

# Lessons in Racism and Poverty

*A new resource by  
American Baptist Churches USA  
and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

October 2005

**Created in partnership between  
National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA and Congregational Life,  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Atlanta, GA**

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## **Introduction**

Poverty is an ugly sight. In America most of us have turned a blind eye to the poor among us. Others of us have simply covered over the ugliness with zoning laws or housing projects. But there is no escaping the flood of poverty in our nation. The recent hurricanes have uncovered the ugliness of poverty. We must respond with a loud “no more!”

Paul speaks about the groanings of nature. We have ignored these groanings, savaged the land for our own selfishness, and lusted greedily for even more. We have overweight pets; we waste enough food every day to feed the hungry. We have ignored the needs of those around us and become consumers of the worst kind. As Christians, we must do better. We have an obligation to care for the “least of these.”

This series of Bible studies have come from a burden. Leaders of the American Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have felt the pain of the poor. These leaders have decided to take a stand for brothers and sisters who have been ignored. We are repentant for our sin of looking past the poverty. We are determined to be the presence of Christ in our world.

Our prayers are that these studies will convict you to join us in the struggle. As you interact with God’s Word, may you too be led to join in responding to the plight of the poor. Poverty is a silent flood that threatens millions of Americans every day. Let us be found faithful.

Bo Prosser  
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## **A Word to the Teacher**

Beyond the traditional introductory material included in Bible learning sessions (Focal Passage, Background Passage, Session Synopsis, Key Verse, Session Objectives, Preparation, and Materials Needed) these materials make use of the following five movements for each session:

- Gathering – a thought or exercise for learners as they gather
- Missional Moment – motivate learners to learn about the subject
- Missional Mandate – examine what the Scripture has to say
- Missional Merger – apply the Scripture to life
- Commissioning – a powerful benediction

No doubt you’ve noticed the use of the term “missional” in the above movements. For the purpose of these lessons “missional” means being the presence of Christ on purpose. God reveals Missional Moments, opportunities to be the presence of Christ on purpose. The Scriptures give witness to our Missional Mandate to be so. The Missional Merger occurs when we combine the Moment and the Mandate and are the presence of Christ.

## **Lesson 1 - The Missional Moment**

**Focal Passage:** Deuteronomy 15:7–11

**Background Passages:** Psalm 69:1–3, 13–15, 24–27, 24–36; Romans 11:33–35; 2 Kings 22–23; Luke 4:18–20

**Session Synopsis:** The hurricane has led to awareness. This is a missional moment for us to turn from our own selfishness. The poor have been present, but we've overlooked them, shunned them. The disaster has made many of us poor, poor in spirit, poor in soul. We must now use our passion for loving our neighbor to help all arise from their poverty.

**Key Verse:** “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’ ” (Deut. 15:11).

### **Session Objectives**

Participants will:

- move beyond sadness, despair, defensiveness, or other common emotional reactions to hurricane Katrina and to move toward embracing this tragedy as a “missional moment,” an opportunity to speak prophetically, act faithfully, and experience personal transformation.
- recognize that hurricane Katrina has revealed poverty in many forms: the real, day-to-day lived poverty of the poor and marginalized; the impoverished social structures that led to class and race distinctions and crippled response to the needs of the “least among us”; and the poverty of our own awareness and faithfulness that left individual Christians, churches, and denominations at a loss in knowing how to respond.
- wrestle with the truth of God’s tremendous concern for the poor from the beginning as evidenced throughout the Scriptures and in particular in Deuteronomy 15.

### **Preparation**

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and spend some time thinking about the ways you respond to people with partiality and also reflect on times you have felt powerless.
- Make copies as noted in Materials Needed.

### **Materials Needed**

- Bibles
- Copies of litanies for each person

## Gathering

Overwhelmed. We have been overwhelmed by a hurricane. Its waters have overflowed the levies; its winds have blown over homes and destroyed bridges and roads. We have been overwhelmed by the number of dead, by the breakdown of vital systems of order, and by the frightening realization that we are vulnerable to forces beyond our control. We have been flooded with concern for evacuees who are spilling out of our schools and gyms. We are paralyzed by the infinite needs. We are numbed by the media. And we do not know how to help.

In such an overwhelming time, let us gather together and join with God's people across the ages by attending to Psalm 69. This is a psalm for a people who are overwhelmed and out of control. It is a reminder that we are not the first to be swept off our feet and overwhelmed, but it is also an important opportunity to direct all of our overwhelming desires, hopes, and fears in a common direction. That direction is the worship of a God of justice.

Note how Psalm 69 begins as a plea for help and becomes a powerful lament and even an expression of rage. It gives voice to a remarkable biblical vision: all creation (even the seas) giving praise to God as destroyed cities are being rebuilt. We will read parts of Psalm 69, and follow each reading with silence. After each reading the leader will give instructions, inviting the group to express first helplessness, then anger, and finally hope.

### 1. Psalm 69:1-3

**Instructions:** In the first silence after the reading try to remember the one most disturbing image of the events of Katrina. Bring to mind one person or place that you would help if you could. At the end of our silence, you will be asked to name that one person or place in one or two words.

Read:

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God” (Ps. 69:1-3).

Sit in silence. After an appropriate silence (thirty seconds to one minute), invite the group to speak their one- or two-word responses.

### 2. Psalm 69:13-15

**Instructions:** In the next silence try to picture yourself helping those whom you named earlier. What would you do if you could reach them?

Read:

“But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.

At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help rescue me from sinking in the mire;

let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

Do not let the flood sweep over me or the deep swallow me up,  
or the Pit close its mouth over me” (Ps. 13–15).

Sit in silence. After an appropriate silence (thirty seconds to one minute), invite the group to respond in short sentences. “If I could be there to help, I would . . .”

### **3. Psalm 69:24-27**

**Instructions:** All of us are frustrated. Many of us are angry. Once again there is much finger pointing and poisonous speech in our country. In this silence you will be asked to bring your anger and frustration into the light of our common worship. It is important that we do not let anger fester within us, but we must also be careful so that our anger will be shaped by the Word of God and directed toward justice rather than mere spite. We will join the psalmist, offering our anger to God and asking God for justice. In the silence try to bring to mind the things which have made you angry or frustrated during the events of Katrina.

Read:

“Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them.

May their camp be a desolation; let no one live in their tents.

For they persecute those whom you have struck down,

and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.

Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal from you” (Ps. 24–27).

Sit in silence. After an appropriate silence, ask, “In one sentence what has made you angry in the events of hurricane Katrina?”

### **4. Psalm 69:34–36**

**Instructions:** In the next silence bring to mind images of hope. Try to think of one person who has acted faithfully, or try to recall an act of kindness or mercy that you witnessed.

Read:

“Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them.

For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah;

and his servants shall live there and possess it;

the children of his servants shall inherit it,

and those who love his name shall live in it” (Ps. 69:34–36).

After the appropriate silence, invite the group to give voice to images of hope.

## **5. Close the gathering time with a prayer.**

**Help for Teachers:** Take care in how you frame this gathering time. Do not let this introductory time become an hour of venting. Most of us do not need another opportunity to vent our anger, but we desperately need to renew our minds and hearts in the hope of the gospel. Tell the group up front that we must limit this exercise to a certain time, and try to help them see that the goal is to direct our many emotions toward redemption and hope rather than either stifling or venting them.

**Help for Teachers:** Do not be afraid of the silence. Do not move through it too quickly. We have been overwhelmed by images and sounds, by politicians and commentators. Let us begin a serious work with this silence, trusting that God has wisdom for us, a wisdom that confounds earthly wisdom (Rom. 11:33–35). Silence may be the most truthful thing we do.

## **The Missional Moment**

### **1. Read Scripture text: Deuteronomy 15:7–11.**

We will read it again and study it more specifically in the next section, but the text sets an important tone for this part of the discussion. It invites us to consider whether there are people in need among us or we are simply unaware of the true needs around us.

### **2. Dispatch from Mississippi**

As the first day after the hurricane was ending, I was preparing to go home from church. It had been a long, hot, and hectic day of securing our own house and checking on church members. Everyone seemed OK, and it was time to go home when the phone rang. It was my friend David from Nashville. “Have you checked on the poor in your community?” he asked.

