

Race and Poverty: Five-Session Study Guide

Session 5

Redemption and Reconciliation

Session Synopsis

In this session participants will be challenged to take seriously God's call for Christians to demonstrate love, especially to those in need. They will be invited to move from words to actions and to strategize specific, concrete answers to the questions, What can I do and what can my church do to demonstrate love to the poor, who are with us, yet have been ignored with tragic consequences?

Focal Passage: 1 John 3:11, 16–24

Background Passages: Psalm 12:5; 14:6; 35:10; 68:10; 72:4, 12–14; 146:7; 1 Samuel 2:8; Isaiah 19:20; 25; 41:17; Jeremiah 20:13

Key verse: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17).

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- evaluate personal and church resources and how they are used
- explore endeavours that assist the poor and challenge social/structural realities that create and maintain poverty
- explore endeavours that promote care for creation
- identify one or two specific responses that their church, region, or denomination can undertake.
- come up with a plan for bringing the church, region, or denomination on-board with the suggested responses
- recognize the ministry that those who suffer in poverty bring to the larger faith community
- celebrate the truth that, even in the darkest hours, God is at work

Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session, asking God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Gather materials and make copies as noted in Materials Needed.
- For Missional Merger, you will need to do a little research to find regional and national organizations and programs that are appropriate to your situation. Review Resources and Connections for places to start and gather materials that are appropriate to your group.
- You will also need to do research locally to find information to share on programs and endeavours in your community.

Materials Needed

- three copies of your church’s, region’s, and/or denomination’s budget (or budget distribution percentages)
- copies of participants’ pieces, one per person

- information on local, regional, and/or national endeavours that address the immediate needs of the poor, work for racial and economic justice, and promote care for creation. (See Resources and Connections.)
- paper and pencils or newsprint and markers

Gathering

Once participants have gathered, invite them to share their responses to the study so far. Encourage honesty and demonstrate respect for all responses, accepting what people think and feel as their valid experiences.

Explain that in this session you will be moving into some challenging territory, reviewing how resources are used and planning specific strategies for responding to (hu)manmade aspects of the hurricane tragedy.

Read the key verse and invite participants to think about their use of personal resources. In what ways does their use of time, energy, and money reflect obedience to Jesus' call to love others, especially those in need? Next ask participants to share what concerns (economic and otherwise) they have about the impact of the recent hurricanes.

Invite prayer requests and offer a brief prayer, asking God to open your eyes to truth, your ears to God's Word, and your lives to love.

The Missional Moment

Review together Participants' Piece #1, "Who's to Blame?" Invite participants to spend some time thinking and/or sharing about how they initially responded to the Katrina tragedy. The following questions may be helpful in guiding your discussion:

- Did you find yourself looking for someone to blame?
- Did you experience any feelings of guilt?
- What will it take for you to let go of blame and guilt and move toward responsible action?
- In what ways did you sense, even in this disaster, that God is present?
- Where do you find hope at a time such as this?

After a few minutes of discussion, move on to The Missional Mandate.

The Missional Mandate

Read together 1 John 3:11, 16-24 then review Participants' Piece #2, "The Test of True Christianity." After reading, invite participants to discuss the following:

- In what ways does creation instill in you a sense of awe and reveal to you God's greatness?
- What is your response when you hear loving action as the test of true fellowship with God?
- What is your response to John's directive to share what you have with those in need?
- John seems to have no patience with speech, even sound theological speech, if it isn't undergirded by corresponding acts of love. Are there ways in which "proper religious speech" has replaced living out God's love in your own life? In the life of your church? Within your denomination?

After some discussion, make the transition to The Missional Merger by explaining that in light of the message of 1 John 2, you will be directing your gaze away from guilt and blame and on to consideration of two key questions: (1) What aspects of this tragedy are actually subject to human influence? and (2) In what ways can we now act to address those aspects?

