



Where is God in the Shopping Mall

Learning Community Experiential Activity

Version 3.01
(Revised questions 15/03/2005)

Where is God in the Shopping Mall?

Purpose:

The purpose of this activity is to help Christians think through their understanding of how God relates to the world and specifically to them in it.

The aim is help people connect the reality of Christ with their everyday life. The activity is designed not only to give information which addresses the cognitive but also to speak to the imagination and thus to awaken the experience.

This activity can be used, among other things, to teach and give people the experience of the doctrines of Creation, God as sustainer of life, and common grace. It may be used also to emphasis the order of creation, the importance of design and the essentially moral nature of the created order.

Emphasis may be given to the importance of interaction with culture and of knowing the big ideas of the times and how they influence us.

It is also possible to use this exercise to help people affirm what is good in both the creation and the culture around us. It may also be used to discuss the issue of how we as Christians related to physical matter and to help people confront Gnostic and platonic ideas in their thinking.

Short description:

The basic idea is that people should be given a list of questions that are primarily designed to get participants to make observations about the objective reality around them. In the context of this they are asked the question "Where is God?"

Location:

The title says "in the shopping mall" but this exercise may be done in any place where there is lots of normal activity. This could be a shopping street, a super market, a professional sports activity or fun fair. The important thing is that the location should not usually be associated with the religious but commonly associated with material and physical activities.

Time:

The exercise can be done in a minimum of two hours but this restricts time for processing and a longer time for discussion is better. Allow up to two hours in the shopping street.

Instructions:

Stage one

The activity is best done alone as people have to think for themselves and too much discussion at this stage gets in the way of reflection. Later on it can be beneficial for groups of two to get together and compare notes and observations.

It is best if the questions are given in written form and that there is space for writing down observations. A notebook is helpful for writing down thoughts. Participants should spend at least 20 minutes sitting by themselves in one place observing the people and the environment. Another 15 minutes should be spent comparing notes with their partner.

Stage two

The group returns to a suitable location for discussion and debriefing. If possible this should be done near to the location in order to facilitate the next stage. If not the next stage maybe accomplished at another time. Ideas for this stage are found latter in the notes.

Stage three

Each participant should be given the list of Bible verses for medication and prayer and give one hour alone to walk in the same place to revisit the location with the new information. They should be encouraged to pray and meditate on the person of God, to address issues of morality and purpose and to consider what it means to worship the God "in whom we live and move and have our being"

Having done this last segment several times it really depends what

Questions

These questions are for a verity of locations. Pick the ones that make best sense for your location. Feel free to experiment with your own questions. There is nothing special about these except that they get people to make observations about the objective world around them and thus get outside of their own subjective existence.

You need to match the questions to your goals:

- 1) The questions about success are very useful if you want to talk about motives for our behaviour
- 2) Other issues this exercise bring up are Gnostic and Platonic ideas about the material world: that matter is some how less important than non-matter or that the "spiritual" is more special or important than the physical.
- 3) The other side we fall of the horse is in our belief that the material world is all there is and we forget the invisible world.

Debriefing:

Take time to process the main observation questions. Set some time for people to express themselves. If there is time this may be done in small groups giving quieter people the time to express themselves.

Make sure there is plenty of time for the last question. It is our experience that some people discover that they cannot answer this question and may even be embarrassed or even fearful about this. It is important not to ridicule or shame people. You will possibly find that few people have a thorough understanding. Most of us do not have time to think theologically about life and have not joined up all the dots in our thinking. It is for this reason we do the exercise.

Location for debriefing: We have sometimes done this in the shopping mall and this is almost always quite noisy and a very dehumanizing experience. This can be useful to make the point about dehumanizing design. It is more constructive to plan a place before you go. This needs to be in walking distance of the shopping mall if you are going to go back into it to do the final part with meditation and prayers and the Bible verses

Lessons:

It has been our observation that many of us struggle to relate the truth of a God centred reality to our daily life. Most of us in the Western World live at some level in two "realities" A religious "reality" and the "reality" of daily life. This has developed for

many historical and philosophical reasons. The impact of materialism and modernity have been profound in removing our sense of the presence of God in his creation. Consumerism awakens our hungers and then confuses them. To what extent do we feed these hungers with material things instead of trusting God to meet our primary needs. To what extent are we practicing Christianity and to what extent are we really materialists. It is possible to be both and this is an uncomfortable place to be.

