



## DON'T WASTE A CRISIS

- *By Andrew Katay, CEO, City to City Australia*

I remember the first time I heard the phrase, 'Don't waste a crisis'. It was in the thick of the GFC, the world seemed to be collapsing around us, and I was immediately struck by two conflicting reactions

- on the one hand, this was utter foolishness, possibly even cruel. How could someone talk like this when there was real pain happening to real people. Surely we needed to spring into action, shore up our position, guard what little was left.
- at the same time, I realized that this was brilliant. Hidden in many crises is an opportunity, if only we have the presence of mind, or perhaps confidence in the sovereign goodness of God, to see it. It was something of a bitter pill, but not wasting a crisis made a lot of sense.

I'd suggest the we live in a culture in crisis. I don't mean particularly the current misery the nation is enduring in relation to the redefinition of marriage to include same sex couples; that's just the tip of the cultural iceberg. Rather, what I have in mind is a much more profound loss of any coherence we have as a society, any common vision of what it is to be a society and what a life well lived is.

Tim Keller summarizes Charles Taylor's monumental work *A Secular Age*, by identifying the four shared cultural narratives according to which people now live their lives, conduct their loves and make their decisions, and so constitute this culture in crisis.

- The identity narrative paints the picture of brave but isolated individuals, finally freed from the cloying constraints of external expectations and demands, able to construct their own identity on the basis of their deepest and truest feelings. But of course, knowing what those feelings are, and keeping them the same across the decades, and so sustaining a coherent life, is an impossible dream. And we yearn for coherence.
- The morality narrative follows directly, and holds that every person must have the right to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, and any attempt to impose a right or a wrong on others is just a power play, a restriction of freedom and intrusion into their personhood. But at the same time, those very notions of the proper use of power, the reality and expression of freedom and the dignity of personhood themselves contain assertions about right and wrong. What's more, we have become a massively moralistic culture, with condemnation after condemnation flowing all over professional and social media, and yet without any basis on which to build those moral judgments. And we yearn for a sustaining vision of what is right and good.

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- The community narrative goes the next step and says that the only way for a society made up of such individuals to get along with each other is by means of what Taylor calls absolute negative freedom. That is, everyone is absolutely free to do whatever they want, as long as it doesn't hurt someone else. But of course, this 'you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone' can never actually sustain a society, it can never build community, for the simple reason that all it does it leave people alone. And we yearn for community.
  - And finally, the truth narrative invites us to stop arguing about opinions and to recognize that there is only one real source for truth and that is the facts, rather than values, the facts of science not the opinions of others. And it's true that the facts of science have done incredible things, from medicine to engineering to agriculture. But of course, while science is immensely powerful in its sphere, its sphere is a strictly limited one, and can never tell us anything about how to live. As one philosopher put it, you can't reason from what is to what ought to be, and you can only know whether a hammer, or for that matter a human being, is a good hammer or human being if you know what a hammer or a human being is for, what its purpose is, and science can never tell us about purpose. And we long for purpose.

You don't need to be a PhD in sociology to recognize these ways of thinking about our world. You hear words to these effects at coffee shops and see them endlessly given as axioms in Facebook discussions and used as bludgeons on QandA, if you still watch it. But for all their banality, the fact is that behind these verbal walls, more or less everyone yearns for a life that is coherent and good and meaningful, lived out in a context of rich community. And yet right now, as a culture we haven't got the faintest clues what those terms mean, or even how we would go about defining them, let alone the inner spiritual resources to achieve them. That's our crisis.

Its symptoms are all around. The anger which characterizes so much of what passes for debate is an indication that people have no idea how to talk outside of their own echo chambers. The facile nature of so much of our gotcha politics, where the primary ask of our rulers seems to have become to keep the other team out, especially if it turns out that they are dual citizens, rather than actually make good public policy. The attention deficit disorder suffered by our media, which means that no topic lasts more than 5 paragraphs or 3 days, and information, real important information about real and important events, becomes just another form of entertainment. In the epidemic of mental health disorders, the ever increasing incidence of depression and suicide, the serious consideration of euthanasia, as though the best way we know to handle suffering is to kill the sufferers, endless use of schooling and education as an ideological battlefield, and on and on and on. I don't think it's a stretch to say that we live in a culture in crisis.

And what's crucial now is that as Christians, as people committed to the living and true God and his purposes for his world, we don't waste this crisis. Our track record here is not stellar. In the early part of the twentieth

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century there was an early earth tremor of the cultural quake that we now face, in what has come to be called the Fundamentalist controversy. In the face of sustained attack by anti-Christian modernists, wielding especially the weapon of Darwin's notion of evolution, we retreated, failing to understand what was really happening, and just shouted Jn 14.6 - I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me' - more and more loudly. We lost the intellectual battle because we didn't even really understand what it was about, and merely hunkered down.