I had not. I had driven past the hidden neighborhood where the poor mostly live in Clinton, Mississippi, and I had wondered how some of the families I knew had fared during the storm. But I had spent my day checking on our members, and we have no one in our church that lives in that neighborhood. David understood. That was not surprising. “Now go check on the poor,” he said. Reminded by a good friend who does not mind asking me to be true to my calling, I went to check on the poor families I know in our community.

The larger questions raised by this story (and the events of Katrina) are whether the poor have become invisible to us and whether that has been through active or passive neglect by people of faith. To begin a conversation about those issues, choose from the questions below:

- How many poor people can you call by name? In what context did you learn their names?
- How far is your church from a poor neighborhood?
- Is anyone in your congregation in need?

- How far is your home from a poor neighborhood? How far is your home from your church?
- Do you know of a church that has moved out of a poor neighborhood? Do you know of churches that have stayed in poor neighborhoods despite pressure to move?

**For intense further discussion and reflection:** “Studies have shown . . . that whites begin to move out of their neighborhoods once the percentage of black residents rises above approximately 8 percent.”<sup>1</sup> No doubt your community will have seen neighborhoods changing in population because of racial migrations. Frequently there is a corresponding history of economic changes in such neighborhoods. How has your congregation responded to these changes? How have you talked about them? Are these issues too divisive to address?

### **3. Race and poverty exposed in the wake of hurricane Katrina**

“We’re seeing people we didn’t know existed.” (Former FEMA director speaking in the aftermath of Katrina)

- Have the events of Katrina revealed poverty you did not know existed? Were you surprised to see the conditions of inner city neighborhoods in New Orleans?
- Have the events of Katrina revealed that people of faith have grown too comfortable with rising poverty rates?

As a class, estimate the number of poor people who live in your community. The official poverty rate for 2004 was \$15,670 for a family of three and \$18,850 for a family of four.<sup>2</sup>

“On August 30th of this year, as the levees of New Orleans were giving way, the U.S. Census Bureau issued its annual Poverty Report. . . . The official poverty rate for the nation rose from 12.5 percent in 2003 to 12.7 percent in 2004. . . . The number of people in poverty increased as well by 1.1 million to 37 million people in 2004.”<sup>3</sup>

**Do the math:** Ask for an estimate of the poor in your own community based on your own estimate of the population of your city or town. Multiply the population by .127. Now ask for an estimate of how many more people in your community were in poverty at the end of 2004 compared to 2003. Multiply your population estimate by .125 and subtract that number from the previous number. (Obviously this will not be a true number, but use it as a way to begin to wonder at how many poor people are in your community. The poverty rate itself is an imperfect indicator of poverty. The word *poverty* is even hard to define. Does it mean lacking basic necessities, or does it mean unable to live without shame in one’s community?<sup>4</sup>

**For further discussion:** The difference between 12.5 and 12.7 percent is small, and it is easy to be unaffected by that number. And yet that slight increase represents people with names in your community. How might churches learn the names of those people?

## **The Missional Mandate: Deuteronomy 15:7–11**

### **1. Read the text a second time.**

The story is told (and most scholars believe) that this section of Deuteronomy is a form of the scroll that was found in the temple during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). Josiah was a (rare) righteous king; and in the middle of his reign, he began a project of reform that included cleaning the temple of corruptive, pagan elements. In the process of cleaning the temple, the high priest reported that he had found a “book of the law,” a text of law which had been previously lost or perhaps neglected. The high priest gave the scroll to Josiah’s secretary, and Josiah had the secretary read the book aloud.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that the scroll was read aloud. Deuteronomy includes the commandment, which Jesus called the “greatest commandment” in Matthew 22:37 and parallels. It is known as the Shema, and it begins, “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:5). *Shema* means “hear,” and this is a call to listen and obey. The act of hearing the text spoken out loud reinforces our proper role as humble hearers of a revealed word. When Josiah heard the text, he tore his robes in an act of royal repentance and then began an aggressive national reform. Consider asking the group to hear this text again, this time as a neglected word from God that calls for our humble hearing and even our repentance.

Although Deuteronomy was a central text for Jesus (he quoted it more than any other biblical book), it is relatively unknown for many Christians, so it will be important to place this text in a larger context.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 15 is part of the so-called “Deuteronomistic Code,” which includes chapters 12–26 and is widely considered to be a commentary on the Decalogue (or the Ten Commandments). Our text, 15:7–11, belongs to a commentary on the third commandment, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (14:22–16:17).

There are other similar commentaries on the law in the Old Testament in Exodus (20–23) and Leviticus (17–26). All of them contain instructions concerning care of the underprivileged and warnings for those who oppress, but Deuteronomy is unique, and the contrasts highlight important features of this text. For example, in Leviticus a system is provided to keep borrowers from taking advantage of lenders, but the focus in Deuteronomy is on “the motivations of the lender.”<sup>7</sup> Notice that the lender is the one addressed here. Other texts address the responsibilities of the poor. Deuteronomy sets its sight on those who have an obligation to care for the poor.

In Deuteronomy 15:1 we are instructed to forgive all debts in the Sabbath or seventh year; therefore, the instruction in verse 9 involves a risk: One may not recover capital if you loan in or near the Sabbath year. This is an exceptionally generous position. The warning which follows is sharp: If you view the needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing, that neighbor might “cry to the LORD against you” (15:9). The people of the Israel first cried to the Lord against the Egyptians (Exodus. 2:23–25); to turn a back to the needy would be fatal failure of memory, to forget the Lord and his benefits.

## **Specific Questions on the Text**

1. Notice that Sabbath is the context for this text on economic justice and that these instructions are not set within a commentary on stealing or coveting. One might think these were more likely settings for such issues; instead, our care for the poor is set within a particular kind of social vision where land and people are not exploited and used up but given rest. Thus the larger biblical vision of economic justice raises enormous questions about our modern global economy, which is built on unquenchable desire and endless work. Ultimately, this passage demands that we ask larger questions about the structure of economic systems.

**Question:** Does our global economic system violate the principle of Sabbath rest?

2. Notice that in order to obey this command, we must first know our neighbors (Deut. 15:7). Yet our neighborhoods are now developed so as to isolate us from one another and to segregate us by income.

**Questions:** Is there a sense in which it will be more difficult to obey this command because of the way we have developed our cities? What can churches do to change our proximity to people in need?

3. We are specifically exhorted to refrain from hostility to the poor (Deut. 15:9). Have we witnessed any “hostility” to the needy in our culture?

## **The Missional Merger**

The study before you represents a combined effort of the American Baptist Churches and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It began with a statement of repentance to the poor issued by the leaders of both bodies.

1. Consider challenging your own church to draft its own statement of repentance in the light of the events of hurricane Katrina. For what would you repent and to whom?

2. Josiah’s repentance included reading the discovered scroll aloud before the people and asking them to repeat their covenant. When do you read your own church covenant? Does it include mention of care for the poor? Should it? Could this text be the impetus for a renewed covenant in your congregation?

## **Commissioning**

Explain that our closing litany is a direct quotation from Luke 4:18–20, Jesus’ inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Explain that the reference to “the year of the Lord’s favor” is thought to be an allusion to the Sabbath year, a year of the release of all debts. Urge the group to depart in the same silence with which we began. In silence we will recognize that too many words have already been spoken on this divisive and difficult

issue. In silence, let us pledge to listen to one another and to God as we continue this study. By departing in silence, let us allow Jesus to have the last word.

**Leader:** The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

**People:** because he has anointed me

**All:** to bring good news to the poor.

**Leader:** He has sent me

**People:** to proclaim release to the captives

**All:** and recovery of sight to the blind,

**Leader:** to let the oppressed go free,

**People:** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

**Leader:** And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

Depart in silence.

1. David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 25.
2. Ibid.
3. U.S. Census Bureau Video Webcast, from transcript of "Speaking of Faith," American Public Media, <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/seeingpoverty/index.shtml>, 15 September 2005.
4. For a helpful theological discussion of the way we define wants and needs and a Christian vision of poverty, see David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 108–13.
5. Mark E. Biddle, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 2–3.
6. Ibid., 9.
7. Ibid., 258.

