

The Launch of the Priscilla & Aquila Centre
7 February 2011

I am delighted to welcome you to this important conference, and especially delighted to introduce and 'launch' a new venture for Moore College, which we have called "The Priscilla & Aquila Centre" – whose core business will be "the encouragement of the ministries of women in partnership with men."

I would like to begin by expressing gratitude to the Anglican Deaconess Institution for financial and other support that they have given over many years to the training of women for ministry at Moore College – and for their continued support in the context of the launch of this Centre.

I would also like to say what a privilege it is to have Jane Tooher as a member of the College Faculty and the founding Director of The Priscilla & Aquila Centre. Jane has a wide experience in student and church based ministries here in Sydney and in London. She has brought her considerable wisdom, insight, energy and personal commitment to the creation of this Centre and the shaping of this conference. I am looking forward to the genuinely groundbreaking work that I am confident this Centre will do under Jane's guidance.

THE PRISCILLA & AQUILA CENTRE

Let me explain three things about the new Centre.

First, the Centre has been created *to encourage and promote the ministries of women*. This Centre will enrich, multiply and expand the ministries of women.

Second, the Centre intentionally recognises that *brothers and sisters in the body of Christ are in partnership*, not competition. We do not wish to isolate the ministries of women from men and the ministries of men. There may be the occasional place for women and men to meet separately in church life, but normally we serve Christ *together*. While the Priscilla & Aquila Centre (and this conference) will have a particular interest in women and their ministries, it intends to set the issues deliberately in the context of the partnership between men and women in life and ministry.

Third, the Centre will work from what is often called a "*Complementarian*" understanding of the relationship between men and women. For some years

“Gender Complementarity” has been included in the formal statement of the “Values” held by Moore College:

... the fundamental equality and mutual dependence of men and women as image bearers of God, while recognising proper differences in roles and responsibilities in life and Christian ministry.

Of course this position needs to be explained more fully than that, it may need to be re-examined, perhaps reformulated, probably defended. Its goodness and value need to be investigated and its practical implications worked out. The Centre will be doing all this, but in a less defensive way than may have been necessary in the past.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTROVERSY

However we do not pretend that the controversy is over. In evangelical Christian circles disagreements about men’s and women’s relationships and roles continues to be deeply felt and difficult.

a. The revolution and its aftermath

This is largely because we are living through a time and in a culture that is still working out the consequences of a social revolution that has been going on in the West since (let us say) the 1960’s. It included the so-called the Feminist or women’s liberation movement, the sexual revolution, (and much more). It has involved massive changes in thinking about such things as marriage, family, parenthood, as well as a radical challenge to traditional gender-based expectations of men and women in family, society and the workplace.

Younger members of our churches have grown up and been educated *after* the revolution and in a world where thinking, attitudes and values are radically different from those of their grandparents. A young Christian married couple today will almost certainly be aware that their own marriage and family are being conducted very differently from the families in which they grew up – certainly very differently from the families in which their parents grew up.

b. Evaluating the revolution

How do we evaluate what has happened in this social revolution? It is complicated. There were, for example, undoubtedly ways in which women were treated unfairly (and worse) – of which we now feel we are more aware. Changes have come to our society that it is very difficult not to welcome. In many ways I do not believe we would want to *go back* as a society and culture. Many of us who are aware of what has happened find it difficult to be too critical of the revolution.

And yet – it is also difficult to think that the outcome of the revolution has been all that might have been hoped. Men and women still hurt one another in many ways. As a society we seem more, not less, confused about marriage and family and parenthood. Did the revolution bring us to a “better place” – when all is considered? I am not at all sure it did. Without pretending that the past was a golden age – *it was not* – I am not convinced that we haven’t exchanged one set of problems for another – and actually still have many of the old ones. Selfishness continues to wreck relationships. Personal ambition continues to derail lives. Power continues to be used for the benefit of the powerful. Un-self-centred concern for others is as rare as it has ever been. Is it not as foolish to think that today’s culture is “enlightened” and wholesome, as it is to imagine that everything was wonderful in the 1950’s?

c. Christians after the revolution

It is hardly surprising, then, that when we Christians today consider areas of life that involve the relationships between men and women (whether marriage, family, parenthood, church, ministry –and more) we do not find it easy.

