

Unguarded

how to be your Christian self
in your world



TOPICS

1. My Story- God is in me
2. Masks
3. My Spiritual Gifts
4. Prayer Partners and Life Groups
5. A Good Self Image
6. Be Like a Tree

1. My Story



How God is in Me

GOAL

To tell the story of my personal experience of Christ, and to uncover its power to engage the heart of others.

INTRODUCTION

We must tell our personal experiences of the living Christ, and the difference he makes to our lives. These days, to be a Christian is to be different. People have been turning off church for generations.

It is easy to leave it behind — just get too busy with good causes. So if you are here, you must have a good reason to stand against the tide.

Key Question

Why are you still a Christian?

We are NOT asking why you go to church nor why you BECAME a Christian. We want to hear why you continue today.

We don't want to hear your theory on why some churches are declining.

Just say, 'This is my story only'. Keep it simple. Avoid Christian jargon unless you explain it.

As leader, share your own story by way of example.

Step One: Soon, when I tell you, we will form groups of 3 and introduce ourselves around ever so quickly. You will have one minute to think what to say. Then each person gets one minute each to answer the question: "I am still a Christian because....." There will then be two more steps, none of which will embarrass you! *OK start now: "I am still a Christian because..."*
After five minutes, check on progress.

Step Two: In a moment, we will combine two groups, and get six. What will you do then? Each of you will take a turn to tell the group of six, in a one sentence summary, about the person who was on your right in the group of 3, why THEY are still a Christian.

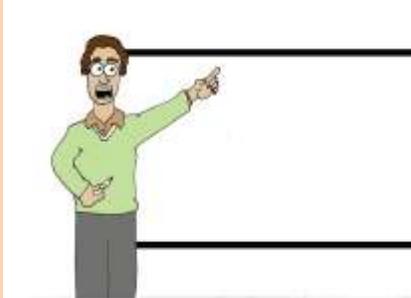
When you report, use this beginning: "(Name) is still a Christian because..."

I will give you five minutes before you form your new groups to get your stories straight. *(This helps with listening and focussing skills.)*

Five minutes, THEN form sixes and go around the circle. It takes only about five minutes, then go to step three.

Step Three. Everyone to move back together. Now, say the same to everyone together what you just told the six, more or less, and I will write them up.

EXERCISE



Prayer Time

Invite people to stand and read it together as a prayer-litany, pointing at the place for reading as you go down the list, led in a clear voice by the leader.

Notes

(about this exercise)

- *People brought up in a Christian home often have difficulty with a question like this, saying “I always have been. I couldn’t be anything else.” Try something like this: “Remember that many children of Christian homes have turned away. What holds you in the faith?”*
- *This is usually a strong experience. Take a break afterwards.*
- *People often want to write down the litany to show others. OK, but it does lose something taken out of context, when it turns into words without a face behind them.*
- *Occasionally, someone has not answered the question at all. They say “I am still a Christian because of so-and-so,” or they say, “I am because I am.” They are having difficulty. Gently probe for more heartfelt reasons. Ask for instance, “What would you lose if you walked away from personal faith?”*

DISCUSSION

Now what can we learn from this?

1. Powerful

Just recall what just happened here. What were your feelings as you read through that prayer just then?

Leader should jot down on the board the feelings expressed. They are usually a small number of quite strong and diverse feelings. I call them ‘spirited feelings’.

Look at this set of responses. Is this the sort of heart response in others that you would like to have from your faith sharing? Quote St Augustine (4th century) “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.”

Powerful and heart-reaching faith-sharing! You have done it already! What more could you want in another’s response to what you were sharing? You are powerful evangelists!

2. Personal

Let’s look briefly at the variety of reasons given and observe that God does not work with people according to any one formula. Each by name receives personal attention and personal relationship. So, there is no formula in faith-sharing except to get personal.

3. Human

Sometimes people comment that their response (feelings after saying the litany together) is shaped only because they are Christians, and that non-Christians would not feel like this.

If you go through the list, however, it is not hard to show that the central element in each person's statement is not a religious statement but a yearning of every human heart. So, we Christians may be more confident to identify our feeling but any human heart will almost certainly have these same spirited feelings.

