

## An Unconventional Bible Study

Martin Bonde Christensen

The main goal of this unconventional Bible study is to open our eyes to the prophetic-critical nature of biblical texts, their ability to question our ways of thinking about society. It also aims at opening our eyes to gender roles in the dialectic relation between history (past and present), culture (culture in biblical time and different participants' cultures) and society (building upon the two first categories). Does God play a role here?

### The Bible Study Breakdown:

- A programme common to all (35 minutes)
- Small groups: Music, Painting, Dancing, and Drama (45 minutes)
- Plenary discussion (15 minutes)

We will use a biblical text for the Bible study – this text should be chosen carefully. It should be about gender-roles, about how society is put together, and about how God changes life. The Bible passage chosen for this study is John 11: 1-44 – Jesus raises Lazarus from death.

Build the Bible scene in one room, where everybody can fit. The room will be crazy with music, discussions, dancing and painting all in the same room so make sure it is big enough for everyone.

### The Room: Four scenes

Set up the room according to the passage in the Bible. Be creative and use furniture, blankets and imagination to make the setting.

Have the river Jordan running through the room and set the scene around it. Each small group will be given an area in the room to perform in.

- A. On the North side of the Jordan River, where John baptized – a symbolic river that can be crossed to change things, set a **place of refuge**. Here the disciples are gathered at the beginning of the story, after fleeing there. **Dancing Group**.
- B. The middle of the room represents the **outskirts of Bethany**, where Jesus meets first Martha, then Mary. It should be an open space, which is neutral in the way that it is between the three other groups and becomes the place where the characters of the story meet. **Drama Group**.
- C. In the south side of the room build the **home of Martha and Mary**. The women in the story are hidden there – it is their own tomb that Jesus brings them out of when he comes to Bethany. **Music Group**.
- D. Towards the west side of the room set up the **tomb/grave**. This is where the light comes from and Lazarus awakens. **Painting/Drawing Group**.

### Common Programme (35 minutes):

#### 1. Introduction and explanation by the leader to the group (10 minutes).

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Biblical material: John 11: The awakening of Martha and Maria's brother, Lazarus.

- There are three or four main characters in the story. They are round characters, which change during the story. The rest of the characters in the story are flat characters. They are stuck in their own world-view. They are afraid. They don't bring development – in fact their main function is to be incompetent opposition. We, the readers, know better than they do!!
- Certain problems should be taken in to consideration during the reading of this story:
  - Are the texts communicating gender? The main difference between people in the Gospel of Luke is not that of male/female, but rich/poor.
  - Are we creating inequality while talking so much about equality?
  - We are choosing texts to liberate females. What about liberation of males?
  - Why do we engage in feminism, when we are talking about gender?
- Biblical stories can be liberating, but they can also be hard to interpret. However, when seeing the biblical texts as narrative – and not as dogmatic – they gain relevance and are easier to understand.
- What should members of the group do?
  - Be open-minded. Don't be afraid: You can do nothing wrong, since you are part of the story.
  - Forget about theology and dogmatisms and just relate to the story as any other narrative piece of work.
  - You are not doing any of this to create a play, a piece of music, a painting or a performance. You are doing it, because your body can also interpret a biblical text. Your feelings can interpret. And of course your feelings are very subjective – but so is academic Bible study and sometimes it is better to be clear about your own personal viewpoint in relation to the text.

## **2. Get into the scene/the biblical story (10 minutes)**

- a. Play piece of music fitting to the story and time. Have people dance through out the room to get into the 'mood' of the story.
- b. Retell the biblical story in your own words. Using the story explain the set up in the room (the Jordan River, the house, the tomb, etc).
- c. Read the passage from the Bible.

## **3. Each person must find his or her role in the story. For example a character, a thing, a feeling/mood, a phenomenon, or... (5 minutes)**

**Divide into groups and re-tell the Bible story slowly and elaborately. Allow time for each person to represent his or her role (45 minutes).**

Each person continues to represent his or her role in the story regardless of which group he or she chose to be a part of.

1. Music
2. Painting

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3. Dancing
4. Drama

Give instructions to each group (these can be printed onto paper and found in their section of the room) on what tools they have to use in their section. The music group has instruments to tell their story in their role. The painting group has paints/pencils/etc to illustrate their role. The dancing group has their body and the space of the room to interpret the story through dance. The drama group has a few basic costumes to act out their role in the story.

### **Plenary discussion (10 minutes):**

Have the group answer the multiple choice questions by dividing the room up into four “feeling sections” and after asking each question have people move to the space that represent the statements.

How did acting this story out make you feel?

- I felt locked and unable to express myself.
- I felt some energy, a little hope, but I didn't manage to move further.
- I felt empowered. I felt my role taking active participation in world-changing events.
- I felt the story opened up new layers of reality.

How does this story relate to traditional gender roles?

- Gender roles in this story reflect a typical ancient Jewish perspective.
- Gender roles are changing, but males mainly dominate the story.
- Gender roles turn upside down. The women act as equals – but not as liberators.
- Gender roles turn upside down. Women and men are equally dominant – or some women and men are equally dominant.

Have time available for general discussion.

### **About the Author**

Martin Bonde Christensen, 32, studied theology in Aarhus, Denmark, and Heidelberg, Germany. Since he has finished his degree in Theology, he has been working as a Folk High School teacher at Løgumkloster Højskole, where he recently resigned to become a minister in the Lutheran Church. From 2008-2011 he was the chairperson of the Danish SCM. Email: bondemartin@gmail.com.

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