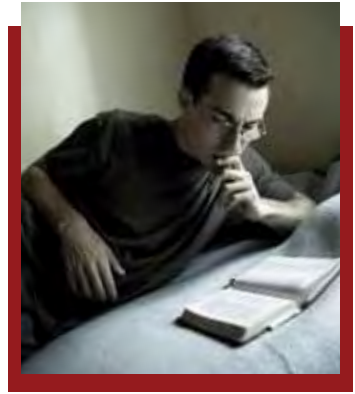


T^{GCI}oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

JUNE – AUGUST 2011



Mercy Ships



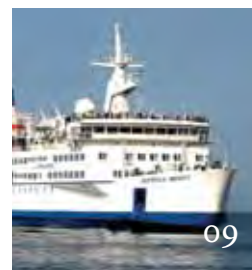
caring for the world's poorest

Catastrophies
– is this it?



Where
was
God?





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About GCI Today

MISSION STATEMENT

GCI Today is published by Grace Communion International to celebrate and share the good news of God’s love in ways that express practical help, hope and encouragement

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Suffering and loss,

freedom and love ...

Where is God when there is suffering? Why are there natural disasters?

Unfortunately, disasters can be a “godsend” for some perspectives, which cast such events as punishments sent from God, usually in the context of the “end of the world”. And so it has ever been for most of the last 2,000 years of Christian history. This in spite of the fact that no one has ever got it right in terms of predicting the “end”.

A televangelist in America recently got his 15 minutes of fame by doing exactly this – setting a specific date on which he claimed the world would end. That date of course passed. His response? Admission of error? Apology? Not likely. Like others who have wrongly predicted “the end”, he has simply moved the date.

Are catastrophic events really signs of the end of the world? Is God punishing people, and leading up to the final Day of Judgment? Joseph Tkach addresses these questions, and the matter of predictive prophecy, in his article “Is This It?”

And if God is all powerful, why does he allow natural disasters? If God is loving, why does he allow people to suffer? Mike Feazell considers these timeless questions in his article “Where was God?” “Love isn’t just a matter of getting along,” Mike notes. “Love is made real in the crucible of suffering, of self-sacrifice, of loyalty and devotion against the odds.”

Our approach to life has a lot to do with the way we approach the Bible – God’s Word, in human words, written over time in history. On this 400th year anniversary of the translation of the King James Version, we also consider constructive approaches to the way we read and understand the Scriptures.

The Bible reveals a God who, in his infinite wisdom, chose not to create the universe as a machine in which nothing can go wrong. Likewise, he created human beings with choice, free will – not as automatons who just need their batteries changed from time to time. It’s multilayered, often complex, and it’s how God in his perfect freedom has chosen to live and create, and share. A world in which there is suffering and elation, pain and pleasure, evil and good, sadness and joy. A world in which the highest of qualities are sometimes most evident in times of trial. And the greatest of these is love.

One of our articles shares the work of Mercy Ships and their response to human suffering on our planet. Here is a unique charity serving the needs of some of the poorest and most afflicted. We also consider the general issue of overseas aid, as well as tell the story of a very local expression of care, companionship and help, as we look at the work of the volunteers operating the Logan Street Diner.

As one article observes, truly it is love that makes the world go around.

John McLean
Mission and National Director, Australia



***Love is made
real in the
crucible of
suffering
and self-
sacrifice ...***



by J. Michael Feazell

Where was God?



IF GOD LOVES people, why does he wipe them out? We can't help but ask that after a disaster such as the devastating earthquake and tsunami that hit northern Japan. What kind of God would kill so many thousands of people and ruin the lives of millions of others in a single stroke?

Where is God when thousands, tens of thousands, or sometimes hundreds of thousands are being crushed, maimed and trapped in a massive earthquake or drowned when tidal waves swallow coastal towns and cities? If God is all-powerful, surely he could stop such things. So why doesn't he?

Who's to blame?

"God didn't do it; he just allowed it," some say. Maybe they think that's a good defense. I don't, and I doubt you do. Allowing something

that you could stop is not much better than doing it yourself.

When something bad happens, we want someone to blame. When the bad thing is a natural disaster, there's no one left to blame but God. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tidal waves, lightning strikes. The insurance companies call them "acts of God." Nobody is to blame – nobody except God, that is.

The Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the recent wildfires and floods in Australia, the earthquakes in Haiti and New Zealand, and the horrific Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 that killed more than 200,000 are just recent examples in a long line of history's mind-numbing natural disasters. Looking back, at least one million died in the North Korean floods and famine of 1995-98. More than 900,000 died in the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Two hundred

forty-two thousand died in the Tangshan, China, earthquake of 1976. The Ethiopian famine of 1974 claimed 200,000.

The Bangladesh sea flood of 1970 took 200,000-500,000. China's famine of 1960 took 20 million. One million died in the flu pandemic of 1957, and up to 100 million died in the flu pandemic of 1918. Earthquakes in Nansan, China, in 1927 and in Gansu, China, in 1933 killed 200,000 each. Up to one million died in Huayan Kou, China, in the Yangtse Kiang flooding of 1887.

The French smallpox epidemic in 1870-71 killed 500,000. One million died from the Irish famine of 1845. The Iran earthquake of 1780 killed 200,000. Ten million died in the Bengal, India, famine of 1769. The Shensi, China, earthquake of 1556 claimed 800,000. And the black plague of Europe and Asia in 1346-42



took 25 million lives.

People ask, why does a loving God let such astounding mayhem happen?

I have another question. Why does God let *anyone* die?

