

GCI Today

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA
SPRING 2014

Everyone is on a
MISSION

THANKFUL FOR THE

Little things

Nurturing healthy family
COMMUNICATION

WELCOME



John McLean

JUST SOME LITTLE THINGS

HE IS "GRATEFUL for his boots. He's grateful for his tracksuit ... He's grateful for his teammates. He's grateful for his coaches. He's grateful for the opposition ... before kick-off he will express his gratitude in the form of a prayer. "He will pray again after fulltime ..." when he will express "gratitude for the opportunity to play." And the journalist who is writing this commentary ends by saying of this high-profile rugby player that "we should be thankful we get to watch."

Whether you are a rugby fan or not, there's an elegant simplicity about this, isn't there. There's something we recognise here: it resonates deep within, it provides intimations of a better way of living. Even – especially – in the harsh world of professional sport, where arrogance, self-promotion, and chasing big money can be the order of the day.

It's easy to be so busy, or distracted, that we don't notice – let alone give thanks for – the little things, the ordinary things, the everyday. In the relentless pursuit of "more", it's easy to forget to stop and be grateful for what we already have. (And there's a whole marketing industry dedicated to trying to convince you that you can't be happy with what you already have.)

On a broader canvas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of the tendency to ask God for big things while forgetting to thank him for the ordinary, little things. We may even lament our limited faith, knowledge, experience (sometimes while magnifying that of others), and consider that pious. Yet as Bonhoeffer observes, the truly spiritual life is found when we begin to relax and "thankfully receive from Him the little things". Of course, there are really no little things, no small gifts, no paltry dimensions to the grace of God.

Being thankful for the ordinary, everyday things helps us to "notice harder" the little things that go to make up life. To be aware, rather than just in a rush. A child's laughter. A friend's presence. A word of encouragement. A bright blue sky. A "wine dark sea". A cheerful smile. A lovingly prepared meal. The taste of cherries. The sound of music. The rhythm of the dance. The delicate colours of the flower. The magpie's warble, the whip bird's distinctive call. Even a pair of football boots.

Bonhoeffer suggests that one of the things we need to give thanks for every day is our fellowship – the divine reality of our fellowship with Christ, and the subsequent grace of our fellowship with one another. We enter into common life together "not as demanders, but as thankful recipients". We thank God for what he has given us, rather than complain about what we don't have.

Yes, we give God thanks for the big things – his love, mercy and grace, expressed to us in Jesus Christ. We also give God thanks, continually, for the little things that make up the privilege to be alive.

What do you have to be grateful for today? Oh, just some little things ...

John McLean is Mission and National Director, Australia

CONTENTS

- 01 **Family communication** – a nurturing atmosphere
- 03 **True servant** – Sheryl Richardson retires
- 04 **Everyone is on a mission** – an invitation to participate
- 05 **Love others** – mission impossible?
- 06 **International congregations "live and share"** – from Australia to Ghana and PNG
- 07 **Jesus' acceptance** – what does it mean?
- 10 **Financials** – the way to freedom
- 11 **Finding my freedom** – it's found in surrender
- 12 **Exploring the Word** – Psalms and our relationship with God

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MISSION STATEMENT

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There are three secrets to successful family communication ... the problem is we don't know what they are! (That's why they're secrets.)

IT'S PROBABLY MORE accurate to say that there are no secrets to successful family communication – we know what to do, it's just hard to do it.

Perhaps the problem arises because it's too easy to assume that communication within a family should go pretty smoothly most of the time. After all, we love each other, we live together, we know each other, and ... well, we're family. That view may, however, be overlooking some of the reasons we might expect complications in our communication: we love each other, we live together, we know each other, and ... well, we're family.

Given the complexities of family life it's

probably amazing that we're ever able to communicate successfully. Consider just some of the everyday differences that exist among the people in your family:

Some of us like planning and predictability ... some of us prefer spontaneity and surprise.

Some like to discuss things in terms of logic ... some are more concerned by how you or they feel about things.

Some need order and control ... some need "creative chaos" in order to flourish.

Some need plenty of time for thoughtful reflection ... some need the stimulation of others' company and ideas.

Some like to take things slow and steady ... some like change and flexibility.

Some just want the facts ... some want to know the stories behind the facts.

