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Growing Together in Life & Faith

What Happens When We Die?

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What Rings Your Bell?

Last week, accompanied by my longtime friend and colleague Curtis May, I visited the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky. Curtis is director of the Office of Reconciliation Ministries (ORM)*, dedicated to bringing healing and reconciliation to people divided by racism and prejudice.

The Center is a fascinating tribute to a remarkable man. Like Curtis, Ali grew up in a segregated America, and the Center has some poignant reminders of what some parts of this country were like before the Civil Rights Act. On one floor there is a display set up as a typical 1950s diner. But as you go to sit down at the counter, an angry voice calls out “Hey, you! What do you think you’re doing? We don’t want your kind in here.”

Curtis suddenly stopped, and for a moment a look of—yes, it was fear—crossed his face. He quickly recovered, realizing this was all part of the display. But that moment of fear was real.

Later we discussed it. “That announcement really rang your bell, didn’t it?” I asked.

“You noticed that?” Curtis replied. He admitted that for a moment that voice had resurrected memories of his early years in segregated Alabama, in a time when announcements like that were part of daily life. Although those days, thank God, are long gone in most places, the memories linger on, and the old wounds can be easily reopened.

Perhaps you have never been the victim of that kind of prejudice. But we all have had things done to us, or that we have done to others, that we wish we could put behind us. We think they are, to use religious language, “overcome.” Then a sud-

den temptation, a random encounter, or some stray words trigger the old response. The bell, that you hoped had been disconnected, is still wired in and can make you revert to a person you no longer want to be.

For a moment, my friend, an educated, mature and experienced pastor, was once again a hapless victim of prejudice. His response was fear. What is yours when that bell suddenly rings? Is it anger? Or greed? Lust, maybe? Do old resentments you thought were long buried bubble to the surface? Do you discover that lurking inside you there is still a racist, a drunkard, a bully or a liar? Or perhaps a personality stunted by an inferiority complex?

It is moments like this that we can really identify with Paul’s admission of weakness. “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15). Paul, the great apostle and relentless evangelist, realized that his old sins could, at times, still take him captive (v. 23).

This world is a brutal and unforgiving place. We will carry some of its scars and wounds with us until we die. And from time to time, when we least expect it, those wounds can be reopened and elicit a less than God-honoring response.

Is there no way out? Thankfully, yes. Paul put it well when he went on to conclude: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” And I am certainly looking forward to that day when what Christ has done for me is perfectly worked out in me by his Holy Spirit.

*atimetoreconcile.org/

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P.S. This is my last editorial as editor of *Christian Odyssey*. I have enjoyed sitting in the editor’s chair for the last seven years, but the time has come to move over. I still plan to write, but *Christian Odyssey* is now an online magazine, and I think it needs an editor who is more familiar with that environment, and who can guide us safely to where we need to go next. **co**

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What Happens When We Die?

What could I say that was not an empty platitude, and above all—was true?

By John Halford

A funeral is never easy, but this one was going to be particularly difficult. Janet seemed to be a successful, attractive person with a lively sense of humor. Then her life fell apart.

Her husband abandoned her in a messy divorce. Her real estate business collapsed. Then she learned that she had terminal cancer. It was too much. One day she pinned a note to her garage door, saying, “I am in here. But call the emergency services first.” Then she took a shotgun and killed herself. The family, stunned and trying to make sense of Janet’s death, had her cremated, as Janet wanted, but they also wanted a funeral. They asked me to officiate.

The funeral was well attended and represented all parts of the religious spectrum with many different ideas about Janet. Some were convinced she was in heaven with Jesus. Others believed she was asleep, awaiting the resurrection. Some likely believed she was in purgatory (but surely not for long, as she was a devout and sincere Christian). A few were convinced that since Janet had taken her own life, God had sent her straight to hell. So who was right? Or were they all wrong? What, precisely, has God told us happens to us when we die?

Death is a frontier, and it is one we rightly fear to even ap-

proach, let alone cross. It is, as Paul wrote, an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and we hold it at bay as long as possible. But eventually it conquers us all. Then what? Most people have some kind of belief that death is not the end. So what could I say at this funeral that was not just an empty platitude, but was true?

What Scripture says

The answer is not what you might expect. God has not told us *precisely* what happens immediately after we die. He has told us that, in and because of Jesus, we have victory over death. Jesus assured us that he is anxious for us to join him to experience life in a way that we mortals cannot begin to imagine, and his promise is that this new life will last forever. But beyond that, the Bible is frustratingly vague about the details. Especially the details of what happens *immediately* after we die. Note the emphasis on “immediately.”

Some scriptures suggest that the dead are safely “asleep,” and so, we can surmise, they will know nothing until the moment of resurrection when Jesus returns (1 Corinthians 15:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:14). But others imply that they are in some way conscious and experience emotions.

Paul had no fear of physical death. He had, at some time in his eventful life, been given a “visitor’s pass” view of heaven,

transforming his worldview. Life “here below” had become difficult, and he was eager to begin the next stage. So he wrote to the Philippians, “As long as I’m alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I’d choose. Hard choice! The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better” (Philippians 1:22-23, *The Message*).

But what did he mean by “be with Christ?” He does not elaborate.

John, the author of Revelation, also talks about “seeing” heaven. “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed, as they had been, was completed” (Revelation 6:9-11).

Further complicating the issue is Jesus’ own words. Just before he died, he asked the Father to receive his spirit (Luke 23:46). Shortly before that, he made a promise to the repentant thief suffering crucifixion beside him. This man believed that,

Janet’s days of pain and despair are over. Whatever her current state, her future is secure in the arms of a loving God. This is what those who loved her needed to know.

after death, good people go to “paradise.” Although he had not been a good man, he realized that Jesus had, so he begged him to remember him in whatever came next.

