

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

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Growing Together in Life & Faith

On Mission
with God

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The first thing I noticed was how happy the children were—doing homework, in the early evening, long after school had ended. I was in Hyderabad, India, visiting a church-run tutoring program for the poor children in the community, and I was impressed watching the children sitting in groups, chatting about their lessons, learning from their tutors and enjoying their time together.

Education is of primary importance for children in India to have any hope of financial success in adulthood. Homework is fundamental, and children need adults to help them with their schoolwork. For those children whose parents are illiterate or have little education, churches and other groups have set up tutoring centers to give these children a fighting chance in school. I was able to spend an evening with several high school and college-age students and a few adults who saw tutoring as their personal ministry or mission. They didn't just focus on schoolwork; part of each evening was also spent worshipping and learning about God.

I've been blessed to travel around the US and overseas on mission for my congregation and denomination, and it never ceases to amaze me how Christians find ways to use their gifts and talents to help others. This is what mission is all about—using God-given gifts, talents and passions to serve and help those in need.

Anyone can be on mission; in fact, every Christ-follower is, by definition, on mission with God. Christ gave us our mission in Matthew 28:18-20. I call this our commission because God has invited us to participate in what he is doing.

Jesus starts this passage by reminding us that all power and authority have been given to him. Whew! That means he's in control. Then he tells us as we are going, to make disciples, to baptize, to teach what he taught. Then he gives us another "Whew!" by telling us he does all of this with us. The Great Commission is an invitation to participate—something we want to do because we know the blessing and benefit of being in relationship with God. It is sharing something that is good.

You see, God didn't call us just to save us or make us special; he called us to participate in what he is doing—bringing many sons and daughters to glory, or to personal relationship with the triune God. Being on mission with God is simply participating with God in what he is already doing. Many of God's children don't know their Father and therefore have no idea how much they are loved. Most do not know they have a Savior, or that they have been forgiven, or that there is a hope they can hold on to. God has invited us to share this good news—as we are going throughout our daily lives. Being on mission with God is simply sharing good news with others.

God has blessed you with gifts, talents and passion that he'd love to see you use in mission with him. Do you love children? Tutor, or babysit, or work in a nursery, or teach, or organize activities in your neighborhood, sharing God's love as you go. Do you love crafts? Find a young person to share your skills, and teach about Christ as you teach about your skill. Do you like to travel? There are many mission opportunities for you to help in your city, your state, your country or internationally. Use the gifts and talents God has given you and join him in mission.

As Grace Communion International focuses on how we can best participate with God on mission, we continue to seek more effective ways to share the gospel. *Christian Odyssey* has served the denomination well over the last nine years and has generated a wide variety of articles to help its readers live Christ-centered lives. This has been a successful endeavor in a lot of ways, but the time has come to move forward and develop the next new method of communication. We will retire *Christian Odyssey* in its current form and run one more issue. But, continue to look with anticipation to what lies ahead.

Blessings... *Rick*

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Jesus' Acceptance

By Gary Deddo

Christians often joyfully proclaim “Jesus accepts everyone” and “does not judge anyone.” Though there is gospel truth in these affirmations, people assign to them a wide range of meanings. Unfortunately, some of those meanings seem to differ from the revelation of Jesus given to us in the New Testament.

In Grace Communion International circles, we often use the phrase, “You’re included.” That simple statement conveys an important point. But it too can be (and has been) understood in a variety of ways. What exactly are we included in? Answering this and related questions calls for care as we, in faith, seek to sort out the related issues so we can be accurate and thus faithful to the biblical revelation.

Jesus certainly did welcome all into his presence and offered himself and his teaching to all who came toward him. He told his listeners he would draw all persons to himself (John 12:32). We find no instances where Jesus rejected, turned away or refused anyone who was seeking him out. More than that, Jesus received and even shared meals with people who were being rejected by many of the religious leaders of his day.

Jesus welcomed and interacted with lepers, the lame, blind,

deaf and mute. He interacted socially with women (some with questionable reputations) and did so in ways that ignored religious regulations of the day. Jesus also spent time with adulterers, with Jewish tax collectors working under Roman direction and even with fanatical anti-Roman political activists.

Furthermore, Jesus spent time with the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders who were his most severe critics (including some who plotted his execution). The apostle John tells us Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save and rescue people for God. Jesus said, “whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). He instructed his disciples to love their enemies (Luke 6:27), forgive those who wronged them and bless those who cursed them (Luke 6:28). Jesus also extended forgiveness to his executioners at the moment of his crucifixion (Luke 23:34).

The rest of the New Testament outside of the Gospels summarizes what we see lived out in Jesus’ life. Paul indicates Jesus came to atone for the sins of the ungodly, the sinners—those “dead in their sins” (Ephesians 2:1). He came to benefit all—he was “on the side” of everyone, he was “for” everyone. He is God’s grace and God’s salvation for all.

The attitude and acts of Jesus clearly demonstrate God’s love for all human beings and his desire to be reconciled to all and to bless all. Jesus came to give life and to give it abundantly (John

10:10, NRSV). God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus came as a ransom to free captives of sin—their own and the evil done against them.

But there is more to the story—a “more” that should not be viewed as contradicting or in tension with what we just surveyed. Contrary to the view of some, there are no contrasting or conflicting aspects within Jesus’ heart, mind and purposes. Jesus wasn’t trying to accomplish two divergent things, such as love and righteousness or mercy and holiness, in some kind of internal balancing act, now tipping one way, then correcting and tipping the other. Such imagined tensions might exist within us in our fallenness, but they do not exist within the heart of Jesus or his Father.

