

BEING THE CHURCH



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1: THE FATHER'S DESIRE	1
2: EVERY BODY NEEDS A HEAD	6
3: DO-GOODERS	11
4: THE GREATEST BUILDING PROJECT	17
5: UNITED WE STAND	24
6: PLAYING OUR PART	30
7: YOU ARE NEEDED	35
8: LIVING UNITED	41
FACILITATOR BEST PRACTICES	47

For additional support like the meaning of the icons and relationship building tips, please see the **Facilitator Best Practices** guide on **page 47**.

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1

THE FATHER'S DESIRE

1: THE FATHER'S DESIRE



WELCOME/ICEBREAKER 🕒 15 mins

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 5 mins



Ephesians 1:3-10

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 35 mins



If you have ever been in a theatrical production, on a sports team, in the armed forces, or part of a community service project, you know the importance of unity. Effective teams with clear goals can accomplish amazing things. However, if a team is dysfunctional or divided, it will likely struggle to accomplish anything. What happens when a church is divided and has lost its way? How can it be united and restored?



The apostle Paul, one of the first missionaries in the Christian community, was facing this challenge of unity with the church he'd founded in Ephesus. These early churches were working out with it meant to follow and worship Jesus, and Paul not only founded them but helped them manage and grow.

[illegible]

In Paul's day, Ephesus (in modern day Turkey) was a rich commercial center in which Greek and Roman deities were prominent. The city hosted a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Artemis, and the cult of the god Dionysus had a strong presence. Ephesus was also heavily influenced by beliefs in the occult.

Christ-followers living in Ephesus had to navigate a society where value systems competed with each other and people blended religious and/or occult ideas to make their own belief systems. Believers in Ephesus were not immune to the influences of other religions, and the good news about Jesus was being diluted. Additionally, the church was divided by conflict between Jewish and non-Jewish (Gentile) believers. They were having a hard time learning how to live together.

Q: Do you see parallels between Ephesus and our society?

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul set out to:



- 1) give a detailed description of the gospel (the good news about who Jesus is, what he has done for humanity, and who we are because of Christ)
- 2) unite Jewish and Gentile Christians
- 3) describe the behavior that honors God and leads to peace and unity.

Along the way, he clarified the role and purpose of the church. Paul knew that if he was to be successful in refocusing the Ephesians, he had to get them back to basics, which in this case meant reorienting his audience on Jesus. However, a wordy theological essay would not work. The Ephesian people had lots of options for the object of their worship and lots of distractions competing for their attention. Paul had to speak about Jesus in a way that showed Christ was above all others and worthy of devotion.

Notes

[illegible]

To get the attention of his readers, Paul started his letter in an unusual way — with a hymn of praise. The apostle's letters typically started with a prayer of thanksgiving, but in this letter, Paul wanted to immediately draw his audience's attention to God's greatness. The passage we read earlier is the beginning of a song of worship that has three movements:

- 1) God's goodness and love before humanity was created (vv. 3-5)
- 2) God's work through Christ to rescue and redeem humanity from sin and death (vv. 6-8)
- 3) Christ's fulfillment of God's purpose for humanity at the end of human history. In other words, Paul is saying that because of Christ, humanity's past, present, and future are blessed.

Q: Why do you think Paul had to reorient his audience on Jesus?

Paul makes it clear that all that Jesus did on earth was to fulfill the Father's desire. Christ was not driven by his own agenda. Rather, he was perfectly submitted to the Father. It was the Father's desire, before humanity was created, for us to be redeemed (v. 4), adopted into his loving family (v. 5), and united in Christ (v. 10).

In this beautiful hymn, Paul gave his Ephesian audience the backstory of humanity, and it likely brought them great comfort. Unlike gods like Zeus and Ares, the Father loves and wants us; he created us out of joy, not obligation or by accident. Not only that, the Father wants all humanity to enjoy the same unity he enjoys with the Son and Holy Spirit. A God this good is worthy of devotion.

? Q: Have you ever wondered why God created us? Does the Father's desire line up with what you thought about God?

In the next session, we will explore what Jesus does to fulfill the Father's desire for humanity.

Notes

[illegible]

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

Like the Ephesians, we live in a society with lots of religions and even more distractions. It can sometimes be hard to focus on God. Part of the problem may be that we do not stop to think about the depths of God's goodness. Perhaps we think God is less loving, good, or present than he actually is.

Today, we learned that it is the Father's desire for humanity to be redeemed, adopted into his loving family, and united in Christ. God's desire is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is good news for us, and it is a reality. What would our lives be like if we lived in this reality? What if we all lived like we were wanted and loved?

