

InterSections

Editorial

Welcome to the May 2015 Issue of *InterSections*.

In today's religious world where Christian worship practices widely differ, the call to worship in 'spirit and truth' can be challenging. To this end, we urge a closer examination of New Testament patterns and ideals, especially as exemplified by the early church. In our *Feature* article, Allan McNicol reflects on the rich meanings associated with the simple elements of the Lord's Supper and the importance of retaining a focus on our Lord. In our *Food for Thought*, Benny Tabalujan considers scriptural, historical and theological reasons supporting the practice of *acappella* singing in Christian worship assemblies.

Brett Christensen, in our *Letter* section, encourages our under 35's – the 'Head Start' generation – to learn from the past in order to build an uncompromisingly Christian legacy for the next generation. We also interview Johnathon Atchley, a former member of Malaga Church of Christ in Perth who now teaches at South Pacific Bible College in New Zealand. Johnathon reflects on his own journey of theological study and his impressions of the church in New Zealand.

In our *Book Review* section Pauline Tabalujan tells us about *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*, written by Adele Calhoun. This book examines a range of disciplines that can lead to a deeper spiritual life. Finally in our *News* section, we hear about Camp Barnabas in Bridport (Greg Wells), the Victorian Autumn Lectures (Brett Christensen) and the North Coast Enrichment Seminar in Coffs Harbour (Jenny Ancell).

We hope this issue of *InterSections* strengthens your resolve to walk faithfully with our Lord.

The editorial team



Food for Thought

Lord's Supper Reflection: Keeping our Focus at the Table

For those of us in the local assembly who have the awesome privilege of presiding at the Lord's Table, one of the first decisions we make is to decide which texts should be the basis of our comments. Feverishly we thumb through key passages. Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20 or 1 Corinthians 11:21-25, which is it to be? Often we presuppose that they are saying essentially the same thing. After all, they are alluding to a singular event!

But if we look closer we quickly discover the descriptions of Jesus' last meal before his arrest are quite different. Biblical writers, like other authors, omit some things and go into extensive detail about others. It is in the careful observation of these different points an author makes – as opposed to others describing the same event – that we often discover important areas of emphasis.

I cannot forget when some years ago in our local assembly a dear brother read at the Table the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20). Somehow or other, while reading it aloud, for the first time he noted that Luke's account refers to two cups offered by Jesus (Lk 22:17, 20). Struck by the tension between this discovery and his preconceived ideas of what should be there he awkwardly began to wonder why this should be. Better preparation would have caused him to notice that both Luke, and Paul (1 Cor 10:14-21) seem to be alluding to an actual practice in some places in the church where a cup is taken first as a preparatory step. However, I hasten to add that Luke (22:19b-20) and Paul (1 Cor 11:23-25) seem to be aware that the historical account given in Matthew and Mark is what was normative for observance.



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Top photo: Mark & Kate Jennings and their children Lily, Eli and Miles.

Similar observations – for example, where texts such as John 6:48-59 make connections not found in other places in the Bible – are helpful in expanding our understanding of the importance of the Supper in the biblical narrative; but in a short essay we cannot pursue this further.

Instead, I would like to go in a slightly different direction. How many of us, often after a hectic morning, have found ourselves at the Lord's Table fully convinced that we are woefully ill prepared to seek to encounter our Lord? In these situations we may ask ourselves what one thing should we focus upon that is essential at this special time. What do I do?

Having spent my adult years teaching and preaching to believers, I realise all too well how many different mental avenues my listeners may be pursuing while I am speaking. Sometimes these diverging pathways are stimulated by what I am saying and sometimes not at all.

But when I come to the Table I try to imagine that I am with those first disciples at that special meal. The Lord takes the bread. In front of us he gives thanks consecrating it to be received for spiritual nourishment. Following custom he broke it and announces – at this point almost all the biblical accounts are in uniformity – 'Take and eat; this is my body!' (Matthew 26:26). That is to say, 'This is me in the situation of my impending death; I charge you to accept its benefits.' Likewise the cup (Matthew 26:27-28). It is though he is saying, 'My life is about to be poured out for the forgiveness of sins.' Humbly, I graciously accept and ponder the implications of this benefit. Coming to the Table. This is foundational.

