

The World's Most Dangerous Bible Study

A Conversation Between Faith and Everyday Life Using Colossians 3:23-24 and U2's "Elevation"

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How It All Began ...

Several ago, my church started a Wednesday evening program for children and youth called Logos. The Logos program started in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and has been offered successfully in churches for decades, often going under different names, such as "Youth Club." It consists of four components: recreation, worship skills, table fellowship (dinner), and Bible study. When it came time for finding someone to teach the Bible study portion for our Junior and Senior High School youth, no one came forward. So, being the minister and resident biblical scholar (I was just finishing my Ph.D. in Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary), I was "privileged" with the task of teaching it. Having never taught a Bible study for teens, and detecting less than zero interest in them for studying the scriptures, I was terrified!

Yet, I was comforted momentarily by the notion that, since there are so many youth groups in churches in North America, there must be a veritable cornucopia of exciting, quality Bible resources available just for them. Once I started looking, however, I became dismayed. Most of the Bible studies struck me as either too boring, or too theologically conservative – or both. So, with great trepidation, I tossed the resources aside and prayed like crazy.

I wondered, "What is at the center our teens' world? Is there any way I can step into that center and bring my scriptures with me, letting them unfold naturally on their own turf?" It was not long before it dawned on me that, if anything, music is at the center of their world – all kinds of music: pop, rock, alternative, rap, hip-hop, heavy metal, even country western. Thankfully at the time, I was listening to much (though not all) of this same music myself. I prayerfully asked, "Can I use music as a common ground for sharing our faith without jeopardizing either the integrity of the scriptures or the music?" When I found it is possible to answer this question with a definite "Yes," the World's Most Dangerous Bible Study (WMDBS) was born.

How It Works

When I teach the World's Most Dangerous Bible Study at Scottsdale Congregational UCC, I follow this general format: I play a popular song, selected

in consultation with the teens. As the song plays (usually at high decibel levels!), we follow along with the lyrics, which I have transcribed either from the CD insert or an Internet site. Then we discuss the song, noting the major thoughts, emotions and messages it conveys on a Dry Erase board. Next, we read a scripture passage I feel may fruitfully engage the music. Again, we note the major thoughts, emotions and messages on the board. Finally, after discussing both the song and the scripture on their own terms, we set the two in conversation, asking, “What are the similarities and differences between them?”

The purpose of the WMDBS is not to say to youth, “Look at your evil ‘devil music’ and how great the Bible is by comparison,” nor is it to say, “You see, it all just says the same thing anyway (so why read the Bible?).” Rather, the WMDBS starts a meaningful and lively conversation between faith and everyday life using music and the Bible as conversation partners. It helps us examine our everyday lives more deeply to discover Christ incarnate, at the center of our world, awakening us to faith and calling us to discipleship.

Not Just For Teens

I have also discovered that the WMDBS is most definitely not for teens only. In fact, shortly after I began using it with teens in 1996, word spread to the adults in my congregation who started clamoring for their own WMDBS. In response, I started one at 8:30 Sunday mornings. Much to my surprise and delight, not only did lots of adults participate, but the teens showed up, too – even when they had already gone over the same material on Wednesday evening! Thus, before my astonished eyes, parents, grandparents, and teens were sharing meaningfully together about their lives, their faith, and the scriptures. I felt a little like the priest Simeon in Luke 2: “Take me now, Lord! ...!” Since then, we have successfully integrated a version of the WMDBS as a regular feature in our “contemporary” worship service called “The Studio.”¹

Little did I realize when I started the WMDBS how profound an impact it would have not only on my congregation and others around the world who have begun using it, but also on myself. The WMDBS has caused me to look at the scriptures – and my faith – with new eyes. It keeps me discovering and rediscovering how the “old, old story” is as fresh, vital, and capable of transforming lives today as it was when it was the “new, new story.” I hope the same may happen to you and your congregation, as you try the following Bible study, using the popular band “U2” as a conversation partner.

