

T^{GCI}oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

NOVEMBER 2013 – JANUARY 2014



MISSION
LIVING AND
SHARING THE
GOSPEL



God's Gift
THIS CHRISTMAS



CARE BAGS
Gifts of love

^{WHY}
Four
Gospels?



- 01 Welcome letter** – The good life
- 02 God's Gift this Christmas** – The joy of giving
- 04 Care Bags** – Gifts of love
- 06 Exploring the Word** – Why four gospels?
- 07 The Good Samaritan revealed** – In it together
- 08 Mission** – Living and Sharing the Gospel
- 09 No butts about it** – Your gift has saved lives
- 10 ACCM USA** – A gift to the fellowship
- 11 Scripture: God's gift** – Approaching Scripture with prayer
- 14 SEP 2014** – Friends, faith, fun

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

THE TEAM

Pastor General
Joseph Tkach
Mission and National Director, Australia
John McLean
Editor **Aub Warren**
Editorial Assistant
Val Leech
Design **Sheryl Rowse**

HOW TO CONTACT GCI TODAY

Phone **07 5553 6000**
Fax **07 5562 2872**
Email **info@gci.org.au**
Website **www.gci.org.au**
Mail **PO Box 402, Varsity Lakes, Queensland 4227, Australia**

Articles on pages 7 and 11 are reproduced courtesy of *Christian Odyssey*.

GCI Today cannot be responsible for the return of unsolicited articles or photographs.

GCI Today is published quarterly by Grace Communion International ABN 53096 517 190. Level 1, Building 2, 175 Varsity Parade, Varsity Lakes, Queensland 4227, Australia.

© 2013 Grace Communion International. All rights reserved.

Printed by Beaudesert Times.

The good life

What does the good life consist of? In recent years we have seen projects, programs, articles and books exploring and analysing human happiness and what makes a rewarding, fulfilling life. Many of the conclusions overlap and reinforce the same key dimensions to positive, satisfying and constructive living. And from the perspective of the gospel most are hardly surprising.

Two elements are consistently found on all the various lists, descriptions and suggestions: gratitude, and helping others. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

A positive appreciation for life, giving thanks for what we have rather than complaining about what we don't have, being "always thankful" (1 Thessalonians 5:18) – these are constant biblical refrains. Christians give thanks to God as the "giver of every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17).

An outward looking, other-centred focus is central to the gospel. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. And he came to not only reveal the Father's loving and inclusive heart, but to personify in himself the love of God. "God so loved the world, he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Self-giving, not selfishness, describes the nature of God (Philippians 2:1-11).

In this issue we celebrate some of the other-centred ways our congregations are involved in giving practical help, hope and encouragement in their local communities, nationally and internationally. From supplying local refugees and shelters with care bags for those in need, to saving some of the poorest people on earth from starvation in Mozambique, we see the love of God at work. We give thanks for what God has blessed us with, for one another, as we joyfully participate with Jesus in his mission from the Father to the world – creating community, and sharing the life and love of God with others. This is mission, and this is life – being "God's love letters to the world", as Mother Teresa phrased it.

All of this makes sense as we grow to understand and love God more deeply – to see the other-centred focus and constant outpouring of Father, Son and Spirit creatively and lovingly into one another. The good life is about gratitude and giving, it is about sharing and participating in the life of God.

And this Christmas, we especially celebrate and give thanks for God's greatest gift to humanity: Jesus Christ. He is our salvation, our life, our friend, our teacher and brother. He is the Father's "indescribable gift" to us.

