

Discover bible study series



A Credible Witnessing Church

By John U'Ren

There is a lot of emphasis in Western countries on “the image” of the church. What is an effective church? What is a successful church? What denotes a Biblical church? The criteria usually revolve around size, numbers, programs, youth, church worship, buildings, music talents and all visible things that Christians do enjoy when they get together!

I was privileged to visit New Delhi some time ago, and see first-hand some outstanding expressions of incarnational ministry. SHARAN (Society for Serving the Urban Poor) operates with funding that comes from around the world.

The overwhelming impressions I had are hard to list in any order. However, what stood out was to see this ministry in the context of limited conditions: under-resourced, basic equipment, congested office space. But they were committed people who were serving a huge number of the poor in the Delhi slums. People who were dedicated, over-worked, living sacrificially and expressing faithfully the mission of Jesus. Health clinics, schools, community cooperatives, small industries, housing, rehabilitation and fellowships were all part of their mission. I saw a visible and credible church at work in the world, which prompted me to ask, “What is an effective/successful church?” Is it about frenetic activity for its members and adherents, or is it setting priorities towards those outside its walls in mission?

Our Bible study here is an injunction to be a credible, loving and caring people with priorities that reach outside the walls of our churches.

Warm-up Exercises

Share together some stories about your lives. What was the hardest/most complex incident or issue that you can recall in your childhood, or growing into adulthood? Then talk about the best or most positive thing that has happened in your lifetime? Share your stories together (but watch the time!).

Read together these words of Martin Luther King:

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of Thermo-dynamics in Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. ...”

Discuss and decide if you agree or disagree.

Look into the Scriptures

Read 1 John 3:11-34. **Note** how the message of 3:11 relates to the themes of John 1:5 and 1 John 4:7-12.

- What is John’s definition of love in 1 John 3:16-18?
- What is the supreme example of love?
- How far are we to take this in our personal Christian lives?

For Further Study

Compare the following five passages with the words of John that you have just studied.

- Romans 12:1
- John 15:13-14
- Matthew 25:31-46
- James 2:1-7
- Ephesians 4:21-25

For Reflection

Listen to Henry Nouwen. Respond to this quote.

We in the modern affluent world try to interpret the Bible to support our life styles. If we are going to obey the call of Jesus it will be costly. We are called to shift the point of gravity, to relocate the centre of our attention, to change our priorities.

Grade your church in the light of the previous passages.

- How does your church measure up?
- How well do the members love one another?
- Does your church have a priority to minister to the poor?
- What grade would your church get if an outsider judged your church on how well you love and serve those outside the church, including the poor and marginalised?

What sort of grade would your church score from 1-10?

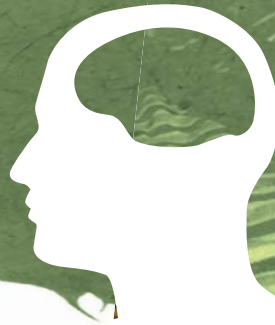
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Apply

In the light of “the grade” you have given your church through the outsider’s eyes, reflect on the passages you have studied and phrase a prayer for your church.

Our God, we pray...

Discover bible study series



Always with Us

Deuteronomy 15:1-11

By Steve Bradbury

Many of our children continue to struggle and survive in unacceptably poor circumstances. Why is this? We are a rich country. Why does a solution continue to elude our political servants? Is this not continued proof that economic riches and spiritual riches rarely reside together? Something is missing in our 'communal soul'.

1996 was declared the Year for the Eradication of Poverty by the United Nations, but it too represented just more wishful thinking. The Millennium Declaration aims to halve world poverty by 2015. The resources are there, but will it really happen? The Bible asserts that there will always be poor among us, but it does so not to provide an excuse for apathy, but rather to insist upon a radical response. What is more, it provides a realistic framework for action.

The following study will help you build up a picture of that framework, but it is important that we keep the following thought in mind:

Studying the Bible is not principally an academic exercise. The main intention is not to possess accurate knowledge, though that is important; rather it is to express how, by progressing in faithfulness to the Lord of lords, one may enjoy real freedom and discover a lasting purpose in life... God's truth is never just a statement of the way things are, it is always a call to action.

Andrew Kirk, God's Word for a Complex World

Why Are They Poor?

This is a simple brainstorming exercise for which you will need a few sheets of paper and a thick marker pen.

- Ask the group to list the answers commonly given to the question 'Why are the poor, poor?' Don't enter into any debate at this stage, just write all the answers on the paper, leaving a 15cm margin on the right side of the sheets.
- Now discuss the answers, delete those you believe to be untrue, and then identify with an asterisk the 6 most significant ones.
- In the margin indicate any supportive Bible passages you can find for each of 6 above (you may find a concordance useful for this exercise).
- Finally discuss any issues which have arisen thus far. Have there been any surprises? Any gaps in your knowledge?

