



EQUIPPER

The monthly e-zine from the U.S. Church Administration and Development (CAD) team of Grace Communion International.

November 2014

Volume 9, Issue 11

www.gci.org/equipper

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Dear minister of Jesus:

We hope this issue of *Equipper* will help you to prepare for Christmas-themed services in your church. Its focus is God's *unexpected grace for unexpected people*—a message proclaimed in the birth narratives of the Gospels and through the actions of Christians like my mother who each Christmas sets aside gifts to show generosity to unexpected guests.

Matthew begins his birth narrative with a genealogy of Jesus that includes several women of questionable heritage. There is Tamar who disguised herself as a prostitute to trick Judah. There is Rahab, a gentile prostitute who gave refuge in Jericho to the Israelite spies. Then there is Ruth, also a gentile, and Bathsheba who committed adultery with David. Matthew seems to delight in pointing out the Messiah's scandalous lineage. But looking deeper, we find an important message of hope—the truth that our loving God offers *unexpected grace to unexpected people*. The result is transformed lives.

Luke has a similar message in his birth narrative, which tells of a pregnant young woman named Mary and her betrothed husband Joseph making an arduous 80-mile-long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register in the census. Upon arrival, Mary goes into labor and the only shelter the couple finds is an animal stall where Jesus' birth is witnessed by sheep and goats. What an unexpected, humbling beginning for the Son of God incarnate! Luke's story continues with angels announcing the birth to shepherds attending their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem. These lowly, social outcasts are, quite unexpectedly, Jesus' first visitors. Having been transformed by the Lord's presence, they go out and share the good news about Jesus with all who will listen.

Back in Matthew's account, we learn of another group who unexpectedly visit the infant Jesus—in this case men who have traveled to Bethlehem from a country far to the east. These men are Magi—gentile wise men (likely astrologers) who God leads to Jesus via a star in the sky. It had been revealed to them that Jesus was a King of kings, worthy of homage.

These Christmas narratives in Scripture are full of unexpected grace lavished on unexpected people. God continues to work in similar ways today—often through his people (my mom's stored-up gifts for unexpected guests being an example). God continues to work for the salvation of all people in ways that are amazingly (sometimes scandalously) inclusive. May we, this Christmas, be deeply embraced by the grace of God, and may that experience empower and embolden us to be conduits of unexpected grace for unexpected people. For more about that mission, I encourage you to read the helpful article on page two in which Jeff McSwain writes about *unconditional gathering*.

Merry Christmas to you and yours,

Greg Williams, associate director, GCI Church Administration and Development, USA

Unconditional gathering (no one from a human point of view) by Jeff McSwain

From now on...we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view.
2 Corinthians 5:16 (NRSV)

Unconditional gathering – it sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it? By its very nature, *gathering* usually involves bringing people together in contradistinction from the rest of the population. There typically are conditioners or identifiers to particular gatherings—not everyone is eligible or interested in joining. It often ends up being defined as our group (us), distinct from the rest (them). We belong, they don't—we're in, they aren't.

Henri Nouwen used to say that when God chooses specific people in history, he does so for the ultimate purpose of revealing the inclusion of others. On the contrary, we usually operate with the mentality that the choosing of some means the exclusion of others. When you're not included, you're excluded; it is as simple as that. We could even read Romans 9 that way, as if God excluded Esau because he chose Jacob. Of course we would stand to miss the beautiful truth of the whole passage (which culminates in Romans 11:32) that God chose Jacob in order to save everyone, including Esau!

God did this by including us all in Jacob's lineage through the Chosen One, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are often tempted to make the same mistake as Paul once did, as testified above, to think of Jesus Christ as an isolated man in history. But now we are given to see the meta-narrative of our lives, every human being having died and been raised in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15), and therefore we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view (v 16).

But to really understand gathering we must go back even further. Our re-gathering in Christ (Ephesians 1:10) is consistent with our being included in him before the beginning of time as adopted sons and daughters of the Father. Adoption is a beautiful expression of gathering. We were gathered into Trinitarian fellowship as an inner-purpose of creation (Ephesians 1:4-5). God didn't have to include us, but he decided he did not want to exist without us. This is grace! Grace does not just come after sin, as if grace needed sin to have meaning. Grace is our primal gathering in Christ, before the fall.

Redemption is simply how grace acts, in character with itself, when the fall shatters and scatters (that's why grace is mentioned in Ephesians 1:6 *before* 1:7). No wonder Jesus says that he yearns to gather Jerusalem's scattered chicks—they belong to him as chicks do to a hen. I think it was from Baxter Kruger that I first heard the phrase that you can't be lost without a home! You can't be astray unless you've been gathered, and you were originally gathered when you were created in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:10).



It's almost as if Mark organizes his gospel around a strategic use of one specific word (we'll have to ask him about this later). Check out Mark 1:33, 2:2, 3:20, 4:1, 5:21, 6:30, 7:1, 8:1. What are the two common components to all of these verses? Well, firstly Jesus, and secondly there's some form of the word "gather" (*synago* in Greek). In reading these verses it's obvious that Jesus was an unconditional gatherer; even the Pharisees and teachers of the law gathered around him (7:1)! And it has probably not been lost on you that the word *synago* is the root for synagogue.

Christ's earthly life points to the eternal truth that he and gathering are inherently connected. We invite people to gather with us in fellowship and at church because they are already gathered with us in the Unconditional Gatherer, the One "in whom all things exist and hold together" (Colossians 1:17), the "temple" destroyed and raised three days later (John 2:21). In GCI we invite all people to belong, because, by creation and redemption, they do!