Jesus reassured him: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

So you see, the Bible does not really give us a specific, unambiguous answer to the question of what happens to us *immediately* after we die. It does however make it clear that death is a cutoff point. One phase of your existence is finished; another is about to begin. It is as if God is saying, “Don’t worry about it. Leave it to me. I have things under control.”

Jesus shows us what it’s like

What Scripture does emphasize is what theologian N.T. Wright has called “the life after life after death,” in a new heavens and a new earth. All our clues for this life come from Jesus.

When Jesus died on the cross, the Father received his spirit, but three days later, Jesus was resurrected and then later ascended.

He was resurrected with a body. A real, recognizable body, with genuine body parts—not a wispy, ethereal manifestation that could be made to look like a body when he wanted to make himself visible. This spiritual body was a new life form—a permanent, everlasting version of what he had been before—a

human being made immortal. No longer bound by the limitations of time and space, Jesus could move back and forth from within the dimensions we experience to those that are beyond our reach, although not necessarily beyond our imagination.

The Bible also tells us that what happened to Jesus will also happen to us. “Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). But it’s not just a matter of “seeing” him—as glorious as that may be. Revelation 21 speaks of us living with God—of having fellowship with him; that is the purpose for which we have been made and the purpose for which we have been given salvation. We will live with the Triune God in never-ending love, joy, and peace. We are given exceedingly great and precious promises, Paul says, and God will do more for us that we can even think to ask or imagine.

This, then, is the Bible’s focus when it speaks of life after death: Jesus himself is the new and living way (Hebrews 10:20).

Our new life will certainly be a rest from anxiety, feelings of guilt and the limitations of our frail bodies. But, more, it will be filled with activity and experiences—all you could possibly want in this life—and much, much, more. Eternity will not be spent in a sort of nebulous nether world, utterly alien to everything

we have experienced and everything we enjoy.

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” wrote Paul to the Corinthians. He added, “but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10 NIV 1984).

Right now we only have a few tantalizing glimpses. We can get foretastes of it when we experience the wonderful things about being alive now. Human love, hard-won accomplishment, deep friendships and acts of genuine unselfishness—those moments when we think, “I wish life were always like this” give us “flash forwards” to another kind of existence. It is the way we were meant to live, the way the world could be—and *will be* one day. They encourage us to join Jesus Christ in hoping and waiting for it with, as Paul said, “joyful anticipation.”

So, could it be that the joyful anticipation continues in some way immediately after our physical death? Although we should not be dogmatic, there is enough in the Scriptures to show this is a strong possibility.

This is what was going through my mind as I pondered what to say at Janet’s funeral. We were saying goodbye to a loved one, but I believe God was saying, “Hello. Welcome—not to your eternal rest—but to the rest of eternity.”

When she took her life, Janet confronted her last enemy. She will never meet another one. Her days of pain and despair are over. Whatever her current state, her future is secure in the arms of a loving God. This is what those who loved her needed to know.

I walked out into the chapel, faced the audience and said, “In this little urn is all that is left of Janet that does God does not want.”

Then I told them the rest of the truth. **co**



By Rick Shallenberger

The love of God is Foolishness Don't blame me for saying this; blame the apostle Paul. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul said he was not there to preach signs to placate the Jews or to preach wisdom to placate the Greeks; he was there to preach Christ crucified. His message was "a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

From a human perspective, God's love simply does not make sense. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (v. 18). To those who don't know that the cross is a message of God's love, it is foolish to believe God would save us by dying.

Indeed, God's love is unbelievable, it's preposterous, it's profound, it's radical.

From splendor to squalor

Think about it. You live in absolute perfection. You are the epitome of unity and communion. Your life is embodied by love, joy and peace, and you decide to radically alter everything.

I just described the beginning of creation, when Father, Son and Holy Spirit lived in perfect unity, in absolute communion. They are of one mind, one goal, one passion. Their existence is embodied by love, joy and peace.

And they decide to change everything by sharing all that they are with something not yet created. So they create humanity and call us the children of the Father. They created men and

women, you and me, to enjoy relationship with them for eternity. But they created us with a caveat. They did not want to demand we behave a certain way in order to be in that relationship. They wanted us to choose to be in that relationship. So they gave us freedom of choice.

And because they gave us this choice, they knew most would choose poorly. So they created the plan. Not a back-up plan, not Plan B, but the plan. And this plan was for God the Son to become human and for God the human to go to the cross and die. That's foolishness, to most. That's radical love.

I recently visited a country in Asia where people worship literally hundreds of deities. Followers spend their lives trying to gain favor with these gods. They want to keep the gods happy so they won't be cursed. They spend their lives afraid they aren't doing enough. The idea that one of their gods would become human to help them, out of love, would seem absolutely foolish to them.

He took all of our filth and foolishness upon himself and made us clean before our Papa/Father. That's radical love.

The Son, however, did not think it was foolish. It was a decision based on love. He loved us enough to throw off his robe of light and attach himself to the placenta of a young Jewish girl. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). That seems a foolish thing for a God to do. That's radical love.

A friend of sinners

As a human, he lived with fishermen and tax collectors—the normal and the despised of society. He spent time with lepers, the demon possessed, and sinners. The religious leaders called him foolish. That’s radical love.