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ **5 mins**

List ways in which God has shown his love for you this week. Next time, we will ask you to share five things with the group.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from group and assign prayer partners for the week, or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

2

EVERY BODY NEEDS A HEAD

2: EVERY BODY NEEDS A HEAD



WELCOME/ICEBREAKER 🕒 15 mins

Does anyone have questions or comments from last time?

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 1 min

**SCRIPTURE READING** ⌚ 5 mins

Ephesians 1:18-23

Notes

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



What if I offered you a two-week, all-expense-paid vacation to Paris?

You would stay in a five-star hotel in walking distance from The Louvre. All your meals would be covered, as well as any expenses associated with sightseeing. Would you accept this offer? Most of us would.

What if I offered you the same deal, but in order to get there, you would have to travel by a small sailboat? The trip across the Atlantic would take about a month, and, by the way, the sailboat is not in the best condition. Would you still accept my offer? Fewer people would accept this offer. In this scenario, the mode of travel to Paris is just as significant, if not more, than the actual vacation.

“Hows” are important. We can say we want world peace, but without a practical plan of implementation, our desire is mere wishful thinking. In the last session, we learned that the Father desires to adopt all humanity. He wants to see us united to himself and each other in Christ.

Think about the magnitude of this desire! For example, can you think of a realistic way for all humanity to be united? It is hard enough getting a group of friends to decide what to have for dinner! Yet, that is what the Father desires. Is this just an example of the Father's wishful thinking? That would depend on the quality of the Father's plan for getting what he wants.



Q: Can you think of other examples where the “how” is more important than the “what”? (Feel free to be silly!)




In the passage we just read, Paul explains how the Father went about fulfilling his desire to adopt and unite humanity in Christ. In order to understand the Father's "how," Paul prays for his audience to be enlightened because what he is about to share is inexpressibly wonderful: the Father's "how" is a "who"! Jesus is the means by which the Father accomplishes his desire.

Notes

[illegible]

To Paul, all understanding starts with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus showed us who God is and what he is like. Knowing God changes us, and teaches us how to live like children of God. We can learn about Jesus through the Bible and the Holy Spirit, who is God and lives in us.

Q: In what ways does knowing God cause us to change our behavior? Can you think of an example from your life?

 In verse 20, Paul says that Christ was raised “from the dead” in the NIV. The literal translation is raised “from the dead ones.” Christ was not only transformed from deceased to alive but he was separated out from the ones who are dead. His death was unique from all other deaths because out of his death he forged a new kind of life.

This suggests Christ created a third option of existence: alive, dead, and alive like Jesus (or in our case “in Christ”). The good news is that God created room for others to join Jesus in this new type of life. God calls those who live this new life in Christ, those whom he has adopted, by a special name: the church.

Like children, the church needs to be loved, guided, and protected. Verse 21 says that Christ has power over all spiritual and human authorities, and he uses that power to care for us. The startling revelation in verse 22 is that Christ is above all for the benefit of the church. He retains rulership over all creation, so nothing can keep humanity from being adopted and united.

In order to describe the church's relationship to Jesus, Paul uses the metaphor of a body. The human body is made up of made up of dozens of different, interrelated parts that work together harmoniously to facilitate life. Similarly, the church is made up of a myriad of different people, who experience a united life in Christ. Every living body needs a living head. As the head, Jesus gives the church purpose and direction, and we draw strength from him. The very life of the church comes from Jesus.

Notes

[illegible]

Q: Can you think of other ways the church is like a human body?

Jesus is the means by which the Father acquires his desire. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offers new life in him, which is also adoption. Those God adopts are formed into a church so that they can become one with God and each other. In the next session, we will learn about the work the church is supposed to do.

APPLICATION DISCUSSION 10 mins

As the head of the church, Christ sets our direction, and we draw our strength from him. In Christ, Christians are all part of the same family and led by the same God. This is true of the church as a whole, and it is also true of us individually. As Lord and Savior, Christ is the head of each of us. We are to take our direction and draw spiritual sustenance from him. The Holy Spirit will help us have a proper relationship with God and other people. Unfortunately, we do not follow Jesus' leading perfectly. As a result, the church is not as united as God would desire.

? What are some things that cause us to resist Jesus' leading? What can we do to better follow where Jesus leads?

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ **5 mins**

Make a list of some of the challenges you are facing. Each day pray for one of those challenges. Ask God for direction and strength. Pay attention to his response(s) and be prepared to discuss your experience next week.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week, or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

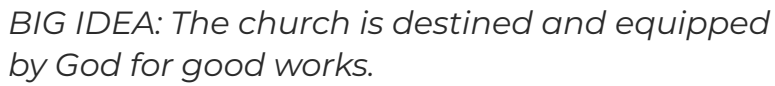
Notes

[illegible]

3

DO-GOODERS

3: DO-GOODERS



Discuss what it was like asking God for direction and strength in our current challenges.

