

# Higher Education

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## Theological Education in History

Theological colleges as we know them are a relatively recent invention writes church historian and Missional Leadership Dean, **Rhys Bezzant**

### HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Above: Ridley College 1910, Student Group

The Psalmist wants our children's children to sing God's praises. Jesus intensively invested in a small group, and formed their hearts and minds for service. Paul wants us to train men and women to train others, who in turn will entrust the good deposit to the following generation. And since those days of the early church, Christians have experimented with models of theological education, because there is always a pressing need to train pastors and evangelists for the sake of our grandchildren. Today is no different.

At the heart of theological education in history is the master/apprentice model of training. Indeed, the word 'Bachelor' for educational achievement came out of the guild system, describing

someone who was unmarried because, as an apprentice, they could not afford to care for a family! On the job training, learning from a master both theological reflection and ministry practice, was integrative, intensive, and inspiring. And in the Anglican world this was the tradition from which the category of curate emerged.

An extension of the master/apprentice model was found in the monasteries. Here it was not so much one-on-one training, but an abbot or abbottess leading a community of learners who aspired to pray, study, and serve. Some communities, like the Benedictines, were cloistered and in others, like the Franciscans, members travelled and asked for alms as they preached on the road.

But in both cases the monasteries provided models of what the church and its leaders could aspire to be. Given his own monastic background, Luther gathered a group of preachers and pastors together after dinner each night in his converted monastery to listen to stories, ask questions, encourage skills and shape theological thinking. So Protestant ministry training began not in a seminary but in a monastery!

It should therefore come as no surprise that theological colleges as we know them are a relatively recent invention. Over the centuries many (but not all) clergy studied a general arts degree at university, though this normally did not include study in pastoral care or church history. At the beginning of the nineteenth century this changed. New models of education were birthed in Berlin, where university study became an apprenticeship in technical academic skills, rather than spiritual formation.

With the professionalisation of employment, the first ever seminary was founded in 1808 in Massachusetts, Andover Seminary, was neither a university nor a monastery, but a training institution that built on a ministry network with the goal of providing leaders for the churches of the new American republic. My hero Jonathan Edwards was to thank for this, as it was his mentees in the movement known as the New Divinity who sponsored this new institution. His own mentoring and theological instruction in the master/apprentice tradition had come to its most modern expression.

Ridley College, almost 110 years old, builds on the best of this story. Ridley is small enough for students and faculty to enjoy close interaction, large enough to have specialist teachers, pursuing skills, knowledge, and character development, and is still asking how we can find and train leaders for the church in fifty years time. Send us some students today!

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**2018 Events**

**August 20**

Women's Preaching Network

**August 21 – 22**

Annual Preachers' Conference

*The Story of God:*

*Preaching Old Testament Narrative*

with Paul Barker, Murray Capill and Mary Lewis

**September 10**

Women's Writing Group

**October 10 and 11**

Ridley Open Day and Evening

**November 9**

Annual Dinner

# Ridley College Annual Dinner 2018



**Save the date!**

**Friday 9 November**

Green Acres Golf Club,

51 Elm Grove,

Kew East

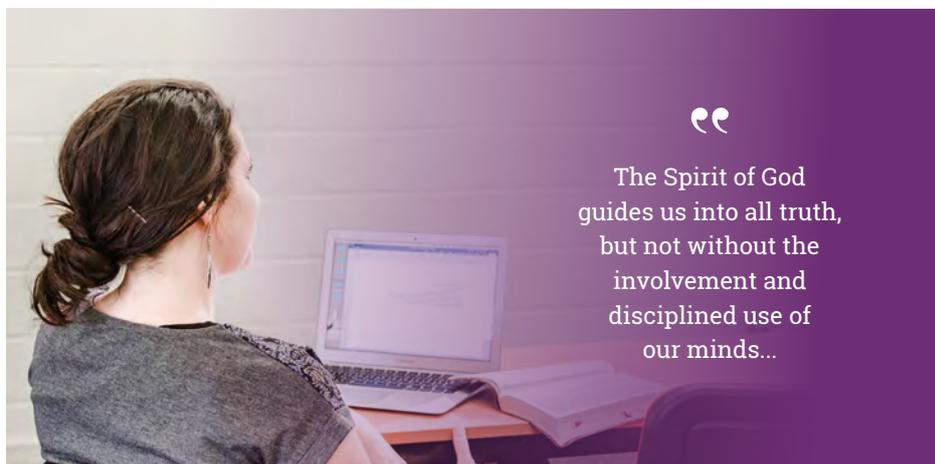
Check the Ridley website for times & locations:

[www.ridley.edu.au/events](http://www.ridley.edu.au/events) or join our events

mailing list: [j.daw@ridley.edu.au](mailto:j.daw@ridley.edu.au)

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The Spirit of God guides us into all truth, but not without the involvement and disciplined use of our minds...