Not long ago, I attended the funeral of a woman who was celebrated for her many personal ministries of love. She died of cancer, and her suffering was nothing short of horrible. A friend's teenage daughter died in a fiery car crash on slick winter roads. She was on break from a Christian college, and her suffering and the grief of her parents, relatives and friends was every bit as real as the suffering and grief of any individual who died in a tornado, a tsunami or an earthquake.

Why did God let Grandma die? "She was old," someone might say. "It's the natural way of things. We grow old and die."

Yes, it is the natural way of things. Bodies wear out. Plaque builds up in arteries, and if enough builds up, it cuts off the blood flow and causes strokes or heart attacks. Sometimes cells get mixed up and go crazy, becoming cancer cells and disrupting the tissues and organs around them. Over time bones lose their density and an accidental fall can break a hip. Joints lose their elasticity. Eyes lose their sharpness.

The ground erodes too, and the earth's crust shifts. Water evaporates. Rain falls. Rivers rise. Winds blow. Even healthy people and young people can get hit by falling rocks or flying debris. People get caught in flash floods, mudslides and collapsed mineshafts.

People fall off roofs, out of windows and off scaffoldings. Sometimes it happens when they are doing humanitarian work, trying to help or save someone else. And God, far, far more often than not, sits by and watches it happen without lifting a finger to stop it.

When someone we love grows old and dies of "natural causes" we accept it as the way God has designed the creation – there's a time to be born and a time to die.

But when someone we love dies before growing old, we ask, "Why would God allow this to happen?"

Not an automaton creation

No doubt, God could have made the universe in such a way that nothing ever went wrong. But he didn't. He created a world that is free to be itself – and to express its identity in continually fresh and creative ways. For some reason, he thinks that is good.

Maybe that's because it takes such a world, a wild and free world, to be the breeding ground for things God values in human beings – things like courage, devotion, loyalty, self-sacrifice, kindness, generosity, hope, trust. By anybody's reckoning these are a few of the noblest features of humanity. Would such qualities exist in a world without risk, danger, calamity – and death?

And where would love be in such a world? Love isn't just a matter of getting along. Love is made real in the crucible of suffering, of self-sacrifice, of loyalty and devotion against the odds.

"Oh really," someone might say. "If God thinks that is so great, why doesn't he just come down here and go through what we go through in his so-called good creation?" Well, that's just what Christians believe he did. And just like death happens to every one of us, he died. But Christians believe that his death changed death itself. He made death a pathway to resurrection, to new life, to a new creation in which "there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

As much as we hate to admit it and hate to talk about it and throw stones at those who do, we all die. We all die of something. Whether we die of "natural causes" or of "natural disasters" makes little difference in the end. Either way, we die, and nothing will stop it, regardless of how kind we are or how mean we are or how smart, careful or wise we are. But the good news is, regardless of how or when we die, Jesus resurrects the dead.

God could stop all natural movement of earth, air and water. He could stop humans from making mistakes, making unwise decisions, being selfish, or stubborn or rude. God could have made a "Stepford Wives" style creation in which everything worked automatically.

But he didn't. God created a world in which something far more valuable than long physical life could exist. He made a world in which love can exist and grow. In love, humans pull together and respond to suffering and calamity. In love, humans forgive one another, help one another, encourage one another and stand by one another.

God suffers with us

God is not a stranger to human suffering. Christians believe that God became a man, suffered as a human and died as a human, and because of that, humanity itself has been taken up into God's own being. In Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, humanity's cause is now God's cause. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

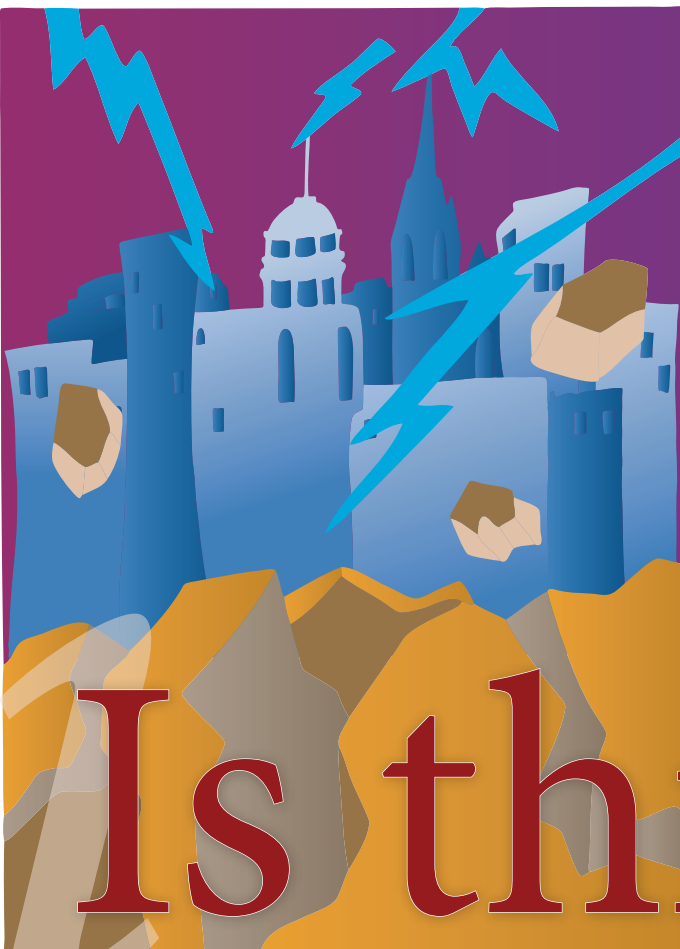
God loved the world so much, John the Gospel writer recorded, that God gave his Son that whoever believes in him would have new life. God sent his Son to save the world, he added, not to condemn it (see John 3:16-17).

