



An Australian
journal for
Christian
encounter &
encouragement

February 2026



Church Scene 1

2024 Church Survey

Feature 3

The Sluggard in a Busy World

Food for Thought 4

The Cost of Laziness

Race Finishers 5

Dennis Vander Kraats

News 6

Elders Appointed, VIC
Camp Challenge, NSW
Kingdom Connect

Puzzling Passages 8

Don't Judge?

Editorial

Welcome to the February 2026 Issue of *InterSections*.

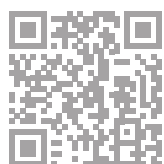
Our August issue last year focused on the virtue of courage, but we thought it would be interesting this time to consider one of the vices. Of all the vices perhaps sloth, or laziness, is particularly pertinent in our modern age. Technology and entertainment takes up so much of our time, yet we've never felt busier. As a result we often excuse laziness as nothing too serious – one of those sins we can safely ignore in ourselves while condemning in others. We'd do well to think seriously about how to wisely use the time God has given us, whether in work, rest, or play.

In our *Feature*, Dale Christensen looks at the sluggard in the book of Proverbs and asks what that can teach us even in our busy lives. Nathan Holyoak offers some *Food for Thought* reflecting on what laziness really costs us from a spiritual point of view.

Benny Tabalujan helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he said 'do not judge' in another installment of our *Puzzling Passages* series. In *Race Finishers*, Paul Tyers looks back on the encouraging life of Dennis Vander Kraats, a member of the Malaga Church of Christ in Perth who passed away recently. In our *ChurchScene* Theophilus Gyau looks at the results from the latest survey of non-denominational churches in Australia to see what has changed over the last six years.

In our *News*, we hear about the latest Camp Challenge in NSW, and the recent appointment of elders at the Heidelberg West Church of Christ in VIC. There's also a note about the Facebook page *Kingdom Connect* where churches can share news about church activities and events, and connect.

May this issue be an encouragement as we all seek to give our best in God's kingdom.
The *InterSections* team.



ChurchScene 2024 Church Survey

The 2024 Survey of Non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia is now freely available on the Klesis Institute website (www.klesis.com.au/surveys).

Background

From 1984 to 2001, Stephen Randall of the Canberra Church of Christ conducted six surveys. The next four surveys ending 2019 were conducted by Alan Rowley, with the latest undertaken by Theophilus Gyau on behalf of Klesis. Peter Gray of Southern Pacific Christian Research has undertaken the analysis of each survey on a voluntary basis, a service we greatly appreciate.

The surveys ask simple questions of each congregation: the number of members, average Sunday attendance, and the number of baptisms over the previous 12 months. The figures relate to the month of October in the year of the survey.

There will be an online information session to discuss this survey on Sunday 1 March, 7pm (AEDT). For more information go to klesis.com.au/surveys

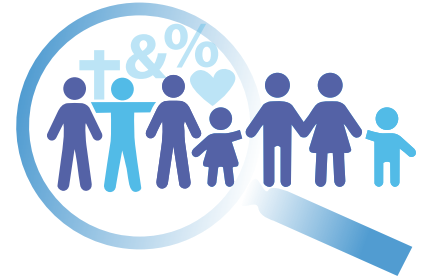
Since the 2006 survey, churches are also given the opportunity to update their church details to be included in the Directory of non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia. The Directory is also published on the Klesis website and is updated throughout the year.

What's different in 2024?

In contrast to earlier survey reports, which were structured around two primary sections, the 2024 report adopts a four-part framework. It begins with a comprehensive overview of the 2024 survey findings, examining data on churches, membership, attendance, and baptisms. This is followed by an analysis of the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2024 results, situating the Australian findings within the broader experience of Christian communities and drawing comparative insights from non-denominational Churches of Christ in the United States. The third section assesses changes since the 2019 survey, highlighting patterns of development and identifying areas of most significant change. The report concludes with an examination of longer-term trends from 1984 to 2024 in the post-pandemic context, tracing shifts in the number of churches, membership levels, and average weekly attendance, and evaluating how the 2024 results relate to those of previous surveys.

