



Emmanuel College

# Papers

**Education and Transformation**

by

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**Emmanuel College**  
**The University of Queensland**  
*Enriching lives since 1911*

Emmanuel College is Australia's ninth, and with St John's College, The University of Queensland's first residential college to gain affiliation. It was founded by the Presbyterian Church of Queensland in 1911 with the first students taking up residence in Wickham Terrace in 1912. As the Presbyterian Church moved towards partnership with other religious denominations during the 1970s, Emmanuel College also came under the auspices of the Uniting Church. Upon its inauguration, Emmanuel College was an all male residence but this changed in 1975 when women were admitted as collegians. Now, the College numbers around 340 students with half our population being female.

Further change was experienced by the College when it moved in 1955 from its original site in Wickham Terrace to its present location on the main university campus in St Lucia.

Since 1911, Emmanuel has stood for excellence in all round education and has had seven Rhodes Scholars during its history. Its graduates have gone on to make a major contribution to Australia in many areas, including as doctors, scientists, teachers, engineers, lawyers and judges, politicians, ambassadors and diplomats, and church leaders.

## **THE AUTHOR**

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James served as President of the Uniting Church in Australia from 2000-2003, and was Chairperson of the National Heads of Churches, and President of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

He has received honorary degrees from the Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland, Griffith University and The University of Ulster. He became a Knight of St John in 2000 and a Rotary Honorary Peace Ambassador in 2001. James has been awarded a Centenary Medal, and in 2006 was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

Now based in Canberra, James is Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Professor of Theology at Charles Sturt University, and Director of the Public and Contextual Theology Strategic Research Centre. He was a member of the Emmanuel College Council from 1989-1998.

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## EDUCATION AND TRANSFORMATION

**Readings:** Matthew 10: 42 - 45  
Romans 12: 1 - 8

**Text:** Romans 12: 2: “Do not be conformed to this world (Greek: age), but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (New Revised Standard Version).

Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist, while attending the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in Kenya in 1975, and surveying the vast crowd (including a High Court judge from the Caribbean, a used-car salesman from Memphis, Tennessee and a bare-footed Kenyan tribesman, recently converted, who had just walked for three days to see what it was the whole thing was about), said: “You people are a sociological impossibility. You have absolutely nothing in common, except your extraordinary conviction that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world.”

This is also true of a university. A university gathers together people of vast diversity for a common purpose and common outcomes. In the last twenty years there have been vast changes in university education. Tertiary education has been radically democratised, with enormous growth in numbers, and great opportunities open to many more people than in the past. Like it or not, universities have to be run as major commercial enterprises. Otherwise they would simply cease to exist. So how, in these circumstances, are they to carry out their responsibility to provide for transformation through education?

What contribution can Christianity, so involved with universities since the early years of tertiary education in this country, make to this transformative process today?

So let us go to one of the hearts of that discussion of transformation for Christianity, Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*. It is arguable that no document in Christian history has played a more influential part than this letter. One simply has to reflect on the pivotal impact of *Romans* on Augustine and the development of Western Christianity, on Luther and then on Calvin, and the political, social and religious consequences of the Reformation, on Wesley and the emergence of the Evangelical Revival, on Karl Barth and his dominance of Twentieth Century Theology, and on the Second Vatican Council and the Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church. A primary impetus for Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, and the Members of Vatican II came from Paul’s

writings, particularly from *Romans*. This letter is thus central to Christian self-identity and self-understanding. It forms a useful basis for the exploration of the understanding of Christian transformation based on identification with God in Christ as it challenges the prevailing Graeco-Roman culture of status based on potentially violent concepts through the ethical sections of *Romans*, particularly Chapter 12.

Christianity was born in the midst of oppression. At its outset, it was a despised minority of a despised minority, the people of “the Way” within Judaism within the Roman Empire. Its documents were those of the oppressed. The same actually was true of Judaism as it developed in the first century CE, and of Islam as it developed in the sixth and seventh centuries CE.

In general, this oppression was very public. However, in three hundred years Christianity had become the official religion of the oppressor. So Christianity was born in a milieu of political and social violence. The evidence which we have both from the New Testament and from non-Christian sources of the First Century CE point to the constant struggle of Christianity to survive in such a climate. Clearly that climate of violence and oppression also influenced the language and concept-construction of many parts of the New Testament. Clearly images of violence and oppression are found in the New Testament. Nevertheless, what is far more striking is how early Christianity sought, against the odds, to transcend this violent world.

The Church in Rome was in the process of formation. It was formed of Christians of Jewish descent, and Christians of Gentile, or non-Jewish, descent. It would seem that the Christians of Jewish descent had very considerable economic power. They had, however, suffered political oppression. In 49CE they had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius, along with all the other Jews. On Claudius’ death in 54CE, shortly before Paul wrote *Romans*, they had been allowed to return. The Gentile Christians had, on the other hand, much more political influence, although in all likelihood they were largely economically disadvantaged. They also probably had the numbers; they were in the majority. So here was the Church in Rome, a minority of the economically powerful and politically oppressed, and a majority of the poor, but politically correct. It was the perfect combination for social chaos, as it is in every situation where these factors exist. What probably existed was a collection of rather poor Gentile house-churches, and at least one rather grand synagogue, now converted into a Church building. However, did they meet together? In *Romans* Paul actually never calls them “the church” (*ecclesia*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> He could, for example, have used the Jewish concept of “the temple”; there were two famous pillars at Solomon’s Temple, named Jachin and Boaz (I Kings 7: 15-22).