It was probably easy to identify some people in your family – immediate and extended – as you read those short descriptions. Notice that there are no "right" or "wrong" ways of being. At least, that's

what we know we should believe – it's just that some of those preferences feel more right to us than others. And that too easily makes other preferences "wrong" (or at least in need of fixing). And therein lies the potential for conflict.

"Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible – the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family," wrote Virginia Satir (1916-1988), known as "the mother of family therapy" and author of the book *Peoplemaking* (1972).

Let's consider that apparently simple statement about environments in which feelings of worth can flourish:

An atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated means we take the effort to acknowledge differences and make the commitment to appreciating what those differences bring to our family. We cannot and should not attempt to

Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships he makes with others and what happens to him in the world about him

– Virginia Satir (*Peoplemaking*)



make everyone else in the family conform to our image or preferred way of seeing and doing things. And of course we don't want to do that, but it's easy to default to assuming others are "wrong" when they are different (and it annoys us!).

An atmosphere where mistakes are tolerated requires a gentleness of spirit and kindness of approach that recognises each family member is human (just like us) and prone to different types of mistakes from which, hopefully, they and we can learn lessons and grow as a result. Mistakes are not faults to be punished for, but opportunities to learn from.

An atmosphere where communication is open suggests an intentional effort to both share information and invite reciprocation, response and reaction without fear of rejection. Open communication also requires a sense of safety about sharing thoughts, feelings and concerns.

An atmosphere where rules are flexible is also important to enabling people to flourish because, while every family has explicit and implicit rules (including about what is talked about and how), those rules must serve a family's inevitably changing needs and contexts. Satir maintained that family rules serve to maintain a family's balance and are related to how parents achieve and maintain their own self-esteem. These rules, of course, also shape how children experience life, family and develop their own sense of self.

Here, then, are five foundational skills that work together to enhance family communication. You will note as you read through them that some come more naturally and easily to some family members than others – which again reminds us that we need each others' differences and we need to be flexible in our "rules" of family communication.

In no particular order, let's consider our five skills.

Listening

Listening is more than just hearing (although given how literally "plugged in" to other sources many of us are these days, even hearing is a good start!). True, active listening involves not just the ears, but the eyes, the mind and the heart. Listening calls for respect, interest and patience. It's also one of the highest-value communication and relationship behaviours we can master. If you want others in your family to share their thoughts openly and honestly, you have to be committed to listening in a way that encourages their communication with you.

Questioning

If listening is "the neglected communication skill" then questioning must be "the too-often ignored communication skill". Asking questions helps us understand, it slows our assumptions, it helps us check for what is fact and what is story. Questions

show interest and help others to think things through and more fully express their feelings and concerns. The old stereotype of the husband or father who is quick to interrupt with a "solution" instead of taking time to listen and understand is funny but also sadly too often true. Firing off a (most likely ill-informed) piece of advice takes a lot less intellectual and emotional effort and skill than listening carefully and questioning gently.

Laughter

Laughing together creates a sense of shared experience. It helps relieve stress. And creates memories of fun together. Laughter has no known negative side effects, it's cheap, portable and easy. Except that our busy and intense lives can often make us more serious than we need to be. Being able to share our concerns in a family is important. Being able to laugh about things together is also important – not least because of the positive physical, mental and emotional benefits laughter provides. Laughing produces the "feel-good" brain chemical we know as endorphins. (Among other things, endorphins helps us manage pain.) Being able to laugh at ourselves is an important first step to a sense of good humour in a family.

Empathy

Not everything is a laughing matter (as some members of our families are quick to remind

COMMUNICATION THAT HELPS OR HINDERS?

FAMILY THERAPIST VIRGINIA SATIR identified four types of "dysfunctional" communication that often create or escalate conflict. She also identified an emotionally intelligent approach for managing communication effectively:

- 1 **Blamer.** Creates arguments by finding faults and not accepting responsibility.
- 2 **Placater** (Non-assertive). Always tries to please others, never disagreeing, seeking approval. Concerned with how others view them.
- 3 **Computer.** Uncomfortable expressing or dealing with emotions. Often appear super-rational, intellectualizing issues, with the result they appear cold or unfeeling.
- 4 **Distracter.** Seek attention to compensate for feelings of loneliness or inadequacy. They can also use a range of emotions from anger to guilt to either avoid an issue (distract) or manipulate how others feel.
- 5 **Leveller** (Congruent / Assertive). Provide clear communication (including "congruent" communication – aligning and managing words, emotions and actions), taking responsibility for their own emotions and behaviours with the goal of solving problems.

