

MAY 2018



# InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement

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Southeast congregation Melbourne, VIC

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## Editorial

Despite Jesus' prayer for unity among his people, (John 17:20–23) we know that unity is hard to achieve. As Christians, we look to the Scriptures as the source of our beliefs. Yet even the nature of the Bible and how it should be understood have become grounds for debate. Is it possible for us to come to a common understanding of what God says in his Word? Can we be united as Jesus prayed or will our witness be undermined through infighting and division?

In our *Feature*, Steve Wilson considers how Christians ought to deal with our disagreements by unpacking Paul's teaching on disputable matters in Romans 14. Benny Tabalujan offers some *Food for Thought* about our use of the expression 'salvation issue' and whether it's helpful as we work through contentious issues with each other. Also, Christian Bargholz reviews *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*, a popular book that seeks to better equip readers to understand the Bible as it was originally written.

Our *ChurchScope* looks at the Southeast congregation in Melbourne and the changes that they've experienced over the years. We also *Interview* Mark and Kate Jennings from Canberra about their church and family life. And in the *News*, we learn about the history of MSOBS's annual lectureships, the Belmore Road 20th annual family camp, the APEDS conference in Brisbane, a new church in Melbourne's west and Project Barnabas' visit to Bairnsdale, Victoria.

We hope you find this issue thought provoking and uplifting. May our love and unity be a powerful witness to an often divided world.

InterSections editorial team.

## ChurchScope

### The Southeast congregation in Melbourne, VIC

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Congregations are a bit like trees: they rarely stay the same for long. Take a snapshot of one, and it will look quite different to the snapshot you take in five or ten years' time. And they have a lineage; each seedling came from a bigger tree, and hopefully other congregations will come from the present one. This is certainly true of the congregation known as 'Southeast' in Melbourne.

There had been New Testament Christians living in Melbourne's outer southeast for years before the Southeast congregation formed. There was talk and prayer about the need for a church in what was then the fastest-growing growth corridor in Victoria, the Dandenong-Cranbourne-Pakenham triangle, but it wasn't until late 1995 when disciples came together there to break bread.

It began in a primary school in Dandenong North. A handful of brethren, previously members of the congregation which now meets in Bayswater, started breaking bread there. Led by David Adkins, this group was soon joined by a family living nearby who were members at the Belmore Road congregation, then by a family who had been worshipping in Frankston. Early in 1996, others came from Frankston when their group decided not to continue on their own as a congregation. As these brethren settled into meeting together, more disciples who lived in Melbourne's east and south-eastern suburbs came and swelled the congregation's numbers.

Today, Southeast's Sunday assembly looks quite different. It is in a different suburb, Endeavour Hills, and none of the original members are there. Attendance currently averages 40, but at one stage



of our history it peaked around 90, and for four years the congregation flourished under the oversight of shepherds, Cliff Offer and David Adkins, until God dissolved that eldership by taking Cliff home. That four-year period highlighted to us the wisdom of God in the way he designed the body. We saw challenges met with united resolve, and not only did the flock show growth and progress in the faith, but the elders themselves seemed to develop and be strengthened spiritually.

A difficult time followed as we tried to adjust to body life without overseers. Said our bulletin at the time, 'It will take a little getting used to not having elders, and this will involve more men sharing some responsibilities. This in itself is an opportunity

for growth in individual members, as people may find ways to serve their brethren and the Lord in which they haven't before.' Unfortunately, we did not do well in this regard. We experienced a period of decline over a number of years, focussing inwards, majoring in minors rather than giving emphasis to 'the weightier matters'.

More recently, having experienced some pruning over the years, we have seen some heartening regrowth and progress, following a renewed commitment by the congregation to pursue the biblical model for us as individuals and as a flock. A key part of this has been our recognition of the men's responsibility to show leadership both in their physical families and in the family of faith. We realised there was no basis in Scripture for the idea that, unless we have elders, we have to be a rudderless boat or a democracy. Having laid that misconception to rest, there are positive signs of further progress together as a group.