CONCLUSION

I believe we have established that you can share your faith with gentleness and power, genuinely, and under pressure. You have got what it takes.

2. Masks

GOAL

To re-sensitize ourselves to the folly of taking a spirituality that is a short cut substitute for the real thing.

PREPARATION

Courageous honesty with gentleness is required. Whiteboard.

INTRODUCTION – 2'



WHALE

17 July, 2003 diary by Shirley Apthorp (Berlin-based music journalist on holidays at the Great Barrier Reef) *used with permission of the author.*

It's the fifth day of the trip, and by morning, our captain John was getting anxious. After our night dive at Pixie's Gardens, he'd taken us overnight quite a distance south to where other boats had reported recent whale sightings.

Nobody had anticipated as few sightings as we'd had; it was their first trip in eight years, they said, where they'd had such bad luck with the whales.

After our morning dive, it was straight on out to sea in search of whales. John sat in the wheelhouse, forehead furrowed in anxiety, chanting, "Come on, Minkies!" while the rest of us stood or sat around the upper deck, staring at the surface of the sea until our vision blurred.

Suddenly Alastair, our resident Minke researcher, from his perch up on the roof, cried, "Breach! Breach!" and sure enough, out there amidst the white tops of the waves, there was an extra white plume. But that was all. Everything was calm again, and we stared at the waves until we could imagine we saw dark shadows between them.

Then, suddenly, "Minke on the port bow!"

The long grey body rolled past just centimeters from the boat, breached with a languid arch of its back just in front of us, turned and passed again. I tore on my wet-suit as fast as I could, and was first in line, splashing into the water directly behind Alastair.

The snorklers are put out on two ropes which stream back from the boat in the current, with strict orders to hold on and move as little as possible. "Swimming with the whales" sounds all very well, but the whales are not really comfortable around free-swimming, active people, and will keep their distance. If the snorkelers are strung out along a rope and float calmly in one spot, the whales will come much closer; they are reassured by the predictable position of the people, and come nearer with each successive pass.

I'd seen it all on video the night before, but I was still quite unprepared for the enormity of the encounter when it happened. This vast, elegant, grey-and-white patterned creature comes swimming along directly underneath you, not more than six metres away. You hold your breath, afraid to move, turn your head slightly and see another, passing on a slightly different angle, just as close. For a time you hang suspended above the bottomless blue water, astonished and jubilant, but shouts on the boat and gestures ahead make you look around excitedly for another encounter. It comes far closer than you expect. A finely-chiseled triangular snout is heading straight towards you, behind it the improbably long and round body.

This time you can see the scratch along the ridge of its back, the fine folds of its throat, the benign droop of its eyelid. It rolls past like the closing credits for a big-budget movie, on and on, until with faintest motion of its tail it's gone. This is it, this is the ultimate, you feel. But before you can fully digest what's happened, you're staring directly into a huge, round eye, the size of your own hand and so close you could reach out and touch it. Of course, you don't; one of the firmest rules in in-water whale encounters is never to touch the creatures. The oil from your skin can damage their protective outer layer, making them vulnerable to infections. And anyway you don't need to; this is so clearly a two-way interaction that there's nothing physical contact could add. That close, the creatures are imposingly vast, but equally strikingly both curious and gentle. They look, you look back, they roll effortlessly past. How can anything so big be so graceful? They pass, and pass again, until you're sated with elation, not quite able to believe that anything in the water could be quite so vivid and astonishing.

EXERCISE *in pairs or threes – 10'*

What would you feel if you booked for a whale watching tour and got shown a fish in a tank?

FEEDBACK. 20'

List "substitutes vs real"

Include in feedback – What is the positive quality you gain when you get "the original"? How can you tell?

This exercise provides a way to check our bearings. There have been many thinkers who have said that religion or God is a just perversion of our own deepest desires. They are completely correct in one thing – we all have the tendency to do this, but this is not the spirituality of Jesus. We have all seen Elvis imitators, loved the music, and been amused that they are not the real thing. We can have a spirituality like that. It can have a certain appeal, but lacks the real spark. We have all experienced religion that lacks authenticity, which needs a reality check, which is an escape from reality, or which obviously has lost touch with the character of Jesus.