(Satir, 1988, *The New Peoplemaking*)

While it's always easy to identify others' faults, it's more important to take responsibility for our own. And the point of Satir's descriptions was not to create blame or guilt but to encourage us to be honest and open in our communication and to take responsibility for what we say and how we say it so that we can contribute to healthy family communication.

Open communication requires a sense of safety about sharing thoughts, feelings and concerns

us). Equally important is the capacity to empathise with others when they are feeling sadness, rejection, humiliation, fear ... and when they are feeling joy, pride, success, and boldness. Simple enough? Well, yes, except that sometimes how others are feeling doesn't make sense to us – or just annoys us. Managing our emotional state – especially as parents – is essential to being able to genuinely "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "weep with those who weep". Empathy is about caring. And it communicates in a way that is often beyond mere words.

Sharing

Communication isn't simply a matter of sending or receiving messages from others. It's a two-way, interactive, cooperative process that requires sharing of ideas, perspectives, concerns, and feedback. The idea of "open" communication requires an environment and behaviours that offer and encourage input and response, give and take, as-

sertiveness and responsiveness. While some are more comfortable at sharing than others, we can't leave it to them to do all the sharing; and neither can they ignore the responsibility of encouraging and respecting others' sharing. After all, if family is defined by anything, it surely must include sharing.

There are no secrets to healthy family communication – just some good, sound, but challenging principles we can try to apply every day in our own individual ways. Some we do well, some come easily. Others we struggle with. And over time we can develop the skills of effective communication. Not perfectly and not always consistently. But in families that share, that laugh, that empathise, that question, and that listen, our flaws and limitations can be excused, and our attempts to more fully express our love and care can be appreciated, just as our differences are celebrated. 🌟



Sheryl Richardson Retires

SHERYL RICHARDSON HAS begun long service leave prior to her retirement. At an office lunch on July 24 Sheryl's service across 37 years of employment in the church's national office was acknowledged.

"This is one of those major milestones," said national director John McLean. "Sheryl has been a part of the office team for so long, and has contributed so much to the national office and to our congregations. She is well known for her diligence, reliability and responsibility. Sheryl is a true servant, and has been willing to work in a variety of roles – whatever needed to be done. She has ministered to our congregations, and through her work helped enable others to function in their various capacities, together fulfilling the broader mission of the church, living and sharing the gospel."

In addition to accounting and administrative duties, Sheryl has at various times organised training weekends (including the original events in the mid and late 1980s), and ministerial conferences. She has also served as the Registrar for ACCM, worked for Pacific Training and Development, helped with National Women's Conferences and a host of other activities and events.

In addition, Sheryl has done a wonderful job running the kitchen at SEPs in recent times, and organising festivals annually.

John noted that Sheryl has continued to do these things in spite of times of family suffering and her own health challenges. "Words cannot adequately describe the contribution she has made to our fellowship, or the appreciation we feel for Sheryl. We pray for her health, and wish her and her husband Peter God's richest blessings in Christ in the years ahead. Again, in what is just about the ultimate accolade, Sheryl is a True Servant, and we are very grateful to God for her."



Everyone is on a mission

by Rick Shallenberger

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 co-mission 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

Being on mission with God is simply participating with God in what he is already doing

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 al-

ready 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. ☺



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

allow for the necessary wrestling 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.

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.

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

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 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

THE MONK AND THE BURRO

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.

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

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. ☺



KIDDIES KOLLEGE

INTERNATIONAL CONGREGATIONS

Live and share

by Rod Dean

One night after midnight late 2009 my phone rang. Unbeknown to me the person ringing was Christopher Balidin who was representing a group of refugees in Ghana from several troubled nations. They were busy looking for the GCI in many other places without realising that the church existed in Ghana as well. Their search took them to the Sydney, Australian church. They were directed to Kalengule Kaoma the Director of African Missions. He in turn notified Emmanuel Okai, the Chairman of the Ecclesiastical Council of Ghana GCI and together the process of integration began.

THIS BEGAN AN ongoing relationship with Sydney and its sister congregations in Wollongong, Bathurst and Canberra over the last five years. Their initial need was grain to feed the hungry community. This began immediately and has continued to this day.