¹ *The Studio* is a multi-sensory, experiential worship service integrating ancient spiritual practices and modern visual, dramatic, and visual arts. It is held in Scottsdale each Sunday at 11 AM, and attracts an unusually high percentage of “unchurched” people of all ages. Over the past year, we have regularly taken *The Studio* “on the road” in response to invitations from seminaries and denominational bodies. In April/May, 2002, five *Studio*-style worship services were held at Princeton Theological Seminary as part of the Institute for Youth Ministry Forum. For more information about *The Studio*, visit our website at www.scucc.com.

Getting Started

Your experience will be greatly enhanced if you follow these simple guidelines for group study:

- (a) Listen to the “Cloud of Witnesses” audio installment of the WMDBS as part of your personal preparation, but I don’t recommend playing it for the group, unless it’s at the end of your session.
- (b) Begin with prayer, asking God to speak to the hearts and minds of each participant in a special way. Don’t use a pre-printed prayer, even if you are not used to leading spoken prayer. Use few words and speak from the heart. People appreciate this more than you may realize.
- (c) Remember that the purpose of the World’s Most Dangerous Bible Study is neither to show people how “terrible” their music is in comparison with the Bible, nor to show that “it all says the same thing anyway.” Rather, it is to create an honest conversation between the scriptures and the music – between faith and everyday life.
- (d) Be quicker to appreciate than denigrate. Music is important to people, and many popular songs speak with astonishing clarity on central life issues. People will not normally take criticism of their music seriously unless you first demonstrate an honest appreciation of it. If you can find nothing to appreciate, don’t lead this Bible study.
- (e) Despite (c) above, I have found that youth can be as prejudiced about certain forms of popular music as adults (frequently more so). Not everyone will like every song you offer. Be a diplomat. Don’t let the critics dominate the conversation. Remind them that the principle subject is not the form of music, but what is being conveyed in it. Offer to play other forms of music in future sessions.
- (f) Have fun! You don’t have to be a biblical scholar to lead this study, nor do you have to have “all the answers.” You’ll likely be surprised at how insightful participants can be. You will learn as much as you teach.

U2’s “Elevation” and Colossians 3:23-24

“Elevation”

Lyrics: You’ll find lyrics in the CD jacket, or online through any standard search engine such as www.google.com (type “lyrics” and “u2 elevation”).

Questions to Consider

Notes in italics below are for the leader’s use, not for the whole group.

(1) According to the song, what is life's goal?

Note that the end of each stanza speaks of "elevation."

(2) What is "elevation" to the songwriter? to you?

The song characterizes "elevation" in several ways. For instance, it meets a deep need, makes one feel like flying high, has something to do with love, truth, and belief.

(3) Why do you suppose going down/excavation is linked to elevation? Can you point to experiences in your life when "going down" led to "flying high"?

(4) How does the song speak of the relationship between love, truth and elevation? What kinds of love do you think lead to elevation? Is it limited to love for a boy/girlfriend?

Colossians 3:23-24

This letter has been attributed to the apostle Paul, though Pauline authorship is disputed by modern scholars. You may wish to refer to the author either as Paul or "the writer." Eugene Peterson writes an excellent introduction to this letter in THE MESSAGE Bible.

Our passage according to the NRSV: "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters [Greek: "not for men"], since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ."

Our passage according to THE MESSAGE: "... don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart of for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ."

Note that the context in which this passage stands – where the writer admonishes children to obey their parents and slaves to obey their masters – can easily sidetrack discussion into areas that are important (though frequently misunderstood), but not the focus of this particular study. What I hope you will be able to spend most of your time on is what life may be like if one truly believes and acts upon the notion that one is serving Christ through one's vocation.

Questions to Consider

- (1) According to the writer, what power deserves our highest loyalty (is most elevated)?

Note that the entire letter to the Colossians is focused on Christ's preeminence over all earthly and cosmic powers.

- (2) Howard Thurman once advised, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not?

Similar advice comes from the Christian mystic, St. Theresa d'Avila: "Do whatever arouses you most to love."

- (3) What makes you come alive most in this world? Would you ever consider doing it as a vocation? Why/why not?