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*Lesson by Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church, Clinton, MS.*

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## Lesson 2 - Poverty Uncovered

**Focal Passage:** Amos 5:11–24

**Background Passages:** Amos 1:1; 2:6–8; 4:1–3; 7:14; 8:4–6; Psalm 40:1–8, 13–17

**Session Synopsis:** Amos calls us to an awareness of all the sickness of greed and selfishness. We think we can “buy” our way into heaven! God tells us through the words of the prophet that he is not impressed.

**Key Verse:** “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5:23).

### Session Objectives

Participants will:

- recognize that we are accountable for our actions and cannot depend on “right rituals” to keep us faithful to God.
- explore ways that our moralisms (words) and religiosity (rituals) have replaced faithful action.
- identify one areas of injustice (ways we neglect the poor and structures that create and maintain poverty) in which we are complicit.

### Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and spend some time thinking about the ways you respond to people with partiality and also reflect on times you have felt powerless.
- Make copies as noted in Materials Needed.

### Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Copies of litanies for each participant

### Gathering

Bill McKibben writes that 75 percent of Americans (most of whom profess to be Christians) believe that the expression “God helps those who help themselves” comes from the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it doesn’t come from the Bible but from Benjamin Franklin, and it represents more of an American ethos of work and self-reliance than it does a biblical vision.

Americans have strong convictions about work and individual achievement. We are working longer hours than ever, and many of us feel like something is wrong if we are not busy. Sometimes we even feel ashamed when we are not productive because we have been so profoundly shaped by this work ethic.

When we are discussing the poor in America, we will need to take into account these strong notions of shame which are associated in our culture with being unable to produce, keep up, or keep busy. To be poor will always mean to live in desperate need, but in our culture it will also mean to live in shame and disgrace because the poor are seen as a drain on our resources. They are seen as those who cannot produce, and we look away from such people in our culture. We recoil from that which we define as shameful.

Of course the Bible commends work and critiques idleness, but there work is good when it contributes to a common good; it is not good when it is pursued for private gain. For example, Proverbs says that “one who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal” (18:9) but then almost immediately warns that the rich are in danger of destructive pride (18:11–12). (See also the warning against self-indulgence in verse 1.) In this context the rich are the biggest threat to our common life because of their private search for individual happiness. In this vision the idle are more a nuisance than a threat.

In the New Testament Paul speaks clearly that all members of a Christian community have obligations to provide for the common good (see 4:28). Thieves are urged to quit stealing and get to work, but notice that the purpose of their work is not so they will quit being a drain on the community but that they also can make contributions to the needy. In other words the common good is directed toward care for the poor. Work is valuable if it contributes to our common good, which is directed to love and care for the vulnerable. Work is not valuable in and of itself.

From a biblical perspective there is no shame in poverty, and neither is work celebrated if it leads to mere personal wealth. From a biblical perspective it is disgraceful to ignore or exploit the poor, but it is not disgraceful to be poor.<sup>2</sup> Jesus also makes astonishing claims (to American ears) about the blessedness of poverty (Luke 6:20).

Today we will not try to unravel the perplexing, unsettling differences between the American dream and the biblical vision; rather, let us take a more modest course. Today let us ask simply whether we have been formed more deeply by a biblical vision of blessedness or a modern American vision of private happiness and success. Today Amos will want to know whether our worship forms us into people who can see and love the poor or only serves to disconnect us from the poor. We will be asking what we desire, what we celebrate, and what we earnestly seek.

We will begin again in quiet reflection, allowing the words of the psalmist to form our own cry for help. Notice how this psalm is written from the perspective of one who is poor.

### **Psalm 40 Responsive Reading**

Invite the group to remember the poor and needy that have been exposed to us in the wake of Katrina as well as the poor in our own communities who have been hidden to us. (Have we looked away from them, in part, because we are embarrassed? Do we recoil at the poor?) As they remember our purpose in gathering, invite them to listen to selections from Psalm 40.

**Leader:** I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

**People:** He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

**Leader:** He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God,

**All:** Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD (Ps. 40:1–3).

(Silent meditation, 10–15 seconds)

**Leader:** Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.

Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

**People:** Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

**All:** “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:6–8).

(Silent meditation, 10–15 seconds)

**Leader:** Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me.

**People:** Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt.

**Leader:** Let those be appalled because of their shame, who say to me, “Aha, Aha!”

**People:** But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!”

**Leader:** As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me.

**All:** You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God (Ps. 40:13-17)

## **The Missional Moment**

### **1. Read the Scripture text: Amos 5:11–24.**

You will read it again in more detail, but we should allow Amos to frame the rest of our discussion. Ask for no comment at this point except for questions of clarification.

### **2. What is shameful, and what is celebrated?**

Amos describes a people with misplaced values and disordered desires. Their appetites are insatiable, and they value individual wealth and private possession over common wealth and justice. As a means of exploring and perhaps exposing our own cultural values, go through the following list and assign values to each word based on your own immediate impression of it. In the company that you ordinarily keep, do these words invoke shame or celebration? Assign a value, from 0 to 10: 0–2 indicates a reaction of shame, 3–4 indicates a general negative reaction, 5 indicates a neutral reaction, 6–7 indicates a general positive reaction, and 8–10 indicates celebration.

Shameful (0–2)	Negative (3–4)	Neutral (5)	Positive (6–7)	Celebrated (8–10)
welfare queen	workaholic	poor	wealthy	
insider trader	looter	billionaire	dead-beat dad	
go-getter	indigent	tycoon	beggar	
prosperous	dependent	windfall	gambling debt	
profit	handout			

**For Discussion:** In our culture enormous value is placed on work, wealth, and industry. Shame is generally reserved for those who will not work. Did you notice excessively negative or shameful values assigned to any certain words? Did you assign positive values to words associated with wealth? Amos values justice and righteousness and seems to find it scandalous to ignore or trample the poor. Discuss these two different value systems.

## The Missional Mandate

The book of Amos is a collection of the prophecies of Amos. We are not sure who Amos was although he claims to be a common laborer (1:1; 7:14). The literary style is advanced, and the author is obviously familiar with broad political issues. One thinks of the eloquence of Martin Luther King Jr. or Clarence Jordan, both simple preachers with extraordinary rhetorical abilities and sophisticated social critiques. Amos was one of the early prophets, active during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah, circa 760 BCE. This places him some forty years before the fall of Samaria, the capital city, to Assyria (722/21 BCE) Indeed his message of judgment for the house of Israel seems to have been fulfilled as the Northern kingdom of Israel was never heard from again after the fall to Assyria.

The years during which Amos prophesied (the first half of the eighth century, BCE) were years of expansion and economic prosperity for the Northern kingdom of Israel. Due to weakness in foreign powers, Israel was able to expand its borders and control trade routes. The economy flourished. There is evidence that a new class of merchants arose, building large homes; but at the same time there is also evidence of a growing gap between rich and poor. Small farmers were dispossessed to make room for the expansion of large estates.<sup>3</sup> (Remember that Amos purports to be a simple herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, the business of the poor.) In other words, business was good . . . for the rich. It was a season of rapid growth, but Amos condemns this prosperity, claiming that it was built on the backs of the poor and that it benefits only the few (see especially 2:6–8; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:4–6). He condemns a people who are so hungry for profit that they cannot wait for the Sabbath to end so they can return to their unjust business practices (see 8:4–6).

It is tempting to read Amos as a radical critique, but he thinks of himself as a conservative, reminding the people of their obligations under the law.<sup>4</sup> Last week's study of Deuteronomy, which showed God's clear law concerning treatment of the poor, leads naturally to this week's study of Amos, a prophecy of judgment for a disobedient people.

Amos makes a clear connection between economics and worship (see 2:7 and 5:21–24). The people are blind to the incongruity between the worship of God and the mistreatment of the poor.<sup>5</sup> Amos grounds the problem in covetousness or unbridled economic desires (4:1–3). There is a warning against those who put their trust in military preparedness (5:9) and a warning that the temple has become “the king’s sanctuary . . . a temple of the kingdom” (7:13) In other words, here is a picture of a religious establishment in service to the powers that be, blind to its own part in the disenfranchisement of the poor.

