from reason, or (3) the biblical position in which divine revelation is seen as the key to all knowledge. In this latter view theory is *not* neutral and all-sufficient, and is constantly directed by religious belief.

The implications of this third position have, however, been repeatedly obscured by the rise and prevalence of a (both Catholic and Reformed) Christian scholasticism which, in regarding science and philosophy as neutral in relation to religious belief, has seriously obscured the full biblical standpoint.

Over many centuries Scholasticism has, in effect, sought to strike a compromise between the biblical view that all right understanding was dependent on our knowledge of God, and the religious rationalism of classical Greece, which proclaimed the primacy of reason in and over all knowledge.

Scholasticism appeared to have performed this impossible task by imposing a dichotomy in which faith receives a ‘super-natural’ revelation of ‘God’ and ‘the way of salvation’ while ‘reason’ was left to explain the realm of ‘nature’ according to its own supposedly independent procedures.

Yet on this model the Christian religion does not transform. Faith is nothing more than a salvation-giving supplement to ‘ordinary life’. Such a scholasticism has not only curtailed and restricted the possibility of understanding ‘all things’ from a scripturally ordered standpoint; it has also functioned to introduce into the area zoned ‘sacred’ ways of thinking actually derived from various pagan standpoints.

This is because scholasticism is a form of ‘rationalism’. It insists on interpreting the content of scripture on the basis of its (often un-examined) notion of reason. One of the more crass results is the kind of ‘systematic theology’ that uses ‘reason’ as a tool to logically re-organise the content of scripture. The bible is approached as if it were a jumbled-up jig-saw puzzle in need of the rationalising expertise of the theologian to organise the whole thing into a logically tight conceptual structure. And this can be done with little or no regard to the immense variations of literary structure and historical circumstances found within the books of the old and new testaments themselves.

There is a lot of the pagan Greek philosopher Plato in this; not least in the notion that we need to ‘escape’ from appearances to get to the ‘reality’ that lies ‘behind’ things. The massive long-term influence of Platonic concepts in Christian thinking has had much to do with why we have lost sight of the profound teachings in the bible concerning what Calvin called ‘the order of creation’. It is why we so often talk about ‘the natural’ and ‘the super-natural’ in our discourse; rather than creation and redemption. It is why we so often forget that Jesus has accomplished the redemption of the entire creation order.

Let me add: the bible was *not* written *by* theologians or *for* theologians. It was written by story-tellers, and prophets, and poets, and wise folk, and witnesses, as they were moved by the Spirit, and it was written for people. Although the text of the bible may be subjected to all sorts of scientifically disciplined analysis, the message that it brings to us does not of itself require that we possess and use any sort of scientific or technical ability, even though that message bears equally on every part of our lives - including the way we think and use our skills. What is required is that we read with hearts opened and tutored by the Holy Spirit. The preaching of the gospel through the public exposition of the scriptures must always keep this in view, and we would do well to shun any suggestion that we need any sort of expert in ‘sacred’ matters to tell us what the bible teaches. The notion of an elite class ‘skilled in sacred mysteries’ takes us back to Platonism again by way of the priestcraft of the Middle Ages.

Comparable influences are at work when I am told (in the well known chorus) that when I ‘turn my eyes upon Jesus’ and ‘look full in His wonderful face’, the ‘things of earth will grow strangely dim’. We have not learned that from the bible or from our Calvinistic heritage! Both lead us to affirm the creation - Jesus is the Light of the World - so much for ‘strangely dim’ - and there is only one thing wrong in the world, and that is sin and its consequences. It was Platonism that gave us the idea of religion as an abstract other-worldly ideal to be aspired after.

Mention of chorus singing brings me to my next point. In bible-believing Australian protestantism, the older Presbyterian and Reformed versions of scholasticism now co-exist alongside a revived fundamentalism. This is often advocated by so-called ‘charismatic’ or ‘new life’ groupings. The best of these present-day fundamentalists do at least proclaim the relevance of the bible for the whole of life, including science and scholarship. They then fall into a serious error: they start to talk as if the bible itself was some sort of actual - or potential - work of scientific reference.

That is to misuse the bible. The scriptures are indeed a light on our path; but they are not the path itself. We must always respect the religious and revelational scope and intention of scripture. The truth is that the bible does not tell us all about all things; it tells us what all things are all about. It is not scientifically encyclopaedic but religiously directive; and that is why I prefer to speak of biblically *directed* learning.

The authority of the bible is not that of a ‘super-natural’ ready reckoner. You will not settle the ‘Women in Office’ question by intently pouring over all of the biblical references to: ‘elders’ / ‘women’ / ‘ordination’ / and so forth. That is little more than textual archaeology - excavating with a lexicon or concordance and seeing what you can dig up ... when in fact what we are being called to do is to be obedient to the norm of the gospel in this twentieth century rather than to ape our or any other idea of what the first century church may have been like.¹

¹ *Addendum to the Second Edition.* My observations in this and the preceding paragraph have prompted some discussion. I am *not* suggesting here that any one specific direction or statement in scripture is to be ignored. At the same time it is, of course, important that all scripture be interpreted correctly. This means that specific directives and injunctions must be considered in context, and in their place in the full span of biblical revelation, if their abiding relevance is to be rightly understood. The basis and purpose of specific injunctions and exhortations must be grasped. We have to distinguish between the culturally conditioned manner in which the teaching is given and its abiding intention and purpose. Greeting with a holy kiss, and washing the feet of the brethren, are clear cases in point. If we fail to make this distinction we can find ourselves anachronistically acting out what we suppose to be the literal requirements prescribed in a specific passage - even as we completely miss the true point of what was written. Few Christians have insisted on literalism with any consistency; if only because the scriptures resist being construed in such a manner.