So let us with humility ask ourselves not whether we or not we trying to reduce Jesus to the shape that reinforces our own comfort zones or own guilt trips – let us assume that we do that and simply seek for "how".

DISCUSSION 20'

a. Where have you, in your experience, seen this "substitution" in the spiritual arena?

- b. It is quite possible that we have done some of this during these workshops. Where, if anywhere, have you been aware of this?
- c. What can we do to prevent 'substitutes' in our spirituality? *This is a bold and valuable list.*

CONCLUSION – 1'

We need to build in to our life some vigilance and testing, some trusting and trying, some solo time and some honest community relationships.

CEREMONY

Try this ceremony to conclude the session.

PREPARATION

Prepare a number of small masks, at least one for each person, different colours and shapes. If you have time, you could prepare a template and ask people to make their own. The act of making is another way of learning and talking. Have the makings for a variety of materials and glues etc. Your imagination rules!

INTRODUCTION

Our substitutes are a way of living behind a mask. Do you sometimes have the feeling you are trapped behind another false self? A mask is a way of coping to protect our vulnerability, is to live behind a wall of fears. Mask = in ancient greek the words was *hupkrites = hypocrisy*.

Read Jesus: Matthew 6. 24-34 about worry.

EXERCISE

- a. *Distribute the masks.*
- b. Take a minute or two, and when you are ready, bring it out here and put it by our prayer candle. It will mean different things to each person. State what it means to you as you put it down. It says at least that you are aware of your masks, and will work on it. Or it may be a moment to surrender an anxiety or take up a new dimension of the calling on your life. "I put down....", "I take up..."
- c. *Allow time for action. Leaders should go first, and must make sure that they go honestly. Play some music.*

CONCLUSION

Thank you for your honesty. May I speak for everyone to each of you? Whether your part was a yes , no or not now, thank you for expressing it. We are honoured by your trust in us with your real self.



3. My Spiritual Gifts

GOAL

To help us go one step forward in understanding that we each have spiritual gifts.

INTRODUCTION

- a. *Discuss with the person next to you:* Are you more like the hippo or the tortoise? How so?
- b. *Discuss:* Who are 'gifted persons'? What is the greatest gift a person can give?

EXERCISE

Your gift of love can be given in two ways. In being you and in serving with your God-given gifts

1. THE WAY I LOVE OTHERS

First, you must realize that you ARE a gift.

- Read Psalm 139.1-12 and register in your mind how thoroughly God knows your movements and thoughts. It is amazing
- Now vv 13-17 and register how good God thinks you are.
- Now vv19-24 which might at first glance seem like a bloodthirsty shout, but the 'enemies' are the thoughts and inclinations of our own hearts. This passage registers how we struggle, and will always struggle, with sin. AND STILL HE LOVES US.
- See it all come together in Isaiah 43.1-4.

Your love really matters to God and to others. You are a gift. Be who you are in Christ.

The authors of "Love Languages" have written some more good insights into this, so go there if you want to do more.

The point is not to use this part of the study as a mirror and say "I am God's gift to humanity' as though it puts you above all others. Nor is to invite you to push back on this and say "I am useless. No one

wants me.” Instead, the gift that you are is that you give yourself to love God and neighbour as Jesus said and then see what joy will arise. And there is even more.

Stop and pray now. What is this teaching doing to me?

2. MY PARTICULAR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

There is another way of seeing that the way our love is varied. Spiritual gifts are always about loving God and neighbour. Read 1 Cor 13.1-13 about ‘giftedness’ that is not using their gifts for love.

1 Cor 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 all have slightly different lists of gifts, perhaps for slightly differing situations. But they all say that every one has a gift, every one plays a part in the one body. No one can look down on another and no one can say ‘I don’t have any gift to contribute’!

So what is my gift?

We find out by accepting **feedback** and by **studying** biblical gifts in cooperation with others.