The relationship has grown in stages. All discussions and projects were coordinated initially through Emmanuel Okai. Today it is through Theo Okai who like

Emmanuel is a bi-vocational pastor.

We have paid for them to have a hall so they will have a permanent place to worship and to have a community identity. A toilet block for the hall is almost completed. A long-term goal is a children's church hall for the many children who attend.

One of the most important scholarships provided is to subsidise the fees for the education of all children from primary to high school. The amount given has remained the same per term so if the number of children grows it becomes a lower percentage of the fees and vice versa. Our region also sponsors vocational training. We are encouraging a HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) style system so others can receive the scholarships in the future and also to teach recipients to give back. We have had one micro-financing of a business which is in the process of being returned to be used by others.

We have financed PA equipment and musical instruments because for the young adults music is a big part of their heritage and how they worship. Each year the medical insurance for the congregation is sent. This is at a relatively low cost and provides security for everyone.

Emmanuel Okai wrote:

There is always hope for the living. It is however a hard life for those who live in refugee camps where grinding poverty and daily want is the staple of a majority. Existence is only on thin hope, crumbs and tenacity. Many in such condi-

tions are thus enticed by all kinds of evils – just to survive.

God be praised that some succeed even under such harsh conditions. This is the reason we are thankful for support from kind-hearted Christians like you and the family of believers in Australia. We are certain that some of the beneficiaries of your scholarship and socio-economic interventions will rise out and succeed. It is our prayer that many – indeed a majority – of those we are working with will succeed in their own ways. Please pray and participate with us.

The attendance has fluctuated due to repatriation of refugees back to the countries of origin. This meant for a while the weekly attendance fell from an average of 130 to 70. People were quite destabilized and traumatized. The attendance has returned to where it was because of new people. The number of children has ranged from 60-80.

We have encouraged communication between the young people of Buduburam and the young people of the PNG church.

Message from the young adults of Buduburam to the young adults of PNG

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We bring you profound greeting in the name of our soon coming Lord Jesus Christ. The Buduburam youth ministry is highly grateful to the Almighty God for the work and wonderful things he is doing in our life over the past years. We as brothers of the gospel would like to encourage you in commitment to the gospel. We know it is a difficult task to be committed to the gospel as youth, but with Christ all things are possible. Keep on praying, and no labour in Christ is in vain. Therefore we all need to persevere to the end. We wish our relationship and our courage will strengthen you spiritually and morally. It is our prayer and hope that the good Lord will continue to strengthen you in all your endeavours. We hope to hear from you soon.

All GCI mission activities and funding are co-ordinated through the National Office in Varsity Lakes. We are very grateful to God that we have been able to maintain a consistent support over the years. ☉

Rod Dean is pastor of the Grace Communion International churches in NSW and ACT.

PHOTOS: COURTESY ROD DEAN

Jesus' acceptance

by Gary Deddo

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

IN GCI 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 that we are 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. In fact, he told his listeners that he would draw all persons to himself (John 12:32). Indeed, we find no instances where Jesus rejected someone, turning away from or refusing someone who was seeking him out. More than that, Jesus received and even shared meals with the sorts of people who were being rejected by many of the religious leaders of his day.

What stands out in the biblical record is the fact that Jesus welcomed and interacted with lepers, the lame, blind, deaf and dumb. 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 that 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 also 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).

What comes across in these examples is that Jesus 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 rest of the New Testament outside of the Gospels summarizes what we see lived out in Jesus' life. Paul indicates that Jesus came to atone for the sins of the ungodly, the sinners—those "dead in their sins" (Ephesians 2:1).

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 is no necessity to think that there are contrasting or conflicting aspects within Jesus' heart, mind and purposes. There is no need to see some sort of internal balancing act, now tipping one way then correcting and tipping the other. There is no need to think that Jesus is trying to accomplish two divergent things at the same time such as love and righteousness or mercy and holiness. Such imagined tensions might exist within us in our fallenness, but they do not exist within the heart of Jesus or his Father.

A willingness to repent requires an attitude of humble receptivity. And that is what Jesus is looking for in extending his welcome, his acceptance

Jesus, like the Father, welcomes all people. However, he does so with a particular purpose in mind. His love has direction to it. He engages all who will listen to reveal something that is generally hidden. He came to give something in particular—to serve all in a way that points in a particular direction, that has a certain goal or end in mind.

