

A 'THICK DESCRIPTION' OF TWO BIBLE STUDIES BY THE LANGA BAPTIST GROUP

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Profile of the group

This Bible study group was formed in the 1980's, with various leaders coming and going. It is associated to the local Baptist Church in Langa, Cape Town. It consists of a relatively large number (30 or more) of young people who are roughly between the age of 15 and 35. The group is led by the local pastor's son, who has received theological training at the Baptist Theological College. The language of communication in the group is predominantly Xhosa, with several inputs also in English. As a result of the size of the group and the venue (the local church), the members of the groups sit in rows of chairs facing the leader. Although the seating arrangement puts the leader in a somewhat dominant position, the participation by the group members is quite lively. The socio-economic profile of the group is important. Many of the members are university or technicon students or people who have entered a first job following secondary or tertiary education. Although many of the members come from poor households (as reflected in the larger township of Langa), an "upward social mobility" can clearly be identified in the group. Some of the group members may still experience themselves as poor but there is for many in the group a realistic expectation of becoming more affluent.

As a result of the size of the group it is difficult to discern a coherent interpretation of the two Bible studies by the group as a group. Members of the group stand up when they speak. Some of the group members speak regularly while others remain silent. This tended to encourage little speeches by various group members with relatively little interaction between the group members. There is also a tendency in the group to respond to the leader or to enter into a somewhat disjointed debate with one another. The group dynamics encouraged a form of individualism where the meeting serve as a platform where its youth members may articulate, clarify and test their own beliefs, commitments and values in the presence of others who share their basic faith orientation. This may well be typical of youth Bible study groups. In contrast with, for example, the Sokhanya group, there is not much of a spirit of cooperative searching for truth. The discussion is nevertheless vibrant and at times quite colourful.

Bible study 1: Matthew 13:53-58

This Bible study commenced with an attempt to understand the response to Jesus by the people of Nazareth in terms of its social context. Why were the people of Nazareth surprised by the teaching of Jesus and why did they reject Jesus?

- Can the analogy of people who went into exile because of the struggle and then returned to their hometown help to understand this event (leader)?
- Has Jesus received some theological education (e.g. a Masters or a Ph.D. in theology) that surprised them (leader)? Did they underestimate him because he is the son of a carpenter (speaker B)?
- The fact that Jesus was well educated (with material possessions) was not the primary problem (speaker D). The people were only surprised because they did not understand

where he (coming from a poor family) obtained his education (speaker A). "Let us say the last time people saw you, you were still a student here at Langa high, and suddenly you come back as a doctor. People would ask where did he/she learn, especially when they see that this person is good at what he or she is doing" (speaker F). In the case of Sibongile (who's mother is a cleaner at Clicks) one would also tend to be surprised and ask: Where did she study? (speaker A).

- Is the deeper reason why they could not accept Jesus not perhaps that he was the "King of this earth"? (leader). They did not believe in Jesus as the incarnation of God (speaker G). What made the acts of Jesus extraordinary was the divine assistance that he received. He was commissioned by God (leader). He was "chosen" (speaker H, with reference to the parallel text in Luke 4). Jesus had two natures: a divine nature and a physical nature (born from Mary). He proved his divine nature through his strength (speaker H again). The people knew Jesus, but not as the son of God, but as the son of Joseph (speaker I). What made Jesus different was that he came from a royal family. He was "undermined" while he himself was of the royal house (leader). Moreover, he was born through the Holy Spirit (speaker F). Although the people expected a king, they did not expect someone they knew. They expected someone with a big name (speaker C).

The people of Nazareth therefore rejected Jesus because of his divine attributes. The Bible study subsequently focused on the consequences of such rejection. This was dangerous: God came to them and they rejected him (speaker J). The danger is that they did not see that Jesus was sent to them (speaker B). Jesus interpreted things the way God wanted, not the way people wanted (speaker H). They did not believe in Jesus, even though others in Galilee confessed that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (speaker G). These people were in the dark, they were afraid of change (speaker A).

The leader then requested the group to reflect on the significance of the text for their own context. Here are some of the responses:

- "What I've learnt is that you must not judge people" (speaker A).
- "It tells us that if you refuse to allow Jesus to come in to your life, you are in danger of missing out on him" (speaker F).
- "We people who say that we are saved, we should be responsible because people are looking at us. We must run the race with determination not to look back" (speaker E).
- As saved people we must have endurance so that we don't fall on the road (speaker A).

In conclusion, following a question by the leader, a few (somewhat cryptic) socio-political implications of the message of the text were also alluded to:

- "The text tells us that we must stop discriminating ... If you chase the vagrant that walks into your house (you may not realise) that you are chasing God." (speaker L).
- "We have politicians who come back from exile with high qualifications only to find out six months down the line the person is a fake. This warns us against those things" (speaker L).
- "Historically we have been oppressed by white people. And now we are ruling the country as the majority. Whites could say look at these black people with inferior education: they are going to take this country to ruins (leader).
- "Now in our days you must prove yourself in the work place and in these multiracial schools. You are not valued according to your abilities but your skin (speaker F).

Comment

There is an interesting interplay in this Bible study between contextual and confessional factors. This is evident from the way in which the crucial question as to why Jesus was rejected (or “undermined”) in Nazareth was discussed in the group.

- The possibility that this had to do with his authoritative teaching and his power to do miracles (of healing) is considered but not accepted. This is perhaps not surprising given the educational background of many of the group members and their expectations to occupy status positions in society (e.g. epitomised by that of a doctor).
- The possibility is also considered that the suspicion of the people of Nazareth had to do with Jesus’ period of absence from Nazareth and his subsequent return to the hometown with an unexpected authority to teach and to heal. This possibility is plausible in terms of the reference in verse 55 and the analogous experience of suspicion regarding returning exiles. This explanation, however, may expose some of the group members to a similar suspicion resulting from their newly acquired education.
- In response to the lack of a plausible solution, many group members opted for a religious explanation. The deepest reason why the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus was that they could not accept his authority, not only as the royal king of the Jews, but as a divine being, the incarnation of God. They regarded him as the son of the local carpenter, not as the Son of God. In grappling with the text, the group thus falls back on their confessional roots in which a high Christology is assumed.
- This interpretation enables (many members of) the group to understand the message of the text in terms of “having faith in Jesus”. Some people have faith in Jesus while others (like the people of Nazareth) rejected him. In terms of the evangelical soteriology that one would expect in a Baptist church, those who believe in Jesus are saved while others remain in the dark. This leads some members in the group to emphasise the need for faithfulness and endurance from those who do believe in Jesus. They should set an example for others.
- The group is keen to spell out the implications of this message for their personal and socio-political contexts. Although the discussion is somewhat disparate and cryptic, it is interesting to note that some speakers place themselves in the position of Jesus (e.g.. they are returning home with new educational qualifications; they are uncertain about their role as leaders in the new political dispensation; they are aware that they are being observed and judged). Others associate themselves with the people of Nazareth (e.g. being suspicious about returning exiles, realising that they should not judge others on external appearances only). If the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus, we should have faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Perhaps these responses reflect a context wherein the group members are in the process of acquiring social status and economic power.

Bible study 2: Luke 4:16-22, 28-30

The group leader was given the following input on the *contemporary context* prior to the meeting:

Debt is something that affects many people today. Many poor people borrow money from cash providers (with a very high interest rate) if they experience a financial crisis. Many students leave university with enormous debts from their studies. Middle class people often struggle to pay the interest on their bonds (for a house or a car). Many affluent people are always in debt because they live from their credit cards, spending money (often on luxuries) now that they would earn later. Poor countries have become entrapped in

massive burdens of debt. As a result they are forced to use significant proportion of their national budgets to fund debt repayment, leading to a constant net outflow of money from poor to rich countries.

In Luke 4:19 Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25 in which a “year of grace” is announced. This year of Jubilee (celebrated every 50 years) was precisely a year that helped people to escape from the burden of debt. How do you think can one escape from the culture of debt in which we have become entrapped today?

The input focused on the many ways in which people, institutions and countries can become trapped in debt. The leader subsequently focused on the issue of indebtedness. As a result, the Bible study tended to move in the direction of a topical discussion on indebtedness and sound financial management instead of a close reading of the Biblical text. The main question for the group therefore became: “How can we save ourselves from the culture of indebtedness?”

The discussion commenced with a retrieval of Biblical texts, including Luke 4:19, Leviticus 25, Psalm 105:20 and Isaiah 61. The group leader then provided some input on the notion of the Jubilee. He illustrated this with an interesting example: If you had a car and had to sell it because you were suffering you would get the car back in the year of Jubilee. Speaker B then asked whether you would have to give back the money that you received from the sale too!

In the discussion that followed the year of Jubilee was portrayed as a year of freedom, of liberty, of release, of democracy. It is a year in which “we” are liberated from debts, from the shackles of sin, from racism, from discrimination, from apartheid. Jesus came to release us. God sent Jesus to save us and to release us from our problems. We are liberated by the mercy of God, not by our own abilities (speaker K).

Given this background, the leader requested the group to focus on the culture of debt (e.g. debts from Foschini or Edgars, cash loans). How can we escape from this culture of indebtedness? The group offered several responses:

- We need to give ourselves in faith to God (speaker L).
- When you are saved, a new flesh comes out. Once you make an ally with Jesus you become a new creation. We have to offer our bodies and our hearts to God as a sacrifice (speaker K with reference to Romans 12).
- The only thing that can save us is discipline; faith alone will not help us (speaker M).
- One needs to know when enough is enough; the problem is greediness. God is saying commit your plans to me and I shall make them successful (!). One must not run away from responsibility. One must be organised and disciplined (speaker N).
- One must ask God to give one strength to manage financial problems through budgeting; if you explain your situation to God you will be helped to make good decisions Some of us must admit that they are shopaholics. People want things in all these shops, (e.g. Truworths, Foschini) (speaker O).
- When you like material things, that’s the sign that you are not concentrating on God. If one is doing things according to God’s will, all the other things will follow (speaker P).
- Although God loves me and I’m saved, I must take responsibility. Once you do that, God will take care of things (speaker Q).
- As you fight with the credits that burden us, remember that Jesus is always on your side (leader).

The group also identified the religious and not only the social impact of a culture of debt:

- If you're in debts you are sick, have stress, cannot sleep and you cannot even go to church (speaker M).
- God does not want to see us on debts because in that situation we tend to forget him. He released us so that we do not go back to the life of slavery (speaker S).
- We should not trouble ourselves by putting ourselves in a life of debts. If God can take care of the birds, God can take care of us (speaker N with reference to Matthew 6).
- No, if people are just sitting around telling themselves that God will provide, it will never work (speaker P). Yes, God does not want lazy people (speaker N).
- "What is happening to us is that we compare ourselves with others. We are not satisfied with the places where God has put us (speaker T).

The bible study concluded with some comments by the leader on the way in God will provide for us, amidst experiences of financial problems, including debts, unemployment and retrenchment.

Comment

The social context of the group obviously plays an important role in this Bible study. The group enthusiastically affirmed the rhetoric of liberation from oppression, colonialism, racism and apartheid. Curiously, despite the attention to the notion of the Jubilee (and the inputs on international debt), there is little if any subsequent anti-capitalist rhetoric. Debt is not so much regarded as something that one can become entrapped in by forces beyond one's own locus of control. Debt, especially at a personal level is the result of being greedy, being a "shopaholic", laziness, a lack of discipline, unwise financial management, etc. This assessment perhaps reflects the members of group's own economic expectations. They are in control of their financial destinies or hope to be in control soon.

The group therefore agrees that one has to be liberated from the evils of (for example) apartheid by God (from the outside). By contrast, personal debt is something that one has to take responsibility for oneself. The group therefore follows a pragmatic and realistic approach to the culture of debt. In other words: You have to put your trust in God. You are not alone. Jesus is by your side. However, God does not want lazy people. You better take responsibility for your personal finances. Then God will bless you.

This approach does not constitute a notion of salvation through good works. In order to be able to take such responsibility one's larger orientation to life has to be appropriate. This is where faith in God plays a role. It is impossible to survive without that. However, once you have faith in God, you have to take care of those things that are within your own locus of control. God will help you to do just that.

This interpretation may be sound, especially given the social context of the group. However, it is not necessarily an adequate interpretation of the text of Luke 4:16-22. It should again be noted that the group opted not to focus on the particular text but on the theme of indebtedness.