

Learn to Live: The Future of Theology in Australia

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St Peter's Cathedral, Adelaide

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1 Corinthians 1:18-35

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age?

Four years ago I had the privilege of holding a residential fellowship for three months at the Folger Shakespeare Library in the United States. This organisation was founded by an oil magnate and his wife and wholly dedicated to the life, works and legacy of William Shakespeare. It is an incredible place both for the richness of its collections, and for the community of scholars it attracts.

One Professor I met there asked what I did, and I explained that I was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia. I was expecting she might remark, "You're a *Vice-Chancellor!*" Instead, she exclaimed "A *University* of Divinity!" She couldn't hide her skepticism. Why on earth would we need a whole *University* of Divinity, rather than just a faculty?

I might as well have told her that I was CEO of the University of Foolishness. And, standing here in academic dress on a hot summer's evening in Adelaide, perhaps I am!

Still – the question of tonight's reading haunts us. Where is the one who is wise? The book that I was writing at the Folger Library is about commemoration, about how past generations seek to be remembered by the future. At the heart of this historical theme is a theological principle, expressed in the scripture we will hear again next week on Ash Wednesday "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return".

The ultimate truth all humans must confront is that we will all die. Until relatively recently, a critical theme of education, of religion, was preparation for death, living in light of our mortality. In medieval Europe this was encapsulated in the arts of death, or *memento mori*, which taught people how to die well. My argument tonight is that in financially rich societies such as our own, theology is the only discipline left that can prepare us for our fate. I therefore argue for a renewed purpose theology must fulfil in this present, apocalyptic age: to teach us to learn to live. In its attention to God, to life in this world, and to life in the world that is to come, Christian theology offers tools to the church, and through it to the wider community, in how to learn to live.

Australia's history readily accounts for the peculiar, perhaps even foolish, conditions that led to the creation in Australia of a University of Divinity. When the first Universities were established in this land in the nineteenth century, they were to be entirely secular institutions in which divinity, or theology, was expressly excluded from the curriculum. This was often with the support of Christian leaders who participated fully in their creation, such as Bishop Augustus Short who held a pivotal role as first vice-chancellor of the University of Adelaide.

The exclusion of theology from our Universities was for two reasons: first, which theology would be taught? Catholic or Protestant? Eastern or Western? Jewish, Christian or Muslim? If theologians of different Christian traditions couldn't even sit in the same room together agree about the content of the curriculum, a university theology course would simply propagate sectarian conflict at the taxpayers' expense.

Second, wasn't theology a foolish legacy from a pre-modern age, an unscientific discipline founded on superstition that had no practical purpose?

Yet Australia still needed clergy for its churches, and they required theological education and ministerial formation for their ordination candidates. So individual churches founded their own colleges, such as St Barnabas here in Adelaide. It was for this reason that the University of Divinity was established in 1910 in Melbourne by an ecumenical group of churches, who successfully persuaded their own members, the University of Melbourne, and the Victorian Parliament of the need for an Australian institution which could provide Australian theology degrees for Australian ministers.

Fast forward a hundred years and we can look back on an extraordinary story of resilience and achievement across the whole theological education sector in this land, thanks to the dedication of church leaders and academic staff. Australian theological institutions are made of hardy stuff, holding as they do the DNA of their partner churches. Theology is the most industry-led part of Australia's higher education system: theological colleges, libraries and universities exist solely because of the extensive investment of the churches. This is in fact the envy of my colleagues in many secular universities!

Ours is also an unusually ecumenical story. In this University, we hold together Protestant, Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The theological diversity of those who gather in classes or around board room tables may seem unremarkable to us, but it was unthinkable just sixty or seventy years ago when we were still throwing stones at each other, whether through ignorance or hate.

And so we have been creative, agile even, in providing theology degrees for Australian clergy through a variety of means for the past century. Yet our story is also one of failures.

First, theology has facilitated harm. Think of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and our many failures, from looking the other way, not asking the right questions, not walking the talk, all the way through hypocrisy to evil. What was remiss in our theological institutions and approaches to ministry training that allowed such evil to occur?

At the same time, we have often been too risk-averse, teaching theology the same way it's been done for decades, and allowing theology to be irrelevant, even harmless. Theology should not be harmless. It should be a matter of consequence, and not only within the walls of the churches. Think, for example, of the ordination of women in the Anglican Church, and the huge theological work which both imagined this change and brought it into being.

The greatest flaw in Australian theological education, scholarship and research is that until very recently it has been almost entirely derivative, driven by European and North American conversations and priorities, with almost no Indigenous content and very little attention to this region of the globe. Thankfully this is at last starting to change. I acknowledge the persistence of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders who for generations have been calling for justice in our theological institutions. With extraordinary generosity and patience, Indigenous theologians are beginning to be heard in ways that are vital for the future of this nation – for after all, as the Statement from the Heart puts it, sovereignty is a spiritual notion – and for the future of theology around the globe as we learn ancient ways to read the Bible, to encounter Jesus, and to discern the work of the Spirit.

So tonight, as we celebrate the students, graduates and staff of St Barnabas College and their contributions to the church and wider community; as we look with hope to this new relationship between St Barnabas and the University of Divinity, where might the future of theology lie? What might we be called to do together in the next step on our journey?

I was brought up in a household of Trinitarian theologians, so I am going to set out a triple framework for answering this question.

First, our approach to theology needs to be foolish, radical and collaborative. By foolish, I mean marked according to God's standards not the immediate priorities of our world. By radical, I mean pruning back to the root, the radix, to first principles, to our fundamental purposes and being willing to remove some branches to make way for new growth. By collaborative, I mean working across boundaries and divisions for the good of the whole Body of Christ and the world in which we live.

To put it another way, theological education needs to be apostolic, contextual and formative. By apostolic, I mean the fundamentals of our faith – our mission as set out in the scriptures and creeds. By contextual, I mean able to connect to this time and place; to be able to be understood and to take root. By formative, I mean education that changes us, that transforms who we are personally and collectively.

Foolish, radical, collaborative; apostolic, contextual, formative. What might this look like in terms of what we deliver at St Barnabas and across the University?

We still need to prepare people for ordained and lay ministries in the Church. We still need Australian theology degrees for Australian ministry. What this looks like, however, will be increasingly different from the picture of the last 50 to 150 years. For the people the Church is calling to recognised ministry bring a very different set of knowledges and experiences. We need to meet them where they are, and give them the tools and knowledges to serve God in this time and place. For some, that will still mean a three-year degree in theology, including Greek and Hebrew, but also Indigenous studies. For others, that may mean theology in the field as part of a well-designed package of work-integrated learning.

There is a huge and increasing need in the caring professions, especially in church schools and agencies that were once led by clergy and staffed by people of faith, for professional education that provides the necessary skills but also an essential understanding of the mission that drove these organisations in the first place. It's for this reason that we've set up the School of Professional Practice at the University, to concentrate resources from across the Colleges as we seek to empower professionals to transform communities and to be a place where work and purpose meet.

Finally, we need to reconnect with the unique wisdom of theology that points beyond ourselves and beyond our immediate moment to the greater good of human flourishing and the truly good life. This is the realm of true education for living. Theology, like philosophy and ethics, helps us to ask the biggest questions of well: why are we here? what is our purpose? how can we serve the common good? In the digital age, when artificial intelligence will shortly be able to do most things for us and instead of us, it is vital that we equip children and young adults with theological tools that can help them appreciate, develop and enjoy the gift of being human.

*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;
God chose what is low and despised in the world,
things that are not, to abolish things that are,
so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*