Basic Facts

The survey covered 75 churches, which together had an estimated total membership of 1,685 people. Average Sunday attendance across these congregations was 1,972, indicating participation beyond formal membership. Over the previous 12 months, the churches reported a combined total of 86 baptisms. On average, each church had approximately 22.5 members and a mean Sunday attendance of about 26.2 people.



In the table below are the figures for 2024, compared with data from the past 40 years:

	1984	1990	2001	2010	2019	2024
Churches	65	76	78	78	81	75
Members	1,926	1,781	1,842	1,956	1,906	1,685
Attendance	2,502	2,439	2,308	2,394	2,272	1,972
Average Membership	30	23	24	25	24	22
Average Attendance	38	32	30	31	28	26

Source: Australian Church Surveys (1984, 1990, 2001, 2010, 2019 and 2024)

Some noticeable trends over the four-decade period (1984–2024):

Churches

- Except for the first survey (1984), the number of churches in Australia has been in the range of 72 to 81 congregations.
- From 1992 to 2019, the number of churches has hovered around 78 to 81 (except for the dip to 73 in 2006).
- Following the drop in 2006, the number of churches rebounded to 78 in 2010.

Members

Across the first thirty-five years of surveying, membership numbers generally ranged between 1,780 and 2,100, before declining to 1,685 in the post-pandemic 2024 survey. Analysis of the 12 surveys suggests four broad phases of membership change: an initial growth period from 1984 to 1988, relative stability with modest decline from 1990 to 2006, renewed growth from 2010 to 2019, and a post-pandemic contraction evident in 2024. Membership rose from 1,926 in 1984 to a peak of just over 2,090 by 1988, then fell to slightly above 1,780 in 1990 and remained in the low-to-mid 1,800s through to 2006. A subsequent increase occurred between 2010 and 2013, when membership climbed into the low-to-mid 1,900s.

Changes Since the 2019 Survey

Between 2019 and 2024, the surveyed churches experienced a noticeable contraction in membership and participation. Total membership declined from 1,906 to 1,685, representing a reduction of 221 members (12%), while average Sunday attendance decreased from 2,272 to 1,974, a decline of 298 attendees (13%). Over the same period, the number of churches participating in the survey fell from 81 to 75, reflecting a net loss of six congregations (12%). In contrast to these downward trends, the number of baptisms recorded in the survey years increased marginally from 83 to 86, indicating a modest rise of 3 baptisms (4%).

Conclusion

The 2024 survey has provided additional data and insights for everyone interested in non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia. The survey also raises important questions worthy of further conversation and gives a vivid picture of the state of the church following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, we are very grateful to all the congregations who provided data for the 2024 survey to be completed. May God help us to use this information to further his kingdom. ◇

Married to Maame, Theo Gyau works in finance and administration and is also studying Bible and ministry. Theo and Maame are members of the Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne.
theopreach@gmail.com



The Sluggard in a Busy World

One of the defining aspects of modern life is busyness. Our lives are jam-packed with work, school, entertainment, extra-curriculars, groceries, and so on. The spiritual dangers of these demands on our attention have often been noted: 'If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy.' So what profit can a hyper-busy Christian draw from scripture's repeated warnings against laziness?

'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.' (Proverbs 6:6)



As I sit here writing, I have split my screen between Microsoft Word and the book of Proverbs. But in the background I also have Kayo open (the Melbourne derby in the Big Bash), Disney+ (an almost finished TV series), the ABC news website, a blood donation booking page, and a car sales website (we're in the market for a people mover), and so much more. If I pick up my phone there are podcasts (so many podcasts!), music streaming, and WhatsApp. There's a timer so I don't forget the burrito in the oven. There's a notification reminding me to buy petrol soon. There's a text from my wife asking if I took the TimTams to work (yes).

Of course, I'm not doing all this at once. But it's there, crouching at the door, waiting for me to lose focus on the task at hand. While I tussle with sentence construction it's so easy to just switch to one of these other tasks.

