

InterSections



Editorial

Welcome to the May 2014 issue of *InterSections*.

Today, we live in a culture that is generally uninterested in pursuing Christianity. The church, for better or worse, has had to deal with this reality. Often there has been the temptation to depart from biblical practices in a bid to increase human appeal. How should Christians respond to modernist and post-modernist ideas in our day? This issue considers some aspects of this question by using restoration principles to capture both the spirit and teaching of God's Word.

In our *Feature* article, Nathan Holyoak examines what a biblical understanding of sin might look like from God's point of view compared to more subtle definitions offered by today's culture. In our *Food for Thought*, Benny Tabalujan examines the challenge of upholding a biblical perspective of baptism and explores why baptism is at times de-emphasised even among religious folks.

In our *International Letter*, Earl Lavender reflects on the current landscape of the church in America from a historical context, asking the question: are times of great social transition beneficial for the church? In our *Interview* section we spend time with David and Jo Roper – former missionaries to Australia. They reflect on their experiences with churches in Sydney in the 1970's.

In our *Book Review* section Jenny Ancell reviews John Piper's book, *What Jesus Demands from the World*. This book takes a closer look at the meaning of Christ's commands spoken throughout the four gospels. Finally, in our *News* section Barrie Morgan writes about Camp Barnabas in Bridport, Tasmania, while Kim Christensen reports on the Victorian Autumn Lectures held at Lake Nillahcootie and Ray Davison informs us of a new church in Mooroolbark, Melbourne.

We hope you find this issue thought-provoking. Feel free to share it with others you know who may find it of interest. And, as always, we look forward to receiving your feedback.

The InterSections editorial team



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Feature



Restoring a Biblical Understanding of Sin

As Christians, the concept of sin is fundamental to our understanding of the human condition. We recognise ourselves as sinners and a good deal of our Christian walk is committed to removing its influence from our lives and from the world around us. Yet when we look at people around us, many don't seem to think of sin at all. When they do think about sin, it's often regarded as just a label used by religious folk to make them feel guilty about their choices or to control the weak-minded. It's also common to talk about sin flippantly, like indulging in a 'sinful' dessert, or enjoying a weekend away in 'Sin City'. Sin is just not taken seriously. Of course, most people are still concerned with right and wrong but it is usually thought about subjectively, without the same sense of authority or gravity traditionally associated with sin.

It is easy for us to be influenced by these attitudes. We too can sometimes make light of sin and sweep some kinds of wrongdoing under the carpet. We are prone to trying to redefine sin into something more acceptable to us and the world around us.

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Do we take sin as seriously as God does? Our source of information on these matters is the Bible. Let's take a look at what God has to tell us about sin.

Put simply, sin is disregarding and breaking God's law (1 John 3:4). However, there is much more to it than this. The Bible uses many different words to talk about sin. Most commonly we see the Greek *hamartia* which contains the idea of falling short of the mark or missing the way. A compound form of this word is found in the Greek Bible (Septuagint) in Judges 20:16 to describe the idea of missing a target with a stone. Proverbs 19:2 is not found in the Greek Bible but a Hebrew word often used to describe sin is used there to describe taking a wrong path on a journey. In this way, we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). We have chosen the wrong path and failed to meet the standard we're aiming for. A number of words are found in both the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation that give different shades of meaning to sin. There is a word to describe something 'bent, twisted or perverted'. It is not the way it is supposed to be, a pathetic shadow of its intention. Another word indicates acts of rebellion and betrayal; a breaking of our relationship with God and each other (Genesis 50: 17; Amos 2: 4). Other words convey the idea of vanity, sorrow and guilt brought about by sin.

Sin began when Adam and Eve became discontent with following God, who had walked with them in the garden. Instead, they listened to the serpent and his deceptions (Genesis 3:1-6). They chose to be their own masters, rejecting God and his instruction. We see how this rebellion destroyed their relationship with God as they hid from him. It also diminished their relationship with each other. They covered themselves and began the blame game over their predicament (Genesis 3:7-13). Their choice to eat the fruit didn't end the way they imagined. What they thought would elevate them ended up bringing them low. Through this one act all creation was cursed and now bears the consequences of their sin (Genesis 3:14-19).