In John 8 we read that when a woman caught in adultery was brought before him, the leaders wanted to stone her. But Jesus said, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” They all left. And Jesus, the only one who was without sin, said, “I don’t condemn you. Go and stop doing what you are doing.” Foolishness to many. That’s radical love.

Jesus ate in the homes of sinners. Foolishness, the religious leaders said, he’s not keeping himself pure. Their sins will influence him. He will become like them. Radical love says, no; by loving sinners, they will become like Jesus.

Jesus—Son of God and Son of Man—allowed himself to be arrested, tortured and murdered so that by his shed blood we could be redeemed, forgiven and reconciled. He took all of our filth and foolishness upon himself and made us clean before our Papa/Father. That’s radical love.

Then he was buried. On the third day he rose from the grave to move beyond giving us redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation. He rose from the grave to give us life. He told his disciples, “When I go I will return, and when I return I will be in you and you will be in me” (John 14:20). That’s crazy talk. That’s radical love; that’s radical life.

He then ascended to our Father and, because of “his great love with which he loved us,”—this “foolish” radical love—“even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:4-6, ESV). Yes, while still sinners—before we even had the chance to repent—God took us in and loved us.

This is radical love. It is in and through Jesus the Son of the Father that we are included. That same Father then placed us—with Jesus—at his right hand. Then that same Father invited us to participate in what he is doing—sharing that radical love and that radical life with others.

God’s plan is foolishness to many. It’s a plan of radical love.

Radical obedience

Notice how Eugene Peterson translated Philippians 2:5-11 in *The Message*:

“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an

incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

“Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11, *The Message*).

That’s RADICAL love.

A living example

Jesus died for all humanity because of love that appears foolish. And he has invited us to participate in this love that sometimes makes no sense, but helps others understand radical love. Let me share one such example of radical love.

We have a ministry partner in Nepal—Deben Sam. Almost every week after church Deben goes to the village where we have a free medical clinic for the poorest of the poor in and around

Sharing the message of the cross is sharing the experience of the radical, transforming love of Jesus. In fact, the whole of Christianity is based on love—the life-giving love of Jesus and his followers.

the brickyards of Kathmandu. Nearby, Deben has built a farm project for the churches and the orphans, and here is one area where Deben shares the gospel. A short time ago, Deben was robbed and severely beaten on his way home and accused of bringing false hope to the village. He was accused of bringing religious pollution—his message is considered foolishness to those who do not know the message of the cross.

Our ministry partner, who has since recovered, practices radical love. The very love God has asked us to share with all—even those whom we consider enemies. That’s how we lay down our lives for others.

Sharing the message of the cross—the message of God’s love—is sharing the experience of the radical, transforming love of Jesus. In fact, the whole of Christianity is based on love—the life-giving love of Jesus and his followers. It’s foolish love, and sometimes, humanly speaking, it simply doesn’t make sense. It’s not a love we know with our intellect, but with our hearts. It’s radical love.

Easter is about the love a Papa/Father has for all of his children—including those who don’t know they are his beloved. The Father gave his Son. His Son gave his life. He died for ALL. He rose from the grave for ALL. His love is for ALL—those who know him, those who don’t know him yet.

This is Radical Love. **co**



I've Been **Taken;** I've Been **Rescued**

By Tim Shipman

A movie came out a few years ago entitled *Taken* that really made me think about my love for my children and God's love for all. The movie is about a father whose daughter goes to Europe with a friend and ends up "taken." She is abducted by a professional kidnapping ring that grabs unsuspecting victims and sells them into slavery. Every time I see this movie my heart leaps, and I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck.

I know this happens, and I can't imagine the terror the girl experiences and the fear and hopelessness the family goes through. Second, the story causes me some personal anxiety because my daughter is majoring in international studies and recently spent a semester in Argentina. She has also been to Spain and Ireland. She plans to travel a lot, and that makes me nervous at times.

So when I see the first part of the movie, where the daughter is on her cell phone with her father and he tells her, "They are going to take you," and then we hear his daughter screaming as she is pulled from under her bed, I just want to run to my daughter, no matter where she is, and grab her and hug her and confirm my love for her. I feel the pain this father is suffering—knowing his daughter is going through almost unbearable trauma of her own. Of course the rest of the movie is about the father rescuing his daughter.

The movie always makes me focus on the primal urge I have to protect my children and to what lengths I would go to rescue one who was taken or in trouble. Just like the father in the movie, I'd do just about anything humanly possible to save any of my children, and woe to anyone who stands in the way of my trying to protect them.

I also know that my love for my children—the love that doesn't let anything stand between us and our children—is from our heavenly Father. Our Papa/Father loves us so much he was not

willing to let anything come between him and us. That "us" means you and me and every person ever created.

Taken into slavery

I haven't been taken by a professional kidnapping ring that wants to sell me into slavery, at least not in the literal sense. But truth be told, the enemy did all he could to kidnap humanity and sell us into slavery to our sins. Like the girl in the movie, we were all sold into darkness, and that darkness became a way of life. But God doesn't leave us in our darkness.

Our heavenly Father stopped at nothing to rescue us from our darkness. He gave us his Son (John 3:16). And the Son stopped at nothing to rescue us. He gave up his life. This season, which includes Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, is about our rescue from darkness. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul refers to God stopping at nothing for us. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians 1:3-4).

The Easter season reminds us that Jesus died for us because he loves us. He took all our darkness upon himself; he became our darkness and our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), and he paid the ultimate penalty for sin—death. But the story doesn't end at his death. Jesus took our darkness so we could be reconciled to our Father, so we could be restored to right relationship with God. Jesus rose from the grave to embrace us and take us to the Father (Ephesians 2:4-6).