John McLean

Mission and National Director, Australia



*Creating
community and
sharing the life
and love of God
with others*



God's gift

THIS CHRISTMAS

by John McLean

*Everyone likes to receive a gift. There's the anticipation, curiosity, excitement, and thrill of discovery. Sometimes there's even urgency about opening the gift and seeing what it is. Then there's the special joy and delight that someone has thought of you – enough to give you something, especially for you. **Gift-giving, joy, and celebration go together.***



**We celebrate
the greatest
gift of all:
God's
gracious
gift to us of
himself**

WELL, MAYBE NOT for everyone. (If it's socks – again – the joy may be muted!) And, if you've ever seen the comedy *The Big Bang Theory*, you will know it is certainly not an occasion for celebration for super-smart physicist Dr Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon may be able to grasp quantum mechanics, but he has trouble getting his head around the basics of human social interaction, as hard as he might try.

And receiving a gift is quite terrifying to him. "You haven't given me a gift – you've given me an obligation," he wails to his neighbour Penny when she tells him she has a Christmas gift for him.

Sheldon can only see the gift-giving exchange in terms of a transaction that requires exactly equal reciprocation. So now he stresses himself with a hyper-vigilant response: how much, exactly, will Penny's gift cost? How can he get her a gift to the exact same dollar amount? To cover the possibilities, the only solution he can see is to buy a whole bunch of gifts so he can select the one that is the same cost as the one he receives on Christmas Day. Gift-giving in particular, and Christmas in general, becomes a time of enormous anxiety, fear and guilt. How will he be sure he has fulfilled his obligation?

While for most people exchanging gifts is a natural and enjoyable part of Christmas, there is of course a deep irony

in addition to the humour here.

Christmas celebrates the greatest gift ever given to humanity, the gift to us of the Son of God. Jesus comes from the inner life of God; God not only revealing himself, but giving himself to us. He comes to us as a baby, in the humblest of circumstances, identifying with our struggles, hardships, disappointments – with all that it means to be human. He comes to give his life for humanity.

Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is grace personified. And "grace" has the same origins as "gift". He is God's "indescribable gift" to us (2 Corinthians 9:15), for whom we can only give thanks and rejoice.

He comes to us, becoming human, one of us, so he can share his life with us – to include us in the joy of the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son and Spirit. There is nothing we can do for our salvation. All we can do is accept it with open hands, and joyfully receive it with gratitude.

Sometimes this sounds too good to be true. That little voice in the back of our heads, from our upbringing, school, work, and yes, church experience, can tell us it can't be so. It's not a transaction we are familiar with – it's not reciprocal, fair. Like Sheldon, we can, instead of responding with joy and gratitude, become stressed, hyper-vigilant, determined we must do more to balance the

ledger, to even the score. Driven more by guilt, fear and anxiety than by faith, hope and love, we can set out to do more, to work harder, to earn such a gift – to try rather than trust, to deserve rather than to gratefully receive.

Yet this gracious self-giving of God is the heart of the gospel, and why it's good news.

That's why this has been called the "wonderful exchange" – Jesus became who we are so that we can become as he is. That we can share his relationship with the Father.

"The prime purpose of the incarnation [the coming of Jesus as a human], in the love of God, is to lift us up into the life of communion, of participation in the very triune life of God", writes James B. Torrance.

It's not a transaction, in which we can balance the books. The gift, the grace of God is so vast we can only receive it in faith and gratitude.

Our giving then is not trying to give back to God. It is participating in the nature of God, who shows himself in Jesus to be loving, gracious and giving. It is participating in the love between Father, Son and Spirit.

Christmas is a time for gift-giving, joy and celebration. Because we celebrate the greatest gift of all: God's gracious gift to us of himself. ☺



by Heather McLean



SHE ARRIVED AT the women's refuge, desperate and frightened. A victim of domestic violence, her body and heart were bruised and battered.

Her only possessions were the clothes she stood in. She had felt unloved and alone for a very long time. And she is not alone. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey, 33.3% of women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

That night, she was given a small gift. A little bag full of the things she had been unable to bring with her in her desperate flight – things to make her



Loaves and fishes in the 21st century?

by Vladimir Grishin

EVERY YEAR THE GCI congregation in Frankston, Victoria makes up Christmas hampers for the homeless in our area. This year was not going to be any different, except for the fact that our church attendance had shrunk from an average of 40 to 30.

