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The Trials of Theological College

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Dr John W. Woodhouse has been the Principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia, since 2002. The following article is based upon his vision of life at Moore, which he regularly outlines to students in different ways and at various opportunities.

Woodhouse moves beyond the daily activities of seminary life to what we are really there for, and how we may practise that purpose. Without this awareness, our experience of college is diminished. With it, we are enabled to see beyond the regular setbacks, irritations and shortcomings of this peculiar community. We begin to see its capacity to completely change our lives.

Although a particular college community is on view, we believe this vision has a lot to say to anyone attending similar centres of biblical and theological study. Indirectly, it also addresses anyone charged to shape and govern any experience of theological education.

I would like to share a vision of life at theological college, because expectations are important. Your experience at college will be more profitable if you are looking for the right things. Otherwise, disappointment and frustration will be inevitable.

In sharing this vision, I will look beyond the many details of college life to the *realities* in which we are involved. These





realities are so important that if you do not see and understand them, no amenities nor buildings nor course offerings can make up for your loss. What are we really, and why are we here?

We are here to know God

Paul prayed for the Colossians ‘that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God’ [Col. 1:9-10].¹ My longing and desire is that each person at this college will grow in their knowledge and love of God. I hope every student desires that for themselves.

It follows that we will beware of pragmatism, which is interested in mere doing, at the expense of knowing, loving and being. It also follows that we leave here to participate in the work that elsewhere Paul describes as God’s spreading ‘the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere’ [2 Cor. 2:14]. We prepare for that work by growing in our knowledge of God.

The knowledge and love of God is the purpose and intention of all that we do here, and is the measure by which we try to assess and evaluate what we do and how we do it. But we need to know what ‘knowing God’ actually means.

Knowing God is God’s idea, not ours

Knowledge of God is possible for humanity not because of some innate capacity in us, but because God wants to be known. When Pharaoh declares ‘I do not know the LORD,’ God responds that he will act so that ‘they *will* know that

1. Biblical quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version.





I am the LORD'. This important Old Testament theme finds its ultimate expression in Isaiah 11:9, where 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea'.

God's intention to be known has significant consequences. It is the opposite of mysticism. It also means that our ideas about God, and our ideas about what it means to know and to love God, will likely turn out to be wrong. Rather, we are here to discover God as he wills himself to be known.

Indeed, our knowledge of God requires some perspective, because it turns out that there is something more important than *our* knowledge of *God* – namely, *God's* knowledge of *us*. We could perhaps even say that *knowing God* means *knowing God knows us*:

'... now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God ...' [Gal. 4:9]

'... if anyone loves God, he is known by God ...' [1 Cor. 8:3]
'The Lord knows those who are his.' [2 Tim 2:19]

Hence knowing God is *good* because it is God's idea. This knowledge began with his knowledge of us, and is better than anything we can achieve or attain.

Knowing God is not merely a knowledge of facts

Paul speaks of a 'knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness' [Titus 1:1]. He also speaks of those who 'profess to know God, but they deny him by their works' [Titus 1:16]. He urges upon Timothy 'the teaching that accords with godliness' [1 Tim. 6:3].

Our knowledge of God is inseparably tied up with 'godliness', a theme in the Pastoral epistles that describes a certain way of living and being that goes far beyond the



mere acquisition of facts. We are not here as providers and consumers in a ‘fact factory’, and you will be seriously mistaken about the nature of your participation if you approach it as just another intellectual or academic enterprise.

We could know the whole Bible off by heart in Greek and Hebrew; we could recite the contents of several textbooks; we could attain high distinctions in every subject – and yet, it would be perfectly possible that *we did not know God*.

Knowing God is real, not abstract; personal, not just intellectual; and will be displayed in your character and conduct, not your cleverness. That is why I think it is always helpful to link *knowing* God with *loving* God: we seek the kind of knowledge here that changes our affections.

Knowing God does involve understanding

Yet to know God includes the exercise of our understanding. For several reasons, my previous point has led in some Christian circles to various strains of anti-intellectualism. Some versions of postmodernism, mysticism or pietism try to sidestep clarity about the knowledge of God. But God wills to be known by the truth being known; and knowledge of truth is a work of the mind.

It is true that this truth has at its centre the person and work of Jesus Christ, the ‘word of the cross’: it is not human philosophy, or human reasoning, or human discovery. It is also true that this truth is ‘foolishness to those who are perishing’: it is not ‘the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age’.

But even conceding those points, *knowing God involves using the brains God made*. It involves understanding and therefore thinking. We know God, not by a mystical experience beyond words, but by hearing the Spirit-breathed word of God. This

Spirit-breathed word of God is meant to be *understood*. It tells us the truth, and by his Spirit and through his word, God reveals to us himself, his promises and his purposes.

