

A Study Guide

for

**GRACIOUS
CHRISTIANITY**

LIVING THE LOVE

WE PROFESS

prepared by

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Preface

Summary of Preface

In the preface Rod and Jake talk about their friendship and purposes for writing the book. For them, conversation is an important part of friendship and they suggest reading the book with someone else – an old friend, a new friend, or a group of people who are friends in the making. While writing the book, Rod was in the process of dying from cancer and the preface includes an excerpt from one of his sermons where he reflects on both his own brokenness and the brokenness of the church.

Terms and People

Dogmatism (pg. 10) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogmatism>

Mennonite (pg. 10) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mennonite>

Evangelical (pg. 11) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelicalism>

Questions to Consider

1. In your life, does disagreement stimulate reflection or does it create hostility? (p.9)
2. How do you define friendship?
3. Are there matters on which it is simply unacceptable for Christians to disagree? (p.10)
4. In what ways are denominational differences helpful? How might they be harmful? (p.10)
5. What are the questions that drive this book? How would you answer them? (p.11)
6. If everyone really understood each other, would we get along better or worse? (p.12)
7. Reflecting on the relationship between suffering and grace, has suffering ever made you more graceful or more jaded? (p.13)
8. How might people of different ages in different walks of life display graciousness differently? Discuss some different examples (at home, at work, at school, shopping, driving, eating at a restaurant, traveling overseas, etc.). (p.13)
9. Who do you know who has been gracious in sickness or in financial distress?
10. How have you been gracious to people who are suffering? (p.13)

Teaching Activities

Look up Aristotle's discussion of friendship in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (books 9 and 10). Compare and contrast this understanding of friendship with the ideas on grace and friendship found in *Gracious Christianity* (p. 9)

Have each person in your group or class recount the best example of graciousness they observe during the last week. Is the group encouraged by the quality of these examples or discouraged by the relatively low levels of graciousness exhibited?

Encourage people to share stories of how they became friends with people they may have at first thought were odd or disagreeable.

Resources from Popular Culture

Grace and the lack of grace have been themes in many recent films. Two of the most powerful are listed below. This study guide will almost always provide contemporary examples of music for you to use in a class or group discussion, but here we list only one song, an old hymn that can amazingly still bring tears to people's eyes.

Films:

Shawshank Redemption
Babette's Feast

Music:

Amazing Grace

Suggestions for Further Reading

All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time (1997) by Robert Ellsberg,

A wonderful treasury of people of grace. Ellsberg's category of "saint" includes Catholics, Protestants, and others. Reading a selection from this book might be a good way to begin group discussions.

Uncommon Decency (1992) by Richard Mouw

In a time when people like to argue more than converse, Mouw provides guidelines for how to speak graciously with each other about matters that often divide.

Making Room (1999) by Christina Pohl

Examines the role of hospitality in the history of Christian life and in the contemporary church.

Becoming Friends (2002) by Paul J. Wadell,

An historical and contemporary study of Christian friendship and how Christian friends can impact the world for good.

Getting Involved

Consider volunteering a day to serve your neighborhood: Through serving others, you may discover that you share more in common with them than you originally thought.

Try to become friends with someone you know disagrees with you about politics or faith. How might that friendship make you a better person?

Often we treat our families with less respect than friends or neighbors. What does graciousness mean for the ways we relate to our spouses, children, siblings, and parents?

Introduction

Summary of Introduction

The introduction defines the idea of graciousness as "love offered lovingly" and links that concept of graciousness to both the grace we have received from God and the grace we are supposed to show to all the people who cross our paths. Jake and Rod suggest, however, that the mere desire to live lovingly is often not enough. We also need to understand why love is central to Christian faith and that leads us into theology. Many Christians shy away from theology because it seems too abstract or disconnected with life, but Jake and Rod show us that theology--reflecting on the historic beliefs of Christianity--can be a wonderful aid for gracious Christian living.

Questions Addressed:

- What does it mean to be gracious as Christians?
- How can thinking about faith help us become more gracious?
- What is the "Jesus creed"?

Terms and People

Wesleyan Quadrilateral - (p. 24)- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_Quadrilateral
<http://www.fwponline.cc/v14n2reasoner.html>

Anabaptist - (p. 25) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anabaptist>

Pietist - (p. 25) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietism>

Wesleyan (g. 25) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_Church

Brethren in Christ Church (An example of the synthesis of Wesleyan, Pietist, and Anabaptist traditions) - <http://www.bic-church.org/>

Denominations in General: <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations.htm>

Baptists - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/baptists.htm>

Lutherans - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/lutheranism.htm>

Anabaptists - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations#Anabaptists

Presbyterians - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/presbyterianism.htm>

Catholics - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/catholicism.htm>

Methodists - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations#Methodists

Orthodox - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/orthodoxy.htm>

Pentecostals - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations#Pentecostalism

Episcopal - <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/anglicanism.htm>

Questions to Consider

1. How might it be possible to have strong convictions and deep commitments while still being open to change?
2. What beliefs are non-negotiable for you?
3. Is it possible to be too gracious?
4. Are some of our faith traditions more "gracious" than others? (p. 25)
5. How can we be gracious when telling people things they may not want to hear? Is it possible to be gracious when arguing with someone else? Does Christian graciousness preclude political confrontation?

6. Where do you think evil comes from? How has evil affected you?
7. What role does the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience play in your life? Do you see these as equally important? (p. 24)
8. What is the relationship between doing your job well and loving others?
9. What skills do we need to acquire in order to discuss differences of faith graciously with those who hold other views?
10. Why are we less gracious than we know we ought to be? What causes ungraciousness?

