

Called to Be a Disciple of Christ

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Introduction

The university confronts Christians with a wide range of ideas and opinions. Living in this setting, we continually explore new perspectives and integrate them into our view of the world. Confronted by so many diverse beliefs the great challenge is to find something which gives consistent orientation to our exploration. This study suggests that the compass for our journey is the desire to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Following Jesus means abandoning our preconceptions and allowing Him to lead. Following should never be confused with arriving at a set of rigid convictions. As long as we are on a journey of discipleship, we revise our faith map in response to new experiences.

Allowing Jesus to lead us means we sometimes travel unfamiliar paths. The journey can be a lonesome, but we take it with the unshakable conviction that we are not truly alone. Christ is at our side; we can face any questions and endure any critique. The only requirement of discipleship is that we cling to God's grace, made available to us through faith in Jesus Christ. This study guide is intended to help leaders invite others to begin the journey which lasts a lifetime.

Session 1: On Being a Disciple

Introductions

Take a few moments to make sure everyone in the group knows one another. Devise a means for all to share their name, some aspect of their life on campus, and what they hope to gain from being a part of this small group.

Emphasize that this small group is formed in hope that together we can discover God's hope and promise for our lives. The expectation is that members will be committed to the group, notifying the leader when they cannot attend. Explain that the meetings will be short on instruction, long on conversation, so faithful participation from each member is essential.

Opening Prayer

Open with prayer, remembering each member of the group by name, thanking God for calling you together and asking that God's Spirit guide your deliberations and conversations.

This Meeting's Emphasis

The first meeting focuses on what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In particular, it explores the differences between being a disciple and being a member of the church. While church membership is encouraged, Christ's calls us deeper to discipleship.

Biblical Focus: Matthew 4:18-22

In this story Jesus calls his first disciples. Invite the group to consider the following questions:

- + Why do you think Jesus selected Peter and Andrew in particular?
 - Had he heard them talk about God?
 - Had he seen them acting in an especially devout manner?
 - What attracted Jesus to them? What traits might he have admired?
- + Jesus decides to invite Peter and Andrew to become disciples.
 - What does he say to them?
 - Does that seem like enough to convince them to follow?
 - Would you have gotten up and followed Jesus?
- + What is said of Jesus' call to James and John?
 - How does Jesus know that they believe the right things?
 - Does it matter to Jesus what they believe when he calls them?

When individuals desire to join the church, we usually enroll them in a class where they are taught the history and theology of the church. Then we ask them if they still want to be a part of the church. Before we put their names on the roll, we usually ask them to profess belief in the church's teachings.

- + Why do you suppose Jesus did not instruct Peter, Andrew, James, and John before he called them?
- + What assurances did Jesus have that Peter, Andrew, James and John held the correct beliefs?
- + Does the style in which Jesus selects his disciples teach us anything about what Jesus considers important?

Even though some experiences may suggest the contrary, the church is concerned about more than correct knowledge, allegiance to doctrines, or being a card carrying member. The church is a voluntary association of those who have heard the call of Christ and are working out what it means to be a disciple.

Your Call Into the Fellowship of Jesus' Disciples

Ask group members to spend a few minutes talking about their invitation and incorporation into Christian fellowship. First, share experiences of joining a congregation. Did they have to go through classes, pass any sort of tests, or in any way prove their beliefs were in line with the teachings of that congregation? Next, talk about other Christian groups they have joined; what was expected of members there?

Biblical Focus: Matthew 22:1-10

Jesus tells a parable in which he acknowledges the indifference with which some treat his invitation. The opening lines of the parable follow the order we would expect; the invitations go to those the king knows, to those in his social circle. But when they refuse to come and mistreat the messengers, the king turns to others. He welcomes all those who wish to be a part of his glorious celebration. By implication, Jesus seems more concerned about

whether persons follow willingly than whether they are part of a specific social or religious group. Jesus' primary criterion for inclusion in His fellowship is a willingness to accept the invitation to the party.

Invite group members to reflect on the following questions:

- + What does the metaphor of a wedding banquet suggest?
- + Why do you think the initial guests did not come?
- + What makes some assume they will be included in God's kingdom?
- + Verse 10 says the servants gathered all whom they could find, "the good and the bad." What does this say about the final make up of God's kingdom?
- + Think of someone you know who is excited about being a follower of Jesus. In what ways is his or her life an inspiration to you?
- + Given the images associated with Matthew 4 and Matthew 22, how would you describe yourself? Are you a member of a congregation? Are you a follower of Jesus? Must you be both to be a Christian? Which is more important?
- + For you, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?
- + How can the Church help you follow Jesus?

Conclusion

Offer a summary of what has emerged in this session. Ask if there are particular prayer concerns anyone would like the other members of the group to remember. Close in prayer, offered by the leader or by members of the group.

Session 2: Following the One Who Calls

Opening

Welcome everyone back. Make sure to ask if there are any questions left hanging from last week. Ask if there have there been opportunities to explore the difference between being a member of a church and being a disciple.

Prayer

Begin this session with a time for "centering prayer." [See *Centering Prayer: Renewing An Ancient Christian Form* by M. Basil Pennington for more on this mode of prayer] Explain that this will be a time of silence, a time to listen quietly to the voice of God, speaking from within our souls. After a time of complete silence, participants may begin to offer petitions in the form of short phrases. Examples might be: for health and healing, for peace, for food and drink, for laughter. Suggest that they should avoid trying to tell God what ought to happen. Invite them to allow God to raise concerns in the silence which they are being urged to entrust into God's care.

This Meeting's Emphasis

In this meeting, the group continues to discuss what it means to be a follower of Jesus, specifically, the role of experience in affirming that call. A key question is whether we follow Jesus because of what we learn or as a result of something which happens in our lives?

Biblical Focus: John 1:43-51

In this text Jesus calls Phillip and Nathanael. First, look at Phillip's call and invite group members to consider the following:

- + What are the similarities to the call Jesus extended to James and John (Matthew 4:19)?
- + Is it of any importance that the text says Jesus "found Phillip?" In what sense do you suppose Jesus was looking for him?
- + As with Peter and Andrew, Jesus doesn't ask questions, he offers an invitation. What do you think happened to Phillip as he began to "follow" Jesus? What do you suppose he saw?
- + Verse 43 says Jesus "found" Phillip. In verse 45 Phillip takes credit for finding Jesus. What do you think is going on here?

Now look at Nathanael's call, and ask members to discuss the following:

- + Who invites Nathanael to come?
- + What events cause Nathanael to overcome his skepticism about Jesus due to Nazareth's poor reputation?
- + Nathanael saw a glimpse of Jesus' messiahship. This was enough to convince him to follow. Jesus promises him that he will see even greater things in the years to come. What things did Nathanael see during his years of following Jesus?

Ways of Learning

There are many ways of learning. Two of the most popular are listening and seeing. Invite students to talk about what they have learned by listening (lectures, presentations, audio or video tapes). Then discuss what they have learned by seeing. What did they learn in a lab, and what did they need to learn through real life experience?

Sometimes we learn best when we are allowed to watch others go about their lives. We learn from what we see them do, from what we see them value. Ask group members if there has been someone in their life who helped them in their journey of faith by allowing them to "see"?

Biblical Focus: Matthew 11:2-6

Jesus is visited by some of John's disciples. They want to know whether Jesus is the Messiah. Examine the response he gives them.

- + What is the question they ask Jesus?
Is it a fair question? Would we also like an answer to that question?
- + Does Jesus give them a clear answer?
After he replies, do his hearers know any more than before?
- + Jesus is asked if he is Messiah. His response suggests some marks of Messiah's coming. According to Jesus, how can one recognize the coming of the true Messiah?

Be prepared to note that Jesus speaks of “hearing” the good news preached to the poor. He shows his identity as God’s chosen in the way he cares for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the dead. He speaks, but those around him experience the power of his touch.

What Have You “Seen”?

Ask group members why they participate in the community of Christ? Is it something that someone explained to them or does it have to do with something they experienced? Generally speaking, we only stick with something when we have experienced that which lies behind the words and rhetoric. It takes an experience of God’s presence for us to remain followers.

