

InterSections



Editorial

Welcome to the November 2015 issue of *InterSections*.

We live in an uncertain world. We are uncertain of our own futures, with concerns about our health, relationships, and our economic and political security. Our culture also tells us we can know nothing for certain, especially when it comes to matters of religion. In all of this, where can we find security and rest? In this issue we consider the idea of Christian assurance. In our *Feature* article, Paul Pollard asks if we can have confidence in our salvation before God. In *Food for Thought*, Ian Coker reflects on the role of God's providence in his own life, through all its ups and downs.

The *International Letter* this time is from Vanuatu. Antony Raine reports on recovery efforts after the devastating cyclone which hit these South Pacific islands earlier this year. Andrew Johnson reviews the book, *God Is Not One*, which compares the world's main religions, and considers how a clear knowledge of religious differences can help our understanding of followers of other religions and improve meaningful dialogue. The Bankstown congregation in Sydney is featured in our *ChurchScope* section. In our *News* section, we hear about a couple who have bought a Christian bookstore in Coffs Harbour. There are also reports about the 'Connecting Children with God' seminar recently held in Brisbane, the latest module of the Klesis Bible Program held in Melbourne and the FriendSpeak outreach programme at the Macquarie church in Sydney.

We hope that you are encouraged and strengthened by this issue. 'May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.' (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

InterSections editorial team.

ChurchScope

Bankstown Church of Christ, NSW

The Bankstown congregation is a continuation of the Lakemba congregation which was established in 1957 by a group comprised of Allan Flaxman, his family and others. Allan received fulltime support in 1960 and continued working with the congregation until 1983. Others worked with him at various intervals during those years and thereafter. A property was purchased in 1963 but by 1988 the church was left with declining numbers and no fulltime worker. The congregation decided to sell the property, investing the proceeds to enable the work to continue in a new location. A move was made to the western side of Bankstown (Lakemba being to the east). The invested funds enabled the congregation to employ Les Totman from early 1992 and the church moved to improved facilities in 1993.

The Bankstown region is a heavily multicultural urban area comprised of 24 suburbs located on the south-western side of Sydney. In the 1990s, more than a quarter of the local population were born overseas and over sixty languages were spoken. The two largest migrant groups were the Lebanese and Vietnamese. Today there is a very significant Islamic population (26% in the suburb of Bankstown itself). In the suburbs where the church meets, about 25% of the population speak Arabic as their first language. Approximately 30% of the local population speak English as their first language.

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*Top photo: Group hike, Larapinta Track, Northern Territory
Side photo: Camp Challenge, New South Wales.*

Membership of the congregation, which has fluctuated over time, presently consists of 19 adults and 4 children. The group consists of people from Samoa, Ghana, Australia, Sierra Leone, China, England, the United States, Singapore and El Salvador. Satish Samuel, from India, worked as full-time evangelist with the congregation in the period between 2007 and 2011.

Since 1993, the church has met at the Wattawa Heights Public School. Originally, the congregation met in a double-classroom but when a demountable building was removed, the school's library moved into the double-classroom, making it inadequate for the congregation's needs. The school had no hall. Land prices in Sydney being prohibitive, the congregation proposed that it would fund the construction of a hall (with additional rooms) on the school's property. The school could use the hall during school hours and the church would use it (and other school classrooms) at other times. The school welcomed the proposal. It was eventually approved by the Education Department. The hall was built and thereafter opened in 1999. Since then there has been an ongoing positive relationship between the school and the church.

A range of evangelistic activities has been carried out through the years. These include showing various film series, extensive letterboxing and doorknocking, the promotion of Bible correspondence courses, newspaper advertising, a website, a clothing giveaway, advertising of Friends Speak English courses at local colleges and a number of booths at community events. Because of the close relationship with the school, Les was able to have regular contact with the school community, speaking at a range of events over the years. Whilst Satish worked here, he also conducted a radio broadcast in the Tamil language.

It has been our experience, however, that advertising, letterboxing and doorknocking have been largely ineffective. Instead, with the high ESL (English as a Second Language) population, Les trained in teaching English to migrants. Though some use was made of the Friends Speak material, Les primarily worked with community volunteer groups and through contacts from church members. Between 1992 and early 2007, there were 23 baptisms resulting from various forms of outreach and a further 45 people (including children) placed membership. Unfortunately, a significant number of members have now either passed away or moved elsewhere.