In the past we didn't have too much trouble in filling 100 hamper bags, but this year I was not feeling that confident at all and even my wife, Vicky, had some reservations. We prayed that God would help us fill those bags. We consoled ourselves by saying that if we didn't fill 100 then we would try for 60.

The day came and we set out for church with our car laden with goodies. Once everyone arrived we set up all the food on the trestle tables. "Everyone" came to a total of 32 people (five of whom were children under eight, two were young teenagers and 12 were people on pensions – leaving very few wage-earners).

We went along and decided how many items of each food would go into the bags. With some items it was one per bag, with others it was two and still others three or four.

Then we picked up the bags and went along the tables putting in the required number of items. The bags ended up fairly full and we did manage to fill 100 bags. However, to our surprise, there was still much food left on the tables and some more in storage underneath them.



We decided to bring the bags back and to keep filling them until the food ran out. Now all the bags were full to overflowing. They were also very heavy. Normally you could carry two or three in each hand while loading them into cars for delivery. This year we could only carry one in each hand.

We wondered at the time how it was that we had miscalculated so badly. It was only later that it dawned on us that we may not have miscalculated at all. We had been doing this for many years and not once had we miscalculated to that degree in the past. Loaves and fishes in the 21st century? We think so. 🌐

feel clean and comfortable such as soap, toothpaste, deodorant, comb, shampoo and tissues. Best of all was a little note with a special message expressing love and concern for her.

This gift of practical help, love and kindness, given to her in her time of desperate need, impacted her deeply and she has never forgotten it.

Care Bags. A simple idea, but one that has brought a glimmer of hope and the warmth of love to thousands of traumatized women and children over many years.

It began with a small group of women who just wanted to help and serve in their community, in any way that they could. From that small beginning, it has grown to involve several GCI congregations around Australia, who for nearly two decades now have faithfully and consistently provided these little care bags to thousands of grateful recipients. As well as a committed

group of individuals who are dedicated to providing this service year after year, it also often involves whole congregations who join in the fun of providing the items needed and helping to stuff each beautifully homemade bag. And each gift is sent on its way with the love and prayers of all.

Over the years other gifts have been provided by different congregations: Christmas boxes for needy children and families, blankets, jumpers, baby clothes and scarves have been lovingly knitted and distributed both here and overseas, activity boxes for children in crisis centres, emergency food bags and care bags for men, women and youths helped by organizations other than refugees.

Often the congregations involved are very small in number. As one lady said, "On an irregular basis we also make donations of baby needs to the Pregnancy Support group. One of their representa-

tives commented that we must be a very large congregation to do all this and was very surprised to learn just how small we are".

A small gift of kindness in a time of need can deeply touch the soul. When Jesus walked the earth, he generously responded to the hurt, poor, sick, disenfranchised and lonely with love, understanding, encouragement and healing. His love and kindness is abundant and all embracing. As one member commented, "the obvious gratitude and delight expressed by the refuge staff is a reminder that the Holy Spirit works in small ways to bring comfort and help to the abused and neglected". Another said, "Each of the recipients thank us profusely as there is so much need in the community at the present time".

Care Bags. Aptly named and a wonderful expression of God's kindness and love. 🌐

Why four gospels?

"GOSPEL" MEANS "GOOD news". Older versions of the New Testament include a superscription at the beginning of each book that reads "the Gospel according to Matthew," "the Gospel according to Mark," and so on. There is only one "gospel," or good news, and four accounts of this one Gospel. There is only one Jesus, but four accounts of his story told by different authors.

This is an interesting and important question, which reflects upon the Triune nature of God expressed in the Incarnation, and the nature of Scripture itself. Several explanations have been offered over the centuries.