Once youth get beyond the "skate board king" or "pop star queen", many will discover that they have a pretty good grasp on what truly brings them alive in the world. Frequently, though, they do not envision doing it because of financial/parental/prestige concerns. Yet, if the writer is correct that we should be serving others as if serving Christ, would it not make sense to find and do what makes us come fully alive? After all, if we are serving Christ, we'll want give our all, go the extra mile (or many miles!), do our very best. How can we sustain the energy if our vocation has nothing to do with what brings us alive?

- (4) If you were doing what makes you come alive as a vocation, and you were absolutely convinced that Christ is the primary beneficiary of your labors, how might you be practicing your vocation differently than the world usually practices it? Be as specific as possible.

This is worth spending a lot of time on. At some point, you may want to tell the story of Phil (from the "Cloud of Witnesses" CD) as a way of focusing the discussion – especially to bring out how Christ may be served in occupations not normally associated with discipleship.

Martin Luther King once advised, "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."

- (5) How might serving others as if serving Christ cause problems in your vocation? Would some of those problems arise because you would be

trying to act more justly toward others? What kind of trouble might you stir up?

- (6) Is vocation strictly tied to a job in which you make money, or are there other ways of living out vocation?

There are many ways people live out vocation without earning a living from it, and each of these ways has advantages and disadvantages which you may wish to explore. Note that even Paul did not make a living from his vocation as an evangelist, but used his skills at tent-making to pay the bills. Tent-making is what allowed Paul to do something the world was not yet ready to pay for (yet they were all too ready to beat him, cast him out of cities, and jail him for it!).

- (7) How might serving others as if serving Christ cause problems in your vocation? Would some of these problems arise because you would be trying to act more justly toward others? What kind of trouble might you stir up?

Bruce Van Blair, who appears elsewhere in “Cloud of Witnesses,” once observed, “God wants you doing what you can do best ... God assumes you will be doing it together.” When we start devoting what we do best to God, we may be certain of two things: (a) we’ll cause trouble; and (b) we won’t be going it alone.

- (8) Ephesians 2:10 asserts, “we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our path of life.” Do you think God calls us into vocation? If so, how specific is that calling (i.e., Does God call people to work in a specific job, or might a range of jobs fulfill a calling)?

*Van Blair has also observed, “The question that goes with conversion is not, ‘Are you saved?’ The question that goes with conversion is, ‘Are you **used**?’ Have you turned your life over enough so that God can use you? Are you a citizen of the Kingdom enough that you work for it?”*

Note that the word “vocation” is from the Latin vocatio – a calling, a summoning – from vocare, “to call.”

Putting It All Together

Now is the time to note the similarities and differences between the song and scripture. If you have been noting responses on a Dry Erase (or similar) board, you may visually represent these by drawing lines between the two.

- (1) What similarities do you find between the song and scripture? What differences?
- (2) Is there a relationship between elevation and vocation? How would the world be different if everyone believed this to be true? How would *your* life change?
- (3) Both the song and scripture deal in the realm of love, truth, and faith in relation to “elevation” (i.e., what brings one fully alive). Is it possible to find “elevation” without these three things? Why/why not?
- (4) How has your understanding of vocation changed as a result of this study? What concrete ways might you act on your understanding?

Next Steps

If this form of Bible Study proves helpful to you and your group, a logical next step is to ask participants what music they are currently listening to. Ask them to loan you CDs you may not have or wish to purchase. You can also find other installments of the World’s Most Dangerous Bible Study – both audio and written materials – elsewhere on this web site.

My criterion for choosing music is simple: If a song expresses something meaningful about life, and the participants are listening to it, I’ll use it. My theological assumption is that, if a song expresses something meaningful about life, the scriptures must have a way of engaging with it fruitfully. Otherwise, scripture would not be scripture. The connections may not always be overt or direct, but they are there. If you do not feel comfortable enough with your Bible knowledge to find related scriptures, put your Pastor on the hot seat. It is her or his responsibility as a Pastor to be familiar enough with the scriptures to notice connections between faith and everyday life. Provided she or he understands the song, and does not seek to overlay an external agenda on it, finding connections with the scriptures should not be too much trouble.