Bankstown is also involved with other congregations. The church has long been associated with the South Coast congregation (meeting at Windang, south of Wollongong). Since returning to Bankstown in 2012, a feature of Les' ministry is that the congregation supports him to spend one day a week and one Sunday a month to work with other churches. This has included regular work in Wollongong and teaching at the Macquarie School of Biblical Studies. Provision is also made to conduct teaching activities elsewhere. At present, to meet people in the local community, Les acts as a volunteer with two weekly English classes run by the Bankstown Library. ■

Les Totman works as an evangelist with the Bankstown Church of Christ in Sydney, NSW. lestotman@yahoo.com.au



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InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, inspire and unite Christians in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. The editors are responsible for selecting material for publication, but each article reflects the views of its author(s). Advertisements in *InterSections* are broadly consistent with the ethos and goals of the journal; however, they do not necessarily constitute endorsement by the journal. *InterSections* is published by Klesis Institute, the ministry division of CommAsia Australia Pty Ltd. © Klesis Institute, 2015. Copyright permission is given to anyone wishing to reproduce an individual article for non-commercial purposes, as long as due attribution is given to the author and *InterSections*. Klesis Institute is a division of CommAsia Australia Pty Ltd (ACN 097136171 ABN 53702023602).

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International Letter

From the South Pacific – Antony Raine, NZ



March 2015 – Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Among the people affected were Christians. However, months later, like many other world events, people might have forgotten that the second most intense South Pacific cyclone on record had hit our neighbours. But, because of the church there, we have not forgotten. This letter is about the subsequent help and reconstruction that I witnessed when I visited Vanuatu in September.

To understand better what it was like after the cyclone, I asked Eric Brandell, a missionary in Vanuatu for over ten years, how was it different from what I see now. He said there was no vegetation left. The land was no longer green. When he and his wife, Shawnda, ventured out of their home the morning after the cyclone hit, they were stunned by the devastation before them. They thought thousands must be dead. However, the final death toll was 24. Prayers had been answered.

What has happened in the last six months? For a start, about NZ\$101,800 (AUD\$ 92,500) has been donated by individuals and congregations from Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the United States to help Christians and others affected by Cyclone Pam. Lives and homes have been rebuilt. Gardens have been replanted. Tourists are slowly returning. And the resilience of the people is encouraging. Also, unlike so many in today's world, they didn't blame God.

But all this is only the start. While there are plenty of vegetables in the market, fruit is not common yet. Some places still experience food and water shortages – and the situation may get worse, especially if it doesn't rain soon. Two of the three major tourist resorts are still out of action. This has a major negative impact on income for the local people. These longer term effects of the cyclone are still being felt, albeit more subtly.

Some large commercial buildings have been left badly damaged, with twisted steel beams and collapsed roofs. When we drove around the main island of Efate we saw uprooted coconut palms and trees that had been stripped bare – now starting to show regrowth. Some homes and businesses are still using tarpaulins for roofs. In places, water was being trucked out to villages.

It was encouraging to see the brethren in Etas (a village about 10 minutes out of Port Vila, the capital, on Efate island) taking ownership of a project of reconstructing the roof of the church building. There were at least 15 helpers plus children, the latter pitching in by getting the fire going for our lunch and cleaning up the concrete scraps. There are up to 60 Christians attending on Sundays at Etas. Many were originally from the island of Tanna.

Meanwhile, church attendance at the Port Vila congregation has dropped – but for the right reasons. People have migrated back to the villages and other islands. At Port Vila, the Brandells host the youth group – who come mainly from Etas village – on Wednesday nights. Volleyball, dodgeball, then a BBQ dinner. There were at least 20 there last week and watching the youth of various ages playing together was refreshing. They play till well after dark and Eric has to stop them to eat.

