

## **The Bible and the Business of Life**

*Edited by Simon Holt and Gordon Preece*

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*The Bible and the Business of Life* is a celebratory festschrift to mark the sixty-fifth birthday and formal retirement of Robert Banks as director and dean of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute in Sydney. The fifteen contributions, authored by a distinguished company of Banks's friends, are divided more or less equally between three major sections: 'exegesis', 'ecclesiology' and 'everyday life'. Each section reflects aspects of the interests, life and ministry of a man whose own understanding of the intersection between the Bible and Christian life has significantly influenced many people throughout the world, especially in America and Australia.

Robert Banks has written widely on the theme of 'theology and everyday life', and the title of this present volume is taken from one of his earlier books, *All the Business of Life*, first published in 1987. In that book, Banks expresses his shock when, some twenty-five years earlier, he came across John Baillie's juxtaposition of theology with something as mundane as 'sleep'. This discovery led Banks into a journey that has been the primary theme of his Christian life, to which *The Bible and the Business of Life* testifies: there is a profound connection between our basic Christian convictions and the way in which we live the *whole* of our lives.

This controlling dynamic in the life and ministry of Robert Banks explains the structure of Holt and Preece's edited volume of essays. Banks's early interest in New Testament studies, which earned him a PhD from the University of Cambridge in 1969, gives rise to the first series of essays, under the rubric of 'exegesis'. For James Dunn, whose close friendship with Banks began while they were fellow research students at Cambridge, the oral Christian tradition is a living tradition that is highly significant for the outworking of Christian community, a theme that clearly lies at the heart of Banks's own practical theology. For Dunn oral tradition is *reformative* precisely because it has a *performative* function in the life of the church.

Stephen Barton's call for radical discipleship based on *dispossession* reflects a lifestyle difference that Robert Banks and his first wife Julie made real throughout their married life. Barton's emphasis on early Christian hospitality resonates powerfully with Banks's own lived-out theology of community, first in Canberra in the seventies and later at Fuller Seminary in the nineties.

Other essays in the 'exegesis' section deal with the importance of prayer (Dieter Kemmler) and Paul's awareness of Roman names and their social significance (Edwin Judge). In the latter essay we are reminded that Paul is less interested in social conventions than in personal relationships. This is consistent with Robert Banks's own 'radical re-modelling of communal life'. The most intriguing essay in this first section is Peter Marshall's 'Paul Our Contemporary: Non-conformity and Innovation Ancient and Modern', which, as the editors point out, mimics Banks's *Going to Church in the First Century: An Eyewitness Account* (published in 1980) in its imaginative use of narrative. Seven people meet for an after-dinner conversation in a house church in Corinth in AD 54, to which several of Banks's friends and

conversation partners are invited as unseen guests. This literary device enables the reader to enter vicariously into first-century 'ideas of mission and innovation strategies and patterns of thought' that provide key elements of a 'biblically based modern mission philosophy' (p 52).

The 'exegesis' section is a mixed bag of essays, each offering something of value, reminding us that any truly authentic community of faith must be anchored in the biblical tradition. It is precisely this conviction that is at the heart of Banks's own groundbreaking study, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (1980), which arose out of his early experimentation with a model of church life based upon a vibrant network of house churches in Canberra.

John Drane, who first met Robert Banks at Fuller Seminary in 1990, authors the opening contribution in the 'ecclesiology' section of the festschrift. His essay, 'Community, Mystery and the Future of the Church', is representative of many attempts today to 'find new ways of being church in a context of rapid cultural change' (p 100). He articulates the need for a contextually relevant expression of church life grounded in a contemporary spirituality that eschews institutionalism in favour of personal experience. Drane's final emphasis on a community that has something to share 'not because we are different, but because we are no different' (p 99) reflects the twin themes of weakness and incarnation that characterise both the writings and the lifestyle of Robert Banks.

Drane's emphasis on the counter-cultural life of the faith community is echoed by Paul Stevens in his challenge to clericalism. In his affirmation of the universal calling of all people in Christ, he traces the way vocation has been interpreted—and misinterpreted!—through the ages. For Stevens, all of life is ministry, predicated on a relational humility that is evident in the life and ministry of Robert Banks, with whom he edited *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (1998).