Rather than an end point, his welcome to all is the starting point of an ongoing relationship. That relationship 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—and that is himself. And in offering himself he gives us the way, the truth and the life. Nothing more. Nothing else.

Jesus' attitude and acts of receiving and welcoming call for a certain response to his self-giving. In essence, it calls for receiving what he offers. In contrast to that receptive response, there is the response of rejecting what Jesus offers, which means rejecting Jesus himself. By Jesus drawing all people to himself he is looking for the response of reception. And as Jesus indicates, that response requires a certain attitude, a certain approach toward him.

To benefit all

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. However, Jesus immediately indicated what response that truth and reality calls for: "Repent and believe in the good news" of the kingdom's arrival. A refusal to repent and put faith in Jesus and his kingdom amounts to a rejection of Jesus and the benefits of his kingdom.

A willingness to repent requires an attitude of humble receptivity. And that is what Jesus is looking for in extending his welcome, his acceptance. For it is only through humility that we are able to receive what Jesus has offered. And note that Jesus offers his gift before any such response is made. In fact, it is the offer of the gift 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 in response to his offer of himself 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 so benefitting from what he gives, requires acknowledging that we are lost and need to be found, that we are ill and need a physician to heal us, that we come 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 that he needs. This is why Jesus indicates that it is the "poor in spirit" who are 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 is an attitude that admits that we are not self-sufficient but must receive life from our creator and redeemer. The opposite of such a trusting and receptive heart has been called pride. In the context of church teaching, pride is an attitude that asserts autonomy from God, a trust in oneself, a confidence in one's own adequacy, even in the face of God. Such pride is offended by the suggestion that one needs to receive anything significant from God, most especially his forgiveness and mercy. Pride then results in a self-righteous refusal to receive anything essential from God, particularly those things you think you can provide for yourself.

Pride insists on paying its own way, getting what it deserves. It insists that it does not need grace or charity from God—that it can provide itself with life sufficient for its own purposes. Pride refuses to "be beholden" to anyone or anything, including God. Pride says nothing really needs to be changed in us. We are fine just as we are. In contrast, humility recognizes that one cannot give oneself life. Instead, it admits its need not only for help, but for the transformation, renewal, restoration and reconciliation that only God has to 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 them himself. His welcome is thus purposeful. It leads somewhere. His purpose necessarily includes what reception of him requires. Jesus tells us that 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 a receptivity to his Holy Spirit. It results in worshipping God alone through the Son and in the Spirit, that is, 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.

Discernment

And this means that Jesus' way involves discernment—it does sort through and notice the kinds of responses made to him (and to all that he offers). Jesus recognizes those who are

Jesus' acceptance and love calls for a particular kind of response, not giving no response or any sort of response

rejecting him and his word and so those who are rejecting a 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 that Jesus has a different attitude or intention other than that which we surveyed above. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus' love is diminished or contradicted by his acts of discernment. Jesus does not condemn those who reject his welcome and invitation to follow him. But he does warn them concerning the consequences of such rejection. Jesus' acceptance and love calls for a particular kind of response, not giving no response or any sort of response.

Jesus' discernment of the various kinds of responses made to him is evident at many points in Scripture. His parable of the sower and the seeds (the seeds being his word) makes this obvious. There are four distinct soils, and only one represents the receptive response that Jesus is looking for. On numerous occasions, Jesus talks about receiving or rejecting him, his words/teaching, his heavenly Father and his disciples. When a number of disciples turned away and left him, Jesus asked whether his twelve disciples would leave him as well. Peter famously replies, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Jesus' initial initiative towards people is expressed in his invitation to "come, follow me" (Mark 1:17). There is a difference between those who follow and those who do not. Jesus likens those who follow to those who act on an invitation to a wedding and contrasts them with those who refuse the invitation (Matthew 22:4-9). In like manner, a difference is noted in

the refusal of the elder son to join in the feast celebrating his younger brother's return, despite his father imploring him to come in (Luke 15:28).

There are strict warnings to those who not only do not follow Jesus but who actively reject his invitation to the extent of preventing others from following him, some even plotting to have Jesus executed (Luke 11:46; Matthew 3:7; 23:27-29). These warnings are severe—indicating what the person issuing them does not want to happen, not what they hope will happen.