I'll leave you with an excerpt from a real 'Letter from the Pacific' written by one of the Christians in Vanuatu. This note was written by Eddie Karns, an 84-year old Christian from the village of Eton, also on Efate island. Eddie has been with the church since 1981. We dropped some supplies off to him when we drove around the island and he was ready with this wonderful letter:

'Dear brothers and sisters, we were so surprised to see that as Christians we have unseen families (Christians) outside Vanuatu. Australia, New Zealand, and America who support us with foodstuffs, clothing & materials for rebuilding our houses which were destroyed by Cyclone Pam. . . . I decided to write this letter with my hand to express our thanks to you, brothers [and] sisters wherever you may be. I pray that our heavenly father who is so rich in mercy and love will repay you for your great love towards us in our time of need. I wish to shake your hand with each one of you personally and say [a] "BIG THANK YOU" but can't afford [the trip], so accept my letter of thanks. Our love be with you all in Christ Jesus, Amen.'

Antony Raine, his wife, Jeanette, and their family are part of the Wellington Church of Christ in Wellington, New Zealand. In his spare time, Antony has been active in the South Pacific and among the people helping with missions and construction projects for Christians. ant.raine@iconz.co.nz



Feature



Christian Assurance: Reflections on Being Sure of a Sure Thing

I will never forget the question a friend asked me when I was teenager. We both attended a large public school in Atlanta, Georgia. She held membership in a local denominational church. I went to a small Church of Christ. She asked, 'If you died right now do you think you would go to heaven?' I had never been asked that question before and it caught me totally off guard. I could not think of anything to say except to mumble a few words to the effect that I did not know. My friend had me stumped!

I will also never forget the exchange I had with a student many years later in the Bible class I was teaching at Harding University. We were studying the Gospel of John and the young lady had been taught that she could never be sure of her salvation until she died – certainly not in this life. In fact, she was much like me when I was confronted by my friend in high school. When we came to John 3:16, it got her attention. There the idea jumped out that those who believe will not perish but have eternal life.

I mentioned that in the Greek 'to believe' is present tense, meaning that if a person continues to believe they would not be lost.¹ This was a novel idea to her! Also, John clearly said in 3:18 that those who believe are 'not condemned,' but those who don't believe are 'condemned already.' John seems to be saying that we don't have to wait until judgment day to know how we stand with the Lord. We can know now if we are condemned or not. At bottom the issue is faith: do we believe in Jesus the Son of God or not?

I also explained to the young student that we can know when we are lost. Before I became a Christian I knew that I was doomed. So, I explained to her if we can know when we are lost, why is it that we can't also know when we are saved?

Assurance basically is confidence in our salvation. It is not an arrogant, worldly type of confidence, but a belief that what God has promised through Jesus Christ he will do. Assurance is living out your Christian life doing all you can to please the Lord – knowing that, ultimately, your eternal destination is due not to what you have done but due to the grace you have received (Ephesians 2:8).

Failure to feel confident that you are saved has serious spiritual consequences. You will be tentative, unsure of yourself, and probably prone to depend on works to compensate for your lack of trust that you are safely in the Lord's keeping.

No one can take you out of God's hand, but you can leave on your own accord (John 10:28; see also John 15:1-6; Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-27). 'Once saved and always saved' is not a doctrine found in the Bible, although it may sound reassuring. Anyone, however, who reads Scripture can readily find in it the security of the believer (John 10:27-28) – but one does not find anywhere in Scripture the security of the unbeliever.

When my friend asked me if I was saved, I wish that I had given her a big 'Yes'. As John said, 'if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son continually cleanses us from all of our sins' (1 John 1:7). Clearly, this verse is conditional. If I do A, then the result will be B. John's point to the believer is clear. If we are continually cleansed by his blood how can we be in a lost state? Or, why would we think we have to wait until the end of time to know how we really stand before the Lord? By our walk of faith and continued cleansing, we can know beyond doubt where we stand and be totally confident that by the Lord's power we are secure in his keeping eternally.

No song better sums up this reflection on assurance than the old gospel hymn, 'Blessed Assurance.' The first stanza and chorus read:

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in his blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long. ■*

1. This is not to argue that salvation is by 'faith only'. Faith and baptism are both required (Romans 6:4-9, 1 Peter 3:21).

