

Deputy Chancellor and colleagues in the Christian adventure:

I wish, first of all, to acknowledge the University for its significant contribution to the work of theology in our land. It is a vital contribution to the integrity of our faith and the witness of Christians in our country.

I also wish to acknowledge with gratitude the generosity of the University in conferring on me the degree of Doctor of Divinity *honoris causa*.

I count it as a high honour to receive this degree from such a University and I thank you for your kindness.

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In October 1967, it was quite chilly in the Swiss city of Basel. The rumour of student protests across Europe and America could be heard in the coffee shops and sensed in the air as graduate students filed into the main seminar room of the Theological Faculty in the University. They were waiting for the commencement of the first Saturday seminar of the academic year, conducted by Professor Karl Barth. There were two Australians present.

The set text for the seminar was the book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. This was an important text by the prominent leader of nineteenth century liberal Protestant theology in Western Europe, with whose theology Barth had waged a war of words for decades.

Barth entered, looking cheerful - he laughed a lot in these seminars. He took in the atmosphere, and declared,

“Do not despise the doctrine of the Trinity; it is the greatest achievement of Christian theology.”

Barth’s declaration immediately stilled the room.

I thought it was an opening peace gesture to introduce another battle with Schleiermacher and his liberal theology. I was wrong.

Barth wanted to talk to these theological students about the work of a Christian theologian.

It has lodged in my memory ever since as a vital clue to what it means to be a theologian. It affirmed the gift of God’s presence in Jesus Christ while highlighting the ongoing challenge of adequately expressing that presence.



In 1933 Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and immediately set out to destroy the power of the churches. The following year, Barth was asked to help the confessing churches to compose a declaration of their faith. A group of theologians met in Barmen, a small town in Germany just east of the border with Belgium. At the conclusion of their meeting, they issued The Barmen Declaration. We can see the Barth mind particularly in clause 8.15

We reject the false doctrine that there are areas of our lives in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

Barth lived by this challenge until his death in 1968. Who is Jesus Christ and how are his followers to live? In 1934 the issue before German Christians was clear and obvious. It was the overwhelming Nazification of the churches by the government of Adolf Hitler. They knew the challenge they were facing.

Today in Australia, it is not so clear. There are many questions:

- Government policies and a materialistic cultural moment have distorted and confused the universities in their historic vocation of cultivating knowledge and wisdom, creativity and insight.
- the swirling dynamics of significant differences that underlie our public adoption of multiculturalism,
- the historical and current conditions of our Indigenous peoples,
- the egregious divisions that exist among us in terms of wealth and opportunities
- confusion about some of our major institutions that serve us in the cultivation of knowledge and wisdom, creativity and insight, and the meaning and practice of what constitutes a good life.

Underlying some of these things is the final death of the Christendom understanding of society and the moral character of our nation. The marriage between church and state, which we call Christendom, prevailed in most of Europe for nearly seventeen-hundred years. Its mental assumptions became embedded in the unconscious assumptions of social life.

The Christendom institutions are now being uprooted, and the value space is being vacated. For Christians, a proper understanding of the nature of these changes and the function of institutions is an immediate challenge for theologians in Australia today

Let me illustrate the problem from the recent extremely helpful *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. The Commission drew attention to the role of what they called, clericalism - an aspect of the institutional character of the churches which gave special status and privileges to clergy. They said it was a source of the power that enabled abuse to occur.

Their solution was better recruitment, selection, and supervision of clergy in parishes and teachers in schools, together with better arrangements to support victims and for the discipline of offenders. The Commission chose to address the effect of the abuse, not the institutional defects that allowed personal power to grow and thus sow the seeds of abuse.



The challenge is not just to support the victims and to punish the offenders. It is also necessary to have in place church practices and institutional arrangements that are designed to inhibit the growth of the personal power that enables abuse. I hope you have seen this challenge being undertaken in your church.

I hope to see it sometime soon in mine.

Identifying and addressing the critical issues facing Christians in Australia today calls for a theology of imagining beyond the obvious to discern what should be truly important in the life of our churches and what kinds of institutional arrangements will best facilitate this.

As graduates in theology, indeed as theologians, it is our vocation to serve our fellow Christians, our Christian communities and the people with whom we live in this wide brown land. The scope of our work is the same as the concerns of the Barmen theologians.

We reject the false doctrine that there are areas of our lives in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him. (clause 8.15)

Theology is a wonderful and privileged vocation. I hope you find it challenging, demanding and fulfilling and I wish you every blessing in it.

