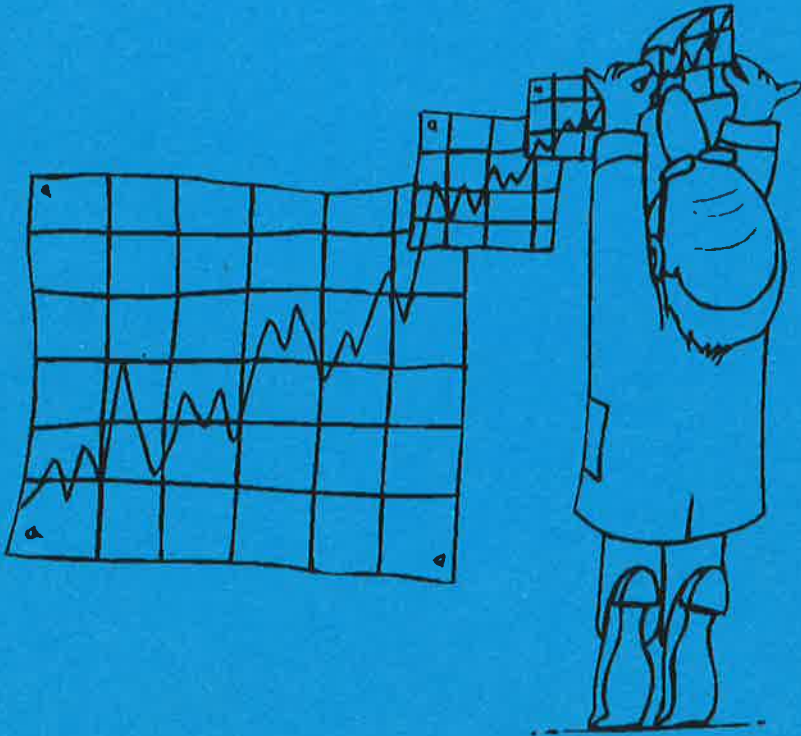


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CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH

Based on Bible Studies and a Paper
given at the
Second International Lausanne Researcher's Conference
High Leigh, Hoddesdon, UK
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CHRISTIAN THINKING ABOUT RESEARCH

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CONTENTS

Introduction	
About the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the International Researcher's Conference	5
Spirituality for Researchers - seeing and hearing	6
Dr Bryant Myers, USA Executive Director, MARC	
Integrity for Researchers - eyes and sight	14
Rev Tom Houston, UK Minister at Large, Lausanne	
Wisdom for Researchers - seeing and discovering	24
Dr Peter Kaldor, Australia Director, National Church Life Survey	
Towards a Theology of Research	33
Dr Arnold van Heusden, The Netherlands Executive Secretary, Evangelische Alliantie	

STUDY 3

WISDOM FOR RESEARCHERS **-seeing and discovering** **Dr Peter Kaldor**

Readings Luke 5:17-25 & Acts 10

Introduction

I think the most common saying I heard at the Lausanne International Conference of Researchers in the UK in February '96 was, 'I am not a researcher'! I wonder what that means? Thinking about it, I wonder if that is a fear from some of us about technological competence or statistical elegance. Or perhaps we feel we have more important things on our minds and research is just one small part of the armoury of what we bring to our sense of call and direction.

It made me stop and think, 'What is research anyway?' and the image I have when I think about that is a very active image. We can picture the University professor sitting very calmly and elegantly in some very nice building just thinking and reflecting some kind of neutral reflection that leads to wisdom. But I don't actually think research happens very often in that way.

I think research is about enquiry, about wrestling with something, really struggling with it. It's about discovery.

Some people analyse what is - in order to describe it.

Other people analyse what is - to point out what could be.

Certainly to me wise research and wisdom in research is the second one.

Some of us may possess a whole lot of technological competence, computer wizardry, statistical elegance and not actually be wise researchers. But some of us who feel we don't have those technical skills may in fact be very wise researchers.

What is Wise Research?

I want to consider two biblical stories that cover three different kinds of researchers, and just think a little about what is wise research. These are very well known stories.