The Missional Merger

Remind participants that many people are asking where God is in this tragedy. Explain that Scripture, from the law and the prophets to the teachings of Jesus and the letters of the early church, makes it clear that God cares for those who are poor. Care for the poor is inherent in the very being of the God who is called:

- Protector of the poor (Ps. 12:5)
- Rescuer of the poor (1 Sam. 2:8; Ps. 35:10; 72:4, 12–14; Isa. 19:20; Jer. 20:13)
- Provider of the poor (Ps. 68:10; 146:7; Isa. 41:17)
- Refuge of the poor (Ps. 14:6; Isa. 25)

Further explain that God calls us to answer the question of Where is God? by holding onto hope that God is at work even in the midst of disaster and also by revealing God's concern for the poor through *actions* that clearly speak the message, "God is here and God cares."

Prepare for small-group work by summarizing the three areas addressed in Participants' Piece #3, "Aspects of the Tragedy in which Human Action or Inaction was a Factor" as follows:

1. Based on the experience following the September 11 attacks, we need to expect charitable giving to decline in the months and even years ahead due to diversion of giving and economic decline. Even as we as individuals and as churches are likely to be impacted by economic decline, we need to strategize for faithfulness to God's call to care for those in need.
2. People are poor for a variety of reasons, including historical, political, and social realities that both make and keep people poor. It will take courage and planning to repent of our participation in and/or ignorance of these realities and respond with God's vision of justice.
3. Resistance to our divine commission to care for God's creation played a role in the extensive damage caused by the hurricanes. Poor communities in general and poor racial-ethnic communities in particular suffer inordinate negative consequences of environment destruction. How will we embrace the Creator's assignment to care for creation?

Stress the good news that God is at work, perhaps in ways we cannot see, and that faithful human action can make a real, positive difference. Divide participants into three groups and assign one area for each group to review and report on, following the instructions on the participants' pieces. Provide copies of pertinent materials, such as budgets and information on organizations and programs.

Reconvene and have each group report. Develop together a plan for bringing your church, region, or denomination on board with the identified strategies. If appropriate, set up a steering committee to take charge of this vision.

Note: If your group is small or if this activity seems like too much territory to cover, consider selecting one area on which to focus. Be sure, however, to share information on all three issues before proceeding.

Commissioning

After all groups have reported and you have developed a plan of action for presenting your strategies to the leaders, committees, and church body, turn your focus toward the God of hope.

Begin by giving participants the two following words of hope:

1) Read together Participants' Piece # 4 "Humble Love" and explain that those we call "the poor" are ministering to us. Through their suffering, they give voice to the poverty in us all. We can embrace the abundant life only when we answer their call to make God's justice real in our world.

2) Even in the worst of times, God is present. Few places is this more evident than in the spirituals of African Americans, who in the midst of horrific oppression, bore witness to God's goodness and found courage for the journey toward freedom.

Close by prayerfully singing together "Deep River," "Steal Away," or "My God is a Rock in a Weary Land."

Resources and Connections

Direct Assistance

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions (www.abc-usa.org): on Hunger (7015:6/75); on Food and Fuel Assistance (8046:3/87); on Welfare and Human Services (8075:6/81)

Empty Tomb, Inc. (www.emptytomb.org)

"Being the Presence of Christ in All the World," sermon by Daniel Vestal, CBF Coordinator (www.thefellowship.info/News/050711Vestal.icm)

Food for the Hungry (www.fh.org/index_katrina)

Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org)

National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.endhomelessness.org)

Racial and Economic Justice

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions (www.abc-usa.org): on Housing (7033:6/83); on Immigration and Refugee Policy (7031:6/82); on Economic Justice for the United States (8199:6/92); on Racial Justice (7032:3/89)

Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program (www.churchworldservice.org/programs)

Fair Labor Program (www.fairlabor.org)

Micah Challenge (www.micahchallenge.org)

Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (www.economichumanrights.org)

Refugee Resettlement, National Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA
(www.nationalministries.org/mission/dhs/refugees.cfm)

Wider Opportunities for Women (www.wowonline.org, and www.sixstrategies.org)

Care for Creation

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions (www.abc-usa.org): on Clean Air (8183:6/90); on Energy (7040:12/88); on Energy (7004:6/77); on Environmental Concerns (8114:9/88); on Individual Lifestyle and Ecological Responsibility (8181:6/90)