Near the end of the movie, we see the father and daughter wrapped in a joyful and love-filled embrace. This is how I've always pictured the embrace between my Father and me. I know I've been rescued, and I know he rescued me because of his love for me. I know Jesus gave his all for me because of the joy of bringing me out of darkness and into his glorious light (Hebrews 12:2). I was taken, but I've been rescued, and so have you. **co**

Do We Teach **Universalism?**

By Joseph Tkach

Some who criticize Trinitarian theology claim that it teaches universalism—the belief that everyone will be saved, regardless of whether they are good or bad, repentant or unrepentant, accepting or rejecting Jesus, and, consequently, there is no such thing as hell.

The problem with this is that it is simply not true. Trinitarian theology does not teach universalism. The noted Swiss theologian Karl Barth did not teach it. Neither theologians Thomas F. Torrance nor James B. Torrance taught it. Neither does Perichoresis Ministries director Baxter Kruger, author of *The Shack* William Paul Young, nor Grace Communion International.

GCI's website clearly states our position on universalism:

“Universalism is a biblically unsound doctrine, which says that in the end all souls, whether human, angelic or demonic, will be saved by God's grace. Some Universalists argue that repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ are irrelevant. Universalists typically deny the doctrine of the Trinity, and many Universalists are Unitarians. Contrary to universalism, the Bible teaches that there is salvation only in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). In Jesus Christ, who is God's elect for our sakes, all humanity is elect, but that does not necessarily mean that all humans will ultimately accept God's free gift. God desires that all come to repentance, and he has created and redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, but true fellowship can never constitute a forced relationship. We believe that in Christ, God makes gracious and just provision for all, even for those who at death appear not to have yet believed the gospel, but all who remain hostile to God remain unsaved by their own choice.”

Those who claim that Trinitarian theology teaches universalism are either being dishonest or suffer from poor scholarship. Careful students of the Bible recognize that whereas we need not

rule out the idea that God will save everyone, the scriptures are not conclusive. Therefore we should not be dogmatic about this issue.

The early church not dogmatic on hell

But why should the very idea of the possibility of salvation for all arouse such hostility and accusations of “heresy”? The creeds of the early church were not dogmatic on the nature of hell. The metaphors are of flames, outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. They are meant to convey what it's like for a person to be lost forever in a self-enclosed “world,” with his own selfish heart, his own selfish desires, adamantly rejecting the source of all love, all goodness, all truth. These metaphors are, if taken literally, conflicting. But metaphors are not intended to be taken literally—they illustrate various aspects of the topic. What we gain from them is that hell, whatever it is, is not where we want to be.

However, to ardently desire for all humanity to be saved and for no one to suffer in hell does not necessarily make you a heretic. What Christian would not want every person who ever lived to repent, receive forgiveness and experience reconciliation with God? The idea of all humanity being transformed by the Spirit of

Those who claim that Trinitarian theology teaches universalism are either being dishonest or suffer from poor scholarship.

Christ and in heaven together in relationship is something to be desired. That is, in fact, exactly what God desires—that all come to repentance and not suffer the consequences of the rejection of his gracious provision for them. God wants this because he loves the world (Greek, *kosmos*), just as we read in John 3:16. God tells us to love and forgive our enemies because he loves his enemies,

as Jesus loved and served even his betrayer Judas Iscariot at his last supper (John 13:1, 26) and on the cross (Luke 23:34).

The biblical revelation does not offer any guarantee that all will necessarily accept God's forgiveness. It warns that there very well may be people who will refuse God's love and reject the redemption and the adoption he has for them. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that anyone would make such a choice. And it is even more difficult to imagine that any would persist in rebellion against having a loving relationship with him. As C.S. Lewis described in *The Great Divorce*, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside."

God's desire for everyone

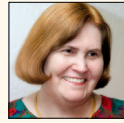
Universalism should not be confused with the universal or cosmic scope of the effectiveness of the saving work of Christ. In Jesus Christ, who is God's elect for our sakes, all humanity is elect. That does not mean we can say for certain that all humans will ultimately accept God's gift. But surely we can hope that is the case.

God himself desires that all come to repentance, as Peter expressed, "Not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NASB). Moreover, God has done everything possible to save us from the terrible and horrific situation that is hell. Yet, in the end, God will not violate the deliberate and persistent choice of those who willfully and deliberately reject his love and turn away from him. For God to override their minds, wills and hearts, he would have to undo their humanity and "uncreate" them. But then there would be no human being to freely receive his costly gift of grace, life in Jesus Christ. He has created and redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, but that true fellowship can never be constituted by a forced relationship.

The Bible does not blur the difference between believer and unbeliever, and neither should we. When we say that all people are forgiven, saved and reconciled in Christ, we mean that while we all belong to Christ, not all are in communion with him. While God has reconciled all to himself, not all are yet trusting and living in that reconciliation. So the apostle Paul says: "God was reconciling the world [*kosmos*] in Christ...We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). And that is why ours is a ministry, not of condemnation, but of the announcement of Christ's finished work of reconciliation, just as Paul exhorts us.

That is why we do not agree with or teach any of the various forms of universalism. Rather we bear witness to the biblical revelation and orthodox teaching on God's own character, mind, heart, purpose and attitude towards all manifested in Jesus Christ. We preach the universal or cosmic lordship of Jesus Christ, and so we hope in the cosmic reconciliation of all those created according to his image. Since the Bible does communicate that it is God's desire for all to come to him in repentance to receive his gracious and costly forgiveness, why would that not also be the desire for all followers of Jesus? Should we desire for others something less than God desires? **co**

Agreeing to Disagree



Many of us assume that everyone we meet should like us. I have no such unrealistic expectation. How could everyone like me? After all, I don't like everyone I meet. Of course, as Christians, I think we should make an effort to get along with everyone, including (or should I say, especially) each other, even if we don't see eye to eye on everything. However, there is no need to put ourselves in constant contact with someone we don't work well with if we have other options.