Fundamentally, the four books offer us four different perspectives on the life and teachings of Jesus. Each one provides its own particular dimension and insight. Through the four books we get four slightly different pictures of the same person. Each picture adds to our comprehension. Taken together, we have a much more complete "picture" of Jesus. (As noted above, even though the Synoptic Gospels overlap in much of their content, they nevertheless bring different elements and contribute nuanced shades of colour within the whole picture.)

The Bible is not a recipe book, or a book of rules, or a list of statements and directives from "Chairman God." It is not a take-away menu to mix and match verses from. It is the story of God engaging with human beings. It is a narrative of God interacting with and within human experience. It is the story not of a remote, distant Other – but of God coming to us in Christ. As Karl Barth has said, "The Word of God is God Himself in Holy Scripture".

Human beings are different. God has made us this way. While there are certain things we all share in common, we nevertheless have different temperaments, backgrounds, family-of-origins, learning styles, life experiences, senses of humour, tastes in music, food, art, sport and so on. We have different skills, talents and gifts.

The different personalities, purposes and experiences of the different writers come through in each of the four

books. Taken together, we get a much richer and more complete view of Jesus than we would with just one Gospel. God creatively inspires the accounts to be written through the unique personalities and temperaments of each writer – and in the process we see illustrated how God created and values, and works with and in, human diversity.

Since the second century, attempts have been made to "harmonize" the Gospels – that is, place similar portions of the different accounts in parallel columns alongside one another. While this has its place, in practice trying to harmonize the accounts may blur the very distinctiveness of the perspectives and approaches that the four separate voices bring to understanding the life and teachings of Jesus.

The four authors then are teachers and preachers, making their own points and applications to their own audiences. They are writers, exercising literary art under the guidance of the Spirit, who works through them, not apart from them. (The Bible doesn't present inspiration of Scripture as God "taking over" the person – where the writer is a mere automaton, or machine, merely unthinkingly writing what God dictates.)

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. 🌐

For reflection and discussion

- Why do we have four books, or accounts of the Gospel?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of "harmonizing" the Gospels?

Luke 2:8-14 (The Message)

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.



THE Good Samaritan *revealed*

by Greg Williams

Each character has something worthy of consideration and validation

CHURCH VISITS ARE vital for me to see firsthand what is happening in the lives of our pastors and members, and I gain an enormous amount of encouragement and inspiration from these visits.

Once in a while a pastor asks me to give the sermon. Lately, I have been giving an interactive message from Luke 10:25-37 about the story of the Good Samaritan. We read through the story from three different translations, and on the third reading the members are asked to consider which character in the story they relate to the most; which character reflects their personality and life experiences. Then we break into five groups representing the five players in the story.

Before we continue, think for a moment about the concept of heroes and villains. In our western culture we are pre-conditioned to think in terms of good guys and bad guys—we want to honor and celebrate the heroes, and we long to catch and punish the villains. Jesus turns the Jewish world upside down by portraying a despised non-Jew as the “heroish” example of a good neighbor. (As much as this is an important factor in the story, stay tuned for a twist at the end.)

The people who identify with the lawyer who asked Jesus, “Who is my

neighbor?” are brave enough to confess that they are detail people who want to know the requirements. They are wired to need clarity and are not shy about asking hard questions.

I lump the priest and Levite together as they represent the religious order of Judaism. The church members who see themselves in this light admit they are reluctant to get involved—sometimes out of fear or caution, and sometimes because they are focused on their destination and don’t want to become distracted.

Some church members identify with the victim because of various degrees of abuse they have suffered in their lives. One member said he liked identifying with the victim because of the rescue and nurturing restoration outcome.

I have been surprised how many members relate to the obscure innkeeper. They are open to help when a situation is brought to their attention, and they are happy to serve beyond first aid to provide long-term convalescent care. The groups liken this example to the mother’s role in the family and to the pastoral care received in church.

Many identify with the Good Samaritan. Their hearts are moved by the love of God to reach out with compassion to others in need or peril. The Good Samaritan is much like a paramedic who moves into danger to rescue others and doesn’t bother with issues of gender or race or even the matter of “What sin did this person

commit to land in such a predicament?”