When we put all these things together, we see a picture of sin in all its ugliness. Sin is an upheaval of the natural order: things are not as they should be. It is the created telling the Creator, 'No, I'm in charge'; the clay telling the

potter how it should be made (Isaiah 45:9-11). We were created in the image of a perfect and holy God, created to be like Jesus (Romans 8:29). When we sin we're not just breaking arbitrary rules but rebelling against God's wise creation and loving purpose. Sin is taking what God created for good and twisting it into something corrupt.

This is the kind of futile thinking which Paul says characterises the sinner (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17). We think we know better but are wildly mistaken. Those things we do when we stray outside God's will are futile and seldom good for us. Like Adam and Eve, they don't achieve for us what we are seeking. This leads to an empty life which, as Christians, we have left behind (1 Peter 1:18). Paul understood this, which is why he considered everything associated with his former sinful life to be rubbish (Philippians 3:7-9). It was useless to him and gave him nothing in comparison to what was to be gained by knowing Christ and the life God had intended for him.

We need to recognise that sin is a lifestyle. It's more than just disobeying some rules. Paul tells us that anything we do that is not from faith, is sin (Romans 14:23). He's talking here specifically about a Christian whose conscience instructs them to avoid a certain food, but they eat it anyway. Even though there is nothing wrong with eating the food, they have broken their conviction before God (14:22); and so they sinned. They have acted not out of faith or respect for God, but out of convenience and weakness. What Paul is saying is that when we fail to act out of faith, we sin because we're ignoring God's place in our lives. Sin is about more than just our actions; it's about our attitude towards God as we live our lives - our relationship with him. This is something that plays out daily. Are we living by faith, trusting God in everything, in step with the Spirit within us? Or are we trusting in ourselves and denying God's presence and authority? It's from this attitude that all our behaviour springs - whether sinful or righteous.

The most important thing we can learn about sin is contained in this statement: God sent Jesus to die for our sins (John 3:16-17). Sin is so serious to God that he gave his only Son as a sacrifice to solve the problem of our sin. Because of this, all who put their faith in Jesus can have the stain of sin removed. We are no longer slaves to sin and its futility (Romans 6:6-23). We can live as God's obedient children and enjoy the abundant life he always intended for us (John 10:10). ■

Nathan Holyoak is associate editor of InterSections and is a part of The Point Church in Brisbane. nathan@helmsdeep.org

InterSections

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Editor: Benny Tabalujan

Managing Editor: Jenny Ancell

Associate Editor: Nathan Holyoak

Board of Advisors: Dale Hartman, Allan McNicol, David Mowday

Enquiries: Klesis Institute, PO Box 700, Glen Waverley, Victoria 3150, Australia.

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Email: info@klesis.com.au **Fax:** +61 3 8677 9575

International Letter

Best Days Yet Ahead?

Most cultural prognosticators suggest dark days are ahead for the Christian faith in the developed countries. In the USA, church attendance continues to fall precipitously in a majority of churches. While some mega-churches continue to grow, most of their growth is the result of families leaving smaller churches. True conversion growth is startlingly low. The word often used is 'non-sustainable' growth. Some say the Christian faith will be a historical memory within a few generations if tendencies do not change.

Studies of non-denominational Churches of Christ have revealed similar findings. Membership is falling, the average age of members is rising and prospects for new growth are not promising. Evangelism is more and more challenging in a clearly post-Christian culture like America. The church has been dismissed as irrelevant at best, a barrier to societal progress at worst. Postmodernity has postulated that we are unable to appeal to any form of absolute truths. Metanarratives – grand narratives or stories – which attempt to give direction to our world, including religions as well as philosophies such as materialism, are considered harmful and even violently oppressive. So we find ourselves in a post-Christian, post-propositional, post-modern world. What are we to do?

What I say next may surprise you. I think this is all very good news! Today we are in a time of significant historical transition. It doesn't happen often. Let me remind you of a couple of other such times. About two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire was strong, but beginning to show signs of weakness. Jews were overly taxed, oppressed, chafing for freedom. It was a time of great societal transition. Rome seemed to be the centre of power of the developed world, but in the eternal wisdom of God - the Word became flesh in Bethlehem of Judea. Who would have thought that the eternal kingdom of God would break into human history in such a quiet way? Yet Jesus changed the world.