OPENING PRAYER 1 min

Begin with three minutes of silence to allow the group to become centered in the present moment. As best you can, lay down your distractions and anxieties at the feet of Christ, who is in our midst. Conclude the prayer time by saying “Amen.”



Ephesians 2:8-10

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins

Q: Have you ever belonged to a club?

What did you have to do to become a member?

Any secret activities or handshakes?

Is this what it is like to follow Christ?

Last time we talked about how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit form Christ-followers into a church or body, with Christ as the head. How do we get included in the body? Do we have to earn our place? Do we need to do anything to maintain our status in the body?



In the passage we read earlier, Paul explains how God includes humans as members of the body and what the body is to do collectively. In verse 8, Paul says that those in the body are saved by grace through faith. It is important that we understand what these words mean.

Salvation is the new, eternal life we have in Jesus as a result of his sacrificial death and resurrection. Through the death of Jesus, our sins — our orientation away from God and associated actions — are washed away so we can enjoy a loving relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those who have accepted salvation are in the church.

Next, we should understand that salvation comes by grace. The word translated “grace” originally meant something that causes “delight and rejoicing.” Some would define grace as unmerited favor, and in many ways, this is true. Grace is not deserved or earned— it is freely given. There is nothing we can do to earn it and there is nothing we can do to lose it. However, this definition misses the relational aspect of grace.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul teaches that grace is not a thing God gives us. Rather, grace is God giving us himself. Jesus is grace. Christ is what causes delight and rejoicing. So, those in the body do not earn their way in, as they might in a club. Those in the body accept the free gift of grace.

Notes


[illegible]

Q: Does grace seem too good to be true?

Last, we have to look at faith. Like grace, faith is also a relational term. Yes, it does mean belief or trust, but faith is tied to the object of faith. In other words, to say, “I have faith in God” is to say, “I entrust myself to God because he is trustworthy and true.”

The reason we have faith in God is because of who he is. It is important to remember that our faith does not save us. Salvation is by grace. However, faith is the means by which we receive salvation. Faith is like signing the check that God has already written and given to us.

Faith accepts what God has given, and faith continues to accept what God gives us day by day to change us to be more like himself. Amazingly, faith is also a gift. We do not have the capacity to believe and trust in God. In our brokenness, we cannot see him clearly enough to trust him. God gives us the faith that opens the door to receive grace.

 In verse 9, Paul says that salvation, grace, and faith do not come by our own efforts. This was an important point for the Ephesian church. It was experiencing clashes between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and, evidently, some Jewish people felt that their culture (e.g., circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary laws) made them better than the Gentiles. It is not the things we do that give us favor with God. Grace has everything to do with who God is. Therefore, we cannot boast in our own devotion or goodness. We can only boast in God and what he has done.

Notes

[illegible]



Q: Do some Christians think that they are better than non-Christians? If so, what message does this send about the church?



Verse 10 speaks to what we can boast about — God’s love and care for us. This is where our value comes from. Even more, Paul describes the church as God’s handiwork or masterpiece. We are God’s most exquisite creation because we were created in Christ. In his wisdom and grace, God did not just make us, but he prepared “good work” for us to do. In this way, God blesses us to be productive and fruitful, just like him.

These good works were planned beforehand, meaning that God always intended us to live a certain way and participate in the work he is doing. Our existence is not accidental but part of God's plan. We are alive at this time because God wants us, as his church, to be a force of good in the world. Let us be clear: salvation is not by good works, but for good works. God has saved us and formed us into the Body of Christ so we can do good things.



Q: Paul calls you God's masterpiece. Does this affect how you see yourself?

In the next session, we will discuss how God empowers the church to be a force for good in the world.

Notes

[illegible]

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

We just learned how God prepared good works for the church. What is the work he wants us to do? To answer that question, we just need to look outside our window. All around us are people who do not know about the saving grace we have received in Jesus Christ.

In every community, there are people who are suffering, forgotten, imprisoned, in need, and in despair. Jesus is already in our communities working to heal our brokenness, and he invites us to join him in that work. He asks us to freely share the grace we have freely received.

Often, the church can be inward facing, just focused on the life of the church. However, God wants the church to have an outward focus and to see how we can participate in the work Jesus is doing to rescue and redeem humanity. What are some ways we can be a blessing to our community? What would happen if all Christians sought ways to heal the brokenness in our neighborhoods?

