

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD + -

THE COURSE SESSION 1 WAR + PEACE

cpx.video/group1

FACILITATOR INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)



If appropriate, the course facilitator may like to ask participants to introduce themselves by name and briefly tell how they spend most of their time—or how they would prefer to spend their time!

Welcome to *For the Love of God: How the church is better and worse than you ever imagined*. The purpose of the documentary, and this short course, is to explore the failures and achievements of the Christian church through its history, so that viewers can make up their own minds about the ongoing significance of Christianity's beliefs, ethics, and community. Never far from the surface in this course is the question: *How faithful has the church been to its founder and his message?*

There are three simple things to keep in mind throughout the course (and facilitators should feel free to expand and clarify any of the following):

1. Broad Christianity. Throughout the documentary, we use the word “Christianity” in its *broadest* sense. This is not a course promoting (or criticising) any particular brand of the Christian faith. For the purposes of this course, all the mainstream churches are representatives—for better or worse—of Jesus Christ.

2. Open Discussion. Participants should feel free to air their own views. While the course has a set content, the goal is not to convince or convert but to pursue clarity about a significant feature of our world. Course facilitators will keep us on track, but participants are encouraged to ask questions, raise concerns, and share their own experiences when appropriate. Facilitators should feel free to approach the various “questions” in these sessions as (a) *invitations to group conversation* or, if participants prefer to remain silent, (b) *prompts for further reflections from the facilitator*.

3. The Bible. The course sets historical events against the backdrop of the teaching of the Bible, and especially the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Without some sense of what Christ said and did, it would be impossible to explore the key question: *How faithful has the church been to its founder and his message?* Be assured: the course material assumes no prior knowledge of the Bible, and facilitators are free to determine the level best suited to their group.

STARTER (5 minutes)

People sometimes say, “Religion is the cause of most wars!” What is it about religion that invites such a criticism?



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences and/or throw it open for discussion.

PART 1 (approximately 40 minutes total)

WATCH Holy War: The Crusades (cpx.video/crusades) (8 minutes)



Discussion (10 minutes)

1. What are your initial impressions from this clip? Was there anything that surprised you? Was anything unclear?



Some participants may not have any prior knowledge of the Crusades, and might just appreciate being better informed. Others might recoil at the sheer violence and hypocrisy of the Crusades. That's fine. All views are welcome.

2. What seem to be the main causes of the Crusades—both according to the filmmakers and anything else you may have come across?

Further Thoughts: Some have said the Crusades were “land grabs”. There is little evidence for this. Most Crusaders were not enriched through these campaigns. More plausible causes for the Crusades include: accommodating Christianity to the military culture of pre-Christian Europe, certain forms of theology, a hunger for power, defending Christians in the Middle East from Islamic aggression, and much more.

Was the violent Crusader a “real Christian”? It’s a difficult question to answer. Consider the documentary’s tentative approach to the question. As Professor William Cavanaugh of DePaul University explains, empirically we must say the Crusader is a Christian, even though normatively, we will want to say the Crusader is not a Christian.

If you have more time ...



WATCH A genocidal God? Violence in the Old Testament (cpx.video/oldtestament) (8 minutes)

3. Does the conquest of Canaan in the Old Testament sound like just an earlier version of the Crusades? If not, what is different about it?



Facilitators may want to share their own thoughts on this question and, in particular, on the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, explaining how Christians have always read the Old Testament through the “lens” of the life and message of Jesus Christ.

Further Thoughts: The Old Testament has its share of violence, in much the same way as medieval European history. Just as it’s easy to dismiss the Crusades as a grubby land grab, the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites in places like Jericho can be painted as unnecessarily vindictive and patently genocidal. But the Old Testament record shows us that it was a discrete (as in a one-off and discontinued) act of God’s judgment against an unspeakably evil culture. It was limited in the sense that it did not represent an expansionist program for enlarging Israel’s empire. And even within the conquest, there were expressions of mercy and kindness, such as the sparing of the pagan prostitute Rahab.



