

# encounter

## The importance of learning theology

Dr Roshan Allpress  
National Principal/CEO

At our recent Alumni Gatherings in Auckland and Christchurch, we traced four commitments that have characterised the work of Laidlaw since our founding as the Bible Training Institute in 1922:

- To the trustworthiness and authority of the **Bible**, and to reading, understanding and applying the Scriptures well;
- To the task of **theology**: of seeking to know and understand God, and therefore to articulate the Christian hope that we have in Jesus;
- To the **Church** as the community of those being transformed by Jesus and working out his purposes in the world; and
- To the **mission** of the Gospel in every part of the world and every sphere of society and culture.

Of these four, it is theology that comes under the most suspicion in Christian circles in New Zealand –



often misunderstood as abstract and impractical theorising when what we really need to do is get down to the real business of mission. This misconception is tragic: theology is indispensable in knitting together Bible, Church and mission.

In his book *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, N.T. Wright makes the case that as Paul the apostle began to wrestle with the implications of Jesus' fulfillment of the hope of the Jewish Scriptures and the mission of the Church to the whole world, he came to the conclusion that every Christian must commit themselves to the task of *thinking*. This was a radical position to take in a Greco-Roman world

where cultivating the life of the mind was believed to be a priority only for rulers and philosophers. However, Paul saw clearly that as God's Spirit was poured out on people living outside the Jewish cultural framework of the Old Testament, there was critical work to be done in order to live faithfully to God in new cultural contexts. This could only be done by "thinking clearly about God".<sup>1</sup>

Paul's encounter with the risen Lord required a "radical mutation in the core beliefs of his Jewish world".<sup>2</sup> He was forced to rethink his most basic expectations and hopes in light of the new reality of the resurrected, revealed Messiah. Wright claims that

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in rethinking Jesus in this way, Paul saw the need for theology to take on a new “loadbearing” role: that of sustaining the faithfulness, unity and mission of God’s new community – now no longer surrounded by the protective fences of Jewish identity, Law, land and leadership – but exposed to a “thousand cultural pressures” as God’s people interacted with the full diversity of Gentile cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Theology became a basic and essential task for every Christian – not merely the preserve of a few priests, intellectuals and teachers. As Wright puts it,

“Thinking clearly about God and his purposes was not just an intellectual luxury, an indulgence for long winter evenings... The renewed people of God were to be renewed in their minds, learning to *think* in a way that was given, for the first time ever, the task of sustaining a worldview...”

Wisdom... was now offered to the slave, the shopkeeper, the housewife.”<sup>4</sup>

The pursuit of theological wisdom is a critical imperative for today, just as it was in the first century. It is why we invite every Christian to study theology: because living faithfully in the world (and integrating Bible, community and vocation) is now no longer a case of reproducing an established cultural pattern, but of thoughtfully seeking new ways to live out the Gospel in the world.

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pp. xvi, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* pp. xvi, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 404.

## Theology in the Church

An exciting new initiative is underway this semester. Laidlaw lecturer, Greg Liston, is simultaneously teaching an *Introduction to Theology* course to an evening class at Laidlaw’s Manukau Campus and to a group at Mt Albert Baptist Church with the aid of videoconferencing technology.

An approach was made to Laidlaw by the Senior Pastor of the church, Steve Worsley, keen to see a deepening of theological knowledge amongst the congregation. With Laidlaw College already videoconferencing a number of lectures between campuses, it was not a difficult or expensive stretch to set up a room at the church.

Six weeks into the pilot scheme, the members of the church taking the course are overwhelmingly positive about the experience. The Manukau students too are enjoying being part of a more diverse group and hearing new perspectives from others during the large group discussions.



Greg Liston teaching at Manukau campus (Mt Albert Baptist Church class on screen)

Steve is encouraged by this new opportunity for his church. “Having the *Introduction to Theology* course available remotely at our church has been a huge boost for us at Mt Albert Baptist. The gap between what an average pew-sitter understands about theology and what someone with a theology degree knows is vast. Are churches turning out people who don’t understand crucial aspects of theology, such as why we believe in the Trinity or the Deity of Christ?

Greg’s course has provided an easy opportunity for 14 of our folk to be part of bridging that gap.”

Videoconferencing Laidlaw lectures into churches has considerable potential as a future mode of delivery throughout the Christian community in New Zealand. This pilot scheme is an exciting first step!

# The importance of an Indigenous Theology

Dr Moeawa Callaghan  
Indigenous Theology Programme Coordinator

Recently I was invited to speak about the Laidlaw Indigenous Theology programme at a church hui on social justice. I talked about a South Auckland housing project we visited last semester. One concern raised at the hui was how to combine Māori theology and social action. This concern relates to the question often asked by young Christian Māori: How can we be Māori and Christian?

As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ is the fullest self-revelation of God—the incarnation of the Word. Christ revealed God’s presence in the world, in and through particular cultures and people, and in particular places throughout time. God provides the means for that to happen. Māori language and tikanga is one way a Māori theology understands how God communicates love in this

land, Aotearoa, through Te Kupu (Logos in Greek). A Māori theological view says that God has provided te reo and tikanga as kaitiaki—as a means of nurture, for the people of this land.

