

# GCI Today

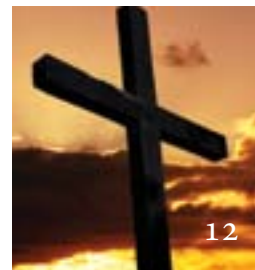
GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

JULY – SEPTEMBER 2013

SCRIPTURE  
GOD'S GIFT  
RADICAL  
LOVE







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## About GCI Today

### MISSION STATEMENT

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

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# Stop well to go well

Recently we were blessed to enjoy a very successful open national conference. It was a time of wonderful fellowship, worship and learning together. GCI Pastor General Joseph Tkach and his wife Tammy, and Dr Gary Deddo, and his wife Cathy, were keynote speakers. Dr Deddo is a former Senior Editor with InterVarsity Press, and a well respected theologian and teacher, who now is part of our fellowship.

Many people commented on the “vibe”, the spirit of the occasion. It was a joyful time of reconnection, connection, and fellowship. One comment heard repeatedly was that the conference was like a big reunion.

While the conference was a busy time for the organisers, it was a time to slow down, pause and reflect for those attending. It was a time to be formed and reformed spiritually as we contemplated and discussed the deep things of God.

As Dr Keith Farmer, another keynote presenter, put it, we have to

learn to “stop well to go well”. For many, life is just very busy – full of time pressures, and the tyranny of the urgent. If we are not careful, we fall victim to the hurry, flurry and worry of modern life. We need to intentionally find time to slow down. To stop.

Stopping is a necessary part of doing. It is necessary if we are to keep going. We are finite beings. Stopping enables us to be aware of the present moment – and more, to appreciate it, to savour, to be grateful for it. And it is in stopping that we are able to think, contemplate, discover and rediscover the deep things of God – grace, truth, love, beauty, forgiveness, rest and communion. To see things we haven't seen before, or to see things in different and more exciting and profound ways than ever.

Dr Farmer also said we need to go deeper to go further. Rather than rushing through, skating along the surface of existence, we need that deep connection with God, participating in his life through Jesus by the Spirit. Going deeper in our re-

lationship with God, and with one another, enables us to keep going, and to go further.

The conference provided an occasion for both stopping well, and going deeper. Our prayer is this magazine will do the same for you, the reader. We hope you will take the time to read and reflect.

Stop well to go well. To go deeper to go further.

**John McLean**

Mission and National  
Director, Australia







SCRIPTURE:

# God's gift

by Dr Gary Deddo

*In the first article on Scripture (January-March 2013, pages 5-7), we considered how Scripture is a gift of the living and speaking God. But this gift is not one that becomes separated from the giver. By the Spirit, God spoke through the prophets and then the apostles. And God continues to speak by the same Spirit through those God-breathed written words.*

**I**F GOD FELL mute and ceased to actively communicate with us in and through those written words, we would not have the true and authoritative word from God that he uses to make himself known. But the living and speaking God of the

Bible does not remain at a deistic distance, winding up his Bible and then sending it out to mechanistically convey information about God. The very nature of God is to communicate himself, make himself known so that we might communicate with him

as his children and so share in holy loving communion.

## Scripture points to Jesus

One further point made in the previous issue confirms all this. God's personal act of



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

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

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

When the Pharisees attempt to use Scripture (and their interpretation of it) against Jesus, he confronts them and says: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40, NRSV throughout). Jesus has to tell them that he is the Lord [author] of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5) and that they are in no place to judge him by their pre-understanding of the Sabbath. When the author of Scripture shows up, we have to stop interpreting Jesus in terms of our

pre-understandings of Scripture and interpret the written words in terms of Jesus, the Living Word.

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

## The mystery unveiled

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

Thomas F. Torrance used to explain it this way. It's like reading a murder-mystery for the second time. The first time we're looking for clues as to "who-did-it." But not everything is clear. Some things make sense and others don't. Some things seem significant; others seem trivial. But in a well-crafted

murder mystery, there will be plenty of clues. So many clues, in fact, that when it finally is revealed who committed the crime, we are somewhat surprised but also satisfied that it makes sense. We say, "Yes, there were clues all along. We just didn't know which ones to pay attention to and didn't see how they 'added up.'"