Paul has told us that the early church met together for a meal on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 16:1-2). He concludes his letter with *Maranatha*, 'Our Lord Come' (1 Corinthians 16:22). Most likely this cry climaxed the end of the assembly.

We live between the first and second coming of our Lord. In between, at the Table, he graciously offers the benefits of forgiveness in anticipation of the coming kingdom. Could there be a greater blessing to start the week? Let us keep our focus! ■

Allan J. McNicol is emeritus professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology, Texas, and is a member of the InterSections editorial advisory board. mcnicol@austingrad.edu



Thank you to the Jennings family (Mark & Kate and their children Lily, Eli and Miles) for their photo on our front page. They're from the Canberra Church of Christ.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:14 NASB

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Letter to the Head Start Generation

Brett Christensen encourages 'Let's press on!'



If you're under 35, this letter is for you. Or maybe under 40. It's a rubbery figure.

I'm writing to you from the perspective of someone who came to Christ at 18 years of age, in 1981. Another era. Back then, most of my peers in the Lord were the children of unbelievers. Most of us had made a break with the past we had come from. We had set about finding our way as part of a new family, the family of God. There was a real buzz: this was something radically new to us, and numbers were increasing as people discovered the awe of New Testament Christianity alive and active in real-life 20th century Australia.

Looking back, and up to the present day, what has my generation of Christians—let's say those of us who are beyond 45 years of age—what have we given you? What's our legacy? Towns known to have disciples in them are fewer now than when I came into Christ. Congregations with elders are also few and far between. In fact, even evangelists and teachers labouring full-time in the Word don't seem to be as common.

I'd have to say, we haven't given you what we should have. By and large, you haven't grown up surrounded by inspiring constellations of Christlikeness, mature men and women who glow with the beauty of Jesus, who stand out as being not of this world but being totally absorbed in the kingdom of God and his righteousness. At least not as many as we could have given you. This of course is one reason why it has been so hard for congregations to choose men to shepherd them: such men have been far too thin on the ground.

But we *have* given you something which a lot of *our* generation did not have: a head start. You did not have to break out of what we broke out of; you were brought up in God's family. (Again, remember I'm using a broad brush, here—generalising as I stand back and look at our respective generations.) For all our faults as parents and spiritual uncles and aunts, we did at least give you that.

With a head start in The Way, you should be able to get further than we did. We should've, too; but you more so. You have before you a golden opportunity to get further, get wiser, get godlier, get more scriptural, and abound more in the Lord's work. The things in which we failed, you can excel in.

One thing we learned, as Israel learned, is that the answer to any challenge is never to go back to Egypt. The answer

to 'Why isn't this working for us?' is never, 'Let's go back to where our parents came from.' Rather, it's 'Let's go towards where our parents were going. They didn't go far enough. Let's press on!' A century ago, many Aussie disciples were giving up on being distinctly biblical. They were throwing in the towel and reverting to being just 'like the nations around us'. The same mistake is made in every generation; today is no exception. But you *can* be. You have a head start; don't throw away that advantage.

In a lot of areas, you'll have to be trailblazers where we failed to be. But if you're pressing on with doing things God's way, you're not alone. God has brought us this far, and he will carry you further...if we stick with him and do not lose heart. (The word 'Ebenezer' comes to mind here, from 1 Samuel 7:12.)

While the world is trying to coax you into wussing out and getting sozzled on materialism, convenience and entertainment — any distraction from things that really matter — and the religious world is pushing us to buy into their sell-out, you can stand up in the spirit of Caleb and Joshua. 'Be strong and very courageous.' I know, I know, my generation hasn't set a great standard in courage. But we haven't totally caved in, either...generally speaking. So build on that.

While even some people of my generation run up the white flag and embrace human ideas and fads, you can really make some ground in this battle. You're the head start generation. You can learn from our mistakes rather than repeat them.

Growing up surrounded by Australian society's values (or lack thereof), it's not easy to realise how messed up the place is, because that's all you've ever known. People don't notice how dark it has gotten till someone switches a light on. You're in a good position to switch on that light for people. I think my generation may have not realised how dark it was getting because it happened gradually and subtly. But if we've taught you anything (in word if not in deed), we've taught you that God's Word is the standard by which all things are to be measured. It's the lamp to our feet and the light to our path. As God's Word illuminates your understanding of how dark it is around you, 'be strong and very courageous'. Be willing to stand out as different – be a light in an increasingly darkened world.