WATCH Love your enemies: Jesus on violence (cpx.video/enemies) (6 minutes)



Discussion (10 minutes)

4. Shortly before the terrible Roman persecution of Christians outlined in the film, the apostle Paul—one of the key leaders of the early church and author of much of the New Testament—wrote to the Christians of Rome about how to deal with conflict. The contrast with the activities of some of the Crusaders could hardly be greater:



Romans 12:9-18 *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

How would you summarise this ethic in a few words?



Facilitators may like to offer their own reflections and/or open it up for discussion.

5. “The problem isn’t religion or irreligion; it is the human heart.” How reasonable is this statement, in your view?

PART 2 (approximately 35 minutes total)

WATCH



MLK: Power and non-violence (cpx.video/mlk1) (8 minutes)

How to judge the church (cpx.video/cello) (3 minutes)



Discussion (25 minutes)

1. Martin Luther King’s speeches might be familiar, but what caused him to pursue a program of non-violence in the face of his adversaries?

Further Thoughts: The clip highlighted the very personal way in which Luther King was drawn into the civil rights movement, and also how he pursued and embodied an approach of non-violence, even when his own family and life were threatened. But it was clear that non-violence was not just a strategy or tactic, but an ethos he learned from Jesus, one that reflected the Creator in whose image every person is made, and one which considered every person, black, white, or other, to be bearers of that divine image. Non-violent resistance—the “sword that heals”, as King called it—flowed directly from his Christian faith.

2. Read the following excerpt from Luke’s Gospel, and then let’s trace the “logic” of Christ’s call to love our enemies, as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr.



Luke 6:27-36 *But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them ... But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

The passage is famous for containing the so-called “Golden Rule”: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

More significant than the Golden Rule is the “logic” behind Jesus’ ethic of mercy and love. He does not teach that we must be merciful to others in order to deserve the mercy of God. It is the reverse: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* The deeper reason for the exhortation to forgiveness and generosity is that it reflects God’s own heart toward us. Christians are to be kind to those who are unkind to them because that is how God acts towards the undeserving. In fact, kindness towards the undeserving is almost the definition of the all-important theological word “grace”. The mercy of Christians towards others, in other words, is motivated by the mercy of God himself. That is the teaching of Jesus.



Facilitators should feel free to share their own thoughts and experiences around the theme of divine “grace”.

3. In the cello scene, the presenters remarked, “To judge a piece fairly, we know to distinguish between the masterpiece that was written and the pretty ordinary performance! Jesus wrote a beautiful composition: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you’. There’s no denying that Christians have sometimes played completely ‘out of tune’—pursuing opulence, hatred, and bloodshed in Christ’s name! But they’ve also played it beautifully, and with lasting effects.”

In your opinion, how well have the filmmakers demonstrated the idea contained in this musical metaphor?

Further Thoughts: A beautiful piece of music, or “divine performance” of it, does not cancel out other terrible re-enactments. In other words, there is an attractiveness, a purity, and a beauty to the version of the Christian life that Jesus taught and lived, and that some of his followers like Martin Luther King mimicked. This does not dismiss some of the atrocities we’ve looked at in the documentary (like the Crusades), or even set aside some so-called “religious” conflicts, which on closer inspection have little to do with people’s spiritual beliefs (such as the Troubles). But it does leave us with a penetrating impression of the Christian faith. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, rejected violence and taught his followers to love their enemies rather than take up arms against them. Jesus lived by this mantra himself, ultimately sacrificing himself for the sake of his enemies, and early followers like the Roman Christians, as well as later followers of Jesus, refused to shed blood in his name.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)



Facilitators may like to finish up the session by reading the summary below, and then offering any other personal reflection that seems relevant.

