

Tom Frame delivered this speech to launch the John W Wilson Publishing Fund for Acorn Press (www.acornpress.com.au/) at St Mark's Anglican Church, Forest Hill, Sunday 14 August 2011. It is reproduced here with permission. Acorn Press is one of Australia's oldest continuing Christian publishing companies. Information about Acorn's titles can be found at www.acornpress.net.au and enquiries about the John W. Wilson Publishing Fund can be directed to info@acornpress.net.au.

I am honoured by the invitation to launch the John W Wilson Publishing Fund which seeks to commemorate a man who exuded Christian charity and holiness, and who made such a mark as a Christian writer and publisher for over forty years. John was a good friend and a valued companion. He was one of the few bishops I really looked forward to seeing when I couldn't avoid attending the annual episcopal gathering during my ministry as Bishop to the Defence Force. And now he is gone and we are depleted. Nothing and no-one can replace John because he had his own special place in our lives. So we mourn his passing and the permanent void this has left in our world but John would urge us to praise God for the dignity bestowed upon each living person in that God has made us different from everyone who will ever live, and that we each in our own unique way convey something of the unfathomable riches of God in whose image we are made.

John confirmed my growing belief that most of the accomplished theologians in Christian history have also been very able writers. If you think for a moment, most contemporary Christians know of the ideas and insights of previous generations of theologians principally through their writings which have been recorded and preserved in some printed form. It is through writing that these theologians have extended their influence beyond their immediate audience and the times in which they lived. This will be true, in time, of John as well. I would also observe that those who think clearly usually write concisely while the process of writing invariably assists to clarify thinking.

This afternoon I want to look briefly at the ways in which the theologian's vocation is discharged through the discipline of writing and suggest that an important component of the modern theologian's 'skill set' is to write clearly and concisely. I wouldn't go as far as saying that someone without a facility for writing cannot be a theologian but I would contend that the value of creative theological thinking is dissipated rapidly by its communication in poorly devised prose. I then want to comment on what I observe of the literary qualities of contemporary theological writing and the influence of substandard writing on the reading public ... before drawing attention to what I believe is a looming crisis in Australian religious publishing: the extreme difficulty that theologians, especially emerging theologians, in this country are facing in striving to have their work published locally. This situation will have, I want to argue, a major bearing on this nation's small theological community and could deplete the quality and quantity of theological conversation in Australia as a whole.

This is why Acorn Press has a vital part to play in the life of the Christian community in this country and why I would urge you to make a contribution to the Publishing Fund that we launch today in John's memory. So, to the theologian's tasks.

The theologian is concerned with God: discerning and defining the character and purposes of God; experiencing and explaining the influence and action of God in the world; recognising and resolving the problems faced by those who want to know God; analysing and assessing rival claims about what God

expects and requires of men and women made in the divine image. As part of their vocation, theologians think thoughts about God, they speak words about God, they devise phrases to describe God; they meet with other theologians to talk about God, they stand in front of students and give lectures about God and they preach sermons that exhort people to listen to God. Theologians also write scholarly papers, compile learned essays and produce academic monographs that set down their thoughts, ideas and conclusions in a permanent form for the benefit of those they will never meet because they are separated from these people by either distance or time.

The theologian's written words are precious because they are deeply personal, embodying the essence of their being and reflecting the evolution of their thoughts on that most sublime of subjects—God. However self-effacing the theologian might be, none would say that their lectures or sermons were without some lasting value or abiding significance, and were therefore unworthy of retention. Although the written text had a particular class or a specific congregation as their original focus, few theologians would accept that their words had no application or were without any appeal to those beyond the first hearers. After all, the bulk of the New Testament was written with a specific audience in mind but the texts were retained because their application and appeal were timeless and universal.

Thankfully, the written words of a great many theologians have been preserved, by those who recognised their continuing influence and enduring wisdom. As historical 'documents', lectures and sermons have been preserved because they reflect the opinions and judgements essential to understanding the theologian's thought processes. They also reveal the questions and concerns that theologian deemed important. Although a small group of theologians does not produce much beyond their lectures and sermons, the majority is committed to producing text for publication as either "work-in-progress" or the fruits of a sustained period of thought and analysis. These theologians find that the writing of essays and books helps to define questions and refine answers. This is an important part of the theologian's vocation and not only because it serves to clarify thought and pre-empt objections.