Let me take you to another historical period. Life was difficult for non-conforming Christians in 18th century Europe. The Enlightenment was in full bloom, but religious oppression was still strong in Europe. A new world had been discovered – America. Opportunities for a new beginning in a new world were abundant. Some even suggested this new land was similar to Eden. Various circuit riders (preachers who rode horses from town to town on the American frontier) began to envision a new age of Christian unity. It was a time of great social transition. The Restoration Movement was born on the American frontier.

Times of great social change provide unique opportunities for spiritual renewal. Rather than bemoaning the great changes occurring around us, we need to see the amazing opportunities they represent. Because Churches of Christ are not encumbered by denominational hierarchical structures, we can be nimble as society changes around us. Our basic convictions remain unscathed. We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God and we believe the body of

Christ desperately needs to be restored in today's world. Cultural challenges should force us back into the Word, calling us to renew our commitment to God's calling to be faithful, set apart for God's purposes.

Because we live in a post-propositional era, we are forced to consider whether our propositional approach to teaching (eg. teaching 'acts of worship' and 'steps to salvation') is ideally suited to reflect today the Good News of the kingdom of God. Similarly, the American Restoration Movement was a child of the rational thinking of the Enlightenment. It focused on our ability to understand and interpret. However, it was weak in acknowledging the active participation of God through the Spirit in the lives of believers.

The challenge of postmodernity has given us the opportunity to build on what we have learned from former generations of believers, enhancing that belief (not leaving it!) with a deeper understanding of the great narrative presented in the Bible. In place of dispensations that divided the Bible into discrete stories, we now understand the cohesive nature of the entirety of the story – from creation to new creation. We take the propositions discovered by past generations and clothe them in the redemptive story of God. Now those truths have even deeper meaning in the context of a life-changing story.

Rather than focusing on only restoring the organisational form of churches in the first century, we understand the pattern called for in Scripture is for the life of Jesus Christ to be reflected in our lives. The 'church of Christ' or 'body of Christ' is a marvelous, biblical name for a spiritual community. As a movement, many of our churches are called 'Church of Christ'. My challenge is for us to live up to our name – with renewed emphasis on 'Christ'. We are the church of Christ if we, his gathered people, embody his life.

My recent experience in missions in various parts of the world reinforces my hope that the best days are yet to come for the Restoration Movement. I believe this to be true in America as it is in Australia. In this time of confusion and spiritual vertigo, let's go back to Scriptures, revisiting the timeless truths of the Good News of God's kingdom on earth. There is no such thing as secular history; it is all His-Story. God is sovereign. Jesus Christ reigns. We are God's faithful children – my challenge today is to live up to that calling.

God's ultimate form of communication has not changed. When God chose to reveal the fullness of divine nature, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. We appropriately refer to this as the incarnation. But we cannot allow the incarnation to be an event isolated in history. As God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends us as the continuation of that incarnation. We know the best days are ahead because Jesus Christ is coming back. If we live in that reality, Churches of Christ have much to look forward to and much to do for him until he comes! ■



Earl Lavender is a professor in the College of Bible and Ministry, Lipscomb University, Nashville, USA. He has made several teaching and preaching trips to Australia. earl.lavender@lipscomb.edu



Food for Thought

Restoring Biblical Baptism



In a previous article titled 'The Restoration Idea' (*InterSections*, May 2013), I discussed why the notion of restoring New Testament faith and practice today is both biblical and desirable. In pursuit of the restoration goal, we come across many questions. This article focuses on one such question: the challenge of restoring biblical baptism.

Bible: what do the Scriptures say?

A quick look into the NT shows that there is much said about baptism. In one of the clearest statements in the Gospels, Jesus instructs his apostles to 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19-20). The thrust of this text is that the process of making disciples involves the essential acts of baptising and teaching.

In the Gospel of John, we read of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus where Jesus asserts that no one can see God's kingdom unless one is born again – that is, 'born of water and Spirit' (John 3:3-5). Although used much as a baptismal text in the second century, some today question whether the 'water' in this passage refers to baptism. However, a plain reading of the text – especially given the references to water baptism later in that passage (3:22-4:2) – indicates that entry to God's kingdom is through the work of the Holy Spirit who facilitates a spiritual rebirth when a person is baptised in water.