Jesus lived and taught a vision of life characterised by forgiveness, mercy, and grace—themes embodied in his own self-sacrificing death on a Roman cross. At many times, and in various terrible ways, those who have claimed to follow Christ have conducted their lives according to violence, hatred, and vengeance. These cannot be readily explained away. They are part of the horrible history of the Church, which Christians must own. Nevertheless Jesus, and many others since, have pursued his ethic of love, exemplifying the words, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

EXTRAS

For further investigation:

- **WATCH** The hunt for heretics: The Spanish Inquisition (cpx.video/inquisitions)
- **WATCH** Does religion cause all wars? (cpx.video/violence)
- **WATCH** Catholic vs Protestant: The Troubles of Northern Ireland (cpx.video/troubles)
- **READ** Jesus’ words from Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 5:1-48

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD + -

THE COURSE SESSION 2 RIGHTS + WRONGS

cpx.video/group2

STARTER (5 minutes)

For most of human history, and across most human cultures, individuals were valued on the basis of things like their status at birth, their skills and capacities, and their usefulness to society. As a result, societies tended to honour the smart, talented, strong, or beautiful, and discard the weak and useless.

- a. How common do you feel this perspective is still today?
- b. Leaving aside any theology, how could we argue against this view, in favour of absolute human equality?



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences, and/or throw it open for discussion

PART 1 (approximately 30 minutes total)

WATCH



The Image of God: The concept (cpx.video/image1) (7 minutes)

The Image of God: The impact (cpx.video/image3) (5 minutes)

And if you have time ...

The genesis of human rights (cpx.video/humanrights) (7 minutes)



Discussion (10 minutes)

1. What are your initial impressions from this clip? Was there anything that surprised you? Was anything unclear?



Some participants may feel surprised, or doubtful, that the equal and incalculable worth of every human life was not always assumed throughout history. Such reactions are welcome and worth discussing.

2. The documentary connects our modern understanding of human rights to the ancient concept of “the image of God”. At the very beginning of the Bible—from the very first chapter—all human beings, men and women, are described as being in a special relationship to the Creator. They are his “image”, just as we might say today that our children are in our “image”. Read the texts below:



Genesis 1:24-28 *And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

The point is reiterated a few chapters later, where it is also clear that the expression “image” or “likeness” refers to a kind of family relationship to the Creator:



Genesis 5:1-3 *When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.*

If the Creator of the universe thinks of every human being as his “offspring”—regardless of their capacities or usefulness—what does that say about the intrinsic value of those around us?



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation

3. The New Testament was written at a time when Christians had no power in the Roman Empire. They approached the problem of slavery not by trying to overthrow it—they had no way to do so—but by trying to work within the structures of the day, and with the people with whom they had influence (i.e. the infant Christian church). The apostles asked that masters treat their slaves with dignity and gentleness, knowing that they, too, were ruled by a heavenly Master, who did not play favourites.



Ephesians 6:5-9 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that*

the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

How does this New Testament text counter the general attitudes to slaves in the 1st century?

Does this text actually provide theological support for slavery?

Further Thoughts: Christians were also taught to show honour to the Roman authorities and to pray for them. This does not mean the Bible supported that specific form of government (pagan hereditary despotism); it just means Christians were eager to find ways to work within the system. Something similar might be said about slavery; Christians did what they could with what they had. This might seem feeble to us but it flowed out of the “image of God” ideal, and resulted in a much better treatment of slaves than they otherwise might expect. It was also an early part of the “long fuse of argument and discovery” (in the words of Rowan Williams) that changed things like exposure and slavery in the ancient world.

PART 2 (approximately 30 minutes total)



WATCH *The Image of God: The future* (cpx.video/image4) (4 minutes)



Discussion (25 minutes)

1. You don't have to believe in God to treat people with dignity, but are there dangers if society drifts from the Christian idea of the value of life?



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation

Further Thoughts: The clip included the disturbing but clear insight of Nietzsche that a society cut adrift from the Christian view of humanity, a view which “preserves what is ripe for destruction”, risks descending into being ruled by the law of selection. The documentary was not optimistic about our ability to carry on with a robust view of human rights, unless it is anchored to the divine, as human rights then just rely on the (majority) opinions and desires of other humans. This might become especially dangerous when we think about how to treat people with significant impairments to their bodies and minds.

