

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

*A Guide to What
Matters Most*

LEADER'S GUIDE

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Introduction

Mainline and moderate Christians have a compelling faith story to tell. And Americans, more than ever, are eager to hear that story. In postreligious-right America, people are hungry for vibrant, grace-filled, open-minded, centrist, mainline faith. *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* can help your church proclaim the good news of mainline and moderate faith to your community.

What Is It?

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? is a seven-week, easily implemented, worship and Sunday school-based, congregation-wide initiative for mainline and moderate churches.

How Can It Help Your Church?

This unique local-church initiative can help energize your congregation, reach new people, make your church more visible in your community, attractively communicate moderate and mainline faith, wake up your Sunday school classes, and help prepare seven weeks of sermons and worship services without impacting your church budget.

How Does It Work?

The program has three basic components. First, participating churches will encourage their congregation to read an engaging new book about mainline faith called *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* Since individual

members and not the church will purchase the books, it will not impact the church budget. Second, church leaders will plan seven compelling sermons, worship services, and Sunday school lessons around the content of the book. Sermon helps and small-group lesson plans are provided in this Leader's Guide. Third, church members will use the book and seven-week event to invite and welcome people to their church. Comprehensive promotional helps for inviting and welcoming people are also included in this Leader's Guide. (Note that a new edition of the book contains this Leader's Guide.)

Book Overview

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? articulates mainline, orthodox Christianity in a fresh, accessible, and storytelling style. The book's preface and table of contents follow a few words about the author.

Author Information

Martin Thielen has served in vocational ministry in both the United Methodist Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. For the past ten years he has served as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church, Lebanon, Tennessee. During his tenure the church has experienced significant revitalization and growth. Martin has a bachelor of arts, a master of divinity, and a doctor of ministry degrees, along with a year of PhD coursework at Vanderbilt University. He served for four years as a national worship and preaching editor and consultant for the SBC. He has led more than one hundred church leadership workshops for ministers across the country. He also served as an adjunct

professor of worship and preaching at a seminary. Writing for publication has long been an important part of Martin's ministry. He has written five books, four of them on the subject of worship and preaching, and more than one hundred articles. His doctor of ministry project was "Ministering to Ministers through Writing." Martin's preaching and worship Web site can be found at www.GettingReadyForSunday.com.

PREFACE (FROM THE BOOK)

When I first met Danny, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.”

In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. Over the next year Danny and I engaged in numerous conversations about God, religion, and faith. During that time Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, “I’ve decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic.” Several months later Danny said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians *package* Christianity.” A few weeks after that conversation, Danny said, “Martin, you’ve just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know—what’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?”

“What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” What a great question! This little book represents my best effort to answer that question. Part 1 presents ten things Christians *don’t* need to believe. In short, Christians don’t need to believe in closed-minded faith. For example, Christians don’t need to believe that Jews are going to hell or that it’s heresy to believe in evolution. Part 2 presents ten things Christians *do* need to believe. They need to believe in Jesus—his life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life’s most profound questions, such

as, Where is God? What matters most? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? Is there hope?

Like Danny, many people in the twenty-first century hunger for an alternative expression of Christian faith that's different from the judgmental and narrow-minded caricatures they see on religious television and in the news. This book offers such an alternative. It articulates centrist, mainline Christianity in a way that's fresh and easy to understand. It also offers authentic Christian insights that speak to our deepest human needs. So turn the page, and let's begin exploring Danny's interesting question: "What's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?"

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LEADING THE SEVEN-WEEK INITIATIVE

The following steps will help you carry out the seven-week, congregation-wide initiative at your church.

1. Block out seven consecutive Sunday mornings on the calendar to carry out the event. Scheduling options include Lent, summer, fall, or New Year's. You can also schedule the study for Wednesday or Sunday nights. Even if your congregation does not engage in a churchwide study of the book, individual Sunday school classes or other small groups might want to use it as a resource.

2. Prepare your Sunday school teachers or other small-group leaders for the event. Two to three months before the seven-week initiative, gather your teachers to talk about this special study. Give them a copy of the book's preface and contents found in this Leader's Guide, along with the teaching helps for small-group leaders. Encourage each adult class to participate. However, do not force the study on anyone. If a particular class doesn't want to participate, that's OK. Most if not all of your adult classes will be excited and enthusiastic about the study.

3. Consider creating a new, short-term class specifically for this event. Recruit a few core people to form the class. Ask them to invite members of the congregation who don't normally attend Sunday school to participate during the seven-week study. They can also invite prospective church members to attend the class. A pastor who is not already teaching a class might want to teach this one. After the

seven weeks are over, encourage participants of this short-term class to continue meeting for an additional seven weeks, studying unused portions of the book. After that, see if enough interest exists to make the class permanent.

4. Purchase an adequate number of copies of *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* Churches who buy multiple copies will receive a discount from the publisher. Any unused books can be returned without penalty. However, laypersons of your congregation, not the church itself, will pay for the books. Encourage all adult members of your congregation, especially members of Sunday school classes or other small groups, to purchase a copy for themselves and additional copies to give to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. You can set up a table for purchasing books in the narthex or other heavily trafficked area in your facility. Most members will purchase the books gladly and eagerly. Why? Because church members want to support their church, they want to reach new people for their congregation, and they want to learn more about their faith. This seven-week event will help them do all three. If you prefer, you can purchase the books out of your education and/or evangelism budget. For more information about ordering books, go here: www.thethoughtfulchristian.com.

5. Begin promoting the seven-week event. In the next section of this Leader's Guide, you will find several no-cost or low-cost promotional aids—including a pastoral letter to the congregation, newsletter articles, a newspaper article, bulletin inserts, posters, and e-mail ads—that church members can send to their friends. One of the major goals of the initiative is for the church to invite and welcome guests. Therefore, encourage your congregation to give copies of the book to family members, friends, coworkers,

and neighbors, along with an invitation to attend worship and Sunday school during the seven-week initiative. As you get closer to the start date, ask members to begin reading the book. At the same time, encourage them to give copies of the book to their friends and invite them to worship and Sunday school for the seven-week initiative.

6. Carry out the seven-week series. During the series you will see increased attendance in worship and Sunday school (or other small groups engaged in the study). Current members will be enriched by the inspiring worship services and thought-provoking small-group studies, and new people will be attracted to your church. Carefully follow up with all visitors, both during and after the event.

PROMOTING THE SEVEN- WEEK INITIATIVE

Pastoral Letter

Six weeks before the event begins, send this letter to all members and friends of the congregation. For best results, send it on church stationery and mail it first-class.

Date

Name

Address

Dear Church Family [if possible, replace "Church Family" with actual names]:

On Sunday, [date], our congregation will embark on an exciting seven-week journey. Our entire church family, both in Sunday school classes and in worship services, will read and discuss an engaging new book about mainline and moderate Christianity titled *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*

During this unique study, we'll discuss several things Christians *don't* need to believe. For example, we don't need to believe that good Christians don't doubt or that it's OK for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. However, we'll spend most of our time studying what Christians *do* need to believe. In short,

Christians need to believe in Jesus—his life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life's most profound questions, including, What matters most? Am I accepted? Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? And is there hope?