Let’s start with a study. Then go to the feedback

There are several published inventories that are really fun and helpful to do. Each one puts together the lists in scripture. Bear this in mind though – you may have a unique gift that hasn’t made it into the top 100 yet, so don’t stop this exercise until you finish all the parts of it!

Here are two online inventories for assessing something of your spiritual gifting.

1. <http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1>
2. <http://www.spiritualgiftstest.com/> introduction and instructions then click to the questions:

http://spiritualgiftstest.com/index.php?option=com_wrapper&view=wrapper&Itemid=3

They have a list of the gifts mentioned in the bible with some definitions.

I thought I would like to do them, so you can see how I assess their results. You will be asked to to the same soon so listen carefully. On this test, from nearly 100 questions I scored as follows:

Lowest ranking:

Helps/Serving/Ministering – 10, Pastor/Teacher – 12, Administration/Ruling – 13, Discernment – 14.

Are these my gifts? My conclusion? Though I was a pastor/teacher for many years it is actually fairly low in the ranking. No wonder I wasn’t very comfortable in the role. Isn’t it a good thing that there are more ways to serve than just being a pastor/priest/minister! As a Christian I have learned to do these things moderately well but I don’t even **see** these sorts of needs half the time and so I am not really a ready responder. Best to leave those roles to others and I will help out where I can.

Middle ranking:

Mercy – 15, Exhortation – 15, Wisdom – 15,

Are these my gifts? Not really. I think I have learned to do these things by being a part of the Christian community— to help and support, to encourage. I have lived long enough to pick up a few bits of wisdom which I will offer where it is asked for. So, nothing special here, just faithful in love of one another. That is a pretty good gift to one another but it is not my particular gifting.

Higher ranking:

Evangelism – 17, Faith – 18, Giving – 19, Knowledge – 19, Teaching – 22

Are these my gifts? Probably. Why is that people come and talk to me about these things the most? I like the interaction about the gospel and scripture, I like the risks of following and trying some things out. I get life from those things, whereas if I had to do administration, as I sometimes do, it just drains me. So may be this is an indicator of my gift, where my spirit sings best.

Next, let's check the **definitions** to see if they describe me.

Evangelism is where I share the Gospel with unbelievers and I equip the church in their task of witness. All Christians are called *to witness* for Christ in their life whether they have this gift or not, but some people have trained themselves for evangelism - actions, imaginations and getting out there, never mind if they get rejected. See Ephesians 4:11, Acts 8:5-12, 26-40, 21:8, Matthew 28:18-20.

Is that like me? Yes, love it, though **the fruit** often seems like not very much.

Faith is where I provide other Christians with greater confidence to believe and expect great things from God. It doesn't mean I never doubt, but I train myself to stand on God's faithfulness. See I Corinthians 12:9, Romans 5:1, 12:3, Hebrews 11.

Is that like me? Yes, love it, though I do sometimes **get down** myself.

Giving is where the I take pleasure in giving large amounts of my finances to the glory of God and enable other Christians to direct there stewardship generously and wisely too. See Romans 12:8, Acts 4:32-37, Galatians 4:15, Philippians 4:10-18, II Corinthians 8:1-5.

Is that like me? Yes, love it, though I have been known **to complain** about how little I have.

Knowledge is where I can understand God's Word and effectively communicate it to others. I just don't know how I know it, and I am often amazed at what comes out once I am in a situation. See I Corinthians 12:8.

Is that like me? Yes, love it, even while I am **working on the timing** of what to say to whom about what!

Teaching is where I communicate and clarify the details and truths of God's Word for others to learn. This gift implies a wider teaching role as distinct from the more local pastor/teacher role above. See Romans 12:7, Ephesians 4:11.

Is that like me? Yes, love it, and it sometimes gets in the way of my listening well, so this gift like all others can get out of **the balance of love** and be present to excess.

So I can tentatively conclude that these are my gifts, even though I am not perfect at them. God doesn't expect any servant to be perfect. Psalm 103.14 'He knows our frame... we are but dust.'

STOP AND PRAY NOW: what is this teaching do to me?

ACCEPT FEEDBACK

Lastly, there are four feedback things to do that will bring stronger conviction about your gifts.

