



32nd
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Synod

Bible Studies

ON PURPOSE

To set forth the Word of salvation for all people

*By the Synod Multi-cultural Reference Group.
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To set forth the Word of Salvation for all people

The aim of these studies is to further deepen our faith and understanding regarding how God is using our “common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people” (BoU para. 1).

The challenge before the church in its witness to Christ as the word of salvation for all people, is that in our postmodern culture today, people are sceptical and suspicious of anyone who claims to know the ‘truth’. There is your truth and my truth but to suggest that there is such a thing as universal truth, that is, truth for all people is now viewed as arrogant and even offensive.

Tolerance, therefore, has become the great virtue of contemporary society, seen as the key to social harmony, that of holding together a mix of diverse and even opposed cultures, lifestyles and beliefs.

The difficulty communicating in a pluralist society where truth is relative is that, as Leslie Newbigin points out, ‘truth simply disappears into the undifferentiated ocean of information’ (1985: 242).

This is not the problem as such. The real problem, as Newbigin contends, is that many churches have been too quick to try and avoid this charge of arrogance and “have been eloquent in their efforts to distance themselves from what is now judged to have been the arrogance of missionaries who talked of the evangelization of the world in their generation. They are eager to repent of the arrogance of their predecessors” (1985: 242).

Loren Mead, back in 1994, described the situation of postmodernism as being a very serious ‘storm, one that is more serious than the church has admitted, and much more serious than its leaders have yet comprehended’. This marks the end of ‘business as usual’ for the churches, says Mead (1994: 1).

David Bosch similarly argues that this new post-modern situation that the church now finds itself in is ‘confronting the Christian church with unprecedented challenges’ (1995:1). Kaldor says of the Australian context, that ‘the world no longer seems like a rosy garden, but much like a hostile jungle (1994: XIV).

Were these authors over exaggerating the situation?

Recent statistics regarding the Uniting Church suggests not. “The data, for the Uniting Church, reveals 2078 church locations across Australia, a decrease of 31 per cent since 1990, and a weekly worship attendance of 97 200 (including 12 500 children), a decline of 40 per cent”. Even more worrying is the fact that “more than a quarter of churches (542) have no children in the congregation and more than half of all churches have fewer than ten children” (2014 NCLS Research).

How are we to respond to these challenges? These bible studies seek answers, not by reflecting on our own life as such, though important, but on God, and how God is using our ‘common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people—the missio Dei.

Study 1: Missio Dei

The mission Dei: Jesus Christ, God's Word of Salvation for all people.

Matthew 3: 13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented. 16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Exegesis: The missio Dei – "In Jesus Christ 'God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin" (Basis of Union para. 3).

vs. 13: The unique fact that is revealed here is the fact that Jesus wants to be baptised; he wants to be part of the mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan to receive baptism.

vs. 14: quandary – who should be baptising who? Should Jesus undergo a baptism for the repentance of sins?

vs. 15: to fulfil all 'righteousness' Jesus places himself in the wrong; he accepts our death for the sins of humanity. This is the way of salvation.

vs. 16, 17. Heavens open up above Jesus; the Father's proclamation interprets not what Jesus does as such, but who Jesus Christ is as a person. Together with Jesus the Son of God, we encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinity is beginning to emerge.

Context: The question regarding the universal scope of Christianity. Is Christ as the Word of Salvation a word for all peoples? Christianity entered the world in the consciousness of a universal commission. However, today doubts have arisen regarding the universality of Christianity as a 'unique' Word of salvation.

Question: Does an embrace of the doctrine of equality, i.e. that all religions are ultimately equivalent take away the need for evangelism (mission and conversion)? Does the appeal for tolerance and respect for others mean that we can no longer talk about truth in any meaningful way?

Only from the perspective of Christ's baptism can we understand Christian Baptism and our calling to 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mat. 28: 20).

"To accept the invitation to be baptized now means to go to the place of Jesus' Baptism. It is to go where he identifies himself with us and to receive there our identification with him. The point where he anticipates death has now become the point where we anticipate rising again with him.... This is the way to become a Christian" (Ratzinger, J. 2017 Jesus of Nazareth p. 23).

Study 2: Worship

How is God using our common worship to set forth the word of salvation for all people?