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ **5 mins**

Research a missions or community service opportunity that interests you. Ask God whether he wants you to participate. Either way, pray for God to bless the cause. Be prepared to share with the group next time about the opportunity you identified and why.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

4

THE GREATEST BUILDING PROJECT

4: THE GREATEST BUILDING PROJECT



Share your missions or community service opportunity and why you chose it.

Any questions or comments from last time?

Popcorn Prayer: As the Spirit leads, have members of the group offer one-sentence prayers asking God to bless the meeting in different ways. The leader closes in prayer when the frequency of prayers subsides.



Ephesians 2:19-22

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



Poet Edwin Markham wrote:

*He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!*

We human beings like to draw circles. We like to decide who is “in” and who is “out.” We are quick to label people and put them in a particular group, and then we make judgments about their character and worth. This happens almost unconsciously — part of our brain’s desire to sort things and find order.

However, sorting people almost always results in division, prejudice, and exploitation. The only cure for our compulsion to draw circles is, like Markham wrote, to learn to draw really BIG circles - big enough to include everyone.



Q: Why do you think it is easy for us to draw circles?



The church in Ephesus had a problem with circles. Since Jesus was Jewish, some Jewish Christians in the Ephesian church thought they were “more Christian” than their Gentile (non-Jewish) brothers and sisters because they better understood the historical and cultural roots of Christianity. As a result, many Gentiles were marginalized and made to feel inferior. In the last session, we discussed that we are saved by grace through faith. We explored how we, as the church, are saved to do good works. With all these circles being drawn, the Ephesian church hindered itself from fulfilling its purpose.

As we learned in the first session, part of the Father's desire is for humanity and his church to be united. God also destined for the church to do good works. Therefore, as the spiritual father of the Ephesian church, Paul had to teach the congregation to draw bigger circles.


Notes

[illegible]

To accomplish this, Paul employs a new metaphor for the church: the temple. Located in Jerusalem, the temple was the center of Jewish religious practice. Within the temple was the Most Holy Place, which symbolized the presence of God. Here, the veil between the spiritual world and the physical world was especially thin, and humanity could meet God face-to-face.

The temple was also the place where sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sins. Paul uses the temple as a symbol of the unity of the church and as a way to help the Ephesians understand how they are to accomplish the good works God has given them to do.

Q: How do circles prevent the church from fulfilling its purpose?

 Paul introduces the Ephesians to a new temple, which was a bit scandalous for a Jewish person to propose. Yet, Paul asserts the new temple is not made with stones but is comprised of believers, both Jews and Gentiles, the apostles, the prophets, and Christ as the chief cornerstone.

When Jesus was crucified, the curtain of the temple, which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 25:50-52). One could see this as a sign that the era of the temple, as a physical building, had come to an end, and a new kind of temple was needed (Heb. 10:4-6). This new temple is occupied by God through the Holy Spirit. Like the previous temple, the new temple, to which we belong, is the place where heaven meets earth and where we interact with God intimately.

Notes

[illegible]



Q: Using a phone or computer, look up images of replicas of Herod's Temple. Also, look at artistic renderings of the inside. The temple had various rooms, and the courts had walls, each one marking where one group of people could go, and others had to remain outside. The temple was used to group and divide people. What do you think was Paul's motivation for declaring the time had come for a new type of temple?



As part of the new temple, no one group had more claim to God than another. Through Christ, all believers are united and filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit unites believers and empowers them to accomplish the work God has given the church to do. Not only that, but the Holy Spirit resides in each person individually. We collectively and individually are the temple of God.

To the Gentile Christians in Ephesus who felt discouraged, this news must have been a blessing. God felt they were important enough to make them his dwelling place. The same is true for us. God thinks you are special enough to be his temple.

