

InterSections

An Australian journal for Christian encounter and encouragement

Editorial

Many Christians experience hardship of some kind in their lives: lingering health issues, financial pressures, tension in relationships – not to mention the more dramatic cases of car accidents, family or church splits and natural disasters. These hardships raise the obvious question: if we're faithful, why do we suffer? Where is God when it hurts?

This issue of *InterSections* has two features that look at suffering. Steve Wilson in his *Food for Thought* explores what Scripture teaches about this topic. In acknowledging that suffering is real, affecting our whole being, he encourages us to go further. He calls us to trust God more – even in hardship.

In our *Interview*, we ply John & Jackie Baldwin with questions regarding the challenges of raising a son with Asperger's syndrome. What emerges from the Baldwins is not only an intellectual acceptance of suffering, but a Scripture-based and heartfelt trust that God is still sovereign and in control.

Our *ChurchScope* article focuses on the Macquarie Church of Christ in Sydney. Ted Paull, a long time member of the congregation, traces its roots and also describes the work of Macquarie School of Biblical Studies, a key ministry of that church.

Our *News* section features an update regarding the appointment of additional elders in Belmore Road Church of Christ, Melbourne. We also carry a brief report on the October 2010 Australian Christian Convention hosted by Westchurch in Sydney.

The ACC is an annual lectureship of the 'independent' Churches of Christ / Christian Church in Australia. In recent years, the ACC has provided a forum where various streams of the Restoration Movement in Australia could dialogue. Whilst our editorial team is from the *a cappella* churches of Christ stream, we're mindful that dialogue with other streams of the movement can be productive. For this reason, we believe a report on the 2010 ACC is appropriate.

Our *Letter from America* is written by Keith Cronk. Formerly from Queensland, Keith and his family now reside in Arkansas. He writes of their move to the US and his reflections on church life in America.

You may be pleased to know that the readership of *InterSections* continues to grow. Around 350 recipients (mainly in Australia), received *InterSections* in August, November, February and May. Most subscribe for the PDF version that is free, while others subscribe for the hard copy (\$22 per year). We hope that you continue to find *InterSections* stimulating and welcome your feedback on its content or ways to improve it. □



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Church Scope

Macquarie Church of Christ, Sydney, NSW

Evangelism continues to be emphasised. Non-Christians are present at almost every meeting and usually 6-12 Friendspeak or personal Bible studies are being conducted each week. We regularly discuss and pray for those undertaking such studies or those whom we'd like to involve.

After working in Perth in 1961-65, Ron Durham contacted other brethren in the USA who had an interest in establishing a new congregation in Sydney. Three of these – Ray Fullerton, David Roper and Coy Roper – made a survey trip to Sydney in 1966 on their way to a gospel campaign in Perth.

All four and their families returned in 1968 to begin a congregation in North Ryde, about 12 kilometres from the centre of Sydney. They were joined within the first year by the Chuck Young and Dave H Roper families (parents of David & Coy Roper). The congregation met for three months in the Scout Hall in Cox's Road next to the North Ryde Shopping Centre.

For the next four years they rented a house in bushland on the corner of Herring and Waterloo Roads – now Macquarie Shopping Centre. Then they bought land and built their own facilities in Kent Road, North Ryde, where the congregation has met since August 1972.

One of the early goals was to establish a preacher training school. After temporary starts in 1968 and 1969, Macquarie School of Preaching began in January 1970, with Coy as principal. MSOP graduated the first four students from the two-year full-time programme at the end of 1971. From the mid 1970s a three-year programme has been offered. Provision was also made for teaching both men and women in Bible study and evangelism.

For the first decade, an average of five full-time workers – a mixture of Australians and Americans – were serving the Macquarie church. Growth was consistent. The congregation grew rapidly in the 1970s from about 30 to just over 100 in attendance. Emphasis on evangelism and the Bible school brought fruit from a community composed of mostly young families.

Ted Paull began working with the church in 1976, becoming principal of the renamed Macquarie School of Biblical Studies in 1979. One of several preachers who worked with the church was Dale Hartman who came in 1979 for three years. Later, Dale continued to teach in MSOBS while working with the SouthWest church for the next eight years. He continues to visit Australia each year and participates in the MSOBS Lectureship in July.



During the 1980s and 90s there was an average of two full-time workers present. A number of factors led to a gradual decline in the size of the congregation until the late 1990s. One factor was that, in common with the community trend, most young families moved to the outer suburbs and the number of children declined markedly.