Death is part of life, and every person who lives will also die. Even you and even me. But death is not the end of the story of our lives.

God did not make human beings merely for this life of suffering and grief – he made us for his new creation of fulfillment and joy. The lives cut short now, deprived now, stifled now, cheated now, will find their fulfillment in the life of the new creation. This is the Christian hope, and Christians hold this hope in faith – faith that God who freely took up our human cause as his own, even to the point of dying like a criminal as one of us, is true to his word. Every person who dies will also live.

In this hope and in this love, we extend compassion and help to others. As we do, we experience the deepest riches of true life, riches that are unseen but more real than physical security or safety. Love truly does "make the world go 'round.'"

J. Michael Feazell is Executive Editor of GCI's Christian Odyssey magazine.



Is this *it*?

by Joseph Tkach



DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKES. TSUNAMIS and volcanic eruptions. Political turmoil across the Middle East and northern Africa. A worldwide economic crisis. No wonder many Christians are asking themselves whether we are entering what Jesus called “the end of the age.”

Our church had a history of preoccupation with predicting and watching for the end time, until we came to our senses about 20 years ago. It would be understandable if some of us who have been around that long might begin to lapse back into some of the old ways of thinking, fearing that the “great tribulation” has finally caught up with us. So let’s take stock of the situation calmly, in the light of what the Bible really says.

There are three key factors that we need to keep in mind.

First is that Jesus and Paul said no one, including the church, would know when Christ would return (Matthew 24:36). We are told instead to be always ready, for the express reason that we would not know (v. 44).

Second, the events Jesus described to the disciples in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 were not about our time, but about their time – “this generation shall not pass until all these things be fulfilled,” he said (Matthew 24:34). And those things, preserved in highly symbolic apocalyptic writing, did take place in their generation when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and leveled the temple.

Third, we must remember that the Bible, including the book of Revelation, is not there for us to use or interpret in just any way we please. Second Timothy 3:15 tells us that the Scriptures are “able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” Verse 16 says that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

According to the Bible’s own witness, that is what it is for. And that is how we should use it. Its purpose is to teach us

about Jesus Christ – who his Father is, who he is, and who we are in him – and the implications of that. It is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, not for predicting the end of the age or for condemning people who don’t yet know Christ.

Despite the fact that the Bible tells us what it is and what it should be used for, it is still probably the most misused book in the world. Some seem to think they can find the answer to any question imaginable somewhere within its pages. They regard it as the final authority on matters of diet, what to wear, what entertainment is allowable, what hobbies to have, and so on. And of course, some claim they can use it to calculate exactly when the “end time” will be.

Such predictions are always wrong, of course, but that does not deter determined wannabe prophets. They simply plunge back in, searching the Scriptures carefully until they come up with yet another creative interpretation. Such obsession is born of many things, but among them is a craving to be special, to know secret things that others don’t know. It is also born of fear. We seem to believe that if we can figure out when a calamity will happen, we can be less terrified about it.

The Bible is for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, not for predicting the end of the age.

But why should believers ever get nervous at the idea of Christ returning? They get that way for one reason: they have wrong ideas about God. They have been led to think that God is some kind of outraged Judge who is on the prowl to wreak terrible vengeance on every sinner. In the back of their minds is the angry, hateful God of the so-called “Great Awakening” preached by such influential personalities as Jonathan Edwards.

But God is not like that. He is exactly who the Bible says he is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Father who loves the world so much that he sent the Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it

(John 3:16-17); the Son who became one of us by the Father’s will so that we, being made pure and sinless in him, could share in his eternal relationship of love with the Father; and the Holy Spirit, whom the Father and the Son send to us to lead us into all truth and to transform us into the image of Christ from the inside out.

Earthquakes are not God’s punishment on sinners. The God revealed in Jesus Christ sends his grace to undeserving sinners, not plagues.

Earthquakes are earthquakes. They’re a fact of nature. They are not the result of God unleashing his fury upon unbelievers. They are the result of natural shifts in the earth’s crust. We prepare for them by learning how to avoid being struck or trapped by falling debris and keeping an “earthquake kit” that contains emergency supplies to last for a few days. We don’t prepare for them by manufacturing unbiblical notions about the end of the age and whom God loves and hates.

God loves the whole world, which is why he sent his Son to save it. And Jesus commanded us to love even our enemies, just as he loves his enemies (which we all once were) and gave himself for them (Romans 5:8, 10).

The apostle Paul wrote that we should always be ready for the end of the age, not by feeding our prediction addiction, but by “putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet,” knowing that “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:8-9).

We have no need to panic. Rather, as the beloved children of the Father, we can bring God’s love to bear on the suffering of others until that great day of his appearing, when at last every eye will see and every knee will bow before Jesus, who loves the whole world and gave himself to save it.

Joseph Tkach is President of Grace Communion International.

Reading the Bible

THE APPLE OF my eye. The salt of the earth. A two-edged sword. All things to all men, bite the dust, breath of life, see eye to eye.

Heard any of these expressions lately? In all probability, the persons using them were not aware they came into our language when the Bible was translated into English. At least 257 new expressions in the language still used in current idiom can be traced to the Bible.

This year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version (KJV). There were earlier translations into English (see article on page 8), and indeed the majority of these new expressions can be traced to the vividly colourful translation by William Tyndale which were included by the translators of the KJV.