There is a biblicism that can have the effect of repressing the full effect of the gospel in human history. If anything keeps me awake at night it is how a blind traditionalism can stifle and waste the abundant gifts that Jesus has given to all of His people.

In practice both scholasticism and fundamentalism have had the effect of masking and undermining the fullness of the biblical message. As an alternative to rationalism and irrationalism I would commend you to **read the bible as directive for the religious basis of every aspect and feature of our lives - including our thinking and learning.**

All of this brings me, in conclusion, to the necessity of genuinely Christian institutions of higher education, science and scholarship. I am not talking here about a ‘TAFE’ for future office bearers in the church, but of free non-churchly institutions that will engage in a long term critical examination of the foundational assumptions that constitute the deep structure of theories in philosophy and each of the special sciences.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions arising from the Calvinistic Reformation, while they have always professed the principle of *sola scriptura*, have never understood this to require a literalistic response to the teaching of scripture. We have always understood that obedience to God’s Word written entails much more than an adherence to specific precepts; and that the drawing of general inferences is legitimate. *This enables us to discern ways of scripturally directed and ordered obedience in situations and circumstances not explicitly anticipated in scripture.* (In fact, we can see this process at work in scripture itself. Jesus did not give his disciples explicit instructions on how to live with gentile believers in the household of faith. Rather, the apostolic church found itself obliged to wrestle with the question of the status and standing of gentile believers, and this process itself expanded its understanding of the fullness and radicality of the gospel). The authority of scripture is radically (re-)directive, rather than literally prescriptive. If this were not so we who would live and think by the Calvinistic and reformational (*reformatorische*) understanding of *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura* would be unable to bring the scriptures to bear upon the totality of our lives in the modern post-apostolic world. In this respect, Christians of the Reformed and Presbyterian persuasion, who have inherited and retained the Calvinistic view of biblical authority, are in a position to understand and apply the teaching of the scriptures more fully and authentically than those who insist on a literal adherence to explicit injunctions. Accordingly, and in line with the whole body of scriptural teaching concerning the people of God as a covenant people, we are right to baptise the babies of believing parents even though there is no N.T. text that says: “Thou shalt baptise infants”. We are not Baptists or ana-Baptists, who for their part (if they remain consistent to the hermeneutic that makes them baptists), cannot *consistently* adhere to what may be termed the ‘reformational’ (*reformatorische*) standpoint.

‘Economic Rationalism’ - for example, is the public policy outcome of one such theory. The kind of public Christian scholarship that we need to envisage would analyse critically the very structure of the questions asked - rather than churn out slick answers to profound problems. I am not talking about a quick-fix: what is needed is for an older and younger generation to work side by side on the scholarly task.

While I believe that the churches should support such a project, it is also true that biblically directed science and scholarship must needs be free to follow its calling before the face of God without the control or constraint of state or church or commerce. Such a calling in higher education should be approached with a humble yet thankful confidence. We should not forget the extent to which truth and clarity and accuracy have been fostered in science by the influence of Christianity. Indeed, the Christian religion, when rightly understood and practised, has never been on the side of ignorance and obscurantism. “All this sounds wonderful”, you might say, “but is it practical? And what about missions and evangelism as ever-urgent priorities?”.

I am convinced that a long term theorising that seeks to be intrinsically scriptural - and not just use a Christian sounding terminology - can have a way of setting our whole consciousness more fully in accord with what the LORD wants in our lives. Dividing things up between ‘natural’ and ‘super-natural’ has so often led evangelicalism to preach something less than the full gospel. In missions it has served to open up in the lives of converts a void that can be promptly filled with un-biblical concepts and practices. In this respect scholasticism can function as a seed-bed for the very secularisation with which we struggle.

Something very similar can be said about evangelism at home: we can end up preaching a gospel that leads to church-going and private devotions. A recovery of the biblical teaching of the creation order; and of the depth and fullness of the deliverance offered to us in the gospel, would produce a very different kind of evangelism. If our lives were

touched by these things - then I think that men and women would just ache to be as whole, as integrated, as relaxed, as creative and as purposeful as we ourselves would be.

I am not suggesting that Christian philosophers and theorists should be there to tell people what to think and how to do their jobs. We can do without yet another petty tyranny - and such an expectation is based upon a serious misconception of what is involved. The fruits of the kind of scholarship that I envisage here are not for authoritarian imposition or commercial sale. They are free. And they enrich and deepen the lives and testimony of all who draw upon them. Those who seek to offer Christian leadership in politics, the professions, and business, should not be left to do so without relevant, critically sharp, and rigorously formulated structural insight; but it remains their office to reflect and act upon the content and implications of such insight before the face of the LORD. We are all members of one body. We are called to work together - to honour the LORD by creatively blending all the gifts that we have received.

Finally, let me remind you that the risen Christ has commanded us, his disciples, as His body, to take the good news to every creature, for all things - including science and scholarship - now belong to Him. We are His servants in His creation. May we not neglect this word as it applies in and to higher education and may God bless us in all our thinking, our teaching, and our learning.