



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 U2: Unexpected Prophets
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 81-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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U2: Unexpected Prophets

Arguably the most successful rock band in the world, U2 not only cries out against injustice, but also dares to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. The band proclaims with Scripture “the place that has to be believed to be seen.” Will we hear them?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 40

Responsive Reading: Revelation 15:2-4

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

**“Great and amazing are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations!
Lord, who will not fear
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed.”**

Silent Meditation

Created anew in him and made perfect in a more plentiful grace, we shall see in that eternal rest that it is he who is God, he with whom we shall be filled....

That day will be our eternal Sunday....

There we shall be in peace and we shall see. We shall see and we shall love. We shall love and we shall worship.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430)†

Reflection

Walther Eichrodt’s wonderful characterization of Israel’s prophets as bringing “the divine reality directly to bear on the sphere of moral conduct,” also describes John the revelator. As he hears the martyrs in heaven sing the victory song of Moses (now transposed into the Lamb’s song), he realizes the beast—the distorting culture of Rome—will not win and can be resisted: “All nations will come and worship before you, for *your judgments have been revealed.*” Yet Rome still threatens and destroys lives. Could John not echo the psalmist’s broken plea, “My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord—how long?” (Psalm 6:3).

The “unexpected prophets” in U2—vocalist Bono (Paul Hewson), guitarist The Edge (Dave Evans), bass player Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen, Jr.—share this prophetic imagination, Steven Harmon suggests. “In their music they imagine, through their glimpses of the divine reality, a world that might be,” and call us to resist the distortions of western culture. Like John’s, their distinctively Christian imagination



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- ▶ *is grounded implicitly in worship and steeped in the biblical story.* Though U2's songs are written for concert performances, Bono says, "They're all songs of praise to God and creation—even the angry ones!" Songs like "Gloria" and "40" borrow language from the book of Psalms, and Bono "gestures heavenward with an uplifted hand when singing lyrics addressed to God, kneels in prayer onstage, recites the psalms, [and] works bits of hymns into the set list." Many songs either retell or allude to biblical stories. Yet Harmon admits that "their deepest import may be veiled from those who do not share the framework of biblical narrative out of which the U2 catalog offers a distinctively Christian rendering of the world."
- ▶ *portrays the triune God and realizes our salvation is based on grace.* As the song "Grace" says of grace personified, "She travels outside of karma." Bono explains: "The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled.... It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven." All through its catalogue, U2 addresses God in triadic fashion as "Yahweh," "Jesus," and Holy Spirit ("God's only dove").
- ▶ *embraces the Christian hope and calls for social engagement.* The biblical tension between the "already" and the "not yet," that "the reign of God is at hand and people have the opportunity to participate in it in the here and now," Harmon says, "is the key theological concept for understanding the spiritual significance of U2's music." U2 celebrates God's redemption, yet calls us to "view the injustices of this world through Christian lenses and identify with those who are marginalized...[as] the proper response to our receiving God's grace."

Study Questions

1. How are the U2 songs "Gloria," "Yahweh," and "40" implicitly grounded in worship and steeped in the biblical story? (The lyrics for U2's songs are available on the band's website, www.U2.com.)
2. Consider how the songs "Until the End of the World," "The First Time," and "Wake Up Dead Man" extend or retell biblical stories.
3. How is grace understood in the songs "All Because Of You" and "Grace"?
4. Explore how God is portrayed in the song "The First Time."
5. What social problems are exposed in the lyrics of "Sunday Bloody Sunday," "Bullet the Blue Sky," "Miracle Drug," "Crumbs from Your Table," and "Beautiful Day"? Do you agree that these songs construe the problems and offer solutions with a Christian imagination?
6. What objections might be raised to viewing rock music bands like U2 as true prophetic voices in our culture?

Departing Hymn: "Hear Our Hearts, O Lord"

†Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 22, Chapter 30.

U2: Unexpected Prophets

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
One of questions 1 through 5, and question 6	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the prophetic imagination of the Irish rock band U2.
2. To examine the distinctively Christian aspects of U2's prophetic vision in a sample of the band's lyrics.
3. To weigh objections to viewing popular musicians as true prophetic voices in our culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Singing Our Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"On July 2, 2005, I watched the LIVE 8 concert on television from the comfort of my rocking chair," recalls Nathan Corbitt. "I was not about to face the many thousands of people gathered for this concert at the Philadelphia Museum of Art just down the road from my house. It was one of the world's largest concerts to end poverty. My first thought was that a group of opportunistic artists were using the event to promote their music; what do popular and wealthy musicians know about the issue? I wondered. Yet the more I reflected on the event and those who organized it and heard the reports of people who attended, I had more hopeful thoughts. Supported and encouraged by Bono, whom many people consider to be a prophetic Christian musician, the artists were doing exactly what prophetic artists do—raising critical awareness about a justice issue and motivating others to get involved.