It would be easy to stop here and surmise that the religious people are heartless bad guys, and the wandering Samaritan who has a heart to do the right thing is the good guy to emulate. However, the story goes much deeper.

Each character has something worthy of consideration and validation. Is it okay to be a detailed person who desires clarity? Is it acceptable to be cautious and focused on what is in front of you? Is it okay to be a person who engages only after being invited to do so? Is there any one of us who has not needed rescuing? It takes all types of personalities to make up the family of God, and we are all in this human experience together.

The real twist to the story is that the Good Samaritan is a Jesus figure. This is the deeper lesson. Who is the great rescuer? Who can effectually disinfect and heal humanity? Who provides an open account for the provision for our needs? The Good Samaritan, Jesus is “the who” we all need—whether we are the victims, the religious folks, the cautious people, the daring people or the nurturing people. For us to join in the good work of the Good Samaritan, we must first be joined to the Good Samaritan—then it is our pleasure to participate with him!

It is Jesus who saves us and it is Jesus I continue to discover as I visit GCI churches and interact with the wonderful church members who teach me. ☉



MISSION Living and Sharing the Gospel

by John McLean

“WHAT DO YOU want to be when you grow up?” the king asks the young lad in the old *Wizard of Id* cartoon. “I would love to do missionary work in a run-down, hopeless town full of heathens,” the lad replies. “We will miss you,” says the king. “Who said I was leaving?” replies the lad, much to the king’s chagrin.

Are you involved in mission? Are you a “missional” person? “On mission”? Do you ever see yourself as a missionary?

The cartoon humourously highlights some of the inherent tensions and misunderstandings involved in doing mission and missionary work. The evidence is that when most people hear about “mission” in churches they immediately think of overseas mission, especially to the economically poorer Third World countries.

And there is such a vast, seemingly infinite, need in the world that it’s easy to see why. Our First World problems that consume so much time and effort can seem trivial by comparison. Did you read the reports of wealthy mothers hiring people in wheelchairs to sit in the disabled queue at Disneyland for them so they didn’t have to line up in the longer queues with their children?

Yet the dichotomy between mission “here” and mission “over there” is a false

one. Like so many things in life, it is not a question of either/or, but both.

We live in a world full of hurt, oppression, loss, pain and need – a world full of opportunities to show the kindness of God to others. God doesn’t have to create special mission opportunities for us. The opportunities are all around us. Wherever we go, wherever we look, there are people in need.

Mission, then, starts where we are. Right here, right now. (It’s no accident the old proverb says, “Charity starts at home”). Whether we are aware of it or not, every day is on mission.

Mission is living. It is an integral part of everyday life, not something separate from it. It is life “in Christ”, in participation with his ongoing ministry to love, serve and help others. We can’t do everything for everyone, and sometimes we ourselves are the ones in need of the help of others. But we can do some things and, as we are able, and as Jesus gives us strength, resources and opportunity, the Holy Spirit works in our lives to extend God’s love to others.

Mission is personal, local, community, national and international. Mission is living – it is “living and sharing the gospel”, the good news of the love, hope and help of God. We are blessed with local congregations, and a national and international fellowship that enables us to network with others in need in our local communities and around the globe. And of course there is the marvellous work that is done by many other churches and organisations like World Vision.

Mission is joining Jesus in his work of sharing God’s life and love with others. This might manifest itself in a variety of ways – our focus might be on the local community, or it might be on international mission. Or it might be a little of both.