Our passage begins in the law courts where the poor have come seeking justice only to be hated for filing charges. The “gate” of Amos 5:10 is a reference to the place of court proceedings, and it seems that they were bullied when they came demanding justice.<sup>6</sup> Verses 14–15 challenge any easy, casual assumption that “the Lord is with you.” If you want the presence of God, “seek good and not evil.” Never presume that God is on your side. Verses 16–17 are written in the language of a funeral dirge. Israel is fallen; there is nothing left to do but mourn. Verses 18–20 introduce a powerful image: “the day of the LORD.” By this is meant that future day when God will intervene on Israel’s behalf. It is possible that Israel’s prosperity had prompted some to proclaim that the day of the Lord was near. To these it seemed obvious that God was pleased with Israel: Is not prosperity a sign that God is on your side? “Watch out,” says Amos. The day of the Lord will be a day of judgment for the rich and vindication for the poor. He anticipates Jesus who declares in a stunning reversal that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt. 20:16). Finally, verses 21–23 include strong language (hate and despise) from God regarding worship which has been disconnected from justice and righteousness. Right worship cannot be separated from right social relations. The *New Revised Standard Version* translation of verse 22, “I will not accept them,” should read, “I will not smell them.” Thus translated, the image becomes one of God shutting first nose, then eyes, then ears to our offensive worship.<sup>7</sup>

## Questions and Notes

**Warning for Teachers:** Reading Amos is hazardous. These questions, if asked in public, will cause internal and external conflict, so be gracious with one another but do not avoid the hard questions raised by this text. You will not have time to discuss all of them fully, so plan your approach. The teacher may choose to ask only one or two, or the teacher may choose to survey them all and let the group respond generally.

1. The passage begins in court. How are our poor treated in court? In our criminal justice system? “In 1971 there were fewer than 200,000 people in America’s state and federal prisons. By 2001, that number had grown almost to 1.4 million, or close to a seven-fold increase. If local jails, youth facilities, military prisons, and other forms of imprisonment are included, on any given day over two million Americans are incarcerated. . . . This rate is the highest in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

**Questions:** Which is a more pressing question of justice in our culture right now, tort reform or prison reform? What does your answer indicate about our cultural values?

2. The connection Amos makes between worship and economic matters is startling. In his view there does not seem to be any divide between how we worship and how we live.

**Questions:** Have we seen worship as a “spiritual” activity, which is strictly separate from material concerns? Does our worship form us into people who love and care for the poor, or does it merely express our feelings and emotions? Which is more important for us to consider, national political reform or congregational liturgical reform?

3. Amos has a message of judgment to the house of Israel: “Your social order is transient. It will not last, but God’s justice is eternal.” This was hard to imagine for a people told they were “chosen,” and it is also hard to hear in a country which has been taught that our style of democracy is the hope of all humankind.<sup>9</sup>

**Questions:** Is it possible that our social order is good but not eternal; or even flawed and in need of correction; or, dare we say, unjust and bound for destruction? Do teachings about the special role of our country in the world make it harder to hear a passage like this?

4. Notice how Amos challenges any gospel that promises prosperity and at the same time addresses our glib assumptions that the day of the Lord will mean good news for us. Amos calls us to beware: unjust social orders will not stand in the Day of Judgment.

**Question:** When we talk about “last things” in worship, is the judgment of social inequities part of our picture?

## **The Missional Merger**

If you have not discovered this by now, you will: poverty is a divisive issue. One source of bitter divisiveness is the question of a proper government role in addressing poverty. Although that is an enormously important question, for the purposes of this lesson it could distract us in two ways. First, that question could distract us by dividing us into political corners, and before long your Sunday School could be another battleground in a culture war. Don’t let that happen today. Second, that question could be a copout. That is, it is sometimes much easier to talk about legislative policy than it is to imagine faithful responses to poverty.

Today Amos asks begs to ask us questions about justice: Are the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer? But at the same time Amos is asking us whether our worship forms us into a people capable of seeing, loving, and caring for the poor. Amos wants to know what we desire, what we celebrate, and what causes us shame? He wants to know what we earnestly seek. Do we desire individual wealth? Do we celebrate the rich and shame the poor? Or do we seek the reign of God, where poor are celebrated and injustice is a scandal?

The following four questions are written to help you ask those larger questions. Choose one or two.

**Teacher Help:** Be careful not to let the discussion deteriorate into predictable “liberal versus conservative” patterns. When and if this happens, you might want to stop the discussion and pay more attention to that phenomenon. Ask the class: “Why is it that it is getting harder for the church to discuss issues that matter without falling into these same two divisions?” It may be that your group needs to discuss that issue. Certainly the powers that profit from poverty have an interest in God’s people not being able to speak to one another. It may be that the first thing we need to do is ask whether we have been so formed by the so-called culture wars that we are unable to pay attention to important matters in a faithful way.

**1. Charitable Giving.** Within ten days of hurricane Katrina, donors had given over \$600 million to relief, and studies show that charitable giving is rising steadily (from \$231 billion in 2001 to \$249 billion in 2004). A closer look at these numbers suggests that we are far more generous to those we perceive as innocent victims than to those whom we think are responsible for their own condition. For example, gifts to legal services, food pantries, and rehabilitation for ex-convicts has declined in each of those years (from \$22.1 billion in 2001 to \$19.2 billion in 2004).<sup>10</sup>

**Question:** What do we say about ourselves when we discriminate between those worthy of compassion and those unworthy?

**2. Where Your Treasure Is.** According to evangelical scholar Ronald Sider, studies suggest that the wealthier Christians become, the less we give in proportion to our incomes. Since 1968 the average income of Christians has steadily increased, and yet the percentage we give to the church has decreased.

- In 1968 the average church member gave 3.1 percent of their income to their church.
- In 1990 the average church member gave 2.66 percent of their income.
- In 1968 evangelical denominations averaged yearly contributions at 6.15 percent of income and mainline churches averaged 3.11 percent.
- In 2002 evangelicals averaged yearly contributions at 4.27 percent while mainline churches averaged 3.17 percent.<sup>11</sup>

**Question:** The Bible is clear that God has a special concern for the poor. What accounts for evidence that the wealthier we become, the less we give? Do these figures indicate that Christians are shaped more by a biblical vision or by the American dream?

**Discussion:** Estimate the percentage of your church’s yearly receipts that go toward care of the poor. How would you determine a faithful figure?

**3. Christians on Race.** Any discussion of poverty in America is incomplete until it has addressed race, but this is another divisive issue, and we have not done much in this lesson to prepare for it. Still, here are some figures that might help begin a discussion about distorted desires and racial division.

According to Ron Sider, “In 1989 George Gallup Jr. and James Castelli published the results of a survey to determine which groups in the United States were least and most likely to object to having black neighbors . . . Catholics and non-evangelical Christians ranked least likely to object to black neighbors; 11 percent objected. Mainline Protestants came next at 16 percent. At 17 percent, Baptists and evangelicals were among the most likely groups to object to black neighbors, and 20 percent of Southern Baptists objected to black neighbors.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the authors of *United by Faith* (Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, Geroge Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim), there are approximately 230,000 Christian congregations in the United States. Only 5.5 percent of those are multiracial, defined as “a congregation in which no one racial group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership.”<sup>13</sup>

**Question:** Do Christians do more to eradicate racism or do we do more to perpetuate it in our culture? Is diversity part of the vision of your church?

## Commissioning

What do you want? What does God desire? For what are you hungry? For this closing time it would be appropriate to place an empty chalice and communion plate in the center of the group. Begin in quiet reflection. Ask the group to consider the emptiness of that plate and cup, and pray that it would be full with enough bread to share. Pray also for your worship, that in offering yourselves to God you would become like the One you love and adore.

After an appropriate silence (30 seconds), begin this liturgy (adapted from Matt. 5:6; Mac. 6:8; and Matt. 9:13).

**Leader:** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

**People:** For they will be filled.

**Leader:** What does the Lord require of you?

**People:** To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

**Leader:** Go and learn what this means,

**People:** “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

**Leader:** What does God desire, and for what do we hope?

**People:** Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

1. Bill McKibben, “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation gets Jesus Wrong,” *Harpers*, Vol. 311, No. 1863, August 2005, 31.