When we accept Jesus, we cease living for ourselves because we belong to another

Warnings are given to those whom we care about, not to those for whom we have no concern. The same love and acceptance is exhibited towards those who accept Jesus and those who reject him. However, such love would not be loving if it then failed to note the difference of response and the corresponding consequences.

Jesus welcomes and invites all to respond in a receptive way both to him and to what he offers, which is the reign of the kingdom of God. Though the net is cast wide and the seed is sown everywhere, receiving, trusting and following him call for a particular response. Jesus likens it to the reception of a child. He calls such receptivity faith/belief or trust in him. It includes repenting of putting one's ultimate trust in anyone or anything else. It is summed up in worshipping the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. The gift is offered freely and extended to all. No pre-conditions are set out to limit or restrict who might benefit from it.

However, the reception of the freely given gift always involves a cost to the recipient. That cost is to give up one's entire life and hand it over to Jesus and the Father and the Spirit with him. The cost is not something paid to Jesus to enable or incline him to give himself to us. It is the cost of emptying our hands and hearts to receive him for who he is, our Lord and Savior. What is freely given is costly to us to receive because it involves dying to the old and corrupted self in order to receive new life from him.

The cost to us to receive God's free grace is referred to throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, we are said to need both new hearts and new spirits that God himself will one day give! In the New Testament we are told that we need to be born again from above, that we need new natures, that we must stop living for ourselves and begin living under the Lordship of Christ, that we must die to our old natures, that we are to become new creations, that we are to be regenerated, that we are being renewed according to the image of Christ, the new Adam. The day of Pentecost indicates not only God's sending of his Spirit to indwell his people in a new way, but our need to receive and be indwelt and filled by his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of life.

Pearl of great price

Jesus' parables indicate that the response he is looking for, the response that indicates the reception of what he offers us involves a cost to us. Consider the parables of the pearl of great

price or the purchase of a field in which there is a treasure. Those who respond appropriately must give up all they have to receive what they have found (Matthew 13:44, 46). Those who place other things as a priority, whether they be lands or home or family, are not receiving Jesus and his benefits (Luke 9:59, Luke 14:18-20).

Jesus' interactions with people indicate that following him and receiving all his benefits calls for the abandonment of anything we might value above Jesus and his kingdom. That includes abandoning the pursuit and possession of material wealth. The rich ruler did not follow Jesus because he could not part with his goods. Consequently he was unable to receive the good that Jesus offered him (Luke 18:18-23). Even the woman caught in adultery was called to set out in a different direction of life. Receiving forgiveness was to be followed by her sinning no more (John 8:11). Recall the man at the pool. He had to be willing to leave behind his place at the pool as well as his diseased self. "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

Jesus welcomes and accepts all but a receptive response to Jesus does not leave anyone where Jesus finds them. Jesus would not be loving if he simply left them in the condition in which he first encountered them. He loves us too much simply to leave us alone as though he merely empathizes with us or feels sorry for us. No, his love is a healing, transforming, life-changing love.

In sum, the New Testament consistently declares that the response to the free offer that Jesus makes of himself, including all that he has for us, involves denying (dying to) ourselves. It involves giving up our pride, our confidence in ourselves, in our religiousness, in our gifts and abilities including our ability to manage and give ourselves life. In that regard, Jesus shockingly declares that compared to following him we must "hate our father and mother." But more than this, following him calls for hating our own life—the false idea that we can give life to ourselves (Luke 14:26-27).

When we accept Jesus, we cease living for ourselves (Romans 14:7-8) because we belong to another (1 Corinthians 6:18). In that sense, we are "slaves of Christ" (Ephesians 6:6). Our lives are completely in his hands, under his provision and direction. We are who we are in relationship to him. Because we are united to Christ, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20 ESV).

Jesus does accept and welcome one and all. He died for all. He is reconciled to all. But he does this as our Lord and Savior. His welcome and acceptance are an offer, an invitation that calls for response, for receptivity. And that acceptance and receptivity necessarily involves receiving exactly what he has to offer according to who he is. Nothing more and nothing less. This means that responding to him will involve repentance, getting rid of anything that blocks receiving from him what he has to offer, that blocks communion with him and the enjoyment of life in his kingdom. Such a response is costly to us—but a cost well worth it. For in dying to our old selves, we receive a new self. We make room for Jesus, receiving with emptied hands his life-transforming, life-giving grace. Jesus accepts us wherever we are in order to take us to where he is going, which is to be with his Father in the Spirit now and for all eternity as his healed, whole, regenerated children.