After completing studies in MSOBS, Peter Tickner began working with the church in August 1996. In the past ten years there has been consistent growth with involvement by students from nearby Macquarie University and younger people remaining in the area, getting married and having children.

The last decade has seen growth in the number of people attending, the size of the congregation and the weekly contribution. In 2009, average Sunday morning attendance was 49, and average weekly contribution was \$1,433. Seven men and ten women are regularly involved in teaching Bible classes.

MSOBS has continued to be in operation. Since 1970, more than 50 graduates have completed the full training course. More than 40 others have completed at least one year of studies. Several hundred brethren have been involved in at least some courses in the school. Regular instruction continues to be provided by preachers from the Sydney and Hunter Valley churches supplemented by periodic visits from country, interstate and overseas lecturers.

There are three important concepts emphasised in the teaching and work of the Macquarie church: Jesus, family and evangelism. We want to rely on the grace and teaching of Jesus as much as possible so that he leads us. In its teaching and activities the congregation emphasises the family nature of the church, beginning instruction in this concept with children and new Christians (we even stress that children can hear us sing before they are born!). This generates an attitude of co-operation and fellowship.

Evangelism continues to be emphasised. Non-Christians are present at almost every meeting and usually 6-12 Friendspeak or personal Bible studies are being conducted each week. We regularly discuss and pray for those undertaking such studies or those whom we would like to involve. □

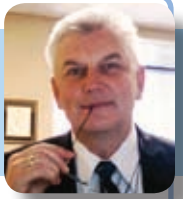
Ted Paull is a longtime member of the Macquarie Church of Christ and Principal of MSOBS. tedpaull@hotmail.com

Letter from America

Keith Cronk



... let us always understand that we live in a lost world, a world that needs salvation from sin. Our mission, our overarching purpose, is to 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation' (Mark 16:15).



I will begin by explaining why we – an Australian family – are living in the US. In 1999 we decided to use my sabbatical leave from University of Southern Queensland to spend a year at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas (population 20,000). We had been blessed to meet a number of Harding faculty and students over time. That piqued our curiosity and desire to experience life at a Christian university. So, we packed a suitcase each and set off on a one year tour.

Many things worked together and we ended up staying and working at Harding. Currently, two of our children are married to Americans and our youngest has graduated and is living and working in Little Rock. Because of this unexpected adventure, it is clear to us that 'we do not know the paths that have been laid down ahead of us'.

I want to try and share the essence of our experience with the church here. Before arriving at Harding we thought we would visit some churches, starting with the College Church of Christ. We went to College firstly, because it was in easy walking distance and, secondly, because it was where most of the people we knew attended. We thought we would just check it out and then find a smaller congregation to call home for the year.

It didn't work out that way! We are still members at College church. I'm serving as a deacon; and this year, I spearheaded the Great Commission Sunday activities (Gordon Hogan wrote about this in an earlier edition of *InterSections*).

Never in our wildest dreams did we think we would be at home in a large congregation. As members of College church, we learned that there are many 'small congregations' in one large congregation. We learned to cherish our care group, in which we are the youngest couple! We appreciate the resources available. We are thankful for the wisdom and unity shown by the 39 elders and ministry team. We smile with satisfaction nearly every week in Bible class over the diversity of views that are expressed in harmony and understanding. We are amazed at the generosity and associated concern of all. In short, we feel at home.

However, do not assume that all congregations are the same. Congregational cultures are diverse and the ways of doing things from one congregation to the next can

be quite different. I can only speak with confidence from my experience at College church.

Next, I'd like to focus one area of strength, and then one area of concern I see in the church in the US. I mention these so as to encourage us all to ensure we address the area of concern, and wisely use the area of strength.

The generosity of the US church is amazing. Like many of you, I thought this was because most of the members of the church in the US were wealthy. I have learned that is not so. It stems from a generosity and willingness to give. There are many examples of this generosity. Through the Great Commission Sunday over the last two years, College church has given an additional US\$600,000 beyond our regular missions budget. Significantly, on the two Sundays that this was collected, the regular contribution was higher! I realize that a congregation of some 1,800 members gave this amount. This works out to around \$700 per family unit. Similar efforts are made by other congregations around the US.