Don't compromise. Press on. You're the head start generation and we're praying for you. ■

Brett Christensen and his family live in suburban Melbourne. He and his wife, Lesley, have three children - all faithful Christians of the head start generation. brett@peopleofgod.org.au



Feature

Why sing *acappella*?

The church I'm a member of practises *acappella* congregational singing. This is unlike many churches today where singing is accompanied by musical instruments. Over the years, some have asked: why sing *acappella*? In response, let me offer four reasons.¹

The first reason is based on Scripture. The New Testament mentions singing but is silent on the use of musical instruments in Christian worship assemblies.² For example, singing is referred to in passages like Matthew 26:30, Acts 16:25, James 5:13, Ephesians 5:19-20, Colossians 3:16 and Romans 15:9. But instruments are not mentioned.

In one of the few extended discussions on Christian worship assemblies in the New Testament – 1 Corinthians 14 – Paul mentions praying, singing, teaching (14:14-17, 26) and, in an earlier section, the Lord's Supper (11:17ff). When Paul does mention musical instruments, he uses them as a negative illustration (13:1) or neutral analogy (14:7). Given that musical instruments are explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament as part of temple worship (eg. 1 Chronicles 15:16, 16:42 and 2 Chronicles 5:12-13, 7:6), their silence in the context of new covenant worship is noteworthy.

Of course, if Scripture is silent about something that doesn't automatically mean that Scripture prohibits it. For example, Scripture is silent about church buildings and abortion-on-demand. Yet many Christians today would accept the former but not the latter. Accordingly, we can interpret silence as being permissive or prohibitive. One way to evaluate such silence is to consider whether it is incidental (which implies permission because the point is discretionary or not important) or theologically significant (which suggests prohibition or at least caution).

This leads to a second reason – based on theology. In the context of God's redemptive story, singing *acappella* is more consistent theologically with the worship offered by Christians under the new covenant. In Jesus' discourse with the Samaritan woman, he foretold the day when God's people will worship not on some physical mountain or temple but 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:24, NASV). Paul describes Christians as those who 'worship God by his Spirit' (Philippians 3:2, ESV).

These texts indicate a fundamental contrast in how communal worship is conducted under the old and new covenants. Old covenant temple worship with its animal sacrifices, musical instruments and elaborate garments tend to appeal to our olfactory, aural and visual senses. In contrast, new covenant worship is more spiritual – and thus more true to God's nature. Instead of animal sacrifices, there is Jesus' sacrifice as represented by the Lord's Supper. Instead of incense, there are prayers. Instead of trumpets, cymbals, harps and lyre, there are human voices.

This leads to a third reason for advocating *acappella* singing: church history. Historical descriptions of early church worship (including those by Pliny the Younger, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian) consistently refer to vocal – not instrumental – music in Christian assemblies.³ So much so that centuries later the word *acappella* (from Latin via Italian) refers to unaccompanied singing 'in the manner of the church'.

Interestingly, the famous 4th century church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, offers a reason for preferring *acappella* singing over singing with instruments. In his commentary on Psalm 92:2-3, Eusebius acknowledges the use of instruments like the *psalterion* and *kithara* in the old covenant. But he rejects their use under the new covenant, stating: '*We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living kithara with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument.*'⁴

While church history is not the final umpire on matters of faith, the rejection of musical instruments by early Christian writers cannot be dismissed lightly. After all, instruments were widely available in the Graeco-Roman culture of their day. Instruments were commonly used in pagan temples. Some instruments were portable and could have easily been used in the Christian worship assemblies of house churches. Yet the historical evidence shows early Christians didn't use them.

Instead, the evidence shows that early Christians saw musical instruments as part of the old covenant which had been replaced by the new, or as being too closely connected to the excesses of pagan assemblies, or as being too earthly to reflect the spiritual nature of worship under the new covenant.⁵ For me, the simplicity of unaccompanied singing underscores a more significant Gospel message: that God's people is a Christ-redeemed, Spirit-led community whose counter-cultural ethics and practices are in clear contrast to prevailing social norms.