Paul Pollard is a retired professor of Bible from Harding University. He has preached for various congregations and is currently an elder with the College Church of Christ in Searcy, Arkansas. In March 2015, Paul was in Melbourne with his wife, Sherry, when he taught a New Testament survey intensive course for the Klesis Bible Program. ppollard@harding.edu

News *Teacher Training Workshop*



On Saturday, 17 October 2015, around 40 people from four congregations gathered at the Holland Park Church of Christ building in Brisbane for 'Connecting Children with God', a one-day seminar about teaching children. The seminar was led by Mary Nelson, who has for many years guided and mentored students at the South Pacific Bible College in New Zealand, as well as teaching children of all ages. Mary is a devoted teacher who not only helps to train those with a desire to teach but, in this present age of worldly things, has a great concern for children being raised with godly standards and ethics. Any children's ministry could only be spiritually strengthened by the benefit of her experience – either personally or by taking advantage of her free online teaching materials found at the Mission Bible Class website (www.missionbibleclass.org).



Workshop in Melbourne.

This was one of the most inspiring and useful teaching seminars that we have been privileged to attend. Forty-five years ago, we were each handed a Sunday school class and invited to teach it, not being given any idea of curriculum, anything about the children attending or even receiving the suggestion that the first and most important thing any teacher could do is pray! Sadly, we understand our situation was common to many teachers. Having attended this workshop, we wish every new teacher could have this experience so that they realise just how precious is every child's soul.

Our thanks to Mary, Andrea Buo (an SPBC student who helped Mary during the seminar) and the Holland Park church for hosting this encouraging and spiritual occasion. Hopefully, many more teachers will learn that they are ministers to God's children. ■

Jan and Arthur Howell, The Point Church, Brisbane, Queensland. arfnjan@hotmail.com

Editorial note: Mary Nelson and Andrea Buo also delivered the same 'Connecting Children with God' workshop in Melbourne on Saturday, 10 October. Held at the Belmore Road Church of Christ building, around 32 people were present coming from four congregations in Melbourne and Hobart.

Christian Bookshop - Coffs Harbour

About a year ago, Paul and Rachel Burns, who previously were longtime members of the South West Church of Christ in Campbelltown, south of Sydney, decided on a sea change and moved up to the mid-north coast of NSW. More recently, the Burns have purchased a Christian bookstore in Coffs Harbour. Called 'Eternal Waters', the business is flourishing.

Eternal Waters provides a range of products including Bibles, academic books, novels, cards, CDs, DVDs, gifts, Sunday School curriculum and communion requirements. If you or your congregation have a specific product or book which you wish to

Jenny Ancell, Coffs Coast Church of Christ, Coffs Harbour, NSW. jenancell@optusnet.com.au

purchase, Paul and Rachel are happy to see if they can supply it or order it for you. They can be contacted during business hours on: 02 5606 1827.



If you visit Coffs Harbour, do come around to the store and you will be warmly welcomed. You can also check out their business website (www.eternalwaters.com.au) for further details. Paul and Rachel are now members of the Coffs Coast congregation. ■

Klesis Bible Program

The third module of the Klesis Bible Program was conducted at the Belmore Road Church of Christ building in Melbourne on 17-22 August 2015. Nathan Guy from the Bible faculty at Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas, taught Luke-Acts to the class of 14 participants. The focus of this module is the inspired writings of Luke and their key lessons for God's people. (Did you know that Luke wrote 2,157 – about 27% – of the 7,947 verses in the New Testament?)

The Luke-Acts module built on two earlier modules delivered by other Harding faculty: an Old Testament survey course taught by Daniel Stockstill (July 2014) and a New Testament survey course taught by Paul Pollard (March 2015).

The KBP is a pilot programme comprising six intensive Bible modules delivered in Melbourne over 2014-2018. It offers Christians who are already active Bible teachers an opportunity to extend further their understanding of Scripture through continuing education courses taught by experienced Harding faculty. Moreover, because these modules are drawn from Harding's undergraduate Bible programme, participants who undertake them on a for-credit basis and complete the required

Benny Tabalujan, Belmore Road Church of Christ, Melbourne, Victoria. benny@klesis.com.au

assessments can gain academic credits which can be put towards a Harding degree.

To date, KBP participants have come from six churches of Christ in Australia and one in Malaysia. Feedback on the programme has been overwhelmingly positive. Participants especially appreciate the mix of biblical depth combined with practical discussions which are shared in class.

The next module of the KBP is on Church History, with a special focus on the Restoration Movement. It is scheduled for 16-21 May 2016. There are a few places still available and if anyone is interested to know more, please contact Alan Rowley (rowley@klesis.com.au or 0419 264 931). ■



News cont.