Evangelical Environmental Network (http://www.creationcare.org/resources/small_group/)

"Gone with the Water" by Joel K. Bourne Jr., *National Geographic Magazine*, October 2004
(www3.nationalgeographic.com)

Mississippi River Basin Alliance (www.mrba.org)

National Religious Partnership for the Environment (www.nrpe.org)

National Wetlands Research Center of the United States Governmental Service
(www.nrcs.usgs.gov)

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Participants' Pieces

1. Who Is to Blame?

Hurricane Katrina is being called “the worst natural disaster in U.S. history.” In response, many people have resorted to blaming God. News programs have been dedicated to the questions, Why did God do this? or, How could God let this happen? And with shocking arrogance and conviction, fundamentalist religious leaders of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have attributed this tragedy to God, offering hurtful explanations, such as branding the hurricanes as God’s punishment for a wide range of transgressions and even suggesting that God targeted New Orleans in particular. (For examples, see “Fundamentalists View Hurricane Katrina as God’s Punishment” and Christian Leaders Speak of God’s Wrath in Hurricane” at www.ethicsdaily.com.)

One thing that most people seem to *agree* on is that this is indeed a tragedy for which preparation and response were inadequate. And one thing most seem to *disagree* on is whose fault those failures were. So, in response, publicly (and likely privately), many of us have been engaged in a blame game with local officials blaming national officials, national officials blaming state officials and the media, and in some cases, people even blaming those who suffered so much in this catastrophe.

Blame is a natural human response. It is, in part, a way to try to get a handle on the unthinkable. It is also, in part, a response to feelings of guilt in the face of horrific tragedy—if I can blame someone, then perhaps I can let go of feeling guilty for not suffering the same fate or for not helping. Unfortunately, blaming can also serve as a way to distract ourselves from addressing important issues. Blame and guilt, will, therefore, only hinder productive response to this tragedy.

2. The Test of True Christianity

First John was written to deal with the confusion, doubt, and schism that were caused by false teachings in the community commonly referred to as the “Johannine community.” There were those within this community who, under the influence of Greek philosophy, came to believe that Jesus only *seemed* human and was in reality “spirit.”

This erroneous doctrine of Jesus led to two false teachings:

1. For Christians, “spiritual” life is more important than moral living. Living according to ethical rules was considered a sign of not being truly “spiritual.”
2. The dualistic notion that the physical world is evil, while the spiritual world is good.

First John directly challenges these false teachings by making clear two fundamental truths:

- **Creation reveals God’s goodness.** God made the world and creation is filled with God’s glory. Creation can supply our needs, but it cannot abide our greed. When the laws of creation are honored, we are blessed by its care and bounty. When we neglect and abuse creation, it disrupts the order of creation, and persons (as well as other creatures) often suffer horrendous consequences. Creation is both the site and the focus of Jesus’ redemptive work. He came into

the world to liberate, not only people, but all of creation from the sin that humans have perpetrated and to reunite the created order with the Creator (see also Romans 8:22).

• **Truly spiritual people live ethically in the world.** Here and elsewhere in 1 John, the commandment of Jesus that we are to love one another (see, for example, John 13:34) is repeated. This is no secondary idea but rather a central element of the Christian faith. John offers this as a test for those who are struggling to feel confident about whether they are truly Christian. The test of true faith, of true fellowship with God, is ethical action, living out the love of God in this world: “And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him” (1 John 3:19). But the writer doesn’t stop there. He has specific notions of what love looks like: Love was demonstrated when Jesus laid down his life for us, and love is demonstrated when we sacrifice material possessions to help those in need.

3. Aspects of the Tragedy in which Human Action or Inaction Is a Factor.

A. Direct Assistance

Step 1: Become informed.