2. Jesus tells a famous story, often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, to illustrate the way God thinks about all human beings, even those who disobey him. According to Jesus, even those who do not live as God's image-bearers are still regarded by God as his children—disobedient children, but children nonetheless—who are being called back into their proper position as members of God's family.



Luke 15:1-2, 11-24 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”



The parable continues with a comment about the older brother, which could be read if facilitators feel there is time:



Luke 15:25-32 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” “your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Jesus tells this story with a theological point. What does it tell us about the nature of human beings, and about the character of God?



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)



Facilitators may like to share their own feelings and experiences of this idea and/or throw it open to group conversation.

The Judeo-Christian view has maintained a belief about human beings that ascribes each person infinite worth, because each has been made in the image of God. This led early Christians to work against dehumanising practices like exposure of children and the ancient slave trade, at least in the limited ways that were open to them. While it is true that the Bible has been used or misused to sustain evil practices, it has also been a power that has fuelled others to overthrow those evil practices. The biblical concept of the image of God upholds a high view of the dignity of each human life. It also calls each one of us back into a family relationship with the Creator.

EXTRAS

For further investigation:

- To view an occasion when the Bible was a player for both good and ill,
WATCH Slavery in “Christian” America (cpx.video/slavery)
- To view a story about one Christian person’s fight against the slave trade in Britain,
WATCH Am I not a man and a brother? The abolition of the slave trade (cpx.video/abolition)
- To discover how a high view of every person shaped the English and German languages,
WATCH Power to the people: Luther, Tyndale, and the road to democracy (cpx.video/literacy)

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD + -

THE COURSE SESSION 3 RICH + POOR

cpx.video/group3

STARTER (5 minutes)

The title of the episode is *Rich + Poor*. Based on your own knowledge or experience, do you associate churches more with wealth creation or charitable work? Be assured: any kind of answer is welcome!



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences, and/or throw it open for discussion.

PART 1 (approximately 45 minutes total)

WATCH



The Good Samaritan: How a story shaped our world (cpx.video/samaritan) (5 minutes)

The invention of charity: Jews, Christians, and the God of the poor (cpx.video/charity)

(7 minutes)



Discussion (15 minutes)

1. What are your initial impressions from these clips? Was there anything that surprised you? Was anything unclear?
2. Why do you think the story of the Good Samaritan resonates so strongly with us? Have you ever acted as a Good Samaritan (of sorts), or received care from a Good Samaritan?



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences, and/or throw it open for discussion. Different parts of the story will resonate with people differently—some may want to comment on religious coldness and apathy, others on the kindness they have found from others, whether religious or not.

Further Thoughts: The clips first provocatively challenge the assumption that charity has always been considered a moral benefit or obligation in society. Initially, the story of the Good Samaritan, and the broader principle of caring for all who cross our paths, challenged the early Christians to establish a food roster that supported thousands of destitute people from a variety of cultural

backgrounds: Jews, Samaritans, Greeks and Romans, believers and unbelievers alike. In the early centuries this led the imperial authorities to exempt the church from paying tax, so that they could deploy all their money to maintaining the poor in society. In later eras, as only intimated here, it led to the creation of healthcare and other social goods, provided by churches and Christians. It also changed the prevailing cultural ideas around charity in ways that led to the development of institutional welfare, social security, and the like.



WATCH Being poor in the ancient world (cpx.video/poverty) (8 minutes)



Discussion (15 minutes)



The following content should be presented by the facilitator, raising any questions that seem appropriate.

3. Ancient norms were very different from those given to the West by the Bible:

- There was a generally accepted concept of looking after your loved ones, but not of showing compassion to the poor and marginalised.
- Plato and Plotinus—huge figures in ancient thought—used logic to argue against caring for the poor: Plato said that the poor were an unwanted blemish upon society and should be banished; Plotinus believed that the poor and downcast deserved to be poor because of their bad deeds in a previous life.
- Emperors and other wealthy benefactors did give to the needy, but only to citizens, and out of a love of honour - in order to receive public praise - rather than for the sake of the poor.
- The Stoics had a concept of courtesy which acknowledged the plight of those less fortunate but in a polite and guarded way that studiously avoided ground-level involvement.