Elsewhere in the NT epistles, we read of Paul's understanding of baptism as the moment when a person puts on Christ (Galatians 3:26-29). He equates immersion into water with the death and burial of Christ so that thereafter the person baptised is able to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4). He refers to baptism as a key unifying point of Christian faith (Ephesians 4:5). He also points out that baptism is a work of God, not our work (Colossians 2:11-13).

In Acts, Luke records the preaching of Peter who calls on the Jews at Pentecost to be baptised for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Throughout Acts, various individuals are described as hearing the gospel and being baptised. These accounts all underscore the importance of baptism in the NT.¹

Why is baptism de-emphasised today?

In the face of the biblical teaching on baptism, why is there widespread neglect of baptism today? The reasons are probably manifold. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in many denominations there's a tendency to view baptism as unimportant or optional. For example, in many evangelical churches, the emphasis is for prospective converts to say the 'Sinner's Prayer' – essentially, a prayer of repentance, forgiveness and a desire for a personal relationship with Jesus – instead of being baptised. In many of these churches the act of conversion is completed by uttering the Sinner's Prayer rather than engaging in the action of immersion in water in the triune name to signify they now live under the claim of Jesus (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). This has led to questions as to whether the Sinner's Prayer is biblical in the first place.²

Personally, I have a hunch that there may be a deeper reason why baptism is often de-emphasised today. At times, when I point out the importance of baptism to someone, I have received the following response: 'Are you suggesting that all those good people – including so and so – who are not baptised are going to hell?' The underlying reasoning for this response appears to be this: surely a good God will not damn a generally good person (especially if so and so is a volunteer nurse in Africa) simply because that person is not baptised? Surely God will not damn all the good people in other churches just because they're not baptised? If my hunch is correct, then the resistance against baptism is not really because of a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on baptism. It's more fundamental than that: it seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on God. If so, this is an example of erroneous theology causing erroneous behaviour.

Upholding a biblical view of baptism – and of God

If the above is correct, then one way to reduce the resistance to baptism is to go back to the Bible and explain more carefully God's will in respect of our salvation. In doing so, we can emphasise three points. First, we know that God's desire is that all humanity believe in Jesus and love him because in him lies our salvation (John 3:16). Second, those who love God are expected to obey his commandments (John 14:15). Uttering empty words unsupported by deeds of obedience is inadequate (Matthew 7:21). Third, one of God's commandments is to be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20).

In asserting that those who come to God should be baptised, we should stress that we make no judgment on those who are not baptised. Judgment in this instance is God's prerogative, not ours. In fact, Jesus says that it's ultimately his words which will judge us all (John 12:46-50). Instead, as Christians who have heard the gospel and obeyed it, our role is to share that same gospel humbly with others as accurately as possible. That means giving the strong emphasis on baptism as the Scriptures do. That means encouraging people to be baptised if they have not done so. After all, if a person loves Jesus and wants to obey him, what's stopping their obedience to Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19-20?

Conclusion

The impact of erroneous theology on questions like baptism isn't new. Several decades ago, a similar situation was faced by Batsell Baxter, a prominent preacher among Churches of Christ in the United States. Baxter was invited to speak on the topic, 'Will the Good People of All Churches Be Saved?'³ As part of his message, Baxter gave two responses to that question. First, he said that when people asked this question of him, they're asking the wrong *person*. Only God could answer it. Second, he said they're asking the wrong *question*. Instead of the question they're asking, they should be asking this more important question: how can all humanity be members of the church which Jesus established?

As a Christian seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice (including baptism) and an end to the confusion of contemporary denominationalism, I can only concur with Baxter. ■

1. Not surprisingly, baptismal practice and theology in the first few centuries after Christ demonstrate the huge importance placed by early Christians on baptism: see generally Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
2. For different views on the scripturalness of the Sinner's Prayer, see: Wayne Jackson, 'The Sinner's Prayer – Is It Biblical?' (<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/368-the-sinners-prayer-is-it-biblical> accessed 22 April 2014); Tony Miano & Matt Slick, 'Is the Sinner's Prayer Biblical or Not?' (<http://carm.org/sinners-prayer> accessed 22 April 2014); and David Platt, 'What I Really Think About the 'Sinner's Prayer,' Conversion, Mission, and Deception' (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/juneweb-only/david-platt-sinners-prayer.html> accessed 22 April 2014).
3. Batsell Barrett Baxter, 'Will the Good People of all Churches be Saved?' in *Family of God: A Study of the New Testament Church* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co, 1980), 154-159.

