

THE ISAAC ARMITAGE LECTURE

20 JULY, 2012

Spiritual Formation, Christian Identity, Community and the Spirit of God in

Spiritual Formation | Dr Darrell Bock

Response by Milton Cujes, Head Master, Trinity Grammar School, Sydney

I would like to thank Dr Wright for the invitation to proffer a response to Dr Bock's lecture. In so doing, I am mindful that you have come this evening looking forward to hearing one lecture, not two!

- Hence, I shall endeavour to be succinct.

I should also declare at the outset two other points. First, that my attempt at engagement with Dr Bock's thoughtful and in many respects, challenging, words will be from the perspective of a journeyman Head Master rather than that of a theologian or academic.

Secondly, now that I have had the privilege of hearing Dr Bock speak on two occasions in the last three days, I should also acknowledge that I run the real risk of having some of my prejudices confirmed by his insightful, Biblically-based, Christ-focussed words.

I resonate with the contextual backdrop that Dr Bock provides for his themes, that,

"Spiritual formation, Biblically-speaking is an exercise in community

- *That it is community-rooted."*

Much of what we see in today's society presents an exaggerated preoccupation in defining success or meaning in life in terms of focus on self. Self-esteem, self-development, self-improvement, self-expression, individual freedom are all important qualities of a happy, successful life but **THEY ARE NOT** of themselves sufficient.

As Christian educators, we need to bear witness to the truth that we gain meaning in life only through contributing something beyond ourselves and in living for something higher than self.

The late John Stott put it well, when he said, *“Only God can give meaning to life, because only He can supply the missing dimensions, God adds eternity to time and God adds transcendence to space.”*

The daily caring, sharing and daring of community experience through an holistic approach to schooling, with its associated “life lessons” such as putting the team's or community's needs ahead of your own personal desires, or honouring your commitments to others even when it may not be convenient to do so needs to be affirmed, even if this runs counter to the prevailing generation Y sentiments of today.

Dr Bock's point that “A privatised, spiritual walk ignores or under-utilises elements God says are essential to spiritual growth” is well understood in the context of parish life, but I fear not as readily acknowledged in the setting of our Schools.

Here I would like to see us as caring, supportive School communities, feeling a little more comfortable in getting beyond the “cringe factor” of sharing some of our individual daily struggles and triumphs of faith.

The linking of spiritual formation with discipleship is apposite. The reference to an experienced mentor as often being helpful and encouraging in spiritual formation is no doubt our common valued experience for which we all give thanks. It also brings to mind the truism about education – that students learn faculty, not subjects – emphasising yet again the importance of having Christian men and women on our staff. Men and women who see their vocation as Christian teachers, who model a Christian lifestyle in the performance of their daily School duties, that attracts our students to ask them what is it that makes them different. A lifestyle that prepares the way for that life-changing conversation with a student which can at times occur in the most unexpected circumstances to “give a good account of the faith that lies within them”.

Dr Bock’s four key elements of spiritual formation, Biblically-derived, attested and presented, provides us with

- the Who – (the spirit as the agent of formation)
- the “What” – (spiritual identity – connected to others and God)
- the “How” – (the road to wisdom: an open and pursuing heart – receiving and doing!)
- and for “Whom” and for what purpose – (the goal of holiness and mission in community)

of spiritual formation.

The consideration of such a Biblical framework provides us with a helpful guide in examining the policies and practices we seek to develop and implement in our own School settings in promoting spiritual formation. It is both helpful and reassuring, with its acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty and grace in our lives, while at the same

time no less challenging, stirring us to take up our responsibilities in serving God and our fellow man.

viz.

- How effectively are we acknowledging and facilitating each individual student as having a special role in our community?
- Are our School communities known for the quality of the relationships within them or by their current standing in academic league tables or sporting competitions?
- Is God's presence seen within our community and how do we show His presence in day to day functional effective relationships?
- How does our community perceive wisdom, humility and spiritual need?
- Is the fruit of the spirit discernible in our midst?
- What role does mission and service policy play within our School?

In responding to this year's challenging topic, Dr Bock has also reminded us that in our Schools we are in fact teaching beyond the academic, social, emotional and physical domains associated with preparation for life – we are also engaged in preparing our students for eternity.

Here, I believe it is incumbent for us to engage our young men and women in an examination of the basic elements of the Christian faith and to consider the answers that Jesus provides to the fundamental questions of life, its purpose and meaning.

This needs to be part of their education as members of our School communities.

They need to appreciate that such knowledge can be tested and that it is knowledge that is available to anyone who truly wants to be wise. Our Schools have a role in challenging us individually and collectively, to reflect and engage ourselves in our

own continuing faith journey. This is best achieved in a community environment where we can share our own doubts and certainties, successes as well as shortcomings in our day to day experiences as frail human beings made in the image of God.

In responding to this challenge we will further the growth and development of our Christian communities and thereby be even more effective in meeting the needs of our students by promoting their spiritual formation. We will be fulfilling our potential as God's people working in His service, guided by the self-sacrificial example of Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit so that in all things we can truly say, *detur gloria soli deo*.