Two essays follow on education. The first, by Bruce Kaye, traces the historical relationship between Australian Anglicanism and the role of church schools, where ecclesiology has unfortunately been demoted, leading to a 'compromising of the theological endeavour' (p 130). In his essay, Kaye argues that systematic theology and ecclesiology are necessarily 'mutually enmeshed with each other' (p 121), and so he applauds the Amos-like role that Robert Banks fulfils as one who understands Anglicanism enough to critique its deficiencies. Miroslav Volf, a former colleague of Banks on the Fuller faculty, is also aware of deficiencies in the education arena, but this time he is addressing theological education itself. Uneasy about the place of God in contemporary theological education—for it is all too easy to elevate the academy above a true *love* for God—Volf offers the suggestive motif of 'dancing for God'. Noticeably, Banks's own *Reenvisioning Theological Education: A Missional Approach to Ministry Formation* (1999) is imbued with the same radical passion for transformation that permeates Volf's essay.

The final section of the festschrift is devoted to the theme of 'everyday life'. The three threads of 'exegesis', 'ecclesiology' and 'everyday life' are so closely interwoven in Banks's theology that there is a sense in which this theme has already been introduced and given some prior treatment. However, the six contributions in this section offer a rich insight into Banks's conviction that it is time we 'did justice to both belief and everyday life, and linked up these two aspects that God always intended should remain together' (*All the Business of Life*, p 61). There are essays on marriage and family life, the value of residential buildings, two essays that pick up again on the

theme of vocation (but this time in relation to everyday life), the nature of leadership, and the relationship between Christianity and the movies.

Stuart Piggin adopts the methodology of a close study of biblical texts (an approach familiar to those who read Banks's own writings) in his examination of the domestic theology of Jonathan Edwards. Not only does Piggin's methodology echo that of Banks but the theme of marriage as an analogy of the love of God is highly appropriate as a commentary on Banks's own married life (following Julie's sudden, tragic death from cancer in 1999, Robert Banks married Linda in 2000, and Piggin spoke at their marriage).

The spirituality of *place* is explored by Simon and Brenda Holt in terms of the sanctuary of home and neighbourhood as places of refuge and community. Residential buildings matter, they argue, because we spend one third of our lives in our homes and engage in three quarters of our social interaction there. We might shape our buildings, but they also shape us. They are a vital part of our everyday lives, becoming for us *places of the soul*.

Laura Simmons and Gordon Preece are both deeply concerned at the way in which work has been instrumental in dehumanising us. Simmons explores Dorothy Sayers' theology of work and vocation and challenges us to see ourselves as those who live out our calling as 'sub creators' with God (compare this with Philip Hefner's notion that human beings 'created in the image of God are participants and co-creators in the ongoing work of God's creative activity' in Ted Peters [ed] *Cosmos as Creation*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1989: 232). In an impassioned plea against vocational rootlessness, Preece insists that we need 'creational and communal roots if we are to counter a postmodern work and consumption ethic that casualises all relationships' (p 214).

The final two essays relate to two visionary roles realised by Banks at Fuller. In 'More Than a Servant: A Fresh Look at the Leadership of Jesus', inspired by a paper written during Banks's period as director of the De Pree Leadership Center at Fuller, Richard Higginson addresses the shibboleth of 'servant leadership', arguing instead for a multiple model of leadership based on the example of Jesus himself, who was 'no soft touch' (p 220).

The final essay reflects Robert Banks's love of the movies. At Fuller he was instrumental in establishing the City of Angels Film Festival in Los Angeles, and in this essay his colleague at Fuller, Robert Johnston, develops one particular expression of a spirituality of everyday life, that of 'seeing God at the movies'. Johnston's essay is a stimulating example of the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, and it is a fitting tribute to Robert Banks's own desire to integrate theology and everyday life.

*The Bible and the Business of Life* is a fine collection of essays and a testimony not only to the life and ministry of an outstanding Australian theologian and human being but also to a God who has created a good world and whose presence is to be celebrated in every area where men and women are active in social, political, cultural and educational discourse and behaviour.