

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

How involved can Christians be in the world?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why might Christians be uncertain about how much we can shape things in the world?



Understanding the information (30 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Christians have had a developing and often different approach as to how, and how much, to be involved in the world and its culture. For example, while some might feel that being politically active is an essential part of discipleship, others might be wary of doing so – and politicians may criticise the church for being caught up with political affairs.



If we are in a position of influence in society or culture, we can be uncertain as to how much our faith should guide our decisions. There has been a spectrum of approaches to these questions which is shaped by how we answer two questions:

Should we emphasise the world as fundamentally good, or fallen?

How active should we be in influencing the world?

For example, when it comes to political involvement, those Christians whose emphasis is that the world is fundamentally fallen and so we are called to focus on only influencing the church might see politics as irrelevant to discipleship.

Those at the other end of the spectrum, who emphasise the world as fundamentally good and that we are called to join in with redeeming every part of it, are likely to see politics as a necessary part of discipleship.

Writers such as H. Richard Niebuhr are well known for describing the spectrum of different approaches Christians have taken in their approach to culture, and involvement in the world. (He calls them: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, Christ the transformer of culture).

Slightly adapting these, we could characterise these different approaches as:

Withdraw: Disciples are called to be separate from the world.

Christians who take this approach will emphasise that the world is 'secular', heavily affected by sin, that there are two 'kingdoms', which God relates to in different ways. They will emphasise Jesus' words, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) as advocating withdrawal. They are likely to see discipleship as just being focussed on church and spiritual growth. They will draw a distinction between church and world, emphasising that the church is called to be light in the darkness, and that we should flee from the world. On a personal level, they would avoid watching films or reading books which they do not see as 'Christian', seeing them as fallen.

Christians who have been part of monastic communities which have focussed on practices of self-denial (ascetics) might be an example of this approach. However, it is hard to see how Christians who work and live alongside many people could genuinely separate themselves in this way.

Critique: Disciples are called to critique society, but from the outside.

Christians who take this approach will emphasise that the world is fallen, but the role of the church is to bring influence by demonstrating in our life together and voicing what loyalty to God looks like. They might emphasise Paul's words telling disciples to be "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Philippians 2: 15-16)

They will emphasise that the church is called to be a prophetic voice which keeps its integrity by not being involved from the inside. On the personal level, they might see watching films or reading books which are not 'Christian' as a 'necessary evil' – to be read or watched to help us to engage with the world in which we live. Christians in Anabaptist or Amish communities might be a visible example of this approach. However, it might be hard to see how such a lifestyle could be possible for every disciple.

While these two approaches have historically been adopted by some, most Christians have seen them as too much about splitting life up into sacred and secular. Instead more common approaches have fallen somewhere between the following two attitudes:

Cooperate: Disciples are called to look for the good in society and cooperate where possible.

Christians who take this approach will still live with the tension that many aspects of the world are fallen, and that their primary loyalty is to Christ. But they will see God's grace outside the church, as well as within it, and believe that there is good in society already. They will work with others to seek the good of all, and look to encounter God in the church, but also in the wider culture.

The role of the church is to offer the vision of Jesus as the one who can enlighten and fulfil society. They might emphasise Psalm 24:1: "The world belongs to God, the earth and all its people."

While many have affirmed this approach, they have pointed out the need to be vigilant in holding the balance between accepting parts of culture but rejecting others at the same time. The conviction that society can only be truly healed through Christ needs to be kept at the centre.

Transform: Disciples are called to join in with the transformation of the world in every aspect.

The fifth mark of mission, which looks for the transformation of unjust structures, assumes this view. Christians who take this approach see the world as 'in between' good and fallen. But as disciples in God's image, they are called to both develop the goodness of God's creation, and to join in with Him in restoring what is broken in every area of life.

They emphasise that Jesus' restoration was not removal of people from the earth, but restoration of the earth, and that there is no aspect of life on earth that is unaffected. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not one square inch of creation over which Jesus does not say, 'It is mine!'"

At a church leaders' conference, the convenor asked the assembled participants what the greatest problem was in their countries. Almost all included bribery and corruption, often as the most serious problem they faced. The convenor responded as follows: "If corruption is the major problem, then why are we preparing our young people only to be pastors and evangelists? Why aren't we training them to be the godly entrepreneurs, economists, policemen, judges and politicians that our countries so desperately need?"

This perspective emphasises that Christians are called to be culture-formers and not culture-followers. They believe biblical wisdom can transform any area of life bringing God's justice, mercy and kindness, in a way that, for example, a consumer view of the world cannot.

Reflecting on Jesus' words that disciples are called to be in the world but not of it, they would see the world, not as God's creation, but as the parts of life that can be 'worldly' by pulling us away from worshipping God, or by having values which do not reflect God's kingdom. Rather than there being separate sacred or secular/worldly parts of life, any part of life can either be 'worldly' or transformed by Christ. They would watch films or read books that are not 'Christian', seeing them as reflecting the God-granted gift of human imagination and culture, but still aspiring to being set apart for God in their lives as the highest good.

However, they will know that, because societies are constantly changing, and because no disciple is yet perfect, this transformation will be about setting direction rather than providing the blueprint for a perfect culture. They will also avoid aggressive power which, for example, might try to coerce those who do not identify as Christians into going against their own consciences.