Now, what would happen if we were to read the murder mystery a second time? Knowing "who-did-it," those early clues would not be irrelevant. Rather, we would see how really significant they were. We would be able to sort out the irrelevant clues from the meaningful ones. Those clues would stand out as even more extraordinary. "No wonder suspect A said X. No wonder suspect B did Y." We would see what they mean, how they point to who committed the crime. We would end up valuing those clues and foreshadowings even more than on the first reading.

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

## It helps to know the Author

Another way to say all this is that the Bible itself tells us *whose* Scripture this is. We know *who* the author is. We know where the Bible came from. It is not anonymous.



So another analogy would be: reading the Bible is like reading a letter from someone you know and who knows you, not like getting junk mail from someone you don't know and who doesn't know or care about you. Reading these two types of mail are entirely different experiences, aren't they?

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

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

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

By God's acts of revelation, we come to know deeply who this God really is. Love for this God, the worship

of this God, trust or faith in this God are responses to who God is. True knowledge of God that is accurate and faithful leads to true worship and living trust in this God.

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

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

### Asking the "who" question

Jesus himself made inquiring about and knowing who he was of paramount importance. His teachings and actions are designed to raise the question: "Who then is this?" His parables prompted his hearers to inquire more deeply. We find him confronting his disciples with this question at two levels: "Who do people say that I am?" and then even more pointedly "Who

do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27, 29). Jesus himself makes the question of *who* central. We must do the same if we are to hear the Word of God (Living and so written) as it was meant to be heard.

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

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

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

**BE JOYFUL ALWAYS; PRAY CONTINUALLY; GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES. THIS IS THE WAY GOD WANTS THOSE OF YOU WHO BELONG TO CHRIST JESUS TO LIVE.**

—1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18



# WHAT SORT OF GOD Is God?

by Phillip Hopwood

## *One of the most profound questions and current debates is what sort of God is God? What underpins his nature, what is at the heart of God?*

**I**N LIFE, FIRST impressions and reputations have a huge impact on how we view an individual or even a group of people. If someone gives us an undeserved bad name, it can take a long time to correct it. Where we start in our understanding of God profoundly affects everything else we think about him and where we end up in our overall view of and relationship with him.

What is the image that comes to mind when you think of God? What sort of being do you think God is? Or to reverse the question, what sort of being do you think God thinks you are? What is his attitude towards you?

When I was young I distinctly remember a scene in the popular movie, *Pollyanna*. One of several at the time starring the very young Hayley Mills. The scene was in a small but crowded church in rural America. The preacher had everyone frozen to their seats, warning them of God's punishment if they didn't repent. He assaulted the hearts and minds of his congregation with a god of devastating anger and vindictive vengeance, a towering judge who was waiting to destroy any hint of

wrong with fire and brimstone. One of the points of the movie was that this was a wrong view.

Recently one of the most popular topics on social media has been the debate about hell. Well known US minister and author Rob Bell wrote a book called *Love Wins* in which he suggested that hell may not be the final end of all the wicked. The debate swings on the question, what sort of God is God? What is the core nature and mind of God?

Is God primarily a sovereign almighty God of supreme power and authority, or is he primarily a God of love? Few would doubt that God is both. But if we start with the first premise as most important, the rest of our beliefs and views of God's will and how we interpret issues of who God will save, hell and final judgment etc., are going to be quite different than if we start with a God of love.

So how do we know the primary motivation and heart of God that underlies who he is and therefore what he does and his view of each of us? Through his words and actions. And his words and actions are revealed to us through the one who became God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself said, "by their fruits you shall know them," (Matthew 7:16, 20) and "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

The life, the words, the actions, the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God reveal to us the underpinning nature and heart of God. He demonstrated that God's love underpins his sovereign power and righteous judgments. Jesus' life exemplifies and makes clear that all God's actions

and future plans regarding you, me and everyone who has ever lived, are benevolent and purely based on love. John 3:16 makes clear that God's judgment is based on his loving desire to save us, so much so that "he gave his only Son." God stopped at nothing to rescue us and restore us to a relationship with him.