Who would want to be included in anything less than that? ☺



Financials – The way to freedom

by Craig Kuhlman

In the third article in this series, Craig Kuhlman explains the value of financial statements.

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 (income – expenses = net income)? Is your net worth more or less than it was last year at this time (assets – debts/liabilities = 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, hold-

Annually reviewing your budget and your balance sheet is like a financial blood pressure test

ing financial freedom as a goal (as I have defined it here), serves as another best practice for stewards of God’s wealth.

Regardless of the philosophy you were raised with, take heart: it can change over time to meet changing circumstances. ☺

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Finding my freedom

by Mychelle Fleming

THIS YEAR MARKS an important anniversary in my life. A ten-year friendship-versary with nine special women. Over the past ten years we have navigated the beautiful mess of life, celebrating marriages, new life entering the world, and healing of terminal illnesses. We have grieved with one another through the losses of relationships, jobs, homes, and even the loss of a parent.

Today I was meditating on the crucial role these friends (and their expanding families) have played and continue to play in my life. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and reminded their presence in my life is the result of an answered prayer.

The year was 2003, my sophomore year of college. If I had to sum up my fall semester in one word it would be FREEDOM. Oh the sweet taste of freedom! I had moved past the homesick phase that encompassed much of my freshman year, and was enjoying the ability to make decisions based solely on my own thoughts and desires. After only a few months of “free” living it began to feel stale. Counter-intuitively, the freedom to make my life all about myself made my life seem smaller. Although my social life was blooming, my individualistic approach was also isolating, because I was the only person investing in my future. During this time I began to pray for real community. I wanted more than just “fun” friends to go out with—I wanted friends who would also hold me accountable. Through a series of serendipitous events, I was introduced to this group of girls. I immediately felt welcome and was invited to attend a small group with them. Throughout the rest of my time as an undergrad and over the past ten years, these women have been my prayer partners and cheerleaders.

Sacrificing my independent life-style for community and accountability changed my perspective on freedom and shifted my worldview. Society champions the virtues of independent living, but I realized I was not on my own. My best was brought out in community. As my spiritual life developed, I began to see this was God’s plan all along. Because our Triune God is a God of relationship, and since we are created in his image, we flourish when we are in com-



A life surrendered to God opens us up to the freedom for the life God created us to live

munion with one another.

A verse encapsulating the change in my view of freedom is found in the Gospel of Mark. Here Jesus tells his disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (NASB). During my sophomore year the majority of my time was spent hopping from one social event to another. Thursday through Sunday was a series of sporting events, beach days, and parties. Although none of these festivities were evil or bad, I began to feel a heavy emptiness in my life. I vividly remember one of my friends informing me the output of my life was a result of focusing on myself and my social desires, I was losing my sense of purpose, passion, and hope, which flourish when I pursue the perfect plans God has for me.

Self-centered living at face value appears satisfying, but a freedom from external constraints leads to internal brokenness, and cultivates a desire to be the god of our own kingdom. A life surrendered to God opens us up to the freedom for the life

God created us to live. If we live as if we are God, our illusions will be crushed by the reality of our limitations. When we live in surrender, we have the freedom to bring our desires to God, and are made complete by the fullness of life and power that comes from him.

I have learned the power of community in my life. I am more aware of times I withdraw from community, and I have learned God works in and through the community he plants us in. Like my friend’s admonition to re-prioritize my time, God has spoken his truth and love to me through countless other conversations with friends.

Surrender is a daily discipline that creates the freedom God calls us to. Is a relationship consuming the first fruit of your time and energy? Does your career or a dream have your first priority? Whatever it is, ask God to reveal what you are holding back and what you need to surrender. My hope is that you may be filled and overflow onto others as he promises in his word: “Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy; fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope” (Romans 15:13, *The Message*)! ☺

The story of God's relationship with his people in the Psalms



The Psalms invite our imagination, and our participation as the people of God

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 songbook 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*, p285).

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 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.

Psalm 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 [in Hebrew, 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. ☺

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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



For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

– 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 (NIV)