The first, in Luke 5:17-25 is the story of the man let down through the roof. "One day when Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and teachers of the Law were sitting there who had come from every town in Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. The power of the Lord was present for Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralysed man on a bed, and they tried to take him in the house and put him in front of Jesus. Because of the crowd, however, they could find no way to take him in. So they carried him up on the roof, made an opening in the tiles, and let him down on his bed into the middle of the group in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the man, 'Your sins are forgiven, my friend.' ... At once the man got up in front of them all, took the bed he had been lying on, and went home, praising God."

Faithfulness

That is a very exciting story of faithfulness. These people had a strong sense of belief, they wanted this man who was sick to have an encounter with Jesus. They went to all sorts of ends to achieve it. They displayed a lot of ingenuity. Their focus on their desired purpose enabled them to feel OK about disrupting a meeting and tearing up a roof. They reflected carefully on what options there were for them to get this person to meet Jesus.

We don't know anything about these people who walk in and out of the Gospel stories. We don't even know if they are religious or churchgoers. But we need to ask ourselves, why they had to let this man down through the roof? Who was in the way of the man having a meaningful encounter with Jesus?

A Sobering Thought

It was the religious people of the time. It was the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law sitting around Jesus, asking questions - which you could say was doing research! They were the ones preventing this man from getting near Jesus.

In my life and actions, in what I do, in my priorities, even in my research, do I ever get in the way of people needing an encounter with Jesus?

Roof Finders and Ring Sitters

Here we have two very interesting contrasts of research in the one story, people with their minds in different bents, with different agendas. We've got the roof finders and the ring sitters. One group thought creatively and used research and reflection to enable them to lay the man before Jesus. The others in the course of their research got in the way.

We need to consider to which group we belong. Where you stand determines what you see. Those people sitting around Jesus had a different agenda. Their lack of engagement with the situation around them meant their research was not helping. It is possible for our agendas to become so important that they actually get in the way of the very people we want to help.

Research Happens in Engagement

The most significant piece of research that I have been in was as part of a team of youth workers involved in an inner city community on a public housing estate. We brought in a whole team of Christians once a week to run youth clubs. These helpers came from the suburbs, were reasonably well educated and with the very best intentions they came to help in a ministry among young people in an inner city area.

After quite a long time we wondered why no one was interested in becoming a Christian. We decided to ask - to research if you like - why this was so. The fact that we had to make that loop of thought says something about what our agenda was.

Going up to a couple of young people we said, "Hey, Karen, we're wondering what you think of Christians?" To our surprise she said, "We think Christians are great people. We think you're really good people. The way you come each week, especially the way we treat you, is amazing." And that is true, they treated us pretty badly at times! So to the next step. "Would you ever consider becoming a Christian?" At this point Karen's face dropped a little and she said, "No, I could never do that, I'm not good enough." That was a piece of research which came right from the heart of our engagement with those young people, and it actually changed our whole ministry.

Wise Research Can Change Our Ministry

That girl's remark turned upside down the programme we were running and we set about doing things in quite different ways with a new vision for what we were doing.

Very often our agenda is our institutional agenda, what the church wants, or what the mission agency wants, or how can we market our mission group. Do we have the strength to follow wise research to the point where it changes our whole agenda and turns it on its head?

Research by Participant Observation

The second story, in Acts 10, is another well known one, about Peter and Cornelius. This is an incredibly exciting story of conversion, growth, research and transformation. As an Australian I want to apply this as a key story for the Church there.

The story of Peter and Cornelius is the story of the Gospel leaping a cultural barrier - that it is not just for Jews but for all people. We need to hear that and learn from it. The Church in Australia is culturally captive to certain social economic groups,

age groups and interest groups. There are mission frontiers in our own back yards. What we desperately need is for the Gospel to leap these cultural barriers.

This is a discovery - the Gospel is for *all*. Peter goes to the house of Cornelius and the people there are converted. The Gospel has leapt an incredible cultural divide. Peter has made a critical discovery about his faith.

In Acts 10:34 Peter says, "I now realise that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what race he belongs to."

Open to Move in New Directions

It was Peter's commitment to the Kingdom, his openness to hear, that made that discovery possible. He took a bold and scary set of risks. He had a strange dream and he tried to understand what it meant. While that was happening he heard some people outside, who called him to come with them and he had to decide whether to go.

Open to Learning

Peter came to the experience with Cornelius wide open to the possibility that God might show him something completely different to what had been accepted wisdom. Wise researchers will be open to that as we crunch data or reflect on what is happening. We must be earthed enough to people, and what is going on around us, to hear. Wise research is not placid, it involves taking risks and moving in new directions.