While we are unable to appoint elders at this stage, we understand that God still expects the mature men to lead and the rest to support them in this. Therefore, in the second half of 2017 the congregation recognised the four of us as leaders among the men and committed to supporting our leadership. With this came a cohesion we haven't had for some time, probably since we had overseers. More members are taking their own personal mission initiatives, encouraging and helping one another, and shining Christ's light to those in darkness. Collectively, we support an orphan in Sri Lanka and a couple of evangelists. We have hosted Autumn Songfest since 2009 and coordinate support efforts for the Kakinada Children's Home in India.

Today's snapshot of Southeast shows a diversity of ages, from preschool to 70s, with several countries of origin and languages spoken. Our Sunday assemblies are translated into two languages other than English. One language is Auslan, four of our members being deaf. We see an inclusive, family atmosphere, an acceptance of one another, with personal openness the norm, rather than putting up fronts. The congregation is described as warm, friendly, open, and inviting. Numbering fewer than 50, individuals can have close relationships with a greater percentage of the members. (You can probably tell that we love being part of this group!)

Like all believers, we're a work in progress with plenty of challenging work before us, and we're thankful to our Lord for the progress with which he has blessed us, and continues to bless us. The ongoing challenge we face is to strengthen our roots in Christ and his Word and get with his program of the body building itself up in Christ-like love, that all may know that we are his disciples. ◇

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## Feature When Christians Disagree

The psalmist celebrated it in song, and Jesus prayed earnestly for it,<sup>1</sup> yet unity and peace among God's people has always been difficult to maintain. There are, of course, many reasons for this. Our focus here is on the issue of faith versus opinion.

In writing to the church in Rome, Paul addressed a situation where there was tension between Jewish and Gentile believers.<sup>2</sup> Having laid the foundation that Jew and Gentile are equally guilty before God and equally reconciled to the one God through faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1–5), Paul outlines the remaining things that constitute the unity of the Spirit which all Christians are to keep through the bond of peace: there is one baptism (Romans 6), one faith (Romans 7–8), one Spirit and one hope (Romans 8), and one body comprising both Jew and Gentile (Romans 9–11).<sup>3</sup> Paul climaxes the practical application section of his letter (Romans 12–15) with a case study of the sorts of Jew/Gentile tensions experienced by the church in Rome (Romans 14–15). Specifically, in Romans 14–15, what was at issue was the observance of some parts of the Mosaic law. Paul was open for Jewish Christians to remain observant but they were not to bind them upon the Gentile Christians. What follows is a brief overview of Paul's approach to managing friction generated by such disputable matters.



Disputable matters (Romans 14:1) are what we call opinions. For the sake of simplicity, let's say opinions are those things that are not straightforwardly expressed in Scripture and so require a good deal of human reasoning to formulate - as opposed to explicit commands that simply require our obedience, or the 'seven ones' identified by Paul as essential to maintaining the unity of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

As we read Romans 14:1 — 15:13, we notice Paul doesn't focus upon who is right and who is wrong. Paul knows who is right in the controversy over diet (14:14a). If settling differences of opinion were just a matter of identifying right and wrong, Paul could have sorted things out very quickly. Instead, Paul's concern is with the attitude brethren bring to their disputes over matters of opinion. Paul focuses upon conscience (14:14b, 23) — what one *believes* to be right or wrong (regardless of whether they are in fact right or wrong) — which becomes the critical issue at stake when navigating disputable matters.

Who are the weak (14:1–2)? Who are the strong (15:1)? I suggest that weakness here is not primarily about a deficit in knowledge or maturity as is usually assumed. Rather, it is about the one occupying the *position of powerlessness* (or the position of power in the case of the strong). The one with a scruple is the one who is weak because her conscience inhibits her, making her impotent in the matter (as opposed to the one who does not share her scruple and so is conscience free and therefore potent in the same matter). This explains why Paul instructs the strong to yield to the weak (14:15–21; 15:1). The strong, to whom the issue is one of indifference (i.e. it doesn't matter either way), *can* give way. The one who believes it does matter one way or the other *cannot* acquiesce without violating their conscience; and they sin if they do so acquiesce (14:23).