- 1. Find a church** - If you are not sure what specific ministry you are meant to serve in go to a church and volunteer to serve in something. Move to another church if there is no place for you to serve in this one. Lack of opening, too little appreciation, lack of encouragement, excess of criticism in a church may be the reasons why you are not confident in your gifts. Is this you?
- 2. Be faithful, confident and humble.** Faithfully serve in the small things and allow God to work in and through your life at His pace. Confidently apply your gifts whenever needed and humbly desire for Him to use you greatly. **Be a good steward of your gifts.** [1 Peter 4:10](#) says, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." So this is about the faithful long haul but do not stay in a role when you feel your time has come to move on. We all must grow. Is this you?
- 3. Seek to serve.** Service is not 'I want'. Giftings are not an excuse for self-promotion. Use your gift or gifts at every opportunity to show the love, grace and power of God to others. This will produce *fruit that remains* and will glorify Him. How is your servant heart? Is this you?
- 4. Ask for feedback.** Do you really want to hear it? Do you really want to grow in your ability to serve, and your ability to love? To use the fruit-tree analogy, is your work bearing fruit for God and does that say your work needs pruning? Is it being done in line with the fruit of the spirit (Gal 5.22-26)? How is your fruit showing? Who will you ask?

YOUR TASK THIS WEEK

Study the bible passages this week, then mid week do an inventory or two, bring the results along and ask for feedback in the group. **When you have given your feedback to each other, PRAY FOR EACH OTHER NOW.**



4. Prayer Partners and Life Groups

GOAL

Our goal in this assignment is to give practical and immediate expression to our longings to grow in faith and effectiveness by becoming acquainted with three models of

shared specific enduring prayer.

After Six Weeks

If you are meeting weekly to do **this study**, form small groups who will gather for prayer each time you meet. They can take three forms as follows: 'five seconds that change the world', 'life groups' or 'prayer triplets.'

If you are meeting in one block, say a weekend camp, then meet regularly in one of these three forms and come together after six weeks.

When you gather, ask these questions:

1. What has God done?
2. What have we learned?
3. What shall we do next? For example, "What further exercises would be helpful for us to do?" or, "What further support do we need from our church?"
4. Lastly, in prayer, take responsibility for the gospel moving in your world!

Here are the three models.

1. Five Seconds that change the world

This is something to be done alone every day. It is a spiritual discipline in becoming hospitable. It only takes about five seconds to say it (OK go ahead and time it). If we all do this, many small things will happen, and some of the small ones will turn into big ones.

Say the following prayer:

Lord, please lead me to someone today with whom I can share your influence in my life. Amen.

You can vary this prayer by putting it in your own words. What's the best

phrase you can find to summarise God's presence and its effects in your life?

The beauty of this prayer includes:

- a.** It is authentic. It comes from you, and it is about the faith that you have, and it is about your everyday life.

- b.** The initiative is God's. You are not controlling your agenda, and you are open to the Good Samaritan moment when your own plans may be interrupted.

- c.** It is quite exciting waiting and taking the step when God nudges you.

Make a card and put it on your bathroom mirror.

2. Life Groups

The aim of Life Groups is to meet weekly for 30 to 40 minutes.

This constraint will help determine which two or three people to arrange to meet with. Lunch time or before work. Some people have met over the phone. If one is away (sick, slack, on business) two should still meet.

What are you doing when you meet? You are not socializing. You stick to this agenda:

- a.** Take 10 minutes each in turns to check in. You set your own 3 questions, and the others ask you every time you meet. Spend your first session describing this to each other. Before that, work out your own questions to bring. If you are unsure what you need to be growing in, ask those who live with you! Or read Colossians — it provides a broad agenda from which you can identify your needs for your own growth right now.

- b.** Ask each other in turn, "Have you been completely honest in what you have said today?"

- c.** Finally, take two minutes each to give your honest best, deepest response to each other.

- d.** It will help if you write notes in your diary. That way, you can pray for each other each day, and you can be more detailed about your responses next time.

This kind of accountability goes way back to the small groups in the Wesleyan Revival. It has also been used in various programmes in recent decades. You

will be amazed at how such a simple practical accountability benefits your spiritual growth.