You can help us prepare for this dynamic seven-week experience in the following ways. First, pray for this important event. Second, attend Sunday school and worship every Sunday during the seven-week initiative. Third, purchase copies of *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* for yourself, your family, and your friends. Books can be purchased in the narthex on Sunday mornings or in the church office during the week. Finally, invite family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to visit our church during the seven-week event.

I look forward to this special time together. Please contact me if you have any questions. It's a joy to be your pastor!

In Christ's love and service,

[your name]

Newsletter Article

As soon as the pastoral letter goes out, place the same letter (minus the greeting and conclusion) in the newsletter—as seen below. Continue to put this in the newsletter until the event has begun. Repetition is good when you are trying to communicate with an entire congregation. You cannot overcommunicate!

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

On Sunday, [date], our congregation will embark on an exciting seven-week journey. Our entire church family, both in Sunday school classes and in worship services, will read and discuss an engaging new book about main-line and moderate Christianity titled *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*

During this unique study we'll discuss several things Christians *don't* need to believe. For example, we don't need to believe that good Christians don't doubt or that it's OK for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. However, we'll spend most of our time studying what Christians *do* need to believe. In short, Christians need to believe in Jesus—his life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life's most profound questions, including, What matters most? Am I accepted? Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? And is there hope?

You can help us prepare for this dynamic seven-week experience in the following ways. First, pray for this important event. Second, attend Sunday school and worship every Sunday during the seven-week initiative. Third, purchase copies of *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* for yourself, your family, and your friends.

Books can be purchased in the narthex on Sunday mornings or in the church office during the week. Finally, invite family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to visit our church during the seven-week event.

Church Bulletin Announcements

Six weeks in advance of the event, begin placing the following announcement in the church bulletin. Continue to run this announcement until the event begins:

On Sunday, [date], our church will embark on an exciting seven-week journey. Our worship services and adult Sunday school classes will focus on an engaging new book about mainline and moderate Christianity titled *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* Copies of the book will be available for purchase in the narthex soon. This will be a great time to invite guests to visit our church! For more information, please see the church newsletter and Web site.

E-mail Promotion

Two weeks in advance of the event, send the following e-mail to your congregation. Ask them to forward it to all of their family members and friends, along with an invitation to visit our church during the seven-week event. One week in advance of the event, send the same e-mail again:

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

*A Seven-Week Series
for Mainline and Moderate Christians*

Week 1: (Don't) Gimme Me That Old-Time Religion

Week 2: Jesus' Priority: What Matters Most?

Week 3: Jesus' Grace: Am I Accepted?

Week 4: Jesus' Work: Where Is God?

Week 5: Jesus' Example: What Brings Fulfillment?

Week 6: Jesus' Death: What about Suffering?

Week 7: Jesus Resurrection: Is There Hope?

Include the name of your church, the dates of the event, worship times, Sunday school times, church address, Web site address, and phone number.

Bulletin Inserts

Use the same information and layout as the above e-mail flyer to make bulletin inserts. Place them in the church bulletin the two Sundays before the event begins. Encourage people to give or mail them to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, along with an invitation to attend church during the seven-week event. Place additional copies of the inserts in the narthex. Right before the benediction, remind the congregation about the additional inserts available in the narthex. Encourage them to take extra copies to give or mail to family and friends.

Newspaper Ads

If you have an advertising or evangelism budget, place the above bulletin insert or e-mail flyer in newspaper ads beginning two weeks before the event.

Newspaper Article

Many local newspapers are willing to run church stories, especially if the articles are ready for publication. Two weeks before the event, submit the following article to your local newspaper. Tell them you would greatly appreciate their running the story. The best time for the story to run is the Monday or Tuesday before the event begins on Sunday. A photo of the church and/or a photo of the front cover of the book would be a nice addition to the story.

Unique Event at [name of your church]

Beginning on Sunday, [date], [name of church] will begin a unique seven-week event called *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* This congregation and community-wide event will be based on an engaging new book about mainline and moderate Christianity. Participants will study things Christians *don't* need to believe, as well as things Christians *do* need to believe. The entire community is invited to attend. The series will continue every Sunday morning through [closing date]. Sunday worship services are held at [time of service/s]. Sunday school classes are held at [time of classes]. [name of church] is located at [address]. For further information, see its Web site at [Web address] or call the church office at [phone number].

Worship Announcements

At least one month before the first session/sermon, begin making verbal announcements in the worship services each week about the upcoming seven-week initiative.

Phone Campaign

One month before the event begins, recruit a telephone task force. People on this task force will call every member of the congregation, along with prospective members. They will remind or inform them of the event and invite them to attend. Two weeks before the event begins, have the task force begin making the calls. Complete the calls at least five days before the first Sunday of the initiative.

Posters

Four weeks in advance of the event, create posters and place them throughout your church and around the community.

CUSTOMIZING THE SEVEN-WEEK INITIATIVE

Since *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* has twenty-one chapters, churches will not be able to cover the entire book during the seven-week initiative. After the seven-week event is over, many classes will want to return to the book and study the remaining chapters that interest them. This will provide small groups with up to fourteen additional weeks of study at no additional cost.

We suggest the following schedule for the seven-week emphasis. However, as you will see below, you can customize the study to fit your church's interests and needs. Comprehensive sermon helps and small-group study guides for all seven weeks can be found later in this guide.

Suggested Seven-Week Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* The first Sunday will introduce the congregation-wide initiative by broaching a few ideas from part 1 of the book. However, we do not expect pastors to preach on the more controversial subjects during the seven-week series. That's best left to small groups after the series is over. After noting a few things that Christians *don't* need to believe, the question will be raised: What *do* Christians need to believe? The answer, of course, is Jesus.

Week 2: Jesus' Priority: What Matters Most? (chap. 12 in the book)

Week 3: Jesus' Grace: Am I Accepted? (chap. 13)

Week 4: Jesus' Work: Where Is God? (chap. 14)

Week 5: Jesus' Example: What Brings Fulfillment?
(chap. 15)

Week 6: Jesus' Death: What about Suffering? (chap. 16)

Week 7: Jesus Resurrection: Is There Hope? (chap. 17)

This selection of chapters will resonate with your members and attract guests. If you like, however, you can substitute chapters. For example, you could drop chapter 15, "Jesus' Example: What Brings Fulfillment?" and substitute chapter 20, "Jesus' Vision: What Is God's Dream for the World?" You can also extend the series beyond seven weeks, perhaps going eight or nine weeks. For example, on the second Sunday of the initiative, you could add chapter 11, "Jesus' Identity: Who Is Jesus?" and thus extend the event to eight Sundays. Or you can delete one or two of the suggested chapters and reduce the event to five or six weeks. In short, each church can customize the event to meet its own unique needs.

TIMELINE FOR PROMOTION

Two months in advance of the event:

- Block out seven consecutive Sundays to carry out the initiative.
- Meet with your Sunday school and/or small-group leaders to explain the event and get them on board.
- Order books (bulk discounts are available).

Six weeks in advance of the event:

- Mail the pastor's letter.
- Publish article in newsletter and repeat it until the event begins.
- Place announcement in bulletin and repeat it until the event begins.
- Find a core group of people to form and promote the short-term class.
- Place information about the event on your Web site and leave it up until the event is completed.

