

Pursuing God With U2: An Adult Study

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This is a six-week program on aspects of God in the music of U2 designed for adult spiritual formation groups. A couple of words up front about the structure and assumptions of the course may be helpful.

First, while this material simply assumes that contemporary popular media is a useful place to look for the footprints of the Holy Spirit, it does not assume that participants have a deep familiarity with U2. If you have fans in your group, however, by all means use them as resources; they will probably know much of what is given here as explanatory material.

Second, U2 is not a “Christian band,” but some of its members are Christians with significant fluency in the vocabulary of the Christian tradition. Thus, throughout their work U2 naturally raises and wrestles with spiritual questions using that vocabulary. Like all art, the results have many levels of meaning and can be viewed from diverse perspectives, especially when you consider that U2’s cata-

log spans more than two decades. This course skips around without giving much attention to which themes U2 emphasized when, and of course highlights only a few of many possible readings of the music.

Third, this course intentionally uses what, in many church settings, will probably seem to be a large quantity of visual and auditory media, allowing much of it to stand without editorial comment or interpretation. While this may be uncomfortable to persons accustomed to a linear or text-based classroom style, people of the ages U2 tends to attract naturally absorb media without requiring propositional statements claiming to encapsulate its "real meaning." Thus, the sessions' use of media is designed to make the structure of the course itself instructive, in a subtle way, for more traditional church groups.

Thus, you're urged not to cut the opening, closing, and background music, and you're urged to find as much of this material as you possibly can. The course cannot be put on by handing out lyric sheets. There are a few must-have items, and then additional possibilities for those who have access to more material. All the items listed are available both used and new through CD and video stores or rental outlets, as well as through internet book, media, and auction sites. In all cases, the track information refers to American releases. The class will flow much more smoothly if you recruit a second person to be responsible for cuing up and starting video and audio rather than trying to do it yourself.

To offer this course you need the following:

On CD: The Joshua Tree; All That You Can't Leave Behind;

War

On DVD: Elevation 2001: Live From Boston;
The Best of 1990-2000

Recommended on CD: Pop; The Best of
1980-1990

Additional possibilities:

On CD: Achtung Baby; Boy
On VHS: The Best of 1980-1990 or Under a Blood
Red Sky

Approximate running times are given for each section of the class. The minimum time needed for each session is 50 minutes at a brisk pace; 75 or 90 would make for a better experience.

Pursuing God as Ultimate

As people arrive, play "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" (The Joshua Tree CD)

Introduction: 10 minutes

Begin with a prayer. Cover any ground rules you want to set for the class. Then using the essay in this book or your own knowledge, give (or if your class contains U2 fans, draw out of them with questions) brief historical background on U2. Make sure to explain that they are not an example of "Christian rock," but a mainstream band, and to point out that their brand of faith is not one that has sat easily with the institutional aspect of Christianity. Comment on why you've chosen to offer a class on their work.

For our first session, we're going to focus on one live performance video from the year 2001. The song dates from 1987, but it has been a highlight of live U2 concerts since then.

Hand out lyrics to "Where the Streets Have No Name" and give people a chance to read them.

Very quickly, on a surface level, what does this song seem to be about?

- desire for an ideal place
 - escape
 - freedom from dividing labels ["no name"]
 - transcendence of negative things ["dust cloud,"
"poison rain"]
-

Video and Discussion: 15-20 minutes

Watch "Streets" (Elevation 2001: Live From Boston DVD, 6:43) Be aware that there are some lyric changes in this live performance.

We're coming in at the apex of the concert, transitioning out of a song about addictions into "Streets," the one we're going to focus on. You'll hear Bono recite a prayer based on Psalm 116:12-14 during the introduction, then move into the actual song, and as you watch I want to give you a few things to look for:

- Observe the use of light
- Listen for the crowd singing along (easiest to hear at the beginning); they are singing at the top of their lungs, but are low in the mix
- If you know a Christian tradition that uses physical gestures in worship, watch for any that may be familiar to you
- Note how the band behaves at the "curtain call" moment at the end

Large group discussion questions:

1. What did you notice?

Take answers, putting them on newsprint if you care to, and invite reflections on what these things convey. Possible answers include:

- use of light: shimmering effect at beginning and end, blinding bursts of white/gold light during the song, use of the color red
- gesture: orans position/hands raised, kneeling/genuflecting, eyes closed, peace sign, prayer posture of hands at end, "God bless you"

2. What did you feel as you watched?

3. Is what we've just seen a worship event? What evidence supports your answer?

Small Groups: 10-20 minutes

Break into groups of no more than 4 and ask them to discuss as many of the following questions as you have time for. Play tracks 1-3 of The Joshua Tree CD quietly in the background.

1. When in your life, in any context, have you felt like what we just watched?

2. C. S. Lewis writes that if we are designed for connection with God, for heaven, that the longing for that connection will be felt in us like a desire "for our proper place . . . for our own far-off country . . . for something that has never actually appeared in our experience."¹⁰ If we take this song as voicing such a desire, a longing for direct encounter with God, what is your reaction to the intensity we saw on the video? Why?