FriendSpeak in Sydney

FriendSpeak is a programme to train and equip churches to reach out to our international neighbours through English, friendship and the Word of God. The FriendSpeak strategy is effective because it offers people something they want but have difficulty finding - a friend who will help them improve their conversational English. FriendSpeak is conducted in a one-to-one setting. We emphasise building relationships and meaningful conversations. The result is a series of heartfelt conversations about faith, love and the source of abundant life!

Many congregations in Australia are using FriendSpeak. At the Macquarie Church of Christ in Sydney we have been using FriendSpeak for several years. It is very effective in reaching people with whom we have had no prior contact. Our FriendSpeak students come from all walks of life. Some are students at university, others are elderly people who have migrated to Australia, while others are looking for work. We have had students from all over the globe.

This year we have studied with 26 students. Fourteen have ongoing studies right now. Because we make friends with people and use the Gospel of Luke as our main English reading material, students get to learn about Jesus. Some of our students have gone on to have personal Bible studies and a few have obeyed the Gospel. Some remain in Australia while others have returned home. As a result we have friends all over the world and only the Lord knows what impact this is having on reaching the lost. Check out the FriendSpeak website (www.friendspeak.org) for more information. ■

Peter Tickner, Macquarie Church of Christ, Sydney, NSW.
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FriendSpeak



 HARDING SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Hogan-Cate Asian Missions Sabbatical

2015 Recipient: David Allen, Chiang Mai Church Planting Team, Thailand.

2014 Recipient: Ong Kok Bin, Seremban Church of Christ, Malaysia.

2013 Recipient: Tan Beng Chuan, Pasir Panjang Church of Christ, Singapore.

Harding School of Theology invites applications for the annual Hogan-Cate Asian Missions Sabbatical. The sabbatical is made possible by the Hogan-Cate Endowed Asian Missions Fund established at Harding University in honour of longtime missionaries to Asia, Gordon & Jane Hogan and Steve & Jean Cate.

The sabbatical recipient will be an accomplished male or female missionary, church worker or ministry leader from among *acappella* Churches of Christ in Asia, Australia and the South Pacific. The sabbatical period is 3-5 months commencing from August.

Whilst based largely at HST in Memphis, Tennessee, the sabbatical recipient will also spend time at the main campus of Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. Funds may be used to cover airfare, food and accommodation, HST tuition fees (audit or credit), visiting churches and ministries and participation in the Harding University Bible Lectureship for spiritual renewal and to promote missions in Asia.

An information sheet and application form are available from www.hst.edu and applications should be emailed to dean@hst.edu as early as possible, ideally before 1 December in the year preceding the sabbatical.

Harding School of Theology

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Evertt Huffard at the 2014 Eldership Weekend, Perth, Australia.

Two back-to-back Christian gatherings in 2016

Keynote speaker: Evertt Huffard
(Harding School of Theology, Memphis, USA)

2016 Asia Pacific Elders, Deacons & Spouses' Conference

26–28 July 2016 (Tuesday–Thursday)

Early bird: AUD\$200 per person twin share for all accommodation & meals
This builds on the Eldership Weekend held in November 2014 in Perth, Australia.

2016 Asian Mission Forum

28 July–1 August 2016 (Thursday–Monday)

Early bird: AUD\$400 per person twin share for all accommodation & meals
This will be the 55th Asian Mission Forum among Churches of Christ in Asia.

Early bird registration: Ends on 15 March 2016

Venue: Hatten Hotel, Malacca, Malaysia (www.hattenhotel.com)

Inquiries: Beng Chuan TAN, Pasir Panjang Church of Christ, Singapore
bengchuan.tan@gmail.com +65 9639 3008





Food for Thought

Personal reflections on the providence of God in my life



It is not without temerity that I approach the subject of providence. This is because there is always a subjective element to such things (and it might also be a reaction to numerous 'providentially hindered' reasons offered on a Sunday that hold no weight on a Monday). It could also be the case that I have often heard many things attributed to God's providence which, biblically, I would have reasoned belonged more to the providence of Satan.

Anticipating providence can be fraught with danger. After all, Mordecai was circumspect in proffering 'who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' (Esther 4:14). I think it's generally conceded that looking back in hindsight God's providence can be seen in the events in Esther, as well as in other situations. We might say that it was the work of courage, virtue and faith that enabled the providential salvation of the Jews in Esther's time. In our own lives, the question as to how much of what is called providence is because of – or, in spite of – wise or foolish decisions could be argued endlessly, but to what conclusion?