Making Disciples

Ask participants to return to those experiences which have given them the courage to believe, to remember the person whose presence made faith a possibility. Invite participants to consider how they might serve as a mediator for another’s experience of God. How can they take on the role of Phillip, inviting a Nathanael to “come and see”?

Closing Prayers

Thank God for allowing group members to “see” and experience the power of God’s Holy Word. Invite members of the group to give thanks by name for persons who have served as guides on their faith journeys. Invite them to pray for those who are in need of gentle guidance, and for the opportunity and wisdom to be God’s instrument.

Session 3: Questions Raised Along the Way

Opening

Welcome everyone back. Ask again if there are concerns left hanging after the last meeting. Address these as best you can. Ask members to share any stories of experiences during the week which affirmed their trust in Christ.

Prayer

Begin this session with a psalm prayer. The leader reads Psalm 130 (or another appropriate psalm). Have the participants get comfortable and close their eyes. Ask them to listen as each verse is read. Ask them to reflect on how this psalm relates to their lives. The response might be one word or an image which catches and holds their meditation. The leader should read the psalm slowly and intently. (Make sure to practice ahead of time.) When the psalm is completed, sit for a few moments in silence. Then begin the discussion.

This Meeting's Emphasis

Students often say, "I am not sure what I believe." Rather than being discouraging, this statement actually represent a very important step in the journey of faith. We say these words when our faith is struggling to include an expanding worldview. In this session we consider periods of doubt and give thanks for the opportunity they represent.

Biblical Focus: Mark 9:14-28

Initially, we focus on the father of the boy and his confessional statement. At a later time we discuss the disciples' inability to heal. Ask the group to consider the following questions:

- + In the second half of verse 22, the father asks for help but seems unsure whether Jesus is able to help. Why might the request be qualified in this way? How would you respond to such a qualified request?
- + In your prayers, do you ever ask Jesus to help you "if he can?" In offering such prayers, what do you expect from God? Are such prayers offered as a "test" for Jesus?
- + Jesus has two angry outbursts in this passage. Locate the verses where he "blows up." What is he angry about?
- + The father says, "I believe, help my unbelief." He includes himself in the "faithless generation," even as he hopes that Jesus is Messiah. He isn't sure; he's searching. He wants to believe, but he finds it difficult. Notice, Jesus does not wait for this man to get his faith in order before he answers his prayer. Though "faithlessness" causes Jesus to become angry, he still acts compassionately. What does Jesus do for the father and his son?
- + With somewhat different eyes, re-read verses 26-27. Can you see in these verses images of a crucified Jesus - one whom everyone declared dead?
- + Notice how gentle and considerate Jesus is in verses 28-29. He seems to have lost the anger of verses 19 and 23. What might explain the change in Jesus' manner?

Biblical Warnings About Unbelief

Scripture contains warnings about "unbelief." Have the group read the following texts. Ask what each passage tells us about unbelief and its consequences.

Hebrews 3:19 - Because of unbelief they will not enter God's rest

Matthew 13:38 – Unbelief prevents Jesus from performing miracles.

Romans 11:23 - Those cut off by unbelief can be grafted back in again

- + Notice, in Mark 9 Jesus describes those around him as a "faithless generation." The father alone speaks of "unbelief." Is there a difference between unbelief and faithlessness? How would you characterize the difference? How is this difference related to the other texts read in this section?

Ambiguity Tolerated and Embraced

Invite the group to react to the following statements:

Paul Tillich said, "The presupposition of doubt [is] the awareness of something unconditional."

Thomas Merton wrote, "Unbelief cannot arise until a [person] has found [a] way to God."

Summarize: Jesus doesn't expect or require our doubts to go away. Jesus can live with our ambiguity; he understands our confusion. Jesus expressed doubts as he hung on the cross (Matthew 27:46.) To express doubts, we first must encounter the Truth. Doubts are an indication of our proximity to the Truth. Rather than allowing doubts to turn us from the Church, we can use them as guideposts to what is most important in our spiritual journey.

