



BCSA PARTNERSHIP DINNER 2018

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Principal

Thank you so much for being with us at this year's Bible College SA Partnership Dinner. We are here together tonight with the College in our minds, but I want to say that really, our most important concern is not actually the College—or any other institution—but the Kingdom of God, and its progress here in our city, in our state and in the world beyond.

We live in changing—and challenging—times. As I, and others, often point out, we seem to be at the crossover point marking the end of Christendom, and the beginning of the post-Christendom era - an era that contains things that we do not yet fully know or understand. We are now rapidly leaving behind the time when our country—and, indeed, our civilisation—identifies with the Christian faith. Christianity has profoundly shaped our history, but it is in rapid decline - at least as a cultural phenomenon. It is now only a small proportion of the population that has any active involvement in church, and society at large is proactively rejecting the faith at every level.

There are, of course, still many, many of us who live lives of faith in Jesus. There are still, of course, many churches that continue to stand firm in the gospel of Christ. But we are in a time of re-understanding our relationship with the culture around us. We are losing our privileges, and many of us fear losing our basic rights too: The right to speak freely of Jesus and of his call on all people. The right to hold views contrary to those of mainstream society without derision or even persecution. The right to raise our children to believe what we believe, rather than what the ever-more liberal state tells us we should believe.

In this environment, many churches, Christian organisations, and individual believers, are trying to work out how they need to adapt and grow to get by and to be fruitful for the Lord. Sadly, in some cases, they are choosing to adopt a kind of Christianity that is not really biblical, and that therefore has no long-term prospects. You see, there are many different version of Christianity that get peddled around at times like these, but not all of them are true to Jesus, and those that aren't will not be honoured by Jesus on the last day. I also think that they are unlikely to thrive or even survive into the generations ahead anyway.

Let me tell you about some of those Christianities that we might see around us today, but that I feel are unlikely to thrive.

Champagne Christianity is unlikely to thrive. This is the version of Christianity that has had its heyday in high Christendom, where bishops hob-nobbed with state governors, where the local vicar had a very comfortable living indeed, and where the people went to church on Sunday morning, and then enjoyed fine red wines and imported cheeses for supper that night. It is the Christianity of power, privilege and prosperity, and those who trust in it will be sadly let down in the decades ahead. Why won't it thrive? Because the privileges that it loves are likely to be stripped away in the years ahead. The tax breaks, the seat at the big table and the position beyond public accountability are unlikely to last. But we don't despair, because this is not biblical Christianity, and we are not hoping that this is what thrives.

Desk-Calendar Christianity is unlikely to thrive. This is the Christianity that can quote one or two feel-good verses from the Bible and that enjoys the 'vibe' of the Christian faith, but that does not know the story of the Scriptures, cannot tell Peter's writings from Paul's, does not know even the most basic theology, and that could not offer even the most basic defence of the faith to those who inquire. Why won't it thrive? Because even though one generation may be able to maintain a faith like this, they will find that they have very little of substance to pass onto the generations that follow. A hollow shell of a much fuller truth. But we don't despair, because this is not the fulness of biblical Christianity, and we are not hoping that this is what thrives.

UnChristian Christianity is unlikely to thrive. This is that distortion of the faith that bends to the point of blessing sin and that ultimately says that what we believe can be compromised for the sake of peace with the unbelieving world around us. It is the Christianity that changes its sexual ethics when mainstream culture says that it should. It is the Christianity that says that people can fruitfully pursue any and all paths to truth so long as they have peace within themselves. It is the Christianity that says what God says doesn't matter so much that we should make a big fuss about it. Why won't it thrive? Because in the end, it is a Christianity that blurs into mainstream society, and while its motivation might be to build bridges and break down barriers, what it really does is take away the distinct identity of the people of God and the uniqueness of Christian belief so it offers no particular reason for anyone to adopt or embrace the faith anymore. But we don't despair, because this is far from biblical Christianity, and we are not hoping that this is what thrives.

Fearful Christianity is unlikely to thrive. This is the version of the faith that lives in constant fear about the unknown, fear of change, fear of a world that is unlike the world it grew up in. This is the Christianity that wants to turn the clocks backwards to a time when people believed by default, when we didn't have to deal with the outworkings of the sexual revolution or of immigration from every corner of the globe. This Christianity often believes that politics or conservative social policy will save us, and that it is more necessary to hold social ground and argue against progressive voices than it is to evangelise with the assumption that the message of Jesus is completely unknown to many in our communities. Why won't it thrive? Because it is so disconnected from culture and it is quite uncreative when it comes to reimagining the ways that the gospel might fruitfully engage today's world. It fails to recognise that the faith can flourish in radically different cultural contexts, and with many possible different relationships to the state. Indeed in some cases it may fail to realise that the Western church is now heading into times that are, in fact, far more like New Testament times than the times than it has enjoyed over the last centuries. But we don't despair because biblical Christianity is not culturally-bound Christianity, and we are not hoping that this is what thrives.