Theologians do not, of course, exist for themselves or for each other. The Pauline epistles stress that those called to the work of teaching are obliged to address the Church and its struggles and engage with the world and its dilemmas, tasks for which theologians are given specific gifts by God. Theologians are to educate and to enlighten those called by God into that assembly known as the Church, and they are to speak publicly about God before the watching world. They are first and foremost communicators who are to use every means at their disposal to communicate with those they are called to serve. They are also required to be effective thinkers who can bring clarity where there is confusion and insight where there is ignorance. For those theologians who discharge part of their calling through the publication of articles and monographs, their written work needs to be clear and concise lest they be misunderstood or their ideas misinterpreted.

Let me come, then to what I discern at the trials of contemporary theological writing. A century ago, religious book publishing was big business. There was a range of smaller specialist publishing houses whose fortunes waxed and waned, and a number of well-established companies committed to publishing across a number of disciplines, including theology. By way of contrast, there are now very few general publishers in Australia even willing to look at religious works. Put simply: the religious market is considered too small to warrant their editorial interest and financial investment. Conversely, and perhaps even perversely, anti-religious titles have attracted general publishers in recent years. For instance, Terry Lane's *God: The Interview* was published by ABC Books in 2004, *Adams verses God: The Rematch* was published by Melbourne University Press in 2007; Tamas Pataki's *Against Religion*, also published in 2007 by Scribe, are examples although, I must concede, Melbourne University Press also published *Anglicanism in Australia: A History* (edited by Bruce Kaye, Tom Frame, Colin Holden and Geoffrey Treloar) in 2002, Scribe published John Carroll's curious book *The Existential Jesus* in 2007 and Roy Williams' *God, Actually* was accepted by ABC Books in 2008. The point to be made is

that religious titles need to span a general reading audience as well as a specialist one to attract a publication contract in the Australian general book trade.

Industry observers note that the Australian religious publishing industry has never been large. It did, however, exude some signs of vitality from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s when several small companies were established to publish Australian authors who were writing about subjects of local interest. Some companies, like Albatross Books, did not survive although they published some very good titles whose influence abides. Those that continue to operate include Aquila, ATF, Broughton Press, Collins Dove, John Garrett, Connor Court and Acorn.

HarperCollins *Religious* is possibly the only company publishing theological works whose main motivation is commercial. The charters of the other companies, such as Acorn, emphasise service to a particular audience, constituency or clientele. Their reason for being—their operational impulse—is largely religious. While these companies aim to remain financially viable, profits are a secondary concern. None of these companies sees itself as an academic publisher although they do publish books by academics from time to time. If a work of theology is to be published in Australia without a subvention being paid to cover production costs, it must be capable of selling 1,000 copies. This means the book **must** appeal to a general audience. Put simply, a specialist work of theology—some would substitute the word ‘specialist’ with ‘serious’—needs also to attract a wide readership. While I believe that specialist or serious works of theology can have attract a general readership, the challenge is for emerging theologians to convince publishers that their work will appeal to thinking Christians to the extent that 1,000 such people will be ready to expend their discretionary funds buying the book they want to sell. The need to reach a general readership might lead, on the one hand, to what has been rather snobbishly denounced as ‘paperback populism’ but, on the other hand and more positively, it might oblige theologians to be more definite about why they write and more candid about the constituency with which they want to engage.

Perhaps needless to say, theologians write for the academy and for each other. This is reasonably expected and properly encouraged. But, as people called and equipped by God, they must also write for the Church and their brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, theologians need to divide their time between the production of specialist works and general works if they are to discharge their entire calling. Of course, this presumes the existence of an informed readership within the churches and the presence of intelligent Christians wanting to read ‘serious’ works of theology. Does such a readership actually exist in Australia? And will Australian Christians read specialist works of theology written in ‘public prose’ and an accessible style if they are available? Deep down, I have my doubts. Recent surveys of the kinds of books being bought by Australian Christians does not bode well for the publication prospects of many theologians. The most popular books are popular titles, many written by touring ‘celebrity’ authors, mainly from the United States or Britain.