Talk About Yourself

Ask the group members to respond to the following questions:

- + What are your most basic beliefs concerning God, the world, and what is important?
(Encourage members to move beyond merely repeating familiar religious phrases.)
- + What do you wonder about? What are your most enduring questions? Where would you like to have some guidance?

Closing Prayers

Offer petitions in the style of the father's plea. Pray, "I believe, help my unbelief....," asking God to aid you in your journey of faith.

Session 4: We Are Never Abandoned

Opening

You have been together as a small group for three sessions. Ask those assembled for feedback on how the group has met their needs or failed to do so. Allow time to talk about ways in which the meetings might be more meaningful.

Prayer

Ask a member of the group to lead in prayer. Time might be allowed for persons to lift before God concerns they bring with them to this meeting.

This Session's Emphasis

Abandonment comes in all sorts of packages. From friends who went to other schools, to pastors or youth workers who left our church, to divorced parents, it seems that someone we love is forever leaving us. We are left asking, "Why?" and wondering if we can depend on anyone. This session allows time to talk about losses in our lives and encourages us to see Jesus as one who will never abandon us.

Biblical Focus: John 13:31-37

When faced with Jesus' departure, the disciples were flooded with a host of emotions. As the group reads this text, ask them to imagine what it would be like to be one to whom Jesus is saying good-bye. Invite them to consider the following:

- + What emotions do you think the news of Jesus departure evoked in the disciples?
- + Jesus acknowledges that they will "look for [him]." They will miss him and want to be with him. How do you think they felt to realize they would not be able to find him?
- + He tells them, "You cannot come." Why do you think the disciples believed they could not come? Were the disciples unable to come due to physical inability or because they were not invited to accompany Jesus on this part of his journey?
- + Peter is especially upset that he cannot come with Jesus. Can you identify with the depth of his anguish?

Summarize: It hurts when someone leaves us. Jesus understood this and was trying to prepare the disciples for when he would have to leave. It would be difficult, but it was necessary. We are so familiar with the story of Jesus' resurrection that we overlook how painful it was when Jesus told him he would be taken from them.

Talk about yourself

Invite group members to share a time, as they are able, when they were "left behind." How did it feel to be excluded? What emotions came once they were by themselves?

Biblical Focus: John 16:7

Ask the members to consider these questions:

- + Jesus says, "It is to your advantage..." Put yourself in the position of the disciples. Would you have found it possible to believe these words?
- + While we may not understand how, Jesus' departure means the Holy Spirit can come; one makes way for the other. Why might it have been necessary for Jesus to depart in order for the Holy Spirit to come?
- + Would the gift of the Spirit have been sufficient to overcome the loss of Jesus? Would you have made this trade?
- + The way Jesus talks about his leaving and the coming of the Spirit suggests that the disciples will be better off once he is gone. How might their lives have improved after Jesus' departure?

Summarize: There is great irony in this text; in his leaving Jesus becomes fully present to his followers. Jesus leaves and sends the Holy Spirit. In departing, he gives even greater assistance to the disciples. Though this was true for Jesus' departure, it is not necessarily true for all the departures and losses we experience. Yet we can learn to look, to hope, and to pray that in each good-bye there is a new beginning.

In the Church, Christ Is Here

- + Invite members to discuss the anchors that have gotten them through life. It might be an aunt, neighbor, friend, pastor or teacher. Who has been there for them?
- + Ask group members to identify times when they have been the anchor for someone else. How can we assure our friends and family that they are not alone?

- + Ask group members how can we work together to provide others a place of comfort, especially when they feel abandoned?
- + How has the church been an anchor for them? How has it failed them?

Summarize: The church may not always be perfect, but it is always present, a tangible expression of God's presence. Some people in the church irritate us, but others bring us comfort. The church is not something outside ourselves; it is Christ living in us. As an institution, the church is what we make it.

Closing Prayer

You have probably shared some hurtful experiences during this session. Close the time together with prayers for healing. Allow each member the opportunity to speak the name of someone they know who is or has been left behind. Ask God to give strength and hope to all those in need of a friend.