Much of the global celebration of the KJV publication has focused on the impact of this translation on the development of the English language, right down to this day. Writer and literary critic Peter Craven has written, "whether we know it or not, the landscape of English-language heritage has been scribbled over with the signature of scripture ... [the King James Version] is encoded in the DNA of our literature."

Figures of speech

And herein lays an irony. Because many well-meaning, dedicated, conscientious Christians balk at the notion of talking about the Bible as language. While comfortable with the conventions and nuances of language in an everyday setting, they get distinctly uncomfortable as soon as someone says, for example, that this passage of the Bible is a figure of speech, or poetic,

or the like. Isn't the Bible holy? The word of God? Yes, but it is in words, about the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. We don't worship the Bible (the words), we worship the One whom the Bible reveals.

Addressing the importance of understanding language isn't to say that the Bible is just like any other book. It is to acknowledge the simple reality that the Bible is written language, and understanding language is an essential part of reading the text. Indeed, part of the beauty, majesty, enduring power and inspiration from the Scriptures is that God has used individuals, in their culture and language, writing over more than a thousand years of time, to communicate his revelation to humankind.

God didn't choose to drop the Bible from on high. He didn't send it special delivery by the angels. He didn't just shout fifty propositions from President God for us to learn by heart. The Bible is not just a book of abstract concepts, or concrete commands, or directives from the Chair of the Board. It's an amazingly rich, complex book, written by different people in different languages and styles in different circumstances in the midst of the realities of life and living. Ultimately, it's a book about someone – God – rather than about some things. It's not a cook book, to mix and match as we see fit; still less a rule book to judge ourselves and other by. It is nothing less than the inspired revelation of God, in time and space, about himself, who he is, what he is like, and what his plan and purpose for his creation is all about. It's about a God who, far from being a remote, distant Other, engages with and within human experience.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on how to make the most of your Bible reading, you can sign up for the Ambassador College of Christian Ministry online class "Jesus and the Gospels". Or you can arrange for the class, seminars or training sessions to come to your congregation. Please contact info@ambascol.org or telephone 07 5553 6000.

It's a translation

The celebration of the KJV reminds us of the obvious – the book we use is a translation. To make a translation, you need to know about language – how it works. For example, as anyone with a second language, or anyone who has even done a year of a foreign language at school knows, you don't transliterate (attempt to literally swap word for word) when you translate, but translate for meaning and intent. Otherwise you end up with gibberish. The translators of 1611 (and translators before and since) were experts in how language worked. The coordinator of the KJV translation apparently spoke 22 languages.

And so, to read and understand the Scriptures, it helps to have an understanding of how language works. This isn't a way around the meaning of the text, but a way into the meaning of the text. And it presupposes prayer, humility, and discussion with other members of the spiritual community of the church.

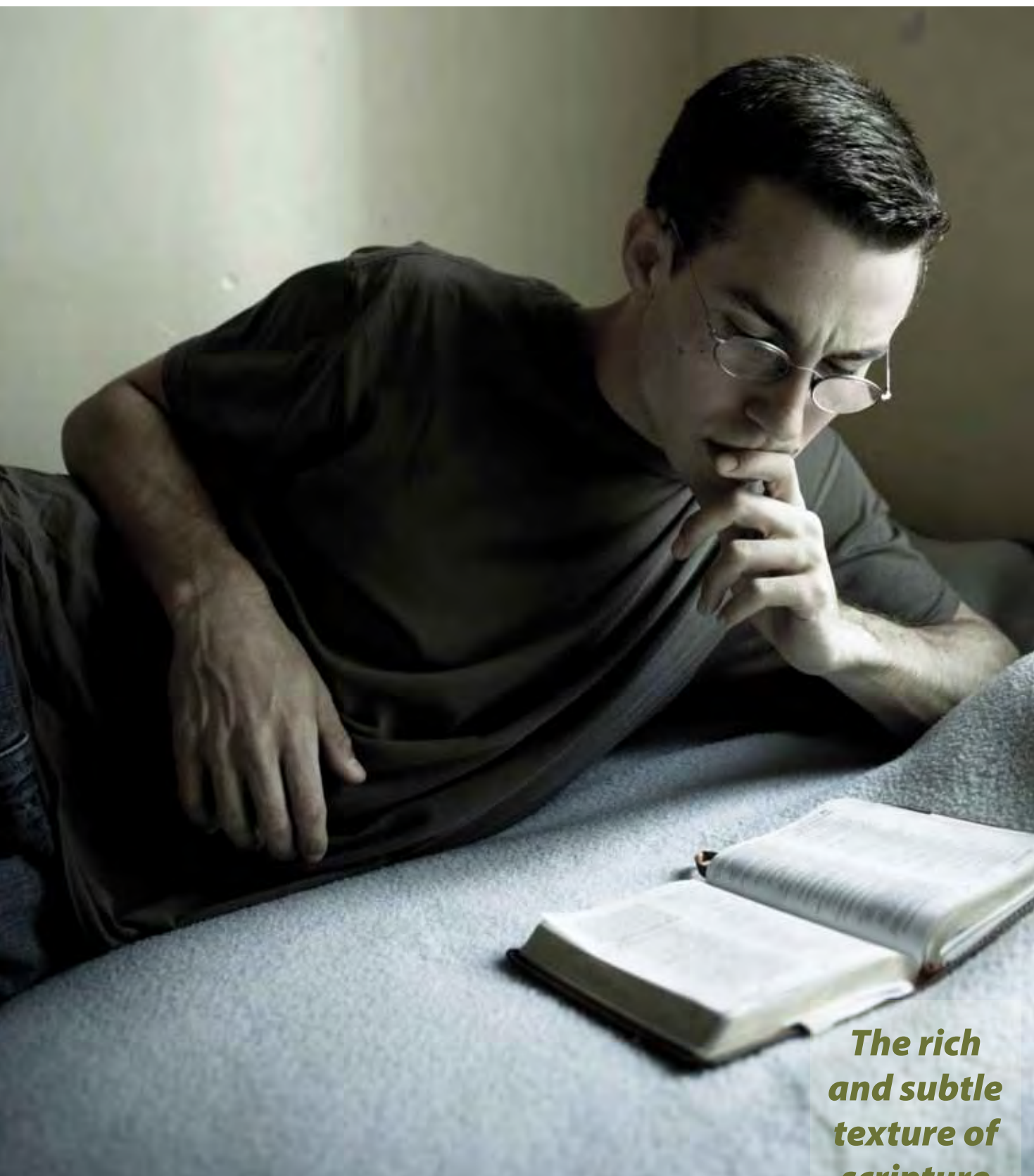
One important basic question to ask is "what am I reading?" The rich and subtle texture of Scripture includes many different kinds of writing – story, law, proverbs, songs, poetry, prophecy, allegory, history, treaties, biography, autobiography, apocalypse, gospel, letters, and theology. To read a passage of the Bible intelligently we need to have