Jesus, like the Father, welcomes all people, and with a particular purpose in mind. Rather than an end point, his welcome to all is the starting point of an ongoing relationship that is one of his giving and serving and of our receiving what he offers. Jesus does not offer any old thing or serve us in any old way (including the way we might prefer). Rather, he offers us only the best that he has—himself. In offering himself, he gives us the way, the truth and the life. Nothing more. Nothing else.

Jesus thus announced to his disciples that in his presence the kingdom of God had drawn near. All of the kingdom’s blessings are available in him. His attitude and acts of receiving and welcoming call for a certain response to his self-giving: in essence, he wants us to receive what he offers. In contrast, rejecting what Jesus offers means rejecting Jesus himself.

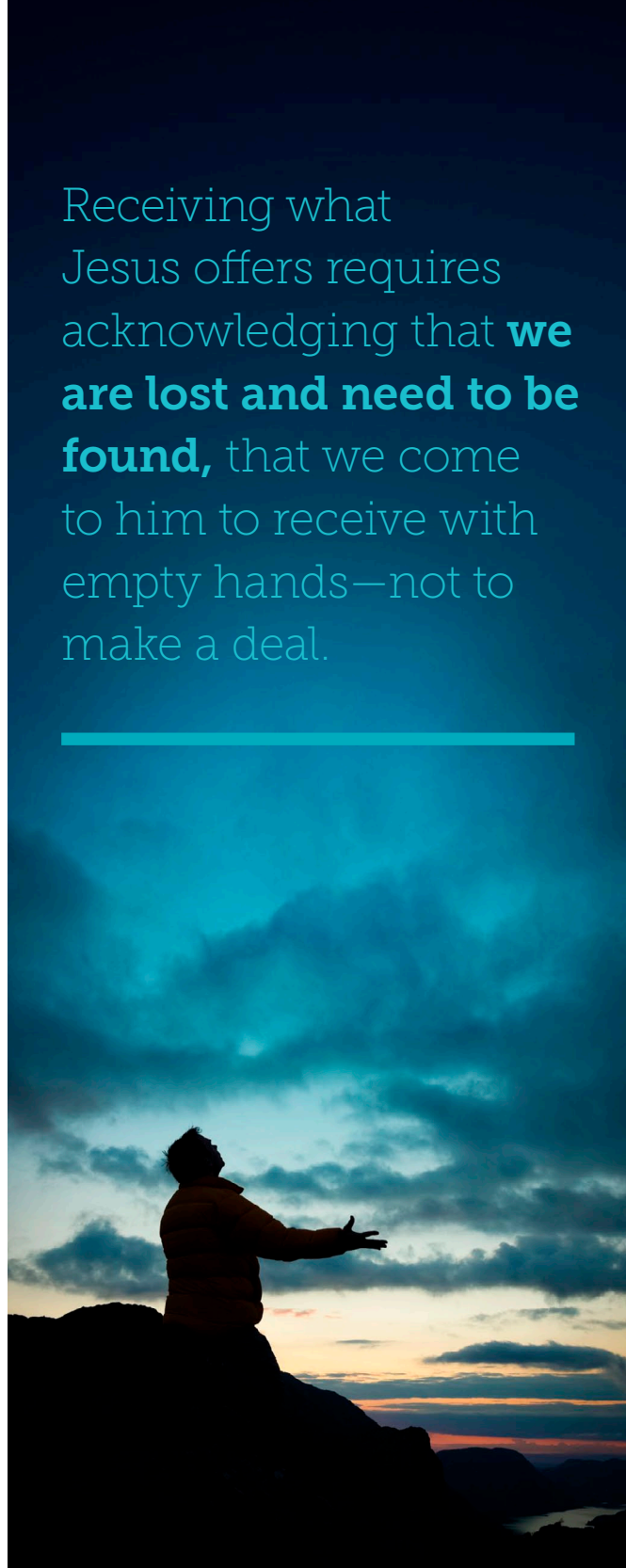
The response Jesus looks for is to repent and believe. A willingness to repent requires an attitude of humble receptivity. Only in humility are we able to receive what Jesus has offered, notably before any such response is made. In fact, it is the offer of the gift—his welcome and acceptance—that calls forth the response.

Repentance and belief are thus the responses of reception to what Jesus has already offered. Those responses are not behaviors or attitudes that pre-condition Jesus’ offer, or determine to whom he makes the offer. Jesus’ offer is for the sake of its reception—not for the sake of its rejection. Of what benefit would such rejection be? None.

The receptive attitude Jesus is always looking for is indicated in a variety of his sayings: “For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10, NRSV). “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Luke 5:31). “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). We must be like the soil that “receives the word” of the sower “with joy” (Luke 8:13). “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

Receiving what Jesus offers, and thereby benefitting from what he gives, means acknowledging we are lost and need to be found, we are ill and need a physician to heal us, coming to Jesus to receive with empty hands, not hoping to make an exchange with him. For like a child we do not presume to have anything he needs. This is why Jesus said it is the “poor in spirit” who are

Receiving what
Jesus offers requires
acknowledging that **we
are lost and need to be
found**, that we come
to him to receive with
empty hands—not to
make a deal.



receiving the blessings of God and his kingdom, not those who regard themselves as spiritually rich (Matthew 5:3).

Christian teaching has summarized this attitude of receptivity to what God in Christ freely offers to all his creatures as one of humility. This attitude admits we are not self-sufficient but must receive life from our Creator and Redeemer.