Teaching Activities

Pour some water into a glass on a sturdy table. (Fill it all the way up to the brim.) Gently shake the table and watch what happens. In what way is this analogous to life? When troubles hit, what come out of you? Reflect on what fills your life and what most naturally comes out of you during times of trouble.

Consider an important decision that you need to make. Diagram the elements of your decision making process. How does this process differ from less important decisions? Do Scripture, tradition, reason, or experience show up on your diagram?

Make a list of some of your non-negotiable beliefs and convictions. Find a person who disagrees with you on one or more of these points and talk with them about why they think differently than you.

Resources from Popular Culture

Gracious Christianity argues that love and grace form the core of the gospel and that those who call themselves Christians need to demonstrate love and graciousness in all they do. Unfortunately, graciousness of faith is not the norm. Christians, as well as followers of other religious traditions, often seem mean spirited or even violent in the ways they present their faith. Some have suggested faith itself is the problem. Artifacts of popular culture that engage themes of grace, suffering, conviction, and complexity include:

Films:

Changing Lanes
Dogville
Dead Man Walking
Magnolia

Music:

"Slow and Steady Wins the Race" by Pedro the Lion
"Quality of Mercy" by Michelle Shocked
"Can't Stand It" by Wilco
"Of Minor Profits and Their Prostitute Wives" by Pedro the Lion
"Bullet With Butterfly Wings" by Smashing Pumpkins

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Jesus Creed (2004) by Scot McKnight,

The Jesus Creed explains the dual commandment to love God and our neighbors as the center of Jesus' own teaching and the core of Christian faith.

When Religion Becomes Evil (2002) by Charles Kimball

Kimball discusses different ways in which religion has fostered hatred and violence in the world and provides a series of markers that indicate when faith may be becoming more evil than good.

Generous Orthodoxy (2004) by Brian McLaren

Generous Orthodoxy sums up Brian McLaren's wide-ranging theological interests and brings them together in a synthetic whole. While some other theologians and church leaders want to make finer and finer distinctions between Christian subgroups, McLaren seeks to draw people into dialogue with each other.

Free of Charge (2006) by Miroslav Volf

Reflections on grace in an often graceless world. Volf includes a number of stories from his own life that make this book especially compelling.

Getting Involved

Volunteer at a hospital or physical therapy clinic. In your service to patients, reflect on grace as a process that takes discipline and ongoing help from a community of care givers.

Think of a big choice that you will need to make in the near future. Form a "committee" of people that know you well and that you respect as Christian peers. Bring them together to help you discern what you should do. (The Quaker's have a tradition of forming "clearness committees" to do just this – see Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*.)

Invite someone who models graciousness into your home for dinner. Before they leave, encourage them to continue to share their gifts of graciousness with others.

Chapter One: God and Creation

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses who God is, why God made the world, and the significance of the Christian idea of God as Trinity and relates all three of those themes to the ideals of gracious Christianity. Jake and Rod remind us that there is only one God and that one God created and loves everyone. In fact, creation itself is an expression of God's love. The love that eternally bound Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together in the Trinity was turned outward in creation making a world that is also ultimately held together by love.

Questions Addressed:

- Who is God?
- Why did God make the world?
- Why is the Trinity important?
- What does God's character tell us about how we ourselves should live in the world?

Terms and People

Eastern Orthodox Church (p. 28) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodoxy ;
<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7063.asp>
Westminster Catechism (p. 28) - <http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html> ;
<http://www.reformed.org/>
eugenics (p. 30) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugenics> ; <http://www.eugenics.net/index.shtml>
Abraham as the father of the 3 Great faiths (pp. 30-31) -
<http://www.soundvision.com/info/hajj/abraham.asp> ;
<http://www.alislam.org/library/links/00000129.html>
Barth's concept of "Wholly Other" (p. 31) - <http://cspar181.uah.edu/RbS/JOB/barth.html>
http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/papers/vol2/520102-Karl_Barth's_Conception_of_God.htm
Negative theology. (pp. 31, 32) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_theology
Omnipotent (p. 32) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omnipotent>
Omniscient (p. 32) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omniscience>
Omnipresent (p. 32) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omnipresence>
Monotheists vs. Polytheists (pg. 32) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotheism> ;
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polytheism>
Trinity (p. 33) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity> ; <http://www.spirithome.com/histtrin.html>
Modalism (p. 34) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modalism>
Augustine (p. 34) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo
Sayers (p. 35-36) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Sayers
Epistemology (p. 36) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>

Questions to Consider

1. What is negative theology? (pp. 31-32)
2. How did Augustine describe the Trinity? (p. 34) How would you describe the Trinity?
3. Is there a difference between understanding God as love and love as God? (pg. 35)
4. How has God shown love to you?

5. What word or image does your church use most frequently to describe God?
6. What is your image of God when you pray?
7. What does it mean for you to understand yourself as "being made in the image of God"? What are the implications for educators, parents, employers, friends, and enemies?
8. In what ways do you see yourself as co-creating the world with God?
9. Christianity and science both speak about creation. How do you connect Christian descriptions of creation with scientific descriptions of creation? (pp. 29-30)
10. Do you see more goodness in the world or evil? How do you nurture goodness? How do you resist or combat evil?

Teaching Activities

Try to come up with a new metaphor for God, one you have not heard before. Explain it to a friend and discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Think of a time when your individual freedom/responsibility was squelched by factors/circumstances that were outside your control? How would you describe that time of your life?

Create two lists under the headings "God is..." and "God is not...". Write down characteristics and adjectives about God under each. If you are part of a study group, compare your list with the lists of others in your group.