Four weeks in advance of the event:

- Begin selling books in narthex and church office.
- Place posters around the church and community.
- Begin making verbal announcements in worship.
- Recruit telephone task force.

Three weeks in advance of the event:

- Place inserts in bulletins with additional copies in narthex.
- Begin inviting people to the new short-term class.

Two weeks in advance of the event:

- Place inserts in bulletins with additional copies in narthex.
- Send e-mail promotion to congregation.
- Send article to local newspaper(s).
- Place ads in local newspaper(s).
- Begin telephone campaign.

One week in advance of the event:

- Send another e-mail promotion.
- Complete the telephone campaign.

TEACHING HELPS FOR SMALL-GROUP LEADERS

Thank you for leading a small group for *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* The small-group component is a crucial part of this event, so you are playing an important role in the life of your church.

Suggestions for leading each of the seven weeks follow. Each lesson plan includes a bottom-line summary of the lesson, Scripture references, a brief commentary of the text/s, a video recommendation, discussion questions, and a closing prayer. Feel free to add to, subtract from, or adapt these ideas to meet the needs of your unique class.

A Note about Using Video

Be mindful of the warning at the beginning of videotapes or DVDs that you rent or purchase. The rental or purchase of such videos gives you the right to show them in a home setting only, unless you purchase a license to show them elsewhere. Check with your pastor or director of education to see if your church or school already has such a license.

Week 1: (Don't) Gimme That Old-Time Religion

Bottom Line of Lesson

Some old-time religion is unhealthy and needs to be discarded.

Scripture Texts

Matthew 19:3–9

Matthew 9:16–17

Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28

Brief Commentary on the Texts

Matthew 19:3–9: In Jesus' day old-time religion allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason. In a day without alimony, child support, or public assistance of any kind, it usually left her with two options: begging or prostitution. That was old-time religion, and Jesus completely rejected it.

Matthew 9:16–17: Jesus speaks of old wineskins, a reference to the old-time religion of his day. Jesus said that sometimes new wineskins are needed because some old-time religion isn't worth keeping.

Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28: Jesus chastises some of the religious leaders of his day for their toxic faith, especially their arrogance, pride, and hypocrisy.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

To help introduce the theme, consider showing the final two to three minutes of the movie *Religulous*. This film argues that all religion is toxic and needs to be discarded. It could spark spirited dialogue about the subject of unhealthy religion.

Discussion Starters

1. In the preface of the book, the author tells a story about a young man named Danny:

When I first met Danny, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t

like organized religion. And I can't stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians."

In spite of Danny's avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. Over the next year Danny and I engaged in numerous conversations about God, religion, and faith. During that time Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, "I've decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic." Several months later Danny said, "I've had an epiphany. I realize that I don't reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians *package* Christianity."

Can you relate to Danny's comments? What "packages" of Christianity turn you off? Why?

2. What examples of unhealthy religion do you see in the world today?

3. Read Matthew 23:13–15, 25–28. In this passage, Jesus condemns the toxic faith of some of the religious leaders of his day. How does this text make you feel? Does it trouble you to hear Jesus speak such harsh words? Why was Jesus so unhappy with these people? (If time permits, read and discuss the other two texts listed above.)

4. In recent years several popular books have been arguing that all religion is toxic and therefore needs to be rejected. Examples include *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Great*. The film *Religulous* makes the same argument. (This would be a good time to show the movie clip mentioned above.) How do you respond to the argument that all religion is unhealthy and needs to be abandoned?

5. In the introduction to part 1, the author says:

A lot of old-time religion is good and noble, and we'll explore much of it in part 2 of this book. But some old-time religion is neither good nor noble. Old-time religion gave us the Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars. Old-time religion oppressed woman, defended slavery, and stifled scientific inquiry. Some of that old-time religion is unhealthy and needs to be discarded. In the chapters that follow, we will review ten tenets of old-time religion that Christians can and should discard.

The author then reviews ten tenets of old-time faith that he thinks we should discard. We don't have time to review all of those today or even in this seven-week study, but we can return to them later. Let's quickly review those ten chapter titles. (Have the class look at the contents, part 1.) Which of these chapter titles do you tend to agree with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones would you like to study after the seven-week initiative is over?

Who's Not Here?

Before you conclude today's class, talk about people who could be invited to the class, both church members and potential members. Get volunteers from your class to call and invite each person named to the remainder of the seven-week study.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, we are all capable of having unhealthy religion. Forgive us when we let our religion become unhealthy. Help us instead to have vibrant, healthy, life-giving faith. Empower us to live out that kind of faith and to share it with others. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Week 2: Jesus' Priority: What Matters Most?

Bottom Line of Lesson

Relationships—with God and others—matter most.

Scripture Text

Mark 12:28–34

Brief Commentary on Text

Jesus lays out the most important element of life and faith: loving God and loving others.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

For fun, and to help introduce the theme, show a brief movie clip from *Up in the Air*. The clip can be found in chapter 13 of the DVD (81:36 to 82:36). In this clip a young man, terrified of getting married, starting a family, and growing old, asks the question “What’s the point?”

Discussion Starters

1. What do Americans value most? List answers on the board. Examples would include money, career, success, beauty, fame, status, family, faith, country, and so forth. Ask the class to decide which three of these items are most important to most Americans. Then ask, How important do you think these three things are to Jesus?

2. Ask members of the class each to make their own “top three” list. Ask them to share what they are and why they picked those particular items. Ask them if their “top three” have changed over the years, and if so, why?

3. Read today's text. Ask, What does it mean to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength? What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves?

4. Have someone in the class read the opening story about Steve and Lisa. After the reading, ask participants to respond to the story. What feelings did it evoke? What thoughts?

5. Ask, If our relationship with God and others truly is the most important thing in our lives, how would that impact the way we live? What would we do differently?

Closing Prayer

Help us Lord, to love you with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and help us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

Week 3: Jesus' Grace: Am I Accepted?

Bottom Line of Lesson

In his grace, Jesus loves and accepts us, even with our flaws, as beloved children of God.

Scripture Texts

John 8:1–11

Matthew 9:10–13

Brief Commentary on Texts

John 8:1–11 tells the story of the woman caught in adultery. Ancient Jewish law called for execution of adulterers. However, Jesus offered her grace. His statement “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” is one of the most famous quotes of the Bible.

Matthew 9:10–13 tells the story of Jesus’ eating dinner with a group of sinners. The religious authorities are upset, but Jesus reminds them that God is a God of mercy and that Jesus has come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

Watch a video clip depicting the story of the woman caught in adultery from the old movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. It might be available at a local video rental store. You can also get the clip at www.wingclips.com. Look under the topic “judging,” and then find *Jesus of Nazareth*. Perhaps a technologically gifted member of the class could burn it onto a DVD and bring it for viewing, if you have the legal license to do so. Or perhaps the class could watch it on a laptop computer. The clip is called “First Stone.” It lasts just under three minutes.

Discussion Starters

1. What if everyone received exactly what they deserved? Would that be a good thing, or not?
2. What does the word “grace” mean to you?
3. Think of a time when you received grace. What did it feel like? How did it impact you?
4. Have someone read the first two paragraphs of the chapter. Ask the class to respond to the argument that grace is the one belief unique to Christianity.
5. Read John 8:1–11. Watch the video if it’s available. What feelings does this story evoke in you? How do you think this woman felt? Why was the man not accused of anything?