The opposite of such a trusting and receptive heart is called

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Being Missional



By Steve Solari

I looked the four teenage boys straight in the eyes and they looked right back at me—friendly and accepting. I realized I had just made a connection and was amazed at how easy it was. The boys were ready to hear what I had to say, ready to share their own thoughts.

We were in a cold, cement block church just south of the US-Mexico border. It was December and there was no heat. A small gasoline-powered generator running outside the building provided the only electricity. Hazy winter sunlight streamed through the large glass windows but didn't provide much heat or warmth to the room. Between 50 and 60 men, women, and children were sitting on hard metal chairs anticipating our visit. After our program of talking about the meaning of Christmas and handing out shoeboxes filled with gifts to the children, our missionaries sat and talked with whomever was nearby.

When I approached the boys, I thought there was little chance a group of teenagers would care to interact with a 30-something foreign man. Experience has taught me that guys in groups aren't always receptive. I started talking to just one of the boys, and the other three immediately became quiet and started listening. We exchanged names and small talk. The one

closest to me spoke English well; he had been born in the US. I felt no need to preach, no need to ask probing questions about their spiritual lives; I only wanted to relate to them. And we did, just hanging out together in the church. I don't know why, but I was surprised at the openness. Maybe this "being missional" stuff isn't so hard after all.

What do I mean by the term "being missional"? It's a commonly-used and, possibly, commonly-misused term. I now define being on mission as "allowing Jesus to cross a boundary through me." That boundary could be geographical, political, cultural, linguistic, generational, educational, or any other kind that separates two people in some way. Sure, sharing the gospel in another country where English is not the primary language would be missional because a linguistic or cultural boundary is crossed. But a woman who shares Jesus with her grandchild while baking cookies together in the kitchen is also on mission, since a generational boundary has been crossed. I believe we ought to re-think what being on mission means, and realize it can be done anywhere, any time.

I hope I'll get the chance to see those boys again next time we visit Pastor Pedro's church in Mexico. If I do, I may be able to add discipleship as part of my being missional. Sadly, we can sometimes think discipleship is something that happens in a class

before or after church. Having a “discipleship class” is a common practice in many congregations, and it’s a wonderful thing. But the term itself can be over-stretched to be synonymous with the term “Bible Study.” In the context of being on mission, though, we are talking about the Great Commission (note the word “mission” in commission) of making disciples. Not just being better disciples ourselves.

But how do we make someone into a student of Jesus? Well, just like being on mission, it’s more something Jesus does through us than something we do ourselves, so that removes a lot of pressure. The more important idea is the setting of where it takes place. The most effective disciple-making takes place in the context of relationship. For example, if I had walked up to those boys and said I know exactly what you should do with your lives, why should they believe me? They had no idea of my background or education or motives, and (given the setting) would probably assume I was about to give them some kind of religious guilt trip. They had little reason to trust me and didn’t ask for my opinion in the first place. That’s why a relationship must come first.

Theodore Roosevelt famously said, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” Think about the opinions you seek out regularly. My guess is you seek the thoughts of those you trust and have spent time with over the preceding months or years. Not someone you just met.

So my first goal was to establish friendship with the boys. Then, if we meet again, we can build on the relationship. It is there that Christ can be shared most effectively. It is there where the One who is most important to me can be properly shared with someone I care about. One of the misconceptions about being missional is thinking the person’s salvation or relationship with Christ depends on that one encounter. That’s leaving Christ out of the mix—assuming he hasn’t already been working in a person’s life and won’t continue working long after I’m out of the picture.

I can imagine the next time I’m with the four boys we will talk more about school, jobs, career aspirations, and maybe even girls they have their eyes on. They might ask what it’s like to be married or how I ended up with my job. Then, as part of the conversation, I can bring up the values I’ve learned from Jesus and how much better everything in my life is because of him. And before you know it, the conversation goes much deeper than it ever could have gotten with a stranger. That’s where discipleship really starts to flourish.

Another way to support discipleship efforts like this is by being incarnational. In this case, I define incarnational as “letting Jesus serve through you.” We had already handed out gifts and food, which involved some personal sacrifice from our team and our hundreds of supporters around the country. But more importantly, we showed how much Jesus loves them by giving up our creature comforts and going to Mexico to spend time with them. To listen, to laugh, to cry and to pray with them. Whatever these boys, their parents, their sisters and brothers and neighbors needed and we could give, we would. That’s what Jesus would do,



Being Missional is crossing boundaries and reaching out to people with the love of Christ through service and sacrifice.

and it’s what we read his disciples did in the Gospels and in Acts. Some of our team members have even given away the clothing they brought to keep themselves warm, and eyewear they would normally use for themselves. That’s incarnational; it’s sacrificial; it’s saying “Here, you should have this, my sister in Christ.” When we sacrifice for someone else, a bond is created that goes beyond money or words. It’s spiritual, and we should never doubt for a second that it creates a doorway for a relationship and then discipleship.

It’s taken me a while to really understand mission—to comprehend what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 28:19-20. He was talking about incarnational missional discipleship. Or as I’ve defined in my own life, “Letting Jesus serve through me, cross boundaries, and build relationships with him.”

Being missional is crossing boundaries and stretching outside the comfort of our own homes and churches. It is seeking to foster deeper relationships with people in order to share Jesus with them and show how much he cares about everything in our lives. It is reaching out to those people with the love of Christ through service and sacrifice. Jesus crossed the boundary of heaven to be with us and live as one of us. He disciplined us and set a process of sharing the good news that would last for millennia. He sacrificed for us, to show how much he loves us all. And when he was done, he pointed to his own example, and told us to do the same. Will we? ☪

Joe Sharpening Tim Sharpening Joe

How my friendship turned into mission, which deepened the friendship.