This is no small subject. When the Bible says, ‘Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’ [Rom. 11:33], we are not being discouraged from searching and from seeking to understand. Rather, we are being reminded that we can never think of ourselves as having finished our exploration and our growth in understanding. What happens next is quite striking. Once we grasp just a little of the ‘riches’ and ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ of God, all other thinking about everything is affected.

Here is why it makes perfect sense, if the circumstances of life allow, for a person to take out one or several years of serious study to increase in the knowledge of God.

We gather as a fellowship in Christ

Various circumstances and purposes lead us to becoming involved in a theological college; and we like to think that our group has been created through sets of personal decisions made by each of us.

But we are related by something prior to all those particular factors – something more important and powerful than those incidentals. We are all ‘in Christ Jesus’. When you and I meet each other, and discover that we each know Christ and are known by him, then we are not strangers. We are brothers and sisters. We are bound to each other by a spiritual bond that the Bible calls ‘the unity of the Spirit’ [Eph. 4:3]. ‘For *through him* we both have access *in one Spirit* to the Father’ [Eph. 2:18].

‘Through him’ refers to our Lord’s death on his cross (‘the blood of Christ’ of Eph. 2:13 or ‘the cross’ of v. 16).

‘Through him’ refers to the agency of Jesus, by means of his death. He died for me in exactly the same way as he died for you, and for the person who sits or reads or chats next to you. Indeed, and more to the point, he died in exactly the same way and with exactly the same purpose for the person you do *not* want sitting or reading or chatting next to you.

‘In one Spirit’ refers to the work of the Holy Spirit of God, who has brought us into the realm opened for us by Jesus’ death. The Spirit in whom you live, and who lives in you, is *one and the same Spirit* in whom I live, and who lives in me. In consequence, we each and all enjoy exactly the same access to the one Father.

Paul is at pains to bring to the minds of his Gentile readers that *this* bond exists between *all* believers, Jew and Gentile. The imperative that introduces the paragraph is ‘remember’ [Eph. 2:11]. The bond that joins Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, also joins every other kind and variety of background and identity that is represented among us. Incredibly, before we are anything else, we are ‘one in Christ Jesus’ by the grace of God.

But our natural inclination will be to disbelieve this gracious gift, and our usual tendency will be to act as though we are some other kind of group. We will presume to treat one another on some other basis than oneness in Christ:

- We will presume to gather with those who look or think or speak or dress or live in some way that appeals to us. *But remember: through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*
- We will presume to imagine a ‘them’ over against ‘us’, whether the ‘them’ is the faculty, the administration

staff, our Board – or if we already belong to one of those groups, the students. *But remember: through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

- We will presume to give primacy to our institutional roles as the basis of our relationship. So I will presume mainly and only think of myself as ‘Principal’; those who lead classes as ‘Faculty’; and those who have been here a while as ‘Third Years’; and so on. *But remember: through him we both – we all – have access in one Spirit to the Father.*
- We will presume to treat the college as a means to an education, a qualification, or a job. We will then presume that the people around us are at best an irrelevance and at worst a hindrance to those goals. *But remember: through him we all have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

The truth is extraordinary. Let us ‘walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.’ That is how we will ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ [Eph. 4:1-3].

Will you therefore shed, before doing anything else, *any* sense of superiority you might feel towards others here? We are all here as sinners, saved only by the grace of God. Will you abandon, right now, any sense of competitiveness? Competitiveness is shabby next to the Christ on his cross.

We can only be what we are towards one another by God’s grace. We therefore put a high priority on meeting together several times a week deliberately under the word of God – alongside the academic study – we take time to listen to God’s word, with the specific purpose of being shaped by God’s word. Our chapel and chaplaincy group meetings are a structure designed to build our fellowship in Christ. But



what I want us to see here is that we *are* a fellowship in Christ. This is not something we hope to be, or wish we were, or are disappointed that we are not. Like the forgiveness of our sins, it is given by God's grace. We live and respond in the bright light of the reality God has given us.

We are partners in the gospel

The ascended Lord Jesus Christ builds his congregation, his 'church' [Matt. 16:18]. But how? In the terms of Ephesians 4, by giving 'the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers' for 'the building up the body of Christ' [Eph. 4:11-12]. Building proceeds through the preaching and teaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which (to mix the metaphors) 'is bearing fruit and growing' ... 'in the whole world' [Col. 1:6].

We exist to partner in that work. In one of the greatest expressions of the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the Lord's work of building (or 'edifying') the body of Christ also becomes what we do.

Jesus said, 'Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' [Matt. 9:38]. Many have been praying just that, and it seems that the Lord of the harvest is answering those prayers in your being here. So do not lose sight of the fact that what we are doing together has to do with the Lord's work of building his congregation, that 'spiritual house' made of living stones [1 Pet. 2:5], as he calls people to himself by the preaching and teaching of the gospel.

If we lose sight of that, we quickly lose direction. That would be as true of the college as a whole as of us each individually. The college might boast of the finest theological library in the land, the best theological education on offer, the most prestigious awards of their kind – but we have simply lost our way if our *partnership in the gospel* ceases to be the reason for it all.