some idea which kind of writing (or genre) we are reading. You don't read the news section of the paper in the same way you read the cartoons; you don't read a history book the same way you read a play by Shakespeare, a poem by Donne, or an email from a business acquaintance.

What am I reading?

God's word needs to be read, in openness and wonder, and carefully considered, prayed about, mulled over and reflected on by individuals. And it needs to be discussed with others in community. This is the nature of language, and the nature of God's Word. Part of that process is to enquire about the context in this broad sense – what is this I am reading? And then not make the mistake of reading all contexts as if they were the same, or simply interchangeable.

Notice again the phrases at the beginning of this article. They are all what is called "figures of speech". Again, this is how language works. To understand their meaning, we need some kind of immediate context so we can make sense of them as the author intended. That doesn't mean they have only one narrow meaning – in fact, the point is they are able to convey a range of concepts and nuances. But to take them literally would be to completely misread and misunderstand



The rich and subtle texture of scripture includes many different kinds of writing

them. Eyes don't have apples! Again, we need an understanding of how language works to make sense of what the author is saying. We do this every day with language. And we also do it with a considered, reflective reading of the Bible.

So, as we celebrate 400 years since the publication of the KJV, it's a good time to reflect on the privilege and joy it is to have the Bible in our language, prayerfully enjoying the conventions of that language as we read and seek to better understand God's

Word to us. As we do so, we remember we don't worship a book, or words, in any language, but the One whom the words reveal to us – the Word, Jesus Christ.

Next time we'll look further at how context and language help us to read the Bible well.

THE KING JAMES VERSION Celebrates 400 years

by John McLean



THIS YEAR WE celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible, an event described by one writer as the single most important publication in the whole of history.

At least six committees, made up of forty-seven scholars (plus others who replaced those who died), worked together to produce this version at the behest of King James I of England. They translated the new Bible from Hebrew and Greek, as well as Latin and Aramaic. They also had significant earlier translations into English (including the Tyndale and Geneva Bible versions) to use as reference.

The publication in 1611 coincided with a time of significant turmoil in both the history of politics, religion and the English language itself. Alister McGrath, professor of theology, ministry and education at King's College, London, points out that the English language was in a particularly fluid state. In this year, the last of Shakespeare's plays was performed. (Had any of the scholars working on the translation dropped in to hear Hamlet contemplate being and not being, or to hear King Lear lament the folly of life?)

King James I was seeking ways to deal with the sometimes contentious Puritans, while maintaining the dignity of kings and bishops. James gave his blessing to the notion of an "authorised" version that was acceptable to the various religious points of view, without a

leaning toward any particular doctrinal slant, and that would read well in a formal church setting. Those involved set about a lengthy, scholarly and remarkably collegial process of working on this new translation. They never felt they were doing a perfect job – translation will always be an inexact science. But they set out to fulfil this lofty challenge, conscious they were working in an honourable line of translators who had gone before, seeking to make a good translation better. They never imagined their version would ever be seen as the one true text, or the only translation to be used and would be surprised that some have since mistakenly taken this perspective.

Available for all

The King James Version helped to make the Bible available in the language of the English-speaking people. In one of those tragic ironies of history, William Tyndale had not long previously been burned at the stake for just such an attempt – firmly believing that the Bible should be available for everyone to read. At 30 shillings for a bound copy, it still had a while to go before it could be in the hand of the ploughman and milkmaid, but the process had well and truly begun. And much of the style and content of Tyndale's translation (some estimates suggest as much as 80%) found its way into the new Bible.

A smaller committee oversaw the final revisions. In a spirit of humility and con-

sultation, each listened to the passages in their particular language of expertise to come to consensus on an English wording.

Writers, both secular and religious, around the globe, have commented on the enduring power of this English Bible, and the impact it has had – and still has – on the language we speak.

The translators were given the brief to make their translation formal, so that it sounded "old" even in 1611. ("Thou" and "thee" were well into the process of becoming "you", and the "eth" endings of verbs were already being widely dropped, for example.)

So there's no wonder it hits the modern ear as dated, for all its original majesty and rhythm. The translation contains a number of errors, some of which have become apparent because of modern scholarship. All languages are living, evolving things, and words develop and change meaning. (A dictionary only captures the usage of words at a point in time.) So it is an important and necessary process that translations continue to be worked on and refined, and there is no such thing as the one and only true, received text that alone should be used.