2. This is the argument of David Matzko McCarthy in *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 108–13

3. J. D. Smart, “Amos,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 118.

4. Gene M. Tucker, “Amos: Introduction,” *Harper-Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 1356.

5. Shelley, 746

6. *Ibid.*, 750.

7. Ibid., 750.

8. David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettoes Happen* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 35.

9. “The ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. . . . That hope still lights the way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.” George W. Bush, “President’s Remarks to the Nation,” 11 September 11 2002 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html>).

10. “Donors Favor Those ‘Worthy’ of Compassion,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 122, No. 20, 4 October 2005, 12–13.

11. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 20–21.

12. Sider, 24–25.

13. “All Churches Should Be Multiracial,” *Christianity Today*, April 2005 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/22.33.html>).

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*Lesson by Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church, Clinton, Mississippi.*

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## Lesson 3 - Seeing the Pain

### Focal Passage: James 2:1–13

**Session Synopsis:** The divisiveness of race, class, and neglect is real. There are real consequences when we make unfair judgments. God has chosen us, *not* to judge people who experience poverty but to love those in need as we love ourselves.

**Key Verse:** “Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:4).

### Session Objectives

Participants will . . .

- explore the concept of redemptive suffering.
- explore how partiality is present in their own lives, in the church, and also woven into our social structures as revealed in the hurricane tragedies.
- explore their own experiences of hardship and powerlessness.
- seek empathy with those we call the poor and marginalized.
- allow the experience of kinship and empathy to lay the groundwork for planning strategies to address injustice and poverty in future sessions

### Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and spend some time thinking about the ways you respond to people with partiality and also reflect on times you have felt powerless.
- Make copies as noted in Materials Needed.
- Gather items and prepare items for the Mission Merger activity.

### Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Copies of participants’ pieces for each person
- Tray with disposable cups, one per person, with only half containing a small amount of drinking water; keep the rest empty
- Crackers (saltines are fine)
- Large glass jar or clear pitcher with water and coffee grounds (those from morning coffee will work)
- Table for all to gather around

### Gathering

As participants gather, offer a word of welcome, share prayer requests, and lead an opening prayer. Pass out copies of “Them and Us?” and read it together as an introduction to the session.

## **The Missional Moment**

### *Activity 1: Explore own experiences of personal disaster and/or marginalization*

Remind the group that one of the most damaging aspects of disaster is the traumatic experience of feeling different, of feeling less powerful than others, or of feeling isolated by your suffering. Explain that we compound the trauma to those who experience disaster firsthand when we don't see ourselves in others.

Invite participants to spend some time quietly recalling a time when they went through a difficult experience or hardship. Encourage them in particular to think about an experience in which things were beyond their control, in which they had to wait, accept what was happening, and the only thing they had to hang onto was hope. After a period of reflection, invite some sharing with questions such as:

- How did you feel during that experience?
- Were there times when it was impossible to *feel* hopeful?
- Were there aspects of the experience that rendered you marginalized or powerless? For example, in a medical crisis, did you have to deal with personnel who wouldn't give you answers or an insurance situation that was impossible to solve? Or in a financial crisis, did you have to deal with companies that messed up records or computerized systems that didn't allow for difficult circumstances?
- What or who, if anyone, made it easier for you to get through? Did you find others to lean on, or were you feeling completely alone?
- During the experience what, if anything, reminded you of God's love?
- How much of a factor were people's responses to how much you suffered?
- Looking back, what did that experience teach you about how God works in this world?

### *Activity 2: Explore some of the partiality that has been revealed in the hurricane disaster*

Pass out copies of "Injustice Appears in the Eye of the Storm" and review it together. After reading, move immediately into activity 1 of the Missional Mandate.

## **The Missional Mandate**

### Activity 1: Define "The Poor"

Hand out copies of "A Brief Synopsis of the Bible and Poverty" and review the material together. Then spend some time identifying those in contemporary culture who fit within the category "the poor." Take care to identify specific groups of people and why they qualify, according to biblical definition, as "poor."

### Activity 2: Explore the Text

Review the following background material and share pertinent information with your group. Then read together James 2:1–13.

*The Book of James: While tradition holds that this "letter" was written by the brother of Jesus, its Greek style leads many scholars to conclude the author was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian who lived many years after James, the brother of Jesus. Whatever the*

*case, James, which is more a collection of guidelines for living than a letter, contains teachings that are similar to those of Jesus. The strength of this book lies in its clear and to-the-point instructions for a faith that is validated through action. This strength has also historically been its weakness. As the biblical canon was being formed, James's emphasis on "doing" made it suspect among church leaders who wished to keep the book out of the Bible. Contemporary readers who want to embrace grace while neglecting the demands of the gospel are sometimes uncomfortable with James's central theme of the inseparability of faith and obedience. Having weathered its critics, the book of James indeed became part of the Christian Bible, to forever call us to an authentic Christianity, which manifests itself in faithful living*

*James 2:1-13: Respect for the poor is one of five key areas of interest that James addresses repeatedly. Early Christians may have been tempted to give preference to people with wealth and power because they could provide needed money and protection to the church, which lived at risk in a hostile environment. Developing the admonition of 1:9-10, "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field," James warns against favoring the rich and against neglecting the poor. He begins by suggesting that favoritism to the wealthy cancels faith in Christ who came to us humble and lowly. Drawing on Old Testament laws that were designed to protect the poor and marginalized, James reminds his readers of the connections between wealth and oppression, poverty and victimization: by siding with the rich, they dishonor the poor among them and blaspheme God.*

After reading, spend some time exploring people's responses to the text with questions such as:

- Is the direct connection that James draws between rich and poor and the explicit condemnation of favoring the rich and powerful troubling?
- In what ways do we as individuals or as a church favor people in power or people with financial resources?
- What are the risks of not showing favor to those with financial and social power?
- What are the risks of welcoming and raising up the poor?

## **Missional Merger**

This exercise is designed to bring participants into a symbolic experience that will help them explore the notions of poverty and partiality with their hearts rather than with their minds. You will need to have the items gathered and near the table ahead of time so you can move easily through this learning experience. Resist the desire to over explain. Rather allow the exercise to unfold at a pace that suits the participants' involvement with it. Model a willingness to tolerate the awkwardness of silence. Meaning will surface as the nonnegotiable aspects of the exercise reveal themselves.

Before you begin, explain that this activity might seem unusual, but encourage participants to embrace it. Explain that it is designed to help move past all the cognitive talking and thinking and move toward responding to the issues on an emotional and,

therefore, life-changing, level. Explain that the hope is that they would carry this exercise with them in the week ahead and allow it to lay the groundwork for identifying and committing to strategies for change in the next two sessions.

1. Gather the group around a table and explain that this activity is designed to help reveal our experiential and emotional understandings of poverty, disaster, and human limitations. Invite them to focus their thoughts on the symbols that you will be bringing to the table.
2. Offer a prayer for insight and openness to receive fresh understandings of the events that shaped the lives that have been so completely rearranged by hurricane Katrina.
3. Allow the group to sit in silence for a few minutes, long enough to feel uncomfortable. (This symbolizes that something is coming.)
4. Distribute a salty cracker for each participant to eat. Encourage conversation about what this might symbolize. (*nourishment, bread, bread of life, or even bread of affliction*)
5. Enter again into silence to the point of awkwardness. (This symbolizes life's way of continuing on its own way at its own pace, without human permission and irrespective of human desires.)
6. Bring out the tray of cups and distribute them in silence, allowing participants time to examine what they have received. (This symbolizes what we have against the needs we see around us.)
7. Invite participants to relieve their thirst by drinking. (This symbolizes resources being used up.)
8. Produce the glass jar or pitcher with the water and coffee grounds and explain that this is all that is available for anyone who is still thirsty. Set the pitcher at the center of the table. (This symbolizes resources inadequate for the situation.)
9. Say: "Poverty has no opportunity to embrace change. Things are as they are, and no further help is available. What can you do next? Who will listen to you? How long can you thirst on this unjust day?"
10. Allow for class discussion until near the end of class time. If no discussion follows, invite the group to sit in silence. Every minute or so, repeat the phrase, "This is the image of poverty among us."

## **Commissioning**

Close with silence or dismiss the group with the following prayer by nineteenth-century Swiss-born pastor Eugene Bersier.