Benny Tabalujan is editor of InterSections and is part of the Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne. b.tabalujan@gmail.com

News

Camp Barnabas 2014

Camp Barnabas is held every Easter long weekend at the northern seaside town of Bridport about one hour's drive from Launceston, Tasmania.

This year Graham Wall from the West Heidelberg congregation in Melbourne presented a series on the Mission Focused Church. This is always a poignant message as it is so easy to become inward focused on ourselves, overlooking our purpose and responsibility of making disciples 'as we go'.

This year's camp had a very strong contingent of young people from toddlers to young adults. Many brought their friends which was a great encouragement to all.

The camp is specifically structured around a balance of spiritual instruction, singing sessions and group sports activities on site and at the beach. This year's highlights were the great lessons, volleyball tournaments, beach tug-of-war and the skit night which brought out the performer in many. A big thank you goes to Greg and Kate Wells who coordinated this year's event.

If you wish to be part of the fun next year at Camp Barnabas, consider booking your flights or Bass Strait ferry to Tassie early to catch the cheaper fares. Why not hang around for a few days afterwards to explore Tassie? Contact Greg Wells or Barrie Morgan at the Lindisfarne congregation in Hobart for further details. ■

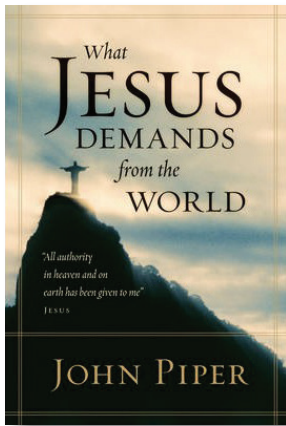
Barrie Morgan, Lindisfarne Church of Christ, Hobart. barrie.morgan1@gmail.com

Victorian Autumn Camp 2014

For the 39th time, Christians got together in Victoria over the Easter long weekend to encourage one another, worship, learn and enjoy one another's company at the annual Victorian Autumn Camp. In all, 85 people attended, representing 14 different congregations from 4 states (including the ACT). The lessons were on the theme 'What Does the Bible Say About Work, Rest and Play?'



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Book Review

John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*
(Crossway, 2006)

John Piper's *What Jesus Demands from the World* is a book that can be best described as a serious examination of the commands spoken by Jesus throughout the four Gospels. Piper, a well-known Baptist minister and theologian, took five months ministerial leave to reflect and write on the meaning and motivation of Jesus' commands and their connection to his person and work. Piper does not apologise for the confronting title of the book. Nor does he try to soften the challenging commands that Jesus requests of any true disciple.

His purpose is to examine carefully the meaning of these commands and explain their significance to a believer's life and faith. From this stance, the book is a solemn reminder of the challenges a believer signs up for when deciding to follow Christ.

The book can easily be used as a study guide as the 50 chapters cover a comprehensive list of Christ's commands and their interpretations. Some of these include: the requirement to trust completely (as opposed to being anxious); the necessity of practising forgiveness; the importance of striving to enter through the narrow door; the command to love and pray for our enemies and our need for supreme allegiance to Jesus. These commands, amongst others, are enlarged upon over several chapters where Piper extrapolates their contextual meaning and significance.

Whilst I find the number of commands dealt with in this book quite rigorous, Piper's insight into attitudes which Jesus commands us to display is thought provoking and there are hidden gems found throughout the book. For example, he considers the attitude of joy. Christians can leap for joy when they experience hate and reviling on account of Jesus's name – in fact we are commanded to rejoice on that day, realising that our reward is great (Luke 6:23). Piper explains that the joy here is not superficial but is a type of attitude that lives with suffering and which eventually will outlast that suffering. Joy, he explains, is sustained through fellowship with Jesus and has a continual mindset which glorifies God.