Such was the case with Paul and Barnabas. Both Paul and Barnabas were dedicated servants of God. After Paul's conversion he had a difficult time convincing Christians of his sincerity. And rightly so! Was this not the man who had been a vicious persecutor of Christians? It was Barnabas who persuaded the other disciples to give him a chance (Acts 9:26-28), and a friendship formed between the two of them. They even went on a missionary journey together.

Joining them on this journey was Barnabas' cousin, John Mark (Colossians 4:10). For some reason, John Mark decided to return home to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), while Paul and Barnabas completed the mission. John Mark's decision did not sit well with Paul. When another missionary trip was planned and Barnabas suggested taking John Mark again, Paul said "no," and a "sharp contention" developed between them (Acts 15:36-41 KJV). Eventually they agreed to disagree and split up. Paul took Silas on his journey, while Barnabas went with John Mark.

Here were two servants of God who couldn't agree. They decided to go their separate ways. We hear nothing about them bad-mouthing each other. They merely agreed to disagree.

The Bible does not say who was right or who was wrong in this instance. Paul and Barnabas prayed to the same God for guidance, and they reached different conclusions. The point is that in some situations there isn't a right or wrong—just a different point of view.

Years later, Paul mentions Barnabas fondly in 1 Corinthians 9:6 as a co-worker for Christ. He even had a change of heart about John Mark. In 2 Timothy 4:11 he says, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." Circumstances change and so do people. How many of us find ourselves eventually valuing someone we once had little regard for?

No matter how hard we try, we will not get along with everyone. The sooner we realize that, the better off we'll be. Agreeing to disagree can avoid conflict, prevent hasty conclusions and allow time to reevaluate situations. We don't have to see eye to eye on every issue to live heart to heart. **co**

Scripture— God's Gift

By Gary Deddo

In the first article on Scripture (Winter 2012-2013, pages 3-5), we considered how Scripture is a gift of the living and speaking God. But this gift is not one that becomes separated from the giver. By the Spirit, God spoke through the prophets and then the apostles. And God continues to speak by the same Spirit through those God-breathed written words.

If God fell mute and ceased to actively communicate with us in and through those written words, we would not have the true and authoritative word from God that he uses to make himself known. But the living and speaking God of the Bible does not remain at a deistic distance, winding up his Bible and then sending it out to mechanistically convey information *about* God. The very nature of God is to communicate himself, make himself known so that we might communicate with him as his children and so share in holy loving communion.

Scripture points to Jesus

One further point made in the previous issue confirms all this. God's personal act of communication is in and through his Son, the Living Word. The whole of the written words of the prophets and apostles direct our attention to the Living Word, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. This Jesus is God's own self-communication, his own self-revelation to us. Jesus does not give us words from God, he is himself God's Word to us. He expresses the very character of God as a speaking and communicating God. To hear Jesus is to hear God himself speaking to us, directly, in person, face to face.

So Jesus is at the center of the written Word, Scripture. But he is also behind all the words, the whole of the Bible, as its source, as the speech of God to us. He is the original Word and the final Word of God, the Alpha and Omega. In other words, by the incarnation of the Word of God, the author of the written word of God has come into the play, he has shown up in the person of Jesus. And as the author, Jesus himself indicates that he is at the center and behind it all.

When the Pharisees attempt to use Scripture (and their interpretation of it) against Jesus, he confronts them and says: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you

have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40, NRSV throughout). Jesus has to tell them that he is the Lord [author] of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) and that they are in no place to judge him by their pre-understanding of the Sabbath. When the author of Scripture shows up, we have to stop interpreting Jesus in terms of our pre-understandings of Scripture and interpret the written words in terms of Jesus, the Living Word.

Through his interaction with the men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus instructs us how to approach the written word of God. To help these disciples understand who he was and what he had gone through, this is what he did: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). A bit later he explained to them: "'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

The mystery unveiled

The written Word of God is to be interpreted in the light of the Living Word, for the purpose of the written word is to direct us to the Living Word so that we might know who God is and what he has done for us. When we approach all of Scripture with Jesus himself as the interpretive key to it all, then we hear the word of God as it was meant to be heard.

Thomas F. Torrance used to explain it this way. It's like reading a murder-mystery for the second time. The first time we're looking for clues as to "who-done-it." But not everything is clear. Some things make sense and others don't. Some things seem significant; others seem trivial. But in a well-crafted murder mystery, there will be plenty of clues. So many clues, in fact, that when it finally is revealed who committed the crime, we are somewhat surprised but also satisfied that it makes sense. We say, "Yes, there were clues all along. We just didn't know which ones to pay attention to and didn't see how they 'added up.'"

Now, what would happen if we were to read the murder mystery a second time? Knowing "who-done-it," those early clues would not be irrelevant. Rather, we would see how really significant they were. We would be able to sort out the irrelevant clues



The written Word of God is to be interpreted in the light of the Living Word, for the purpose of directing us to God.

from the meaningful ones. Those clues would stand out as even more extraordinary. “No wonder suspect A said X. No wonder suspect B did Y.” We would see what they mean, how they point to who committed the crime. We would end up valuing those clues and foreshadowings even more than on the first reading.