Therefore, Māori theology begins by bringing Māori values and identity into conversation with the Bible. For example, Whakapapa, as central to Māori theology, functions as a foundational hermeneutic for the Indigenous Theology programme. With its holistic foundation, a whakapapa hermeneutic focuses on understanding, establishing, cultivating and maintaining the interconnected relationship between Atua, tangata, whenua. Whilst whakapapa can generally be understood as genealogy, whakapapa is also the mechanism for explaining and valuing the interconnectedness of all creation. Māori theology, therefore, is primarily concerned with relationships, past, present and future, with te kauwae runga me te kauae raro – the temporal and the spiritual worlds.

Christ in Māori theology is deeply embedded in a Māori worldview. Thus, traditional images are drawn on to describe Christ in a meaningful way

for Māori. For example, in *He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* eucharistic liturgy we find these metaphors for Christ:<sup>1</sup>

*Ko te Karaiti... te taroi o te riri*  
*Ko te Karaiti te pou herenga waka*

The first metaphor, *taroi*, means to tie up in a *kete*, close, draw together; *riri* means to be angry, to fight. Traditionally, *te taroi o te riri* was the title given to a person who took a stand between opposing war parties and persuaded them to make peace. In this way Christ is expressed as The Mediator. In the second metaphor Christ is the mooring post to which several canoes are tied. He binds together into one body.

These examples reflect a theology of relationship that connects past, present and future. This is a Māori way of strengthening identity in Christ and a faith that is grounded in relationship with God, the land and the people. Such a commitment to relationship binds Māori theology and social action.

<sup>1</sup> A New Zealand Prayer Book *He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*. Te Haahi Mihinare ki Aotearoa ki Nui Tireni, ki Nga Moutere o te Moana Nui a Kiwa, Genesis Publications, Christchurch 2002, 479.

## Art and Theology: “leading us more into our humanity”

Libby Brookbanks is the first Laidlaw graduate to commence a doctorate through AUT’s Design and Innovation Department under a Laidlaw supervisor, exploring issues around the incarnation and its relevance for creative practice. Libby describes art as “my native tongue”, with art subjects dominating her high school education. Art History at Otago University followed, and then further degrees from Elam Art School and Auckland University, finishing with an MA in Art History.

At Auckland University she pursued art and architecture, and “dabbled with theology”. As her interest in art and



Libby Brookbanks, PhD candidate

theory grew she knew she needed a deeper source of knowledge in order to be able to consider creative practice with any sort of insight or compassion. “While art explores and expresses the human condition, it can become bleak. The more I understand of this world, the more I see where God is needed.” She became increasingly conscious of this need while teaching Art History at an art school. Students were stuck in a cycle of introspection – their art demonstrated their need but did not necessarily provide

a platform of understanding or nurture. It was this pastoral care deficit that brought her to Laidlaw College to study a Postgraduate Diploma in Theology.

Describing her year at Laidlaw as “absolutely profound”, it was a time to recalibrate the deep truth. “What Laidlaw did for me was to reset my foundations which had become rocky and cracked.” She loved being taught by lecturers who were also practitioners. Combining study with application is important to Libby – “if you’re not applying knowledge, then forget about it!”

With the incarnation “leading us more into our humanity”, Libby sees something as simple as drawing with pencil and paper as a way of enabling people to “be in their own skin and express themselves”. As she starts the doctoral journey, her goal is to develop teaching programmes that will integrate art and theology and help people communicate these concepts through drawing practice.

# The importance of theological education

Dr Roshan Allpress  
National Principal/CEO

Laidlaw College's mission is to equip students and scholars to renew their communities with a faith that is as intelligent as it is courageous.

As New Zealand's largest theological college and Christian tertiary institution, we train graduates who not only have skills for their vocations, but can articulate *why* they teach, counsel, pastor, serve and lead. We work to ensure that graduating students are not just great practitioners, but have spent time engaging with the Bible and learning Theology, and are committed to integrating their faith into their vocation.

One of our distinctives as a theological institute in New Zealand has always been the training of leaders for both churches and wider society – using theological study to help students ground their work in a sense of purpose greater than themselves, and equipping them to think well about the wide sweep of human experience. As Oxford University's Professor William Wood states, "theology is the closest thing we have at the moment to the kind of general study of all aspects of human culture that was once very common, but is now quite rare."<sup>1</sup>

As an evangelical college, committed to the Gospel of Jesus, we are preparing students for lifelong faith: encouraging practices and habits of faithfulness, seeking to strengthen a "proper confidence" in the Bible – helping them dig deep wells that will sustain them in service and leadership over many decades.

The value of our qualifications to wider society is most fully expressed in the many decades of service that our graduates give to their communities. Over 95 years we have commissioned over a thousand missionaries who have worked to spread the Gospel and invest in communities around the world. Closer to home, we train leaders for New Zealand's Christian non-profits and church charities – providing a staggering array of social services to those in need. Through our Teaching and Counselling programmes we form Christian professionals for the work of education and well-being, and through our Christian Leadership tracks we train ministers and pastors across New Zealand's denominations.

Laidlaw's missional impact is also realised by the increasing proportion of our students who are pursuing part time study as professional development mid-career. These students include lawyers, medical professionals, Māori and Pasifika community leaders, non-profit managers, business leaders and many more.

As tertiary education becomes increasingly about skills and career-paths, theological education – at Laidlaw, or at one of the many other colleges around New Zealand – remains critical, simply because we need educational pathways that will help young adults deepen their faith and better formulate the "why" behind their work, as a means to better leadership in their fields.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in, "Study Theology, Even If You Don't Believe in God", *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/study-theology-even-if-you-dont-believe-in-god/280999/>, accessed 27 July 2017.



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