

## VALUE 1 – BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP

### SERVING AS A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST (Acts 6, 7)

#### Introduction

- Think of a time when you experienced wonderful service eg at a restaurant, shop, or when someone really looked out for you – how did you feel?
- Think of an occasion when you experienced bad service - how did that make you feel?
- How will our attitude to others make them feel?

This study is about service – whether it’s serving at tables (6:2) or serving by preaching the Word of God (6:4) – ministry or service is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Read the next two verses.

*“Even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:45)

*“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.”* (John 13:3)

#### Declining service in a growing church (6:1-7)

The church was growing, but the Grecian Jews were grumbling (v1). New babies are wonderful till the older brother or sister realise they are no longer number one!

- Which problems that can effectively hinder church growth are identified here?
- How did the church solve the problems and what was the result? (v2-7)
- What should our church leaders concentrate on, and what should they delegate? (v2-3)

#### The self-service church? (6:8-10)

- Should the church help its leader to minister, or should the leader help the church to minister?
- Why are “*grace and power*” vital for effective ministry (v8)?
- Jesus promised, “*Don’t worry about how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.*” (Luke 21:12)
- God helped Stephen’s ministry of the Word. (v10). How does He help us serve in other ways?

#### Service outside the walls (6:11-7:1; 7:54-8:1)

Stephen might be called the patron saint of all who minister *outside the church walls*. His long speech describes how God met people outside the Holy Land – in Mesopotamia (7:2), Egypt (7:9-10) and Sinai (7:30ff). It marks the transition from ministry in Jerusalem to ministry *outside the walls* (Acts 8:1-28:31)! His own ministry *outside the walls* (7:57-8:1) powerfully affected a young man called Saul (Acts 22:20).

- The priesthood of all believers means we can all bring God to people and people to God through service inside and outside the walls. Outside it may seem to be a futile gesture as Stephen’s forgiveness of his executioners appeared at the time. How can we encourage one another each time we meet to serve people (where we work, in our street and locality, etc)?

#### Secret service

- God does not sign His name under every sunset or panoramic view! Just as He has made this world beautiful for us, how can we make other peoples’ worlds beautiful for them through quiet service?
- What affect will it have on us (6:15)?

## VALUE 2 – SPIRITUALLY AUTHENTIC

### SPIRITUALLY AUTHENTIC (Revelation 3:14-22)

#### Introduction

There is so much cynicism in Britain today about institutions (particularly the Christian church) that it’s time to think more deeply about the situation. We may find deep implications that we will need to face up to.

#### Let us look at some of the people ‘out there’

- There are those who are negative, even hostile about anything to do with religion. They may or not have been taken to Sunday School but they left as soon as they could and now want nothing to do with us.
- There are those (usually in the ‘over forties’ age range) who were once in church membership but for various reasons have now withdrawn. Perhaps they had some bad experiences when they were with us. A surprising number among them are devout: they still pray and seek to do good.
- There are those who have never had any contact with the church at all yet they have a personal spirituality. Their beliefs may be drawn from a variety of sources as well as their own intuitive perceptions. They have a kind of ‘folk religion’.

We could suggest a number of contributing factors (discuss briefly) but is there an underlying factor that could be changed by us? After all, there is a further group of people that we would recognise:

- Those within the church itself who are conventionally religious but have no clear testimony to the saving power of the Lord Jesus in their lives. (And those of us sharing in this discussion are not always at our spiritual best either!)

What we need is to be SPIRITUALLY AUTHENTIC. If we are not, no wonder the outsiders have given up on us!

#### So let us look at the people ‘in here’ (that’s us!).

Pray that the Lord will help us to hear what the Spirit says. Then read the passage.

Not all of us could say, off-hand, where Laodicea was, but there are many churches like it much nearer than Asia Minor. How like the Laodicean church is ours?

- Is the church door closed or open (v20)? Not literally but spiritually, of course. We can tell this by how many besides ourselves use it. If they don’t, why?
- Is the church warm (v16)? If “*warm*” = “comfortable” what is “*cold*” and “*hot*”?
- Have we plenty of financial reserves (v17)? Is this bad or good? What should we do about it (v18)? Be specific.
- Have we anything to offer that other people really want (v17)? What could we have (v18)? Interpret the verse.
- Where is Jesus in our fellowship (v20)? Near but outside, knocking and calling out? How would we know if He is in or out?
- How can we bring Him in (v19-20)? Don’t forget the need to repent (church people don’t like repenting any more than outsiders!). Who can bring Him in?
- What will happen (v21)? Which means .....