By contrast, hundreds of biblical texts urge compassion and involvement in redressing the plight of the poor and needy. Here are just a few (facilitators may like simply to read out a selection, making any brief comments they feel appropriate about the context and content of the passages):

From the Old Testament



Deuteronomy 24:19-22 *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do*



not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Proverbs 19:6 *Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.*

Proverbs 21:13 *Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.*

Proverbs 22:7-9 *The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender. Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.*

Isaiah 58:6-7 *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

From the New Testament



Matthew 25:31-40 *(Jesus speaking) “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”*

James 1:27 *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world;*

James 2:14-17 *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*



1 John 3:16-17 *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

PART 2 (approximately 30 minutes total)



WATCH Why you need Christian neighbours: Faith and social capital

(cpx.video/socialcapital) (5 minutes)



Discussion (25 minutes)

1. The first clip had some inspiring ancient examples of Jews and Christians caring for the poor and marginalised in the time of antiquity. And there are several other clips from later times that are available to watch. But the last clip showed an average Australian church getting on with the business of caring for its poorer neighbours without much fuss. It might include the provision of meals or groceries, or perhaps just inclusion in social environments where conversation and care can be found. None of these things seems revolutionary; they are examples of what Francis Spufford described as “applying love in small individual practical ways”. But they nevertheless reveal that modern Christians consider the principle of the Good Samaritan has ongoing application to their lives and the life of their local Christian community.

If the “religious bump” is real, why don’t we hear about it more? And could it actually make you more favourable towards a bunch of Christians moving in down the street?

Further Thoughts: The statistics are revealing. Higher rates of volunteerism and charitable giving cannot be easily dismissed. It doesn’t mean that Christians are better than people who don’t believe, but they might be better than they themselves would be without their Christianity, and the church does seem to bring a positive influence upon society, especially for those on the margins of society.

2. A central issue in Christianity’s tradition of charity is the question of “motivation”: What inspires the Christian practice of caring deeply for those in need? This is one of the most misunderstood features of Christianity today. Many have said that charity motivated by “fear of hell” or “divine reward” is hardly very charitable. But this misunderstands one of the central tenets of biblical faith. The practice of love (for all) is motivated by the love God has already shown to us in Jesus Christ. Consider the passage read earlier:



1 John 3:16-17 *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

Here it is clear that God's love—displayed in Christ's death on our behalf—is the driver for Christian behaviour. Just a few paragraphs later, the same author (the apostle John) reiterates the point:



1 John 4:9-11 *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

Why do you think Christians sometimes have a reputation for believing that their good works—their charity for the poor, and so on—will earn them a place in heaven?

What differences might it make—practically, psychologically, and so on—to believe, in fact, that the charity we show others is inspired not by *fear of punishment or hope of reward* but by the confidence that God himself already loves us and all those around us?



This is such a crucial issue in Christian teaching, the facilitator may wish to add their own thoughts and experiences around this topic, as well as throw it open to further conversation from the group.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)



Facilitators may like to finish up the session by reading the summary below, and then offering any other personal reflection that seems relevant.

Charity has not always been universally practiced, or even regarded as a social good. But the early Christians, inspired by their Jewish heritage, had a strong sense of caring for the poor and needy, and they took this into all the world. There is no doubt the church also sometimes failed the ethic of the Good Samaritan. Yet the notion of charity spread beyond the walls of the church and is now seen as a universal obligation. The specifically Christian motivation for charity, however, can sometimes be lost: we are to show love toward those in need because that's how God has already treated us in sending Jesus Christ to die and rise again for our salvation. Whether or not we accept this theological motivation, this is the intellectual origin of the West's great love for charity.