As I think of areas of concern, I can only echo the sentiments of Kent Hartman, expressed in a previous *Letter from America*. Kent noted that many short-term mission trips are designed to engage the participants in good works – and good works only. This became clear to me when working with a group in preparation for a mission trip. I asked the group why they would want to go to another culture, to knock on some stranger's door. The aim of the question is to draw out that people are lost and need to hear of God's mercy and grace, Christ's love, the plan of salvation and the hope of heaven. However, a number in the group were adamant they could not do this. There is a long discussion that can be had about this, but part of it is due to a lessening of the urgency to tell people they are lost. This is not universal, but a trend.

So I conclude with two points. Firstly, just as God is generous in all things, he calls us to be generous. It may be something we have to learn, but we should know that there is great reward when we give. Secondly, let us always understand that we live in a lost world, a world that needs salvation from sin. Our mission, our overarching purpose, is to 'Go into *all* the world and preach the gospel to *all* creation' (Mark 16:15). □

Keith and Marguerite Cronk were formerly with the Gipps St Church of Christ, QLD. Keith is now chief technology officer at Harding University and a deacon for the College Church of Christ in Searcy, Arkansas.

InterSections

InterSections is a quarterly journal designed to inform, inspire and unite Christians in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. The editors are responsible for selecting material for publication, but each article reflects the views of its author(s).

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Editor: Warren Holyoak

Associate Editors: Christine Payne & Benny Tabalujan

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

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

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Email: intersections@klesisinstitute.com **Fax:** +61 3 9806 1205

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Food for thought

Reflections from a Companion to Suffering

For the past year I have worked as a counsellor supporting carers of people with a disability, mental illness, or chronic or terminal disease. As a Christian, the experience has been rewarding but challenging.

Western society tells us to avoid suffering at all costs or to seek compensation if we can find someone else to blame. Biblical wisdom tells us to accept pain as an essential part of life and to look for the gift that often comes only through suffering (empathy, humility, patience, greater faith, etc).

To journey with carers and those they care for is to be confronted with the uncertainty of life. A normal life can very quickly become anything but normal. Disease and accidents will quickly rob an individual and their loved ones of dreams and expectations with devastating effect. James was quite right when he rebuked those who would take the future for granted (James 4:13-16). We really don't know what tomorrow will bring, and our priorities for today should humbly reflect this truth (Matthew 6:19-21; Luke 12:16-21).

The inadequacy of simple (often simplistic) explanations for suffering is an issue for companion carers and those they care for. I am reminded of Job's friends who did well while they sat silently with Job, metaphorically holding him while he grappled with his pain (Job 2:11-13). Most often, this is all we can and need to do for those grieving. Our own discomfort and insecurities in the face of suffering tempt us to do more. We want to fix things and make the pain go away. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar could not resist this temptation. Their well intentioned efforts may have made them feel better, but they did a disservice to both Job and God.

Theologically, we know that suffering is directly or indirectly a result of sin (Genesis 3). Much suffering is the consequence of human choices (reaping what we sow, as well as innocently suffering because of the sinful actions of others). Perhaps natural disasters can be traced back to the Fall (Romans 8:18-25), as may all manner of illness including congenital disabilities and ageing. Our creaturely aspect subjects us to the same corruption as the rest of creation. And we know that God uses suffering as a means of discipline (eg. Amos 4:6-11; Hebrews 5:8; 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). All this might be intellectually satisfying but such explanations are usually cold comfort to those caught in the midst of suffering.

God did not attempt to explain himself to Job and his friends. The Creator and Sustainer of everything reminded Job there are some things humans do not and cannot know ... 'so you'll just have to trust me'. God's response to the problem of suffering – even the suffering of the righteous and the innocent – was not an explanation, but a call to faith.

And God has emphatically demonstrated why we can trust him in the midst of suffering. He loves us. He humbled himself to become a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He subjected himself to all the pain, grief and injustice that sin wreaks in this world (Hebrews 4:14-5:9). Jesus died to overcome sin, and he was resurrected to give us hope and assurance of better things to come.

We have God's promise of a time when he 'will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things [will] have passed away' (Revelation 21:4; cf. Romans 8:18). In the meantime Jesus, through his Spirit, is our divine Companion and Comforter who walks with us as the One who truly knows and cares.