Paul says neither the weak nor the strong should despise or condemn the other (14:2–3). It is important that each of us live in good conscience before God (14:5b) as each of us will give account of ourselves to God (14:4–12). We are our brother's keeper - yes (14:13–21). But we are not our brother's judge. That prerogative belongs to God alone (14:10–12). Unlike matters of faith, opinions are things we can keep to ourselves (14:22a) for the sake of others (14:22b), especially those who are bound by their conscience (14:23). In matters of opinion, foregoing our perceived liberty in deference to the conscience of a sister or brother is not being captive to them; it is loving them (14:15–21; cf. Galatians 5:13–15, 24–26)!

The kingdom of God is not about our opinions (as good and as God honouring as we think they are). It is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:17). This is not to say that opinions reasoned from Scripture are unimportant; we would dismiss much of what is called theology if that were the case. It is to say that the spiritual welfare of Christians and the unity and peace of God's church are a higher priority (14:15–17; 15:1–13).

As Jesus made clear, all things that pertain to God's will are important, but some things are more important than others.<sup>5</sup> Giant strides towards maintaining the unity Jesus prayed for are made wherever and whenever both the weak and the strong humbly keep their opinions to themselves as an expression of sacrificial love towards each other in imitation of Christ (Philippians 2:1–5).

Does your holding an opinion different to mine compromise my good conscience towards God? Does it cause me to believe or do anything I think is wrong? Of course not. Another person's opinions are their business, not mine. We can and should respectfully discuss and diligently study our disputed opinions together in the light of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> But it is not fatal to our peace and unity if we cannot, despite our best efforts, come to agreement about disputable matters. At the end of the day I can say, with tongue in cheek, that 'although I would prefer you agreed with me, I can comfortably accept your liberty of conscience to believe and do disputable things *your way* while ever I remain free to continue to believe and do disputable things *God's way*!'

It's only when one seeks to impose their opinion upon another that consciences may become compromised. That's why brethren don't often divide over private theories or private actions. But differences regarding communal actions pertaining to things like corporate worship or use of church funds can, if not approached as Paul instructs, stretch the bonds of peace and fellowship to breaking point.

*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant [us] to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:5–7 NRSV) ◇*

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# Book Review *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*

by Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 2014)

How do we as Christians understand the Scriptures? Is it simply a matter of reading them and doing what they say? Or does it involve the more complicated matter of interpretation? Is the Bible a simple book that can be plainly understood without the need to interpret? Or does it require rigorous thought to discover its deep truths?

Most Christians would argue that these two viewpoints are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the essential parts of Scripture are clear enough for any to read and come to understand, whilst other parts, given their relative complexity, welcome a more rigorous approach. It is my conviction that it is for this reason (i.e. this belief of ours that the Bible can be separated into what does and does not need interpretation) that people do not read the Scriptures. So, once we have read and come to an elementary understanding of what is conceived to be 'essential' we often neglect what is more 'complex'. We therefore end up not reading what we think we already know, and not reading what we know we don't.

It is for the purpose of getting people to read the Scriptures again that Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have written their book. As stated from the outset of *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, it's the authors' conviction (one to which I subscribe), that everybody interprets the Bible. Interpretation is simply unavoidable.

Reading the Bible and understanding what it says comes as a result of viewing it through the lens of our own lives and our own experiences, i.e. interpretation. Hence, the issue is not whether we need to interpret the Scriptures, but whether our interpretation is valid.

The book is designed to give us the tools necessary for developing a better interpretation of the Scriptures, one that is grounded in their original intent, audience, and context; an interpretation that takes into account the different literary styles at play, and how those subtle differences should influence our understanding of them; and an interpretation developed out of a framework that has at its core the belief in the Scriptures' inspiration, but also an honesty that suggests that its inspiration can result in different implications for each book of the Bible.

The book is comprised of 13 chapters:

1. Introduction: The Need to Interpret
2. The Basic Tool: A Good Translation
3. The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually
4. The Epistles: The Hermeneutical Questions
5. The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use
6. Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent
7. The Gospels: One Story, Many Dimensions
8. The Parables: Do You Get the Point?
9. The Law(s): Covenant Stipulations for Israel
10. The Prophets: Enforcing the Covenant in Israel
11. The Psalms: Israel's Prayers and Ours
12. Wisdom: Then and Now
13. Revelation: Images of Judgement and Hope

While a summary of each chapter would be too long for a short review such as this, a few fundamental points are worth noting because they are applicable across the broad spectrum of the topics covered.