6. Ask someone in the class to read the final story of the chapter: “Dancing with Grace.” Ask class members if they are comfortable with this image of God? If so, why? If not, why not?

Closing Prayer

Eternal God, thank you for your unmerited, unconditional, amazing grace. Help us to freely receive that grace in our lives, and help us to freely give it to others. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Week 4: Jesus’ Work: Where Is God?

Bottom Line of Lesson

Although God is not limited to working through people, God primarily works in the world incarnationally—through human instruments.

Scripture Text

John 1:1–5, 14

Brief Commentary on Text

Jesus has coexisted with God (and the Holy Spirit) from the beginning of time. However, at the appointed hour, God sent Jesus to earth. Thus God became “flesh.” We call this the “incarnation.” In short, the incarnation tells us that God actively engages in the world through human beings, especially through Jesus Christ.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

In the introduction of the chapter, the author uses two films to illustrate two competing theories about how God works in the world. Show a brief clip from both movies.

For *The Truman Show*, see chapter 20, minutes 83:18–84:47.
For *Apollo 13*, see chapter 12, minutes 79:57–81:02.

Discussion Starters

1. Ask the class to give biblical examples of God’s using human beings to do God’s work. For example, Adam and Eve tended the garden and named the animals, Noah built an ark, Abraham and Sarah began a nation, David led the people of Israel, and so on.

2. Ask the class to give modern examples of God’s using human beings to do God’s work. For example, pastors preaching the gospel, doctors healing the sick, teachers teaching children, parents raising responsible children, and so forth.

3. Ask, Where is God at work in our congregation and community? How can we cooperate with God to do God’s work in this place?

4. Watch the two video clips mentioned above. Discuss the two different versions of how God works in the world. See the opening paragraphs of the chapter for guidance in this discussion.

5. On the Internet find the lyrics for “Who Will Be Jesus?” by Bruce Carroll. (Copyright laws prevent us from printing them here.) Have someone read them. Ask for feedback.

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for working in the world through ordinary people like us. Use each one of us here today to help carry out your work in our church and community. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Week 5: Jesus' Example: What Brings Fulfillment?

Bottom Line of Lesson

True fulfillment comes from serving others.

Scripture Text

John 13:1–5, 13–17

Brief Commentary on Text

Jesus washes his disciples' feet and then uses that experience to teach them about the importance of service. By taking on the role of a servant and washing his disciples' feet, Jesus shows us that true fulfillment comes from caring for others. As Jesus said in today's text, when we follow his example and serve other people, we "will be blessed" (v. 17 NIV).

Sunday Morning at the Movies

Near the end of the chapter, you will find a section called "Dr. Green's Final Prescription." It's based on the television show *ER*. In this scene Dr. Mark Green, a major character in the show, gives his final advice to his daughter before he dies from a brain tumor. His final advice is "Be generous." You can find this episode on Season 8 of *ER*, "On the Beach" (November 13, 2008).

Discussion Starters

1. The opening section of this chapter tells the story of Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity. Have any of you ever volunteered on a Habitat build? Tell us about that experience. What did it mean to you to work on the house?

2. What's the most significant service experience you have ever had? What impact did it have on you?

3. In this chapter the author says:

Self-absorbed people who live only for themselves and their immediate family will never be content. Self is too small a god to serve. True fulfillment comes only through service to others. Hundreds of different ways exist for us to follow Jesus' example. But every Christian is called by God to pick up a towel and wash the feet of others in some way. And when we do, we—like Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity—will discover true joy and fulfillment.

Respond to that statement. Has that been true in your life?

4. What are some practical ways we can serve others in our church and community? What can our Sunday school class do to serve others?

5. Read the text about Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples. How do you think it would feel to have Jesus wash your feet? What was Jesus trying to teach them?

6. Watch the *ER* clip mentioned above. How did that scene make you feel? If you were going to give your child or children your last advice, what would it be?

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of service. Help us to take up our towels and wash others' feet. Help us to better serve our family, our friends, our church, and our community. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Week 6: Jesus' Death: What about Suffering?

Bottom Line of Lesson

Although God does not prevent suffering, the crucified God fully enters human suffering and works to redeem that suffering.

Scripture Text

Matthew 27:27–31

Brief Commentary on Text

A major portion of each Gospel is devoted to Jesus' crucifixion, including this brief passage of Christ's passion. The death of Christ was extremely important to the biblical writers. Jesus' suffering tells us that, at heart, God is a crucified God who fully understands and enters human suffering.

Sunday Morning at the Movies

Show a brief clip from *The Passion of the Christ*. See chapter 16, minutes 53:13–54:53.

Discussion Starters

1. This week's chapter raises two important questions about suffering. First, why does suffering occur? Second, where is God when suffering occurs? Today we'll discuss those two questions. We'll begin with the question, Why does suffering occur? In this chapter the author lists several answers to that question, including these: (1) human sin, (2) the laws of nature, (3) an opportunity to grow, and (4) demonic forces of evil. (List these on the board.) How helpful are these answers to you? Can you think of others? (Note: Since this is such a complex topic, the discussion today will need to be done in a brief, broad-strokes

fashion. You can come back later and discuss this more in-depth, including studying chapter 1, “God Causes Cancer, Car Wrecks, and Other Catastrophes.”)

2. The second question raised in today’s chapter is, Where is God when suffering occurs? The author says:

When children get leukemia, teenagers die in accidents, good Christian people contract Lou Gehrig’s disease, or communities are devastated by tornadoes, where is God? That’s a profoundly important question. The Christian answer to that question is clear. There’s no ambiguity here, no “seeing through the glass dimly.” Instead, the answer is straightforward. Where is God in the midst of suffering? God is right smack in the middle of it. We learn that from the cross of Jesus.

What response do you have to that quote? Does the concept of a “crucified God” who enters human suffering resonate with you? Why? Why not?

3. Have you ever experienced God’s presence in suffering? Would you be willing to tell us about that experience?

4. Watch the above video clip from *The Passion of the Christ*. How did you feel as you watched that clip? What does it mean to you that Jesus was tortured and executed?

5. Read the final section of the chapter, “The Crucified God.” Ask members of the class to respond to that story.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we acknowledge today that we don’t have final answers to the problem of suffering. But we thank you for being a God who understands, enters, and ultimately redeems suffering. Today we pray for those who suffer,

including members of our class and church. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Week 7: Jesus' Resurrection: Is There Hope?

Bottom Line of Lesson

Jesus Christ's resurrection gives us hope for life and even hope for death.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 28:1–7

Brief Commentary on the Text

This passage, along with other Gospel narratives of the resurrection, proclaim the glorious good news: “He is not here; for he has been raised!”

Sunday Morning at the Movies

The end of the chapter has a section called “The Last Word Is Hope.” It's based on the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. If you would like to use a brief video presentation from the movie, use the following clips: (1) 71:27–72:56, and (2) 134:30–136:15, followed immediately by (3) 136:56–138:13. Another option is to watch the powerful video *Sunday's Coming* (<http://www.ignitermedia.com>).