3. Prayer Triplets

We are about to break into threes to pray for each other by name, concerning our Christian lifestyle.

We will now take 5 minutes today to form groups of people from the same congregation or centre, to work out now when and how you should meet. Pairs is OK. Four is not workable.

In those groups, you are asked to write down three people whom you would like to become disciples of Jesus? People you know and deal with. Let them not all be church dropouts or close family members.

There is a second leg to this assignment. In the next six weeks, we want you deliberately to set out to enjoy yourself. More specifically we invite you to spend some time with these three (3) non-christian people for whom you have a love and compassion.

Your assignment is to consolidate your relationship with them and to extend to them some hospitality, within six weeks from today. Invite them home for a meal or a coffee, take them out to coffee, to the park together, sit together in the lunch room, buy them flowers, send a gift, whatever fits you and the situation without overdoing it.

What to do when you meet

To prepare your spirits and to support you on task, arrange to meet for half an hour each week with two other christians to pray for all nine of your “three friends each”.

- Pray for yourselves in your hospitality and invitation.
- Pray for a generous sensitivity to where each person is at.
- Pray for the leading of the Spirit.
- Pray for an opportunity to share something of the gospel.
- Pray for what to do next.
- Pray for love and joy to be shared.

Discuss ways you can individually or together, develop deeper caring relationships with each person on your list, respond positively and practically to the specific needs of any person, help each person understand the gospel (make notes of any helpful insights from these discussions).
Pray for each other’s special personal needs and your families.

.....
Lord show me how to do something appropriate to express my love for them. May I be so in tune with you that I will be aware when you give me the opportunity to tell them something of what you can mean to them.

My Triplet Partners (with contact details for urgent prayer needs)are:

.....
.....

My Three Persons for Prayer are:

.....
.....
.....

Continue to pray for the nine people. Pray for your prayer partners. Followup on any of the insights from the last meeting.

CONCLUSION

In his book *Three Times Three Equals Twelve*, Brian Mills lists the following amongst the factors which contributed to the effectiveness of Prayer Triplets:

- The praying is outgoing rather than inward looking. We are depending on God, not ourselves.
- Prayer is specific. People are prayed for by name, day to day needs are upheld with a special focus upon them moving along the path of Christian discipleship.
- Those praying feel motivated and supported to share their faith with those for whom they pray.
- Relationships deepen, confidence grows, faith is strengthened, spiritual growth takes place and a close bond develops. The group provides an effective framework for sharing, mutual support, encouragement and warm accountability.
- Expectancy levels begin to rise as faith deepens, understanding of the meaning of prayer takes place, and the strong help the weak.
- It is biblical. Matthew 18:19-20 is acted upon, “whatever you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father heaven. Where two or three come together in my name there am I with the m.”

Why is this so effective?

- All celebrate with them their new step of faith.
- Disciple them yourself, using some suitable follow-up material.
- Where possible, link them with a small nurture group. Your prayer triplet could play this role.
- Build them into a caring local church
- Keep in touch with them regularly.



5. A Good Self Image

From A Biblical Perspective

By John Mallison

GOAL OF THIS SESSION: To strengthen and broaden the self-regard of the faith-sharing person, so that they will not narrow their approaches nor speak out from unhealed hurts.

Q: Think about a village with its various animals and birds.

If you had to compare yourself with one animal or bird which one would you choose and why? (*This is purely to get you thinking about who you imagine you are.*)

For example:

- Are you a hen protecting your chicks?
- Or are you a pig always looking for something more?
- Or a dog drawing attention to itself by making too much noise?
- Or an eagle looking down on the world but only involved when you want to be?
- Or a spider waiting around for something to happen

Q: Open Discussion about self-image

How do you respond to the following statements? If you overheard someone saying this in the markets....

- "I'm special, because God made me and he doesn't make junk."
- "God, help me to believe the truth about myself - no matter how beautiful it is." (from *Seasons of the Heart*, by Macrina Weiderkher)
- "I cannot change, it is just the way I am."
- "Why don't people listen to me?"