Review the following information together:

- In August 2001 (prior to the September 11 attacks), 50 percent of organizations surveyed had reported an increase in giving, and 23 percent were keeping pace in giving in comparison to the previous year.
- In October 2001, (following the September 11 attacks), 44 percent of these charities experienced a *decline* in giving compared to the previous year.
- As compared to the previous year, the number of charities experiencing a shortfall *doubled* following September 11, 2001.
- More than 20 percent of those charities reporting declines experienced at least a 20 percent drop in giving with some local food banks reporting as much as an 80 percent drop.
- The two main reasons for the decline in giving were: (1) diversion of giving from regular charities to the September 11 tragedy, and (2) the slowdown in the economy. (Statistics from February 7, 2002 press release, Association of Fundraising Professionals, www.afpnet.org.)

These statistics highlight two potential challenges for us as we seek to fulfill God’s call to care for people in need. The first challenge is the “myth of generosity” that frequently follows high-profile tragedies. That is, a highly publicized and strong response to the tragedy is followed by a significant decline in charitable giving, with many givers having redirected their normal giving to the tragedy. The second is the negative impact on giving of economic decline, which the U.S. has been experiencing and may well experience to an even greater degree in the months ahead.

Step 2: Process the information.

Discuss the following questions:

- How have you responded in terms of time, money, and energy to the hurricane tragedies? In what ways will this response limit your ability to support other, ongoing poverty relief efforts?
- In what ways do you anticipate the economic decline will affect you and your family? How difficult will it be for you to commute to work or heat your home this winter?
- In what ways do you anticipate the economic decline will affect others within your church family? In your local community? In your state and nationally?
- To what extent do you think the economic decline will play a role in your and your church’s ability to support poverty assistance efforts?

Step 3: Strategize.

Review your church's budget and suggest creative strategies for your church to . . .

- truly become a *community* of faith, bearing one another's burdens and helping one another through this time of potential economic hardship
- support local, regional, and national poverty relief endeavors that might suffer from diversion of giving
- become a place where those experiencing poverty can find assistance

B. Unjust Social Structures

Step 1: Become informed.

Review the following together:

•When descendants of the slaves who escaped Egypt were led to from the desert to a new land, God gave them a social structure with laws designed both to prevent and to correct poverty. These laws served to protect classes of people, such as widows, orphans, and immigrants, who were at risk of becoming impoverished. The people were also directed by God to regularly level the playing field by redistributing wealth and changing people's social status through debt forgiveness and land redistribution. The prophets regularly denounced Israel for not fulfilling this standard of economic justice. This standard is upheld and promoted in the ministry of Jesus, who came to bring "good news to the poor."

•The notion of economic justice can feel threatening. It may even have an unnerving "socialist" ring to it. Corporate responsibility, after all, runs counter to the rugged individualism that most of us were raised with and hold dear. The truth is, however, that not everyone has an equal chance of enjoying the abundance God created for us to share and social structures sometimes literally keep people trapped in poverty. Consider the following statistics:

- In 2004, the number of U.S. Americans living in poverty rose to 37 million (1.1 million more than in 2003), representing 12.5 percent of the U.S. population.
- The U.S. poverty guideline for a family of four in the forty-eight contiguous states and D.C. is under \$19,350, however 43 percent of families classified as poor had a cash income of less than half the poverty standard.
- Women leaving welfare in 2004 earned an average of \$6.75 per hour—that's \$14,000 a year for a full-time job.
- In any given year, between 900,000 and 1.4 million children in the U.S. experience homelessness, and 17.6 percent of children in the U.S. lived below the poverty line in 2004.
- From 1980 to the present, poverty rates within the Hispanic and Latino population have consistently been at least twice that of whites. The rate among blacks and First Nations peoples has ranged between 2.5 to 3.5 times that of whites.
- Children of every race have higher poverty rates than the rest of the population.

[Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States*, August 2004; Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State (<http://travel.state.gov>); and "Poverty in the United States" (www.plu.edu/~poverty/stats/home.html)]

These statistics attest to the fact that poverty is a complex problem with a variety of causes, including political and economic structures that marginalize people and put them at risk for inescapable poverty.

Step 2: Process the information.