Resources from Popular Culture

This chapter gives a sweeping picture of the mysterious God who made the world. Touching on Trinitarian concepts, the authors focus their energies on the character of God as love--lavishly poured out for the world in expansive and embracing graciousness. Here are some popular culture expressions of creation and how humanity is uniquely positioned within it.

Films:

The Matrix
Pleasantville
The Truman Show
Chariots of Fire

Music:

"The First Time" by U2
 "Carnival" by Natalie Merchant
 "Theologians" by Wilco
 "Fake Plastic Trees" by Radiohead

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Trinity by St. Augustine

Written in the early 400s, this is a classic in the history of theology and one still very much worth reading.

Cosmic Grace: Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I (2003) edited by John Chryssavgis

The leader of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians speaks about God, creation, and our responsibility to care for the earth.

The Language of God (2006) by Francis Collins

A prominent contemporary scientist and director of the Human Genome Project shares his personal faith and reflections on creation, science, and medical ethics.

Trinity: A New Living Spirituality (2004) by Joseph F. Girzone

This short little book by a well known Catholic writer speaks eloquently about the Trinity, laying special emphasis on the practical implications of this doctrine.

Rediscovering the Triune God (2004) by Stanley J. Grenz

Grenz tells the story of trinitarian theology in the last century, analyzing the remarkable diversity of thinking that has emerged.

God for Us (1993) by Catherine LaCugna

This is a difficult book, but well worth the effort. LaCugna stresses the ways in which Christians have often "forgotten" the Trinity, stressing belief simply "in God," and she explains what is lost when this happens.

God Is Not . . . (2004) by D. Brent Laytham

This book delightfully undercuts a variety of different popular, but mistaken notions of who God is and what God's character is like.

The Trinity and the Kingdom (1993) by Jurgen Moltmann

Moltmann, a leading German theologian, seeks to develop a "social" understanding of the three persons of the Trinity.

The Trinity (1997) by Karl Rahner

A ground-breaking treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity by one of the most important Catholic theologians of the century.

Getting Involved

Explore the concept of "God's graciousness" in the creation of the human body through journaling. What has your body taught or revealed to you about God and God's love?

Plant a garden to grow some of your own food. Keep a journal to record your thoughts as you cultivate the soil. What analogies can be made to how God is working in your life and in the creation?

Adopt a highway or clean up a vacant city lot. As you care for this area, think about the world as a gift that God has given to us. Also think about how you would treat that area if you owned it. Do we treat public property or the property of others the same way we would treat our own?

Chapter Two: Human Nature

Chapter Summary

Every person is made in the image of God and because of that every person deserves to be respected and treated with dignity. The image of God includes both freedom and responsibility. While no one possesses absolute freedom, each of us has some ability to shape our lives. Love provides the atmosphere in which human freedom works best, and the ideals of justice remind us of what that love entails. The gap between how we ought to live and how we actually live is called sin. Non-Christians sin and so do Christians. Rather than seeing this as a problem, Jake and Rod suggest that remembering how much we share with everyone else--both the good and the bad--can help us be more gracious in the ways we relate to others.

Questions Addressed:

- What kind of people were we created to be?
- What is the "image of God"?
- What is sin?

Terms and People

Imago Dei (p. 40) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imago_dei ;
<http://www.geocities.com/mnapologetics/ImagoDei.htm>
freedom -http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_%28philosophy%29
John Wesley (p. 43) -http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley
sin -<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sin>
forgiveness -<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness>

Questions to Consider

1. What makes people different from animals? What is God's image in us?
2. How would you define "freedom"?
3. What do Americans mean by "freedom?" Would people from other cultures or countries define freedom in the same way?
4. How would you define "justice"? What is the difference between justice and charity?
5. Where do you see justice most lacking in America or elsewhere?
6. Is religious freedom always a good thing? Why or why not?
7. How would you define "sin"? What is the difference between "making mistakes" and sinning?
8. Can someone really forgive another person if that person has admitted no fault?
9. What do all human beings have in common?
10. Are Christians different from other people? If so, what makes them different? If not, what difference does it make to be Christian?

Teaching Activities

Generate a list of experiences that are common to all people. How have these experiences been experiences of grace? How have they not?

Where do you see oppression and injustice in our society today? Submit a "Letter to the Editor" to your hometown newspaper to raise awareness about this issue in your local community.

Consider starting a monthly podcast on the internet to share your questions about human rights and civic responsibility.

Resources from Popular Culture

In this chapter, the authors guide readers through the great complexities of the human condition. From the Imago Dei to issues of freedom, failure, dignity, and doubt - the authors are pressing toward a faith that works toward love, justice, and concern for common humanity. These themes appear in the following films and music.

Films:

The Corporation
Crash
The Lord of the Rings
Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room
Mystic River

Music:

"John Wayne Gacy, Jr." by Sufjan Stevens
"Adam Lives in Theory" by Lauryn Hill
"Waste of Paint" by Bright Eyes
"Fall of Troy" by Tom Waits

Suggestions for Further Reading

Selected Speeches (1997) by Ernest L. Boyer, Jr.
Talks about life and education by one of America's best teachers.

The Dialogue (1980) by Catherine of Sienna
Catherine is one of only three women "doctors of the church" in the Catholic tradition. Originally written in the mid-1300s, this is her best known work.

Shantung Compound (1991) by Langdon Gilkey
During World War II, Gilkey was imprisoned in a Japanese detention camp in China with several hundred other westerners. This book reflects on what it means to be human in trying circumstances and what faith means.

John Wesley on the Sermon on the Mount (2002) by Kenneth C. Kinghorn
Wesley is always instructive to read and this collection of his sermons in slightly updated language makes them very accessible.

Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action (2000) by Thomas Massaro
Catholic documents can often be hard to read even when they say great things. Massaro's book highlights what is important in language all can understand.

The Dignity of Difference (2003) by Jonathan Sacks

This book by the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain is a wonderful celebration of human difference and a reminder of how much Christian understandings of grace are rooted in Jewish faith.

Gender and Grace (1990) by Mary Stuart Van Leeuwen [check spelling]

This important work looks at how views of gender have shaped and sometimes misshaped our understanding of what it means to be human. Van Leeuwen writes from a distinctly Reformed position.

The School of Charity (1934) by Evelyn Underhill

This delightful commentary on the Nicene Creed is full of wisdom. Underhill was the leading scholar of mysticism in the twentieth century and a mystical sense of wonder infuses her writing.

Getting Involved

Visit a community where English is not the primary language. Keep a journal documenting your experiences of grace and hospitality during your trip.

Add an element of service during your family vacation time. Afterward, talk together about how this experience affected you.

Think of someone you may have hurt (intentionally or not) and tell them you are sorry.

Chapter Three: Hearing God's Voice

Chapter Summary

God is speaking all the time, but we are often too preoccupied to notice. God doesn't shout to get our attention, but typically speaks softly and quietly. God's voice invariably comes to us as a call, luring us deeper into life and deeper into the love God feels for the whole world. God can speak through nature and human experience, but the clearest way God has ever spoken to the world is through a person: Jesus of Nazareth, who Christians believe was both fully human and fully divine. A very important way we hear God's voice today is through prayer, but sometimes God can seem silent even when we are trying to listen. That silence reminds us to uphold others when God seems silent to them.

Questions Addressed:

- How does God speak to us?
- What does it mean to feel called by God?
- What has God communicated to us through Jesus?
- What is prayer?

Terms and People

Apologetics. Polemics (p. 55) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polemics> ;
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apologetics>
Catholic Catechism (p. 60) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catechism>
Aquinas (p. 56) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aquinas>
proofs for the existence of God (p. 56) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existence_of_God
Frederica Mathewes-Green (p. 58-9) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederica_Mathewes-Green
prayer (pp. 60-2) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer>
Desmond Tutu (p. 62) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu

Questions to Consider

1. Who (what kinds of people) does God speak to?
2. What is the nature of God's voice? What is the purpose of God's "call"?
3. What is the difference between "special" revelation from God and "general" revelation?
4. What are ways in which God can speak to us? How do the authors suggest we discern what God is supposedly telling us?
5. How should Christians respond to other religions? How informed should Christians be?
6. What does it mean to be gracious to people from other religious backgrounds?
7. Why do different Christians interpret the Bible differently?
8. What do we learn about God and about God's character by the nature of how Christ came to live on earth?
9. What is the nature of prayer? What are the essential/most important aspects of prayer?
10. Why are we supposed to pray for our enemies?

Teaching Activities

Write a parable – a very short, short story – that illustrates how God speaks to us.

Try to come up with a new metaphor for discovering God's will. Is “discover” a good word to use in this regard? How do we come to know God’s will for us? With what degree of certainty can we know God’s will?

Create a “Faith Journey Map” from your birth to the present. What significant spiritual experiences did you include? Share your map with someone else. How are your life trajectories similar and different?

Resources from Popular Culture

A challenging topic, the authors give a brief vignette of vocation. Dancing through tough topics like General Revelation, Christology, and Prayer - the author's move toward problematizing God's voice so that readers look for a little more than just the proverbial "writing on the wall." Some examples of how the public communicates or wrestles with conviction, divinity, revelation, and Truth are offered in the Teaching Resources section.

Films:

Whale Rider
Millions
The Fisher King

Music:

"Secret of the Easy Yoke" by Pedro the Lion
"Dear Lord" by Joseph Arthur
"Gabriel" by Glen Phillips
"Jesus in New Orleans" by Over the Rhine

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

This new summary of Catholic teaching is an important resource for Christian faith and practice for Protestants as well as Catholics. The section on prayer has been praised by Christians across the theological spectrum.

Summa Contra Gentiles by St. Thomas Aquinas

This is the classic text of theology from the high medieval period. Aquinas discusses the central questions of theology in interesting and very finely detailed argument.

A Diary of Private Prayer (1949) by John Baillie

A classic collection of prayers that many have found helpful in developing their own spirituality.

Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (2000) by Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright

In this book two scholars – one more progressive and one more conservative – share their

alternative understandings of Jesus's life and meaning.

The Secret Message of Jesus (2006) by Brian McLaren

This is McLaren at his best, explaining not only who Jesus was, but what Jesus's teachings mean for us today.

Jesus Through the Centuries (1999) by Jaroslav Pelikan

This short history of how Christians have understood who Jesus was and what it means to follow him offers a wealth of insight for Christians today.

God has a Dream (2004) by Desmond Tutu

This delightful little book captures Archbishop Tutu's vision of God and Christian faith. Drawing on his work with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu calls Christians to new levels of graciousness and forgiveness.

Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship (1995) by Leslie Newbigin

Newbigin who was both a missionary (to India) and great ecumenical leader discusses the dangers of certitude and the importance of humble confidence.

Getting Involved

Walk a labyrinth. Does this activity help you center yourself and regain perspective on your life as a whole? What did you reflect on as you walked?

See if there is a spiritual director in your town or congregation. Set up a visit and ask questions about the practice. How might a spiritual director help you?

Visit a monastery for a silent weekend retreat. How does living in silence, even for just a short while, alter your actions and attitudes toward others? Does silence make you feel closer to or more distant from those around you?