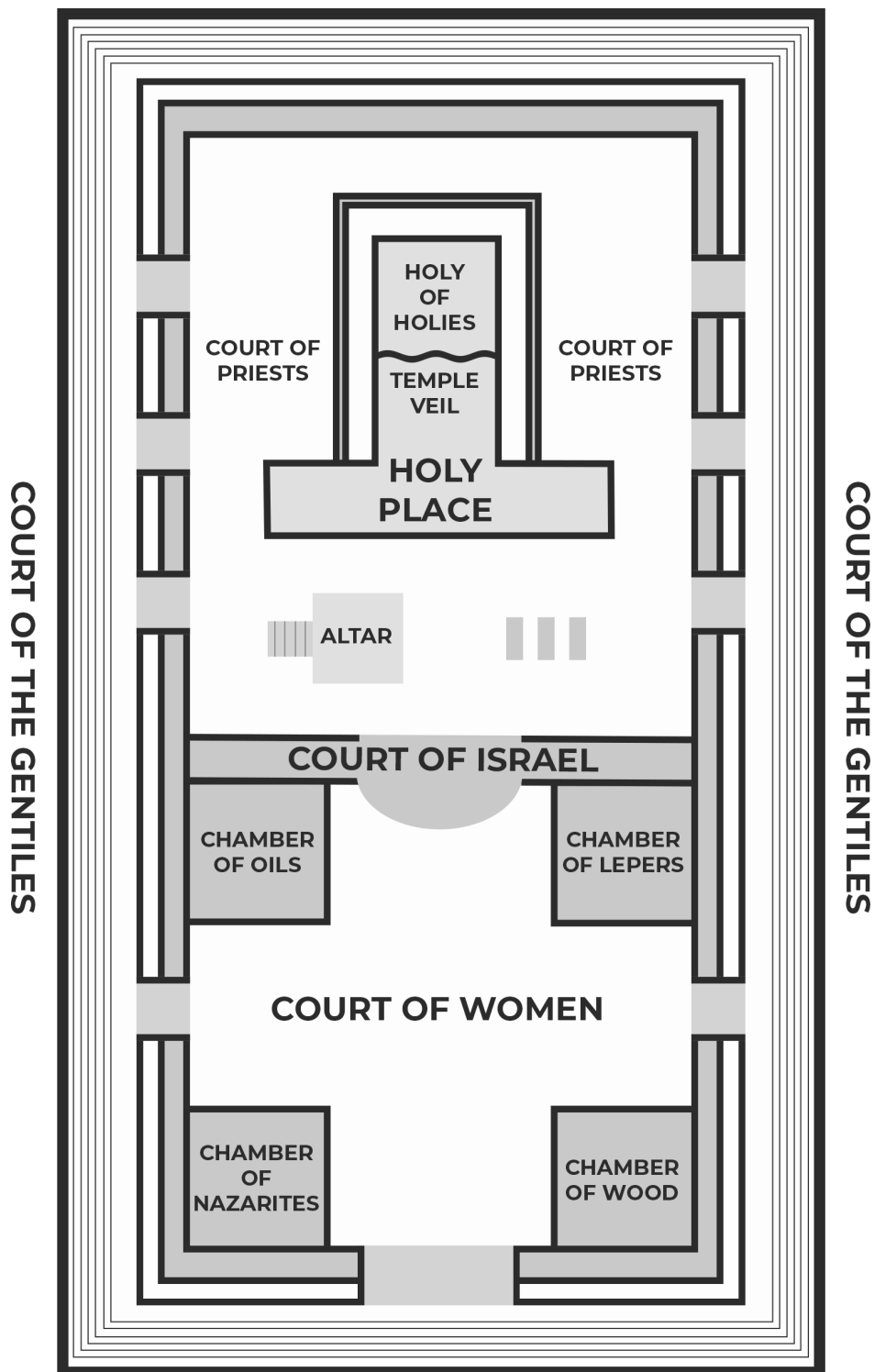
In the next session, we will discuss how God removes our circles and makes the church united.

Notes

[illegible]

HEROD'S TEMPLE

Notes



? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

All of us at one time or another get discouraged. Maybe someone said something to put you down. Perhaps things are not going well at work and you do not feel successful. Maybe you feel like you do not fit in anywhere. Whatever the reason, we have all been made to feel down on ourselves.

We can get so mixed up that we think God does not care that much about us. The reality is that God thinks you are amazing! God thinks you are so special that he wants to live in your heart. He has made you his temple and he wants to reveal himself to the world through you. Since he resides in you, he has given you power to change the world for the better.

God has made us righteous “change agents” for his glory. Does the way God thinks about you change the way you see yourself? How can you better live in the reality that you are the temple of God?

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ **5 mins**

Watch the Bible Project's video on [The Temple](#).
Be prepared to talk about it next time.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week, or have one person send out the list to the group. Also share your updates and praise reports for the week. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

5

UNITED WE STAND

5: UNITED WE STAND

**WELCOME/ICEBREAKER** 🕒 15 mins

Any questions or comments from last time?

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 3 min

**SCRIPTURE READING** ⌚ 3 mins

Ephesians 4:1-6

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o’clock on Sunday morning.” Unfortunately, not much has changed since Dr. King spoke those troubling words.

Researchers Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith report that church attendance among Black and White American evangelicals is almost completely segregated. 90 percent of Black Americans and 95 percent of White Americans attend a church predominately (80 percent and above) made up of people in their own racial or ethnic group.