The biblical injunction to consider the ant commends her industriousness and initiative: *'Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.'* Sitting here, multitasking, certainly feels industrious. After all, we do need to buy a car, and I do need to check that burrito. And yet at the end of the day I feel like the sluggard in Proverbs 26:14: *'As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard turn on his bed.'* A lot of restless movement, but not a lot of productive labour.

This is not meant to be a self-help article about focused work or efficiency. Instead, I want to draw your attention to the ways in which the Proverbial admonition of the sluggard is surprisingly relevant to the over-busy and ever-distracted. In fact, it may be helpful to think of laziness as one of a family of traits including listlessness, boredom, and apathy. The archaic term *acedia* gathers these characteristics together under one umbrella.

The sluggard says *'There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!'* (Proverbs 22:13). The man of *acedia* is never short of justifications for habitual unproductivity. And yet his lack of a fruitful harvest doesn't mean he's done nothing; it can take the form of half a dozen projects started but not finished: *'The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, but will not even bring it back to his mouth.'* (Proverbs 19:24)

Proverbs has several reminders about the lazy man lacking food. Most of these criticise the sluggard's indolence at a time when the diligent man has put in hard work: *'The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing.'* (Proverbs 20:4) But one parallel verse is much more direct: *'He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues worthless things lacks sense.'* (Proverbs 12:11) The one consumed in worthless pursuits gets just as much plowing done as the sluggard on his bed.

To take one example, most of us wish we would read scripture more than we currently do. Our spiritual sustenance comes from time in God's word (1 Peter 2:2), yet often the reading of scripture gets crammed into the margins of the day, if not shelved altogether. There aren't enough hours in the day – yet if we tallied the time spent scrolling social media or watching TV, we'd find there's time. Our laziness doesn't take the form of complete inactivity, but rather distraction, consumption, and the pursuit of 'worthless things'.

Heed the warning of the Proverbs against laziness – it's not just for the sleepyheads, but the busy, distracted believers too. ◇

Dale Christensen works in scientific research. He and his wife, Gina, and their children are part of the Southeast Church of Christ in Melbourne. dale-c@klesis.com.au



InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, encourage, and unite Christians in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. The editors are responsible for selecting material for publication, but each article reflects the views of its author(s). Advertisements in *InterSections* are broadly consistent with the ethos and goals of the journal; however, they do not necessarily constitute endorsement by the journal. *InterSections* is published by Klesis Limited (© Klesis Limited, 2026). Copyright permission is given to anyone wishing to reproduce an individual article for non-commercial purposes, as long as due attribution is given to the author and *InterSections*. Klesis Limited (ACN 688366896 ABN 50 688 366 896).

Founding Editor: Warren Holyoak (2009-2011)
Editor: Nathan Holyoak
Associate Editors: Theo Gyau, Dale Christensen
Board of Advisors: Dale Hartman, Allan McNicol, David Mowday
Editorial Assistants: Pauline Holyoak, Stephanie Klempfner
Enquiries: klesis@klesis.com.au
Art & Design: Gekko Graphics / Heather M. Cox
Publisher: Klesis Limited intersections.com.au
Email: intersections@klesis.com.au

To subscribe: • PDF format: email to info@intersections.com.au & request to be placed on the *InterSections* mailing list. Provide us with your name, mailing address, phone & email.
• Printed format: write to *InterSections*, PO Box 700, Glen Waverley, Victoria 3150, Australia, providing your name and address and cheque payment to Klesis Limited for AUD\$31.90 (per year for 4 issues). You may also use the on-line *InterSections* subscription form, available from intersections.com.au

The Cost of Laziness and Distraction

It's never been easier to become distracted. Our smartphones and computers put the world at our fingertips – which is tremendously powerful, but also a great temptation. Added to this, our wealthy society has opened up more time for leisure than our ancestors could have imagined. This lifestyle now seems perfectly normal, an unquestioned part of life. But living as faithful and diligent Christians in this environment requires us to be thoughtful and to consider the ways in which these influences might work against our calling to daily discipleship and spiritual growth.