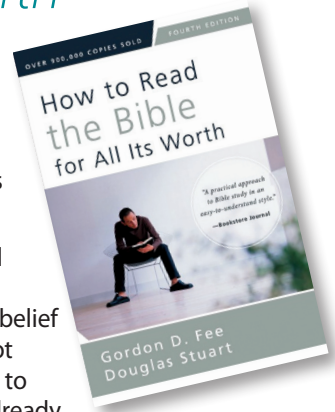
As Fee and Stuart readily stress, fundamental to the understanding of the Scriptures, regardless of their literary type, are exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis involves the careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover its original intended meaning. It seeks to understand a given text's original purpose. Hermeneutics involves seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient Scripture. Hermeneutics thus asks questions of the Bible's meaning in the here and now.

Learning to use these two tools effectively, the authors argue, is fundamental to a solid and informed interpretation of Scripture. This rests upon a key principle: any interpretation of Scripture for the here and now (hermeneutics) must be informed by their original meaning and intent (exegesis). Fee and Stuart argue that these tools (when used effectively) and this principle (when used consistently) will lead to a better interpretation of the Scriptures by allowing them to speak as they always have, and freeing them from the risk of abuse or misunderstanding.

A note of caution: this is not a book that seeks to provide readers with answers to the difficult hermeneutical questions of the contemporary church. Any reader commencing a study of this book with that expectation will be disappointed. What this book seeks to do is to provide Christians with the tools needed to navigate effectively through the difficult issues facing the church.

Each chapter on a different part of Scripture includes examples of the use of exegesis and hermeneutics, and the conclusions that these tools can bring. But the authors are not trying to spoonfeed us with the answers themselves; their purpose is to get us reading the Bible for ourselves again and to help us make new discoveries or reconsider old ones in light of the tools they provide.

This book is highly recommended for everyone, Christians or otherwise. It seeks to move Bible readers away from the idea that understanding Scripture simply comes from merely reading the text. It encourages us, by giving us the tools necessary, towards rigorous and thoughtful study in the pursuit of a more complete understanding of the Bible. ♦



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## Minister Position - Hawkes Bay Church of Christ, NZ

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# Food for Thought

## Reflections on what is a 'salvation issue'

The term 'salvation issue' typically pops up when individuals differ on a point of Christian teaching. One says: 'Oh, this isn't a salvation issue—let's agree to disagree on this.' The suggestion is that this particular teaching is not important to one's salvation; conversely, if something is a salvation issue, then we must get it right in order to be saved.<sup>1</sup>

Given the increasing use of 'salvation issue' in Christian conversations, I've been wondering whether I should use it too. After mulling this over, I'm leaning against using it—even though I appreciate that the term is used by many in a well-intentioned way. Let me give three reasons for my reluctance and offer some thoughts for reflection.

First, 'salvation issue' seems to me to be a well-intentioned but ultimately unhelpful shorthand. Many who use it believe that some biblical commands are more important than others. They use 'salvation issue' to focus on God's key commands, while creating freedom for Christians to have different views on lesser commands. I applaud this desire to acknowledge that not all commands are of the same weight. After all, Jesus himself said the two greatest commands are to love God and to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:34–40). Elsewhere, he noted that practising the 'weightier matters' of justice, mercy, and faithfulness is more important than tithing herbs (Matthew 23:23). The biblical evidence indicates that not all commands are of equal importance.<sup>2</sup>

However, using 'salvation issue' as shorthand to separate important commands from lesser ones begs the question: who decides the list? The Scriptures don't appear to provide a clear and exhaustive list. Denominations differ when making up theirs. A century ago, some would have included playing cards, wearing bikinis, gambling, aborting a baby, and engaging in homosexual acts, among matters which could jeopardise someone's salvation. Many today have a much shorter list. Some reduce it to the two commands of loving God and loving others (and conveniently leave it to you to decide what these two commands involve). In the absence of a scriptural list of salvation issues, humans tend to make up their own lists based on cultural norms, denominational distinctives, and personal preferences.