As we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the KJV publication, we give thanks for the work of the Spirit in all of this, and remember we don't worship a book, or formulation of words, but the One whom the words reveal to us – the Word, Jesus Christ.

OUTLOOK OF HOPE IN SIERRA LEONE



Mercy Ships brings hope and healing to the poor – including Isatu ...

FOR THE BETTER part of a day, Isatu sat on her hospital bed staring at the reflection of her face in a mirror.

Despite the three thin strips of translucent bandage, she could see that the volunteer doctors on the Africa Mercy had corrected the cleft lip that had kept her isolated from people throughout her whole life. She was amazed. She could hardly grasp the fact that she would now smile like everyone else.

Isatu was born with a cleft lip that created an unpleasant, even angry, expression on her face. It disrupted her upper lip and front teeth ... and her entire life. She had spent her 13 years at home, helping her mother keep house for the family, which included a sister and two brothers.

Since West African culture views deformi-

ties as a sign of a curse, the cleft lip prevented Isatu from making friends and going to school.

Then hope appeared in the form of a radio advertisement. A Mercy Ship was coming to Sierra Leone, bringing surgeons who could fix cleft lips. Isatu was delighted.

At the Mercy Ships medical screening, Isatu's father described her as a very friendly girl who is a big help at home. But she sat expressionless as he spoke. Her father answered all questions for her. Quiet and withdrawn, she did not speak to anyone – a defence mechanism learned from years of being shunned.

Isatu was the first patient to receive the priceless appointment card for cleft lip surgery in the Sierra Leone Field Service. And what a difference the surgery made in her life. Almost overnight, she was transformed from a very sombre girl to one who giggled about everything and made friends among patients recuperating in the ward. The successful cleft lip surgery gave her a whole new perspec-

tive on herself and on her life, evident in the beautiful new smile she generously bestowed on everyone.

When Isatu's brother arrived to take her home, his delight with Isatu's successful surgery was obvious. He even revealed that because of the difference the surgery had made, Isatu was to be enrolled in adult education classes, followed by training to become a seamstress. Isatu beamed as she realized she would soon be preparing for a productive life.

With pride and affection, her brother said, "Now she can get married and have a family." Getting married and having children is of prime importance to young women in Sierra Leone, a goal previously prohibited by Isatu's cleft lip.

Outlook of Hope is the name of one of the projects being undertaken by volunteers serving with the international charity Mercy Ships during the current ten-month assignment to the West Africa nation of Sierra Leone, one of the world's poorest countries.

Mercy Ships is working with Sierra Leone's Ministry of Health, Smile Train and local surgeons to provide specialized surgeries that will result in life-changing and, in many cases, life-saving changes.

Through the project, Mercy Ships expects to provide up to 650 surgeries for patients affected by maxillofacial deformities, including tumours, complications of injury or infection; more than 150 cleft lip and palate repairs; counseling and other services to help patients return to society; along with required physical, occupational and speech therapy services.

Meeting the need

One of the greatest problems affecting people living in developing nations is the lack of available and affordable health care. Infrastructure is either substandard

or simply non-existent. In response to such need Mercy Ships offers a range of health care services free of charge. Highly skilled surgeons on board the ships perform thousands of operations each year to correct disability, disfigurement and blindness. Medical and dental teams travel the country and establish clinics to provide vaccination programs, dental treatment, HIV/AIDS education, and basic health care for those with no access to these facilities. Local community health workers receive training in hygiene, nutrition and disease prevention.

Mercy Ships drills water wells and improves sanitation, builds hospitals, clinics, training facilities and basic housing where none exist. Agricultural projects help replenish livestock in war-torn areas and boost food production. Working in partnership with local people, Mercy Ships empowers

communities to help themselves. In all of its programs Mercy Ships provides vocational training as well as meeting immediate needs. The result is a way out of poverty.

The unique feature of the charity is that almost all who serve are volunteers, paying their own way and raise their own support to serve short-term for a few weeks to long-term in a career capacity.

The charity operates only on invitation from and with full cooperation of the nation's government, or the United Nations.

For more information about supporting Mercy Ships with a donation or for information about volunteering, visit www.mercyships.org.au or call (07) 5437 2992.



Mercy to millions

MERCY SHIPS is a global charity that has operated hospital ships in developing nations since 1978 providing free health care and community development services to the forgotten poor. Following the example of Jesus, Mercy Ships brings hope and healing to the poor.

The emphasis is on the needs of the world's poorest nations in West Africa, where the world's largest charity hospital ship Africa Mercy, with a crew of more than 450 volunteers, provides the platform for services extending up to ten months at a time. Mercy Ships works on land-based projects in Sierra Leone in partnership with other organisations, while teams also work in several nations of Central America

and the Caribbean. Mercy Ships Australia, one of 15 international support offices, is based on the Queensland Sunshine Coast. www.mercyships.org.au

Volunteers serving with Mercy Ships have had an impact on the lives of millions of people in the world's poorest nations. Mercy Ships has provided services valued at more than \$800 million, touching the lives of nearly 3 million people. Some of the more notable statistics include:

- Performed more than 56,000 free surgeries such as cleft lip and palate, cataract removal, straightening of crossed-eyes, orthopedic and facial reconstruction, and obstetric fistula repair.
- Treated more than 520,000 people in village medical and dental clinics.
- Educated about 29,000 local health care workers, who have in turn trained many thousands in primary health care.
- Trained local medical professionals in modern health care techniques.
- Completed more than 1,100 community development projects including construction of schools, clinics, orphanages, water wells and agriculture programs.
- Demonstrated the love of God to people in 70 different nations.
- Enabled more than 1,200 volunteers from more than 40 nations to serve with Mercy Ships each year.
- Completed over 563 port visits in 53 developing nations and 17 developed nations.