These challenges are nothing new. Even the earliest Christians needed some prodding to keep on track. In Thessalonica there were some who were idle who Paul calls 'busybodies' (2 Thessalonians 3:6–13). Finding nothing meaningful with which to occupy themselves, they bustled about getting involved in other people's business. They were active, but not productive — all heat no light.

Paul warned Timothy about similar behaviour. It was particularly a problem for young widows, 'being idle and going about from house to house ... but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to.' (1 Timothy 5:11–14). Their free time allowed them to indulge their worst tendencies. A form of idleness was also a problem for those in the church who were wealthy (1 Timothy 6:17–19). They were arrogant and self-satisfied, which led them to be aloof and unwilling to share or to get involved.

Although these things were written in a different time, it's easy to see parallels to our own situation. By world standards, we in Australia are rich and comfortable. We too might feel we can take it easy and retreat into our own comfortable world. Our social media feeds are filled with nonsense. Have you ever found yourself getting involved in something that didn't concern you, or saying things you ought not to? Consider the mindless 'slop' that we're fed on TV streaming services in the name of entertainment which only needs to hold enough interest for us to not click away. Whatever our situation, we all face the same temptation to idleness and meaningless activity.

Paul's prescription was the same for each person: Get busy doing something useful with your time. Find something good and worthwhile to commit yourself to – earning a living, raising a family, helping others – and do it diligently. That's the kind of person God wants us to be. It's not exactly revolutionary wisdom, but we really need to hear it.

Sure, you might say: But I'm not like that – I keep busy. That's good! But I think we should be careful not to let ourselves off too easily. If we're not alert to it, we can overlook the ways in which our culture's preference for comfort and leisure can affect our own mindset. Do you see leisure as your driving motivation, the marker of a good life? Do you try to get away with the bare minimum, or are you willing to go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41)? How much time do you spend in virtual worlds that have no connection to reality?

Of course, we all need time to rest. We need down time, fun times with family and friends, unstructured time. But I think the greatest danger of idleness and distraction isn't that we put off tasks that need to be done, it's that we fail to give our attention to the things that really matter. With all our distractions, even our down time isn't really restful. We bounce around from one thing to another with little sense of purpose. It's in this way that laziness or idleness begins to have wider spiritual implications. The cost of idleness isn't just lost productivity but the kind of people it trains us to be. If, through negligence, we train our minds to give in to all the little distractions around us, how can we hope to avoid the things that distract us from what is truly important? If we train ourselves to always take the easy path, how will we be able to withstand trials or temptations?

Paul described his Christian life like a race for which he needed to be in strict training (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). Training is more than just activity – it's all about building change by small steps, so that you'll be ready when the real thing comes along. Little distractions might not seem like much, but even those small moments give us the opportunity to train ourselves and to develop the self-control that we'll need one day when we're truly tested. This is how we grow spiritually.

Jesus warned about those who, like seed sown among thorns, 'are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature' (Luke 8:14). Take warning from that passage: That will be you if you allow yourself to become lazy and distracted from your true, God-given purpose. ◇

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



we can overlook the ways in which our culture's preference for comfort and leisure can affect our own mindset.
But I think the greatest danger of idleness and distraction isn't that we put off tasks that need to be done...
... it's that we fail to give our attention to the things that really matter.

Dennis Vander Kraats

Dennis Vander Kraats was born in Canada. He was a fitness fanatic who loved ice hockey. He attended Notre Dame University in Indiana, USA. In 1982, upon graduation, Dennis decided to take a holiday in Australia, after which he planned to return to Canada to attend medical school.

But God had other plans for Dennis. He met Marion when they were drivers in the last two cars to board the *Princess of Tasmania* to Melbourne. They both made it with little time to spare. After just five months, they were married. Dennis never made it back to Canada or to medical school.

In Melbourne, Dennis studied degree courses in Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese medicine. At one of these courses, he met Andrew Verity who introduced him to a member of the Frankston church.