#### Final point.

The world may not have much time for the church as an institution but it still has time for Jesus. So the most effective thing we can do is ..... Let’s pray and ask God for.....

## VALUE 3.-.CLEARLY PROPHETIC

### **TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK?**

The object of this study is to try to discover the extent the church should be involved in the transformation of society by seeking to influence legislation.

- From your experience identify moral ills affecting society today? Which do you feel are most important to address?
- What is the church's responsibility, if any, to speak into these issues?

Several stances might or have been taken by Christians and the church over such issues;

1. Simply to preach the gospel and not get involved.
2. Preach the gospel and live the life of God's Kingdom and not get involved.
3. Preach the gospel, live the life of God's Kingdom and seek to change the law of the land.
4. Change society by law (and force).

Discuss the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' and short-comings of each approach.

Hopefully your discussion will have led you in the direction of (3). And our study will now approach a passage of scripture and apply it along these lines, looking at one particular issue.

#### **Read James 5:1-6**

- 1) "*Now listen, you rich people...*" Are these rich people Christians? What are they to do and why are they to do it? Repentance and obedience are surely required here.
- 2) How should believers live with regard to possessions? (v2-3; compare with Matthew 6:19-21 and Luke 12:15). How do these values square with what we see in our materialistic society?
- 3) Does v4 have anything to say about Third World poverty? If so, what?
- 4) Define "*luxury*"(v5). Does the definition change from culture to culture? How can we know that our definition is the right one? Also examine "*self-indulgence*" How do we keep clear of it?
- 5) How might the 'world system' condemn and murder innocent men (v6) in our name. Are we responsible if we do nothing about it?

Notice that the progression of our thinking has indicated the need for the rich to repent (ie to respond to the gospel?), then taught us how we should live and finally focussed on the need to work on behalf of the oppressed poor. In other words, to be 'Clearly Prophetic' people.

Alongside our desire to share the gospel, in what practical ways can we work towards

- living more simply
- challenging the oppression of the poor?

In closing, read **James 2:8, 12-19**. Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must prompt us to do something.

## VALUE 4 – COMMUNITY FOCUSED

### **My personal community**

Describe your level of involvement in the communities where you belong, and say what it means to you (eg my family; deeply involved as a parent, the most worthwhile thing I do).

(It might be helpful for the group to spend 15 minutes or so on this, depending on your numbers, and to think 'widely'. You might find a flip chart useful, so important links are captured.)

#### **Read Matthew 5:13-16**

We are to be "*salt*" and "*light*" in our communities. Share any difficulties you feel about this. Why might your "*salt lose its saltiness*", or your "*light be hidden*"? What are the remedies for this?

#### **Read Matthew 9:9-13**

Jesus had many meals out. What are the advantages of bringing the gospel to people this way? List the pluses and minuses of being host and guest. Has anyone in the group an example of successful hospitality based evangelism?

#### **Read Luke 4:18-19**

Jesus had a mission to "*the poor, the broken hearted, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed*". Think about those in your communities who fall into such categories (literally and metaphorically). What are Christians doing to bring help? Is there a challenge here for anyone (Matthew 25: 40)?

### **My church in the community**

Think of things your church might do in your community:

- Joining with other churches to run events
- Meeting social needs in the area
- Working in community projects not run by the church
- Joining clubs, committees or classes.

Where is the truth for you when you look at these two statements?

- Community action is a distraction from the gospel.
- We live the gospel and prefer not to preach it.

### **Conclusion**

Pray about your involvement in some of the suggestions which will have been made. If you feel the Lord leading you further, look at the practical issues for you as individuals, a home group or church, and work out how you will take action.

## VALUE 5: CULTURALLY RELEVANT

### **RESPONDING TO A CHANGING CULTURE**

**Read Acts 17:16-34.** Paul was greatly distressed by the number of idols he saw in the city of Athens. While there, he spoke about Jesus Christ to Jews in the synagogue, and to Athenians in the market place. In the market place he debated with the Stoics, who promoted self sufficiency as the highest good, and the Epicureans who were all for pleasure. He appeared to both groups to be speaking about new divinities of which they had not heard. As a result he was brought to speak in the court of the Areopagus. He appears to have been speaking illegally in public and was brought before the court because it licensed public lectures of the type he had been regularly giving. Paul explained that he had come to declare to the Athenians, the nature and purpose of the 'unknown God' who they already worshipped and who was represented by a statue well known to them. He took the opportunity to tell them about the living God and the Saviour, Jesus Christ. As a result of his work in Athens a new church was formed, probably under the leadership of Dionysius and Damaris.