There is no greater joy than the joy of extending kindness and good news to others. That’s the way our other-centred, Triune God is. That’s the way he made us, and that’s the only way to lasting happiness and contentment. To paraphrase Mother Teresa, we are God’s pencils, writing his love letters to the world. ☉

*Mission is joining Jesus in his work of
sharing God’s life and love with others*

No butts about it

by John McLean

MOZAMBIQUE IS ONE of the poorest places on earth. Many years of civil war have left the country devastated and in ruin. Earlier this year our congregations around Australia took up collections to help the people from several villages in Mozambique whose homes and crops were washed away by massive floods. These people are already among the poorest of the poor in the world – and they were left with nothing. On your behalf, I was able to liaise with GCI South African National Director Tim Maguire to help provide rescue and relief in this emergency. Canada and the USA also provided emergency funds. (This is one of the many blessings of having an international fellowship!)

Your kind gift has, quite literally, saved hundreds of people from starvation. At our recent international conference, Tim Maguire asked me to pass on his deep thanks to those of you who generously contributed, on behalf of all those who were saved from famine, and fed and re-housed.

To prevent the need for such a rescue mission happening all over again the next time there is flooding, Tim is working with the locals to develop a sustainable future. Through programs of ongoing education, new and different crops are being sown, and planted in different locations where they will not simply be washed away by the flood waters.

And, significantly, your donations have enabled Tim to move to the next stage of the project: providing goats to the villages. Goats are hardy, fast breeding, and easy to care for. They provide meat and milk, and help villagers enjoy a healthier diet and a regular income. Goats help provide a way out of the grinding poverty the villagers otherwise face.

So, again, thank you. Your generous gifts enabled Australia's direct contribution to GCI's mission overseas, saving and improving the lives of many.

You made a real difference, no butts about it.



YOUR KIND GIFT HAS, QUITE LITERALLY, SAVED HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE FROM STARVATION



Devastating floods have compounded the damage and suffering caused by years of civil war in Mozambique.



Immediately after the international conference in the United States in August, Mission Developer John McLean conducted two days teaching the Ambassador College of Christian Ministry (ACCM) class "Jesus and the Gospels"

ACCM: A gift to the fellowship

"The class was very enlightening, it was exciting getting to know more about Jesus and the trinity and the communion we have with Him"

– Samantha Alexander

"WOW!" – Thomas Davis

"Please keep on doing ACCM. It is a gift to us"

PARTICIPANTS CAME FROM the Caribbean (including Jamaica, Bahamas, Barbados, St Kitts, Bermuda, Martinique, Haiti and Guyana), Canada, the UK and the USA. ACCM teacher Phil Hopwood, who also attended the conference, took a session on "The Ascension".

The group spent an exciting, stimulating and delightful two days together. The class is an interactive learning experience, studying the gospels, and focusing on the "who" of the Gospels: Jesus.

The students included a group from Haiti and Martinique, who speak French. Betty Brunet translated for them. In spite of health problems, our Haitian pastor Joseph Franklin and his wife participated, as well as Goriah Papih, our pastor in Guyana. These brothers and sisters work in some of the poorest and most difficult of conditions anywhere in the world. They were delighted to be together, learning, discussing, and growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, the deep things of God.

All the participants expressed their enthusiastic appreciation for the class. "We

need more of this" was the common theme. There's always a very special atmosphere and bond created at these events. This one was no different, abundantly blessed by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. It was a very encouraging and uplifting event, bringing together people from a variety of countries. "Please keep on doing ACCM. It is a gift to us," one participant commented.

Our Haitian brothers and sisters were very grateful to the Sydney, NSW, congregation who sponsored them to take the class. It was an especially encouraging and blessed two days, focusing on the revelation of the Triune God in Jesus, and the relationship he has included us in.

We are truly an international communion, and this ACCM class was another opportunity to experience that firsthand with people from around the world, some of whom are quite isolated for much of the year. 🌐





SCRIPTURE:

God's gift

by Dr Gary Deddo

This is Part 3 in a series looking at the ongoing gift Scripture presents us with. In this article, Gary Deddo looks at guidelines for approaching Scripture reverently with prayer by faith ...