Australian aid dollars have contributed to significant declines in child deaths, gains in school enrolments and the provision of clean water and sanitation for the world's poorest people, says a report released recently by World Vision Australia.



IT MAY NOT BE PERFECT, BUT Overseas aid IS HELPING millions

RICH NATIONS SPEND just one third of one percent of their income on aid each year. Global military spending was 13 times higher than all aid from wealthy countries in 2009 and more is spent on soft drink each year than aid for poor countries," World Vision CEO Tim Costello said.

"Despite this small investment in aid, the report shows it's having a big impact. And that should give Australians confidence that their aid dollars are going to good use. According to the report, since 1990, global aid efforts have helped prevent 45 million child deaths and an additional 1.8 billion people have gained access to improved water sources.

"An extra 40 million children have received a basic education each year since 2000. The number of women dying from pregnancy related causes has also dropped and the number of people dying from AIDS is on the decline."

Rev. Costello said World Vision program results listed in the report, *Effective Aid: Helping Millions* – which calculates the impact of aid over the past 20 years – shows the 10 countries who receive the most Australian aid have all shown significant progress in combating poverty (with the exception of Afghanistan which is affected by ongoing conflict).

"World Vision has worked for a number of years now in a region in Peru called Lamay. Before we started working there child deaths and malnutrition were very high," he said. "However, between 2000 and 2006, the malnutrition rate dropped from 66 percent

to 39 percent and the number of women who gave birth in a health clinic instead of at home rose from 30 percent to 90 percent. World Vision's project has clearly contributed to some remarkable changes in the health of the Lamay community."

The report notes that overseas aid is complex and involves working in environments with many challenges that may include extremes of poverty and injustice, weak government, corruption, powerful belief systems and inter-country politics. While the challenges are large, the level of aid resources from donor governments is relatively low – just one-third of one percent of donor country income.

Given the huge issues involved in overseas aid and the relatively few resources available, you would expect that not much is achieved by giving aid. However, the report cites evidence that this is definitely not the case, suggesting aid is one of the most effective investments that donor countries can make.

Health, education, and water and sanitation support are among the areas of aid that the report cites as indicative of the positive impact aid is having.

Health

Good health and the provision of health services are fundamental to poverty relief. In many ways health outcomes are the ultimate test of any global aid program and nothing shows the impact of aid better than its effect on the health of children.

Since 1990, there has been a 36 percent reduction in the number of children who have died, from over 12 million to around 8 million each year. This amazing improvement has resulted from a combination of economic growth, technological advances and the provision of aid. Aid's role has been large – it has helped to provide clean water, skilled birth attendants, better nutrition, child immunisation, antimalarial mosquito nets, medicine and new technologies for childhood diseases. It has helped to ensure that health services have reached the poorest and has also

played a large role in educating parents and children in better health practices.

The Global Fund estimates that the investment of US\$10 billion between 2002 and 2009 has prevented 4.9 million deaths – this is an average cost of approximately A\$2,300 per life saved. This means that, with the increases planned, the Australian aid program should be able to prevent at least 500,000 deaths each year by 2015.

Education

Education is another critical factor in poverty reduction. However, there are still millions of children in the world unable to complete even primary education because their families cannot afford the costs of school or require them to go to work for the family. This is a particular problem for girls who are often removed from school when family economic conditions are tight.

There has been significant progress on improving children's access to school, with an extra 40 million children receiving basic education each year compared with 2000. Aid has been one of the major factors that has increased the access of children in poor communities to education – aid has funded school facilities, equipment and text books, and has helped to improve curriculum, staff training and education system management.

Water and sanitation

Access to clean water and knowledge of hygiene are essential aspects of improved health. Since 1990, an additional 1.8 billion people have gained access to an improved water source and an additional 1.3 billion have sanitation. Economic development and aid underlie these improvements.

Australia's international aid program has supported effective water and sanitation programs in a number of countries through technical advice, assisting developing countries to access infrastructure loans, and through the direct provision of water and sanitation facilities in urban and rural areas.

Despite a growing world population, the

proportion of people without access to these essential services is continuing to fall.

Other aid success

Australia and other donor nations support an international network of agricultural research centres that focus on improving crop and livestock productivity in developing countries – aid has been critical in helping global agricultural production keep pace with population growth and will be essential to help adapt agriculture to the effects of climate change.

Assistance with economic governance has helped to improve the macro-economic stability and growth prospects of a large number of countries and is also helping developing countries to reduce their dependence on aid by generating more of their resources domestically through improved taxation systems.

Overseas aid supports some of the poorest and most marginalised people – those who often have the least power and the least say in their country. Aid, for example, has supported women's groups throughout the world, ensured the provision of services for refugee groups and minorities, and helped to enhance protection of children from exploitation and trafficking.

Aid is also helping to reduce corruption by providing technical assistance to improve judicial systems and anti-corruption bodies, and by supporting poor communities to hold their local, state and national governments to account. Examples include funding for participatory mechanisms to assess the quality of government services and the implementation of more transparent budget processes.

The World Vision report shows an increase in the aid budget and a greater focus on essential services could save an extra 500,000 lives annually.

Like most large scale and complex human activities – aid is not perfect. However, it is a proven, critical part of helping to reduce poverty and build a fairer, more prosperous and more secure life for all people in the small world in which we now live.