Mind you, I suspect that's better than an earlier moment of crisis, with the emergence of modern science, particularly under the astonishing work of Isaac Newton. As Michael Buckley points out in his book 'At the origins of Modern Atheism', the response was not retreat but accommodation, and the attempt to argue for Christian truth on the basis of a scientific starting point, rather than a gospel starting point. So that it was no real surprise that that what emerged for the first time in history was an intellectually credible scientific atheism.

But if we reach further back, right back to the 3rd and 4th centuries we find another moment of crisis, which provided an opportunity to which the church fathers responded brilliantly. In his book, *The one, the three and the many*, former professor of theology at Kings College London Colin Gunton shows how that world reached a point of crisis, an inability to reconcile two competing and incompatible visions of life and reality. I won't go into the details, but Gunton demonstrates how those theologians deployed the resources that they found in the gospel, and specifically the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, to basically solve the fundamental problem of that culture. They didn't simply rehearse old platitudes, it was a genuinely creative word that was needed. But it was creative in a way that didn't sell out, that didn't simply accommodate the culture around them. They out thought and then they outloved the culture, and so won it for Christ.

That is how not to waste our current crisis. We need to outthink and to outlove. To demonstrate in our words and our deeds that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is to be found all the things for which we yearn, even if in many ways those yearnings will be transformed by Jesus when we encounter him. What I'm suggesting is doing for our own day and time what the Apostle Paul describes in this way in 2 Cor 10:

*Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

Oh yes, we are in a war, a gospel war waged not according to human standards, the kind of standards we see on Facebook posts and the newspaper comments section, but rather a battle in the shape of the cross.

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Which is where BCSA comes in.

I am convinced that fundamental to that war is the kind of work that Bible colleges do in equipping leaders of God's people to out-think and out-love the world.

- on the one hand, Bible colleges need to lead the out-thinking our culture. There's a reason that so often the church's response to challenge or opportunity is to retreat into obscurantism and just yell a little louder, or to sell out in the name of relevance, and chameleon like simply mirror the culture back to itself. It's not that people who do those things intend to squander the opportunity, it's perhaps not even that they would recognize that in fact that's what they are doing. It's just that those options are genuinely difficult to avoid. It takes deep understanding, sustained reflection, penetrating analysis of our culture, and profound knowledge of the Bible and Christian thought to do better. I suggest to you that a Christian community's theological and missional depth can never exceed that of its Bible college - that's how central they are. What's more, it's crucial that that take place at the local level. The texture of the culture in Adelaide is different from Melbourne or Sydney, or Hobart or Newcastle for that matter. I've been to Adelaide around 20 times over the last two and half years, and every time I learn some new nuance to the Adelaidian culture, mainly as I make some appallingly predictable Sydney sider's faux pas. No, local theologians, who love and breathe the local cultural atmosphere, are needed to lead in the task of out thinking that culture.
- But out-thinking is not enough. We also got to out-love the culture. As the Apostle Peter puts it, to 'Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.' Listen to how sociologist Rodney Stark describes the lives of those sisters and brothers: "Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fire, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services. . . . For what they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable." Leading Christian communities to live like this, with this depth of compassion, this wisdom in welcome, this sacrificial spirit, that too is core business for Bible colleges. That's their work, to be in the business of forming theological practitioners, pastor reflectors, who can mobilize the gifts, passions and opportunities of the communities they lead to win the city for Christ.

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The fact is that any movement depends on its leadership for its fruitfulness, and the movement of the gospel we call church is no exception to that. And make no mistake. The church is God's Plan A, and there is no Plan B. 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it'. BCSA is uniquely positioned as a fundamental instrument of training and equipping leaders of the church in South Australia, and an investment in BCSA is one of the most strategic gospel investments you could possibly make, now in this moment of crisis, more than ever.

A friend of mine serves as a gospel leader in China, and he made a comment which struck me insightful. He said that Confucianism and Taoism had failed China, failed to sustain its soul, and so it turned to communism. But now it was apparent that Communism had failed China, and that right now, the soul of China was empty. In other words, he was talking about China's crisis. And he went on today that therefore, right at this moment was an opportunity, because China would either fill its soul with a version of capitalism and materialism, or it would fill its soul with Christ. And so he has dedicated his life, his resources, his capacity to doing all that he can to bring Christ to China. He is deeply involved in theological education as fundamental to that.

The soul of our nation is empty. Postmodernism has done the only kind of work it was ever going to do, which was to tear down and destroy the hubris and foolishness of modernism, and we see the cultural rubble around us. In that sense, post-modernism was a friend to the gospel, precisely because modernism was no friend at all. But now is the time for a new task. The task of building.

It will take the whole team to wage the gospel warfare, to deploy divine power, to take every thought captive to Christ. And right at the centre of that team will be local theological colleges. I can't tell you how delighted I am that BCSA is positioned in Adelaide to make its contribution to movement of gospel in South Australia and beyond, and that it has a community of support like this around it.