In accord with modern research, I have noticed that those carers and their care recipients who seem to remain resilient in coping with the most difficult of circumstances have these things in common: a sense of hope; a sense of meaning and purpose; a clear sense of self (identity); a sense of personal responsibility (not playing the victim or the blame game); and social connectedness (relationships). It strikes me that all these things are central also to the Christian faith: the hope of heaven; loving God and our neighbour (purpose); God's child, created in his image (identity); a forgiven sinner, accountable to God and neighbour (responsibility); a member of the body of Christ, his church (relationships). God's people can expect suffering in this world, but God has equipped us well with the means to cope. The only ingredient we need to add is our faith!

Western society tells us to avoid suffering at all costs or to seek compensation if we can find someone else to blame. Biblical wisdom tells us to accept pain as an essential part of life and to look for the gift that often comes only through suffering (empathy, humility, patience, greater faith, etc).

I sometimes invite contemplation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer with carers who are spiritually minded (and, not surprisingly, many of them are). The abbreviated version made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous is well known. But the original author had a lot more profound insight to share than the first few lines. As a parting word on suffering, I will leave you with the full version to consider:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen. □

Stephen Wilson is a deacon for The Point Church in Brisbane. He works as a counsellor and educator for a community services organisation with a special focus on supporting carers. stephen_wilson@optusnet.com.au

Gleanings

On congregational worship:

'A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping... There is really some excuse for the man who said, "I wish they'd remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dogs new tricks."' - C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (Collins, 1966) p 6.

'The communion of the saints with the Triune God is a participation in the divine life which involves embracing the divine mission in the world. We worship God not only when we enjoy his communion as a gathered community but also when we participate in his mission... The church is divine presence in the world- God dwells through his people to carry out his mission. As the body of Christ, we are the hands and feet of God as we sacrifice our lives in worship. We worship as we follow Jesus and imitate his ministry, participating in his mission.' - Hicks, Melton & Valentine, *A Gathered People* (Leafwood, 2007) p 130.

News

Belmore Road eldership appointments

In July 2010, the Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne appointed two new elders, Steve Burgin and Ian Campbell. Prior to the appointment of the new elders, Trevor Baker and Charles Hooi have faithfully shepherded the church since their appointment as elders in 2004. On the occasion of Steve and Ian joining the eldership, Trevor stepped down. The congregation honoured Trevor and Charles and their wives Christine and Swee Lan for their faithful service and welcomed the two new elders. Trevor is now a fulltime carer for Christine, a diabetic who has regular dialysis needs.

The appointment of Steve and Ian to join Charles in the eldership was the culmination of a process that went over several months. Belmore Road has been without a fulltime evangelist since Marvin Ancell stepped down in 2007 and relocated to Coffs Harbour to help with the church plant there. In the absence of a local evangelist, Stuart Penhall, evangelist with the Gosford congregation in NSW, helped guide the process together with an eldership nomination committee consisting of Belmore Road members.

Belmore Road is one of a number of Churches of Christ in Australia with an eldership. Others include:

- Gosford Church of Christ (Gosford, NSW): Ray Gritten, David Mowday, David Payne, John Stone
- Malaga Church of Christ (Perth, WA): David Atchley, Peter Coleman, Ken Deetlefs, Wilbert Sibanda, Paul Tyers, Dennis Vander Kraats
- The Point Church (Brisbane, QLD): Michael Evans, Warren Holyoak, Peter Searson

Benny Tabalujan, Belmore Road Church of Christ. benny@klesisinstitute.com

2010 Australian Christian Convention

The 2010 Australian Christian Convention (ACC) took place on 8-10 October 2010 at the Castle Hill Community Centre in Sydney. The ACC is an annual lectureship organised by a group of 'independent' Churches of Christ. For the past two years, however, the ACC has been hosted by *a cappella* churches and has attracted participants from independent, *a cappella* and former International Churches of Christ – each a stream of the Restoration Movement in Australia seeking to restore New Testament faith and practice. Rather than turning their backs and ignoring one another, some from each fellowship are now engaged in dialogue that still respects individual convictions and congregational autonomy while acknowledging one another as brothers and sisters who have been baptised into Christ.

Hosted by Westchurch in Sydney, the 2010 ACC drew participants from throughout Australia and several other countries. Approximately 150 people took part in the Friday night and Saturday sessions.

The theme of the 2010 ACC was 'All Things, All People, All Means' based on 1 Corinthians 9:22. There was a special focus on new church plantings. A pre-convention Church Planters Workshop gathered individuals from eight church planting teams focusing on Australia and New Zealand. Also, a panel consisting of Dwight Whitsett, Randall Brooks, Stuart Penhall, Craig Peters and Jim Newman led a challenging discussion on 'What Would it Take to Establish 100 New Churches in Australia and New Zealand'.