Chapter Four: The Fullness of Salvation

Chapter Summary

Salvation is God's way of calling us and the whole world forward toward the kind of life we were always meant to live. While salvation in some sense involves the whole world, people are especially interested in how salvation applies to them. Salvation is both personal (we enter into a new relationship with God) and social (we enter into a new relationship with everyone else). Salvation is often experienced as beginning at a specific point in time, but it also involves a long process of spiritual growth and maturation. Christians believe Jesus is the key to salvation as evidenced in his birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Salvation is not intended to separate us from others, but to connect us to both God and others in new and gracious ways.

Questions Addressed:

- What is salvation in the broadest meaning of the word?
- How are the personal and social dimensions of salvation connected?
- How is it that Jesus saves us?
- How does salvation change people and change the world?

Terms and People

Determinism - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Determinism>
Predestination - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predestination>
Free Will - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will
Infant Baptism (p. 67) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infant_baptism
Wittenburg Door (p. 69) - <http://www.reformationtours.com/site/490868/page/180550>
Evangelism (p. 70) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism>
Sojourners - <http://www.sojourners.org/>
Athanasius (p. 71) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius>
Martin Luther (p. 68) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_luther
Maryknoll Catholic Order - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryknoll> ; <http://home.maryknoll.org>

Questions to Consider

1. Do you use the word “salvation” to describe your relationship with God? What are the strengths and weaknesses of using this metaphor? How would you describe your experience of closeness to God?
2. How much emphasis do you put on the personal aspects of salvation and how much on the universal?
3. Which parable do you like better: “the prodigal son” or “the sower and the seed”? Why?
4. Who do you know who seems to embody “fast grace”? Who embodies “slow grace”?
5. What is the difference between feeling guilt and being ashamed of yourself? Which would you be more likely to experience?
6. Why do you think some people seem able to forgive others so easily while other people find it so hard to forgive?
7. Have you ever confessed your sins to someone else? How did that make you feel? What happened?
8. How have you experienced “renewal” in your life as a result of grace?

9. What part of Jesus' life plays the bigger role in your faith: incarnation, teaching and example, death on the cross, resurrection?
10. How is hope related to faith and to love in your understanding of salvation? Which of these three (faith, hope, love) plays the largest role in your life?

Teaching Activities

Make an "anonymous confession box" and have everyone in your study write down something they want to confess and put in the box. Tell everyone that confessions will be destroyed without anyone looking at them. Discuss how confession (even anonymous confession) can help people deal with sin.

Have members of the group share brief moments of salvation they have experienced or observed. Do these stories reflect slow or fast views of how God's grace works?

The cross is a central image in Christianity. Ask people to describe different crosses they have seen. What do these different crosses communicate about Jesus and salvation?

Resources from Popular Culture

This is a fun little chapter that points readers to more than just personal piety or abstract generalizations. How do you see salvation being communicated in culture today? What themes do you see emerging in our modern society and what could educators capture and share that exemplifies this for students?

Films

Apostle
Babette's Feast
Woman Thou Art Loosed
Les Miserables

Music

"Jesus Walks" by Kanye West
"Chocolate Jesus" by Tom Waits
"Bartender" by Dave Matthews Band
"I Can Only Imagine" by MercyMe

Suggestions for Further Reading

Recovering the Scandal of the Cross (2000) by Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker

This biblical and theological examination of the atonement is not as dry as that sounds. The authors ask and answer questions about what salvation means and how the cross makes salvation possible.

Born Again (1984) by Charles W. Colson

Set against the backdrop of the explosive Watergate scandal, Colson recounts the story of his own search for meaning and encounter with Christ.

Deep Conversion; Deep Prayer (2006) by Thomas Dubay

One of the most popular and respected Catholic retreat masters and spiritual directors in the USA offers insights about conversion and the life of faith.

Knowing Christ (2002) by Alister McGrath

Oxford theologian Alister McGrath offers a personal look at his own spiritual journey and a commentary on the nature of salvation.

The Return of the Prodigal Son (1994) by Henri Nouwen

This is a wonderful set of reflections on Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal and on the nature of divine grace.

The Life You've Always Wanted (2004) by John Ortberg

John Ortberg calls readers back to the dynamic heartbeat of Christianity—God's power to bring change and growth—and reveals both the how and why of transformation.

A Theology for the Social Gospel (1917, 1997) by Walter Rauschenbusch

Written during the early decades of the twentieth century, this book still has much to say about how Christianity relates to social and economic life.

The Purpose Driven Life (2002) by Rick Warren

This mega-bestseller focuses on the basics of Christianity and much of it has to do with the personal dimensions of salvation.

The Divine Conspiracy (1997) by Dallas Willard

Willard lays out an understanding of salvation that involves one's entire way of life.

Getting Involved

Create a "confessional space" somewhere in your home and develop a daily habit of confessing your sins at the beginning or end of the day.

Watch the movie *The Apostle* with some friends and talk about how this film relates to the chapter. How is grace exhibited? How is salvation portrayed? With whom do you most identify?

Do something nice for someone who cannot reciprocate. Do something for the sheer joy of doing good.

Chapter Five: The Spirit and Life

Chapter Summary

The Nicene Creed describes the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the Giver of life" and that life-giving understanding of the Spirit's work undergirds gracious Christian living. We become more spiritually mature as we live in closer accord with the Spirit's life-giving work in the world. According to the Bible, spiritual maturity is defined by the "fruit of the Spirit" which includes the character traits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Spirit seeks to lead us deeper into the joy of life, but that life also requires some degree of self-denial. St. Francis of Assisi exemplifies this paradox of self-denial and joy which is so central to living graciously as Christians.

Questions Addressed:

- What is the Spirit's role in the world?
- What is spiritual maturity?
- How does the Spirit guide us?
- How are self-denial and self-fulfillment both part of discipleship?