John's first epistle makes boldly plain, that "God is love." Love is not an occasional feeling with God. It is who he is, all the time, in everything he does. His loving judgment is that through his Son becoming one of us, and dying and being resurrected as one of us, that all mankind is forgiven and invited to be part of his family. "Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8, 1 Timothy 1:15-16, 1 Peter 3:18). It is God's will that none should perish, but that all should have their lives turned around (2 Peter 3:19). This is hardly a God whose primary motivation is to condemn and punish anyone who steps out of line.

God opposes sin and evil, not just because he is the omniscient, almighty, sovereign judge of the universe, but because he loves us. He does not want his children to suffer by living contrary to his loving way of life. His plan and promise is to restore the universe to be as he intended from the beginning (Revelation 21:3).

The more we read about God's words and actions, and his promises for the future, the more it becomes clear what sort of God he really is. And, no matter what our first impressions may have been, the more it becomes clear; God is a God worth knowing and trusting. ☺





*"Loved the uninterrupted worship"*

*"Thank you, Thank you, Thank you"*

*The conference organisers: "You did good"*

*"Love to have this annually"*



## Celebrating our communion

**TWO HUNDRED AND TEN** people gathered on the Gold Coast for an encouraging, inspiring and enlightening weekend of learning and fellowshiping together at our national conference.

The conference, ***Life Together in Christ***, was held on the Gold Coast. The spirit-filled atmosphere was buzzing with excitement and joy. Getting together was a real delight – with many commenting on the tangible sense of "reunion" evident at seeing friends from around the country and overseas. The weekend was a great opportunity to connect and reconnect with brothers and sisters in Christ.

It was a marvellous occasion of personal

and communal formation and reformation, and growth in the grace of Christ. It was a time to reflect on God's lavish love for us, his beloved children. And to simply enjoy being together, learning and growing in the deep things of God.

Many have commented on how spiritually rich the weekend was for them personally. It has provided a lot of profound content for prayerful consideration, discussion, and exploration for a long time to come.

GCI President Joseph Tkach, Tammy Tkach, Dr Gary Deddo and Cathy Deddo were guest speakers, along with Dr Keith Farmer. Dr Farmer lives on the Central Coast of NSW, and is a former Ministry

College Principal, and has been involved in ministry in Australia for many years.

In my introduction to Gary Deddo, I mentioned that Michael Jenkins, in his excellent book *Invitation to Theology*, had credited a conversation with Gary as being a key transformational moment in his life. And at the conclusion of the conference, numerous participants expressed how much they had found the whole weekend experience to be transformational for them too.

The national conference was open to any who wished to attend. We had people travel from all around the country, and we were especially blessed to have brothers and sisters join us from Malaysia

and New Zealand. We were also glad to welcome representatives of both Perichoresis and GraceWalk, ministries that, like GCI, embrace a Trinitarian, incarnational perspective on theology.

The Women's Conference was folded into the general conference by offering a women's stream (open to both genders). Tammy Tkach and Cathy Deddo addressed the group.

Cathy Deddo also spoke at a plenary session on the topic of "Living in Grace". Gary Deddo's plenary sessions were: "Theology, Faith and a Life of Joyful Obedience" and "Serving Together with Christ". It was a blessing to have Gary and Cathy with us. Gary is a very well re-

*continued over >>*

*"Wonderful fellowship, old and new friends"; "reunion"*

*"It was so spiritually rich and refreshing – very edifying and rewarding to spend time together exploring the deep things of God"*

*"Great speakers, very encouraging messages"*

*"Thanks be to God"; "Don't know what you can do to top this conference"*







*"It was a most uplifting, encouraging and enjoyable time — one that I appreciated very much"*

*"Love being a part of this family"*

*"Hope there will be more"*

*Cathy Deddo wrote, "We were thrilled to be invited to join in and be a part of it and loved the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people"*

*"I left feeling very uplifted and filled with contentment, and I know many others did too"*

*"Awesome conference — inspiring, encouraging, and lovely atmosphere"*



<<continued from page 7

spected teacher, theologian and editor, and it is a privilege to hear him lecture.