Discussion Starters

1. Hope is a major biblical theme. Why do you think that is the case?

2. Think of a time when hope helped you through a rough experience. Would you be willing to share that with the group?

3. How important is the resurrection of Christ to Christianity? Would there be a Christian faith and church without the resurrection? If so, what would it look like?

4. In today's text some women went to the tomb where Jesus was buried and heard the news of Easter: "He is not here; for he has been raised!" What do you think that would have been like?

5. When the women first told the other disciples about the resurrection, they were met with skepticism. Why do you think that was the case? Do you think it is difficult for people to believe in the resurrection today?

6. What does the resurrection of Christ mean to you personally?

7. The last section of the chapter is called "The Last Word Is Hope." It's based on the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. Watch the clips and discuss the theme of hope in the movie. If you can't watch the clips, have someone read this portion of the chapter and discuss it.

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the great gift of hope, both in this life and in the life to come. Thank you that the last word of the gospel is not death but life, not crucifixion but resurrection, not despair but hope. We give you thanks in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

PREACHING HELPS FROM THE AUTHOR

I'm delighted that you and your church are participating in this event! In this section of the Leader's Guide are preaching materials to help you prepare sermons for the seven-week initiative. Before the preaching suggestions, several comments are in order.

First, one year during the Lenten season, I preached a seven-week sermon series on *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* at my church in Lebanon, Tennessee. My congregation and community enthusiastically responded. During the series worship attendance jumped 20 percent, large numbers of guests visited, and as a direct result of the series, we added over a dozen new members, several by adult affirmation of faith and baptism. If our Sunday school classes had been studying the same seven topics, if we had offered a book on the subject, and if we had promoted it more aggressively, the seven-week event would have been even more effective. If you will carefully prepare and boldly promote it, this seven-week, congregation-wide event can help invigorate your church.

Second, stories from the book will not be included in these preaching helps. As you will see when you read the book, each chapter is chock-full of stories that can be used during the seven-week series and beyond. So rather than reproducing all of that material here, I'm going to assume that you already have the book or will order it soon. If you would like to order a copy, go here: www.thethoughtfulchristian.com or call 1-800-554-4694.

Third, don't be afraid to use content from the book in your sermons, especially the stories. You can feel at ease in using materials from the book for at least three reasons. First, as much as I wish it were so, not everyone at worship during the seven-week event will have read the book! Second, even if they have, they will enjoy hearing the stories again. And third, repetition is a powerful tool, so let it work in your favor.

Preaching ideas for all seven weeks follow.

Week 1

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Introduction to Series: (Don't) Gimme Me That Old-Time Religion Matthew 19:3–9; 9:16–17

Introduction to Series

Early in the service, before the Scripture reading and sermon, introduce the series. Tell your congregation how much you are looking forward to the next seven weeks. Encourage those who have not yet read the book to do so. Challenge them to attend one of your small groups during the duration of the series so they can study the book with others. Explain that in today's service you will be introducing part 1 of the book and that, over the next six weeks, you'll focus on part 2. Print a schedule of the sermon topics in the bulletin, listing which chapter will be covered each Sunday. Call attention to that schedule in this introduction. Finally, remind them that this is a great time to invite

guests to church. Conclude this introduction with a prayer, asking God's blessings on the seven-week event.

Sermon

Unlike sermons 2–7, the first sermon of the series will not come from a specific chapter of the book. Instead, it will be broadly based on part 1 and will serve as an introduction to the entire series. I recommend that you do *not* broach the controversial topics found in part 1 of the book. First, you don't need the grief that comes from preaching on topics like homosexuality! Second, you might not agree with some of my conclusions in part 1. That's OK. Good Christian folks often disagree on difficult issues. Third, these kinds of complex topics are better dealt with in small-group conversational settings than in Sunday morning sermons. Fourth, and perhaps most important, this series is designed, at least in part, to invite and welcome guests to your church. Preaching on highly volatile topics is not a good strategy for welcoming new people. There is certainly a time and place to preach and teach on these topics, but this seven-week initiative is not the best venue. If you want to tackle the hard subjects found in part 1, consider doing a sermon series on those topics at a later date.

The suggested texts for week 1 are Matthew 19:3–9 and Matthew 9:16–17. Both texts provide examples of unhealthy religion. Another good option is Matthew 23, where Jesus takes on the Pharisees for their arrogant, hypocritical, toxic religion. Since the sermon for week 1 does not focus on a specific chapter of the book, I'm providing you with a sermon manuscript. When I preached this introductory sermon at my church, I called it, "(Don't) Give Me That Old-Time Religion."

(Don't) Give Me That Old-Time Religion

Most of you are familiar with the old gospel song “Gimme Me That Old-Time Religion.” The chorus goes like this, “Gimme me that old-time religion, gimme me that old-time religion, gimme me that old-time religion, it’s good enough for me.” [Note: this will be more effective if you lead them in singing (a cappella) the chorus. If you are not much of a singer, have someone else lead the chorus, or ask them to speak the words of the chorus with you.]

Well, a lot of old-time religion is good and noble. But some old-time religion is neither good nor noble. Old-time religion gave us the Crusades, the Inquisition, and religious wars. Old-time religion oppressed woman, defended slavery, and stifled scientific inquiry. The fact is, some old-time religion is unhealthy. Even Jesus didn’t like some of that old-time religion. We saw two examples in today’s Scripture readings. The first example of Jesus’ frustration with old-time religion comes from Matthew 19, which deals with the topic of divorce. In Jesus’ day old-time religion allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason. If she burned his dinner, if he found someone he liked better—the reason didn’t matter—he could dump her on the street in a heartbeat. And in a day without alimony, child support, or public assistance of any kind, it usually left her with two options: begging or prostitution. That was old-time religion, and Jesus completely rejected it.

Old-time religion, at least some of it, is greatly overrated. We see the same thing in today’s second Scripture reading, from Matthew 9. In this passage Jesus speaks of old wineskins—a clear reference to the old-time religion of his day. Jesus says that sometimes new wineskins are needed because some old-time religion isn’t worth keeping. In the book we’re studying together, the author mentions ten tenets of old-time religion that can be discarded. Let

me quickly review four of them. [Note: you might want to review only one, two, or three of them.]

First, we can discard old-time religion that claims God causes cancer, car wrecks, and other catastrophes. It's not God's will that a nine-year-old child die of leukemia, that a teenager become paralyzed in a car wreck, or that two hundred thousand Haitians die in an earthquake. Just because something bad happens does not mean that God caused it to happen. Jesus understood that. We also need to understand that. Religion that blames God for everything that happens is old-time religion that we can and should discard. [Note: If you want to add further details to any of these four points, add scriptural references, or tell a story to illustrate them, see the corresponding chapters in part 1 of the book. You'll find plenty of material to flesh out these points.]

Second, we can discard old-time religion that claims good Christians don't doubt. Faith is not about having absolute certainty, having all the answers, or seeing everything in black-and-white. Real faith, as the apostle Paul tells us in Corinthians, "sees through the glass dimly." Real faith asks hard questions. Real faith struggles. Real faith doubts. And real faith accepts ambiguity, mystery, and unanswered questions. Even Jesus experienced struggles and questions and doubts. When he was dying on the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Doubt is not the enemy of faith; doubt is a part of faith. So the idea that good Christians don't doubt is old-time religion that we can and should discard.