There is yet a fourth reason for singing *acappella* when Christians assemble: it helps to foster church unity. Surveying two millennia of Christian worship, musical instruments have been a source of rancour more often than not. The use of musical instruments was an issue (albeit relatively minor) in the Great Schism of 1054 when the Eastern / Orthodox church split from the Western / Roman Catholic church. Today, the vast majority of Orthodox churches – with around 300 million adherents – still sing *acappella* in their worship assemblies.⁶

During the 16th century Reformation, John Calvin (and others) rejected instrumental music.⁷ In the 19th century, among Stone-Campbell (or Restoration) Movement churches in America, the introduction of musical instruments was a factor which contributed to a rupturing of fellowship.⁸ In Australia, Churches of Christ did not use instrumental accompaniment in worship until around 1885 – again, not without angst.⁹ In more recent decades, the 'worship wars' within various Protestant

denominations include debate over the type of music and range of instruments used in worship.¹⁰ In contrast to such controversy, few fair-minded Christians would deny the scripturalness or orthodoxy – and, indeed, the purity and grace¹¹ – of singing *acappella*.

It follows, therefore, that singing *acappella* in worship assemblies has much to commend it. It's an ancient practice which is supported by Scripture, biblical theology and church history. It's especially compelling for those of us seeking Christian unity based on restoring the faith and practices of the early church. So, let's sing *acappella* with confidence and also humility – and thus help maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ■

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- 1 In compiling these reasons, I'm indebted to several sources including: Everett Ferguson *et al*, *The Instrumental Music Issue* (Gospel Advocate Co, 1987); John Mark Hicks, 'Why Don't You Have Music in Your Church?' (unpublished paper, 1997); Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (3rd ed, Star Bible Publications, 1999); Allan & Patricia Burke McNicol, 'Musical Preferences Do Matter: Appropriate Music in the Assembly' (2003) 19 *Christian Studies* 43-58; Jeffrey Peterson, 'The Sacrifice of Praise' (2010) 24 *Christian Studies* 43-54; and Bruce McLarty, 'Why Worship Without Instruments?' (December 2012) *Gospel Advocate* 33-35.
- 2 This article focuses on using musical instruments when Christians assemble to worship as a church and not in other contexts. The significance of Christians gathering 'as a church' (1 Corinthians 11:18 NASV) is discussed by Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Eerdmans, 1996) 243.
- 3 For details see: Ferguson (1999). See also: James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 4 Eusebius, *Commentary on Psalms* 92:2-3, quoted in Ferguson, *et al* (1987) 94.
- 5 Clement of Alexandria in various writings mentioned these reasons: McKinnon (1987) 30, 32-33. See also: Gerald Abraham, *The Concise Oxford History of Music* (Oxford University Press, 1979) 39.
- 6 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: New Edition* (2nd ed, Penguin, 1997) 286.
- 7 Calvin commenting on Psalm 33:2 - John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans James Anderson, 6 vols (Eerdmans, 1963) 1:539; as cited by Hicks (1997).
- 8 See the entry on 'Instrumental Music' in Douglas A Foster *et al* (eds), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Eerdmans, 2004) 414-417.
- 9 David Roper, *Voices Crying in the Wilderness* (Restoration Publications, 1979) 239.
- 10 See generally, Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) especially chapters 1 & 5; and Terry W. York, *America's Worship Wars* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).
- 11 For the benefits of *acappella* singing in church assemblies, see: Darryl Tippens, *That's Why We Sing: Reclaiming the Wonder of Congregational Singing* (Leafwood, 2007).

News Camp Barnabas

Camp Barnabas 2015 was held over Easter in Bridport, Tasmania. It was a wonderful few days of fellowship and fun. This is the 19th year for the camp and approximately 70 people attended. Bob & Lynne Marks from the Warringah church (NSW) came down, and Bob presented an excellent series of studies entitled: 'He's Got The Whole World In His Hands.' We also had a number of interstate visitors, which we are so thankful for. Camp Barnabas has always been a family camp, so there was an excellent mixture of young and old.

