



# The Ayson Clifford Library

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James Ayson Clifford


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Carey Baptist College's Ayson Clifford Library in Auckland, New Zealand, is named after James Ayson Clifford, who was principal of the college, then known as the New Zealand Baptist Theological College, from 1961 to 1973. The formation of the library was initiated by J. J. North, who later became the first principal of the college (North, 1924, p. 274).

Born in New Zealand, Ayson Clifford was the college's fourth principal. Before and after his tenure as principal, he was a lecturer at the college, lecturing for another three years after his principalship. He spent 31 years at the college as a staff member (Clifford, n.d., p. 103). In his memoirs, he states that he taught "Old Testament Exegesis and Hebrew, first and second-year Greek, Church History, Logic and English (Clifford, n.d., p. 26)."

In 1955, Ayson managed to pull together some financial support during his sabbatical year and went overseas for one year. During that time, he studied the library systems in various colleges that he visited. He observed three

central systems: Library of Congress, Union, and Dewey. Dewey's system was selected because it was better known to those helping him catalogue Carey's library collection (Clifford, n.d., p. 41). To this day, the library collection utilises the Dewey Decimal Classification. Ayson enjoyed the task of cataloguing but found it "slow and time-consuming (Clifford, n.d., p. 42)." He continued managing the library, cataloguing, repairing, and keeping the library collection for many years (Clifford, n.d., p. 102).



Before entering the Baptist College in 1934, Ayson gained an M.Sc. (Guy and Sutherland, 2014, p.69). Unfortunately, as a student at the College, Ayson had a major accident a few months before the final major exam, which prevented him from completing his theology qualification. Upon finishing his studies, he carried out pastoral placements in several New Zealand Baptist churches.

The library's history has previously been published in the ANZTLA eJournal, [issue 18](#) (Ng, 2017). This short article includes reflections on Ayson from three of his past students while he was a tutor, vice-principal, and then principal.

Don Hopkins was a student at the college from 1949 to 1952. The college was at Mt. Hobson before being moved to 63 Victoria Avenue, Remuera, in 1954 (Guy & Sutherland, 2014, p.104).<sup>1</sup> Ayson joined the college as a staff member in 1945. When Don was a student, Ayson was a tutor, Don remembered Clifford teaching him church history and Bible exposition. Don recalled that students were required to attend classes at his house following an accident. Ayson was warm-hearted and had a genuine relationship with his students. This was evident as Ayson officiated at Don's wedding when he married Edna on 19 December 1953 in Whangarei. Subsequently, when the couple celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Ayson attended the celebrations at Mount Eden Garden in Auckland.

Brian Smith, a missionary student from 1956-1958 (Guy & Sutherland, 2014, p. 115), remembered being called to Ayson's office in June 1958 after attending a Missionary Council meeting in Wellington. A few years later, Ayson was appointed vice-principal. Brian and Shirley Wilson, also a student in her second year of the Deaconess programme, planned to marry at the end of the year. However, this was put on hold when Ayson informed Brian he would proceed to India alone, and Shirley could only join him 12 months later. This, however, was reversed when a subsequent cable from the field stated, "send Smiths married easier on accommodation." The news delighted the engaged couple. Ironically, one noticeable change during Ayson's principalship "saw the student body shift from mainly single to mainly married students (MacLeod, 1999)."

Brian remembered one of Ayson's sermon series. He had a series of four sermons on the book of Jonah, one on each chapter, which he used repeatedly. Ayson's sermon title for chapter 4, where a sulky Jonah sits for shade under a bean plant, and God causes the plant to wither, was "Pity the pumpkin."

As principal, Ayson was a great advocate for the library. Sherburd and Silcock (1976, p.35) state that he catalogued the books with the students. He was practically the unpaid librarian. Ayson documented in his memoirs, "I became responsible for the library, a job I would hold for twenty years. With the help of Geoff MacCann's wife Glen, a trained librarian, I gradually got our books systematized in their new location (Clifford, n.d., p.34)." Laurie Guy, a student from 1971 to 1973, remembered that all students were required to

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1950s, it was 63 Victoria Avenue but later changed to 85 Victoria Avenue. It is now 95 Victoria Avenue.

do practical work for two hours on Monday afternoons. Several students were allocated to work in the library under Ayson's supervision.

Ayson Clifford was a people person. Laurie remembered him having breakfast and lunch with students during weekdays. He was joined by his wife, Cicely. This meant that, as husband and wife, the Clifford's only meal together without others was at night and on the weekends.

As an Old Testament lecturer, Ayson developed an interest in archaeology. It was reported that he spent a sabbatical researching in the Middle East. According to Brian and Laurie, this led to his oft-repeated line about the text of 2 Cor 4.7, "We have this treasure in clay pots so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." Pointing out that archaeologists often deal with pieces of broken pottery, Ayson observed, "This treasure is in crackpots!" He could be extremely funny at times, with an exceedingly dry wit. Nevertheless, he was very strict. For example, he once told a student off for playing tennis on the college tennis court on Sunday afternoon as he believed that it breached the concept of the sabbath.

Ayson was actively involved in the Auckland Baptist City Mission in his later years. He was a champion and very vocal in his opinions when times were hard. This was reflected in the articles he wrote for the *New Zealand Baptist*. For example, one of his provocative articles was "*Save Our Services: Auckland Baptist City Mission Staggers Under Wide-Ranging Changes*" (Clifford, 1992, p.7). Later, Ayson was a significant catalyst for the Baptist Baycrest retirement village in Whangaparaoa (Belding, 1999, p.2).

When a new purpose-built library was finally completed in 1976 in Victoria Avenue, Remuera, it was deemed appropriate to name the library in his honour (Guy & Sutherland, 2014, p.155). Ayson and his wife, Cicely, were present at the opening of the new library building.



Photograph of Ayson and Cicely Clifford at the opening of the library, 28 March 1976. MA A7/4, New Zealand Baptist Archive, Auckland

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