

# Logarithms and a Faith to Pass On

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Things have certainly changed from the time when I went to school! I know it was a long time ago but the changes have been enormous. When I was at school they taught and encouraged cursive writing with its graceful loops and swirls. Nowadays almost every student graduates with a form of printing which they don't use very much because they now have very fast and fine-tuned skills on a keyboard - be it on their computer or mobile phone.

When I went to school I learnt how to multiply and divide using logarithms – and every student was equipped with Barraclough's tables of logarithms and anti-logarithms. The idea is very simple – every number can be expressed as some power of 10. When you multiply two numbers you simply add the indices! For example, to multiply 100 ( $10^2$ ) by 1000 ( $10^3$ ) you simply add 2 plus three to get  $10^5$  – namely 100,000. And to divide two numbers you simply subtract the two indices; and this can be applied to any numbers at all.

Now, here is the point; no student uses logarithm tables anymore, as they can do it far faster and more easily on their calculator or on their mobile phone. And yet the principle of adding or subtracting indices is built into all the core concepts of modern day mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology and practically everything else. The packaging was old hat and has been superseded, but the concept is fundamental and just as relevant now as it was in my schooldays. These days we have logarithms based on 2 for computer work and on the exponential  $e$  for advanced scientific work and any other base we might like to choose.

What we need to teach our students is not how to use Barraclough's tables but the fundamental principle that stays relevant and will always remain so.

In our lectionary Psalm today – Psalm 78 we have the comment about the Lord God,

*He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children so the next generation would know them - even the children yet to be born; and they in turn would tell their children.*

So we are talking here about what we pass on to our children, grandchildren and coming generations; and in the light of what we have just been saying we shouldn't be too busy passing on antiquated modes, methods and understanding which have been superseded as we cannot expect this to be relevant in today's modern society. Rather we should be searching out the fundamental truths which are the same yesterday, today and forever, and seek to pass these on to our children and coming generations.

Has anything changed or has been superseded in our faith? Yes indeed, a lot of our understanding and if you like the "packaging" of our faith certainly needs to change.

Since the brilliance of Einstein and Hawking, the Universe is now a very different place to what it was when I went to school. Not very different in function I suppose, but our understanding is vastly different! When we pray with the psalmist in Psalm 19; "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork" we are praising God for a vastly more extensive and complex handiwork than the Psalmist, or even I at school could possibly imagine.

It is a firmament which started at the Big Bang some 15 billion years ago (when even time itself was created), and includes an unimaginable number of stars and galaxies, black holes, possible worm holes and other concepts far beyond our imagining.

So when we say "God is great, he has created all this", we are saying far more than we were saying one hundred years ago.

One feature of earlier faith was to virtually envisage God as a kind of superhuman - a human being with extraordinary powers. So the Bible talks about God "walking" in the garden of Eden, and passing by Moses so that Moses could only see his back. The Bible describes God "arguing" with Job and Lot and even "changing his mind" on occasions. No doubt there is truth in all of

these metaphors but not in the old packaging of a superman or of a benevolent father figure with white hair and a beard – rather like Santa Claus.

So what do we hand on to our children and grand-children? Certainly God is great and the Creator of this vast universe the glories of which are being uncovered more and more as science proceeds; but he is also the loving Father of Jesus who can be very close to us to sustain and support us in our daily living. That is the vast mystery, that this Creator God of all this vastness cares to have a personal relation with us on this infinitesimal planet amongst the stars. And He is the loving Father who has prepared a place for us in all eternity. That is what we pass on to our children! We pass on a God who becomes even greater with every modern discovery of science! We pass on this vast mystery!

And we need his wisdom to interpret what eternal truths the Bible is telling us in modern language and concepts.

The message of Jesus is timeless, but maybe the packaging needs to change somewhat.

J.B. Phillips wrote a short volume in 1952 entitled “Your God is Too Small” which has become a Christian classic and was republished in 2004. The book is summarised on the jacket saying

*Phillips explains that the trouble facing many of us today is that we have not found a God big enough for our modern needs. In a world where our experience of life has grown in myriad directions and our mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and scientific discoveries, our ideas of God have remained largely static.*

There is another area where things have changed a good deal – namely in the almost complete secularisation of society. When I was at school, Christianity had pride of place in society. Not that everyone went to church, but most did, and most children went to Sunday School. Sunday was a quiet day with very little open and very few sporting fixtures or concerts arranged, and most shops were closed, even the service stations. Islam was a far off religion appropriate for the Arab countries and Pakistan but of little relevance for Australians. So the church here virtually had a captive and receptive audience and the packaging of our faith was appropriately parochial, and it didn't matter if it was old fashioned, it was generally acknowledged.

How things have changed! Now it is hard to separate Sunday from any other day in the week with everything scheduled, open and active. Church is no longer the new normal and there are a multitude of new age philosophies circulating in addition to Islam and other faiths. Many churches are closing down and being developed into trendy restaurants or fashionable homes.

So what do we pass on to our children? Certainly not the old package as that is sure to be rejected in today's multicultural fast-paced sophisticated secular society.

As with the heavens, we need to widen our idea of God. If he is the creator and Lord of all life, he is also Lord of the whole scene of what we see in the world today. He is not restricted to Sunday, nor to church buildings, nor to a particular theology espoused by any church, nor to just the Bible. He is the God who inspires people to acts of love, courage, bravery and sacrifice wherever. Such acts are happening around us all the time, and when we see such things, this is our God stirring in the hearts and lives of people. When we see people rising up against evil and injustice, this is our God urging people to recapture what is right and just- what should be. And we can say these things because down deep we are all made in his image.

He is a God who dearly loves our planet Earth with all its intrinsic beauty and majesty ("for God so loved the world"), he is a God who expects us to also lovingly care for and tend it for our future generations. He is a God who detests the rampant ravaging of Earth's resources for short term gain. That is something else to pass on to our children!

He is the God of Islam and of every other faith where people strive to search for eternal truths. Like much of our understanding it will be partial and clouded but God is behind the yearning we all have for the meaning of life and eternal truths. Like Paul Tillich once commented, he is the God behind all the gods.

This is the God we should pass on to our children, a God who is everywhere. A God who is modern, and a God who is intimately involved in our lives and the well-being of society. If we pause to think, this is also the God of Jesus, unencumbered by the rules and regulations of the scribes and pharisees a God who would reach out lovingly across all boundaries.

What does this mean for the future of the church? I would be sorry if this meant that all the old traditions were to be thrown out the window – for there

is so much wisdom, devotion and depth to be found there; things that undoubtedly come from living close to God.

But just like the logarithms, this needs to be carried over into a modern package.

So if I had to summarise in a nutshell what is the essence of Christian faith to carry over from generation to generation, as times and customs change and as understanding grows, it is this:-

God is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is not changed by fashions or fads and is the creator and sustainer of the entire Universe in all its vastness, including us.

He is not only the God of Biblical shepherds, vineyards, fishermen and wedding banquets, he is also the God of modern traffic jams, computers, Wi-Fi, gene technology and space travel.

And the God revealed to us by Christ, the other faiths and the beauty of nature itself has chosen to also live closely and personally with us if we so choose, no matter how modern or sophisticated we have become.

Thanks be to God, Amen.