You are love, and you see all suffering,  
injustice and mercy that reign in this world.  
Have pity, we implore you, on the work of your hands.  
Look mercifully on the poor, the oppressed,  
and all who are heavy laden with error, labor, and sorrow.  
Fill our hearts with deep compassion for those who suffer,  
And hasten the coming of your kingdom of justice and truth.

Adapted from *Eerdmans Book of Famous Prayers*, compiled by Veronica Zundel (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 80.

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## Participants' Pieces

### Them and Us?

One problem with responding to crises is that we tend to define our options in terms of “them and us.” This immediately sets up a sort of hierarchy in which those who have power, resources, or standing reach out (down) to “serve” those in need. While functionally it is true that *they* suffered through the hurricanes or *they* experience marginalization because of race and/or poverty, our faith in Jesus calls us to an experience of community in which when one suffers, all suffer. And when there is suffering, we are confronted with the opportunity to hear God’s voice anew and to respond to God’s dream for a community defined by truth, mercy, and justice.

The reality is that those who suffer minister to the rest of us. They bear in their lives the marks of injustice; and through that witness, if we listen, they call us to liberation and redemption—liberation from greed and false securities and redemption from the sin of participating in unjust social systems. Just as by Jesus’ stripes we are faced with our woundedness and given the opportunity to be healed, by the unjust suffering of others, we are confronted with our kinship in suffering and given the opportunity to be changed and to heal the injustice in our society.

When we respond only by pulling cash from our wallets, we are similar to a performer pulling a rabbit out of the hat. But as important as that giving is, there is no magic here. There is much behind-the-scenes work to be done. That work begins with recognizing that what happened to *them* happened to *us*. In God’s kingdom there are no “others.” Today’s session includes exercises designed to help us feel our kinship with those whose suffering has pierced our thinking. The hope is that through this emotional connection, we will set the stage for identifying and committing to strategies of change in the final two sessions of this study.

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## **Injustice Appears in the Eye of the Storm**

The following news excerpts help reveal the ways in which partiality played and continues to play a role in the suffering caused by the hurricanes:

In recent weeks, the world watched as the richest country in the world . . . opted to leave the poor, elderly and disabled to fend for themselves. Hurricane Katrina delivered a harsh reminder that millions of Americans spend their lives trapped in urban and rural slums, where middle- and upper-class citizens can ignore them—until something goes horribly wrong.

“I hope we can realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane,” Sen. Barack Obama said last week. “They were abandoned long ago—to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.”

(Source: Karin Ronnow, “Our progress on erasing poverty appears to be stalled,” *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, 20 September 2005, <http://bozemandailychronicle.com/articles/2005/09/20/features/lifestyles/02karin.txt> [accessed 28 September 2005].)

Consular authorities from Latin American countries estimate that around 300,000 people from Mexico, Central America and several South American nations live in the area affected by last week’s hurricane and the consequent flooding, which left millions of people with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

“It is very difficult for us to find and identify the Latin American victims, and to reach them with assistance. Furthermore, the U.S. State Department has so far placed restrictions on the efforts we could make,” Honduras’s ambassador to the United States, Norman Garcia, told IPS.

. . . Offers of food and medical aid and logistical support made by governments in Latin American and the Caribbean have been turned down by the U.S government.

(Source: Inter Press Service News Agency, 20 September 2005, “Thousands of Latin American Immigrants Among Katrina’s Victims,” Diego Cevallos, [www.ipsnews.news.net](http://www.ipsnews.news.net), [accessed September 25, 2005].)

Some have managed to get into shelters run by the Red Cross and Catholic Charities, which provide food and medical care, no questions asked. But when U.S. citizens in those shelters flock to cardboard tables where [federal] agents sit, Latinos stay behind watching from their cots, relief workers said. [While following 9/11, undocumented immigrants were promised they could seek federal help without fear of arrest], the Department of Homeland Security recently announced that immigrants have no immunity from deportation when providing information required to receive federal aid. That point was driven home when two [undocumented] immigrants, from Honduras and El Salvador, were taken into custody in West Virginia by state police after a military cargo plane carrying 305 evacuees arrived there September 5. . . .

The estimated 40,000 Mexicans and 150,000 Hondurans who lived in New Orleans cannot get [services including] mail delivery and temporary trailer homes.

Mario Fletes, a Honduran painter with a wife and three sons, reports, “I went to get unemployment, and they said they couldn’t process my Social Security number,” which,

he insisted, is legitimate. “I went to apply for food stamps and they told me to come back in two days. I went Thursday and they told me not to come back.”

(Source: Darryl Fears, “For Illegal Immigrants, Some Aid is Too Risky,” *Washington Post*, 20 September 2005, [www.ipsnews.news.net](http://www.ipsnews.news.net) [accessed September 25, 2005].)

## **A Brief Synopsis of the Bible and Poverty**

### **The Bible’s Consistent Message on Poverty**

God’s concern for the poor and the call for God’s people to care for the poor is explicit throughout the Bible:

- The Law of Moses sets up a system for preventing and redressing poverty. (See for example, Exod. 22:22–27 and Deut. 16:9–15.)
- The prophets condemned Israel for focusing on religious ritual while abusing the poor and neglecting justice, which would protect people from poverty. (See for example, Amos 5:11–13, 21–24.)
- The prophets also suggested that Israel’s leaders were punished for not caring for the poor in accordance with laws such as those found in Deuteronomy 15:1–11, in which they were commanded to forgive the debts of the poor every seven years.
- While the prophet Isaiah announced God’s promise to send an anointed one to preach good news to the poor, Jesus professed to be that very one. (See Isa. 61:1–4 and Luke 4:16–21.)
- The apostle Paul reports that the Jerusalem church, which was the center of early leadership among Christians and the site of the ongoing ministry of the apostles of Jesus, asked only one thing of him as he set out to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. That was to remember the poor. (See Gal. 11:2.)

### **What Does the Bible Mean by Poor?**

In the Bible the following people are identified as poor:

- People whose lives are difficult (widows, orphans, aliens)
- People displaced by war
- People who didn’t own property
- Those without homes
- Those who were considered of less value (non-Israelites, aliens or immigrants, women and children, and Israel’s enemies)

(Adapted from “The Poor,” in *The Learning Bible: Contemporary English Version* [New York: American Bible Society, 1995], 2267.)

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## Lesson 4 - Confession and Repentance

**Focal Passage:** Revelation 3:14–19

**Background Passages:** Revelation 1:4; Colossians 4:13–16; Matthew 6:19–21, 24; 25:31–46; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Luke 4:18

**Session Synopsis:** A call to Intentionality of Confession and Repentance

We have deceived ourselves into thinking that we have no need of God. More often than not, we have also become lukewarm (indifferent) in our dealings with one another, leading us to become grossly insensitive and negligent to the plight of neighbor and foe alike. The time has come to repent of our selfishness and move into right relationship with God, self, and others.

### Session Objectives

To acknowledge that incomplete faith is no faith—allowing the relationship with God to affect some aspects of who we are and how we live but not others is sin.

To identify ways in which we compartmentalize our relationship with God, choosing to embrace worldly values in some areas of our lives and trust in ourselves (rugged individualism, personal success) rather than allow God’s values to define who we are.

To identify specific areas or personal practices in which we are “lukewarm” and specific, concrete acts of repentance.

### Preparation

- To get ready to facilitate this session, leaders should conduct a personal reflection and engage with the passage in order to own its message, to be challenged by its call, and to be prepared to fully engage others in this deep and potentially life-changing aha moment.
- Leaders should also gather any and all local and national news on the effects that any natural disaster brings to communities, and in particular what effects hurricane Katrina has had in the lives of those closely affected by its devastation.
- The Missional Moment writing below may be used as a handout. The news headlines, newspaper clippings, Internet postings, etc. should be placed on the walls where the session is to be held.
- Prepare newsprint for the Gathering session, where the leader will find instructions for its use. Make enough copies for each participant of the questions for small group discussion found in the Missional Merger section. Copies will also be needed of the litany at the end of the session.

### Gathering

As the group gathers, ask each participant to recall a time when they directly or indirectly experienced a natural disaster. Have participants pair up and briefly share with their partner the experience they recall including what happened, who was there, who helped out, what ramifications are still left.