By Tim Poe

I In 2008 I took a six-month internship reporting to a guy named Joe, who has been a good friend ever since. Joe is truly the friend Proverbs 27:17 describes as iron sharpening iron in intellect and in character. He has a big intellect, a big heart and a marvelously wicked wit which are all fantastically appealing to me.

We both enjoy the Socratic method of asking questions that make people think. We frequently illuminate inconsistencies of thought in each other, and call each other out on it. He is one of those guys you just love to be around because he is fun and helps you be a better person.

On a lark, or so I thought, when I applied to work for Joe, on my resume I put down Trinitarian Theology as a hobby. I think it was the first day at work he called me out on it. He told me he was an atheist and asked a few questions. I asked him questions. About 15 minutes later, I told him he wasn't an atheist. He was incredulous. I was confident. I explained he wasn't sure if there is a God or not and therefore he was agnostic and not an atheist.

One thing Joe is not used to is losing an argument, so it has been "on" ever since and we both thoroughly enjoy it. I owe much of my success in my professional career to him. He has taught me many things; the most valuable to me is what I've learned about personal ministry and personal mission.

Being missional isn't about selling vacuum cleaners or products to supposedly make life better, so we should have no expectation of trying to "hook" people or pull a "bait and switch." Trying to be clever so others don't know what "hit 'em" is not what personal ministry is about. It's about making friends like Joe.

Joe told me I am the most dangerous kind of evangelist. I told him that's because he couldn't win an argument with me (not true—he often wins). He countered, saying it's because I care for him and I am able to articulate a theology about loving people rather than the standard bad news gospel (separation theology). I'm glad I was talking to him on the phone because I wouldn't have wanted him to see me tear up.

Personal ministry is about making friends and having mutually safe conversations about God, life, the universe and



everything. It is about enjoying other people's company. It is about sharing life with your friends. I told Joe I was going to write about our friendship and he said he felt like he was my personal mission in this sense and hasn't felt like a customer. Joe is still agnostic and though he wants to believe, he can't yet theologially justify belief to himself. I'm fine with that and he is too. I think we both agree that is God's problem to fix. I can't tell you how much I look forward to our next conversation, whether theological or professional. I know I'll walk away a better man for it. **co**

Love Others: Mission Impossible?

By Nan Kuhlman

Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to love others unconditionally (as God has loved you) and in this way share the good news of humanity's inclusion in the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's not Mission Impossible, but it's a challenge. In our zeal to share our understanding of our worthiness and acceptance in God's sight, we sometimes lose patience with the very ones with whom we are sharing the good news. Why can't they just get it? Why would anybody not want to hear that God's love and acceptance of each one of us is sure and complete?

Though our motives for sharing this good news are likely good, we are often shocked when our efforts to explain our inclusion in the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit end up falling on ears with hands firmly clapped over them. Given the wide range of life experiences of each person, the willingness (or ability) to hear that he or she is loved, accepted and included by God (no strings attached) can be wide and varied. What are we to do?

Our first response is to believe we must be patient and

When we focus only on the end result, we don't allow for the necessary wrestling that strengthens faith.

persistent with those we witness to, but this often implies the belief they are wrong and we are right. This view doesn't allow for any individuality in our spiritual journeys. Further, expecting others to conform according to our timetable can have disastrous results.

Zorba the Greek discovered this when he tried to "help" a butterfly exit its cocoon more quickly. He breathed on the partially emerged butterfly to warm it, believing it seemed to crawl out more swiftly. Once it was out, the crumpled wings would not unfold despite the butterfly's efforts to straighten them. More warm breaths on the insect did not help and shortly thereafter, the butterfly died.

This example teaches us when we focus only on the end result, where others come to an understanding of our acceptance and inclusion by God, we need to allow for the necessary wres-

ting that strengthens their faith and makes it real to them.

More importantly, we must be willing to grant them the freedom to grow at the pace they choose. This freedom only comes through love. Rather than cultivating patience in our quest to share the wonderful truths about God's loving acceptance of all, we might consider the ways we can love others so they are freed from their burdens, whether it is the burden of needing to be right or having to win an argument, or perhaps the burden of tradition, or even the burden of hurt feelings from mistreatment at the hands of those who claimed to know God.

Consider the love of a monk shown to a lowly burro in the poem "Love Does That" by Meister Eckhart:

*All day long a little burro labors, sometimes
with heavy loads on her back and sometimes just with
worries
about things that bother only
burros.
And worries, as we know, can be more exhausting than
physical labor.
Once in a while a kind monk comes
to her stable and brings
a pear, but more
than that,
he looks into the burro's eyes and touches her ears
and for a few seconds the burro is free
and even seems to laugh,
because love does
that.
Love frees.*

Because the kind monk sought to convey understanding and love to the burro, the burro felt its burden lifted. By seeking to comfort and encourage one another and allowing the freedom "to grow in grace and knowledge," we lift the burdens of hurt that may blind others to the unconditional love of God. This makes sense, as we are loving one another the way we have been loved by God first. For us, it may seem like Mission Impossible, but with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all things are possible. **co**

Jesus' Acceptance

From page 4

pride. In the context of church teaching, the attitude of pride asserts autonomy from God, trust in oneself and confidence in one's own adequacy even in the face of God. Such pride is offended by the suggestion one needs to receive anything significant from God, most especially his forgiveness and mercy. Pride then results in self-righteous refusal to receive anything essential from God. Pride insists on paying its own way and getting what it deserves. It insists it does not need grace or charity from God—it can provide itself with life sufficient for its own purposes. Pride refuses to be beholden to anyone or anything, including God.