EXTRAS

For further investigation:

- To investigate how the example of the early Christians went awry,
WATCH Treasures on earth: The medieval papacy and its opponents ([cpx.video/popes](#))
- To see how the idea of the Good Samaritan influenced modern healthcare,
WATCH The origins of Western healthcare ([cpx.video/health](#))
- To view a story about one Christian's fight for the working poor in industrialising England,
WATCH A heart for the poor: The 7th Earl of Shaftesbury ([cpx.video/shaftesbury](#))
- To learn about one man who literally moved into a leper colony,
WATCH The leper priest: Father Damien of Molokai ([cpx.video/damien](#))

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD + -

THE COURSE SESSION 4 **POWER + HUMILITY**

cpx.video/group4

STARTER (5 minutes)

Most of us have lived in a time of declining power and influence for the church. Why do you think this is? And is it a good thing, in your opinion?



Facilitators may like to share their own preliminary thoughts or experiences, and/or throw it open for discussion. All views are welcome.

PART 1 (approximately 35 minutes total)



WATCH

The church under Nazi rule (cpx.video/nazi) (7 minutes)

The Empire converts: The making of Christendom (cpx.video/power) (5 minutes)



Discussion (20 minutes)

1. What are your initial impressions from this clip? Was there anything that surprised you? Was anything unclear?
2. During the reign of Nazism, Bonhoeffer described genuine Christian behaviour as “sympathy and action” rather than “mere waiting and looking”. Do either of these descriptions typify the behaviour of Christians from what you’ve seen? Or would you have another description?



Facilitators should feel free to share their own thoughts and/or invite participants to express their own views and experiences.

Further Thoughts: With the institutional church being pushed more and more to the margins of society, people might think that a more fundamental description of Christians’ behaviour in society is “annoying and irrelevant”. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer set out an ideal, that the place of the Christian in wider society is not to cosy up to institutional power structures such as governments, nor to do nothing in the face of unjust institutional power. Rather, it is to speak out

and act against abusive power, perhaps starting with the church, and even at the expense of damaged reputations and personal safety.

Bonhoeffer saw Christian faith as a calling to sacrifice oneself in service of Jesus, and for the benefit of others. In his famous words, “When Jesus calls us, he bids us to come and die”. Sacrifice, service, and humility were not just buzzwords for him, but the principles by which he lived his life, and ultimately went to his death.

3. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine halted persecutions of the church and made Christianity legal. He also invited church leaders into positions of power and financially backed the Christian movement. Within a century or more of Constantine, the church became increasingly wealthy and powerful. It perhaps became harder and harder—and less desirable—for Christians to remember and obey Jesus’ teaching about power and humility:



Mark 10:35-45 *Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said ... [He] called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man [the way Jesus frequently referred to himself] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*



Facilitators may like to offer any brief explanatory comments about the passage, and offer their own thoughts about the question below.

What does this passage tell us about Jesus’ expectations of his followers? And what is the *foundation* or motivation of these noble ideals?

Further Thoughts: Jesus is exceedingly clear: his followers cannot exercise power in the manner of the society around them, which is characterised by “lording it over” others. This was true in ancient times as well as today. Instead, Christians are to become servants of others: that is the path to true greatness in Jesus’ upending ethic. Jesus also very plainly states that this servant/slave ethic follows his own example, in which he served people throughout his life, which is amply seen in the gospel stories. Furthermore, he served people in his sacrificial death, which he saw as paying a “ransom” price that set people free from slavery to sin and brought them back into right relationship with God.

PART 2 (approximately 45 minutes total)



WATCH The humility revolution (cpx.video/humility) (10 minutes)



Discussion (5-10 minutes)

1. Perhaps the first text in history to clearly advocate humility as a virtue for life is found in the New Testament:



Philippians 2:4-8 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!

(NB: Many scholars believe the indented section above is a small section of an early Christian hymn.)



Facilitators may wish to share their own thoughts about this remarkable passage.