Pastor General Joseph Tkach delivered a most encouraging snapshot of our international fellowship entitled "GCI: Transforming its World". As ever, it was a delight to have Joe and Tammy visit us.

Some conference insights included the following: Success is a matter of faithfulness, not numbers. Everyone is important, regardless of age, experience, or life situation. Every congregation is important, regardless of size. (Our small Grafton congregation had almost every member who was physically able to attend at the conference.) We don't "peddle" religion, but participate in the ministry of Christ. Our ministry is participation in his.

Our unity is not in uniformity, but

in our union with Christ, and communion with the Triune God and one another. We are called to the mission of "living and sharing the gospel", serving "all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places".

We accept the amazing grace of God with open hands (not clenched fists), in humility and gratitude. All our lives are "in Christ", lived in his grace.

In this grace, it is not a question of "If we, then God....", but rather, "Since God, then we..." Life then is one of joyful obedience, lived in faith, hope and love, not guilt, fear and anxiety.

As one attendee put it, "The conference was exceptional, and I keep going through the notes, and gaining more from them."

There was a very positive spirit evident, and a deep joy in appreciating

our union with Christ and communion with the Triune God and one another. The next conference is eagerly awaited — so eagerly, many were asking if we could please do it again next year. Unfortunately, next year is simply not possible. However, so enthusiastic was the response, and so spiritually profitable was the experience, that we will plan another general national conference for the following year, 2015. So that is something we can all begin saving and preparing for. And we will now plan to make such an event a regular one on the calendar every two years.

To paraphrase a famous Psalm of David: How good and how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell (and conference) together in unity, union and communion. We are indeed blessed to share life together in the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit.

# The gospels

THE FOUR BOOKS known as Gospels are written as continuous prose narratives. They function as a kind of ancient biography — similar in style to Greco-Roman biography (which is quite different to most modern biography). They are very different from, say, a letter which has a specific author writing to a particular audience, such as Paul writing to the church in Ephesus.

Simply, the Gospels are the story of Jesus. More technically, they are Christology (the study of Jesus Christ) in narrative form. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright emphasises the importance of "story" in understanding how the Scriptures function.

They are books about Jesus. Many of the verbs are either used by Jesus himself, or used about Jesus. He is the subject of the story, the focus of everything that happens.

In everyday life, we distinguish between poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction, documentary and comedy, and so on. We "see" a cartoon differently to how we would "see" a photograph. We hear a news bulletin differently to how we would hear a joke. We interpret a documentary differently to how we might interpret a situational comedy on television.

Understanding this basic nature of the communication we engage in helps us avoid misunderstanding, mistakes and confusion. The particular kind of communication is known as genre. There are a wide range of generic features associated with each different type of communication.

In the same way, in the New Testament writings a Gospel differs from a letter, which in turn differs from apocalyptic literature. Knowing the kind of literature we are reading can help us be better students of the text, avoid making mistakes of interpretation, and understand what we are reading more deeply.

Jesus himself didn't write a book. Nor did he leave a written diary, letters or notes. The story we have is written by others about Jesus.

Further, the Gospels are written well after the events they describe. (In the case of John, probably a long time after.) It is unhelpful to think of them as modern documentaries, as if someone were following Jesus around with a notebook and a portable camera.

All of the Gospels are written after the resurrection. That is, they all carry a post-resurrection perspective. The authors are believers, writing about a Jesus who to them was just as alive — or even more alive — than when he was walking the dusty roads of Judea. They are not simply stories of the past, but written from the perspective of faith and belief — that through the Holy Spirit Jesus was presently active in the life of the community of believers.

Two of the authors (Matthew and John) were part of the inner circle of the twelve disciples; two (Mark and Luke) were not. They all write with the benefit of hindsight. Some of the events that the disciples didn't understand when they were living through them they can now make sense of through the

eyes of the resurrection and ascension.

