

THE ISAAC ARMITAGE LECTURE

18th October, 2013

**So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them,
male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1.27 TNIV)**

**In the 21st century, should we be educating males and females or
educating human beings?**

**Dr Julie Townsend,
Headmistress,
St Catherines School, Waverley**

**Response by Dr Bryan Cowling,
Executive Director,
Anglican Education Commission, Diocese of Sydney.**

I would like to thank Dr Wright for the invitation to proffer a response to Dr Townsend's lecture. I would also like to thank Dr Townsend for her presentation, for the research and reflection that has preceded its delivery and for the substance contained within it. As a fellow educator, it should come as no surprise that I concur with most of what she has said. She has posed many questions. I like questions. I should declare at the outset that I have never taught in an all-girls school, nor in an all-boys school for that matter, though I received my secondary education many years ago in the best all-boys high school in Newcastle. My current position sees me visiting many single-sex schools as well as co-educational schools.

I am intrigued by the suggestion that the 'age of postmodernism' may be over and that we are now entering the 'age of authenticity.' I could not help thinking how ironical that is for the subject we are discussing this evening. I just hope that this does not lead too quickly to the corrupting of yet another good word in the English language.

Foundational Truth

Dr Townsend, quite rightly drew our attention early in the lecture to the foundational biblical truth of her thesis, namely, 'that God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.' (Genesis 1.27) And from that premise, she went on to develop three significant themes: first that males and females are equal, second that males and females are different and third that their differentness is both intentional and fundamental to the establishment of wholeness or completeness within God's creation.

Meaning-Making

In addressing these themes I think it is fair to say, Dr Townsend has engaged in the practice of meaning-making. I cannot resist making the observation that in many of the revised BOS syllabuses, it appears 'encouraging students to make meaning' within such subjects has achieved greater prominence than in the past. This is a good thing. We know that God has placed meaning within the world. Part of our cultural mandate is to uncover and explore it. Julie's modeling of it in this lecture is most apt.

Equality

The equality theme is an interesting one. It ought to be grounds for great celebration. Somehow, I think, over time, it has been obscured by ego-centric, powerful masculine leaders in all spheres of society suppressing their female counterparts and, or in more recent times, by well-meaning, zealous feminists attempting to impose their own hegemony on the world in place of the males. For once it is both politically and theologically correct to assert unequivocally, that in the eyes of God males and females are of equal value. But that piece of theology is rarely recognised as having a Christian origin.

I might just observe, that earlier this week, in a Synod debate, discourse on what gender equity means in respect to governance, equality was defined, not unpredictably, in terms of numbers: that is, equality is realized by having 5 women and 5 men on a committee, or 10 women and 10 men in the Cabinet! Real equality is more than numerical.

Differences

Dr Townsend cites a range of scientific sources that establish beyond doubt that there are distinct differences between males and females, not just in the western societies with which we are more familiar, but globally. They see the world differently. These differences, like equality, are worthy of recognition and celebration. They are enriching, they are enabling, they are

empowering, and they are all of these because our wise God created us in that way.

Complementary

More than merely being different, males and females have been created to complement one another. In her concluding paragraph Dr Townsend said, *'we must work together to celebrate differences, accommodate weaknesses and draw comfort from each other's strengths. With women and men working side by side, complementing each other, we may not make a perfect world, but we will be moving in the right direction.'* Where are the champions of such a great idea? In our schools? In our churches?

What does this thesis say to us about the education of boys and girls?

Dr Townsend suggests that we should educate girls to be women, we should educate boys to be men, we should value the differences between males and females, we should teach boys to value the female voice, we should strengthen girls' weaker traits, we should strengthen boys' weaker traits and we should promote equality. Together these seven tasks represent an impressive challenge. I note with approbation that in reference to the education of girls she included the intentional education of them to be wives, mothers and I would add, adult daughters, and likewise for boys, intentional preparation to be loving husbands and responsible fathers.

Types of Schools

Throughout the western world, there is some contention about whether single-sex schools are 'better,' 'worse,' 'more' or less 'appropriate' than their co-educational counterparts. After reading five different pieces of research, I found it impossible to sustain a case for any one of these judgements. And certainly it was impossible to identify any specific Christian theological grounds for claiming one approach was more Christian than another. As Smithers and Robinson said, *'it doesn't matter what educators [or for that matter theologians] think is best, it is the market place that ultimately decides what sort of school parents choose for their children.'**

Every one taught by both a male and a female?

On the premise that God created marriage, that God established that a family should comprise an adult male and an adult female and that each child should be brought up by a mother and a father, is it reasonable to infer that in the education of children outside or beyond the family, every girl and every boy should be taught by both male and female teachers? This would challenge the leaders of government and private schools alike, even at the best of times, to provide multiple mature male and female teacher-role models for their students. How much more important is this as the number of single-mum families and same-sex unions increases?

As an aside, I note that there is a debate going on in Britain and America among early childhood educators as to why less than 3% of the teachers of pre-school children are males, and whether our anxiety about child-abuse is depriving young children of a positive male influence. Is this something we should be concerned about?

Is it either or both?

Finally, let me remind you of the question that prompted the lecture. Dr Townsend asked, “in the twenty-first century, should we be educating males and females or educating human beings?”

You, no doubt will have drawn your conclusion on what her answer was. Had the question been asked of the nineteenth century, or of the first century, would her answer, or would your answer, have been any different?

For my part, in respect to each of these alternative questions, I would have answered ‘both.’ And I would have done so for this reason, that in the hurly-burly of twenty-first century Anglican education, I think that many of our teachers have a very undeveloped, inadequate understanding of what it means to be a human being. They are weak on biblical anthropology and that is serious because virtually every subject taught in schools has an anthropological basis. And because of this, these teachers have an inadequate pedagogy.

A pedagogy fit for an Anglican school is one that acknowledges that the learners are embodied spiritual beings, created in the image of God, they are unique, they are variously gifted, they have habits, desires and a history, they have particular styles of learning, indeed they are wired to be learners, explorers and inquirers; they are wired to live in communion with God and their fellow beings.**

And they are females or males. But underpinning their gender is their God-given human nature and their need to enjoy fellowship with their Creator.

Thank you Julie for making meaning for us and for precipitating an important conversation.

*Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson, *The Paradox of Single-Sex and Co-Educational Schooling*, Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, 2006

**Cairney T, Cowling B and Jensen M, *New Perspectives on Anglican Education*, AEC, Sydney, 2011.