Most of the congregations in the Western world are not just divided by ethnicity, but by class and political affiliation as well. While this is not true of all congregations and denominations, it seems that somewhere along the way, the church, to some extent, lost sight of the Father's desire for us to be united. Perhaps looking back to Paul's instructions to the Ephesians will help us chart the way forward.



Q: Why do you think the church, in America and elsewhere, is so divided?

In the passage we just read, Paul asserts that unity requires effort. As we discussed in the last session, we instinctively draw circles, and it takes intentionality to overcome the divisions we create. Therefore, in verse 1, Paul issues the command to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” In Paul’s thinking, our calling — our personalized invitation to participate in Christ’s ministry to the Father based on our God-given personality, spiritual gifts, and desires — requires us to recognize it and actively respond to it. We are called, so we need to live called.

In other words, each believer needs to understand their purpose in Christ and live in such a way as to fulfill that purpose. Therefore, living united requires Christians to take personal responsibility for setting the conditions that produce unity.

Notes

[illegible]

Q: Do you see yourself as having a calling?



Verses 2-3 describe the ways in which the Ephesians can accomplish Paul's command, namely by being humble, gentle, patient, empathetic and gracious, and peaceful. Adopting these virtues fulfills our calling and promotes unity in the church.

The first virtue, humility, is the only self-facing virtue mentioned. The rest have to do with how we interact with others. C.S. Lewis said, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less.”

In order to promote unity, we need to take ourselves out of the center and be others-focused. We need to strive for the well-being of our sisters and brothers. One more point on verses 2-3: Unity and peace require us to “make every effort.” As was mentioned earlier, it takes work and sacrifice to make peace and heal divisions.

The status quo will not bring unity. What brings unity is the bond of peace. Making peace is part of the good works for which the church was created. Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the presence of wholeness and completeness. Wholeness and completeness are possible only if Christ is the foundation on which we build our relationships. Peace does not come naturally because we are wired to turn away from God and pursue our own desires and comfort. Therefore, peace requires us to pursue healthy relationships with others in a way that moves us outside our comfort zone.

Notes

[illegible]

Q: What are some ways to make the church less divided?



In verses 4-6, Paul composes a creed to celebrate the unity we have in Christ. It consists of three groups of three confessions: 1) body, Spirit, hope; 2) Lord, faith, baptism; and 3) one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all. The creed is Trinitarian, meaning that it affirms that the Father, Son, and Spirit are equal and united. In this way, Paul is subtly saying the church should resemble God revealed in Jesus Christ — we should be a plurality in unity.

The key to Christian unity is found in Jesus. Before all other identifiers, we are Christ-followers, united by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Following Christ's example, we humble ourselves, get out of our comfort zones, and do the work that makes peace. We see division as an enemy because the Father's desire is to see us united.

Next time, we will discuss how each of us can personally contribute to the church's unity.

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

As we have learned, the church is, for the most part, afflicted with one kind of division or another. This does not mean that our churches are bad. However, it does mean that we need to do more work to reflect the Father's desire. We need to reach across human-made barriers and affirm the unity we have in Jesus Christ. This requires education and work.

We cannot hope to overcome the things that divide us until we learn about the stories of people who are different than us. Getting to know the stories of our brothers and sisters helps us form healthy relationships with them. Otherwise, we risk relating to others on our own terms with our limited knowledge, which often furthers division.

How can we be people who make peace? Is there a division that God wants us to help bridge for the glory of Christ?

Notes

[illegible]

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ **5 mins**

Do some research on something that divides the American evangelical church or the Church in your local context (e.g., race, gender, politics, etc.).

Identify a book or documentary that can help you learn more about that topic and how to bridge that divide. If possible, talk to a person who can help you come up with strategies to promote unity. Be prepared to share your thoughts on how to bring more unity to the church.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

6

PLAYING OUR PART

6: PLAYING OUR PART



WELCOME/ICEBREAKER 🕒 15 mins

Any questions or comments from last time?

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 10 min

SCRIPTURE READING ⌚ 5 mins

Ephesians 4:7, 11-13

Notes

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



In the Star Trek universe, The Borg are one of the most feared entities in the galaxy. Its famous threat, “resistance is futile,” has found its way into popular culture. It is a collective made up of cyborgs (part “human,” part machine) that gets stronger by conquering and assimilating entire civilizations, turning them into Borg.

The people who are assimilated lose all individuality and free will, with no trace of the person they used to be. Is this what it is like to be a part of the church? Are we supposed to surrender our individuality for the sake of the community of faith?

In his discussion of the church, Paul used metaphors like the “body” and the “temple” to create images of the unity the church should enjoy. However, one could wonder, does our unity cancel our distinctiveness?