Second, using the term 'salvation issue' seems to approach the Christian life in a more static than dynamic sense. It tends to focus on whether a person is right before God on key salvation issues at a specific moment. In contrast, Scripture suggests that salvation is a process incorporating both justification (being made right with God) and sanctification (being made holy over time). The dynamic process of sanctification suggests increasing knowledge and action, through which we're to work out our salvation with fear and trembling even as God is at work in us (Philippians 2:12–13). Accordingly, even though sin can stain us each day, as long as we're walking in the light, confessing our sins, Jesus' blood washes away all our wrongdoing (1 John 1:7–10).

Third, even if we can get most people to agree on a list of salvation issues, there's the trap of making light of matters which are not on that list. If attending Sunday church services isn't a salvation issue, why not skip some (or most) services? If partaking the Lord's Supper is not a salvation issue, why do it weekly or at all? If having church elders isn't a salvation issue, why strive towards having an eldership? Having a list of salvation issues can thus foster a dismissive attitude towards other, lesser, commands.

In contrast to making light of lesser commands, in Romans 14, Paul addressed the mixed Jewish-Gentile church in Rome on the question of keeping dietary laws (see also 1 Corinthians 8). Paul's teaching is clear: no food is unclean in its essence (14:14) and so eating meat is fine. Yet we should not be contemptuous towards a Christian who's a convinced vegetarian or cause them to stumble. To such a person, eating meat is sin and results in condemnation (14:23). If need be, we should exercise self-restraint and avoid eating meat (14:23)—at least in their presence. This suggests that what we see as a 'non-salvation issue' for us (eating meat) can be a 'salvation issue' for others. More than that, Paul tells us not to make light of that issue—lest we destroy for food him for whom Christ died (14:15). Non-salvation issues can be that serious.

In summary, here are some conclusions for reflection:

1. Let's acknowledge that not all of God's commands are of equal importance. Rejecting this teaching can lead us to 'major on minors' and fall into legalism.
2. It's better to use the term 'weightier matters'—instead of the non-biblical term 'salvation issue'—to describe the more important commands. Using biblical terms for biblical concepts keeps us closer to the Scriptures.
3. Even the not-so-weighty matters are not to be neglected. The fact that some commands are more important than others does not free us to focus on the former and disregard the latter. We're called to uphold all commands and eschew all sin.
4. In one sense, it seems that any sin can become a salvation issue because sin separates us from God. Conversely, is it possible that grace can trump a salvation issue? Meanwhile, salvation appears to be a dynamic process and we do well to walk in the light, abiding in Christ and being strengthened by the Holy Spirit, all to God's glory. ◇

<sup>1</sup> Some use a different terminology (e.g. essentials and non-essentials, or faith and opinion) to convey variations of the same idea.

<sup>2</sup> The opposite view – that all commands are of equal weight – may be a result of a misinterpretation of James 2:10. That text states that a person who breaks a law 'becomes guilty of all'. I take this to mean he becomes a law-breaker, or a breaker of the law as a whole (the writer may be referring to a common opinion among Jewish teachers that behind the action of becoming a law-breaker one can usually find an attitude which is contrary to taking the law seriously). It does not mean that he has broken every law; thus, a person who litters is a law-breaker but not a murderer. Neither does it say anything about the relative importance or weight of the laws themselves (e.g. that littering is or is not as serious as murder). The confusion seems to arise from the phrase 'becomes guilty of all'—through which some (wrongly) conflate the idea that all laws are of equal weight.

# News APEDS 2018



## Who's Next?

On 27–29 April 2018, The Point Church in Brisbane hosted the 3rd Asia-Pacific Elders, Deacons, and Spouses conference (APEDS). Over 60 people attended from congregations across Australia and as far afield as Singapore, India, and the United States. It was a time for Christians with an interest in church leadership to gather to consider the present situation of the church and church leadership.

