

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)