Dennis and Marion began a Bible study with Geoff Pollard. Marion's family was very active in the Catholic church but in 1986 they were both baptised by Geoff Pollard in the bathtub of their family home in Frankston.

Dennis and Marion were blessed with two sons, Rob and Tim. The family moved to Perth in 1995 and became members of the City Beach church. They were of great encouragement to the brethren there in their support of others, both physically and spiritually. Their home was always open and their love for others quietly displayed through their kind generosity, generated through God's Spirit (Matthew 6:1-4). Dennis applied both his knowledge gained at university and his knowledge of God's Word to assist many people. He was a no-fuss guy, blessed by God and, assisted by Marion, wholeheartedly shared his joy and love with others. (Philippians 4:4-9).

In 2009, as a member of the newly-established congregation at Malaga, Dennis agreed to serve as a Shepherd, together with six others. Over the following years the congregation grew in the grace and knowledge of Jesus and many believed in Him and were added to Christ's body.

Dennis continued to faithfully serve the church until his son Rob suffered a catastrophic brain aneurysm. Consequently, Dennis had to refocus his available strength on his own family. Rob was treated in the ICU and a large group of brethren spent days praying together in the hospital chapel with the family.

Rob spent six months in hospital and a further two years in intensive rehabilitation at home, assisted by Dennis, Marion, and Tim. Rob then returned to work as a physiotherapist. Although unable to walk, his wheelchair raises him to a

standing position which enables him to treat patients. Rob already had a Masters degree in Sports Physio and this year he completed his PhD. Following the example of his parents, Rob continues to assist others, both physically and spiritually.

Feeling that the needs of his family prevented him from having a full understanding of the needs of members, Dennis stepped back from being an active member of the shepherding group but remained a Shepherd in an advisory capacity.

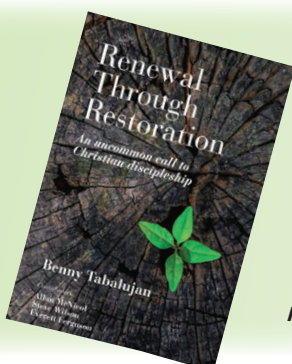
However, still looking for ways to serve others, he worked in partnership with fellow Shepherds, David Atchley, and Wilbert Sibanda, to support the *Children in Need Trust* in Zimbabwe which places orphans in Christian homes, where they are able to attend school and learn about God.

In the last five years Dennis experienced his own health challenges but in true Dennis style he never wanted attention or fuss. He continued to attend worship, always assisting Rob to stand for singing and to participate in teaching God's Word.

By employing the gifts and blessings granted through God's Spirit, Dennis and Marion have changed the lives of many. Through their kindness, I too have personally received many blessings in life. Although for a while we are separated, Dennis' legacy of faith continues. (James 1:12).

Please pray for our sister Marion and for Rob and Tim, as they negotiate life without Dennis – their special person. ◇

Paul Tyers



Renewal Through Restoration: An Uncommon Call to Christian Discipleship

Perspectives from 4 current and former church elders in Australia and America:
Benny Tabalujan, Allan McNicol, Steve Wilson, and Everett Ferguson.

- 230 pages, including discussion questions
 - Bulk discounts for 2 or more print copies: Klesis.com.au and Christian-studies.org (Ebook: Amazon.com)
 - Allen Black, Harding School of Theology: "Extraordinary book - thoughtful, well-informed, irenic."
 - Harold Shank, Oklahoma church elder: "This call has great personal appeal."
 - Nathan Wilson, youth leader: "Read it if you grew up among Churches of Christ and are seeking to understand why you should stay."
- For discounted bulk orders of 2 or more print copies, please order online at [Klesis \(klesis.com.au\)](http://Klesis.com.au).**

News Kingdom Connect

Kingdom Connect is a new social media page started up last year to connect non-denominational churches of Christ across Australia... & beyond! It shares church events, news, photos & encouragement – much like *Happenings* & *InterSections* (and often cross-sharing news from these sources) but on Facebook and Instagram. The page is currently overseen by Kate Jennings from the Canberra church, with input from other brethren. Find the page with this logo on Facebook and Instagram and feel free to share contributions.