In contrast, humility recognizes one cannot give oneself life. Instead, it admits its need not only for help, but for the transformation, renewal, restoration and reconciliation only God can give. Humility acknowledges our inexcusable fault and our utter helplessness to renew ourselves. We need total grace from God or we are lost. Our pride needs to be put to death that we might receive life from God himself. Receptivity (to receiving what Jesus has to offer) and humility are inseparable.

In the end, Jesus welcomes all in order to give us himself. His welcome is purposeful. It leads somewhere. Jesus tells us he has come to enable the worship of his Father (John 4:23). This is his most comprehensive way of indicating the purpose of his welcome and acceptance of us. Worship is a way of indicating a total response to who God is as the only one who is worthy of our ultimate trust and loyalty. Jesus' self-giving leads to a true knowledge of the Father and receptivity to his Holy Spirit. It results in worshipping God alone through the Son and in the Spirit—to worshipping God in truth and in Spirit. For in offering himself to us, Jesus gives himself to be our Lord, our prophet, priest and king. In doing so he reveals the Father and sends us his Spirit. He gives of himself according to who he is, not according to who he is not, nor according to our wishes or imaginations.

Jesus' way involves discernment—it sorts through and notices the responses made to him (and to all he offers). Jesus recognizes those who are rejecting him, his word, true knowledge of God and right worship. He discriminates between those who are receiving and those who are not receiving. However, this discrimination does not mean Jesus has a different attitude or intention other than that which we surveyed above. Jesus' love is not diminished or contradicted by his acts of discernment. He does not condemn those who reject his welcome and invitation to follow him but he does warn them concerning the consequences of such rejection.

Next time, in part 2 of this article, we will look at our response to Jesus' acceptance. ☪

Releasing God's Power Through Prayer



A.W. Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (*The Knowledge of the Holy*).

People think a lot of things about God, many not necessarily accurate. If what Tozer said is true and if what we think about God is wrong, the most important thing about us is in error. Fundamental errors about him can cause us to live out of fear and guilt and cause others to make mistakes in their thinking about God as well.

What we believe about prayer says a lot about who we think God is. If you believe prayer is how to get things from God, your view of him is reduced to a cosmic vending machine. If you make deals with him, God becomes a wheeler-dealer, open to bargains and ultimately, the one who can crush you if you renege. If you see prayer as an act of appeasement, God is petty and arbitrary and must be satisfied with your offering before he will act in your favor. All of these views bring God down to our level and reduce him to someone who thinks and acts like us—a god made in our own image.

One belief about prayer goes something like this: when we pray (some insert correctly), we release God's power into our lives and even into the world. Apparently, we hold God back or block him from doing things if we don't pray properly or if some sin is getting in the way. Not only does this paint a strange picture of a God in shackles, or as one restrained by more powerful forces, it puts a huge burden on us. We are then responsible if the person we prayed for isn't healed; it's our fault someone got in a car accident; we can blame ourselves if we don't get the results we desire. And all of this puts the focus on you and me, not on God, and makes prayer a self-serving endeavor.

The Bible does talk about hindered prayers in the context of marriage (1 Peter 3:7), not as a reflection on God but on us. As the New Life Version puts it, we'll "find it hard to pray" (because of our attitude and negative feelings).

God isn't waiting for us to say the right prayers so he can release his power. He isn't the dad who withholds good things from his children unless or until they say the "magic word," much as a human father waits for his child to say please or thank you. God loves to hear our prayers, and he hears and interacts with each and every one, whether we get the answer we want or not.

As we grow in grace and knowledge of God, our view of him will grow too. As we're learning more about him, we need to be careful about taking everything we hear from others at face value; rather, we should hold statements such as "releasing God's power" up to the light of Scripture and what respected theologians have said. We also need to be aware of how subtle misconceptions about God are inserted into popular and Christian culture and how they masquerade as facts about who he is.

In short, God loves to hear our prayers and isn't bothered by our not using the right words. He has given us the gift of prayer as the beautiful interaction we can enjoy with him through Jesus in the Spirit. ☪

A Conversation on a Plane Flight



In my role on the Church Administration and Development team I spend a lot of time in the air and meet a wide range of people. I met Mat on a recent flight. I'd been settled in my usual aisle seat for a few minutes when Mat showed up at the last minute wearing a large overcoat with a backpack strapped over his shoulder. He reached across me and began unpacking various picnic supplies into his seat. He then scooted into his window seat beside me. As soon as he sat down, he turned to me and said he needed to put his backpack in the overhead. Mat returned to his seat, removed his coat and then decided to place his coat in the overhead. Mat sat down for the third time and turned to me and said he had to go to the restroom.

I chuckled and said, "You're like a big kid." He laughed, and I heard other chuckles and noticed the passengers around us had been amused by the continual up and down activity.

When Mat returned he asked what kind of work I do, and I shared my story. He then told me that he had just started his career in accounting and was traveling to visit a friend in New York City. The flight took off, and once we climbed to 10,000 feet I opened my laptop and began typing. Mat ate his picnic—summoning the flight attendant at least six times so he could enjoy three cups of hot tea. Then, when Mat handed the remains of his picnic to the flight attendant, something



(an accountant would notice such things). I asked him about his view of God and he said he hadn't spent much time thinking about God. We talked about the story of the Prodigal Son and what the heart of the Father is like. I showed him that coming to understand who God is and then who he is in relationship to God are the two big questions in life. I encouraged him to search for a church that focused on building relationship with God and then I gave him was a copy of C. Baxter Kruger's *The Parable of the Dancing God*.