Discuss: Withdraw, critique, cooperate, transform...which approach makes most sense to you and why?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Romans 12: 9-21 in which Paul describes Christians living in the world.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

Whether we are thinking about politics, or art, or media, or economics, or science, or any area of life, it is likely that, while the priority is to join in with the Spirit in the transformation of the world is, we may also draw helpful insights from the other approaches at different times and depending on our situation. There may be times to emphasise one model over another.

For example, if we live in a very corrupt culture or under an oppressive government, we may need to ‘withdraw’ to protect faith, or to critique prophetically.

Nevertheless, to look at the question of politics, the transformation perspective may lead us to agree with Desmond Tutu’s words, “I am puzzled by which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don’t mix.” We might remember how in Scripture God creates government to bring public justice, and calls governments to account saying, “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” (Isaiah 10: 1-2)

We might look at how being involved in politics can help us develop something good in God’s creation, or to struggle against injustice on behalf of others. We might be strengthened in our involvement by knowing that God’s kingdom is the only holistic source of eternal change – God wants to change both structures and people – and that if hearts are not convicted to change, no amount of political control can be long-lasting.

At the same time, the way in which those who withdraw, or critique, remind us how fallen the world can be might help us to examine the values of our political party or movement, and ensure as far as we can that they are in line with those of Christ. We might agree with Martin Luther King who said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.”

We might find worshipping with others regularly an important help in ensuring that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God, and not to any party. And the knowledge that we ourselves are works in progress – both good and fallen – might help us to be humble, learning and loving in the way we engage with those who disagree with us.

Discuss: How does politics feature in your discipleship?

Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of applying your faith outside the church.



Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



Group prayer (5 minutes)

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.



From 'A Christian prayer for union with creation' published in Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*.

HOW INVOLVED CAN CHRISTIANS BE IN THE WORLD?

CHRISTIANS HAVE HAD A DEVELOPING AND OFTEN DIFFERING APPROACH AS TO HOW, AND HOW MUCH, TO BE INVOLVED IN THE WORLD.

WHAT ARE THE KEY DIFFERENCES?

For example, while some might feel that being politically active is an essential part of discipleship, others might be wary of doing so – and politicians may criticise the church for being caught up with political affairs.

Our approach to these questions is shaped by how we answer two questions:

Should we emphasise the world as fundamentally good, or fallen?
How active should we be in influencing the world?

Broadly speaking, different approaches could be:

Withdraw: Disciples are called to be separate from the world.

The world is “secular”, heavily affected by sin, there are two “kingdoms”, which God relates to in different ways.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36)

Discipleship is about church and spiritual growth.

We should avoid watching films or reading books which are not “Christian”.

Critique: Disciples are called to critique society, but from the outside.

The world is fallen, but the role of the church is to influence by demonstrating in our life together and voicing what loyalty to God looks like.

Be “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation (who) shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.” (Philippians 2: 15-16)

The church is called to be a prophetic voice.

Watching films or reading books which are not “Christian” might be a “necessary evil” –to help us to engage with the world in which we live.

Cooperate: Disciples are called to look for the good in society and cooperate where possible.

Many aspects of the world are fallen, and our primary loyalty is to Christ, but God’s grace is outside the church, as well as within it, and there is good in society already.

We work with others to seek the good of all, and encounter God in the church, but also in the wider culture. “The world belongs to God, the earth and all its people.” (Psalm 24:1)

There is a need to be vigilant in holding the balance between accepting parts of culture but rejecting others at the same time.



Transform: Disciples are called to join in with the transformation of the world in every aspect.

As disciples in God's image, we are called to both develop the goodness of God's creation, and to join in with Him in restoring what is broken in every area of life. Jesus' restoration is not removal of people from the earth, but restoration of the earth.

No aspect of life on earth is unaffected. Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not one square inch of creation over which Jesus does not say, "It is mine!""

At a church leaders' conference, the convenor asked: "If corruption is the major problem, then why are we preparing our young people only to be pastors and evangelists? Why aren't we training them to be the godly entrepreneurs, economists, policemen, judges and politicians that our countries so desperately need?"

Christians are called to be culture-formers and not culture-followers – biblical wisdom can transform any area of life bringing God's justice, mercy and kindness, in a way that, for example, a consumer view of the world cannot.

Rather than there being separate "sacred" or "secular/worldly" parts of life, any part of life can either be "worldly" or transformed by Christ.

They would watch films or read books that are not "Christian", seeing them as reflecting the God-granted gift of human imagination and culture.

APPLYING THIS TO POLITICS

There may be times to emphasise one model over another.

For example, if we live in a very corrupt culture or under an oppressive government, we may need to "withdraw" to protect faith, or to critique prophetically.

Or the transformation perspective may lead us to agree with Desmond Tutu's words about politics, "I am puzzled by which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix."

We might remember how in Scripture God creates government to bring public justice, and calls governments to account.

God's kingdom is the only holistic source of eternal change – God wants to change both structures and people.

Worshipping with others regularly might be an important help in ensuring that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God, and not to any party.

The knowledge that we ourselves are works in progress – both good and fallen – might help us to be humble, learning and loving in the way we engage with those who disagree with us.