They Will Always Be With Us

- **Read** Deuteronomy 15: 1-11.
- What do you think is the central concern of this passage?
- Given the fact that it describes very specific instructions given to God's people at a particular time in a particular place, what relevance, if any, does it have for Christians today? (You may find it useful to consider the implications of 1 Peter 2: 9-10 as you consider this question)
- How can the apparent contradictions between verses Deut.15: 4 & 11 be reconciled?
- What is the logic that links together the first half of verse 4 with the second half?
- What explanation does the passage provide for the continuation of poverty?
- **Read** Matthew 26: 6-13. At first glance, it would appear that Jesus is rebuking his disciples over their concern for the poor. How ought we to understand Jesus' words and concern here? What does it have to say to Christians active in poverty alleviation programs?

Prayer and Reflection

Look again at the Andrew Kirk quote.

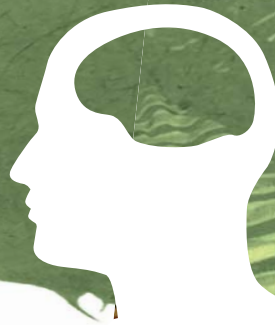
Studying the Bible is not principally an academic exercise. The main intention is not to possess accurate knowledge, though that is important; rather it is to express how, by progressing in faithfulness to the Lord of lords, one may enjoy real freedom and discover a lasting purpose in life... God's truth is never just a statement of the way things are, it is always a call to action.

Prayerfully consider what action God's word is calling you to in response to the continuing struggle of the poor, both local and global.

For more information:
www.tearfund.org.nz
0800 800 777



Discover bible study series



Appropriate Gifts this Christmas

By Allan Harkness

This Bible Study can be used as an individual reflection or in a group. If it is used in an intergenerational group (e.g. families), split the study over 2-3 shorter sessions. The study may be especially useful to help people think creatively about the sorts of gifts they will give this Christmas.

Christmas Confusion

Advent in New Zealand could well be one of the busiest in the world, combining as it does the end of the school year with all its farewells and celebrations, and the beginning of the long summer vacation. Christmas is sandwiched in the middle. Added to that, the competition put up by Santa and the commercial interests and where does God find a place? Life becomes over-burdened and strained and the peace that God wants for us at Christmas is just not there.

Still Waters, Deep Waters, Rowland Croucher (ed), Albatross Books, 1987, pages 301-2)

- In your group: Think about the feelings you usually have in the lead-up to Christmas. Share with one another – note the range of feelings. Which are the most common among you?
- “Whose birthday are we really celebrating?” This is an uncomfortable thought that sometimes comes as Christians try to get Christmas in perspective.
- How often do you feel that you’re not in control- that you are being manipulated by the self-indulgent and consumerist expectations of others?
- Too often we find ourselves acting as if it is our birthday we are celebrating, not the birthday of Jesus – not least in the area of gifts and presents! If it is Jesus’ birthday, what are appropriate gifts to give Him this Christmas?

The Real Story of Christmas

Brainstorm in your group: list in the “Impact” columns on the chart supplied the effect that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus had on the various characters. NB: You may not have both positive and negative features for all the characters.

(Some historical background might help members appreciate these events in their context e.g., the social status of the shepherds, the powerlessness of people against the military, so you may find it useful to have some good commentaries available).

EFFECTS OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS EVENT			
Character	Impact		Attitudes
	+ve	-ve	
Joseph			
Mary			
Magi			
Shepherds			
Herod			
Infants (Matthew 1:16)			
Their parents and families			
Jesus			

- In pairs: choose one or two of the characters in the list, and think together about the attitudes they held which were most likely being challenged (right hand column of the chart). Report back to the whole group.
- Imagine that you were able to give each of the characters above a special “gift” (not necessarily tangible/physical). In the light of the discoveries summarised on the completed chart, what would each character most benefit from receiving? (And do you think the person would appreciate it?)
- It seems that there was both a “bright side” and a “dark side” to the events of the first Christmas. In our contemporary world, it is probably much the same, as our attitudes and practices at Christmas often accentuate some of the major pressure points and inequalities facing many people.
- Are there people in our society/world who resemble the characters in the Christmas story in some way? Who are they? What is the impact of Christmas on them? (Think laterally: the impact may be direct or it may be indirect, resulting from the way others celebrate Christmas! Use a recent copy from TEAR Fund articles, newspaper and magazines for ideas e.g., victims of land-mines in Afghanistan; political leaders; oppressed women; and immigrant families in New Zealand suburbs employed as low-paid outworkers,
- What gift(s) might these people appreciate this Christmas?
- Let’s change direction for a moment. Because Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, a good question is, “What gifts can I/we give him?”
- That’s an important question for Christians to try to answer, “Of course, we can offer ourselves again to him as living sacrifices” (Romans 12:1-2). Yes, this need not be merely a predictable and glib answer – but what does it actually mean in practice?
- Follow carefully through this line of reasoning.
What is Jesus’ challenge to disciples of his? See John 20:21 (in context of verses 19-23)
Sent to do/be what? Read Philippians 2:1-8 to reflect on a challenge, and a model for attitude and behaviour. Where could (should?) this happen? Read Matthew 25:40 (in the context of verses 31-46).