Terms and People

Pantheism (p. 79) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantheism>
Syncretism (p. 79) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism>
Philokalia (p. 83) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philokalia>
Azusa Street Revival (p. 77) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azusa_street_revival
Nicene Creed (p. 78) - <http://www.mit.edu/~tb/anglican/intro/lr-nicene-creed.html>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_creed
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (p. 85) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonhoeffer>
St. Francis of Assisi (p. 86) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi
John Muir (p. 79) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Muir

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean to say the Spirit is the "giver of life." Is every living thing filled with God's Spirit in the same way?
2. What is your attitude toward nature? Is protecting the natural environment a Christian's duty?
3. How do the authors explain "living simply"? How simply do you live? Is simplicity something Christians should strive for?
4. What does it mean to "yield to the Spirit"? Have you experienced this?
5. How do we discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit? How much reason is involved? How much are the emotions involved?
6. Do you practice any "spiritual disciplines" on a regular basis? What do you do? How does that impact your life?
7. Who is the most spiritually mature Christian you know? What in your mind makes that person mature?
8. What special spiritual gifts do you possess? What is your experience of some of the more visible gifts of the Spirit like speaking in tongues?

9. How would you describe the "cost and joy of discipleship"?
10. What phrase in the prayer of St. Francis is most meaningful to you?

Teaching Activities

Have the class or group read Galations 5:22-23. Ask them to share which characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit they feel they possess the most. Which do they need most to acquire?

Ask the group to share experiences of nature when they have felt especially moved by God's Spirit.

Divide into small groups (of 3 to 4) and ask each group to develop a new metaphor for describing the work of the Spirit in the world and another metaphor to describe the work of the Spirit in the church.

Resources from Popular Culture

The authors spend most of their time here in a conversation about the work and role of the Holy Spirit. While the church is trying to manifest the fruits of the Spirit, the wider popular culture may see them embodying something else. What conveys the popular understandings of the current human condition? Is there anything out there that deals with dying to self so that one might live again for others?

Films:

A Man for All Seasons
Bonhoeffer
Tender Mercies
Romero

Music:

"Theologians" by Wilco
"Mysterious Ways" by U2

Suggestions for Further Reading

Mere Discipleship (2003) by Lee C. Camp

Camp's book is a heartfelt reminder of how radical the calling to follow Jesus and live by the Spirit can be, especially amidst the affluence and narcissism of contemporary western culture.

Celebration of Discipline (1978) by Richard J. Foster

When it was published, this book helped spark the resurgence of interest in spirituality that is still growing today. A wonderful introduction to the personal and corporate disciplines of the Christian life.

Streams of Living Water (1998) by Richard J. Foster

This winsome book outlines six different but complementary traditions of Christian faith and practice (contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical, and incarnational) that continue to guide Christians toward spiritual maturity today.

The Upside-Down Kingdom (2003) by Donald B. Kraybill

This 25th year anniversary edition of Kraybill's call to radical Christian discipleship still makes for good reading. It is an Anabaptist vision of Christian faith presented in terms all Christians will find instructive.

The Moral Imagination (2005) by John Paul Lederach

One of the leading ethicists of the Mennonite world analyzes the art and soul of peacemaking. This book combines realism with hope seeking to make our work for peace and justice more effective and compassionate at the same time.

Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace (1999) by Kent Nerburn

Nerburn's reflections on the famous prayer of St. Francis encourage readers to embody the Christian virtues of peace, patience, humility, and compassion in their lives today.

Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit (1996) by Clark H. Pinnock

This is one of the best and most complete theological discussions of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in print.

What God Wants for Your Life (2005) by Frederick W. Schmidt

Writing largely to a mainline Protestant audience, Schmidt describes the many factors that need to be taken into account as we seek to discern God's leading in our lives.

Poverty and Joy (1999) by William J. Short

This book explains the history of the Franciscan tradition from St. Francis himself up to the present.

The Will of God as a Way of Life (2004) by Jerry Sittser

This is a wonderfully readable exposition of how God guides us through life via our own decisions as we seek to be faithful followers of God in the present.

The Cost of Discipleship (1949) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This is the most well known of Bonhoeffer's published works. In it he discusses the nature of Christian discipleship based largely on the Sermon on the Mount.

Getting Involved

Watch one of several recent documentaries on the life of Bonhoeffer and discuss what you might have done had you been living in his circumstances.

Pentecostal churches pay special attention to the activity of God in the Christian's life. If you have never attended a Pentecostal worship service, you may want to. Talk to church members about their experiences of the Spirit.

See if there is a Catholic Worker House in your local town or a city nearby. Visit the house and ask them to tell you what they do. Consider getting involved if you have skills the group could use.

Chapter Six: Being Church

Chapter Summary

No one is a Christian all by himself or herself. We are Christians together, and we call that togetherness "church." While Christians make up the church, the church exists for others. As church, Christians work together to help make the kingdom of God a reality on earth. God's kingdom exists wherever people treat each other with love, respect, justice, dignity, and compassion. The church has not always embodied these kingdom values, and we should freely admit those failures, but overall the church has been a force for good in the world. The church also exists to worship God. In worship we are reminded of who we are and who God is. We praise God for the grace we have experienced and, as we leave worship, we reaffirm our calling to act as God's gracious agents of love in the world.

Questions addressed:

- What is the church?
- How is the church related to the "kingdom of God"?
- What role does the church have in public life?
- How does worship change us?