Third, we can discard old-time religion that claims women can't be preachers and must submit to men. Some Christian leaders, in the name of old-time religion, make women second-class citizens. They insist that women should submit to their husbands, and they insist that women should not serve in leadership roles in the church. They base their argument

on a few verses from the Bible. For example, in Ephesians 5, Paul says, “Wives, submit to your husbands.” But in the very next chapter, Paul also says, “Slaves, obey your masters.” We obviously don’t promote slavery anymore, so why would anyone in the twenty-first century promote the submission of women? Mainline Christians understand that women are equal partners with men, that marriage is a partnership and not a hierarchy, and that woman can and should be leaders in the church. So the idea that women are second-class citizens in the home, at church, or in society is old-time religion that we can and should discard.

Finally, we can discard old-time religion that says it’s OK for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. I’m sure you’ve met Christians who are arrogant, self-righteous, and judgmental. It’s not a new trend. There was a group of people like that in Jesus’ time. They were holier than thou, they were judgmental, they believed they had all the right answers, and they condemned everyone who didn’t agree with them, including Jesus. They were also the only people whom Jesus didn’t like and couldn’t get along with. Arrogant, judgmental, obnoxious religion is the exact opposite of the grace-filled spirit of Jesus Christ. It’s old-time religion that we can, and should, discard.

Other examples of unhealthy old-time religion could be mentioned today, but we don’t have time for that. So let me get to the bottom line of today’s message. Many people in our world today, and in our own community, have problems with religion. However, most of them don’t really reject God or Christianity or church. Instead, they reject the way that God and Christianity and church have been *packaged*. In the language of today’s text, they are not rejecting the pure wine of Jesus and Christianity; they are rejecting outdated, inadequate, dried-up wineskins. These people desperately need to know about new wineskins. They need to know there are alternative expressions of

the Christian faith, different from the negative caricatures they see on religious television and in the news. They need to know that not all Christians reject science and reason. They need to know that not all Christians are judgmental and arrogant. They need to know that it's OK to have questions and doubts. They need to know that you can love God with your heart but also with your head. In short, these people need to know that there are alternatives to unhealthy expressions of old-time religion. And we, as a mainline/moderate church, offer such an alternative. We in the mainline and moderate tradition have a great message of open-minded, grace-filled, gender-equal, "head, heart, and hands," orthodox Christian faith; and we need to proclaim it boldly!

Today we've said that some old-time religion can and should be discarded. But that raises an important question. What old-time religion *cannot* be discarded? That question brings us back to our book. In the preface the author tells an interesting story about a young man named Danny. At first Danny claimed to be an atheist. Later he decided to "upgrade" to an agnostic. Not long after that, Danny was seriously considering becoming a Christian. One day he said to the author of our book, "OK, you've just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know, what's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?"

"What's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?" What a great question! The answer to that question, of course, is Jesus. We can discard many religious beliefs and still be Christians. However, we cannot discard Jesus. In order to be Christian believers, we must believe in Jesus' life, teaching, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life's most profound questions, including, What matters most? Am I accepted? Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? And is there

hope? Over the next six weeks we'll explore those questions together. I look forward to the journey!

Week 2

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus' Priority: What Matters Most?

Mark 12:28–34

The text for week 2 is the Great Commandment found in Mark 12. You can get textual help from any good commentary. But to drive the point home, you would do well to tell some stories. You can find several in chapter 12 of the book. For example, consider telling the opening story about Steve and Lisa. This is a powerful story about what matters most in life and would add much to your sermon. You might want to use it as your conclusion. The final story of the chapter, “What about My Résumé?” would also work well. The other stories in chapter 12 come from my own personal experience and might not be as helpful. However, if you take out the personal references made about *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, that would also make an excellent illustration. Stories from your own experience would work even better.

Consider beginning the sermon with a scene from the movie *Up in the Air*. If you have projection capabilities, you can show the clip on screen. The one-minute clip comes from chapter 13 (81:36 to 82:36). If you don't use projection screens, just tell the story. In this scene a young man is having second thoughts about getting married. The wedding ceremony is about to begin, but he has a serious case of cold feet. He's not sure he can go through with the wedding. A member of the family, played by George Clooney, is sent to talk to him.

The young man says, “I don’t think I’ll be able to do this.”

George Clooney’s character asks, “Why would you say that today?”

The frightened young man says, “Well, last night I was kinda like laying in bed, and I couldn’t get to sleep, so I started thinking about the wedding and the ceremony and about our buying a house, and moving in together, and having a kid, and then having another kid, and then Christmas and Thanksgiving and spring break, and going to football games, and then all of a sudden they are graduated and getting jobs and getting married and, you know, I’m a grandparent, and then I’m retired, and I’m losing my hair, and I’m getting fat, and the next thing I know I’m dead. And it’s like, I can’t stop from thinking, what’s the point? I mean, what is the point?”

That story would be a great jumping-off place to dive into the morning text. When this religious leader asks Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” he was basically asking, “What’s the point? What matters most?” There are a lot of answers to that question, from money to success to beauty to power to fame. But Jesus says that what matters most is relationships with God and others. The above movie illustration from *Up in the Air*, along with comments about the text, combined with a strong story or two, will result in an effective sermon for week 2.

The following story would make a good addition to your sermon:

The Big Rocks

A well-known time-management guru gave a speech one day at a top-drawer business school. As he stood in front

of a class of high-powered overachievers, he said, “OK, time for a quiz.” He pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed Mason jar and set it on the table in front of him. He then produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them into the jar.

After filling the jar to the top, he asked, “Is this jar full?”

Everyone in the class said, “Yes.”

“Really?” he asked. Then he reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He poured the gravel into the jar, shaking it as he did, causing pieces of gravel to work themselves into the spaces between the big rocks. Then he asked the group once more, “Is the jar full?”

By now the class was on to him. “Probably not,” one of them answered.

“Good answer!” he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He dumped the sand into the jar, filling all the spaces between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, “Is this jar full?”

“No!” the class shouted.

Once again he said, “Good answer!” Then he took a pitcher of water and poured it until the jar was filled to the brim. He looked at the class and asked, “What is the point of this illustration?”

One eager student said, “No matter how full your schedule, if you try really hard, you can always fit more into it.”

“No,” the speaker replied, “that’s not the point. The point is—if you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.”

So what are the big rocks? Of all the things that clamor for our time, energy, and attention—what matters most? Someone once asked Jesus that question. In Mark 12 a religious leader asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” In short, this religious leader was asking Jesus, “What are the big rocks? What matters most?”

Week 3

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus' Grace: Am I Accepted?

John 8:1–11

As noted earlier, don't be afraid to use content from this chapter for your sermon. For example, I highly recommend that you tell Tony Campolo's story about Agnes. I've heard and told this story many times, and it still deeply moves me. Remember, repetition is a good thing!

The text for week 3 is John 8:1–11. Most scholars doubt that this story was in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John. However, since this story is burned into the "canon" of most people and since it's so much like Jesus, I don't worry about that. However, if you don't want to use this text, many others illustrate Jesus' grace, including Matthew 9:10–13.

