

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