Prepared from material submitted by Peter Gray, a member of Westchurch, Sydney, who organised the 2010 ACC. gray.sky@mac.com



Peter Gray.



Tony Amerine.



Church planting workshop.



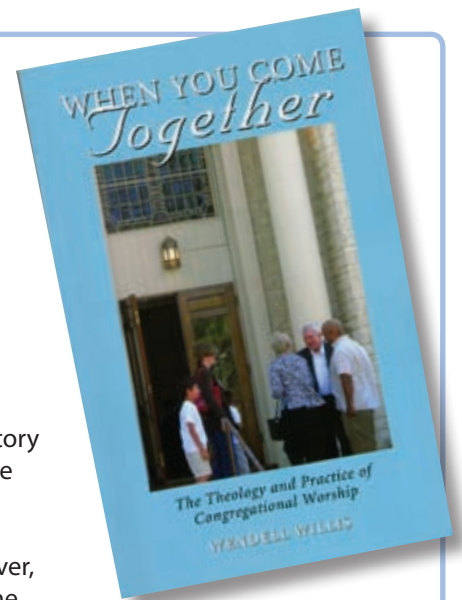
ACC Ladies Stream.



Belmore Road elders and their wives (l-r): Charles & Swee Lan Hooi, Ian & Cath Campbell, Steve & Kate Burgin.

Book Review

When You Come Together: The Theology and Practice of Congregational Worship by Wendell Willis, Christian Studies Press, 2010



Across the spectrum of Christendom many churches have experienced 'worship wars'. Typically this is manifested as a battle between traditional and contemporary worship styles. Much ink has been shed in this war of words.¹ Wendell Willis acknowledges that Churches of Christ have experienced this tension too. He states that 'a previous fundamental uniformity no longer exists' among Churches of Christ in the US. He should know – he's a former minister among Churches of Christ for 18 years and is now a Bible professor in Abilene Christian University, Texas.

Willis' short book is suitable for most readers who wish to think through these worship issues more carefully. He confines his discussion of worship to our weekly congregational gatherings. Whilst acknowledging that one can make a 'very good argument' that worship is about how we conduct daily life, he refrains from entering that fray. He also avoids a detailed consideration of how the 'heart' and our inner attitudes affect worship. Willis' approach produces a shorter, more focused book – and for that we're thankful. But his approach is also limiting. After all, the Bible is replete with passages about how we are to praise God with all our heart (eg. Psalm 9:1). Indeed, can worship without heart be considered to be worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24)? Thus, some may view this feature of the book an unfortunate omission.

Despite this limitation, Willis does a commendable job in examining what we do in our weekly assemblies. He begins with a chapter on the theology of worship. After a short exposition on John 4:24, he stresses that Christian worship is Christ-centred: the Lord's Supper is a partaking in the body of Christ; hymns are sung to Christ; prayer is offered in the name of Christ and the gathering is the body of Christ. From this theological basis, Willis uses four criteria to evaluate our worship:

- theological (what are we confessing and teaching about God when we do what we do?)
- historical ('a sense of history saves us from the tyranny of present trends and fads')
- pastoral (are worshippers encouraged, is the whole church growing closer to God and each other?)
- communicative (words, gestures and forms ought to be examined for what they communicate).

The next chapter is a discussion on early Christian worship among Jews and Gentiles. Willis points out that the New Testament provides 'very little explicit information' about how the earliest church worshipped. However, early church history can supplement this. He notes, for example, that early church worship was closer to synagogue worship

(which was word and prayer-based, participatory and lay-led) than Temple worship (which was sacrifice-based and priesthood-led). Moreover, as more Gentiles became Christians, it was remarkable that Gentile pagan cultic practices (typically involving sacrifice, processions, dance, singing with instrumental accompaniment) weren't carried over into the church. Christian worship was distinctive in its simplicity and restraint.