## Academic Aspirations

**Brian Rosner** considers the differences in theological training in Jesus' day and now.



**FROM THE PRINCIPAL**

At first blush, the way Ridley College trains Christians and the way Jesus did it seem very different. Whereas we offer formal educational qualifications, Jesus gave informal instruction to a small group of people who lived with him. We sit in classrooms; Jesus gave on-the-job training. We speak, read and write and expect our students to do likewise; Jesus taught only orally. We give lectures; Jesus told stories. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, why, then, is Ridley College an educational institution?

There are several things to say in answer to this question. First, the way I have characterised the two approaches to ministry training, ours and that of Jesus, is a caricature and not the whole story. Jesus taught his disciples the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, just as rigorously as we teach our students the Bible. And like Jesus, we recognise the importance of on-the-job training. What we do at College is only a part of what a student needs in order to become an effective gospel worker. We look to churches and other Christian organisations to provide much of the modelling and mentoring that students need to become fully equipped for God's mission in the world. We see ourselves as partners with such groups.

Second, there are differences between Jesus' day and our own that make training for ministry different. Jesus' disciples had direct access to the Son of God himself, or as Hebrews puts it, 'God's final Word'.

We, on the other hand, have God's Word to us in a book, which was written thousands of years ago and in languages foreign to us. Furthermore, the wisdom of centuries of Christians who have gone before us needs to be studied in order to learn from their example and avoid erroneous teaching. The gap between us and the first century is vast. But, with sustained and serious study it can be bridged. The Spirit of God guides us into all truth, but not without the involvement and disciplined use of our minds.

In Luke 2:52 it is said of Jesus' own development as a human being that he 'increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and with people.' It is intriguing that it is recorded that even Jesus grew in reputation before the people of his day. In a similar way Ridley is concerned not only to please God, but also to have the achievements of our students receive wide recognition on the human level. This is one of the reasons that we have government approval for our educational awards. Our diplomas and degrees are fully accredited, along with those of fifteen other colleges, through the Australian College of Theology, the largest theological education provider in the country.

In this *Ridley Report* we consider Ridley College from the perspective of our academic aspirations and standing.

# Engaging with Tertiary Standards and Expectations

**Martin Sutherland**, Dean and CEO of the Australian College of Theology, Ridley's accrediting body, explains why we don't just 'do our own thing'



## AFFILIATION WITH THE AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY

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For many decades, Ridley College and the Australian College of Theology (ACT) have enjoyed a fruitful partnership in theological education. The nature of the partnership has changed, as the needs of the church have changed and the wider framework of higher education has evolved. The link remains an important one for both Colleges. Each institution contributes a vital aspect of the educative process. Ridley, like all colleges affiliated with the ACT, employs the faculty and teaches the students. The ACT does not have a campus of its own. It recognises that training for mission is best explored in communities of learning which are able to shape their own identity. The ACT's role is to provide the framework of qualifications and quality control which are needed for courses to be recognised in the wider sphere.

When the ACT was founded in the late nineteenth century, it was an Anglican-only examining body which provided a standard-setting benchmark by which individual dioceses could confirm that the attainments of their students were equivalent to university training. Higher education has, of course, changed enormously in the decades since. University education, once an option for only a few (mostly wealthy) people, has become the expected minimum education for most professions. As the options, especially those generated by new technologies, have expanded, societies and economies have become more complex. Governments and other policy-makers want an education system which enables the best preparation for the rapidly changing and complex world in which we live. As a result, the era of the private setting of standards has gone. The ACT now aligns its courses with the wider expectations of higher education and works with its partner colleges to ensure that its theological degrees, whilst addressing the issues crucial to the church, also meet the current tertiary standards.

There is, of course, a potential problem here. In that the church can never outsource the gospel to government agencies. Would it perhaps be better to walk away from tertiary education as the framework and just 'do our own thing'?

Certainly it is the case that meeting the required standards for accreditation can seem onerous, distracting even. Yet there are pragmatic and, more importantly, missional reasons for continuing to engage with wider tertiary standards and expectations. Among them are:

### Resourcing

Currently the State is prepared to invest heavily in tertiary education. This includes theological education that meets required standards. The government does this because it recognises that there are social, cultural and economic benefits from having an educated population. FEE-HELP and other student support funds are accessed by most ACT students. They would not be available if our courses were not accredited. Now, if the funding model was changed so that it came with conditions that Christian providers could not agree to, then we would have to give it up. But unless or until that occurs, students and colleges benefit from state recognition and investment.