This unique meeting with Mat reminded me of what Peter says in his first letter: "You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if

someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way" (1 Peter 3:15-16a, New Living Translation).

I find this instruction from the bold and brash disciple who stepped out of the boat, who rebuffed Jesus when he spoke of his impending death and who pushed John aside to run into the empty tomb quite interesting. Peter says we must have Jesus as Lord of our lives first and then be prepared to share the good news about Jesus to those who "ask." And the explanation should be done in a caring and respectful way. What a great guideline for sharing the gospel!

My exchange with Mat was one of those rare encounters when a person asked me to converse about Jesus and his church. I could only tell Mat about the Jesus I know and worship. It wasn't all the seminary training that prepared me to be able to explain the good news about Jesus, but my actual personal relationship and journey with Jesus that allowed me to speak of his redemptive and inclusive love.

I don't necessarily think my comment about Mat being a big kid endeared me to him, but it was honest, and it fit the occasion. Perhaps the Spirit providing me with patience when liquid spilled on my laptop keyboard set the stage for Mat to hear about the hope found in Jesus. I don't try to over-analyze my "plane encounters" like this one. Instead, I celebrate them and pray for more. **co**

My personal relationship and journey with Jesus allowed me to speak of his redemptive and inclusive love.

from his trash left a small stream across the keyboard of my laptop. Mat buried his head in his hands and said, "I am the worst passenger ever." I simply took a napkin and performed damage control on the keyboard and then shut down the laptop so we could talk.

Mat had been raised Catholic and stopped going to church because of the large amounts of money being spent

Overcoming the Darkness

Being on mission is sharing the light God has given to us in Jesus.

By Linda Rex

A memory I have from many years ago is of entering a large darkened room, which was lit only with candles. As we entered and took our seats at one of the many tables, my first impression was how the candles set the mood for the whole event.

Each candle was small and the room was filled with dim light. And even though the room was still somewhat dark, it was a different type of darkness. The candles shone enough to give the room a warm, friendly feeling. They invited me to come and stay.

The setting reminded me of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

I think we sometimes underestimate our ability to impact the world. The darkness is so overwhelming we inwardly scream for someone to turn on the lights. Jesus, come quickly! Come now! We long for him to flip the switch that will eliminate the darkness forever. We look at ourselves and believe all we have to offer is a candle at best. We forget how a candle still offers light and warmth.

As we wrestle with the darkness of pain, suffering, loss, death and sickness all around us, it is easy to wonder where God is in all this. And then we experience a little candlelight from someone—a kind word, a card in the mail, a friend's hug—and

all of a sudden, we are transformed. Our mood is lifted. We feel once again like we belong and are at home.

This can be instructional to us as we seek to find ways to reach out in our communities with God's Word of life. We can make going on mission much more difficult than it needs to be. But all we need to know is it is simply sharing the light God has given to us in Jesus. As we go deeper in our relationship with God in Christ and are filled with and led by the light of his Spirit, we glow more and more with the light of God's love.

We are more and more at home in God's presence and naturally will want others to be at home there too. God's love overflows in our tenderhearted concern for others. We are led to find ways to share life with the people around us. And we are encouraged to intentionally include people who may not have previously been included in our sphere of influence. A small gesture of generosity here, a gift of hospitality there, and soon we have changed the whole atmosphere of darkness.

As congregations we are able to shine an even brighter light as we live out our relationship with God in a corporate way. We grow in our communal life in Christ by the Spirit and it begins to flow over into the community around us. As we include others in our corporate life by offering them God's love in little and big ways, we begin to have an impact on the darkness.

We will not be able to fully eliminate it. It's Jesus' job to flip on the overhead lights. But in the meantime, we can impact the world in such a way others can feel like they belong, that they too are at home in God's household. We can, in Christ by the Spirit, change the whole mood of this dark world with the candlelight of God's love, one friendship and one relationship at a time. ☪



Serving Our Servers Through Prayer

Being missional at a restaurant.

By Carrie Smith

Nod your head if your parents have ever embarrassed you. Yep, that's what I thought, everyone is nodding. Being the daughter of a pastor during my high school years gave me much opportunity for eye-rolling and smh (shake my head) moments, especially when we were out in public. What I have come to learn, though, is Dad was not really as embarrassing as I thought. I was just insecure and worried how others would judge me or react to my dad (a pretty cool guy in my book, even if he is a little corny).

One of those eye-rolling moments came one night when my family was out to dinner at a local restaurant. We had just given

our order to the waiter when my dad did something I will never forget. He asked the waiter if we could pray for him. Could he be more embarrassing? But the waiter's response surprised me. He actually gave us a prayer request. Wow, no judgment, no strange looks; just a simple request and a "Thank you" as he left our table.

I don't remember if I asked my dad when he started doing this or why. I simply remember this becoming part of our routine whenever we were out to eat. We would place our orders and then Dad would ask the server if she or he had anything we could pray about. Some servers would ask to win the lottery, not really taking the request seriously, but then my dad would say, "So, you would like financial stability?" And that would make the server realize he was serious and accept his offer to pray for them.

It took a few (okay, more than a few) years before I was comfortable doing this on my own. I started testing the waters

Financials—The Way to Financial Freedom



In my last column I introduced the importance of budgets and balance sheets (two primary financial statements or simply “financials”) to maintain balance among competing financial interests. This subject is so important to proper stewardship of God’s wealth I want to dig a little deeper this time.