It would also be appreciated if you could let your churches know! It's a great way to stay informed about church events and share about good things happening in the churches around Australia!

Kate Jennings.



Kingdom Connect

Connecting the Church of Christ family across Australia... and beyond!

Elders Appointed, Heidelberg West, VIC

Three men, Ken Moroney, Errol Reay and Kok Bin Ong, were officially appointed as elders for the Heidelberg West church on December 7.

Ken, having grown up in a Christian family, has been involved with the church in Melbourne for decades, mainly at Heidelberg West. He has an extensive bible knowledge and has preached and taught over many years. He and his wife, Jennifer, have four daughters who have all become Christians and they are now involved in assisting in the spiritual development of their grandchildren.

Errol migrated from India with his wife, Christine, over 20 years ago when their now adult children were young. They have worshipped at Heidelberg since then, while their children worship with the Western Melbourne church. They are a hard-working, benevolent and hospitable couple, and are also focused on the spiritual development of their young grandsons.

Kok Bin is a more recent arrival at Heidelberg, having migrated from Malaysia around 5 years ago with his wife Esther. Initially they worshipped at Belmore Road, where their adult children worship. However, when the Heidelberg church advertised for a full-time preacher, Kok Bin applied and was successful in securing the position. He brings over 30 years of experience in teaching, preaching and personal work in Malaysia to his roles at Heidelberg.

Geoff Thomas.



Camp Challenge, NSW

Camp Challenge was held again in the beautiful Blue Mountains between Christmas and New Years. The campsite was bursting to capacity at just over 100 campers from all over Australia, all gathered for a time of deep encouragement, faith building, connection and lots of fun!

cont'd page 7



Camp Challenge, NSW

Daniel Smith from the Gipps St. Church in Toowoomba, QLD spoke on the theme 'Tremble Before Him: The surprising Good News about the Fear of the Lord.' It was excellent, deeply biblical teaching which everyone really engaged with. There was also a lot of little ones at camp who enjoyed the kid's Bible classes!

Evening games, sports, singing around a campfire, and the New Year's Eve dress up night all contributed to the laughter shared and bonds made. It was a blessing to have campers from all over Australia to build connections between the churches too. Camp books out very quickly due to the limited capacity and we ask for prayers during our search for a bigger campsite. You can find out more about Challenge here – Facebook / Instagram / website. ◇

Kate Jennings



**Journal of
Christian
Studies**
Scholarship for the Church

- ❖ JCS features biblical scholars writing for thoughtful Christians
- ❖ Each issue unpacks a topic important to the church in our current culture
- ❖ \$60 AUD per year for three issues (~90 pages each)
- ❖ Subsidies available for those in ministry

For more information contact Dale Christensen
dale.christensen.a@gmail.com • 0403 793 353



A donation is a gift that keeps on giving!

P: 0468 719 025 or 03 9890 4494 • enquiries@accet.org.au www.accet.org.au
PO Box 552, GOSFORD, NSW 2250, Australia.

©Australian church of Christ Evangelistic Trust ABN 18 064 594 371

ACCET provides grants
to churches of Christ
in Australia for evangelism

Puzzling Passages

Don't Judge?

Benny Tabalujan



Today, the idea of making judgments concerning others is often scorned.¹ Many, especially in the West, prefer to adopt a non-judgmental posture when it comes to other people. Being tolerant, open-minded, and accepting – in everything from politics, art, and technology to lifestyle choices and personal ethics – is seen as virtuous.

To top it off, some advocates of this kind of non-judgmentalism quote Matthew 7:1 as their authority. This is the famous text where Jesus says: 'Don't judge or you too will be judged.' (Some mouth our Lord's words without even realising the source.)

This can be puzzling for Christians. If it's true that Jesus forbids making judgments concerning people, then is our Lord expecting us to be totally open-minded and affirming of all people in all things? How does this sit with other biblical texts which appear to call for discernment – and, at times, even separation or rejection – when we confront certain situations?