When I preached this sermon at my church, we showed a video clip depicting the story of the woman caught in adultery from the old movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. You can get that clip at www.wingclips.com. Look under the topic "judging," and then find *Jesus of Nazareth*. The clip is called "First Stone." It lasts just under three minutes.

Consider building your sermon in the following way. Begin with the C. S. Lewis, Anne Lamott, and/or Will Campbell story from the first few pages of chapter 13. Then move to the text. Add your own thoughts and experiences of grace. Then conclude with the Campolo story.

Week 4

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus' Work: Where Is God?

John 1:1–5, 14

This week you and your congregation will grapple with the question Where is God? Another way of asking the question is, “How does God work in the world?” The answer is that God works through people, as we clearly see in the incarnation of Christ.

Once again, don't be hesitant to use materials from chapter 14 of the book. For example, the chapter lists numerous biblical examples of God's using people to do God's work in the world. And the humorous closing story about God sending a “professional” can be used effectively as either the introduction or conclusion of the sermon.

The most important part of week 4's sermon is *your own local experience of God at work*. You need to share where you see God at work in the world, especially in the life of your congregation and community. You don't need dramatic stories. You just need to share examples of God's working through the people in your congregation. For example, if I were preaching this sermon at my church this Sunday, I'd tell about last week's barbecue event at my church. One of our young adult Sunday school classes cooked a huge amount of BBQ, sold it to members of the church and community, and used the proceeds to support inner-city ministry with children. The week before, another Sunday school class rallied around a member going through chemotherapy. They sent her notes, brought her food, cleaned her house, and mowed her yard. These events were simple yet powerful examples of God's working through human instruments in our local church and community. These kinds of local examples of

God at work in your community will mean far more to your folks than stories from my book or anyplace else.

That being the case, I can't offer many more preaching helps for this Sunday. However, the following story, while silly, might serve as a good introduction to your sermon:

Where Is God?

A young mother was at wit's end with her two boys, ages eight and ten. The boys constantly engaged in mischief. Through the grapevine this mother heard that the local Catholic priest had great success in disciplining children. So she asked him if he would speak with her boys. The priest agreed but asked to see them individually. The next morning the mother sent her eight-year-old to see the priest, with the older boy scheduled to see him that afternoon.

The priest, a huge man with a booming voice, sat the younger boy down in the sanctuary, then asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy's mouth dropped open, but he made no response. He just stared at the priest, wide-eyed, with his mouth hanging open.

So the priest repeated the question in even a sterner tone: "Where is God?"

Again the boy made no attempt to answer.

So the priest raised his voice even more, shook his finger in the boy's face and shouted, "WHERE IS GOD?"

The boy screamed at the top of his lungs, bolted from the church, ran home, and dove into his bedroom closet, slamming the door behind him.

His older brother rushed to the bedroom and said, "What happened?"

The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, “We’re in *big* trouble this time. God is missing, and they think *we* did it!”

It’s a silly story but an important question. Where is God? Where is God at work in the world? *Is* God at work in the world? The answer surely is yes. God is at work all over the world, primarily through human instruments.

Week 5

What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus’ Example: What Brings Fulfillment?

John 13:1–5, 13–17

Week 5 reminds people that true meaning and fulfillment in life come from serving others. The text, from John 13, tells the story of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet. As Jesus said in this text, when we follow his example and serve other people, we “will be blessed” (v. 17 NIV).

There are several stories in chapter 15 that you can use in your sermon. Almost everyone is familiar with Habitat for Humanity, so the Millard Fuller story is a good one to tell. The closing story about Gus is powerful, so you should give serious consideration to using it. You might also want to use the Mark Green story from *ER*, “Dr. Green’s Final Prescription.” If you have projection capability, you can find the clip on Season 8 of *ER*, “On the Beach” (November 13, 2008).

A good flow for the sermon would be to begin with the Millard Fuller story, then move to the text, and close with the Gus story. Of course, you can add your

own experiences and stories as well. In case you need it, an additional extended story on the theme of service follows:

Christmas at First Church

Several years ago, a United Methodist Church in North Carolina learned about the joy of service, both individually and as a congregation. This church, concerned about homeless people in their town, especially during the winter months, spearheaded a program to help. They, along with fourteen other churches in their city, committed to care for homeless people for one week each winter. Each church opened up its facilities, usually the fellowship hall, to care for about eighteen to twenty homeless guests. Their job was to provide them with a warm and safe place to sleep, meals, and other needs for the entire week.

In early November the cooperating churches had their final organizational meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to schedule a specific week for each church for the winter months. The United Methodist pastor planned to go to the meeting, but she was busy, so she asked a woman from her church to go in her place. This woman, a new Christian and new church member, was an enthusiastic and devoted layperson. The pastor gave her a list of convenient weeks in January and February for their congregation to care for the homeless group. The pastor told her, "Make sure to schedule us for one of these weeks."

The woman went to the meeting. But not long into the meeting, they reached an impasse. Not one of the fifteen cooperating churches was willing to take Christmas week. First, it interfered with all their Christmas activities, including Christmas Eve services. Second, everybody knew that their members would not want to cook

meals and provide other services for homeless folks during the Christmas holidays. This woman, an enthusiastic new Christian believer, was dumbfounded. She could not believe that none of the churches would take Christmas week. The more they argued about who was going to have to take Christmas, the madder this woman got.

Before she knew it, she smashed her hand down on the table, stood up, and gave a speech. “I can’t believe this,” she exclaimed. “Jesus and his family were homeless in Bethlehem on the very first Christmas, and yet not one church in this community is willing to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas. Shame on you!”

The pastors all felt ashamed but not ashamed enough to volunteer for the week of Christmas! When nobody volunteered, this laywoman boldly proclaimed, “My church, the First United Methodist Church, will take Christmas week, not only this year but every year.”

One of the pastors said, “So moved.”

Another said, “I’ll second that.” After a quick vote, the meeting adjourned.

After the meeting was over, this woman went to see her pastor. She was excited. She said, “I have great news! Our church gets to care for homeless people during the week of Christmas, not only this year but every year! Isn’t that great?”

Well, that wasn’t exactly great news to the pastor. What about their Christmas Eve services? How would they find volunteers to cook and care for homeless people during the holidays? No, this was not good news at all to the pastor. In fact, she was sorry she had not gone to the meeting herself. But what could she do? It was a done deal.

The next Sunday the pastor gave the news to her congregation. She said, “We are going to host homeless people during the week of Christmas, and we need a bunch of volunteers to help.”

She didn't think she would get any response, but she was wrong. People came out of the woodwork to volunteer. Families with young children volunteered, saying to the pastor, "We want our kids to know there is more to Christmas than getting presents." Families who had lost loved ones during the year volunteered, hoping to fill the void of the Christmas season. In fact, the pastor got more volunteers than she could use. Christmas week finally arrived. Eighteen homeless people came to the Methodist church to spend the week. And much to this pastor's surprise, it ended up being the highlight of the year for the church.

People brought in tons of food all week long. The homeless guests ate like kings all week. Church members also brought nice clothes and coats for them to wear. They brought gifts for everyone, especially the children. And they didn't just give food and clothes and gifts; they gave of themselves as well. People stayed for hours to visit with the group. They ate meals with them and played games with them. They even had a marathon, three-day-long Monopoly tournament! Many members spent one or more nights during the week. The church members got to know these people as *real* people.