The aim of camp has been to provide an encouraging environment where brethren and friends from different congregations can gather for just a few days each year, sharing a time of good fellowship. We try to find the balance between organised activities and free time to allow enjoyment of the beautiful environment of Bridport. There was the annual and competitive beach soccer match, a tug of war, volley ball, as well as the quiz night and annual camp concert. A good time was had by all; hope to see you there next year. Contact Greg Wells 0408146748 if you are interested in coming down. ■

Greg Wells, Lindisfarne Church of Christ, Hobart. gk.wells@bigpond.com

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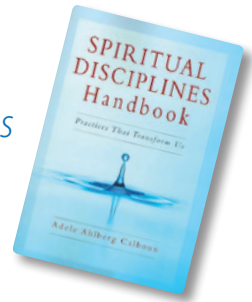




Book Review



Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us
by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (InterVarsity Press, 2005).



Once in a while you come across a book you wished you had known of earlier. The *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* is one such book for me.

Spiritual disciplines, according to Adele Calhoun, are not ends in themselves. They are the means that will bring us to a worshipful life with God. Calhoun sees worship as the main backdrop and foundation of a Christian's life; as she sees it, all life is worship (Romans 12:1-2). The practice of spiritual disciplines transforms us and is an ongoing process of this worshipful life.

As Christians, our ultimate desire is to be like Christ, to be guided by the Holy Spirit and to commune with God. However, along the way, the world's influence creeps in. We're wearied by trials and tribulations. Or we simply lose our first love. So Calhoun urges us to return to that desire. According to her, when there is a gap between our desire and where we are currently at, the intentional practice of the appropriate spiritual discipline(s) can lead to transformation, restoration and renewal. Spiritual disciplines are thus a way of allowing God to fill that gap.

Calhoun uses the acronym 'WORSHIP' as the framework for the book. Each letter points us to an area in our lives that needs to be opened to God's working:

W is for **worshipping** God and translates into practices like acknowledging God the Father, expressing gratitude to and having communion with him. The importance of Sabbath is reinforced.

O is for **opening** myself to God and involves contemplation and journaling toward being teachable, etc.

R is for **relinquishing** the false self through detachment, discernment, submission, etc.

S is for **sharing** myself with others through an accountability partner and being part of a community or covenant group. Spiritual friendships are encouraged.

H is for **hearing** God's Word through Bible study, devotional reading and Scripture memorisation.

I is for **incarnating** the love of Christ through caring for the earth and demonstrating compassion and stewardship, etc.

P is for **praying** as it is expressed through breath prayer, fasting, and undertaking fixed hour prayers, etc.

Calhoun attaches ten appendices which offer help to get us started. Appendix 1 (the Spiritual Health Planner) is great if we are unsure about our desire(s). It gives us an idea of where our soul is oriented and what is lacking. My favourite is Appendix 10 – the seasons, stages and ages of transformation. Calhoun discusses five seasons of the soul: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, and the Seasoned saint. With each season, she deals with the key questions which arise, as well as the primary longings and specific temptations experienced. She also recommends appropriate disciplines to help us along.

In my case, autumn is my current season. I'm in transition between the bounty of summer and the nakedness of winter. In this phase, slowing down and rest is important for me. The emphasis in this season should not be on doing but instead on practising *being in the Lord*. 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10) is an Scripture appropriate for autumn.

What I like about this book:

1. **One size does not fit all** – This book recognises that Christians are different. The spiritual disciplines that it recommends are tailored to Christians of various ages and generations. For a young Christian, the disciplines are a good starting point to allow one's faith to take root. For older Christians, they're a great opportunity to reflect and recalibrate.
2. **You determine your journey** – Calhoun recommends that our journey does not have to begin with Chapter One. We can start from anywhere in the book and work with the discipline that meets our current needs. There are different disciplines but they lead to the same outcome of being closer to God.
3. **Solitude and community** – The discipline of relinquishing (R) our false self requires the practice of solitude. Only we know what falsehood to let go. At the same time, we're encouraged to be part of a community through the disciplines of sharing (S) our lives with others and to incarnate (I) the love of Christ.
4. **There is no right formula** – Calhoun does not advocate a magic formula of spiritual disciplines. There is no right discipline to begin with. There is no right amount of time that we need to spend developing a particular discipline. Instead, she encourages time spent in each discipline to be intentional and without haste. In this way, we are never 'finished' with a discipline. The emphasis is being on our own journey, at our own pace. We are not Christians on a conveyor belt who are being mass produced.
5. **No answer grid provided** – Calhoun does not provide answers to our spiritual dilemmas. Instead, through the reflective questions and spiritual exercises included in the book, we're guided to find the answers ourselves. At the end of each chapter, there's a table summarising the desire and definition of each discipline, the appropriate Scriptures and the recommended practices. The fruit we bear is dependent on us and how much we desire to be with God.