The church could therefore be understood as “the body of Christ”, the Second or New Adam. It was to be a united, multi-ethnic, socially-diverse and theologically-varied body.

The picture of the church needs to be seen over against the social perceptions of First Century CE Roman society.

Let us look at that world.

**First**, in the world of Early Christianity, social groupings were based on kinship, ethnic issues, power, and politics. Kinship was the central factor of social organisation. The kinship group was the focus of individual loyalty, and had decisive influence over individual identity and self-awareness. The security of each individual was grounded in the community, sharing as they did common interests, values, and activities. Hence, the most basic unit of social awareness was not the individual. Individual consciousness was subordinate to social consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

**Second**, religion, like other social factors, was enmeshed in kinship and politics. Membership of a religious community was not necessarily based on religious relationships, but on bonds of kinship that gave structure to religious associations. Involuntary members belonged to a religion because, for example, they were born into a particular family. Voluntary membership in early Christianity stood in contrast to family-based religion. In the First Century CE the religion of voluntary members resulted in a newly-created kinship group.<sup>3</sup> Although it appeared to be similar to, or to look like, any other kinship group, it was in fact a created or fictive kinship grouping. In Early Christianity, language of the natural kinship group, for example “household (of faith)”, was used for a created kinship group. Indeed, the struggle of the Christian community as a totality, for example in Rome, can be seen in relationship to these two types. It struggled as to which of these two types it in fact belonged.

**Third**, there is considerable evidence in the First Century CE within Graeco-Roman culture of intense expressions of emotion, through outbursts of anger,

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<sup>2</sup> MALINA, B. J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, 55-66; 60-64; MEEKS, W. A.. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 90-91. Cf. THEISSEN, G. *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992, 272 – 278.

<sup>3</sup> THEISSEN, G. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (edited and translated by John H Schutz). Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 27-40. Cf. ESLER, P. F. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific approaches to New Testament interpretation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 6 – 12.

aggression, pugnacity, and indeed violence. Moreover, these appear to have been very public and socially acceptable.<sup>4</sup>

**Fourth**, in such an atmosphere, concern for honour and shame was significant. This was because honour determined social standing and was essential for social cooperation. Honour was the outward approval given to a group or an individual by others whose honour was not in question. The honour of an individual normally was dependent upon the outward approval given to one's group. On the other hand, people became shamed when they transgressed group standards or when they sought a social status to which public approval was not given. Honour was ascribed, for example, by birth into an honourable family, or by it being given or bestowed from honourable persons of power. It was acquired by outdoing others in social interchange. A person's sense of self-worth was therefore established by public reputation related to that person's associations rather than by a judgment of conscience.<sup>5</sup>

Over against these four factors outlined above, Paul summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of oppression and violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation now means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Paul's community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered in that they are not primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social co-operation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced. The social groupings see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include cohesiveness within the group based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of peaceful harmony are central to the community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-

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<sup>4</sup> PEARSON, L. *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*. Stanford: University Press, 1973, 193; WEDDERBURN, A. J. M. *The Reason for Romans (Studies of the New Testament and its World)*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 81-83. Cf. LOADER, W. R. G. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids (Michigan) and Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans, 2002, 177.

<sup>5</sup> MALINA, 27-48.

life of the community, originating from beyond. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Graeco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity. Here is true transformation. Paul summons Christians to new social roles. They are based on mercy, peaceable conduct and reconciliation in a culture where expressions of violence seem to have been normative. The call for transformation means new expressions of group identity. No longer based on kinship or ethnicity, group identity nevertheless seeks to retain the intense cohesion of former groups. Paul's community members bind themselves together as one body in Christ. This metaphor is poignantly suitable in a society where self-awareness arises from group association rather than from individual worth. The ideals of honourable and shameless conduct are altered in that they are now for Christians not any more primarily derived from society outside. Rather, enhanced honour for the community derives from its incorporation into its risen Lord. Patterns of social co-operation are modified as a result. A new communal identity as one body in Christ is thus reinforced.

The social groupings see their identity as coming from beyond themselves. Their self-understanding and their life together are defined by the kindness or mercy of God and by the truthful harmony (or peace) which God gives. The other factors in the transformation include cohesiveness within the group, based on an understanding of God's action from outside. For that reason, attitudes of overcoming violence and of peaceful harmony are central to the Christian community's identity. Moreover, no other identity marker (ethnicity, gender, class, or status) may be accepted as absolute. Honour derives from the faith-life of the community, originating from God. The original groupings are transformed by the new ideal of a central awareness of their relationship with God.