What we do know is that Ephesians 5:20 urges the need for thankfulness within us. Thankfulness demands some sort of assessment of life. Since thanks are given to God, it follows that the things that happen in life can be attributed to God's providential care.

With reference to my own life, I cannot claim providential events that compare with Esther's saving of a nation. But I am aware of serendipitous events that have punctuated the course of individual lives. I do remember a providential positioning which played a part in blessing a brother in Christ. He worked for a large company and was wrongfully sent to prison. As it happened, my father-in-law was the personnel manager of that company. My wife, Diane, and I were able to speak to my father-in-law about the situation. My father-in-law held the brother's job open whilst the brother was in prison when normally the job would have been lost.

Like most others from time to time, I have also asked questions as to why, where, when and to whom I was born. If the people who have been providentially placed in my life had not been there, would I have been a Christian? When I was young, my father made a search for truth and his search exposed me to both the denominational model of Christianity and the restoration plea of non-denominational Churches of Christ. I count that as a providential blessing.

Similarly, an American missionary called Claude Guild became part of my life in my late teens in Brisbane. He planted the germ of preaching in a mind that had never (not for a second) considered such a thing. At the same time I was blessed to meet a young woman, Diane, who, though not a Christian at the time, was nonetheless spiritually minded. About three months after Diane became a Christian, I made up my mind to go to Macquarie School of Preaching (now Macquarie School of Biblical Studies) in Sydney. I pondered how I was going to break the news to Diane that I would be leaving Brisbane and spending the next two years in Sydney; this meant postponing marriage plans. Remarkably, when Diane heard the news, she responded: 'We could get married and I could support you.' And so it came to pass.

Diane then obtained a transfer from the bank and found a position at Martin Place in Sydney. Travelling daily in different directions was a burden, but in a short time a position came up at Macquarie University, just a stone's throw from MSOBS. This lasted the duration of my schooling and proved to be a great providential blessing.

Our initial plans were to complete school and return to Queensland, where I would get a job and we would help the congregation wherever we were. Fulltime preaching was not on the table because of the small size of congregations. Two phone calls changed that. Hartley Simmons first called me from Sydney airport when he and his wife, Helen, were waiting for a flight to return to the United States for their eldest son's funeral. He asked, 'Can you meet me at the airport?' Classes had ended for the day. So I met them in an airport lounge. Hartley asked me if I had any plans after graduation, scheduled in three months' time. I said I had none. He said, 'How would you like to come and work in Toowoomba? I will speak to the elders of my supporting congregation and see if they can stretch the budget.' I had practically forgotten that conversation when, a short time before graduation, I received another call from Hartley. He said, 'Well, it's all set, you're coming to Toowoomba next year.' And that too came to pass.

That was the start of a wonderful relationship with the Ridgewood congregation in Beaumont, Texas which lasted 25 years until the Toowoomba congregation became financially self-supporting. Initially we were supported on less than what we had received while in MSOBS, but God's promise in Philippians 4:19 proved true. We were able to rent a house from a wonderful old gentleman who charged us less than half the going rate then.

After seven years, a generous Christian sister helped us with a deposit for our own house. At the time, I was feeling the pinch of a growing family as my office was forced out of the house into a garden shed on the back patio. Since I was busy, Diane looked around for a house to buy with the understanding she would call me if a house was worth our viewing. The church building was at 52 Gipps Street; and the house at 45 Gipps Street came onto the market not more than 20 minutes before she spied it. I was there in a flash. After a brief inspection, we signed up for it. My office problems were over! I could walk to the building in a couple of minutes. We lived there for the next 28 years and it is impossible to guess how much money, time and petrol that location saved us over that time. Truly, the Lord has been good to us. ■

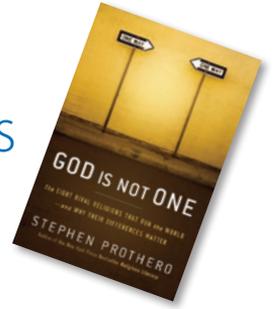
Ian Coker and his wife, Diane, and their family were longtime members of the church meeting at Gipps Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, where he was the evangelist. Now that Ian has retired, Ian and Diane are part of the Townsville Church of Christ, Queensland.
dicoker@mail.com



Book Review



God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World by Stephen Prothero (New York: Harper One, 2011)



The title of Prothero's book boldly proclaims the central thesis of his argument. A professor of religion at Boston University, Prothero suggests that the contemporary push to view all world religions as essentially similar – with areas of divergence between different religions being alternative pathways that can be followed to arrive at the same endpoint – is a great fallacy. This push does an ethical disservice to religious followers and disrespects the fundamental differences between religions.