There are also two things I would like to see in a future edition. First, I would change the title of the book to '*Spiritual Disciplines Guidebook*'. Having read the book various times, it has become more of a guide than a mere handbook to me; it is a new-found treasure. Second, I wish it is printed in a pocket size so that I could carry it everywhere I go 24/7! Clearly, these are minor qualms. More importantly, I encourage you to give this book a go. I think you will be blessed by it. ■

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Victorian Autumn Camp

This year was the 40th time disciples from various congregations have gathered in Victoria over the Easter long weekend. We celebrated this milestone with a lunar eclipse above the campfire, and an extra hour on Sunday. This year 66 people attended from Queensland, NSW, ACT, Victoria and Russia.

The kind of people who spend the longest weekend of the year with brethren from near and far are the kind who are greatly encouraging to be with for four days. This camp has built strong and lasting bonds of fellowship between members of different congregations. Stephen Randall first told me about it, and took me along in 1984. Back then two brothers from different congregations organised it, but for the last 12 years my wife, Lesley, and I have run the camp – at Lake Nillahcootie.

The focus of these gatherings has always been God's Word: a programme of lessons from the Scriptures forms the framework around which everything else happens. Those speaking included: Rick Niland, Peter Tickner, Peter Thomson, Rod Poynton, Micah Kirkpatrick, Dale & Bryce Christensen, and Geoff & Jarrod Thomas. Each presented uplifting and challenging talks about a favourite Bible book. Attendees also contributed \$710 to help brethren in Vanuatu who suffered from Cyclone Pam. ■

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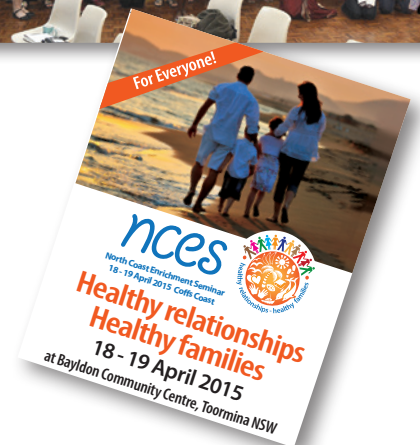


North Coast Enrichment Seminar

'Healthy Relationships, Healthy Families' was the theme for the 2nd North Coast Enrichment Seminar hosted by the Coffs Coast congregation from 17-19 April 2015. The seminar aimed to encourage Christians and families towards a deeper understanding of God's wisdom concerning marriage and raising children. The weekend was wonderfully inspiring to the congregation – indeed, to all 35 people who attended. Several Christians from interstate visited and this made for a time of great fellowship. In the lead-up to the weekend, a community booth was set up in Coffs Harbour advertising the seminar to locals. The weekend kicked off with an Indian-cuisine meal and a devotional by David Carr. This was followed by a 2-day seminar at the Bayldon Community Centre.

Guest speakers included Stephen Wilson and David Payne, who presented thoughtful lessons on healthy spiritual foundations for successful couple relationships and what it means to bless children and empower them to withstand worldly influences. All the presentations were a fantastic reminder of God's unfailing love towards his children and that his character traits – such as faithfulness, integrity, unconditional love and grace – provide the foundation for all healthy relationships, both in marriage and the church. We were blessed by this seminar! ■

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



Interview *Jonathon Atchley*

What do you enjoy the most about teaching?

