

AUT Thanksgiving Service

Does the study of theology belong in a university?

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? What has faith to do with reason?

You may say the world's oldest universities started with faculties of theology.

But that is only half the story.

Over time these same universities dismissed that which was not seen as reasonable. Athens reigned supreme over Jerusalem as doctrines such as the virgin birth and the resurrection were redefined or even dismissed as irrational

Denominations moved away from the university for training people for ministry.

Although the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne both had Faculties of Divinity, as the tide of higher criticism rose, denominations saw them as less than optimal for ministry training.

1891 was a watershed year in this movement. In that year, Moore College moved to its current site next to, but not in, the University of Sydney. The Baptist Union opened a college in Melbourne. And Australia's largest denomination, the Church of England, established a body known as the Australian College of Theology.

So why would we re-enter the world of the University?

Yes, we are not a public university - we will maintain control.

Yes, at one level, little is changing - we have been a Higher Education Provider for many years.

Yes, there is a place for theology in the University sector, we do need to give the reason for the hope that we have.

As we give thanks tonight for university status, it's also good for us to pause and to focus our attention on our identity and our mission by looking at 2 Timothy 2.

Granted the apostle is not addressing the inauguration of a university in 2 Timothy 2. But he is giving important principles for training up Christian leaders.

The chapter begins **v2 the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.**

This is about the recruitment and training of gospel workers, that is key to our work. So as Paul writes this his final letter from prison in Rome, as he awaits his execution, there is much that we can glean from what he says to his son in the faith, Timothy.

It is not insignificant for us that Timothy is in Ephesus, the place where Paul had begun a small theological college in the Hall of Tyrannus where he taught daily for two years. Graduates of that school included men like Epaphras who had planted churches in Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. Luke tells us **Acts 19:10 all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord** because of what was achieved in the Tyrannus Theological College.

Tonight I want to focus on three things for us to remember from 2 Timothy 2.

1. Remember the centrality of the gospel. **V8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel,**

Unlike public universities, the AUT is an affiliation of evangelical colleges.

I know the word evangelical has different meanings in different contexts; it's a word that has been politicised, weaponised and used to exclude. But in its original context, evangelical is about the Gospel. Evangel comes from the Greek word for good news, gospel, which is defined for us in **v8** as the resurrection of Jesus, a descendent of David.

It is prudent to note that when theological education lost its way in the university, it was on these two points: the historicity of Jesus and bodily the resurrection. The Jesus of history was replaced by the Christ of Faith. The Resurrection was redefined as spiritual immortality. Belief in miracles was seen as irrational.

To say the AUT is all about Christian theology is not sufficient, it needs definition. Every university in Australia focuses on Christianity. It is not possible to study history, philosophy, literature, music, architecture, ethics, law without recognising the impact of Christianity on Western society. Every university talks about Christianity. Every university talks about Jesus. But that which distinguishes the AUT is that we proclaim a gospel firmly rooted in history, in **Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.**

At a pragmatic level, it's good to remember that the denial of the historicity of Jesus is the first step to the death of any Theology Faculty. Charles Sherlock in his book *Uncovering Theology* tells us that prior to WW1 there were 3,300 students studying in the six public universities in Australia: the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. How many of these universities still have faculties of Divinity? I search the websites of each of these university to find the answer. None of them. Indeed when I typed "Divinity" into the website for The University of Melbourne, it didn't even recognise the word but asked "did you mean diversity"? So I typed "theology" and it asked me "did you mean technology"?

But it is not just for pragmatic reasons that we affirm the historicity of Jesus. It's an issue of theological identity. It is deliberate that the new crest of the AUT has an open Bible at its centre. The first thing that we state in our constitution is our Christian foundation, I quote "The Australian University of Theology obeys the commands of Christ, teaches His doctrine and follows and upholds his discipline." We are a university of theological conviction, grounded in the gospel of the person of Jesus, born of a woman, crucified under Pontius Pilate, risen from the dead. At the core of our identity are the words of **V8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.**

2. Remember we are dealing with the things of God

Paul goes on to divide people into one of two categories: unapproved workers and approved workers. Listen to what Paul says about unapproved workers in **vv14 Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.**

How do you apply that to a university of Theology? **Do not quarrel about words.** At one level that's what we do. How many PhDs have been written on the meaning of just one word? Students often complain that the 100,000 word-limit is too restrictive to define the word.