And that’s much what it’s like when properly reading the Bible. Knowing it all leads to what God has done in Jesus Christ, we don’t set that recognition aside. Rather, we interpret the whole of the written Word in terms of its center, the Living Word of God. In that way the whole of Scripture is properly interpreted, the gift of God is properly received.

It helps to know the Author

Another way to say all this is that the Bible itself tells us *whose* Scripture this is. We know who the author is. We know where the Bible came from. It is not anonymous. So another analogy would be: reading the Bible is like reading a letter from someone you know and who knows you, not like getting junk mail from someone you don’t know and who doesn’t know or care about you. Reading these two types of mail are entirely different experiences, aren’t they?

Sometimes when I’ve gotten letters (or even emails) from those I know well, I can almost hear their voices as I read what they wrote. I know just how they’d say it. It sounds “just like them.” Reading the Bible should be like that. The more we get to know the heart, mind, purpose and attitudes of Jesus, the more we’ll hear his voice throughout all of Scripture and see how it points to him, the Son, and his mission as the self-revelation of the Father and the Spirit.

When reading and trying to understand Scripture out of the center of knowing whose scripture it is, another aspect of a proper approach becomes apparent. The primary purpose of all of Scripture is to reveal to us who this God is. That is, central to the message of all the biblical writers is to convey to us the nature, character, purpose and attitudes of our Creator and Redeemer God. They want us above all to know not just that some kind of god exists, but which God in particular and what this God is like. And they want their hearers to know who God is because the God they know wants to be known and is working through them to accomplish just that.

But the revelation that God is accomplishing is not just aimed at abstract, impersonal information. It reveals a God who has created us for relationship, communication, and holy love. Knowing this God involves interaction of faith, trust, praise, adoration, worship, and so we have fellowship and communion that includes our following in his ways; that is, our obedience. This knowing is not just a “knowing about,” but a knowing in a sense similar to how we hear of Adam knowing Eve and so conceiving a child.

By God’s acts of revelation, we come to know deeply who this God really is. Love for this God, the worship of this God, trust or faith in this God are responses to who God is. True knowledge of God that is accurate and faithful leads to true worship and living trust in this God.

Throughout the Old Testament, the most often and widely repeated description of God’s nature and character is his “steadfast love.” In the Psalms alone the Lord’s steadfast love is highlighted nearly 120 times. Psalm 136 uniquely proclaims God’s steadfast love in the refrain of all its 26 verses.

An expanded and slightly more comprehensive description found across the Old Testament echoes what the Lord revealed of himself to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” The Old Testament prophets constantly held out to their hearers the nature and character of God, the only one worthy of their faithfulness and worship. However, the fullness of what God’s steadfast love means does not come into full view until we see it embodied and lived out in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, with his promise to return.

Asking the “who” question

Jesus himself made inquiring about and knowing who he was of paramount importance. His teachings and actions are designed to raise the question: “Who then is this?” His parables prompted

Continues on page 14



Live to Save

By James Henderson

Once I was saved by a taxi driver.

It was the late afternoon in hot and dusty Lagos, Nigeria. I needed to get to the airport from my hotel. I found a taxi and negotiated what I thought to be a reasonable fare.

From the outset, it was clear that I could miss my flight. The traffic was more or less at a standstill. Juggernaut lorries were bearing down on everything and everyone in their path, passengers crammed into dirty buses like hens in battery cages, car horns beeping, radios throbbing out loud polyrhythmic beats, people yelling and laughing. Only the hawkers were moving as they worked their predatory way among the stationary vehicles.

Chased by angry men

"I'll pay you more if you find a shortcut," I told the driver. Suddenly we veered off down what looked like a blind alley. I did not recognize any of the places we passed, and I was more than a little tense. We entered one of Lagos' many shantytowns. How could this be the right direction? We slowed down to turn a corner where a group of five men were hovering. They turned to look at us, and one of them pointed to me in the back of car. They began to chase us. They picked up stones and debris and threw them at the taxi, hurling racist abuse as they went. I am pretty sure they meant to rob me, and who knows what violence would have ensued.

What about my driver? Could I trust him? Would he stop to protect himself? Would he give me up to them? Or would he even join them? All I could see were his eyes reflected in the rear view mirror.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out of this," he said. He drove as fast as he could along the uneven road, but the gang was catching up.

I panicked more when I saw in front of us the mother of all potholes. I had seen potholes of all shapes and sizes in my African travels. This was huge and sprawling. I could not see how deep it was. I thought, "This is it, there's no way out now."

My driver, however, went straight on, drove over its precipice-like edge, slid down into its belly, and then accelerated up over the other side. I looked around to see the men break their run at the rim of the pothole, and one of them tumbled, falling inside. The others swore and shook their fists at us. We got to the airport with just a few moments to spare. I gave the driver all the Nigerian currency I had left as a tip. This man, whose face I don't remember and whose name I never knew, had perhaps saved my life.

God helps us

Do you ever wonder how God intervenes in our lives? As a Christian, I interpret events in the light of my faith. A non-believer might say that I just had a lucky escape. Maybe. But in my mind there are so many of them, so many times when things could have been worse, much worse; so many unusual and unexpected moments of salvation. You'd think I would have learned to anticipate them by now, but I haven't. I feel an affinity with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Remember when, after Gabriel had announced to her about how her child would save the world, she pondered those things in her heart. I ponder God's saving moments in my heart. Perhaps you do the same.

Being human, we tend to think more of how God works to help us. Jesus said that he was among us as one who serves, and he continues to serve us to this day. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. We value his acts of service, and it is right that we should.