My experience is that busyness and the pressure of particular tasks are very effective opportunities for our unbelief to surface. We see only the immediate, only the pressing, only the particular. But everything done here, from introductory Greek grammar to the mundane tasks of administration, is a partnership in the gospel. We are a department of mission.

Those who understand this pray, as Paul prayed and repeatedly urged his readers to pray, for this great work of God to build the congregation of God. They will also realise that partners in the gospel must live under the Lordship of Christ so that (again), godliness takes priority over learning. To achieve first-class honours in your course here may actually be a serious mistake. The course of study you are about to embark on is demanding and stressful. If those demands become an excuse for neglecting your marriage or your children or other responsibilities you have under the Lord, then repentance and change is what you must do. God wants godly partners in the gospel, and is not always especially impressed by distinction grades.

We are a community of scholars

But since the knowledge of God involves the use of our mind, we also gather as a community of scholars. When Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders as overseers in the towns of Crete, he said of such persons that ‘he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it’ [Titus 1:9].

Again we find a paradox. God works by his word. God’s word is trustworthy. This word, which is folly to those who are perishing, is the power of God to us who are being saved [1 Cor. 1:18]. And yet this trustworthy, powerful word of God has been entrusted to us, with the responsibility to guard it,

to hold firmly to it, to rightly handle it. Our partnership in the gospel demands this.

I can think of no greater human responsibility than to hold firmly to the trustworthy and faithful word of God, taught as a good deposit entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit. Only then will we be able to exhort, to comfort with sound, healthy teaching.

Our community of learning is therefore an expression of our partnership in the gospel. Our curricula, our assignments, our study programmes, our writing are correctly seen as the major activities of our College: we are a community of scholars. But these are only correct when all that work has the goal and overriding purpose of holding firm to the word of God given, that we may be able to comfort and exhort with healthy teaching – and rebuke those who contradict it.

The distortion and perversion of the word of God, the teaching of error as though it were truth, is what the human mind tends to do naturally. And what the New Testament sometimes calls ‘false teaching’ is not neutral. It is a disease, it destroys, and it causes harm. And mere ‘scholarship’ is no guarantee against it. Humble learning before God, which is faithful to the good deposit entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit [2 Tim. 1:14], is the antidote. The repeated calls in Scripture to ‘remember’ suggest that our spiritual memory is not good. History suggests that what is taken for granted by believers today may be forgotten by the next generation of believers, and denied by the next.

Hence our responsibility as a community of scholars is enormous. We must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that we may be able to give instruction, to comfort, to exhort with sound healthy teaching and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

We are going to beware of intellectual fads. You will encounter authors who are stimulating and challenging, who



open up fresh and new ways of seeing all kinds of things. You should read them; you should understand what they are saying; you should not close your mind down. Yet your task will be to discern when stimulating writers are not holding firm to the trustworthy word – just as it is to discern when some well-known or well-liked author is failing in the same way. So we are an unusual community of scholars. There is not a lot of scholarship for its own sake here.

We are organised

So we gather to know God, as a fellowship in Christ, partnering in the gospel, as a community of godly scholars. But we are not just an amorphous mass, and I simply want to draw into proper focus what we see and experience on a daily basis. A simple way to think of our college community is in terms of the four groups that comprise it: students, faculty, support staff and supporters. One of the most delightful images of our fellowship in Christ is that of the one body with its many different members [1 Cor. 12:14-21]:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'

It is cause for thanks to God that such a body of people has been brought together as we find here in this College. You can



see this miracle all over the world, in every place where God has gathered his people – but it is no less wonderful here.

I am sure I do not need to remind you to treat with proper respect and love the members of this body who might initially appear to have a less important role among us. We have alongside us many people prepared to do many apparently mundane tasks so that the faculty is free to study and teach well, and students are free to study and learn well. Very occasionally, we speak disrespectfully to one of those who serve us. That is a denial of who we are in Christ. I know you will be careful about that.

Of course all this being said, we do not always get things right. Mistakes are made; not everything proceeds as we hope or want; we experience disagreements; and we sometimes let each other down. I know that. Our imperfections and failures will be a large part of our experience of the college.

But how we live and work together can and must be shaped by what we are, and I invite you to see what we do here through clear eyes and with true vision.

We are here to know and love God. We participate in something that began as his idea, not ours; indeed, we are here because we are known by God. Our knowledge and love of God is more than mere fact-gathering, yet it does include a proper apprehension together of the truth. We are here through Jesus, having access in one Spirit to the Father, and so we are a fellowship in Christ. As we proclaim Christ and him crucified, we are partners in the gospel. We hold firmly to the word of the cross, which constitutes the nature of our scholarship. And as we teach and study and learn, we give thanks to God for those who uphold our organisation and make possible the conditions of our study and learning.