"In debriefing the concert experience with a number of my staff who attended, I discovered that only one church had purchased a vendor table where they enlisted people to become involved through a local church ministry. There are nearly three thousand congregations in Philadelphia and many are involved in prophetic ministries. Most churches have a more traditional view about keeping the sacred and secular separate" (*Singing Our Lives*, p. 29).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God's gracious help will "put a new song in our mouths" that encourages many to "see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD."

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 40 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Silent Meditation

Provide a period of silence for members to reflect on the passage from the final paragraph of Augustine's great work, *The City of God*.

Reflection

This study guide explores some distinctively Christian themes in the prophetic songs written and performed for the secular market by Bono (pronounced “BON-o”) and the Irish rock band U2. It is a follow-up to the previous study guide, “Prophetic Music,” which introduces Nathan Corbitt’s broad definition of “prophetic music” that could apply to songs written and performed for a secular market, for the Christian popular market, or for use in Christian worship.

Invite members to share their knowledge of U2. Some will be fans of the band’s music and may share a favorite recording or describe an experience of listening to their songs. Others will know about U2 through the social activism of its lead singer Bono, whom TIME Magazine named, along with Melinda and Bill Gates, Persons of the Year for 2005.

After the group has reviewed U2’s body of work, consider the prospects and dangers of viewing popular musicians like Bono and U2 as true prophetic voices in our culture.

Study Questions

1. “40” restates Psalm 40, with a haunting refrain from Psalm 6:3. “Gloria” borrows the first words of Psalms 30, 31, and 51 to seek God’s help in singing about the self and the world honestly. “Yahweh” asks God to transform us (hands, mouth, and heart) and reshape our life together (“Take this city if it be your will”). Rebirth is the refrain’s theme (“Yahweh, Yahweh, always pain before a child is born; Yahweh, Yahweh, still I’m waiting for the dawn”).
2. “Until the End of the World” imagines a wiser Judas greeting Jesus on his descent into hell on Holy Saturday. (For more on the doctrine of Christ’s “harrowing of hell,” see Ralph Wood’s “The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail” in the *Heaven and Hell* issue.) “Wake Up Dead Man” imagines a disciple’s brutal prayer on Holy Saturday. The “already/not yet” tension of discipleship is especially clear on this day between Christ’s death and resurrection.
3. “All Because Of You” sees God’s grace in creation (“the curve of the moon”), in his presence with us (“You heard me in my tune when I just heard confusion”), and in redemption (“You can make me perfect again”); it describes redemption as rebirth. “Grace” distinguishes grace from karma, and celebrates its re-creative power (“Grace makes beauty out of ugly things”).
4. This Trinitarian song, which depicts God as lover, brother, and father (Holy Spirit, Son, and Father), focuses on God’s pursuit of us while we are yet sinners (“I spend my whole time running, He spends his running after me”). God is the source of all that is good (of the Holy Spirit, “She teach[es] me how to sing”; of Christ, “for the first time I feel love”; and of the Father, “He gave me the keys to his kingdom (coming”).
5. U2 responds to violence in Northern Ireland in “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” which describes the carnage and calls us to identify with “The real battle just begun to claim the victory Jesus won on... Sunday, bloody Sunday.” “Bullet the Blue Sky,” notes Harmon, “cast a spotlight on American support for repressive military dictatorships in Central America, and retooled versions of the song... have addressed the international arms trade and the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal.” “Miracle Drug,” “Crumbs from Your Table,” and “Beautiful Day” take up the cause of Africa’s need for debt relief, medical intervention, and trade reform.
6. U2’s music can stir wonderful discussions of theology with young people. Yet Harmon admits that “Bono’s occasional lapses into the language of the streets of Dublin do not serve as the best model for Christian speech,” and Corbitt doubted at first that the LIVE 8 concert was just “a group of opportunistic artists...using the event to promote their music; what do popular and wealthy musicians know about the issue?” Bono realizes that there are other difficulties in found different ways of expressing it, and recognized the power of the media to manipulate such signs. Maybe we just have to sort of draw our fish in the sand. It’s there for people who are interested. It shouldn’t be there for people who aren’t.”

Departing Hymn

“Hear Our Hearts, O Lord” is on pp. 53-55 of *Singing Our Lives*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.