SINCE, AS WE have been discussing, Scripture is the gift of God, where God has graciously promised to speak to us through his living Word, what, then, are some guidelines for approaching it? I think the first thing needing to be said is that we must approach it reverently with a desire to be addressed, to hear a word from God. This attitude is probably best demonstrated when we start with prayer to

God, the God of the Bible. In prayer we acknowledge that we look for and anticipate receiving a word from God himself, that is, hearing from the Living Word through the written word by the Spirit. It shows we are ready to listen, to hear. And we express in prayer that we want to hear what the Lord has to say to us. That is, we listen as his children, as his sheep, not as one of his advisers or as an engineer might seek im-

personal information about some empirical object or law of physics perhaps to use for some other purpose.

In prayer, we also acknowledge that we depend upon the Lord and his grace to speak in a way that we can receive. That is, we listen by faith, as we trust that the Lord does speak and knows how to get through to us, the dumb sheep! Listening to Scripture as God's holy word is an act of faith in

the God whose word it is. We read or listen to Scripture by faith in the grace of God, just as we do in every other response of ours to God. We listen and study Scripture by faith.

This means that we do not put our trust in our techniques for studying the Bible no matter how simple or how sophisticated they are. And we aren't just mining for data, for information, for formulas or principles or for truths that we can possess or use for our own ends or purposes. In prayer we place ourselves before the living Lord trusting that he will make himself known to us and enable us to hear and follow him wherever he takes us. Faithful prayer to the Living God of the Bible is essential for our preparation for listening to Scripture.

God's agenda, not ours

Second, listening to Scripture as God speaking to us means letting it set the agenda for us, according to the nature and purposes God has for giving us the gift of his word. This means that we'll come to Scripture not to give us, first, exactly what we're looking for, such as answers to our current or even pressing questions, but to show us what the right questions are and what issues have priority in God's view. We will not force Scripture to answer questions that it is not designed to answer nor give priority to some concern or issue we have that does not match with the priorities and central matters of Scripture itself. We'll be open to having our mind reshaped to reflect the mind of Christ and what he views as of first-order importance.

The primacy of the WHO? question

And what is the central thrust of biblical revelation? It is to make known the identity, character, heart, purpose and nature of God. Scripture is primarily designed to answer the question, "Who is God?" So our primary question in reading and listening to Scripture ought to be, "Who are you, Lord?" That's the first and most important question that ought to be on our hearts and minds as we study Scripture. No matter what passage we're dealing with, our primary concern ought

to be: "What is God telling me about himself in this passage?"

We'll need to put in second place our questions of What? How? Why? When? and Where? In fact, these questions can only be rightly answered by putting the Who? question first. In many church settings the most difficult question needing to be put on the back burner is this: "What am I supposed to be doing for God?" We are so anxious to discover what God wants us to do for him that we often overlook the most foundational aspect of Scripture which involves revealing, clarifying and reminding us of God's nature, character, heart, purpose and aim. It's far more important to know who it is we're obeying, than to attempt to do the right thing. In fact, we can't even accurately discern what God wants us to do, and in what way to do it, unless we act out of knowing and trusting in this God according to who he is. Only then will our attitude and motives and the character of our actions match or bear witness to God's own character. Only then will we find that his commandments are not burdensome and that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. So we need to read the Bible and listen to preaching in order to see more deeply into who God is.

I should also add that the greatest

and most damaging deception we can fall into is being misled about the nature and character of God. Being misled or deceived about who God is undermines our faith, which is in turn the foundation of our whole response to God. With our faith or trust in God undermined or twisted, all the rest will collapse too: our worship, our prayer, our listening to Scripture, our obedience, our hope and our love for God and for neighbor. Our faith is a response to who we perceive God to really be. When that is properly aligned, then the Christian life is enlivened and energized even under difficult situations. When it is distorted, we then attempt to run the Christian life with ropes tangled around our feet. So being reminded daily of the truth of who God is must be our top priority—matching the priority of the structure and aim of both the written and the Living Word of God.