Open to the Holy Spirit

Peter followed God's leading and followed the Holy Spirit in the whole process. Right at the beginning, after he had his dream, Peter was trying to understand what the vision meant. In v 19 the Spirit said, "'Listen! Three men are here looking for you... so get ready and go down and do not hesitate to go with them.' So Peter went down."

Open to the Holy Spirit, open to God's leading. That's easy to say, but what does that actually mean in your life and in the ministry you are part of now? For Peter that meant some really scary steps forward.

In my research would I be open to discovering that some theory I held and cherished might be wrong or irrelevant or might be a back eddy in terms of Kingdom values? Or that our plan for helping churches in Australia to be more effective was somehow inappropriate. Or our plan for evangelising the whole world was somehow not right. Are we open to that? We need to be open in order to discover what God's Spirit is leading us to.

One of the incredible things in this story is that the point at which the Gospel leaps one of the most significant barriers of the time is also the point at which the Church is opened up to a massive transformation.

Open to Transformation

The conversion of Cornelius and his household leads to a point of transformation, and not only for Peter. The Church is challenged to its core as to what it believes in a very significant area, the area of circumcision.

v 45. "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." They are asking whether circumcision is a Gospel imperative for all believers, or at least half of them! - or is it a cultural expression that is right for one group and not for another?

Maybe with 2,000 years of history we don't understand the incredible significance of that, but this is a major issue for them to deal with.

The Church had to wrestle with this issue and wrestle with what God was saying to them about this new piece of information and this new issue. In that context the Church discovered new directions and new ways forward.

A Wise Researcher is Not A Lone Ranger

Another aspect is that after he left Cornelius, Peter went straight back to the Church, to his peers, and said, "Let's pray together and reflect on this".

Wise researchers are not going to be lone rangers. They are not going to be empire builders out there on their own. They are going to be bonded into a community into which their discoveries and reflections can be worked through prayerfully.

Accountability

In our research are we bonded into a group of people to which we can be held accountable? I mean costly accountability, not just pats on the back, because research is a risky adventure. Not knowing the destination, we embark on the journey and in the process we need strong support, we need not to be out on our own, we need to be accountable in God's strength.

We can expect that if we are being wise researchers we might be massively transformed. Scared? You should be.

Researchers Are Artists

Some years ago our National Church Life Survey (NCLS) team in Australia sat down and cleared up the database of attenders, getting everything on one software package. Then we looked at what we had and stopped and reflected as a team. And the way we imagined our data was as a giant block of stone that needed to be crafted and chiselled to discover the image that God had placed in it.

I would argue that researchers are artists and I hope and pray that we have analysed well. I hope and pray that we have brought our real world experience, and engagement in the mission of the Church, to the task of looking at the information.

I hope and pray that we have brought our passion for the Kingdom to that data, not just our desire to build the NCLS or even to build the Uniting Church, or the Anglican church, or

the Pentecostal churches, or whatever we are part of, but building the Kingdom. I hope and pray that we have brought a willingness to be surprised.

I hope and pray that we have valued the insight of each other on the team and other people in the Church in Australia and worldwide who have contributed to our reflection on that material.

And I hope and pray that we have chiselled the stone in that database in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

It's a risky business, a scary process and a very fulfilling process.

Prayer

I invite you to spend a moment silently reflecting on the particular sense of call you have and the concerns that you are focused on in your ministry.

I invite you to spend a few moments praying for the people for whom you have a burden and a concern. To step into their shoes and understand and reflect on where they are at.

Perhaps you might like to reflect on the most significant points of learning in your life, what you learnt and how you have learnt it, and thank God for it.

Lord God, we thank you for the privilege of serving you. We thank you for the possibility of discovery. We thank you that you can use us, no matter what our technical competences or skills might be in the task of critical research and reflections on what you would have us do. We thank you that we need each other to discover direction and your will.

We pray for a Kingdom perspective, that we may be open to furthering the Kingdom, not just the organisations or institutions that we work for.

May our heart be for the people we wish to serve. And may our strength and discernment and willingness to be bold risk takers come from the strength of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Help us to find holes in roofs and not just sit in circles around you.

Amen.