Speakers such as Evertt Huffard from Harding School of Theology, Jay Jarboe from Missionary Resource Network, Steve Wilson, Benny Tabalujan and Stuart Penhall spoke on the theme of 'Passing the Baton' of church leadership, discussing challenges facing congregations in building and maintaining biblical church leadership, as well as considering strategies and sharing encouraging work being done in this regard. It was a fruitful and inspiring time which left attendees with a common sense of mission and shared purpose. The next APEDS conference is planned to be held in 2020. ◇

Craig Holyoak [craig@helmsdeep.org](mailto:craig@helmsdeep.org)

## Belmore Road CampING

This year marked the 20th anniversary of the Belmore Road CampING (Camp I Need God) being held at Camp Manyung, which overlooks Port Phillip Bay. This is the annual family camp of the Belmore Road congregation in Melbourne.



Amid the beautiful coastal views, it was refreshing to learn about 'Transformation — through the renewal of our minds' (which was the theme this year). Andrew Johnson, from Holland Park Church of Christ, in Brisbane, delivered a series of instructive lessons on being living sacrifices, practising living in the world and yet not conforming to it, and renewing and transforming ourselves to follow God's will.

There was also lots of fun and laughter, fellowship over meals, forming new relationships, and bonding over meaningful conversations and late night games as we encouraged each other along our walk in Christ. Some of the activities included water balloon volleyball, the big swing, playing corn hole, and the hilarious camp auction which raised funds for the newly planted Western Melbourne church and Project Barnabas run by the Coffs Coast church. It was a rejuvenating weekend reconnecting with others as we drew closer to God by renewing ourselves. ◇

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## MSOBS Lectureship: Looking back and forward

As we look forward to the forthcoming MSOBS lectureship scheduled for 18–22 July, it's worthwhile to see how it all began. It started when the Macquarie congregation in Sydney began a fulltime Bible training program in 1970, when occasionally two or three visiting teachers came for a week or two for a 'Special Session' at what was then called the Macquarie School of Preaching.

The first lectureship was held in July 1972 on the theme of 'World Evangelism' with Joe Cannon from Papua New Guinea as the featured speaker, along with several preachers from around Australia. The photo above shows lectureship speakers, along with MSOP students and teachers. The aim was to provide an opportunity for Christian men and women from around Australia to have the opportunity to learn from visiting teachers over 4–5 days, and to benefit from fellowship in study, worship, conversation, and eating together.

Since then, the Macquarie School of Biblical Studies Lectureship has been held in July almost every year with 12–20 visiting speakers, mostly from Australia but also including some from the United States, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and India. The 2017 lectureship on the theme 'Making Choices God's Way' was held over 12–16 July, with 15 teachers including Dale and Sheila Hartman and Tim Lewis from the USA and Billy Kumar from India. The Hartmans have been consistent lectureship teachers since the late 1970s. The MSOBS Lectureship for 2018 is planned for 18–22 July on the theme: 'What Pleases God!' ◇

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## New church in Melbourne's west

February 2018 saw the planting of a new church in Melbourne's west. Called the Western Melbourne Church of Christ, this church plant has been in the works for more than a year. What began as a small fellowship of Christians gathering on an intermittent basis on Sunday afternoons slowly evolved into a church plant.

The new congregation had their inaugural worship assembly on Sunday afternoon, 18 February 2018, at their rented hall in the Brookside Community Centre in Caroline Springs (about 25km west of Melbourne CBD). David Payne from the Heidelberg West congregation was the guest preacher and there was a good crowd of 23 people present, including visitors from Melbourne sister churches.





Roberto Quintanilla, a fulltime church worker in the Melbourne area, is helping coordinate the new congregation's activities. Roberto's ministry is the fruit of a collaboration among several churches in Melbourne and elsewhere, as well as various individuals. Similarly, the Western Melbourne church has been blessed with support and encouragement from a number of Melbourne sister churches. The fact that the new church meets at 5.30pm means that Christians from other congregations which meet in the morning are able to visit and encourage the new church later in the day. Its presence in Caroline Springs also means that Christians who live in the west now have an option to be part of a congregation closer to their home. May this new congregation be a testimony to God's grace and goodness and be a blessing to all who come into contact with them. ♦

Benny Tabalujan b.tabalujan@gmail.com

## Project Barnabas - Bairnsdale

On the weekend of 27–29 April 2018 the congregation at Bairnsdale, Victoria, was greatly blessed by Project Barnabas. Sixteen Christians travelled from congregations in Coffs Harbour, Canberra, and Melbourne for a weekend of encouragement and fellowship.