After that follows seven chapters on specific aspects of worship: prayer, singing, the Word (reading), sermon, the Lord's Supper, giving and baptism. Each chapter begins with a description of what is typically done, followed by an evaluation using the theological-historical-pastoral-communicative criteria. Among some of Willis' more thought-provoking comments:

- 'Because the Lord's Prayer was intended as a prayer which both shaped and defined Jesus' followers, I believe that it is still appropriate and valuable for worship today.'
- 'It will surprise many both in and out of Churches of Christ to know that the rejection of instrumental music in worship is not unique to us – even today. Apart from the fact that there are factions in most major traditions of Christendom which are *a cappella* (Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists), this is also the case with the numerous Eastern Orthodox churches (Greek, Russian, etc).'
- On Scripture reading: 'There should be a place for God to speak to us through his word apart from our attempts to explain or interpret his words.'
- 'The goal of biblical preaching is to work with a portion of Scripture until by thought, study and prayer it becomes transparent, and the hearers can see God through it.'
- On the Lord's Supper: 'Theologically, we would want to emphasize that this meal is the Lord's (we are his guests), that it is community based (from the word *koinonia*), and that it presents a remembrance of God's gracious act in Christ for which we give him thanks (eucharist).'

Willis also makes a case for baptism to be undertaken in the context of worship. : 'If...worship is a community-shaping event, and if baptism is the occasion for entrance into that community, then the two have an essential, not simply pragmatic relationship.' Whilst he acknowledges the validity of 'private baptism' (baptism outside the context of congregational worship), he argues that 'baptism in the

Book Review cont.

context of the church gathered for worship is a better normative pattern'. However, Willis doesn't explicitly deal with the question of timing: should we wait for the Sunday worship assembly if, on Monday, a person is convicted of his need for baptism and wants to be baptised immediately?

The closing chapter looks at the shape of the worship hour. Willis favours worship having some form or structure. He asserts that 'free form' worship may give the impression that God too is random and unpredictable – whereas Scripture depicts God as an intentional creator and shaper (Genesis 1-3). He also points out that the 'shapeless approach to worship' probably increases anxiety rather than attention in many worshippers. On this he quotes C. S. Lewis – who once observed that Jesus' command to

Peter was 'feed my sheep' and not 'run experiments on my rats'!

Overall, Willis has made a useful contribution to the literature on worship. He writes clearly and demonstrates familiarity with Scripture and church history. He's also sensitive to the practices of Churches of Christ. Granted, some might quibble that he doesn't use footnotes and his treatment lacks detail. Others might be disappointed that he doesn't address worship in other contexts – like house churches and family or individual worship times. However, the upside is that the book is short and simple to read. Most importantly, Willis' tone is respectful and considered. He's removed the pugnacity that sometimes characterises the worship wars, and made it more of a dialogue – and that's something to be thankful for. □

1 For more detailed treatments, see: Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Eerdmans, 1995), one of the first books to question seeker-sensitive worship services. Dawn's sequel is *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Eerdmans, 1999). For a more recent discussion, see Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker Academic, 2009).

Reviewed by Benny Tabalujan, an associate editor of InterSections and part of the Belmore Road Church of Christ in Melbourne.

Gleanings

On suffering

'When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to turn on one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork.'
– C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Geoffrey Bles, 1940) p 70.

'To say that Christ takes upon himself the sins of the world is to say that he takes upon himself the suffering of the world too... But unlike Buddhism, Christianity...affirms this love that suffers and, what is more, affirms it not in spite of the fact that it suffers but because of it. It affirms it for the reason that to love others to the point of suffering with them and for them in their own suffering is the only way ultimately to heal them, redeem them, if they are to be redeemed at all.'
– Frederick Buechner, *Now & Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (Harper, 1983) p 103-104.

'The modern humanist traditions see suffering as a deficiency – usually under the analogy of sickness... Suffering, as such, has no value and no meaning – it is only a sign that things have gone wrong, and a challenge to humanity to set them right again through goodwill and ingenuity... In counteracting the trend, Lamentations provides demonstrations for the ennoblement of suffering. It *faces* suffering, *encounters* suffering. It doesn't *do* anything about it. It doesn't *give* an answer. It doesn't *provide* a remedy. By taking suffering seriously it gives significance to it... [It] encourages the "longsuffering" of pastoral work, gives meaning and dignity to the person who suffers, and leaves the healing up to God in Christ on the cross.'
– Eugene H Petersen, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Eerdmans, 1980) p 137-141.

Interview

with Jackie & John Baldwin

Tell us a little about yourselves.