From this New Testament passage, how would you distinguish “humility” from “being a doormat” for other people to walk over? What is the heart of humility?

Further Thoughts: Humility had very negative connotations in the ancient world, as it meant that someone had degraded, debased, or even humiliated themselves. Whether it was the Delphic Maxims or Aristotle himself, there is little evidence that humility was considered as noble in those days. This is obviously a contrast to our modern age, in which we view humility as a positive virtue, even though most of us struggle to enact this quality in our own lives and interactions. Humility is a foundational ethic of the Christian faith. It is founded in Jesus, who first humbled himself by coming to earth from heaven, and into a very humble existence at that. But then more dramatically, Jesus humbled himself to a shameful criminal’s execution when he was crucified on a Roman cross. This naturally means that humility remains a hugely significant value for his followers, as we’ve already seen in Mark 10. From the catacombs of ancient Rome to the writings of early Christians, it does seem apparent that Jesus was instrumental in bringing a reversal to wider society, a “humility revolution” in the words of the clip.



WATCH How missionaries changed the world (cpx.video/humility) (8 minutes)



Discussion (20 minutes)

1. Were you surprised that research has pointed to positive impacts of missionary influence? Why/why not?
2. What drove people like William Carey and the Serampore Trio to do what they did?

Further Thoughts: The clip was revealing because we tend to believe the familiar stereotype of missionaries destroying indigenous cultures, often to great advancement and enrichment of themselves. But it was telling that societies with more missionaries also had more economic development, educational outcomes, and political involvement as well as longer life expectancies, lower infant mortality, and less corruption and crime. The clip discussed the Serampore Trio's work to outlaw infanticide, the killing of lepers, and the ritual sacrifice of widows in India, as well as missionary involvement in other issues connected to women's rights. Positively, Carey and others achieved educational outcomes in India that even surpassed those in his native England at the time, for example, obtaining state funding for education.

Carey's final interaction with Alexander Duff revealed the driving force behind his numerous achievements—it was none other than Jesus Christ, Dr Carey's Saviour. Jesus was the one who inspired and empowered Carey and many others like him to bring about extraordinary positive change in the societies in which they lived.

3. The whole episode finishes with the words: "When Christians have played out of tune with Jesus, the results have been disastrous. But when they've followed in his footsteps, that's shaped our world in ways we can all be glad of."

In what ways has your view of Christ and/or the church changed over the course of our four sessions together?



Facilitators should feel free to offer their own reflections on these questions and/or invite others to respond.

4. One New Testament passage (quoted already in session 3) perhaps captures the essence of the message and ethics of Christianity:



1 John 4:9-11 *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

In your own words, how would you describe what the filmmakers have been calling Jesus' "tune"?

Does it remain difficult for you to "hear that tune" because of the disappointing behaviour of Christians? Why/why not?



Again, facilitators can invite participants to respond and/or simply share their own thoughts on these challenging questions.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)



Facilitators may like to finish up the session by reading the summary below, and then offering any other personal reflection that seems relevant.

Power is for the taking, and there are plenty of examples in which the Christian church has taken power, or at least cosied up to regimes and powerful structures, often with disappointing results. This was true in the ancient world, when the Christian faith became embedded within the Roman Empire, and in more modern times, including the rule of Nazism in Germany last century. But the example of Jesus in his humble earthly life, and his sacrificial death, is an enduring inspiration of self-sacrifice rather than self-service. His message of love—seen most powerfully in his death—has empowered many of his followers to serve rather than rule. They do this not to earn a place in heaven but to love those whom God has loved. They do it all "for the love of God".

EXTRAS

For further investigation:

- To see how the early church positively promoted women,
WATCH Oppressive or liberating? Christianity and women (cpx.video/women),
but to see a vivid example of when this went awry,
WATCH Witches: Fear and loathing in Salem (cpx.video/witches)
- To learn about the mixed track record of Christians in colonial Australia,
WATCH The colonial project: Christianity in the Age of Empire (cpx.video/colonialism)