But there is the world of difference between worshipping God with our minds and just quarrelling over words. Of constantly looking for something new. We are not a Faculty of English literature where we redefine words with an Alice in Wonderland approach to Exegesis. We are dealing with the things of God.

There is a difference between worshipping the Lord with our mind and worshipping ourselves with our research and scholarship.

There is a difference between scholarship that builds up the church and scholarship that builds up the scholar.

In **v16,17** Paul tells us that quarrelling about words, what the ESV translates **irreverent babble** of the unapproved worker leads to a gangrene, that kills life.

That does not mean that we eschew scholarship. We need to study the Scriptures.

Jesus tells us in **Mark 12:30** to **love the Lord your God with all your mind**

But we study with reverence and humility as approved workers for the glory of God.

We should push each other academically. If you are the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room. But the fruit of this is humility, not arrogance.

v15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

In a secular world, scholarship may be divorced from the scholar, but if our scholarship is ministry, grounded in the gospel of the Lord Jesus, such a divorce is not possible, our scholarship is tied to what we believe and how we behave.

3. Remember we are about forming ministers of the gospel

I am using that word "minister" in a very broad sense, not just about clergy.

When it comes to Christian ministry, character is king.

A ministry may flourish without knowledge of the aorist participle; but it will not flourish without sanctified Christian behaviour.

Theology is transformational. We are about theological formation.

The best theological program cannot totally prepare students for Christian ministry.

What we can do is to give the tools to handle correctly the word of truth. These include original languages, exegesis, hermeneutics, Systematic Theology, Church History. But these are not ends in themselves, they are tools for a larger picture.

To develop theology that points to the Triune God who transforms character.

At an AUT graduation, we are not dealing with finished products.

We can all tell of stories of those who finished college with an average GPA but finished their ministries 40 years later with distinction. The tools they had received in their education were a big part of that ministry, but they were not the whole story.

We can also tell stories of those who graduated with distinction but went off the rails.

In our passage we are given a negative example of how theology forms character. We are introduced to a man named Hymenaeus who is teaching that the resurrection has already taken place. This is probably some Greek notion of resurrection as release from physical embodiment. A false theology that devalues the body and leads to behaviour that is not to be tolerated. It's not the first time we meet this man: in 1 Timothy Paul says that Hymenaeus should be handed over to Satan. His theology is leading to damnable behaviour.

Theology is formative of behaviour. What we believe impacts how we live. And Paul now gives an illustration of how good theology brings honourable behaviour. **vv20,21 In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.**

If you have a saucer that is used to feed the cat, if you put it in through the dishwasher, on an extra hot setting, you can use it now on special occasions. Maybe if the VC of the AUT drops in for a cup of tea.

The old chair in the garage, if restored can take pride of place in the lounge room for James to sit on. The point is clear. Theology is transformational.

Good theology will point sinners to the sanctifying work of the Spirit. And that will have transformational impact in vessels used for special purposes.

According to Wikipedia, 23,000 people have graduated from the ACT. To some extent, what they are doing reflects back on the education they received. Among them are ministers, elders, theologians, Bible translators, politicians and authors. They work in hospitals, schools and aged care and Sunday Schools. All theology is transformational - whether for good or for bad. For us knowledge is not divorced from theological conviction and resulting behaviour. **Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.**

We need to remember that we are a university that is grounded in the Gospel. We need to remember that we are university that is not just arguing over words as an academic pursuit, but we are dealing with the things of God as it **correctly handles the word of truth.**

We need to remember that we are a university concerned with forming ministers of the gospel, that good theology brings transformation.

That is what the AUT is on about – our identity and our mission.

What a privilege to be involved with the AUT!

What a responsibility!

What a cause for prayer in dependence on Divine Grace!

What a reason for thankfulness!