In fact, aid that is well targeted, evidence-based and aligned with a community's needs is one of the most cost-effective and productive investments that wealthy countries can make.

World Vision's Effective Aid: Helping Millions report is available at: https://www.worldvision.com.au/Libraries/Reports/WVAReport_Effective_Aid_2011.sflb.ashx



Logan street diner – becoming part of each others' lives

by Amanda Chivers

ALMOST SIX YEARS ago, our church searched for a way to connect with our community without imposing the formal structures of church on them. Together with a man known as "Phil Can Do" – a man who almost lost it all and decided to give back to God what he could – and Dorothy, a veteran of the street van concept, were formed a motley crew to start a street van in Logan city, Queensland.

In the beginning, the sausages were cooked on a small BBQ off the back of Phil's truck, but as time went on and through God's grace we eventually built and improved the van. Every second Friday from February to December, we have been there to offer food, a hot drink, company, a laugh and even a shoulder to cry on. Our volunteers have come from many different walks, some regular and some come just occasionally, but all are valued. We have settled into a routine of cooks, servers, listeners and counsellors, providing a safe and stable environment for our visitors.

Not all our visitors are homeless, indeed many have homes but struggle financially. Others just need some company. If it looks like rain, some of our regulars will ring to confirm if the van is on. To them it is an important part of their week. It is easy to get caught up in the lives of our regulars and we have made some good friendships out of it. Over the years we have seen relationships blossom and some of our new friends have moved on to new lives.

Being involved in the food van has been a real eye opener to me especially in the way God works in ALL our lives. He doesn't care how intelligent we are or how much money we make each week. What he does care about is how we treat each other and what sort of blessing we are to others. All of us who work on the van have stories of how we have seen this in action. How people who seemed only interested in taking what we had to offer at first, begin to bring and give and show appreciation. Of demanding turning into asking and thanking. Of regulars becoming helpers. The food van has become as much a part of their lives as ours.

We are deeply grateful to all those individuals and businesses who have supported this outreach financially and with gifts of food. Without those contributions we would struggle to continue as effectively as we do. The van doesn't only run on food – there are things like tyres and coffee pots to replace from time to time as well. It's comforting to know we have the means to maintain our outreach.

This year began with devastating floods in southeast Queensland and we took the van out three times to different areas to provide food and support to the volunteers and those whose homes were affected. For some of the visitors to the van, a cold drink and an ear to listen was all they wanted.

We pray that we can be a blessing to those in the community who come to us, and support all those involved in the operation of the Logan Street Diner.

Glass HALF-FULL theology

by Rick Shallenberger

YOU ARE FAMILIAR with the old adage of looking at a glass and seeing it as half empty or half full. The idea is that if you are an optimist, you will see the glass half full. If you are a pessimist, you will see the glass as half empty. I tend to be a glass half full type of person. But I wasn't always that way—especially when it came to my spiritual life.

When I was younger, I tended to lean toward the glass-half-empty view of my life with God. Whatever I did, however good I tried to be, it was never enough. I always felt condemned, because I knew I was a sinner.

My view was fairly simple. God was good and holy; humans were evil. I memorized a few scriptures that reminded me that there is none good, that all have sinned and fallen short, that the human heart is desperately wicked, etc. These verses, standing apart from the rest of the Bible, framed my thinking about God, about Jesus, and about myself.

Because of our sinful nature, I believed, God the Father had turned his back on mankind, and the Son had to give up his equality with the Father to build that bridge back to him. Jesus came to earth and lived a perfect life, only to die on a cross to pay the penalty for my sins. I knew I could spend the rest of my life doing good and I'd never be able to repay Jesus for his sacrifice. My half-empty-glass approach to life kept me focused on the human plight—the human failure.

Then one day when I was reading the book of Romans, God began to open my eyes to his love and grace. I started to see the glass as half full, not half empty. I saw that the Bible focused on salvation, redemption, and deliverance, not on sin and weakness. The great themes of the Bible do not dwell on human weakness, but on God's steadfast love and faithfulness to redeem and deliver. God got my mind and focus off of me and on to Christ. The glass became half full when I started to see what Christ gave me—forgiveness, acceptance, love, adoption, inclusion.

Seeing Christ at the center of everything increased my faith in the God who gives us the gift of salvation simply because he loves us.

My biblical, spiritual and theological glass is now half full, and as a pastor, I rejoice when I see others' glasses becoming half full as they see God's word not as condemnation but as a constant affirmation of God's love, acceptance and inclusion.

With the assurance of God's faithfulness, demonstrated by Christ, testified to in the Scriptures, and ministered to us by the Holy Spirit, I yearn for the day when the ascended Christ will appear, and we'll all finally see the glass neither as half empty nor as half full, but as totally full!

Rick Shallenberger is pastor of Christ Fellowship Church, a GCI congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio.



Place Your Life Before God

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognise what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. "

– Romans 12:1-2 (The Message)



Hmmm ...

"A man may say, 'I am going to church to worship God,' but he should also be able to say, 'I am going to the factory, the shop, the office, the school, the garage ... the mine, the shipyard, the field ... to worship God' ... When Christ becomes the centre of life then we can present real worship, which is the offering of every moment and every action to God."

– William Barclay

"The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment."

– Dorothy Nevill

"Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility."

– Saint Augustine

"I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others. Be gentle and you can be bold; be frugal and you can be liberal; avoid putting yourself before others and you can become a leader among men."

– Lao-Tzu

"We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results."

– Herman Melville