### Quality

Involvement in a wider standards system which provides official accreditation has been good for theological education. It has made it better. Christian agencies are subject to the sin of pride just like anyone else. At times, we have assumed that we will always know best, but the results have not always borne this out. Constant rigorous examination by external bodies has helped us to lift our game. Our teaching gets better, our research gets better and our graduates are better educated. Formal education is neither the only pathway to, or a

guarantee of successful ministry. But it has an important part to play, so it should be as good as we can make it.

### Credibility

In times of missional challenge, such as is clearly the case in Western societies today, the church is being tempted to retreat into its own shell, to redefine mission as a form of 'holy withdrawal' from the rest of society. When it does this it is failing the Gospel. Christians are called to engage with the underlying assumptions and prejudices of culture, and at the same time be prepared to challenge our own assumptions and prejudices. This is not an easy task. We need people who have developed skills, knowledge and wisdom to do the hard thinking. Equally importantly, we need Christians who can work as 'cultural agents', who will be taken seriously by wider society, and who can speak in ways that respectfully challenge ideas and structures. We will not succeed by simply shouting louder. Society is prepared to listen, but it wants to hear from those who know what they are talking about. Credibility is built in many ways. Recognised qualifications, which have opened themselves up to testing and review, build confidence in a sceptical world.

No model of training or education is absolute or perfect. The ACT and Colleges like Ridley have changed their approaches in the past and will do so again in the future. If compliance regimes and the systems of accreditation become counterproductive, or their demands become inimical to Gospel practice or truth, then we will walk away from them. This is not the case currently. In fact, we gain real value from this wider engagement. Indeed, in its current configuration, it assists the ACT and its affiliated Colleges to serve the mission of God.

# Preparing for a Lifetime of Ministry



PhD student and Ridley tutor **Elizabeth Culhane** reflects on the benefits of formal study at Ridley College



Above: Elizabeth Culhane, Ridley tutor and teaching assistant

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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*'So, what do you do?'*

When you are a theology student, your response to this routine question can arouse a minefield of opinions about the value of formal theological and ministry education:

*'Time is short. Why would you bother with all that book learning when you could be out in the world doing God's work?'*

*'Many great Christian leaders did not go to Bible College. It is a frivolous use of time and money.'*

*'Did your church not teach you to read the Bible?'*

But, rather than being a waste of time or money, formal theological study is vital for anyone preparing for a lifetime of ministry. This applies whether your context is the workplace, home, church, school, prison, hospital or somewhere overseas. Here are six ways in which theological education is important:

### 1. Time and accountability

It is extremely difficult to carve out the time for in-depth study of the Bible, Church History, Greek, and the other theology sub-disciplines on your own. Formal study offers you the structure and accountability to move through a body of material systematically. It encourages disciplined learning through regular tests and assignments. Formal study enables you to learn from experienced faculty in a focused manner. It is an investment of time from which you will reap the benefits for decades into the future.

### 2. Theological fundamentals and frameworks

You may not be aware of your doctrinal presuppositions before coming to study theology, but they're there. They are informing your ministry priorities, how you speak to believers and non-believers, and your sermons.



## Formal theological study is vital for anyone preparing for a lifetime of ministry...

In each theology sub-discipline, the curriculum is designed to teach you the fundamental knowledge and frameworks that underlie the discipline.

This knowledge has significant implications for your life and ministry. Your weekly Bible Study group probably cannot cover how the theology of Christ relates (and does not relate!) to the theology of the church, or how past Christians have responded to previous iterations of many of the theological and pastoral issues we face today.

### 3. Challenged thinking

Formal theology and ministry training will expose you to ideas that differ from your own. This is vital for everyone, especially those who have been in the same Christian context for a long time.

We must have certain ideas challenged if we are to develop a robust understanding of God and his counsel, one that remains ever-open to challenge by Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

### 4. Mission and ministry

'Academic' theology is not divorced from 'practical' ministry. They inform each other. The curriculum is founded on what is important

for serving God and his world. The more we learn about God and his world, the more our hearts are enlivened with concern for God's mission.

### 5. Formation

Theological colleges like Ridley are committed to ensuring that students are formed in Christ-likeness through their studies. This occurs through initiatives such as daily chapel services and weekly prayer triplets with other students. In weekly 'life and ministry groups', students discuss how their studies are impacting the development of their Christian character and service.

### 6. Community and relationships

During formal theology and ministry education, much of your learning takes place through your conversations with faculty members, visiting speakers, and fellow students. The relationships you form with your peers provide mutual encouragement as you navigate the various demands of life and study.

And after you graduate, these relationships will be invaluable sources of support amid the pressures of ministry in which it can be difficult to make friends.

Elizabeth undertook a Master of Divinity at Ridley from 2012–2016. She is now a Ridley tutor and teaching assistant, an active member of St Jude's in Parkville, and a Ph.D. student in systematic theology.