What I enjoy most is getting to sit down with students one-on-one or in a small group and to walk with them as we try to understand the Scriptures together. As I said earlier, my attraction towards theology was about mutual understanding and 'seeing beyond the veil.' Sometimes this involves speaking with people of differing beliefs, but mostly it just means slowing down in Scripture or through a particular thought. Teaching gives me the opportunity to do this with others, and I am so very thankful for that opportunity.

That's also why I want to encourage others to study the Bible formally. You may think it's a waste of time, but we need people who can actively process their faith and explore new dimensions. This has been our aim at SPBC. Our college motto from 2 Timothy 2:2 says, 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.' We need teachers, not just doers. So if you want to know more, you know where to find us! ■

Interview questions were drafted by Nathan Holyoak, associate editor of InterSections. john.atchley@gmail.com

Interview

Jonathon Atchley



Johnathon Atchley grew up in Perth where he was part of the Malaga Church of Christ before moving in early 2015 to Tauranga, New Zealand. He's now a member of the Otumoetai Church of Christ and lectures at South Pacific Bible College.

Can you describe your experiences growing up in your family and as a member of the church?

My dad is a second-generation member of the Churches of Christ while my mother was baptised the night before their wedding. In contrast, I've seen couples where the husband and wife do not share the same faith. This is a hard road that breaks so many hearts, even while they're still called to love one another (1 Corinthians 7:12). I'm so thankful that our family didn't have to bear this burden.

What made you interested in studying the Bible formally? What are your thoughts about the benefits of a rigorous education in theology?

A year or two before I started my Master of Divinity in Perth, I noticed that I spent more time digging into history and different interpretations than many others seemed to. This made me realise how attracted I was to knowing what others believed and why, and to ask questions about my own understanding. And for those who are serious about wanting to know God, one of the best ways to do so is through rigorous study.

Of course, most of the apostles weren't 'educated' as we understand it today. But they did sit at the feet of the greatest teacher the world has ever known – for three years or more. If that isn't formal education then I don't know what is. That doesn't mean that I think that every Christian leader needs a qualification. I would just beg them to consider how it might test and prepare them for the intricacies and demands of ministry.

How did you find the experience of studying theology? What are the pros and cons of studying – like you did – in a place like Perth Bible College instead of a school associated with non-denominational Churches of Christ?

If I can be honest with this one, I sometimes wonder whether studying at a Church of Christ school would have made it easier for some to approve of my study. It's not as though there are dozens of people standing in the wings judging me because of my inter-denominational college, but there have been enough.

On the bright side, early at PBC I was told that being faced with different interpretations of Scripture means that you'll either have to dig deeper to understand your own view, or you'll have to broaden your horizons in terms of what God has said. That statement has only grown in relevance over the years.



That said, we all tend to be wary of academic theology in general. Sometimes this is actually a healthy thing – having a qualification doesn't necessarily make you the best Christian in the room. But, at other times it can be destructive. We're only hurting the church when we discourage potential leaders from studying theology before jumping into paid ministry.

The fact that theological study is relatively uncommon amongst our fellowship in Australia shows how little we've valued it. Inadvertently or not, we've placed too much doubt on academic theology and whether it has a place in the church. I don't think that this has been an altogether encouraging testimony on our part.

SPBC (South Pacific Bible College), where I'm now teaching, is the only accredited Bible college among non-denominational Churches of Christ in our part of the world. Yet it isn't supported as much as it should be. We need places like this more than we may realise.

Since moving to New Zealand, what first impressions have you gained concerning Churches of Christ there – are there any interesting similarities or differences to Australia?

In many ways New Zealanders are just like us (shocking, I know). They're dealing with a lot of the same issues – like ageing members, inter-congregational friction, future leadership, etc. They also enjoy many of the same privileges that living in a country like ours affords.

Different to Australia though, they have more members who have gone through some kind of theology program. They're also more influenced by American approaches to religion – probably because of all the missionaries they've received and because New Zealand itself is heavily Americanised.

If I could point to any one particular need in New Zealand, it's the desire for direction as well as cohesion between congregations. Much like Australia, they've been struggling with how to tread the line between autonomy and cooperation. Back home we've been making some headway in that department. In New Zealand, the leadership conference last November at Otumoetai Church of Christ showed that Kiwis are wanting to make a change too. It makes me hopeful for the future of the church here.

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