In addition, throughout the ethical sections of Romans, attitudes to those outside the newly created Christian social groupings are to be the same as to those within them. There is to be no distinction. All are to be treated in the same way. This perception was totally new in much of Greco-Roman society. We thus see the radical way in which Paul took hold of Greco-Roman categories of group identity, and then applied to them new metaphors, including that of the body of Christ, so as to create in them a totally new identity through transformation.

How are we to be transformed today? The contemporary reality of many parts of the world is one of deep oppression. Behind this lies the development of a new ideology which “legitimatises a culture of violence by invoking God arbitrarily to suit a particular agenda for aggression. As a result, insecurity, fear and anxiety characterise the lives of many people”.<sup>6</sup> This culture of oppression manifests itself in many different ways. There is the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. Surrounding our very life is the violence against the environment.

The people of Scots and Ulster descent who founded Emmanuel College were people who firmly believed in the power of transformation, especially through education. In this sense they were “a wee bit radical”.

This issue of transformation is very important in a multicultural and multi-religious society like Australia. Our dominant Western culture faces an enormous challenge. Throughout the Western world our culture is going through a period of immense insecurity. In fact, it seems to me, our culture is in the middle of great self-doubt. Western culture has brought great good to many parts of the world. Those positive goods have included democracy and equality, and the alleviation of poverty for millions of people through the activities of commerce and the stock markets. These two factors in the past have brought millions of people in Western societies out of poverty and hopelessness and into wellbeing.

However, now there is great self-doubt about both. There is doubt about the effectiveness and integrity of democracy. In Western societies is it often corrupted by the power of money and the intransigence of the bureaucracy? Again, there is doubt about the validity of the stock market. Is it too unstable? Can it provide stable prosperity? What is the relationship of the market to the state? The effect of these questions has been to create insecurity in Western culture, with its close associations with Christianity. There have been two reactions to this insecurity.

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<sup>6</sup> KOBIA, S, quoted in World Council of Churches News Release entitled “Restating the Ecumenical Vision demands Conversion, says Kobia”, Geneva, 15/02/2005. Cf. BURTON, J. *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention*. London: Macmillan Press, 1990, 1 – 2; 13 – 24.

First, there has been growth of a self-loathing of Western culture by many within that culture, particularly among certain intellectuals. This has manifested itself in an excessive love of other traditions and ambivalence about one's own tradition. Second, and more dangerous, has been a violent defence of Western culture and an unthinking attack on other cultures. Both of these reactions are dangerous.

We need a completely different perspective. That perspective needs to be based on a sober reflection on one's own culture. In this case it requires a sober reflection on Western culture. Western culture has provided great good to humanity, both in terms of the development of democracies and equality before the law and in terms of the alleviation of poverty and the creation of opportunity for millions. That is fundamentally why people from other cultures seek to live in Western societies. Western culture has of course many faults, but the factors discussed above are worth developing and nourishing. There is no place for self-loathing of, or violent defence of, Western culture per se. Equally, other cultures, for example those related to traditional Muslim societies, have great values, particularly the emphasis on the centrality of the community, and mutual care within the community. There have, of course, been negative aspects of such cultures, including lack of respect for human rights. Thus, for all of us, there is a need to value and nourish many aspects of each other's cultures for the common good.

Twenty years ago in Belfast, Northern Ireland I was watching a rugby match one Saturday afternoon on the television, when suddenly there was a news flash that a bank had been robbed. I was mildly irritated. At that time bank robberies were common, and so why was it necessary to disrupt the screening of a rugby match with this information? In any case, a chase took place between the getaway car and a police vehicle. The roads were icy, and both cars skidded and ploughed into a pram, which a woman was pushing, with her baby in the pram and a toddler holding her hand. Both children were killed instantly.

The name of the mother was Betty Williams, a Protestant, whose husband was overseas in the merchant navy. The social worker assigned to help here was a Catholic, Miréad Corrigan. Once Betty's affairs were sorted out the two women went on to found the Peace People, a popular movement to seek peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Both women went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. I became involved in this movement, while home on leave from Indonesia. We walked through both Catholic and Protestant areas, trying to pull the community together. One particular Saturday afternoon I took part in a march through such a mixed Protestant – Catholic area of Belfast.

As a Protestant minister I walked arm-in-arm with a colleague from the university where we had been lecturing, who had just become a Catholic bishop. His name was Cahal Daly, later to become Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland. He was a small, scholarly man, an overgrown leprechaun, as at times he referred to himself. Protestant young people were hurling abuse and rotten fruit at me for consorting with a Catholic. A person rushed out of a Catholic church wielding a great crucifix with which she hit Cahal over the head, questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth, expressing this concept with a single word, constantly repeated. Cahal fell. I asked him if he would like to sit down for a few minutes in a shop door. Although in his seventies, he looked at me with steely eyes. "James", he said, "there's a handkerchief in my pocket. Get it out and clean up my head, and up we get, and on we go, arm-in-arm. For if we give up at this point, then all that stuff which we lecture on, and all that stuff which we spout from the pulpit, will be seen to be sheer hypocrisy". He showed what transformation is.

Amen.



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