Recall that financial mistakes are made by thinking, “I can afford the payment; it must be okay.” For those who have shopped for a home, you may have heard the realtor say, “Oh, you can afford a much larger home.” So the rule of thumb when it comes to budgets: just because you can, doesn’t mean you should. Having stated that, I must also caution to never forget our first principle or best practice: maintain balance in all decisions and never place yourself in a position of looking back someday with regret.

How can we use budgets and balance sheets as tools for wise financial decisions? First, think of them as a sort of financial scorecard to measure your progress. Most financial planners recommend at least annually reviewing your budget and updating your balance sheet to see if your financial situation is moving forward or falling backward. In other words, is your net income more or less than it was last year at this time ($\text{income} - \text{expenses} = \text{net income}$)? Is your net worth more or less than it was last year at this time ($\text{assets} - \text{debts/liabilities} = \text{net worth}$)? If they are both positive or have increased, you are on the right track to building wealth and achieving financial freedom. If they are negative or have decreased, this is a sign something is not right and if unattended, will create future problems. Call it a financial blood pressure test.

The appropriate management of these two financial statements is also the means toward the next concept: financial freedom. This term has been used in different ways and can mean different things to different people, but what I mean is no longer needing to rely on others (parents, friends, employers, government, etc.) to meet your financial needs. In other words, by keeping your expenses at a minimum, paying off existing debt and increasing your financial assets (income-producing balance sheet items), in time your income-producing assets will be enough to cover your monthly expenses. At that point, you have achieved financial freedom. You can do what you want, including no longer having to work if you choose, and your lifestyle can be maintained.

Obviously, managing your financials in this way will come easier to some. A lot of it has to do with your financial philosophy or worldview and self-discipline. If you are wired to save, rather than spend, you will build wealth and achieve financial freedom sooner than others. Regardless of how long this may take, and it can take a lifetime for some, holding financial freedom as a goal (as I have defined it here), serves as another best practice for stewards of God’s wealth. **co**

A simple offer of prayer often opens up a conversation: about family, where to go for college, studying for finals, making decisions

when I was out with the family. I would ask the server instead of my dad asking, and then we would pray. The more I did it, the more excited I was to do it again. It became something I looked forward to whenever I would go to a restaurant because I knew God was allowing me to participate in someone else’s life, even if only for a moment.

I have been doing this long enough now for it to almost be second nature. I still have moments of insecurity, usually when the server seems abrupt or I am not sure if my company will be comfortable with my asking, but even those moments are becoming fewer and fewer. In all this time, I have only been turned down by one person. She asked to think about the question first, and when she returned to our table she said she was good and thanked me for the offer. That is the beauty of praying for someone; you can do it anyway. My friends and I still offered up a prayer for God to continue to move in our waitress’s life in a mighty way.

When asked for a prayer request, most servers would mention their kids, a family member or loved one. Their immediate thoughts were not for themselves, but for someone else. A few servers have almost started crying because of the burdens they were carrying, and some stayed at the table to pray right along with us. A simple offer of prayer often opens up conversations: about family, where to go for college, studying for finals, making decisions about jobs, housing or relationships.

Another benefit comes when you return to a restaurant and have the same server again. God sometimes has to nudge me a bit to remind me of their prayer request, but it is a joy to see their faces light up when you ask them how things are going. Some even remember me and offer their updates before I ask.

I know everyone does not have a natural inclination to pray for their servers, or at least to ask them aloud for a prayer request. It can seem a little embarrassing or intimidating at first, but why not give it a try? See what happens. You will be amazed at what God can do, is doing, in you, through you and all around you. **co**

God's Relationship With His People in The Psalms



Although a few of the psalms survey the history of God's people, most of the psalms describe an individual's relationship with God.

We might think a Psalm was just for the particular person who wrote it, and not necessarily a promise for anyone else. However, these poems were included in the song-book of ancient Israel to invite us to participate in the relationship that was described in these songs. They indicate that God's relationship was not just with the nation as a whole, but also with individuals in that nation. Everyone could take part.

Complaining, not explaining

The relationship, however, was not always as smooth as we might like. The most common type of psalm was the lament—almost a third of the psalms bring some sort of complaint to God. The singers described a problem, and asked God to solve it. The psalm was often exaggerated, full of emotion. Psalm 13 is an example:

*How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

People knew the tune because it was sung frequently. Even those who were not personally distressed were invited to join the lament, perhaps as a reminder that some of God's people were in distress. They looked to him for intervention, but they did not know when it would come.

This still describes our relationship with God today. Although God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to defeat our worst enemies (sin and death), he does not always take care of our physical problems as quickly as we might like. The songs of lament remind us that we may experience difficulties for a long time, and yet we continue to look to God to resolve the problem.

Some psalms even accuse God of being asleep:

*Awake, and rise to my defense!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.
Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God;
do not let them gloat over me.
Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we wanted!"
or say, "We have swallowed him up." (Psalm 35:22-25)*

The singers did not really imagine that God was asleep at the bench of justice. These words are not intended to be an objective explanation of reality. Rather, they are descriptions of the person's emotions—in this case, frustrations. The national song-book invited people to learn this song, to express the depth of the feelings. Even if they did not currently face enemies like this, the day might come when they would. And so the song cries out for God to take vengeance:

*May all who gloat over my distress
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who exalt themselves over me
be clothed with shame and disgrace. (verses 26-27)*

In some cases, the words are "over the top"—way beyond what we'd expect to hear in church:

*May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever...
May they be blotted out of the book of life
and not be listed with the righteous. (Psalm 69:23, 28)*

*Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm 137:9)*

Did the singers mean these words to be taken literally? Perhaps some did. But there is a more gracious way: We "should understand their extreme language as hyperbole—emotional exaggerations by which the psalmist...wants God to know how strongly he feels about the matter" (William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, 285).