Event Christianity is unlikely to thrive. This is the Christianity that depends on the huge conference, the international speaker, the annual ecumenical gathering, the short-term mission trip and the well-branded worship concert. These are the sorts of events that deliver the adrenaline rush, the emotional high, the special memories, the connections with famous people, or the chance to take time out with friends from distant places. Of course, none of these things are bad in and of themselves—indeed, they can be very good—but neither are any of them the bread and butter of Christian living. Instead, they are more like the icing on the cake. So why won't this Christianity thrive? Because icing without cake rests on very little and offers very little nourishment. It does not feed and sustain believers through the daily grind. Worse than this, it can actually make the regular patterns of Bible study, private prayer, self-discipline and long-suffering service seem boring. But we don't despair because this is not biblical Christianity, and we are not hoping that this is what thrives.

Despite the fact that none of these Christianities are likely to thrive, we have great hope because there is a Christianity that we know can. It is the Christianity that does not look for material prosperity, but hopes in the Kingdom of heaven. It is that Christianity that does not just know the odd Bible verse, but that lives and breathes the Scriptures. It is that Christianity that does not let the culture decide how it should define itself, but that adheres to the faith once revealed no matter how unpopular that might become. It is the Christianity that does not live in fear, but in the great confidence that the purposes of our sovereign God will most certainly prevail, even if the culture around us changes beyond recognition. It is the Christianity that does not depend on the special occasions, but that adheres to healthy patterns and routines of discipleship each and every day. It is the Christianity that is unashamedly and unambiguously focussed on Christ alone as Lord and Saviour, and on the Bible as the Word of God that reveals who he is and who we are before him. It is the historical mainstream Christianity whose doctrines, disciplines and devotions can be traced back to the time of the Lord himself. It is at the same time the Christianity that is quite comfortable in changing contexts, being no more anchored to the cultures of the past than the present - it is equally at home anywhere, because it knows that its true home is elsewhere. It is the Christianity that is as comfortable with a little as with a lot and with rejection as with acceptance. It is all of this because sees and lives everything through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who leads his people through any and all humiliation and suffering into sure and certain hope. It is, in short, a more biblical Christianity.

This Christianity exists in faithful and healthy churches and ministries. And, in God's economy, those churches and ministries thrive under faithful and healthy leadership that loves and cares for the people and work of God just as Jesus did. It is, therefore, not by accident that the New Testament says as much as it does about Christian leadership. The truth is that few churches or ministries rise above their leaders; something we all know well from our own experiences. Underprepared leaders fail to disciple, comfort, teach, correct, direct, evangelise, encourage or model what we need to thrive as God's people. But those who are ready for their work train, guide, love, care for, build up and prune in line with God's purposes. They call people to faith, bring believers to maturity and help them persevere until their end.

And of course, this is where Bible College SA comes in. Again, we do not exist for our own sake. We have no interest at all in just continuing on as a viable institution apart from our Kingdom purpose. No. Our express purpose is to prepare the next generations of gospel workers for Adelaide, South Australia and beyond. That is, our goal is simply to supply the churches and ministries of our city, state and world with more and ever-better equipped pastors, chaplains, youth workers,

missionaries, children's ministers, Bible-study leaders, elders, corporate worship coordinators and church planters so that healthy and faithful Kingdom works not only survive but thrive in our generation and in the next.

The way we prepare people is by offering integrated programs of Bible study, theological formation and ministry training at the highest levels, and taught face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder, day in day out, by teachers and trainers of the highest calibre. On our team, we have people with doctorates from the best universities in world and people who have served in coal-face ministry leadership here in South Australia for decades. We have staff that do not just teach our students, but who love them and invest in them personally, knowing the sheep by name.

God is not at all taken by surprise at the end of Christendom. God knows what is needed for his people to continue in the faith and for others to be won to Jesus. And we believe that God has established and preserved Bible College SA, to be a key part of our state's gospel ecosystem for this time we are in and for the years ahead. By supplying well-prepared leaders for our churches and ministries, we believe we have a vital role to play in sustaining biblical Christianity in this place.

Tonight, we are asking you to consider joining us in this work. As you do this, you should know that this ministry does not offer quick returns. It may not even offer returns that you will see in your own lifetime. Rather, it is a long-range strategic work, an investment in the future, that we believe will serve our children and grandchildren and the communities that they will belong to years from now. Few ministries rise above their leaders, and few leaders rise above their training. And great training depends on great partnerships.

In Philippians 1, the Apostle Paul says -

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Together we look forward to that day, and together we share in the work of the gospel until it comes.