Can you pick out the different viewpoints that Paul encountered in Athens? How did he attempt to present the gospel to those without a Jewish or scriptural background? Did he change the nature of the gospel by so doing?

He said of the people in the Areopagus, "*I see in every way you are very religious*" (v22). Statistics show that over 60% of people in the UK believe in God. What evidence of this do you see in ordinary people's lives? How would you introduce the gospel to someone you recognise as having some belief in God?

At the time that the early church was growing and taking shape this was said, 'Christians...do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some particular lifestyle. They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow customs in clothing, food and other aspects of life. But at the same time they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship. They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens suffers all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evil doers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and they are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give a reason for their hostility. To put it simply – the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world...The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.' From the letter of Diognetus.

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.** What did it mean for Paul to "*become all things to all men*"? In your group identify what that might mean for you today. Consider, for example, people of other faiths, ex-prisoners, addicts, the poor, the rich, the old, the young, Generation X.....

A writer comments about our churches today. 'On the whole, we do not sing songs with tunes that most of our people like. We do not use the language that most people use. We do not address the issues that most people want addressed. We do not give people an opportunity to ask the questions that are really on their minds.' (Mark Greene in Idea, March/April 2003)

Another writer comments, 'Although Christians met...together before Constantine and some of those meetings could have been seen as 'services' it was only after [Constantine] that services became the primary, visible, preoccupation and embodiment of what church is all about...Non-Christians often see the church as a building with pews in rows for services. Most Christians now understand the church is not a building but a community – but it is still a community that meets for services.' (Bryan Knell May, Evangelical Alliance, 2003)

The writers are making two connected points, that our churches have lost contact with mainstream culture and that what many regard as the most important aspect of church – services – is really to misunderstand

that a church is actually a community. Do you think that your church has lost contact with mainstream culture? Is your church an effective community and is it recognised as such by the people who live around where you meet? Do these statements and these questions raise issues you need to look at?

It has been said that, 'Unless good and through research is undertaken, we cannot expect to harvest all that God the Holy Spirit is preparing in the hearts of the people in our community.' (Martin Robinson and Dwight Smith, *Invading Secular Space*, 2003)

These writers believe that church members may think that they know the people and the communities that live around their church but that actually this is not often the case. How well do you know your communities and the non-Christians who live in them? What evidence do you have to support your views? If you don't know them well, what could you do to get to know them better?

## VALUE 6 – MUTUALLY COMMITTED

The church may be seen as your local fellowship, or something smaller (a group within the fellowship such as a home group or youth group). On the other hand you might think of the groups of churches within your area, whatever their denomination. Others might look at your own denomination as the church. Then, of course, there is the wider aspect of the whole of Christendom (the visible Church) and all those who have gone before (the invisible Church). In this study we will explore our feelings towards our commitment to one another, and it will be useful for each person to explain how they see their own role and position, before we proceed to look at the Bible.

### **Read Acts 4:23-37**

Look for the indications of unity within the church. "*their own people*" (v23), "*together in prayer*" (v24) and "*one heart and mind*" (v32). What would you consider the basis for this? Do you experience the same unity?

One highlight of their communal life was the sharing and caring (v32-35). Perhaps members of the group could share such experiences. Are there ways we can encourage sharing and caring in our fellowship, or within the churches of our area, circuit, denomination?

### **Other scriptures**

**Acts 20:35** tells about it being "*more blessed to give than to receive*". But many Christians find receiving hard, because we have been taught to be givers. What is it about us that we need to examine?

Paul describes the unity of the church in the simile of the body (Romans 12:3-8 & 1Corinthians 12:14-31). Does this make us look inward, thinking of the gifts in our own group? Perhaps there has to be a wider group to embrace all the gifts mentioned. How would your group or a church be open to receive wisdom and guidance from individuals in the wider church?

The Early Church groups saw themselves as a part of something much larger. Look for evidence of this in the following scriptures:

Titus 3:8 & 14; 1Peter 4:8-10; Romans 12:8; Acts 15:31-32; Philippians 2:3-4, 19-24; Ephesians.6:22; Philemon 12-13; Romans 1:12; Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:26-27; 2 Corinthians 8:3-5.

How can we encourage our groups and churches to share these things?

To close, look again at any practical issues which have been identified which may change the way we live our Christian lives. Pray that God will lead us into them.