The psalms are full of emotive language. In our relationship with God, we are encouraged to acknowledge the depth of our feelings, and to give the matter into God's hands.

Giving thanks

Some of the songs of lament end with promises of praise:

*I will thank the Lord because he is just;
I will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High. (Psalm 7:17)*

It might sound like the person is bargaining with God: If you help me out, then I will praise you. But in reality, the person is already praising God. The request for help is an implied statement that God is able to do what he is asked. The people are already looking to him for the intervention they need. They expect to return to the place of worship on the next festival and sing songs

In Psalms, praise and thanksgiving and lament are all intertwined, reflecting the fact that God's people experience all of these and **God is with us wherever we go.**



of thanksgiving. They know those tunes, too.

Even those who are grieving are invited to learn the psalms of thanksgiving and praise, because there will come times in their life when these songs express their emotions as well. We are invited to praise God even when we are personally in pain, because other members of the community are in times of joy.

Our relationship with God is not just about us—it's about us being participants in the people of God. When one person rejoices, we all rejoice, and when one is suffering, we all suffer. The psalms of lament and the psalms of rejoicing are equally appropriate for us. Even when we have many blessings ourselves, we lament that many Christians are being persecuted for their faith. And they sing psalms of joy, too, confident that they will see better days ahead.

Psalms 18 is an example of thanksgiving after God has provided a

rescue. The superscription explains that David sang this "on the day the Lord rescued him from all his enemies":

*I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. . . .
In my distress I called to the Lord. . . .
The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook. . . .
Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it. (Psalm 18:3-8)*

Here David is using exaggerated language to make a point. Whenever we are saved from our distress—no matter whether our enemies are invaders, neighbors, animals, or drought—we praise God for whatever he does to help us.

Praise songs

The shortest psalm illustrates the basic outline of a hymn: a call to praise, followed by a reason:

*Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord [Hallelu Yah]. (Psalm 117:1-2)*

God's people are invited to incorporate these emotions as part of their relationship with God: feelings of awe, admiration, and safety. Do God's people always have these feelings of safety? No, the songs of lament are a reminder that we do not.

One interesting thing about the book of Psalms is that all these different types of psalms are mixed together. Praise and thanksgiving and lament are all intertwined, reflecting the fact that God's people experience all of these and God is with us wherever we go.

A few of the psalms concern the kings of Judah, and may have been sung every year at a public pageant. Some of these we now apply to the Messiah as all the psalms find their fulfillment in Jesus. As a human, he experienced our sorrows, our fears, our feelings of abandonment, as well as our faith and praise and joy. We praise him as our King, as the one God uses to bring salvation to us.

The psalms invite our imagination, and our participation as the people of God. **co**

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Mission/Purpose



People who have a purpose in life live healthier and longer lives, concluded neuropsychologist, Patricia Boyle. Dr. Boyle was quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article by Diane Cole entitled “Why You Need to Find a Mission” (January 14, 2013). Having a purpose, Boyle pointed out, slows cognitive decline. When asked to define purpose in life, Boyle replied, “It’s the sense that your life has meaning. You’re engaged in things that you think are important on a broader level, beyond just yourself.” She goes on to say, “Being purposeful is not something that just happens without your being active and intentional.” I found this article thought-provoking, especially from a Christian perspective.

To be honest, I’m not big on “missions” and “mission statements.” To me the word “mission” sounds task-oriented. Being a bit lazy, I tend to shy away from anything remotely resembling more work I might have to do. But I do like the word “purpose.” To me purpose indicates my life makes a difference and reminds me what I do every day matters to God and those around me.

I’ll never be a Mother Teresa, and you’ll never be a Dr. Albert Schweitzer or a Billy Graham. But I suggest that’s not what God specifically called you or me to do. Maybe God called us to live ordinary lives intentionally trying to do what he would have us do in any given circumstance.

While I admire great missional leaders who do extraordinary things, I think God is just as pleased with the Christ-centered grand-

mother who raises her grandchildren with godly principles because her drugged-out daughter is in jail. The aged spouse who cheerfully cares for a mate with Alzheimer’s touches my heart. The policeman with a devotional in his pocket who puts himself in harm’s way to protect others paints a picture of what Christianity is about.

I think about the soldier who fights for my freedom counseling with a chaplain and praise God that the chaplain is there. The housebound prayer warrior who sends out cards and letters of encouragement is on mission with God. The single mother grocery clerk, working two jobs to keep her family fed, who smiles at me and tells me to have a blessed day is on mission. The dedicated teacher, trying to teach morality to her students in spite of low pay, overcrowded classrooms, and under-funded programs has God’s heart and understands her mission.

Mission is done by ordinary people who rely on our extraordinary God; people who see their purpose as simply trying to live a Christian life. By living in mission, they bring glory to God and positively affect those around them.

For some of us I believe our mission—our purpose in life—is as simple as sharing the love of God by how we live our lives. We are God’s workmanship, created to live our lives according to his will (Ephesians 2:10). If we stay God-centered, he will give our lives meaning, keep us focused and motivated—and provide the strength that can keep us going (Philippians 4:13). **co**

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