Biblical Perspective

A wholesome view of God's work in creation.

We are made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:27 - "God created male and female in his image".

Theologians have discussed hard and long what this means. However, we can be certain about a few things:

i. I am responsible for what I do

We are not puppets. We can make choices. We can choose between good and evil; between a negative or a positive perspective. We can determine our attitudes, our values, and our behaviour. You may have heard "Free Will" - a western philosophical phrase.

We have the power to take responsibility for our own lives - to be courageous, to enable new beginnings

We have the capacity to believe or disbelieve, to have faith or to doubt, to face life's challenges with a child-like trust in our loving, gracious, all-powerful heavenly Father or to run away from them or let them defeat or consume us.

We have the capacity to shelter or hurt, help or harm each other. 'Love your Neighbour as you love yourself'. That means that if we see war, God does not send angels. He has already sent us!

Q. Name a time when you were stuck in a sense of rejection or inadequacy?

ii. I have the capacity to love.

"God is love". It is not that God is merely loving, but he is the source and centre of true love. This is not what is so often described as "love" by this world, but a selfless, undeserved, kind, gracious love that never gives up even when it is spurned.

Q. Read 1 Corinthians 13, inserting your own name wherever the word 'love' appears. How did that affirm you? Challenge you?

We have the capacity to show that divine quality in our love for both ourselves and others, even the most unlovely. The best cure for a lost soul is to care for someone else.(Matthew 10.39)

Q. Are you in the habit of telling others that you love them? That God loves them? Do you have difficulty doing this? What would you like to be free to be able to do? Who will you talk to about this?

Faith in what God has done for us through Christ's death and resurrection frees us to love in this way through the transforming power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

iii. God made me a very special person.

This word of the Lord is a hard one for many to believe in.

- Psalm 139:64 – "I am fearfully and **wonderfully made**
Your works are **wonderful**. I know that full well.
- Ecclesiastes 3:11 - "He has made everything beautiful in its time".
- Psalm 8:5 – You made me "...a little lower than the heavenly beings **and crowned `me`
with glory and honour"**

Yes! We are flawed, we are sinners, we have not lived completely as God intended. We are also wounded. We live in a fallen world which keeps trying to squeeze us into its distorted mould. So much of our pain is NOT our fault.

However, what God did in Jesus Christ on Calvary is all about restoring the fullness of that "glory and honour", restoring the beautiful plan God has for our lives.

Being made whole again is a slow process which Satan does his best to hinder, especially by getting us to focus on the negative rather than the awesome positive gospel, the good news of hope and promise.

The vision God gives us in Christ is all about possibilities – what might be, not what is. **We need not be locked into more of the same.** Hope! It is about new realities which can be seen and apprehended by faith. The Good News is that life can begin again!

God's call is for us, through the Spirit, to personally experience by faith what we **already are in Christ - a new creation!** (2 Corinthians 5:17)"

Q. Do you believe that God looks at you and he really believes **in you**?

iv. Nothing will ever stop God loving me.

Put your own name into these verses and repeat them to another.

John 3:16 – "God loves the world (my name) **so much** that he gave his son...

Romans 8:38,39 – "For I (my name) am absolutely convinced that **nothing can ever separate me**

from God's love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are - high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean – nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us."

How utterly overwhelming that the Sovereign Lord of the universe has made this incredible love with us!! *Say together now-*

***There is nothing we can say or do
that will stop God loving us.
How special we are to him!
Each one of us is his beloved!
Our church is his bride.***

Prayer then is not merely a spiritual discipline, a routine exercise but a place where our Divine Lover and we, the beloved, spend time with each other. A time of intimacy, of being loved and returning that love. The words are not as important as just being together, basking in agape love!

However God is **holy love**, because his love is perfect. There are consequences to unrighteous behaviour. He disciplines us if we break his laws. Sin comes under his judgement. But because he sent Christ to die for us, he forgives and restores following genuine repentance and faith in Christ's finished work. Then life can begin again! Romans 5:25, 3:23, 6:23, 4:7; Psalm 103:1-5,8-18; Isaiah 43:25.