Q: Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were asked to surrender your individuality? How did it feel?



In the passage we just read, Paul wanted to reassure the Ephesians that unity did not mean uniformity. In verse 7, Paul argues that Christian unity is contingent upon a type of diversity. To Paul, the most significant distinctiveness that should exist among believers is the diversity of grace.

Here, Paul uses the word “grace” a bit differently than he did before. By “grace,” Paul means spiritual giftedness or spiritually-gifted individuals. This grace comes from Christ through the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual gifts are an aspect of Jesus’ very nature. Every believer has been given this type of grace, so all Christ-followers resemble Jesus in some way.

Notes

[illegible]

Q: How does it make you feel to know you have a resemblance/aspect of Jesus living inside you?



In verses 11-13, Paul describes how unity in the church takes place. In verse 11, we see the grace alluded to in verse 7 is people fulfilling roles by the Holy Spirit. While all believers receive spiritual gifts, some of the gifted have a more direct role in fostering Christian unity.

Not all spiritual gifts are referred to here, but that does not mean that the unlisted gifts are not important. Paul is speaking specifically about the unity of the church. In this passage, Paul shows that gifts have a personal or interpersonal benefit, and they help establish institutional order and cohesion in the church. By the roles Paul names, we can infer that unity is connected to our knowledge of God. As we grow in our knowledge of God, the unity of the church will increase. Also, the church will be better equipped to do good works.

Q: Can you think of other spiritual gifts that are not mentioned in this passage?

Unity is possible because Christ is the giver of the gifted individuals, and the source of their identity is in him. The diversity of roles and gifting given by Christ are complementary and jointly contribute to the overall goals of the church.



According to verse 12, the church's role is to equip people for ministry, which results in the edification (building up) of all believers. It is only by a selfless orientation that ministry results in edification of the church and good works. Verse 13 tells us that the finish line of the work of the church is unity and conformity to the image of Christ. He is the goal of the church's work. The church starts and ends with Christ.

Notes

[illegible]

Believers cannot attain “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” without unity. This is a particular type of unity. Not unity from a human perspective, but unity “in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.” The type of unity in diversity the church is supposed to enjoy is the same type of unity that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy (John 17:20-21).

In the next session, we will discuss the importance of using our gifts for the benefit of the church.

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

As we learned, we all have been given spiritual gifts, but not everyone knows which gifts they have been given. Part of finding our place in the Body of Christ is knowing and operating in our gifts. It is not only how the church remains united, it is how the church helps us grow and mature in Christ. If we do not know our gifts or how to use them, we will not be able to fully benefit from inclusion in the church. Following Christ is not just about receiving from God, it is also about giving to others. How can we develop churches where all members, by the Spirit, are using their gifts?

★ DIVINE PARTICIPATION ⌚ 45 mins

Take the spiritual gifts survey
(www.faithaliveresources.org/discoveryourgiftssurvey).
Report your top spiritual gifts next time. As a warning,
the test has 80 questions and takes 30-45 minutes.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week, or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

7

YOU ARE NEEDED

7: YOU ARE NEEDED

**WELCOME/ICEBREAKER** 🕒 15 mins

Any questions or comments from last time?

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 3 min

Begin with three minutes of silent prayer to allow the group to become centered in the present moment. Lay down your burdens and distractions of the week at the feet of Christ, who is right here with us. Conclude the prayer time by saying “Amen.”

**SCRIPTURE READING** ⌚ 3 mins

Ephesians 4:15-16

Notes

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



In order to sell their products, many marketing executives work hard to give us the message that we are not good enough. “You would be happier if you took this pill.” “You could be more attractive if you only wore these clothes.” “Want to be popular? Drive this car!”

We are constantly bombarded with messages about our inadequacy. It is no wonder why some of us may feel that what we have to offer God is not good enough. Last session, we talked about how we have all been given gifts. However, it may be hard to imagine that the church actually needs us. The startling truth is that the church does need us. If we do not operate in our gifting, by the Holy Spirit, something will be missing from the body.



Q: What are some reasons we may feel like the church does not need us?



In verse 15 of the passage we just read, Paul is providing the Ephesian church with hope. Up until this point, Paul painted a beautiful but challenging image of the church. They were a fractured faith community, and every word Paul wrote must have shone a light on an area where improvement was needed.

Practically speaking, how could the church in Ephesus unite and be a fitting body for Christ? Paul was inspired to show the way forward: there were things they could do to participate in Christ's process of maturing us spiritually.