Australian writers and Australian topics do not figure prominently in the religious bestseller lists. Neither they nor their work are in great demand. Very few of the most popular titles sold in Christian bookshops could be considered ‘specialist’ works of theology and fewer still would be regarded as ‘serious’ volumes by scholars. Readers seem to prefer devotional and pastoral ‘how to’ books over biblical studies and systematic theology. Whether they ever buy books dealing with these two disciplines would be worthy of further exploration because it raises a number of important questions about the biblical literacy of Australian Christians and the whole genre of systematic theology.

Speaking candidly, if Australian theologians decide to devote time to writing books in the hope of having them published and then read, they need first to have modest expectations, and second, they may need to seek an off-shore publisher with a substantial worldwide distribution network. Regrettably, this leaves open the possibility that an Australian theologian could be better known in Britain or North America than

in their own country because they simply cannot publish their work at home. Perhaps more disappointing, works by Australian theologians could be difficult to acquire locally because the cost of importing their work to this country could be financially preclusive. Therefore, Australian theologians who believe they have a literary vocation need to be acutely aware of their audience and to be closely conscious of market forces ... *before* they undertake any writing project ... *if* they are to see their work delivered into the hands of those they hope will read and benefit from their scholarship.

It is for these reasons that I give thanks to God for Acorn Press and why I want to promote the Publishing Fund founded in John's Wilson's name. It was with incredible foresight that John and four colleagues founded Acorn Press in 1979—as Paul Arnott explained a few moments ago. Last week, I was genuinely surprised to notice how many Acorn titles I have on my shelf and that the most well-thumbed (meaning dog-eared and post-it noted) was “Australian Anglicans and their Constitution” by John Davis—a book that was a gift from the late Canon Jim Glennon in 1994. I have cited, quoted and commended this book many times over the years and can't imagine how I would cover this topic in my teaching without this important Acorn title. The sales of this book wouldn't rival any of the Harry Potter series but I can't use J. K. Rowling's work in the teaching of Australian Anglican ecclesiology. I could mention several other Acorn titles that have been indispensable to both my private reflection and professional research but I might embarrass several of the authors who are with us today because I did or didn't mention them or their work.

Let me just say this: I am not sure what Australian theologians would do without Acorn Press but I am sure of what Australian Christians would read without Acorn Press—mass produced, aggressively marketed, overly hyped, poorly produced, badly edited, index deficit, extravagantly titled books by overseas authors whose primary interest is other than the very complex and nuanced religious landscape within which we reside. Every speech needs a rant—this one just had its ... and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

On a serious note to close: John Wilson recognised that theologians are writers and that writing was an integral part of their sacred calling, and that their books were the fruits of their divine service. Not surprisingly, John insisted on prayer being a feature of Acorn book launches. He led by example. Despite all of the immediate and institutional demands on John's time, he still managed to devote himself to writing, and to produce articles and books that have benefitted and blessed thousands of people whom John never met and never knew. From works like his wonderful little Lenten study guide “The Old Testament: On the Way to the Cross” published in 1994 to his most recent, very substantial and final book “Christianity Alongside Islam”, John explained, enlightened, encouraged, educated, exhorted and even entertained people of diverse tastes and varied interests. His learning and his wisdom will be appreciated by a generation yet unborn because they will be preserved in his writing. For those who are drawn to his example – as I have been, there is much of great value to emulate in our own lives. His talents as a writer are foremost among those things for which I give thanks to God, the Church and John himself.

To that end, I now launch the John W Wilson Publishing Fund and encourage you to make a contribution in appreciation of John's legacy and as a tangible sign of your commitment to Australian religious publishing. May God bless this endeavour and be glorified in our giving. Amen.

Tom Frame

is the Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra and Professor of Theology in Charles Sturt University. He was ordained into the Anglican ministry in 1993 and served as Bishop to

the Defence Force from 2001 to 2007. The author of over twenty books, he is also Chief Executive Officer of a small publishing company called "Barton Books" which aims to bring specialist works of theology to readers of serious Australian religious thought.