Mark's Gospel contains 661 verses. Of these, about 90 percent are found in Matthew, and about 50 percent also occur in Luke. Thus these three have been called the Synoptic Gospels (from the Greek "syn", meaning together, and "opt", seeing). Most of the book of John is quite different.

One theory is that possibly Matthew and Luke had access to and used Mark. (This operates on the assumption that Mark was written first.) Ten meter handwritten scrolls, without paragraphs or punctuation, let alone chapter breaks, were hard to reference as we might expect today. And ancient expectations were quite different from the practice of academic referencing we are used to today, so this use of other sources without citation was not uncommon.

Luke is quite specific that he set out to examine "many" accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. He says he "carefully investigated everything" (Luke 1:1-4). This would have included written accounts, and investigating oral or spoken versions as well. His "research" probably meant speaking to and interviewing many people, collecting information and stories passed down verbally by eyewitnesses. This existence of stories and verbal communication of accounts is known as oral tradition.

It may help to imagine a family gathering over a communal meal such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. The conversation turns to a much-loved grandmother called Beth who has recently

died. Different members of the family recall stories, anecdotes, and events from her life, and from their own interactions and experiences with her. While there will be some moments of, "As Beth always said," different experiences will be remembered in slightly different ways, with slightly different contexts and points of emphasis. No one is overly worried about getting the chronology exactly and minutely right about every detail. Mostly, the family is sharing precious memories and moments that bind them together, and remember their grandmother with affection.

In the Gospels, we sometimes have the same stories told, but with slightly different emphases or points drawn from the same events. In spite of the obvious similarities of the Synoptic Gospels, they nevertheless bring distinct perspectives.

Ninety percent of the material in John's Gospel is different from that in the Synoptic Gospels. John writes as an old man, having carefully reflected down through the years on his experiences with Jesus, and presents us with a highly considered and processed account of Jesus' life and teachings. He tells us that there are many stories he does not include in his book. He selects only some of Jesus' full story, with a very specific purpose in mind (John 20:30-31).

As wonderful as these texts are, we don't worship the books. We worship the One whom the books are about, the subject of the books, the One who is the focus of the stories. We worship the Word, not the words about him. ☉

# DO WE TEACH Universalism?

by Dr Joseph Tkach

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

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

GCI's website clearly states our position on universalism:

"Universalism is a biblically unsound doctrine, which says that in the end all souls, whether human, angelic or demonic, will be saved by God's grace. Some Universalists argue that repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ are irrelevant. Universalists typically deny the doctrine of the Trinity, and many Universalists are Unitarians. Contrary to universalism, the Bible teaches that there is salvation only in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). In Jesus Christ, who is God's elect for our sakes, all humanity is elect, but that does not necessarily mean that all humans will ultimately accept God's free gift. God desires that all come to repentance, and he has created and

redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, but true fellowship can never constitute a forced relationship. We believe that in Christ, God makes gracious and just provision for all, even for those who at death appear not to have yet believed the gospel, but all who remain hostile to God remain unsaved by their own choice."

Those who claim that Trinitarian theology teaches universalism are either being dishonest or suffer from poor scholarship. Careful students of the Bible recognize that whereas we need not rule out the idea that God will save everyone, the Scriptures are not conclusive. Therefore we should not be dogmatic about this issue.

## The early church not dogmatic on hell

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

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

relationship is something to be desired. That is, in fact, exactly what God desires—that all come to repentance and not suffer the consequences of the rejection of his gracious provision for them. God wants this because he loves the world (Greek, *kosmos*), just as we read in John 3:16. God tells us to love and forgive our enemies because he loves his enemies, as Jesus loved and served even his betrayer Judas Iscariot at his last supper (John 13:1, 26) and on the cross (Luke 23:34).