The gospel, however, is not just about us and about how God saves us eternally and daily. It is also about how Jesus calls us to participate in his salvation of everyone. That calling above all involves our unabashed witnessing to what Jesus has done for us. We preach Jesus and his resurrection. We are his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In addition, we are part of God’s everyday compassion toward others, of his mercies, which “are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23). With God’s guidance, we seek ways to aid and assist others practically and verbally, thus producing in us and perhaps in them the Spirit’s fruits. Jesus practices his saving acts toward others through us. His ministry of service continues through us.

I don’t know what you think about the state of the world, but aren’t we in a mess? Sometimes it seems as if we are all heading into the mother of all potholes! He supplied someone like you and me an unexpected answer to help me when I needed it most. I realized later that I did not for one minute think about how to save the taxi driver from what could happen to him. After all, the gang could have assaulted him and taken his car. Of course, the driver no doubt thought of himself. But he also thought of me. He thought to comfort and save me.

The ironic thing is that, when I got into the taxi, the driver had asked me what I did for a living. “I’m a Christian pastor,” I told him, “and I train other pastors in how to minister to others.” “Oh,” he said, “I’m a born-again Christian, too.” “Sure,” I thought to myself, “probably just a cultural Christian who does not really practice his faith.” How often we judge others. Or, should I say, how often we misjudge others?

Saved in order to save

We all share in the suffering of the world. Just as others around us go through difficult times, so do we. Most of us have a story to tell about family tragedy or illness or making ends meet. Together we participate in life’s ups and downs. But do we participate in Christ’s salvation of others?

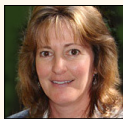
As we threaded our way through decrepit alleys of the shantytown, I remember seeing a sign on a church wall that read, “Have you received your miracle today?” God spared me not just to live to be saved another day, but also to save another day. More time to participate in the saving acts of Jesus. We are blessed so that we might be a blessing to others.

Have you given someone his or her miracle today? **co**

TAMMY’S TURN

By Tammy Tkach

Grace to Be Who You Are



I enjoy riding a bicycle for exercise and try to ride almost every day. One day this past summer, believe it or not, it rained—in the summer, in California! It wasn’t really rain, but there was enough moisture I decided not to ride. I don’t have rain gear and didn’t want to get wet. Not that I’m afraid I’ll melt, I just don’t like going out in the elements without the proper clothing. So, not wanting to miss a workout, I pulled out an old exercise DVD.

I started to laugh as Tony Little appeared on the screen, telling me to “Conceive, believe and achieve.” I used to work out regularly with Tony and realized I’ve missed his wit and wisdom. As we started into a nice stretch for the back, Tony reminded me to go only as far as I can go. “Well, of course,” I always say. What else does he expect?

Tony may not realize it, but he has hit upon an essential element of grace. As we each work our way through life, we can only go as far as we are able. We may see someone achieving something wonderful and think, “I should be doing that.” But if or when we can’t, we may become discouraged and may even give up. We compare ourselves to others, then judge and condemn ourselves. Or others may judge and condemn us because they feel we should be more like them.

The grace we receive from God and in turn extend to others and ourselves allows us to go at our own pace, fall down and get

up again, without fear of condemnation. God knows our weaknesses and faults. He knows our strengths and abilities. He doesn’t expect everyone to look alike, act alike or be in the same place in their growth.

God values our unique personalities, and his grace gives us room to be who we are. We can be happy we have different gifts and talents and give glory to him as we use them to serve him and others. How can we do less for each other? Just as we have received forgiveness and are learning to extend it in return, so we are to honor and respect each other by showing grace in our everyday interactions.

Paul was careful to stay away from making comparisons: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

Even nature teaches us each star, tree, flower, animal—everything—has its value, glory and purpose. Each of us has value and purpose, with our own unique place in the world. We have the freedom to do what we do best and not worry about what we can’t do.

God’s grace is a marvelous gift and touches every part of our lives. Go as far as you can go and may his grace be with you on the way. **co**

his hearers to inquire more deeply. We find him confronting his disciples with this question at two levels: “Who do people say that I am?” and then even more pointedly “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, 29). Jesus himself makes the question of *who* central. We must do the same if we are to hear the Word of God (Living and so written) as it was meant to be heard.

What is disclosed in Jesus and preserved for us in the responses of the apostles and their writings is that God is not just graciously loving towards us, but is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who have their being by being in triune holy love from all eternity before there ever was a creation. For Jesus is who he is in his eternal relationship of holy love to the Father and eternal Spirit. That is the deepest level of God’s self-revelation, where we

discover who God is in God’s inner and eternal triune life.

So in our Bible study we should approach it as if we knew whose word it is, but continue to make our central question to listen and learn from it *who God is*. We should listen to what Scripture tells us about who God is as we interpret all of it out of its center—God’s self-revelation in Jesus. This means that other questions we might like to ask first, or about which we are anxious, must be made secondary. For Scripture with Jesus at the center not only provides us with certain answers, it tells us what the right questions are! So the questions of what?, where?, when?, why? or how? must be made relative to the question of Who? For it is the key to all these other questions.

We now have laid out the basic orientation for our understanding of Scripture and how best to approach it. We will consider some further implications for listening to the Word of God in our next installment. **co**

Four ways to read *Christian Odyssey*

1. On the Website

Sign up for our email newsletter.