The theme of the weekend was lessons from Nehemiah, a book of the Old Testament that is perhaps not studied as much as it should. Graham Wall, Roberto Quintanilla, and Marvin Ancell taught a series of lessons that encouraged us to consider the important role that we all have in helping build the Lord's family.

Fellowship activities included a casual dinner and devotional, breakfast, and a three-hour cruise on the Gippsland Lakes (which included watching seals, dolphins, and a variety of native bird life). It was a great opportunity to get to know other Christians and to share both the challenges and successes of our Christian journey.

The Barnabas Project is a great example of how congregations can come together to boost smaller, remote congregations and I would recommend everyone to take whatever opportunity they have to spend time visiting and encouraging other congregations.

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## Feature - continued

- 1 Psalm 133:1–3; John 17:20–23.
- 2 The church in Rome presumably began with Jews and proselytes from Rome who were converted in Jerusalem in AD 30 (Acts 2:10–11). Luke mentions Aquila and Priscilla being caught up in Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD 49–50 (Acts 18:2). The Roman historian Suetonius notes that, 'Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from the city.' *Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars* (London: Folio Society, 1992), 199. This is likely a reference to controversy about Christ between Jews and Christians (at this time Rome considered Christianity to be a sect of Judaism so Claudius' expulsion of all Jews would have included Jewish Christians). But Priscilla and Aquila are back home in Rome when Paul writes to that church in AD 57 (Romans 16:3–5). Perhaps the church in Rome had shifted from a Jewish base to a Gentile base with the expulsion of Jewish Christians for several years and was now having to readjust again with the return of Jewish Christians from their exile. It is noteworthy that Gentiles are mentioned prominently at the beginning and end of the letter (cf. Rom. 1:5 and 16:26). I believe it is this tension between Jewish and Gentile believers that Paul addresses throughout Romans; with special practical application in chapters 14–15.
- 3 Ephesians 4:1–6.
- 4 Ephesians 4:1–6. The difference between faith and opinion is not as simple as 'salvation issues' versus 'non-salvation' issues. For a fuller discussion of this I recommend Jack Cottrell's essay, 'In Matters of Faith, Unity; In Matters of Opinion, Liberty'. Available at <https://thecra.org/index.php/restoration-herald/articles-of-note/inmattersoffaithunity>
- 5 Matthew 23:23.
- 6 Remember that disputable matters are biblically informed reasonings, not anything-goes doctrinal relativism or subjectivism.

## Interview - continued

### Mark, what do you see as the challenges for the church in Australia in the 21st century?

Some of the challenges facing the church at present were raised at the recent APEDS conference hosted by The Point church in Brisbane in March this year. Under the broad theme of 'passing the baton of church leadership', challenges raised during the sessions included these:

- The need to continue to rely on God and Scripture as our source of authority.
- The challenge of maintaining a pipeline of preachers and ministry leaders to serve future generations.
- The need to avoid unhealthy kinds of church culture.
- The need for emotionally healthy leaders in the church.
- The challenge of maintaining strong families and relationships.
- The need for greater commitment to faith and ministry in churches.
- The challenge of maintaining strong and faithful Christians amongst second and third generations.

On a personal level, when I start contemplating the challenges facing the church I'm quickly overwhelmed until I remind myself that God is always present, that he cares for us deeply, and doesn't want us to worry. He wants us to ask him for help (Philippians 4:6–7) and use his strength (1 Peter 4:11) rather than trying to fix things on our own steam and only turning to him once we work out we can't do it by ourselves! May God bless the churches in Australia and around the world. ♦



# Interview *With Mark and Kate Jennings*



## **Tell us about how you met and what drew you to each other.**

M: I met Kate when I started going to the Canberra church in 2003, having moved from Perth to Canberra for study. My love and respect for Kate grew over the first year. I was driving to Campbelltown every few weeks for Thursday night Bible study. Kate would come along (I think she felt sorry for me because no one else that I invited was coming!). We never ran out of things to talk about, and we became very close—sharing a deep faith. We were married in December 2004. I would need more paper to list all the things drawing me to beautiful Kate—but central has been a deep respect for her faith, service and passion for the Gospel. Before I met Kate, she had been an AIM student and a missionary in Brazil. This is a good example of her passion for God and love for people.