To help resolve this puzzle, let me offer three observations. First, a closer reading of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1–5 shows that he's not forbidding the making of all judgments with respect to people. Rather, I take this as Jesus chiefly forbidding hypocritical judgments. Imagine if Bob rebukes Tom for stealing an apple from the supermarket when Bob himself is stealing another man's wife by having a secret affair with her. That's where Jesus' hyperbole hits home: the implausibility of removing a speck in someone's eye when we have a log in our own eye. In fact, our Lord tells us what we should do in verse 5: 'first take the log out of your own eye' (my emphasis). This implies that there are occasions when we can correct others. However, we should first self-reflect and acknowledge our own sins before we point to sins in others.

Second, limiting Matthew 7:1–5 principally to hypocritical judgments is consistent with other biblical passages which envisage Christians making judgments in certain situations. Consider John 7:24 which calls us to 'judge with righteous judgment.' Here, Jesus instructs his disciples to judge or evaluate people and situations based on true substance, not just by appearances. In both John 7:24 and Matthew 7:1, the Greek verb *krino* is used. Depending on the context, *krino* can mean to judge, condemn, evaluate, form an opinion, or discern.

Consider other routine matters. If you wish to date someone, how can you proceed without making at least one (maybe tentative) judgment of the person you wish to date? Or, if you wish to choose which religious leaders to follow, how can you proceed without evaluating them? As Jesus once cautioned: if we don't evaluate leaders by checking the fruits which they bear, it's easy for us to fall prey to false prophets (Matthew 7:15–20).

Third, the meaning of hypocritical judgment also merits elaboration. Some understand 'removing the log in our own eye before removing the speck in someone's eye' to mean that we must be practically sinless before we can correct sin in others. According to this logic, Christians can't call out sexual immorality or financial shenanigans simply because we're far from sinless ourselves – as evidenced by the numerous moral and financial scandals enveloping churches in recent decades. Some say: if Christians have the temerity to do otherwise, then Christians are hypocrites!

However, I suggest that such logic misconstrues hypocrisy. The essence of hypocrisy is applying a double standard to a common situation: one (less strict) standard for me and another (more strict) standard for you. Recall Bob and Tom: with regard to stealing, Bob is applying a lower standard for himself but a higher standard for Tom. Typically, when we use a double standard, this leads to behaviour which contradicts what we preach. It can also make us appear to be pretending to be someone we're not.

In reality a church comprises imperfect people. All Christians are sinners (Romans 3:23). At the same time, we're sinners who have been baptised and forgiven of our sins, and are enjoying new life in the Spirit through God's abundant grace (Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:7; Romans 6:3–4).

When sinful – but forgiven – Christians exhort us and others to live according to God's perfect standard, that's not hypocrisy. Why? Because we're using the same standard – namely, God's Word – to evaluate ourselves and others.

Hence, the key is for Christians to acknowledge our sins and repent of them, even as we urge fellow believers and others to live according to Scripture. We can then evaluate, discern, or judge without hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Put differently, this means that Bob doesn't have to be sinless before he can correct Tom. But Bob should first confess and repent. In this way, Bob can exhort Tom with humility and grace as a fellow sinner on a journey towards greater holiness.

To summarise, then, while Matthew 7:1 may appear initially to be a puzzling text, a closer reading of our Lord's words in its wider biblical context yields helpful insights. Jesus warns us against making hypocritical judgments, using double standards, and condemning others unfairly. Instead, we're to exercise righteous judgment by discerning matters according to substance and not just appearances. Finally, we should evaluate ourselves and others using one standard – God's Word – as we navigate our complex 21st century world. May God help us do this well! ◇

¹ There is, of course, the sweet irony that those scorning are implicitly rendering judgment on those making judgments.

Benny Tabalujan is a former editor of InterSections magazine. He and his wife, Pauline, are members of Citivision Church of Christ in Singapore. b.tabalujan@gmail.com