The author devotes several chapters to commands which a disciple may find difficult: loving and praying for our enemies; doing good to those who hate you; praying with perseverance; and not being anxious about the threats of man. His insights and reflections shed light on these commands, offering the reader many opportunities for self-examination. A sampling of his reflections:

- On loving our enemy: 'But a heart that does not aim at our enemy's eternal joy in Jesus is not the full-orbed, robust love that Jesus demands.' (p 227)
- On praying persistently: 'The point is not to finally break God's resistance but to discover, by patient prayer, God's wisdom as to the way and time the prayer should be answered.' (p 108)

It is encouraging to note that Piper approaches baptism and the remembrance of the Lord through the Supper as they are simply stated in the four Gospels, reinforcing the fact that they are Christ's commands. However, in my opinion, the fullness of their doctrinal importance is lacking from his treatment of these two commands. Also, his beliefs on marriage and divorce may be controversial and his reasoning for what some might describe as a rigid approach appears to be related to his understanding of the contextual meaning of Matthew 5:32, 19:9. Despite this, I was impressed by Piper's presentation on the sacredness of the marriage bond and its glorious spiritual portrayal of God's covenant with his people.

I think this book is best read in a devotional style - slowly pondering the spiritual commands which Jesus encourages us to pursue. Most of all, Piper's book helped me appreciate some of the lofty traits of Jesus: his utmost loyalty to the Father, his unconquerable joy and goodwill, his indifference to public scrutiny and his meekness and lowliness of heart. Piper succeeds in meeting his aim as he explains Jesus, his work and how it reveals the glory of God. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to contemplate Jesus and his glorious nature. ■

Jenny Ancell is part of the Coffs Coast Church of Christ, Coffs Harbour, NSW, and managing editor of InterSections. jenancell@optusnet.com.au

News continued Victorian Autumn Camp 2014



Speakers from four congregations taught about work and rest as gifts of God, the kind of relationships we should have with our employers, and challenged us to think about how we behave during our leisure time and whether or not it glorified God.

The traditional Under-30s v Over-30s soccer match was held on the first afternoon, with the young ones suffering a narrow defeat. They picked themselves up in the cricket match the following day, with children as young as three bringing the youngsters to a well-deserved victory. (Or so I'm told. I was busy sipping a latte and enjoying a vanilla slice in town with the rest of the ladies – another camp tradition.)

After a weekend full of fine food, fellowship, flying foxes, friendships and Easter Egg hunting (not an 'f', but too important to exclude), camp wrapped up on Monday with a time of prayer and singing, an early lunch, lots of hugs and a search for two missing five-year-olds (who were found safe and wondering what all the fuss was about). What a great weekend! ■

Kim Christensen, Southeast Church of Christ. kimberleyraening@gmail.com



Mooroolbark church

A new house church has begun in the Melbourne outer eastern suburb of Mooroolbark, Victoria. Because of the lack of representation of the Lord's church in this area, a few Christians for quite a long time have been thinking of starting a congregation closer to where they live in this locality. Finally a decision was made.

How was this move to take place? It was decided a gradual shift would make less impact. With the blessings of the congregation at West Heidelberg (a suburb in the north of Melbourne) where a few of us were, we started. For a period of time we met at Mooroolbark for one Sunday in the month. That graduated to two Sundays in the month; then to every Sunday.

We have been blessed by God for our labours. Firstly David, Kate and Sam Adkins joined us (they live just round the corner). The group also includes Clyde Peters,

along with Jerry Hauck, Helen Van Delft, and Sue and me. So far, we have had a great start with eight members.

To date God has added one precious soul, Carol. There have also been eight Bible correspondence courses, 11 replies from an advert in a paper, 13 replies from letterboxing (we letterboxed just over 11,000 homes in our area), and we have had 13 visitors.

Things in the planning stage include a spot on a local radio station and a market stall in various local areas. God is good and great! ■



Ray Davison raydave@optusnet.com.au

Interview continued

When did you leave Australia to return to the US? To what extent, if any, does Australia remain a part of your life and ministry today?

We worked in Australia from January 1968–November 1977. After returning to America, we made two trips back to Australia: in 1985 and 1991. It had been our intention to return at regular intervals but then our children began working in other areas of the world and it seemed important to support their efforts. But Australia remains in our thoughts and prayers. We get regular reports from several individuals there and Dale Hartman brings us up to date when he returns from his annual visit.

Now that you've retired after a lifetime of church ministry, what advice would you give to budding missionaries, church planters, preachers, fulltime church workers – and their spouses? What other parting comments would you like to share with InterSections readers?