List of articles in this issue (click to view)

List of other articles on the GCI website

The screenshot shows the website for Grace Communion International. It features a navigation bar with links like Home, God, Media, Publications, Our Story, Our Churches, Church Development, Education, Participate, and Donate. The main content area is titled 'Christian Odyssey' and includes a 'Subscribe to Christian Odyssey via email' form. Below that, there's a section for 'Christian Odyssey: Scripture - God's Gift' with a list of articles such as 'What Rings Your Bell?', 'What Happens When We Die?', and 'Radical Love'. A 'View Issue Download PDF HP Magcloud' button is visible.

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2. As a Virtual Magazine

The virtual magazine interface shows a page titled 'Waters of Life' with a large 'S' at the beginning of the text. It includes several images and a 'How can you help?' section at the bottom. A thumbnail strip at the bottom indicates that all pages are accessible.

Thumbnail illustrations of all pages. Like a contents page that's always there.

3. In PDF Format

The PDF document shows two kittens, one orange and one white, sitting together. A magnifying glass icon is overlaid on the white kitten, indicating that the PDF can be zoomed in.

Download a PDF to print, save for later and even zoom-in!

4. In Print

The print magazine cover features a large cross in a field with the title 'What Happens When We Die?' prominently displayed.

Read the old-fashioned way—on real paper.

Can You Believe It?

A Study of John 20:18–29



Jesus died on a cross. So have many other people. But only one came back to life—Jesus. The early church announced the resurrection of Jesus, and it has been a key teaching of Christianity ever since.

But some people find it hard to believe. There must be some sort of mistake—either a mistake in the diagnosis of death or a mistake in thinking that the person is alive again.

Jesus knows that it's hard to believe—an incident with Thomas illustrates this and has a lesson for us as well.

In John 20, we are told that some disciples found that Jesus was no longer in his tomb. He soon appeared to Mary, and she told the other disciples about it. But one woman's word was not enough to convince them.

The disciples see Jesus (verses 19-20)

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” We do not know exactly how Jesus got into the room on that Sunday evening, but John implies that it was in some supernatural way. Jesus could still do miracles.

He greeted them with peace, and “after he said this, he showed them his hands and side.” Apparently there were still holes in his hands and a spear wound in the side—although the wounds caused by scourging were presumably gone.

“The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” They believed.

Authorized to preach (verses 21-23)

Jesus repeated his greeting and then added, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” This is John's version of the Great Commission. Just as Jesus was sent to earth with a mission, so now this mission is given to the disciples.

Jesus had promised that he would not abandon the disciples—he would come to them in the form of “another advocate...the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-18). Jesus fulfilled that promise: “And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

Some scholars think that Jesus was reissuing the promise and that it was not fulfilled until 50 days later, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Others say the disciples received the Spirit at this time, and the Spirit came again in a visible way on the day of Pentecost. We do not need to resolve that question now, but we see here that Jesus was not a ghost, vision, or apparition—he was a living, breathing human being with a real body.

tion—he was a living, breathing human being with a real body.

Jesus described the results of their mission: “If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Does this mean that God may want to forgive someone but will be thwarted by disciples who are not quite so gracious? No, Jesus is not giving the disciples the power to control what God can or cannot do.

Rather, he is speaking about what people *experience*. The context is the mission of the disciples: preaching the gospel. When the disciples preach forgiveness, people will experience forgiveness. When the disciples don't preach it, people will not have the joy of knowing they are forgiven. Jesus wants the disciples to announce forgiveness to all the people God forgives (and that, as we find out elsewhere in the Bible, includes everyone).

Thomas believes (verses 24-29)

However, one disciple was absent from the Sunday evening gathering. “Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’”

But he was skeptical. He said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” He wanted not just to see, but also to touch.

Jesus gave him what he wanted: “A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’”

“Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’” Jesus not only appeared—he knew what Thomas had said a week earlier.

We do not know whether Thomas touched Jesus, but he responded with faith. “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” Earlier, Thomas had called Jesus Lord (John 14:5); now he calls him God. As John tells us in the opening verse, “The Word was God” (John 1:1). John wants Thomas's response to be ours as well, that we accept Jesus as our Lord and our God.

Jesus himself moves the discussion to future believers, including us: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’” **co**

Dr. Michael Morrison teaches classes in the New Testament at Grace Communion Seminary. More information about the seminary can be found at: www.gcs.edu.

People don't resist change. They resist being changed.

Peter Senge

What you share with the world is what it keeps of you.

Lyrics from "Give a Little Love" by Charles Fink

What seems effortless for [C.S.] Lewis is actually extraordinarily difficult to emulate. The market is now flooded with books by Ph.D.s who cannot write an interesting and intelligible paragraph, and by wannabe pop apologists who just aren't very smart.

J.G. Stackhouse,
Christianity Today 12/27/2012

Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers.

Author Unknown

A lot of church members are singing "Standing on the Promises" while they are just sitting on the premises.

Author Unknown

The Lord gave us two ends—one to sit on and the other to think with. Success depends on which one we use the most.

Ann Landers

Experience enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.

Franklin P. Jones

So our life in Christ is not something that we're always going to feel some kind of glorious heaven-opened-light-shining-down wonderful moment. It's actually lived out in the midst of the struggles of day-to-day life and the messiness of real relationships and the ups and downs.

J. Michael Fezell

It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them.

Alfred Adler

The ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

Albert Schweitzer

Our ego hinders our ability to influence more than anything else under our control.

Michael McKinney



I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.

Helen Keller

When a man is wrapped up in himself, he makes a pretty small package.

John Ruskin

An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it. Truth stands, even if there be no public support. It is self sustained.

Mahatma Gandhi

For however devoted you are to God, you may be sure that he is immeasurably more devoted to you.

Meister Eckert

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

C.S. Lewis

"Where did I read that?"

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