Terms and People

Cyprian (p. 90) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprian>
Le Chambon (p. 92) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Chambon
Inquisition (p. 96) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inquisition>
Amish (p. 96) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish>
Eucharist (p. 98) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist>

Questions to Consider

1. What is the difference between "the church" and your local congregation?
2. What is the difference between "the church" and a denomination?
3. How is being a member of a "church" different than being a member of a local "club"?
4. How well do you know other members of your congregation? How well do you think church members should know each other?
5. What is the least Christian thing you have seen a church do? What is the most Christian thing you have seen a church do?
6. How do the authors describe the kingdom of God? Where have you seen the kingdom of God in action?
7. How much should Christians be involved in politics? How much should any church be involved in politics?
8. What moves you to tears about what is wrong in society?
9. Does worship help you refocus your own life? What parts of your church's worship service are most meaningful to you?
10. What does the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist) mean to you? What do you think about when participating in this part of worship? How would you explain what you experience?

Teaching Activities

In small groups discuss what the ideal church would be like. Who would lead it? What would be its top three priorities? Compare differences between what the small groups decide.

Draw a timeline of your life. Plot the most significant experiences you have had with a church. How have these experiences shaped your understanding of what the church should be?

Identify some social issue that is reported on in the local newspaper. Ask how the church might best address that issue.

Resources from Popular Culture

This chapter speaks about both the successes and failures of the church. Sometimes it is easy to parody the hypocrisy of the church, but there are times when the story of the church is positively inspiring. These popular culture resources touch on both sides of this dual reality.

Films

Hotel Rwanda
Romero
Saved!
X-Men
The Mission

Music

"Suspect Fled the Scene" by Pedro the Lion
"Crumbs From Your Table" by U2
"Grandma's Hands" by Bill Withers
"Church" by Lyle Lovett

Suggestions for Further Reading

Going Public: Christian Responsibility in a Divided America (2002) by Lawrence E. Adams
The church ought to be involved in public issues, but how? Adams attempts to chart a path for political involvement in a time of hyper-partisanship.

The Practicing Congregation (2004) by Diana Butler Bass
In this short but insightful book, Bass offers a vision of renewal for all congregations, but especially those of the mainline Protestant denominations.

Transforming Mission (1991) by David J. Bosch
When it was published, this book started a whole new conversation not only about "mission" understood as evangelism, but also about the nature and mission of the entire church as the people of God.

Truly the Community (1992) by Marva J. Dawn
A grace-centered description of what the church is called to be according the twelfth chapter of Romans.

Models of the Church (2002) by Avery Cardinal Dulles

First published in 1974, this is an expanded discussion of what the church (Catholic, but also Protestant) can and should look like.

The Peaceable Kingdom (1983) by Stanley Hauerwas

This book is not an easy read, but it remains one of Hauerwas's best books and his description of the church as "the servant community" is a masterpiece of theological ethics.

What Is Mission? (2000) by J. Andrew Kirk

Kirk's focus is on the church's mission in the world and how that relates to the way of faith modeled by Jesus.

Tempting Faith (2006) by David Kuo

After years of working with the Religious Right, David Kuo examines the cost of being involved in politics.

Christ and Culture (1951) by H. Richard Niebuhr

This classic study of the relationship between Christianity and culture still serves as a guide for the church's role in society fifty years after its publication.

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger (1997) by Ronald J. Sider

This 20th anniversary edition of Sider's call for the church adopt to a posture of active generosity instead of complacent affluence still rings true today.

God's Politics (2005) by Jim Wallis

The subtitle is "why the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it" and that is exactly what this book is about – charting a middle pathway through currently befuddled political options.

Christian Perspectives on Politics (2000) by J. Philip Wogaman

Wogaman's book walks the reader through all the varieties of political stances the church has adopted over the years and helps Christians reflect on their own political goals and values in light of the gospel.

Getting Involved

Create a list of 4-5 churches that you have never attended before. Try to include a diversity of worship styles. (For instance, include liturgical, charismatic, and traditional congregations.) Visit each church and keep a journal of your reflections.

Volunteer with some local Christian organization that helps the poor or those in prison.

Think of ways that you might become more involved in leading worship in your own congregation.

Chapter Seven: The Bible

Chapter Summary

The Bible is the Christian guidebook, and Christians around the world look to the Bible for inspiration, instruction, and correction. This book, more than any other, is the common text where Christians go to find answers when they have questions and guidance when they are perplexed. God speaks to us through the Bible, but the Bible is an ancient and complex collection of writings that needs to be read and interpreted with care. All of life, from the best to the worst, is on display in the Bible, as is God's power to intervene. In the broadest scope, the Bible tells the grand story of God's interactions with humankind, but the many smaller stories of the Bible are also important. They illustrate the faith-charged character of the little choices, challenges, and joys that are part of life. The Bible provides us with many different narratives of grace and graciousness that model how we ourselves should live.

Questions addressed:

What kind of book is the Bible?

How should the Bible be interpreted?

Why do Christians sometimes disagree about what the Bible means?

What does the Bible teach us about grace and graciousness?

Term and People

Inspired (p. 102)- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inspired>

Esoteric (p. 104) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esoteric>

Protestant Reformation (p. 104)- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation>

Dogmatism (p. 106)- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogmatism>

Ecumenical (p. 110)- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical>

Questions to Consider

1. Which passages of the Bible seem to you to require the least interpretation?
2. Which passages of the Bible seem the most difficult to understand?
3. How has the Bible served as a guide book for living in your experience? Give some specific examples.
4. What is your "canon with the canon"? (See pg. 109)
5. What is your church's "canon with the canon"?
6. Have you ever used a biblical commentary? How has that helped you understand the Bible?
7. Do you agree that the Bible is not a book of science?
8. If you could delete one book from the Bible which would it be? Why?
9. If you had to pick one book of the Bible as your favorite which would it be? Why?
10. How would you explain the grand story that holds the whole Bible together? Is there a grand story or are there just many small stories in the Bible?