Theological summary:

1. God is creator and source of all life. The creation was his idea and for His purpose. This creation was made for him and by him. This gives us value and meaning.
2. God is the sustainer of life. His Word holds the whole of creation both invisible and visible, together. Even as we sin against him, in his love, he holds together the creation; including that small piece of earth in which we exist. To what extent are we aware of his presence?
3. To what extent do we walk through life in moment by moment awareness of and dependence on the Holy Spirit?
4. God is both infinite and personal. We must never reduce the infinite God to our imagination. Consider the stars he has made. The vast expanse of the space. God is almighty. But God is also personal. He demonstrates this in the relationship that exists in the trinity. In the willing sacrifice of the son.
5. God made the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. We call this His common Grace. We are all beneficiaries of this
6. Human beings are made in the image of God and therefore have intrinsic value. This value is not diminished because of the fall neither is it enhanced by good works. Consider the lilies of the field compare this to our own desire to dress ourselves up. To what extent are the attractions of the shopping mall a way to cover up the shame of our fallenness?
7. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. We see the hand of God is the need for design and in the balance between form and content. The structures of life show us something about the way in which God has made us.
8. What is success mean for a Christian? What are our inner feelings about the successful life and to what extent are these the same as being fruitful (see Gal 5:22) How does my real gut view of being successful clash with my calling as a Christian to be "other"- centred rather than "self"- centred.

Bible passages:

Hebrews 1:1
Colossians 1:15
Acts 18

Observing and Interpreting a Shopping Mall

- Spend about one hour in the shopping mall
- Take a notebook or clipboard for writing notes easily
- Work in pairs – with someone not from your country
- Spend at least 20 minutes by yourself in one place observing the people and the environment
- Another 15 minutes should be spend comparing notes with your partner
- Write down your answers as you wander around:

1. Who are the main target groups it is seeking to attract? How is this communicated?
2. What atmosphere does it have and how is this generated?
3. What common assumptions are made by everyone in this place without which this place could not function
4. List three examples of dignity that you observe
5. List three examples of depravity that you observe
6. What would you change and why?
7. List essential structures and activities that are invisible to you but that are essential to the running of this place. (Architectural, financial, social..)
8. What are the most common sounds? List 5 major sounds you hear?
9. What are the predominant colours you see? List 5 in order of predominance?

10. What types of advertising do you observe?

11. Which motives, aspects of personality, life goals, etc does the advertising appeal to?

12. How do you define success in your life? How will you know you have succeeded?

13. From where do you get your ideas of success?

14. What aspects of the location are humanizing or dehumanising?

15. Which aspects are there because of sin? Can you imagine changes that would be made just because people choose not to sin?

16. How did you feel at different times as you walked around?

17. Where is God?

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Scriptures to consider:

Colossians 1:15- *What lies outside Christ's power?*

He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn **over all creation**. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together**.

Hebrews 1:1-3 - *What lies outside Christ's power?*

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, **sustaining all things by his powerful word**.

Genesis 1:27 – *Where is God to be seen?*

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Matthew 25:35-40 – *Where is Jesus to be found?*

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or need clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Psalms 139:1-12 – *Where is God not?*

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your right hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Matthew 6:25-34 – *God's care of us.*

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you

of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Isaiah 40:12-20 – *God is greater than anything we can create*

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counsellor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who has taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.

1 Cor: 6.20 – *We don't belong to ourselves*

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own, you were bought at a price.

1 Cor: 7.30 – *Hold possessions lightly*

From now on, those who buy something (should live) as though it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them.

2 Cor. 9:6-9 – *Called to be generous.*

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

James 1:5 – *God's wisdom available*

If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

Hebrews 11:13-16 – *Where do we really belong?*

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.