Prothero contends that differences between religions are real to everyday practitioners. In many cases these differences have led to conflict, even death. In an effort to reduce this conflict between adherents of different religions, the concept of religious tolerance has been promoted. Accordingly, differences are tolerated or even trivialised and dismissed. It leads to an artificial unity and agreement between all religions.

Prothero introduces the term 'Godthink' to describe this ideological perspective of 'naïve theological groupthink' (p. 3). This Godthink contends that all religions are essentially the same; differences are dismissed for the 'higher goal' of unity. Prothero argues that proponents of Godthink have been blinded to (or wilfully ignore) the differences between religions. They have thus lost the ability to respond to these differences in realistic, appropriate and sensitive ways.

Prothero shares the same aspiration for peace amongst religious rivals as do the proponents of Godthink. However, he advocates a different way to achieve this goal. Rather than minimising differences between religions, Prothero believes that 'genuine dialogue across religious boundaries must recognise the existence of these boundaries and the fundamental difference between the lands they bisect' (p. 336). He argues that traditional interfaith dialogue compromises doctrine for the sake of fellowship. In contrast, his approach incorporates an awareness of, and respect for, religious differences as the key for interaction and co-existence between proponents of different religions, and managing the tension of doctrine and fellowship.

Hence, this book is an antidote to Godthink by seeking to improve the level of religious literacy amongst readers. Prothero's purpose for writing this book is to delineate the key conceptual, ideological, ethical and spiritual differences between the eight main religions of the world. His seeks to equip readers with the capacity to participate in respectful and articulate dialogue with people of other faiths, leading to peaceful co-existence among and within communities.

The book includes a separate chapter discussing each of the eight main religions: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism and Daoism. There is a final chapter exploring Atheism. Each chapter articulates four key concepts inherent within the religion: the identification of a 'problem' confronted by humanity; a solution to this problem; a technique for moving from the problem to the solution; and an exemplar of people who or practices which have successfully charted the course from problem to solution.

One of the strengths of the book is that Prothero has successfully summarised (without being simplistic) the history, doctrines, sacred texts, ethical imperatives and contemporary issues of each religion into a single chapter. This allows contrasts and comparisons to be made. However, I think it would be even more helpful to include a condensed version of the problem, solution, technique and exemplar overview for each religion at the start of each chapter, as provided in the Christianity and Buddhism chapters.

Whilst Prothero strives to be objective in his discussion of each religion, his Christian heritage often bubbles to the surface when he provides analogies to support various arguments. He seeks to temper this acknowledged bias by referencing his active participation in dialogue and ceremonies of other religions. However, I would argue that this bias, once noted, does not need tempering. It provides a practical example of the very concept he is arguing: that religious differences should be articulated and appreciated as a pre-requisite for respectful dialogue and interaction.

For most religions, Prothero takes delight in highlighting whether orthopraxy (right practice) or orthodoxy (right doctrine) is the more dominant expression of that faith. I found this point of comparison invaluable. It provided an insight into the correlation between faith, lifestyle and belief for each religion. It also forced me to reflect on my own Christian perspective of the interaction between practice and doctrine and to view this interaction through the lens of other religions.

Prothero doesn't hesitate in proclaiming his belief that all religions are not one and they do not seek the same God. He counters the push for morphing all world religions into one big happy family; he highlights the superficiality and ignorance of this perspective. In so doing, Prothero advocates that a respectful appreciation of religious differences will ensure that future interfaith dialogue will be based on an awareness of the uniqueness of each religion, rather than a watering down of this uniqueness. Prothero's thesis is based on the concept that respect for and appreciation of religious differences will be a more effective vehicle to future peaceful co-existence than a misplaced optimism that unity will be achieved by reducing all religions to their lowest common denominator. ■

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