- I identify; I've been there
- I wish I could experience that kind of thing
- That kind of desire for God might come a few times in someone's life, but it's not normal or sustainable
- Seeing that kind of passion about spiritual things makes me nervous because . . .
- I don't buy Lewis' statement, or I don't buy that what we see on the video has anything to do with spirituality
- Other

3. The lyrics to the song say, "And when I go there, I go there with you." At the end, the band is seen clapping for their audience. What does this say about the role of community in connecting with God? When have you experienced a corporate connection with

God that inspired you?

Large Group Conclusion: 10-15 minutes

Discussion questions:

1. Imagine that you were part of the event on the video. If you were using those 7 minutes as information about what God is like, what conclusions would you draw?

2. Compare and contrast this with at least one other event you've experienced that purported to show what God is like. (You might want to make a list with two columns.) What are the pros and cons of each?

Closing: 5 minutes

Give an overview of what's coming next; cover any housekeeping issues.

Prayer Time:

Pray in whatever fashion is most native to your group, or call the group to prayer, then read again the first stanza of the lyrics to "Streets."

Ask: If you were writing a song like this right now, about what your deepest longing in life is, how would it begin? Silently (or aloud, depending on the tolerance of your group) tell God, "I want to" Then close with Rev. 22:17: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Outro:

Before talking begins, immediately put on "40" (War CD) as people are getting up to go.

Pursuing God as Justice

As people arrive, play "Mothers of the Disappeared" (The Joshua Tree CD)

Introduction: 2-3 minutes

Pray; cover any announcements; introduce topic of this session.

Video and Discussion: 15-20 minutes

Explain, or draw out of fans in your group: U2 is from the Republic of Ireland. This 1983 song is about sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, but has also been applied to many other situations of evil. We're not looking so much for specific visuals this time as for the general feel of the song, and I'd like you to follow the lyrics as we watch.

Hand out lyrics; play "Sunday Bloody Sunday" (ideally watch a performance from the early 80s on The Best of 1980-1990 VHS or the Under A Blood Red Sky VHS (these two are identical—approximately 6:00); or play the studio version from War (4:40); if you have extra time, it's also available on the Elevation 2001: Live From Boston DVD (8:04).

Large group discussion questions:

(write answers up on newsprint if you care to)

1. What are some of the striking images to you in this song?

- how long
 - broken bottles
 - bodies strewn across a dead end street
-

- battle call
 - trenches
2. Where do you find hope in the text?
 - "Tonight we can be as one"
 - "Wipe your tears away"
 - "Claim the victory Jesus won"
 3. What does it call the listener to? A pacifist response? Outrage? Turning to Jesus? Wiping others' tears?

Small Groups: 10-20 minutes

Break into groups of no more than four. Ask them to discuss as many of the following questions as you have time for. During it, play the War CD beginning with track 1 quietly in the background.

1. What situations in the world right now leave you saying "How long?"
2. When I hear the image of being "immune," numbed by the amount of suffering covered on TV, I...
 - know exactly what it means; one person can't do anything to help
 - know what it means but just pray God will change things
 - understand, but deal with it by choosing a few causes where I know I can make a difference
 - don't relate; even when it's far away, I feel very strongly for suffering and get involved
 - think those people should be solving their own problems
 - other

3. What do you think is meant by "the victory Jesus won on a Sunday Bloody Sunday?" If you believe in this victory, explain what you think it offers in situations of hunger, oppression, or violence. If you

don't, give your reaction to people's comments.

Large Group Conclusion: 15-25 minutes

Get volunteers to read the following two quotations:

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble
oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the
Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every
yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
(Isa. 58: 4-7)

There is a radical side to Christianity that I am
attracted to. And I think without a commitment
to social justice, it is empty. Are they putting
money into AIDS research? Are they investing
in hospitals so the lame can walk? So the blind
can see? . . . If you are not committed to the
poor, what is religion? It's a black hole.¹¹

Discussion questions:

(as many as you have time for)

1. What do these quotations have in common?
 2. Do you agree that without a commitment to social justice, Christianity is empty? Why or why not?
 3. List some other important parts of discipleship.
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How does social justice relate to them?

4. Whatever you may think about specific social issues, why is it important that Christians act out the love and compassion they preach?

5. Is there a specific situation on which our group could agree to take action together?

Closing: 7-10 minutes

Give an overview of what's coming next; cover any housekeeping issues.

We're going to finish by watching a video from the late 90s which specifically calls people who claim to have a relationship with God to take action. Watch for how that call is made, and for how many different kinds of people are part of the world it imagines.

Watch the video "Please" together (The Best of 1990-2000 DVD, 5:02)

Prayer Time:

After "Please" ends, without commenting on it, offer a very brief prayer and dismiss the group.

Outro:

As people are leaving, put on "Peace on Earth" from the All That You Can't Leave Behind CD.

session 3

Pursuing God as Absent

As people arrive, play "With or Without You" (The Joshua Tree CD; also available on The Best of 1980-1990 CD or VHS)

Introduction: 2-3 minutes

Pray; cover any announcements; introduce the topic of this session.

Song and Discussion: 15-20 minutes

There are a lot of places in Scripture where people express anger at God and accuse God of being too absent from the world, especially in the Psalms. This is a theme U2 has picked up on frequently. We're going to look first at a Biblical Psalm, and then at the contemporary one with which U2 ended the 1997 album Pop.

Have a volunteer read:

Hear my prayer, O Lord;
give ear to my supplications in your faithful-
ness;
answer me in your righteousness.
Do not enter into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you.

For the enemy has pursued me,
crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.
Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is appalled.