Jesus Christ, the Center of the center

Third, as we do so, we'll have as the center and norm of our knowledge and trust in God all of what Scripture says about Jesus Christ. Oriented to this living Center of the center, we'll want to see how the Old Testament points and prepares us to recognize him. Jesus Christ is God's answer to the Who





Jesus Christ

Jesus is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, for in him we see and hear the heartbeat of God

question—in person, in time and space, in flesh and blood—that ancient Israel sought to know. In Jesus Christ, “What you see is what you get.” In him the whole God is personally present, active and speaking. Jesus is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, for in him we see and hear the heartbeat of God. We watch and hear the motions of his heart and mind, even his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The light we find shining forth from the face of Jesus sheds light on all of Scripture, for in him the God of the whole Bible has personally revealed himself.

So we ought to read and interpret Scripture in a way that through it all, in one way or another, we come to see how it points towards and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Think of this as a process much like reading a murder mystery novel for the second time. The first time through, at the end, you finally come to discover “who done it.” The second time through is a much different experience. You can see in a new light how all the clues early on in the mystery pointed to “who done it.” You appreciate the clues (and recognize the false leads) even more the second time through. But the clues are not the solution. Their value is how they indicate or are signs pointing to the resolution of the mystery.

This means that central to our study and understanding of the whole Bible

should be the person and acts of Jesus. This calls for giving a certain priority to and focus on the Gospels. This does not mean narrowing our attention simply to the words or teaching of Jesus, as some “red letter” Bibles might tempt us to do. Rather, this means placing at center stage all of what the Gospels tell us about who Jesus is. This will include his own words, actions and self-interpretations (think, for example, of all the “I am” statements in John), but also make use of those texts that answer most directly who Jesus is, not only in the Gospels but also throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Who Jesus is in relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit

As we prayerfully begin to listen to Scripture concentrating on the Who question as answered by God himself in Jesus, you’ll find that the primary way Jesus is identified involves his relationship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The answer to the Who? question is intrinsically bound up with grasping the nature, character, purpose and aim of Jesus in relationship with the Father and Spirit. For Jesus primarily and consistently identifies himself by means of those relationships. He is the one sent from the Father, the one who has been eternally

with and eternally loved by the Father. He is the One who has the Spirit and who has come to give us his Holy Spirit.

The highest concentration on the importance of Jesus’ relationships with the Father and Spirit comes in the Gospel of John, reaching the apex in John 17. To know Jesus is to know the Father. To know the Father means recognizing who Jesus is. Interacting with Jesus means dealing directly and personally with the Father and the Spirit.

So in our Bible study and preaching we must pay attention to the quality and nature of Jesus’ relationship and interactions with the Father and Spirit. For he is, in his being, the Son of the Father, one with his Spirit. Pay special attention to anywhere in Scripture where we’re given insight into the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit. For in those relationships we will see and hear most directly, personally and concretely who the God of the Bible is. And in returning to that living Center of the center, again and again we’ll find our faith nourished and growing with a life of joyful obedience flowing out of it.

With the Center of our prayer, faith, devotion and worship set, as a kind of North Star, everything else regarding listening to and studying the Lord’s Scripture gets properly oriented. ☉

WHAT IS SEP?

Twelve days of activities, adventures, worship and discussion? Meeting the best friends you'll ever make? Exploring your faith in new ways? A place you are always accepted? The time of your life?


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

youth.gci.org.au

sep@gci.org.au

 **GCI Youth Australia**

SEP 2014 January 6 – 17 Morisset NSW

Hmmm ...



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

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

"Nine-tenths of education is encouragement."
– Anatole France

"Teachers who inspire know that teaching is like cultivating a garden, and those who would have nothing to do with thorns must never attempt to gather flowers."
– Author unknown

"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."
– Nelson Mandela

"Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake."
– Victor Hugo



GCI Today is published by Grace Communion International
www.gci.org.au