

Response to Dr Briony Scott's Armitage Lecture

I'd first like to thank Dr Scott for her stimulating lecture, and for the sharp questions that it raises. There's no point in sugar-coating reality, and as one of this nation's leading educators Dr Scott has spoken to us with forthrightness and insight and even, I daresay, courage. She has posed for us questions that those who care about Church schools cannot avoid addressing. [I should perhaps at this point declare my own interest. I was a student at a Church school; I taught English at a leading private School; I was chaplain at St Andrew's Cathedral School; and I am now a parent at a Church school. I am also an educator and keenly interested in questions of education and its relationship to theology. I am currently serving as part of a Fellowship set up by the Archbishop to foster discussion between theologians and leading educators.]

I'd like explore four points in response.

1) Dr Scott was I believe right to expose the crassness of the proposal to find some 'measure' for success in Christian schooling. Education at all levels is dying the death of a thousand paper cuts delivered by the Gradgrinds of government who don't value anything unless it can be measured against benchmarks and KPIs. Utilitarianism is the philosophy that prevails in public discourse in 21st century Australia. It's a philosophy which claims that what is good must surely be measurable, or it has no business claiming to be good.

But Christians are not utilitarians, because we have a much grander vision of the good than what can be simply quantified.

And so Dr Scott has rightly subverted our question by pointing out that for followers of Jesus Christ the quality of relationships is essential to that vision of the good – a quality that in the end answers to the ultimate judge and He alone. This is what success in Christian schools will look like. Can we count it, or measure it? Who cares.

I do think there was much more to say here. Though very emphasis on relationships is a thoroughly Christian insight, we need to be careful that we relate this talk of relationships back to the Christian story itself, lest 'relationships' become a kind of Platonic ideal. It would be possible, after all, for a pirate ship to be crewed by an effective team in good relationships with one another.

The gospel of the God who is Trinity speaks to us a very particular quality of relationship - relationships of costly love that involve forgiveness, mercy and grace. 'Greater love has no-one than this', said Jesus 'to lay down one's life for one's friends' – which is of course what he himself did; and it is that story, the story of the cross, which teaches us true relationships. And note: it wasn't a message of relationships based on mere acceptance – to die for one's friends is to say that one's friends need dying for, because all is not well with them as they are. Sometimes relationships patterned on the cross require a No as well as a Yes.

2) Is there to be no judgement of Christian education then? Do we have nothing to say about what might constitute a successful Christian education?

Dr Scott has spoken to us with some feeling about the endless and often carping criticism of Christian educators by the Christian community – in contrast to those outside the Christian community who do not make judgements.

I too am irritated by the tone of much of this criticism. Much of it, like the question of Christianly teaching maths, is just idiotic and needs to be called for what it is.

But the response is not to repudiate judgement, but to encourage better judgement. I cannot agree with the analogy about the doctor. The Head of a school has professional expertise and ought to be trusted to exercise it, but the Head is operating as an expert within a community of shared knowledge and values. This is widely recognised in state education of course, and you can see it played out in the vigorous debates we have in our newspapers about what goes in schools.

And I am afraid that Christian or church schools *are* in many cases the domain of the churches who found them, support them, pray for them and with them and brand them.

What is needed is a more nuanced and open discussion both ways. The problem as Dr Scott describes it need not be seen as a question of Church input into education per se, but the quality and the manner of that input. This is why I have enjoyed being part of an ongoing think-tank consisting of theologians, educational academics and heads of Anglican schools.

3) Which leads me to my third point. Let me return to the analogy of the doctor – the professional whose expertise ought not to be interfered with. Heads of schools indeed have that kind of professional expertise in the area of learning, though it is not exactly the same. But my problem here is with Dr Scott's casting of the Church as staffed by 'professionals'.

Dr Scott protested that she is not a theologian, and we recognise what she means at once: she has not had training in the academy in the discipline of theology. But that is not what makes a theologian. Martin Luther once said 'every Christian is a theologian'.

And that is right. Dr Scott and other Christian heads and educators *are* theologians. They share in and lead others in the knowledge of God. They pastor others in the name of Jesus our Lord. Theology is not something that is best left to experts but something that is by its very nature a shared enterprise. What this means is that I have no wish to cordon off my discipline and to plead the protection of my professional expertise. If Churches and church officials have acted as if a person with the Christian experience and intelligence of our Heads of School cannot challenge our so-called professional expertise, then we need to repent of it.

Dr Scott's paper is filled with theology, as it rightly should be – indeed it necessarily will be as she seeks to describe her role as a Christian educator. But I would hope that this where Dr Scott as a theologian will become aware of the shared nature of this exercise of seeking to know the mind of God and to live in the light of the gospel of Christ; and that mutually enriching partnerships between Churches and schools may emerge.

4) And so to my last point, and it is this:

Dr Scott has described what she calls a difference of purpose between churches and schools, although we serve the same God. The role of a school is to educate, not to evangelise, though of course evangelism may take place – and does, I know, I did some of it myself – at a school.

But when the church thinks that the primary role of the school is to evangelise and not educate its students then it is imposing a paradigm on the school that does not belong to it. And if effective evangelism is the measure by which a school is to be counted successful or not, then it is not a school but something else masquerading as a school.

The problem I think is to do with the notion of 'the good' that I mentioned earlier. It was Augustine who pointed out that Christianity was not simply a choice for a single good as the only good, but an ordering of all goods to the highest good – the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Which is to say: the preaching of the gospel is not the only good that we may seek in this world. The education of young people is a good worth pursuing and a job worth doing, and doesn't need justification in terms of evangelistic opportunities, or the prospect of bums on seats. In fact, the best evangelistic opportunities will arise as the task of educating young people is carried out with integrity and dedication – precisely because it is the kind of genuine care for people that shines through at these moments. True education is itself the result of a commitment to the kind of world that God has made – a world which is ordered according to the divine plan. In the gospel is revealed to us the goodness and beauty and truth with which the holy God has imbued the creation, and for which he will hold we human beings accountable.

And this could prove more significant than we yet realise, for the barbarians are at the gates of Western civilisation. In flight from its Christian roots, the West is pursuing a self-destructive course. In its denial of God, it is wilfully blinding itself to the reality of his beauty and truth and goodness. Look at London: were we had riots not for bread or for rights but for running shoes. Without God, it turns out, everything is permissible – the ugly, the false and the evil. Even the New Atheists have begun to wonder how civilisation might be saved if the God of Jesus Christ is abandoned. They cannot paint a universe with any colour to it; they cannot appeal with any conviction to a sense of absolute right or wrong, and so any outrage they have looks insincere; and they cannot know that what they see around them is real. There is now a sense among them of tragic

loss – an acknowledgement perhaps that their project has destroyed the only things worth having.

Perhaps a new dark ages is upon us. And perhaps, as after the decay of mighty Rome, it was the Christian monasteries that preserved the possibility of a less savage way of life, so now our schools and churches will need to become the protectors of the true, the beautiful and the good. That is what is arguably already in evidence: people with no faith can see that our schools and the extraordinary people in them preserve something precious which has been lost, and that in their devotion to what is true, and right, and beautiful in creation, they point beyond themselves to the source of all these things.