Teaching Activities

Ask people to describe what is on their refrigerator doors. How is this like the Bible?

Ask people to share their favorite Bible story from when they were young. Do they still like that story? Why or why not?

Have people get into small groups to discuss how they would have made decisions as a church during the years before the Bible was collected into the set of writings we have today.

Resources from Popular Culture

The Bible has become so much a part of popular culture it is almost everywhere. Two films listed below have recently raised new questions for many people about what the Bible really says.

Films:

The Passion of the Christ

DaVinci Code

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Art of Biblical Narrative (1983) by Robert Alter

This is one of the best books for learning how to read the Bible as the narrative it is rather than as a simple guidebook of rules or source book of doctrine.

Jerusalem (1996) by Karen Armstrong

An interesting historical look at the city which forms the central backdrop for so much of the Bible.

Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale (1977) by Frederick Buechner

One of America's best preachers makes the biblical world come alive for people today.

The Bible Makes Sense (1977) by Walter Brueggemann

A recently reprinted short introduction to the Bible by one of America's best biblical scholars.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth (Third Ed. 2003) by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart

A very readable introduction to how to interpret the Bible.

The New Faces of Christianity: The Bible in the Global South (2006) by Philip Jenkins

An interesting book about Christianity in Africa and Asia with special attention to the ways in which the Bible is being interpreted in these regions.

The Bible in History (2004) by David Kling

Describes how different passages of the Bible have become especially prominent at certain during the history of Christianity and within certain movements.

Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible (1999) by John Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison

This collection of sermons illustrates how the Bible is read differently in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Eat This Book (2006) by Eugene H. Peterson

Presents an approach to reading the Bible that focuses on conversation and spiritual development.

Getting Involved

Read through the Bible in one year. This will require you to read 5-6 chapters a day.

Gather a group of friends and read one of the gospels together at one sitting. Actually act out the encounters Jesus has with different groups and individuals.

Ask your church to have a different person each week share their favorite passage of the Bible with the congregation as a whole. Have them explain why they like that particular passage so much.

Chapter Eight: The Future

Chapter Summary

When we think about the future we wonder about both our own individual futures and the future of the world as a whole. In terms of the whole world, God has promised that the powers of arrogance and evil that deform the world will someday be entirely defeated and God's will will be done on earth just as it is in heaven. In the present, Christians work to help establish the kingdom of God wherever that is possible. In terms of our individual lives, Christians are encouraged to trust God and refrain from judging others. Based on Christ's resurrection, Christians envision spending eternity with God and all the saints in heaven. That hope frees us from grabbing frantically for every passing pleasure, and allows us to savor life with patience and serve others with pleasure.

Questions addressed:

- How does hope change the way we face the future?
- What does our own effort have to do with the coming of God's kingdom?
- How will God judge us in the future?
- What will heaven be like?

Terms and People

Nostradamus (p. 121) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostradamus>

Purgatory (p. 125) - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory>

Letter from a Birmingham Jail - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail

Questions to Consider

1. Do you see yourself as a person of hope? Who is the most hopeful person you know?
2. Where do you see seeds of hope in the world today? What developments seem to undercut hope?
3. What is the difference between being hopeful and optimistic?
4. In what ways are you or your church involved in promoting justice in the world?
5. If Christianity is a balance between patience and impatience, are you personally more patient or impatient?
6. Read Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."
(http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular_requests/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf)
What does this important document from the past still have to say to us today?
7. What do you think will happen to you when you die? Is there life after death?
8. What is your mental image of heaven?
9. What is your mental image of hell?
10. Jesus tells us not to judge others. Is that really possible? Who is the person you find most difficult not to judge?

Teaching Activities

Share an experience in your life that revealed the Kingdom of God to you.

List ways in which you can work toward peace and justice in the world today. How much

impatience does this require? How much patience?

Ask if anyone has had a near death experience and would be willing to share that story. How did the experience change that person?

Resources from Popular Culture

Heaven, hell and issues of justice are often vividly portrayed in contemporary culture. Here is a list to start with, but people in your class or study group may want to suggest other resources they like better.

Films:

Dogma

What Dreams May Come

Eyes on the Prize (video series about the Civil Rights Movement)

Music:

"The Far Country" by Andrew Peterson

"Red Clay Halo" by Gillian Welch

"Mercy for Cities" by John Francis

"When the Ship Comes In" by Bob Dylan

"Imagine" by John Lennon

Suggestions for Further Reading

The God of Hope and the End of the World (2002) by John Polkinghorne

Polkinghorne, who is a scientist, a theologian, and an Anglican priest, explains the nature of Christian hope and his vision of the future.

If Grace is True (2003) by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland

Two ministers argue that God will eventually save everyone.

The Great Divorce (2001) by C. S. Lewis

This is C. S. Lewis's fictional account of life after death, dealing with his views of both heaven and purgatory.

Heaven: A History (2001) by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang

Just like the title says, this is a history of what people have believed about heaven.

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1990)

This collection of Dr. King's writings is still a powerful witness to his faith in both God and the future.

No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized (1992) by John Sanders

What will happen to people who are not Christians when they die?

Vital Christianity (2005) by David Weaver-Zercher and William H. Willimon

Explores ways in which spirituality and justice come together.

Getting Involved

Pray the Lord's prayer at least once a day.

Look around your community and ask where hope needs to happen. How can you help that hope come alive?

Visit a local retirement community and talk to the persons living there, especially those who have no one to visit them on a regular basis. Listen to what they want to say. Pray with them.