Paul Tyson, ‘On being of the world but not in the world – how secularism defines our religion and renders our worship harmless’

Dr Tyson is Director of the Emmanuel Centre for the Study of Science, Religion and Society, Emmanuel College, University of Queensland.

Abstract: As Peter Harrison points out ‘religion’ is as new an idea as ‘science’. Both of these notions are alien to the Biblical revelation and to the beliefs the practises of the Church before modern times. Yet the ideas that there are discrete ‘supernatural’ and ‘natural’ realms, that true knowledge only concerns material things and mathematical relations, that religion is a private matter separated out from the realm of secular public life, define contemporary Australian Christian beliefs and practises. In this manner thinking that has come to define what the New Testament calls ‘the world’ sets the terms of Christian belief and practise, relegating faith to the civically harmless realm of distinctly personal, non-political, non-scientific religion. Our faith is defined out of public life and becomes a sectional interest identity concern (surely a debasement of both faith and politics) at best. It is no surprise that Australia is worshipping the Golden Calf of financialized functional materialism, and that this idolatry is just as at home inside the Church as it is in ‘the world.’ The paper concludes with a few tentative ideas about how the Church might seek to change this situation.

Barbara Deutschmann, ‘Gender and the Garden Story’

Since retiring from TEAR Australia last year, Barbara Deutschmann has been largely working on how scripture speaks relevantly to current life issues. She is currently doing a PhD on gender and the Garden narrative in Genesis.

Abstract: Same-sex marriage, gender violence, post-feminism, queer discourse: gender-framed topics pulse through Western society’s political and social conversations. People of faith are driven back to their foundational narratives, such as the Garden Story of Genesis 2-3, in search of faith-full perspectives on these matters. This paper will give an overview of trends in interpretation of Genesis 2-3, then, looking at the narrative afresh, draw out some implications for current conversations on sex/gender. In the exploration, just as we are driven to ask questions of scripture, we find that scripture, in turn asks questions of us.

Keith Sewell, ‘The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity: Roots, Consequences & Resolutions’
Dr Sewell is Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt College, IA, USA.

1515–1530  Break

1530–1600  Karen Pack, ‘Mateship – a holy alliance: rediscovering covenant friendship in the contemporary Australian Church’

Abstract: There was a time in Australian society when ‘mateship’ was revered as one of society’s grounding realities – an ANZAC value. Understood as a relationship of unbreakable loyalty, mateship held deep friendship to be a reverent, almost sacred thing. In today’s society, the lines of friendship have been blurred and the notion of loyalty sacrificed to the ego-centric ideal of ‘doing what is right for me’. Friends are no longer life-long mates, but seasonal or situational companions to be picked up and discarded according to convenience. Even more concerning, however, is the blurring of lines between friendship and sexual recreation. Rather than being the domain of ‘platonic’, non-romantic connection, friendship is now seen as a safe place to satisfy one’s irresistible need for sexual intimacy. To express this reality, we have even spawned a new lexicon, including ‘friends with benefits’, CSBF (Casual Sex Between Friends), ‘booty call’ and numerous far less savoury terms. When a friendship between men seems to involve an emotional connection or attraction, it ceases to be simply a friendship and becomes a ‘bromance’. For a Christian, this sexualisation of friendship and intimacy should be alarming, given the ideals of friendship and commitment taught in the Biblical narrative. This paper seeks to address the sexualisation of friendship in contemporary Australia, and contrast this with the Biblical ideal of covenant friendship. This paper will consider how such covenant friendships can be a nexus of hope in the midst of despair, an expression of the Ahava of God. Ultimately, it will seek to answer the question, ‘How can covenant friendships nurture holiness and wholeness, serving as a witness to the holy and tenacious love that God has shown us?’

1600–1630  Graham Leo, ‘Reading the Book of Esther: A Theology of Work for the 21st Century in the West’

Graham is a DMin student exploring the engagement of churches with male workers in their congregations. His work is investigating how men perceive the significance of their own work, and how their own churches perceive and respond to that work. Graham is a retired school Principal from the Gold Coast.

Abstract: The world of politics is the field in which our perceptions of human work are set in Esther. This paper will consider ways that notions of Jewry in fifth century (BCE) Persia clearly sound many resonances to the social milieu in which many in the West find themselves, especially Christians in ‘secular’ workplaces and various typical urban or rural environments.