Discuss the following questions:

- How do you feel about the notion of economic justice? Does it excite you? Does it threaten you?
- What in your background or personal experiences may lead you to feel this way?
- Sociologists tell us that people begin to hoard and compete for resources when they believe that there isn't enough to go around. By working to change structures that lead to and maintain unfair distribution of creation's abundance, we proclaim the fundamental Christian belief that God created the world "good," fully stocked to sustain us. Is it helpful to view working for economic justice as a proclamation of God, our Creator and Sustainer?
- The strategies you design to challenge unjust social structures and proclaim a belief in God as Creator depend in part on where you are beginning. Will this be a new venue of witness for your church, or is this a ministry in which you are already involved? What challenges might you face in getting others on board? What experiences, fears, or misconceptions might be at the base of those challenges?

Step 3: Strategize.

Review your church's budget and information on local, regional, and national efforts for economic justice. Work together to identify some specific activities that you would like to suggest to your church family.

C. Environmental Racism

Step 1: Become informed.

Review the following together:

- Many scientists are convinced that global warming caused by environmental pollution has led to the increased occurrence and intensity of tropical storms. There are those, however, who argue otherwise. So let's consider two undisputed environmental factors in the hurricane destruction—the "management" of the Mississippi basin and the disappearance of wetlands.
- According to the Mississippi River Basin Alliance, the magnitude of the tragedy in New Orleans was far from a natural disaster. The hurricane was the tipping point, but the extent of the catastrophe was a "decades long culmination of human decisions that unnaturally moved water into tighter and increasingly fragile man-made spaces and concentrated people where they would be most vulnerable to flooding" (homepage of www.mrba.org). Additionally wetlands off the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts have for centuries served as natural protection from storm surges. In May 2003, the USGS Wetlands Research Center reported that Louisiana had lost nineteen hundred square miles of coastal land, primarily marshes, during the twentieth century and would likely lose another seven hundred square miles by the year 2050 (www.nwrc.usgs.gov/releases/pr03-oo4.html). The disappearance of the wetlands due to drainage and development left residents of these coastal areas severely exposed, leading to extensive property damage and loss of lives.
- Another indisputable reality is that minority and poor communities suffer disproportionately from the consequences of environmental destruction. Consider the following*:
 - An estimated 50 percent of African-Americans and 60 percent of Hispanics live in counties with levels of two or more air pollutants exceeding government standards.
 - Fifty percent of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native American/First Nations people live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
 - While 70 percent of African-Americans live in counties that violate federal air pollution standards, African-American households emit fewer greenhouse gases (e.g. 20 percent less

carbon dioxide) than do primarily Caucasian households, and per capita, African-Americans use 30 percent less gasoline than do whites. [Sources: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (www.CBCFHealth.org) and "Climate Change Hits African Americans Harder," 23 July 2005, Inter Press Service News Agency (www.ipsnews.net).]

Step 2: Process the information.

Discuss the following questions:

- Is environmental racism a new concept for you?
- Do you see it as a significant issue?
- How do you feel about environmental concerns in general? Do you consider it an important Christian concern? Is it secondary? Tertiary? Not even on the radar?
- Why do you think you feel the way you do?
- How would members of your church respond to these statistics?
- How might they respond if you were to suggest getting involved in protecting creation?

Step 3: Strategize.

A final and most important indisputable reality is the call of God to care for the creation that was entrusted to us. Spend some time exploring your church's budget and activity schedule, identifying the level of importance placed on care for creation. Work together to develop a goal statement related to care for creation and your church. Depending on your circumstances, the statement could range from exploring what Scripture says about creation and our role in caring for it to starting a grassroots campaign to fight for legislation that protects our wetlands, our waterways, and our air.

4. Humble Love

My heart is transformed by the smile of trust given by some people who are terribly fragile and weak. They call forth new energies from me. They seem to break down barriers and bring me a new freedom. It is the same with the smile of a child: even the hardest heart can't resist. Contact with people who are weak and who are crying out . . . is one of the most important nourishments in our lives. When we let ourselves be really touched by the gift of their presence, they leave something precious in our hearts. As long as we remain at the level of "doing" things for people, we tend to stay behind our barriers of superiority. We ought to welcome the gift of the poor with open hands. Jesus says, "What you do for the least of my brothers, you do for me."

—*Jean Vanier*

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