Let me caricature our experience a little.

Some Christians open their Bibles and think that they can see an endorsement of *some aspects* of the revolution and the relatively enlightened times in which we now live: concern for justice, for the dignity and value of all people, which is only enhanced for all who are one in Christ Jesus, all sons of God. The gracious Lordship of Jesus Christ under whom we all – *equally* – are servants, brothers and sisters together, breaks down all the barriers, so that there is

now not *Jew and Greek*, nor *slave and free*, nor *male and female*, for we are all *one* in Christ Jesus. Committed to that vision, can we not see that the social revolution of the last half-century has overcome in society to some real degree and in some striking aspects some of those things that *needed* to be overcome. In church life there is nothing commendable about social conservatism for its own sake. We want to be at least as good as the society about us in issues of fairness and justice and treating one another properly. We feel decidedly uncomfortable with church practices that seem to belong to another age – practices that seem to care *less* about fairness and equality than our society does. Is it not, frankly, embarrassing to belong to a church that seems to treat women as second-class members?

Other Christians open their Bibles and think that they see the revolution in very different terms. It has been an attempt to live by one rule: *freedom*: freedom in sex, freedom in relationships, freedom in every aspect of life – freedom from any external constraints on any of us – so long as we do not hurt anyone else. *That* has been the spirit of the revolution (as these Christians see it). But these Christians see the word of God requiring a certain good order in human sexual behaviour, an order in the relationship between husband and wife, parent and child, man and woman. To the extent that the revolution has represented the overthrowing of that order it has represented rebellion against God. It has been a human bid for freedom *from God*. It is all very well (these Christians think) to pick and choose some elements of the revolution that look virtuous, and match them with some elements in the Bible. But the bid for freedom, if it is a bid for freedom *from God*, is a disaster from beginning to end.

It seems to me that this is a reasonable picture of the confusion that is still with us.

d. Thinking about differences

Although our new Centre does not intend to re-run the debates of recent decades, we will be aware of the differences that still exist in our fellowship. How should we think about those differences?

To those of us who have come to a so-called Complementarian understanding of the issues, I want to say:

Let us take care to recognise the true and good motivations of those who disagree with us here. See and be glad when brothers and sisters care about justice and righteousness, when they are disturbed by men who seem to think they are superior to women, or by women being treated as less important, valuable, or significant than men. When brothers and sisters react against traditional ways, because they see a history of oppression and ill-treatment, take care to appreciate this. Furthermore, be slow to think that a brother or sister cares less than you do about being faithful to God's Word. Of course if this *is* the case, it is very serious and needs to be talked about. But be very careful. Let us be slow to assume that only we (and those who agree with us) care about God's Word.

One reason our differences have been so hard to deal with is the impression sometimes given that the so-called "Complementarian" side thinks that those who differ do not care about Biblical authority – OR those who differ *imagine* that so-called "Complementarians" think that.

To those on the *other* side of the controversy, I want to say this. Take care to recognise the true and good motivations of those with whom *you* disagree. See and be glad when brothers and sisters care about faithfulness to God's Word, who approach God's Word with the assumption that what we find there is *good* – no matter what the world may think. When brothers and sisters believe God's Word more than they believe the voice of their culture, when they work very hard to see their culture through the lens of God's Word rather than the other way around – take care to appreciate this. When they will not conform to the values of today's world for the sake of looking good in the eyes of the world, do not judge them as the world judges them. Furthermore, be slow to adopt a sense of moral patronising superiority, thinking that a brother or sister cares less than you do about justice and fairness and the proper treatment of people. Of course if this *is* the case, it *is* very serious and needs to be talked about. But be very careful. Be slow to assume that only you (and those who agree with you) are on the high moral ground of concern for justice.

A second reason that our differences have been hard to deal with is the impression sometimes given that the so-called "Egalitarian" side thinks that they are morally superior, and those who differ are less concerned for justice

and fairness and the right treatment of people – OR those who differ *imagine* that “Egalitarians” think that.

Welcome to what I believe is going to be a rich and rewarding conference for us all – as we launch the work of the Priscilla and Aquila Centre.