After a few minutes of sharing, unite the group as a whole and ask the group to talk about what has impacted them most about what they know of hurricane Katrina: the loss of life, the loss of property, the lack of immediate help, the condition that people were living in that did not allow them to evacuate safely, the negligence on the part of government, etc. Ask how did they feel? Were the feelings the same or different from their own “disaster” experience?

Jot down the feelings expressed on large newsprint, which you will have divided into two sections and labeled at the top of on one section, *How We Feel/Felt* and on the other, *How We'll Respond*. Leave the “how we’ll respond” section blank for now to fill in at the end of the session.

## **Missional Moment**

Hurricane Katrina has been called the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. Its catastrophic nature and devastation have been widely reported by all forms of media. It has not only directly affected the states in the Gulf Coast, but its ripple effects have been felt by all. Statistics, which change by the day, cannot keep up as the exploration and evaluation of its devastation will continue to shock even more in the days, months, and years to come. The losses are too many to quantify: too many are the dead (as of this writing more than one thousand); huge is the loss of property; countless the loss of jobs; nameless the loss of family ties, friendships, and dreams. The physical and emotional trauma will continue to surface in years to come. What has also surfaced in a powerful way is the level of poverty prevalent in the United States.

Before hurricane Katrina, many of those affected were already among the poorest of America's poor. In the hardest hit counties, some 305,000 people not only lived in poverty, but their families' income fell below 50 percent of the poverty line—about \$7,500 for a family of three. Now many live in strange towns with only a few dollars in their pockets. They've become a new class of poor, one that makes the old class look well off by comparison. They have not only lost their jobs and their homes; they're also isolated from family and friends, putting them at great risk for depression and substance abuse.<sup>1</sup>

The level of poverty continues to grow, and children are the most affected: twelve million children in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and five million children live in families whose incomes are less than half the federal poverty level!<sup>2</sup>

Affected by this disaster have been thousands of legal as well as undocumented immigrants who have come to this country from many foreign lands in search of a better tomorrow for their families. Promises by the government to help out and not to deport have been shattered by some INS officials who have taken advantage of the pain and misery of these evacuees and promptly incarcerated them. Many are now awaiting deportation.

## The Missional Mandate

(If desired, copies of this section can be made to share with each participant.)

The Scripture text for this session is Revelation 3:14–19. It is one of the seven letters addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia (Rev. 1:4). All seven letters are written with more or less the same order. Each comes directly from Jesus in all his glory and splendor. A specific message to each church follows, usually with some kind of praise or recognition with a warning or reproach given to each church. A promise for redemption concludes the letters, if they will do what is needed in confession and repentance. This is very much in keeping with the overall themes found in the book of Revelation: judgment, redemption, and the kingdom of God. It is interesting to note that the church in Laodicea does not receive praise and the church in Ephesus does not receive a reproach.

Laodicea is known to be a proud and affluent city near Colossae (Col. 4:13–16) and as such is known for its banks, recommended by even Cicero for exchanging money; its linen and wool industry; its medical school and famed medicines, notable among them an ointment used to treat eye ailments. According to the text, the church situated amidst this wealth has an arrogance and attitude of self-sufficiency (Rev. 3:17), which has produced a middle of the road lukewarm religion ebbing between depending on their efforts to maintain a status and quality of life, to following the teaching of Jesus. “The Laodiceans do not reject the gospel of Christ, nor do they affirm it with joy. They maintain it without conviction, without enthusiasm, without reflection on its implication for life.”<sup>3</sup> They are content to live life as if their beliefs do not impact their daily life.

The charge leveled at the church in Laodicea is precisely the nature of their lukewarm faith. They are neither hot, which would imply totally living day-to-day life based on the radical teaching of Jesus; nor are they cold, meaning that they are accepting a lifestyle of comfort and ease at the expense of others who are suffering from the lack of equal distribution of wealth. They are lukewarm, neither here nor there. The letter addresses this particular situation. The word that comes from the Lord is crystal clear: being lukewarm is totally, 100 percent unacceptable! “I am about to spit you out of my mouth” says the Lord, if you do not decide once and for all whose side you are going to be on—no middle-of-the-road religion. Either you believe in totality or you don’t. The letter clearly implies that a decision must be made whether to follow Jesus in his entire message of reconciliation and radical living or reject his teachings altogether.

Much harm is done by those professing to be religious and yet live day to day life as they are not. Matthew 6:24 speaks to this same sin: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.” Elsewhere in the Bible these middle-of-the-road Christians are called hypocrites!

The tragic and sad state of affairs for the Laodiceans is that while they think they are well off, they are actually quite the opposite. They are in fact wretched, pitiable, poor, blind,

and naked (Rev. 3:17). The message again speaks to the false values and assets which inform their “Christian” walk: although they have money, yet they are poor; although they have great medicine for the eyes, yet they are blind; although they have great textiles and clothing, yet they are naked.

All is not lost for the Laodiceans, for in Jesus there is always hope for a brand-new start. The message from the Amen (Jesus himself—2 Cor. 1:20) given in verse 18 provides a redemptive option for their sinful and middle-of-the-road ways. The counsel here is to make a complete turnaround and once and for all discover and claim for their lives the source of their real wealth, the kind of wealth that only comes from God and from living life by kingdom of God ethics and principles. Wealth in this sense is not material well-being, money in the bank, the finest clothes, or even the best of health medicine can give. The wealth spoken here is of gold refined by fire, eternal treasure and nonperishable; white robes to clothe from nakedness—salvation, forgiveness of sins and new life, nothing of which to be ashamed; salve to clear blurry vision to see clearly the reality of living life according to the passion and compassion of Jesus—his preferential option for the poor, for the suffering, for the outcast, for the most vulnerable (Luke 4:18; Matt. 25:31–46). It is a call to move from straddling the fence, from living in the center of complacency and to make a radical shift to a discipleship in Jesus that would demand a change in the distribution of their wealth, of their time, of their energy, and of their self-centeredness. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot continue to live life in solidarity with oppressive powers and those who systematize and keep wealth while at the same time pretending to be in solidarity with those who are poor, vulnerable, weak, and who are the recipients of the scraps of living life on the margins.

“Here is the choice Jesus gives us: we can pursue self-centeredness and the power and privilege it provides or we can choose to follow God, but we can’t do both. Nonetheless, those at the center, accustomed to its privilege want to do both. And they believe that it is possible to serve God and to protect their power and privilege. This pursuit of power and wealth, masked under a façade of Christianity, inevitably leads to injustice, here defined as the undue privilege obtained by the powerful and the lack of rights existing for the powerless.”<sup>4</sup>

Grace and a new opportunity for confession and for repentance for the sinfulness of living life trying to please two masters come to the church in Laodicea. Out of God’s glorious, bountiful, merciful love comes an opportunity to repent in earnest and in serious, intentional fashion to transform their erring ways. In God it is never too late for a brand-new start. The decision, however, has to be made out of a total conviction that Jesus’ lordship will reign and that his teachings will be accepted as mandates, nonnegotiable and optional, for living life in solidarity with others and in faithfulness to God. A decision has to be made that lukewarm faith will no longer be acceptable. The time to choose is gracefully extended by way of a letter that contains no words of praise and yet is full of love and grace.

Today, once again, the church of Jesus Christ is given a new opportunity to stop living a lukewarm faith, straddling the fence between doing something on behalf of the poor out

of charity, pity, and on occasion, and at the same time being content to store up treasure for ourselves here on earth (Matt. 6:19–21). The call to each individual is to a radical shift in day-to-day life, evaluating spending habits and daily stewardship issues of time, money, and energy. For the Christian church the opportunity is given to do missions according to God’s heart and mandates impacting the community and the place it is in by being in solidarity with those who live life on the margins of society. There is a place at the table for everyone in the kingdom of God. It is a call for the church to seek ways to impact oppressive systems and to seek diligently the equitable distribution of wealth, food, shelter, and educational opportunities for all. The following question posed to us as we read the letter to Laodicea should propel us to confess, repent, and change our lukewarm faith: How do well-meaning Christians read the Bible in order to reconcile a faith in Christ with their continuous pursuit of power and privilege? In other words, how is the Bible read to justify living amid wealth and privilege while others lack basic rights and necessities?<sup>5</sup>

We too have received this letter. We have opened, read, and understood its message to us amidst the tragedy of hurricane Katrina and the shining light it has brought to the reality of extreme poverty and suffering here in the United States. What will we as disciples of Jesus Christ need to do individually and collectively to be on fire for the cause of Jesus and to be in solidarity now and in the long run with those who are waiting to experience God’s love concretely demonstrated through the meeting of daily physical, social, and spiritual needs?