We are called to worship the Lord our God and Him only shall we serve. Satan, however, will continue to try and push God aside in our thinking; make him a secondary matter, as if God is not actually needed or make God out to be annoying in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters such as 'making the world a better place'. This is at the heart of the temptations of Jesus in the desert, and at the heart of the church's temptations today.

Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

The Temptations in the wilderness. Mat. 4: 1-11

vs. 1 "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil". The story of the temptations is intimately connected with the story of the Baptism of Jesus, for it is there that Jesus enters into solidarity with sinners.

vs. 3 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'. This demand for proof is a constantly recurring theme in the story of Jesus' life. What a challenge for the church. If you claim to be the Church of God, then, start by providing bread for the world – the rest will come later. Jesus responds, vs. 4 "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God". Jesus is not uninterested in human hunger and our bodily needs, but Jesus places these things in their proper context and in their proper order.

vs. 6 "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written...." The devil proves to be a Bible expert who can quote the Psalm exactly. But, Jesus said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test". Our modern temptation is for God to submit to experiment. He is to 'tested' just as products are tested. If he doesn't provide, then, he is not God.

vs. 8. "All this I will give you, if you bow down and worship me". Jesus is invited to 'worship power', But, the Lord answers with a passage from Deuteronomy, the same book that the devil himself had cited: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt 4:10; cf. Deut 6:13). The fundamental commandment of Israel is also the fundamental commandment for Christians: God alone is to be worshiped.

Question: As we experience challenges in the life of the Church today, what temptations are appealing to us at this time that need to be brought to light and rejected?

"This so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at His Word".

"Sweet Peace, the gift of God's love"

"O Jesus is a rock in a weary land – a shelter in the time of storm"



Study 3: Witness

How is God using our common witness to set forth the word of salvation for all people?

Mark 1: 14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

There is an inseparable relationship between Christ and the Kingdom of God. Christ not only bears witness to the Kingdom of God, He is also ‘the’ Kingdom of God because he brings to us God! “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14: 9).

We wait “with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and the Christ, who shall reign forever and ever” (BoU para. 1).

We are called to bear ‘witness’ to Christ as Lord. If Christ is indeed Lord, then, we must be willing to stand up for our faith, even if that means becoming a ‘martyr’ for Christ. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mat. 16: 24).

Joo Gi chul, Korean Pastor and martyr says these words, “people of Christ, they shall live like people of Christ! People of Christ shall die like people of Christ. Do not turn away from Jesus because of the fear of death”.

Context in which we must bear witness to Christ as Lord in the world today. We live in an uncompromising secular society; people of faith, particularly Christians, are openly mocked and ridiculed. Matters of faith and truth are pushed to the margins of society. In its place, relativism and subjectivism now rule.

Conclusion: Christ brings to us the Kingdom of God in person. He is the Word of salvation. Only through Jesus can we be united in a ‘common’ witness to the Kingdom of God. We must have the courage to bear witness to Christ, that he is our hope and our salvation. Glory be to Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Questions:

What is your understanding of “the Kingdom of God?” What role does repentance play in helping us to ‘see’ the kingdom of God?

We may not be called to be martyrs in our Western society today, but what type of situations or circumstances call for courage?

How can we as the Uniting Church be more effective in our common witness to Christ as Lord in our secular, multicultural and pluralist society?

Study 4: Service

How God is using our 'common service' to set forth the Word of Salvation for all people?

Jesus is the Word of salvation for all people. By this we understand that both Jesus' words and actions are one! There is an intimate link between the two.

John 1: 1 "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... 14. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth".

The Basis of Union para. 1 reminds us that, "In entering into this union the Churches concerned are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died..."

Para. 4 "Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church".

Our service is modelled on Christ, who "did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage, but he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of servant...therefore God exalted Him so that..... every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2: 6-11).

The church cannot drive a wedge between words and deeds; evangelism and mission, theology and ethics, spirit and truth, gospel and law, sin and grace, cross and resurrection, Son of Man and Son of God. Both must be held intimately together, otherwise, our faith will be compromised.

"In the Gospels the new reality [in the world] is the presence of Jesus himself. He is here. In him the kingdom of God has come near so that it now confronts men and women with its reality and requires them either to be so radically turned around that they recognise the truth and believe, or else to continue on their way facing in the wrong direction and pursuing that which is not God's kingdom."

Question: How can we 'confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds' without compromising the truth of the gospel?

What can we learn through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures?