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Bible Study -- Leader's Guide

Challenging Themes for Contemporary Christians: Studies in Malachi

by Curt Gast

About the Author

The Reverend Curtis R. Gast served Lutheran campus ministry from 1971-1989 at Bowling Green University and Ohio State University—Columbus. He presently serves as pastor of Peace Lutheran Church, Gahanna, Ohio.

Introduction

These four sessions are designed for four 90-minute discussion periods. Each session is divided into three learning categories:

1. Case history — getting a sense of the theme for the session from a here-and-now posture.
2. Scripture study — consulting the source for discussion and action.
3. Bridging — bringing an ancient story into a contemporary life situation so that the story has meaning today.

Case history

1. Permit the group ample time to read the case silently.
2. Pose the learning questions:
 - a. What is happening in this case?
 - b. Who are the people involved?
 - c. What are the issues?
3. Address as many of the case questions as possible in a 30-minute time period. Answers are not expected to be exhaustive. Select two or three key questions prior to the start of the class and tackle those questions first.

Scripture study

1. Read the assigned biblical verses aloud. Shared reading by members of the study group is preferred.
 2. Pose the study questions.
 3. Fill in gaps from notes included in this guide and from other resources (**The Layman's Bible Commentary**, Vol. 15, John Knox Press).
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Bridging

1. Ask the group to take a moment to reread the case study.
2. Allow a few moments for individual reflection on the questions.
3. Address as many of the bridging questions as time permits, giving priority to those questions marked with an asterisk.

Each section will take approximately 30 minutes. Keep the study moving. It is necessary to deal with all three sections in order to give the study continuity. It is likely not all the questions can be addressed. You are both leader and participant. As leader, it is necessary for you to give direction and be informed. In the first session, give an overview of the four study sessions by using the information in the **Introduction**. Take no more than five minutes for this.

Each session closes with a prayer. Use this prayer if appropriate, or close the session with another creative method.

Session 1:

Sunday's Hour -- Service or Show?

Malachi 16-14

1. The prophet's identity is unknown. The name Malachi means "my messenger". This work was written in the middle of the fifth century B.C. and 50 years after the dedication of the new temple in Jerusalem. Concern over abuse of this temple sparked the writing of this prophecy.
2. The prophecy is described as an "oracle", which means burden. This is the way the prophet usually felt when confronted with the task of having to chastise.
3. The priests were surprised to hear that they had been lax in leading worship and were probably quite defensive
4. Animal sacrifice was typical. However, the people had grown accustomed to bringing sick and imperfect animals for the ritual. The priests were guilty of accepting the inferior animals. For Malachi, this meant God was being relegated to a lesser position and neither priests nor people were taking worship seriously.
5. The people would not think of giving such imperfect gifts to their political leaders. The prophet was accusatory: "How dare you give such imperfect gifts to God!"
6. To suggest that the temple be closed would have been a terrible affront to the people, a move so drastic that it would destroy the very symbol of who they were as God's "chosen."
7. In Christian tradition, the "pure" sacrifice is seen as Christ present in the elements of the eucharist. However, we can only interpret this way in light of the Christ event some 500 years after Malachi wrote.
8. "Sniffing" at the Lord implies only a mild interest. The people were sniffing and not investing. Malachi accused the people of going through the motions of worship while not totally giving their "hearts" in the experience.
9. The prophet saw the people treating God much like an idol instead of a living reality.

Session 2:

God's Priests -- Roles and Models

Malachi 2:1-9

1. Having pointed out certain abuses in worship, the prophet insisted on a change in the priests. They were to be more sincere about their role or God would curse them.