Q. What aspects of the above could enable you to make your ministry to others more effective?

Q: What blockages could there be in your life preventing you from receiving the fullness of God's love? (Share with the group only what you feel comfortable about sharing openly. You may want to find someone with whom you feel you can confidentially share and discuss more of this.)

Who in your life, apart from God, is the one whose love most shapes you?

Conclude your group work with short prayers about love.

FURTHER THINKING

Authentic, New Testament Christianity walks on two feet - realism and optimism.

Realistically acknowledging that we are flawed (sinners), we are sinners and we are wounded (sinned-against), because other flawed people have impacted our lives through a wide variety of negative activity.

But, because of God's grace, his undeserved kindness in all he has done for us through Christ, we can be optimistic. Things don't have to stay this way. We can have hope that life can begin again and that we can become positively different.

God intends us to be people of faith and hope. In our own situation and for everyone else, faith and hope! There are NO hopeless ones! As followers of Jesus Christ we can be optimistic about ourselves and others!



6. BE LIKE A TREE

(a Meditation on Psalm 1)

- Go and stand at the foot of a tree. Touch it and feel its strength. Look up and all around. See how it shelters the birds and creatures and smaller plants around. Maybe it has sown a seed and a little one of its kind is nearby. This tree is you. Say: "you are (name)."
- Think about the tree roots below your feet. They are all the people who have shown you good. They have fed you with water and nutrients. Walk around the tree naming all those people, and thanking them. It might take a while. All their goodness has gone up into the tree, into you. See the sun - God's light has been constantly shining to make these roots a gift to you, and to make you a gift to others also.
- Look now for a damaged branch or a scar on the trunk. Hard times have come to the tree, and to you. What have they been? Start to name the bad things that have been done to the tree over time, or your feelings about things that have been done to you. Maybe rejection, abuse, disappointment, traumatic events, great loss, you know what they are. Some of it has been done by the very same people who have done good to you.
- Now you must choose. Jesus received all these wounds too, and he gave out love. All the good and bad has come into your tree. What will this tree (you) give out? What will you pass on to the little ones that need you and look up to you? The sheltering love or the hard things? Look back at your behaviour - have you been giving out both? Is that what you really want to be?
- Pray now for the heart that was in Jesus. Think of his love for the little ones. 'Love your neighbour as much as you love yourself' he said, so both ends of that need some loving work, right? Pray now for the healing power of the Holy Spirit who is waiting in all of Creation to flow into you. He is sent by God into any who welcome him, to flow through you to those whom you love.
- Who will you tell about this?
- Look around you right now for a sign of God's presence. What is God showing you?

Thanks to Tom Powell of *Red Dust Healing* for some of these insights.



Why do this study?

You may not want to know how to be your Christian self in your world.

You might be content to keep your light guarded, hidden under a bushel. The risk of rejection might be too great for you, the vulnerability of not knowing how people will react.

Or on the other hand you might like to share your faith somehow, so why not do these exercises...

1. **My Story** – What is the story of God’s presence in me told in such a way that others can relate to it?
2. **Masks** – am I a follower of Jesus or an Elvis impersonator?
3. **My Spiritual Gifts** –each of us has a spiritual gift and each one is a gift. What’s mine?
4. **Prayer Partners and Life Groups** – some structures for keeping on and seeing change.
5. **A Good Self Image** – let us not needlessly narrow our approaches or speak from unhealed hurts.
6. **Be Like a Tree** – a focussed meditation on Psalm 1

These are not just intellectual, ‘find the right answer’ small group studies. I hope your group likes to understand God and themselves at more depth.

How to do this Study?

In your group, you don’t have to do all to topics. You don’t have to do them in this sequence. You can adjust the content so that it suits your language and particular emphasis.

Other topics in the PURPLE COW WORKSHOPS for Christian small groups and THE WONDER WORKSHOPS for secular groups, can be found on <http://makesyouwonder.yolasite.com/small-group-exercises.php>

Feedback from other users of this material can be seen on Purplecowworkshops.wordpress.com

YOUR FEEDBACK from your experience will help others. Send it to jdtr@westnet.com.au

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