K: Same story as above. Yes, I did feel bad for him at first that he had no-one to trek to Sydney with him! But it was his deep, authentic faith, maturity, servant-heart, and caring nature that soon made me see he was the guy for me. I feel blessed every day to share life and family and faith with such a good, godly guy. We just love this life God has given us together!

## **Were there any significant people or experiences in your earlier years that invigorated your faith?**

M: One January night in 1996 I was outside looking up at the stars—and at that moment became overwhelmingly convinced that only God could have created something so beautiful. That experience, as well as my parents' wonderful example of real faith that I had witnessed throughout my life, led me to deciding to become a Christian. There are too many significant people that have encouraged my faith to list here. Through movie nights and fishing trips, Jeff and Eva Lee helped keep me and the rest of our church's small youth group connected to the church family during our awkward teen years. When I moved to Canberra I lived with Steve and Willie Randall for two years. Long hours of spiritual conversation with them expanded the depth and breadth of my faith. Recently, Benny and Pauline Tabalujan's hard work for the future of the Australian churches has been a real encouragement to me. Finally, my (longsuffering!) wife Kate is a constant source of encouragement and counsel.

K: I have been encouraged in my faith by so many good people. In particular, I would have to say Penny and Graham Fry in the Canberra church have played a formative role for many years... from letting me hang out at their house all through my teen years to encouraging me to take on Christianity at age 16 and then teaching me how to study the Bible and grow my own faith. They invested in me and also countless others and they have always been such a rich encouragement and example.

Another formative experience in my faith was going to Texas when I was 18 to study at the Sunset International Bible Institute for the Adventures in Missions program. After 8 months study there, I spent two years in Brazil serving alongside missionary families to share the Gospel, plant a new church, teach English, and work in shanty town communities. It was an incredibly eye-opening, challenging, encouraging, and life-changing experience!

## **You have a young family of three children: are there any spiritual priorities or values that have been important to you in raising children?**

M: Strong families build strong churches—so we try to prioritise family life and good parenting over work, church ministry, and other pressures. While families may express godly parenting in different ways, for us this has meant

trying to find creative ways to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually present in our children's lives. It has meant Kate leaving the workforce for almost a decade to focus on child-raising. It has meant me trying (with mixed success) to lead our family in devotionals most weeknights. It has meant trying to bring the kids alongside us in church ministry wherever we are serving. We try to take regular holidays as a family and allow the kids the joy of meeting with Christians in other places around Australia. Church camps and Bible-based holiday programs have all contributed to their faith experience. Kate and I try (and often fail) to model godly grace and decision-making in our parenting.

K: Raising kids is so incredibly challenging and humbling in many ways. We fail hard and often and can only rely on the grace of God to fill the many gaps we leave in our parenting. But, though never perfect, we are always trying to parent our kids with intention, love, and grace. Building a strong family identity has been very important and foundational for us. We want the kids to know who we are as a family and what values we are founded on. We pray it serves as a strong foundation for their personal faith and future. Prioritising our marriage for both our and the children's sakes has been a key value. We love making memories, family traditions, slowing down and enjoying the simple life, and lots of family time in the home together. We want them to know our faith is a part of everyday life (not just Sundays!) And especially for them to know that we, like them, are flawed and always learning that God loves us and them, always, no matter what.

## **Kate, you play a vibrant role in Camp Challenge and as a member of the Challenge board. What have been the highlights of this Ministry?**

I have been attending Camp Challenge since I was 12 years old—and every year since, except for a few times when I was living overseas. It was my first real introduction to the wider church community across Australia and has been a rich blessing for many years. The sweetest thing is now attending camp with my own kids (who love it so much they cry when we leave), and especially with other families who have been campers for decades too! I have been on the Board since I was 19 and it has also been such a blessing to serve alongside many servant-hearted people, especially Bob Marks who has been so invested in camp for a long time. There is so much work that goes into camp—we meet every month or two, all year around, and I love how everyone on the Board contributes differently. For us, seeing people come to camp each year and have fun, make connections, and be encouraged in their faith is such a rich reward.