Session 5: My Call and the Calling of Others

Introductions

Introductions can sometimes seem unnecessary and repetitive. Tonight, ask each group member to share the most exciting thing which has happened to him or her this week.

Opening Prayer

As the leader, offer a prayer which acknowledges some aspect of each participant's life. Remember something just shared or a lingering concern.

This Session's Emphasis

As our world becomes more diverse we are increasingly aware of other religious traditions. Some say Christianity has no right to assume it is correct and all the others are wrong. The internet and television programs from around the world make us aware of the insights contained in other religious traditions. This session explores the question, "How do we know that God prefers for us to be Christian?"

Biblical Focus: John 10:11-16

In this text we consider one of the "I am" statements found in John's gospel. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." He talks about what it means to be the good shepherd and then speaks of sheep in other folds. Read the text aloud and then ask the members to consider these questions:

- + Jesus identifies traits of a "good shepherd." What are these?
- + Look back at the opening verses of the 10th chapter; here are more images of a good shepherd. In Jesus' ministry, life, and death, how does Jesus show himself to be the "good shepherd"?
- + What is the nature of the relationship of a shepherd to the sheep? Does the shepherd demand things of the sheep or does the shepherd serve the sheep?
- + In verse 16, what might Jesus mean when he refers to the "fold"?

Who would you include in the “fold” which contains you? In other words, what sheep are enough like you to be of the same “fold”?

Who would you consider to be outside the fold to which you belong?

+ Jesus does say, “So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

What do you understand this to mean?

+ Even if we interpret this passage to mean that God is active and working through differing religious expressions, Jesus expresses the goal of forming one flock. What might one flock look like?

Summarize: This passage of Scripture has puzzled many church folks. It has been interpreted in different ways. Some think the text’s focus is those who are yet to be converted, to those who have not heard the Gospel. Thus, the passage reinforces the necessity of making sure everyone hears the story of Jesus. Others see in this passage an opening for us to believe that God speaks through other religious traditions.

Other Religious Expressions

Invite group members to share with one another what they know about other religious expressions. For example, they might share what they know about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Native American Spirituality, and Judaism. What elements of other traditions are particularly interesting? What parts of other traditions do they find most difficult to comprehend or problematic when compared to their understanding of Christianity?

Ask how many group members know someone who is a Hindu, Buddhist, or Jew.

Suggest that group members might want to speak with a student from a differing religious experience. Sometimes we form images based on what we read and hear, not from interactions with believers.

Ask if there questions they would like to ask a pastor or teacher of religion. Sometimes, we need scholarly answers to our questions. Just because someone belongs to a particular religious tradition he or she may not have all the answers.

Biblical Focus: John 14:6-7

It would be inadequate to look at John 10 and not look ahead four chapters to John 14. Here we have another of Jesus’ “I am” statements. He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” Read this verse together and then discuss the following questions:

+ What do you think this means?

+ Is it possible that “through me” means something other than “being one of my disciples,” i.e. being a Christian?

Summarize: The relationship between John 10 and John 14 has puzzled believers for centuries. Some find the passages contradictory, asserting that we must either choose between the two references or understand John 10 as referring to something other than non-Christians. Yet it seems that if we interpret John 14 literally, we need to interpret John 10 in the same way. Jesus’ acceptance of persons of other faiths (See the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4) seems to imply that we should not turn our backs on other faith traditions. In the end each Christian has to decide how broadly Jesus understands his “flock” and “fold.”

A Diverse World

Rather than viewing other spiritual traditions as a threat, Christians can see them as opportunities to deepen their experience of God. Because Christians confess that Christ, “is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17, NIV) we need not be afraid of honest conversation with those who practice other faiths. In talking with folks who do not share our religious convictions, we discover more about our own beliefs. When we are forced to articulate what we believe in conversation with other traditions, we learn to express the teachings of the church more clearly and effectively.

Closing Prayer

Pray that God will bring light and life into all persons, regardless of their faith tradition. Pray for differing religious traditions, that the believers in each might experience the grace of God, the grace which has informs our hearts and guides our spirits. Trust that God’s Spirit will bring greater understanding of the similarities and differences of the world’s religious traditions.