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

## God's desire for everyone

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

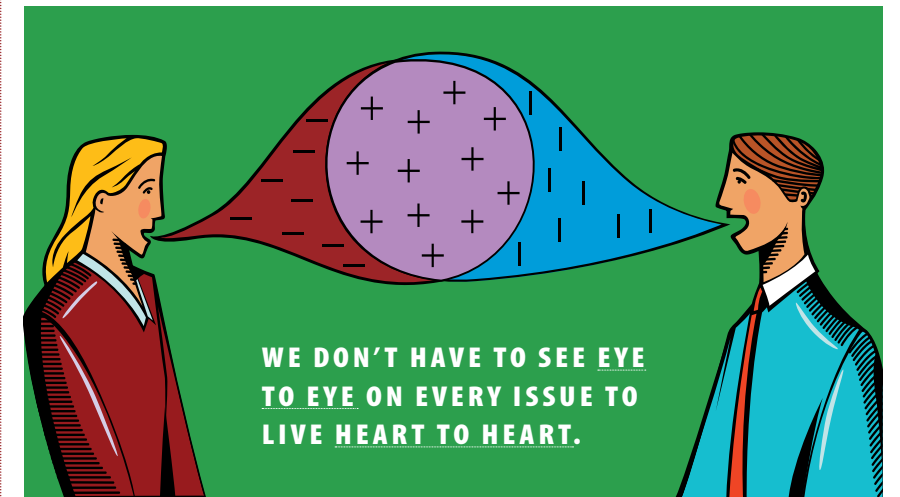
God himself desires that all come to repentance, as Peter expressed, "Not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NASB). Moreover, God has done everything possible to save us from the terrible and horrific situation that is hell. Yet, in the end, God will not violate the deliber-

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

ate and persistent choice of those who willfully and deliberately reject his love and turn away from him. For God to override their minds, wills and hearts, he would have to undo their humanity and "un-create" them. But then there would be no human being to freely receive his costly gift of grace, life in Jesus Christ. He has created and redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, but that true fellowship can never be constituted by a forced relationship.

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

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



## Agreeing to disagree

by Barbara Dahlgren

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

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

Joining them on this journey was Barnabas' cousin, John Mark (Colossians 4:10). For some reason, John Mark decided to return home to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), while Paul and Barnabas completed the mission. John Mark's decision did not sit well with Paul. When another missionary trip was planned and Barnabas suggested taking John Mark again, Paul said "no," and a "sharp contention" developed between them (Acts

15:36-41 KJV). Eventually they agreed to disagree and split up. Paul took Silas on his journey, while Barnabas went with John Mark.

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

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

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

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



# Radical *love*

by Rick Shallenberger

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

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

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

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

## From splendor to squalor

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

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

And they decide to change everything by sharing all that they are with something not yet created. So they create humanity and call us the children of the Father. They created men and women, you and me, to enjoy relationship with them for eternity. But they created us with a caveat. They did not want

to demand we behave a certain way in order to be in that relationship. They wanted us to choose to be in that relationship. So they gave us freedom of choice.

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

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

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

## A friend of sinners

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

In John 8 we read that when a woman caught in adultery was brought before him,

the leaders wanted to stone her. But Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." They all left. And Jesus, the only one who was without sin, said, "I don't condemn you. Go and stop doing what you are doing." Foolishness to many. That's radical love.

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

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

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

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

This is radical love. It is in and through

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

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

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

## Radical obedience

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

"Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

"Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created

beings in heaven and on earth—even those long dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11, *The Message*).

That's RADICAL love.

## A living example

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

We have a ministry partner in Nepal—Deben Sam. Almost every week after church Deben goes to the village where we have a free medical clinic for the poorest of the poor in and around the brickyards of Kathmandu. Nearby, Deben has built a farm project for the churches and the orphans, and here is one area where Deben shares the gospel. A short time ago, Deben was robbed and severely beaten on his way home and accused of bringing false hope to the village. He was accused of bringing religious pollution—his message is considered foolishness to those who do not know the message of the cross.

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

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

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

This is Radical Love. ☺



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
**ALL OF THE ABOVE!**



We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.  
1 Thess 2:8

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Hmmm ...



*People don't resist change.  
They resist being changed.*  
– Peter Senge

*What you share with the world is what it  
keeps of you.*  
– Lyrics from "Give a Little Love" by Charles Fink

*Many folks want to serve God, but only as  
advisers.*  
– Author Unknown

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

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

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

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

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

*Our ego hinders our ability to influence more  
than anything else under our control.*  
– Michael McKinney



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