Although they were not required to go, all eighteen of the homeless guests went to the Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion service. They were warmly welcomed by the entire congregation, and everyone in attendance had a holy moment. In fact, the whole week turned out to be a glorious experience for the church, and it continued to be that way for the next five years.

This story has an unusual ending. After six years of hosting homeless folks during the week of Christmas, the Methodist pastor got a phone call from the Baptist pastor. He said, "You know, everyone in this town has heard about how much fun your church has hosting the homeless group at Christmas. So we were wondering, would you be willing

to share that week with some of the other churches? We were hoping we could do Christmas week this year.”

This United Methodist Church in North Carolina learned something profound through this experience. They learned that true fulfillment comes not by taking care of our own needs, but by taking care of others’ needs. May that be true in your life and in mine.

Week 6

What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus’ Death: What about Suffering?

Matthew 27:27–31

This week your congregation will grapple with the problem of suffering. Three preaching options follow:

1. Stick closely to the book. Chapter 16 provides more than ample preaching material. Pick a few sections of the chapter to use, add an experience from your own life about finding God in suffering, and conclude with the final story about David and the crucifix. This will work well.

2. Forgo a regular sermon. Instead, do a combination of Scripture readings and a solo. This will work best if your seven-week series occurs during the season of Lent. If so, week 6 will fall on Palm/Passion Sunday. (Another option is to do this Scripture/song approach on Good Friday.) After introducing the theme of suffering, you will read selected Scriptures from the passion of Jesus. Between segments of the readings, a soloist will sing three verses (a cappella) of “Were You There?” Here’s the way it would look:

Introduction

Many of you have heard of Elie Wiesel. Wiesel, a Jew, is a survivor of the holocaust. During his teenage years he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi concentration camp. Other than himself, everyone in Elie Wiesel's family perished in that horrible camp. In one of his books, Wiesel tells a powerful story from his experience at Auschwitz. The story involves a hanging that he and all the prisoners were forced to witness. Three men were hung by the Nazis, one of them just a teenage boy. They had been accused of blowing up a power station.

To warn the other inmates of the high cost of resistance, all the inmates were forced to walk by and see the execution at close range. It was a grisly scene—a scene of death, evil, and suffering. By the time Wiesel marched by, the two adults were dead. But the youth was still alive, hanging on the gallows, struggling between life and death. Behind him Wiesel heard a man ask: “Where is God now? Where is he?”

That's the question, isn't it? Where is God? Where is God in my illness? Where is God as I face the reality of death? Where is God as I face a deteriorating marriage, financial problems, doubt, and depression? Where is God in the midst of war, terrorism, earthquakes, fear, and hatred?

The execution continued. The lad lingered on. Once again Elie heard the man ask, “Where is God?”

Elie Wiesel said, “I heard a voice within me answer him: *Where is God? He is there, hanging on the gallows.*”

The cross of Jesus tells us that God is a God of the gallows, a crucified God. Although God does not take away our suffering, God enters into our pain and shares it with us. The Bible foretells that Jesus is “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” The cross tells us that when we suffer, God suffers

with us. So on this Passion Sunday [or Good Friday], let us remember that our God is a crucified God.

Scripture Readings/Solo

Read Mark 14:22–24, 26–27, 29–37, 41–43, 45–46, 50.

Soloist sings first stanza: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

Read Mark 14:53, 55, 60–65; 15:1, 12–20.

Soloist sings second stanza: “Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?”

Read Mark 15:25–32; Luke 23:34; Mark 15:33–34;
Luke 23:46.

Soloist sings third stanza: “Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”

3. A third preaching option is to use the above Elie Wiesel story as a brief devotional, drop the Scripture/song combination, and observe Holy Communion.

Week 7

What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?

Jesus’ Resurrection: Is There Hope?

Matthew 28:1–7

The theme for week 7, based on chapter 17, is hope. If you do this series during Lent, week 7 will fall on Easter Sunday. However, any Sunday of the year is a good day to celebrate the great hope of Christ’s resurrection.

Like weeks 1–6, you can find plenty of preaching material for week 7 in the book. For example, you might want to tell “The Last Word Is Hope” story from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. If you have projection capability, consider showing the following two clips: (1) 71:27–72:56, and (2) 134:30–136:15, immediately followed by 136:56–138:13.

The following story of resurrection hope would also work well:

Are We Having Easter This Year?

Back in March 1994, a young woman named Kelly Clem was serving as the pastor of Goshen United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama. The Sunday before Easter, Palm Sunday, the church was packed. Kelly’s two-year-old daughter, Sarah, was in the church nursery. Kelly’s four-year-old daughter, Hannah, was dressed in a little blue-and-white choir robe, sitting on the front row with the children’s choir.

As the service got underway, the congregation heard wind blowing outside. The sky turned black. Then the lightning began, followed by hail. Suddenly there was a burst of wind. The stained-glass window shattered, and shards of glass shot across the sanctuary. Somebody shouted, “Tornado!” Pieces of ceiling started to fall. There was a horrible sound as the roof of the church was ripped off, and the building crashed around them.

Reverend Kelly ran to check on her children. But a brick hit her on the head, and she fell hard on her shoulder. When she finally got up, she looked around at the devastation. Someone told her that her two-year-old daughter, Sarah, was OK—that the nursery was still intact.

Then Kelly looked down to where her four-year-old daughter, Hannah, had been sitting. There was nothing there but a pile of bricks. Under that pile of bricks, she could see little blue-and-white choir robes. Members of the church pulled Hannah and the other children out of the bricks, but Hannah did not make it. Nineteen people in the church died, and eighty-six others were injured.

Over the next few days, Kelly performed one funeral after another, including one for her daughter. Toward the end of that awful week, Kelly began receiving phone calls from members of the congregation. Given the death of the pastor's daughter and the destruction of their sanctuary, they asked, "Reverend Clem, are we having Easter this year?"

But Kelly knew they weren't just asking about Sunday's services. She knew they were saying, "Reverend Clem, we desperately *need* Easter." And after leading nineteen funerals, including the funeral of her four-year-old daughter, Kelly Clem knew that *she* needed Easter also. So Kelly and her congregation planned an Easter sunrise service.

A few days after the tornado, a reporter asked Reverend Clem if the disaster had shattered her faith. She replied: "It has not shattered my faith. I'm holding on to my faith. It's holding me. All of the people of Goshen are holding on to one another, along with the hope that they will be able to rebuild." Then Kelly said to the reporter, "Easter is coming."

That Sunday morning at the Easter sunrise service, two hundred people gathered in the front yard of the destroyed facilities at Goshen UMC. With a bandage on her head, her shoulder in a brace, and her heart breaking with grief, Reverend Kelly made her way to the makeshift pulpit. She opened her Bible, looked into the faces of her traumatized congregation, and then read these words from Romans 8: "Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

A MESSAGE TO PASTORS

If you enjoyed the content and storytelling style of this book and Leader's Guide, you will want to visit the author's preaching and worship Web site at www.GettingReadyForSunday.com. The site includes preaching, worship, and pastoral leadership articles, sermons and sermon series, Martin's columns in *Net Results* magazine, and other helpful information for clergy.