My husband John was born in Casterton, Victoria, in 1956 and has one younger brother. As a boy, John lived near Glenelg, South Australia, and East Gippsland, Victoria, before moving to Melbourne. John became a Christian in 1977. I'm the second oldest of six girls and was born in Wellington, New Zealand. I became a Christian in 1974. In 1975, at the age of 16, my family moved to Melbourne. John and I met at Belmore Road church in Jan 1978. We were married in December 1978. We have three children – Vicki (1980), James (1983) and Penny (1988). We also have 5 grandsons with the sixth due in March 2011.

Tell us about the moment when you first discovered that your child has special needs.

It's hard to pinpoint one moment. When James was about 18 months, he began exhibiting very distinct behavioural characteristics. For a long time we were confused and frustrated, knowing something was amiss but not what it was.

After years of seeking help from one specialist after another, we finally were told that James has Asperger's syndrome (commonly known as autism). James was nine years old. Finding out he has Asperger's explained where our son had gone and who he is. This explained his obsessive-compulsive behaviour where he would throw any object into the air. It didn't matter where it came down – it just had to go up into the air. (However it still didn't explain how my outside broom disappeared and hasn't been seen again.)

It explained the Tourette's part of James where he would say phrases over and again, swear like a wharfie and verbally abuse his family without batting an eyelid. It explained his hypersensitivity to sounds, light, and touch. It explained his extremely rigid reliance on routine and why the slightest alteration to this would freak him out. It explained why he couldn't speak until he was about 3½ years old; until then the sounds were literally a jumble.

It explained why he would laugh when someone was hurt, or be angry when something was joyful. He had no concept of body language; he didn't intuit the correct manner of behaviour. It also explained why he could absorb the most trivial information and spout the answers to things most of us forget – great to have on your team if playing Trivial Pursuit. It may seem odd, but when the Asperger's word was mentioned, my initial response was: 'So, there's a name for this after all. It hasn't been our imagination.'

How do you reconcile the idea of a great and good God with having a child who has special needs?

I can't speak for John, but it took me awhile to reconcile the fact that not only was James different to many people, he was normal to us and that this is exactly as God had intended to make him. I found great reassurance in Psalm 139 where the psalmist tells us that God doesn't make mistakes – that there is a reason for everything he creates. I also was reassured that God wouldn't give us a load that we couldn't bear – 1 Corinthians 10:13 and 1 Peter 5:7.

What are some of the main challenges you've faced as a couple?

Trying to explain why their brother was different didn't always go down well with our daughters. It felt as though so much time was spent on James that the time to share in certain experiences with our daughters, or those things that most families take for granted, were lost.

Facing public scrutiny was very difficult. The looks, the perceived unspoken judgment was there. Any events outside the home were very stressful, as we never knew how James would react. There were a number of occasions where someone in our own family or at church wanted to speak with us about James, but we were very sensitive and, dare I say, defensive of 'non-professional' input.

I recall vividly two occasions where brethren stated they didn't think we were doing a good job raising our son and that perhaps they should take him and raise him instead. You know those times where you feel instant white hot anger? That's what I felt. I told them to mind their own business and walked away.

I would have to say the worst years were those between 12 and about 25. One result is that the relationship between our daughters and our son is not really the best. This saddens us. However, James is our son and we love him very dearly. He surprises us constantly.

Some parents in your situation have given up on God, feeling angry, disappointed and weary. Why are you still walking with Jesus after all these years?

There have been many times we've felt angry, misunderstood, frustrated and despairing. Some of these continue today. But the simple truth is that we have Jesus, a brother and friend who understands. We have a Comforter who helps soothe us. There are so many people we've met who are in far more difficult circumstances, so we count ourselves blessed.

How does your church family help you in your situation? How can we – as the people of God – improve in the help we extend to families like yours?

I can say this has been a growing process for us as well as our physical and spiritual families. It was difficult in the early years as Asperger's was not readily recognised as a disability. Society's perception 20 years ago was very old-fashioned and institutional.

However we have been extremely blessed with our family at Belmore Road as they have stuck with us, nurturing our family wherever and however they could. Perhaps if we were to spend some time with an individual or family for a day or two, it may help us understand some of the issues and needs being faced. This opens the way to deeper relationships, where we can give mutual encouragement and support.

What are some of the key lessons you've picked up along the way in your journey of faith? What lessons has your child taught you?

Be careful what you ask for. Long ago I asked God for patience – and he gave us James. I've been practising patience ever since. It's not down pat yet. We've learnt there's only one person you can trust and that's God. He knows exactly what he's doing, so let him do it. The answers or help you are looking for aren't always in front of you. More often than not they come from left field. □