## **Missional Merger**

For participants to get to the aha moment of the text found in Revelation 3:14–19, they must have the opportunity to read the text, ask questions of the text, interpret the text in the context of the Bible, and make relevant applications to today. Therefore the formation of small groups for reflection and study is suggested. Form small groups with no more than three or four persons in each group and hand out the questions below. Give groups fifteen to twenty minutes to meet together. When groups have completed their task, have them report to the larger group by sharing their response to the last question. On the newsprint used to gather folks at the beginning of this session, write their responses in the section *How We’ll Respond*.

1. According to Revelation 3:14, who is the Amen (also see 2 Corinthians 1:20)?
2. In your opinion, what is the significance that the Amen is “the origin of God’s creation”? (The New International Version [NIV] uses the term “the ruler of God’s creation.”)
3. According to verse 15, what is the charge made against the church?
4. The city of Laodicea was known in Asia for its rich monetary banks, its fine linen, and its medicines, in particular a salve for eye problems. Laodiceans depended on these material goods for their contentment and well-being. Connect this fact to the counsel given to them in verses 17–18.
5. Why do think that God’s words are so hard hitting as they relate to the church’s being lukewarm? (“I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”)

6. Why is the church called to be earnest and to repent from their middle-of-the-road—neither hot nor cold—faith?
7. In light of Jesus' indignation at the dependence of his followers on material wealth and self-centeredness, what is the message for you and your church today?
8. What should our individual and collective response be to the reality of the shameful poverty and lack of basic needs that hurricane Katrina uncovered?
9. How can we concretely respond to the people affected by Katrina and who continue to be in need? (Discuss short- and long-term responses.)

## Commissioning

### You've Got Mail!

In today's session we were given the opportunity to read someone's letter, a letter sent long ago to a people long ago. And yet it is a letter written for our specific space, time, and context.

Let us respond to its timeless message by reciting the Lord's Prayer in the following manner and let us hold one another accountable for our decisions today.

**Leader:** Loving God in heaven, hallowed be your name.

**Members:** Help us to always remember that you are Holy and Creator of all. Nothing is ours to keep. All adoration is for you alone.

**Leader:** Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

**Members:** Remind us again and again that your kingdom came to us in Jesus and that your perfect will is for all to share in the riches, privileges, and mandates of the kingdom on earth as in heaven.

**Leader:** Give us this day our daily bread.

**Members:** And give us compassion to share daily life-giving bread to those who are suffering from physical and spiritual hunger.

**Leader:** Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

**Members:** We confess and repent from our sin of self-centeredness, where individualism and the accumulation of material wealth has become the norm at the expense of those who go without and have need. Forgive our lukewarm walk and give us a brand-new start.

**Leader:** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

**Members:** Deliver us from the temptation of making luxury into need and from allowing earthly systems to lull us into ineffective faith and content living through mere acts of self-gratifying charity.

**Leader:** For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

1. Article published on 23 September 2005 in Boston.com.

2. National Center for Children in Poverty, [www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org).

3. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Revelation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1980), 104.

4. Miguel A. de la Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44.

5. *Ibid.*

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## 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 endeavors that assist the poor, challenge social/structural realities that create and maintain poverty and 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.

### Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session, asking God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- 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 endeavors 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 endeavors 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 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.

If it is your practice, invite prayer requests. 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**

Hand out copies of the first participants' piece and review the material together. 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?
- If you had loved ones who were affected or if you were affected directly, did you feel as though God, others, or even you somehow failed?
- What will it take for you to let go of blame and guilt and move toward responsible action?

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

## **The Missional Mandate**

Read together 1 John 3:11, 16-24 and then hand out and review the second participants' piece. Invite participants to discuss the following:

- 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 under girded 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 rather than blame God, ourselves, or one another, in light of the message of 1 John 2, we

would do better to respond to two direct 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 is clear that God cares for those who are poor. This is clear from the social design God provided to the people to be called “Israel” and in the admonitions of the prophets. It is clear in the message of Jesus and in the teachings of the epistles. 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 share this concern for the poor, to answer the question, Where is God? not with our words but with actions that clearly speak the message, “God is here and God cares.”

Prepare for small-group work by briefly describing the following three areas related to the hurricane tragedies in which human action or inaction played a part:

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 faithful human action can make a real, positive difference. Hand out copies of third, fourth, and fifth participants’ pieces. 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 hearts toward God. Offer a prayer of dedication for the plans you've made. Ask God to prepare the hearts of those you will need to bring on board and ask for guidance, patience, and hope to sustain your endeavors. You may want to close by singing together, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

## **Resources and Connections**

### **Direct Assistance**

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions ([www.abc-usa.org](http://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)

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ([www.thefellowship.info](http://www.thefellowship.info)): Hurricane Katrina Response ([www.thefellowship.info/disaster/katrina](http://www.thefellowship.info/disaster/katrina))

Empty Tomb, Inc. ([www.emptytomb.org](http://www.emptytomb.org))

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

Food for the Hungry ([www.fh.org/index\\_katrina](http://www.fh.org/index_katrina))

Habitat for Humanity ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org))

National Alliance to End Homelessness ([www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org))

### *Racial and Economic Justice*

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions ([www.abc-usa.org](http://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](http://www.churchworldservice.org/programs))

Fair Labor Program ([www.fairlabor.org](http://www.fairlabor.org))

Micah Challenge ([www.micahchallenge.org](http://www.micahchallenge.org))

Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign ([www.economichumanrights.org](http://www.economichumanrights.org))

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

Wider Opportunities for Women ([www.wowonline.org](http://www.wowonline.org), and [www.sixstrategies.org](http://www.sixstrategies.org))

CBF's Rural Poverty Initiative ([www.ruralpoverty.net](http://www.ruralpoverty.net)): note 'Principles,' 'Perspective,' and 'Resources' pages

### **Care for Creation**

American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions ([www.abc-usa.org](http://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/](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/small_group/))

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

Mississippi River Basin Alliance ([www.mrba.org](http://www.mrba.org))

National Religious Partnership for the Environment ([www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org))

National Wetlands Research Center of the United States Governmental Service  
([www.nrcs.usgs.gov](http://www.nrcs.usgs.gov))

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*Lesson by Cassandra Carkuff Williams, Ed.D., managing editor and resource coordinator, American Baptist Churches USA.*

## 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](http://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 in adequate. 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.

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## 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 physical world is evil, while the spiritual world is good. This notion of a good spiritual reality and an evil physical reality is referred to as “dualism,” a philosophy that divides the world into two opposing dualities of physical/evil and spiritual/good.

First John directly challenges these false teachings by making it clear that:

1. God made the world and sent Jesus to free the world from sin and reunite the world with the Creator.
2. Truly spiritual people are those who 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.

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### 3. 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. 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.

\*Statistics source: February 7, 2002 press release, Association of Fundraising Professionals, [www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org).

#### 4. Unjust Social Structures

Step 1: Become informed.

Review the following together:

When descendants of the slaves who were led from Egypt to set up a new nation in the Promised Land, God gave them a social structure with laws designed both to prevent and to correct poverty. The people of God were commanded to protect classes of people, such as widows, orphans, and immigrants, who were at risk of becoming impoverished. They 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.

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 invite your church family to participate in.

\*Statistics 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](http://www.plu.edu/~poverty/stats/home.html)).

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## 5. 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](http://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/pr03-004.html](http://www.nwrc.usgs.gov/releases/pr03-004.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.

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.

\*Sources: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation ([www.CBCFHealth.org](http://www.CBCFHealth.org)); and "Climate Change Hits African Americans Harder," 23 July 2005, Inter Press Service News Agency ([www.ipsnews.net](http://www.ipsnews.net)).

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