Make that 'semi-retired.' I still write for *Truth for Today* and preach and teach as I have opportunity. What advice would I give? Forget about following trends and concentrate on following Jesus and his word. When I taught Restoration History, I suggested that perhaps the Lord made each congregation independent (ie. have local autonomy) so that no matter what happens to the broader Restoration Movement, any individual congregation can remain faithful. Make a solemn vow that, no matter what happens, you and those you influence will remain true to The Book. ■

David & Jo Roper are now part of the Eastside Church of Christ in Midwest City, Oklahoma, USA. The Eastside church has a decades-long association with mission work in Australia. macroper@sbcglobal.net

Interview *David & Jo Roper*



Could you tell us a little about yourselves and how you ended up serving as missionaries in Sydney in the 1970s?

When I was a student at Abilene Christian College, mission fever was running high. I have no gift for languages so I figured I should go where English was spoken. While preaching in Oklahoma, I made mission trips to the northern states of the US and to Canada, but decided those locales were not a good fit. In 1967, my brother Coy and I went on a mission trip to Perth, with a stopover in Sydney. We were impressed by the openness and friendliness of Australians and made the decision to move Down Under. It was not long before our parents decided to come with us.

What was Sydney – and Australia – like when you were here? What struck you as the key similarities and differences with the US at that time? For Jo: what was it like to be a missionary wife for you?

When we arrived in Australia, the only way to describe my feelings is 'overwhelmed'. But other feelings were mixed in. Australia was enough like Oklahoma that we could immediately begin to work but different enough that for a long time I consistently felt off-balance. Many American workers loved the laid-back 'she'll-be-right' attitude of some Australians, but for those of us used to fixed agendas and strict schedules, this was a source of frustration. Regarding Jo's role, she basically did what she had done as a preacher's wife in Oklahoma. Her biggest challenge was the challenge faced by all of us: a redefining of who she was. She was no longer 'the preacher's wife'. She was a member of a team: Ray & Mary Margaret Fullerton, Dave H. & Lillian Roper (Coy's and my parents), Ron & Faye Durham, Coy & Charlotte Roper, myself and Jo, together with all our children.

You raised a young family while in Australia. What do you think was the experience like for your children? How has that Australian sojourn impacted their lives subsequently?

Two of our daughters are quick adjusters like their mother. As far as I could tell, they had a minimum of problems with their new environment. Our other daughter is like her father—slower to adjust. I think the move to Australia was hardest on her. I should note that our most effective 'evangelists' were the children of our team. They brought their friends to Bible classes, church services and other activities. A number of those young people are now leaders in the church in Australia. An unanticipated result of raising our girls in Australia is that it made them citizens of the world instead of individuals whose allegiance is to one nation. In addition to Australia, they have lived and worked in Japan, Romania and Great Britain.

You both worked primarily with the Macquarie Church of Christ in Sydney. What challenges did you encounter as you sought to share the Gospel and establish a congregation of God's people there? And how did God manifest his work in all this?

When our team first came to Australia, our primary contribution to the Lord's cause was encouraging the small churches in and around Sydney, especially the house churches. It took longer to get a foothold in the Ryde/Macquarie area. One of our challenges was that people were hesitant to align themselves with a group of foreigners who



(from their viewpoint) might be gone tomorrow. It is hard to express how thankful we were when the Lord blessed our efforts with the first baptisms.

A key work of the congregation then (and now) is the Macquarie School of Bible Studies (or Macquarie School of Preaching when it was first set up). What was your role with MSOBS and what prompted its establishment?

Before Coy and I committed to come to Australia, plans were already in place to establish a Bible training school. After the initial attempt to start the school failed, Coy refused to believe that Australia was not ready for such a program. He travelled throughout the nation, informing congregations and recruiting students. After the school reopened, Coy worked full-time with the school while I worked part-time. Coy and I had favourite classes that we taught but we also taught any and all subjects that were part of the required curriculum when there was no one else to teach them.

With the benefit of hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently in terms of your ministry in Sydney – and why?

I feel confident that on occasions I could have made better decisions and could have done things better — but nothing comes to mind. As far as I know, everyone on our team always did the best he or she could. You would probably get a more definitive answer to this question from the Australians who worked with us.

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