The process starts with the church holding on, in godly love, to what is true. Jesus declared that he is the truth, so Paul was encouraging his audience to speak in love about the things that pertain to Christ: who God is, what Jesus did for us, what Jesus taught, how Jesus lived, how Jesus saved humanity, and how we should live as we follow Jesus. You can summarize this by saying “the gospel.” As the church lives and shares the gospel, the individual members will look more and more like Jesus.

Notes

[illegible]

Q: What are some ways we can live and share the gospel?

As each member of the body shares in word and action who Jesus is, in and through her/him, the church gains a fuller image of who Jesus is as the different facets of Christ fit together to make a beautiful whole.

The different attributes of Jesus (our spiritual gifts) fit perfectly together, and the church grows, unites, and forms a fitting extension of Christ. This passage helps us understand the extent to which Jesus must be the center of the church.

Christ is the source and the goal of the church's growth and maturity — the church draws on his resources in order to become more like him. Christ catalyzes spiritual growth, diversity in gifting, and the unity of the church.

He is also the standard by which the church measures its progress towards its goal, as well as the goal itself. It is by Christ that the church does good works, thereby fulfilling its destiny.

Q: Can you think of a time when you saw God more clearly as a result of how another person operated in his/her spiritual gifts?



Paul teaches us that every believer has a part to play, and the church can achieve unity only when every part of the body does its job. The church does not have any extra pieces. Every part of the body is necessary. You are necessary. The church can achieve its collective goal — spreading the gospel and our unity in Christ — only when Christians fulfill their individual responsibilities to each other.

Notes

[illegible]

Whatever God has gifted you to do, do it! Like Anne Frank said, "Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!" Perhaps we should say you do not know how great God can be through you and what he can use you to accomplish. We just need to trust him and let him use us.

In the next session, we will explore how the unity of the church depends on Christians behaving in a way that reflects our belonging to Christ.

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 5 mins**

We have learned that the church can only achieve its purpose if Christians use their spiritual gifts by the leading of the Holy Spirit. As a result, our congregations should be structured in a way to assist people in discovering and using their gifts.

As part of Grace Communion International's vision of healthy church, congregations should be "team-based and pastor-led." Having a team-based approach ensures that all members of the congregation can get actively engaged in ministry — everyone has an outlet for their gifts.

The pastor disciples those teams to help members grow spiritually. Congregations should examine themselves and ask, “Do we have systems that support members using their gifts?” At the same time, each Christian should examine herself/himself and ask, “Am I using my gifts to contribute to my faith community?”

Notes

[illegible]

★ DIVINE PARTICIPATION ⌚ 5 mins

Find a spiritual gifts accountability partner. Discuss ways in which you can support each other in using your gifts for the benefit of the body. Be prepared to discuss some of the things you are thinking of doing to grow in and use your spiritual gifts.

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Collect prayer requests from the group and assign prayer partners for the week or have one person send out the list to the group. Then ask for a volunteer to close in prayer.

Notes

[illegible]

8

LIVING UNITED

8: LIVING UNITED

**WELCOME/ICEBREAKER** 🕒 15 mins

Any questions or comments from last time?

OPENING PRAYER 🕒 10 min

**SCRIPTURE READING** ⌚ 5 mins

Ephesians 4:17-24

Notes

[illegible]

DISCUSSION OF SCRIPTURE 30 mins



Latisha was born with scoliosis, a condition where the spine has an abnormal curve. As a result, she leaned to the right when she stood and had some difficulty walking. After a successful surgery and some time wearing a back brace, Latisha's spine was corrected. Yet, during one of her physical therapy sessions, her therapist asked her, "Why are you walking like that?"

"Like what?" Latisha asked.

"Like you still have a curved spine."

Even though Latisha's spine was straight, she was still leaning to the right when she walked. She had gotten so used to walking the wrong way that it was hard for her to walk the right way.

After addressing the disunity of the Ephesian church, Paul still had a problem: Many church members were still behaving like they did before following Jesus. They were so used to walking the wrong way that they had a hard time walking the right way.

As a result, verse 17 is the “line in the sand” of Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. The author forces the readers to make an ethical decision in order to continue reading. If the readers want to respond to God’s grace by becoming the united church, equipped for good works, each one of them would need to behave in a way that reflected their new life in Christ.



Q: What are some things that keep us from “walking the right way” in our relationship with Jesus?

In verses 18-19, Paul describes the condition of those who live apart from Jesus. Paul says that those who do not follow Christ are “darkened in their understanding.” In the Bible, light is often a symbol of spiritual enlightenment — God-given awareness of the reality of God and what he is like.

Notes

[illegible]



Darkness (the Bible often uses the metaphor of blindness) is ignorance of God and his ways. Interestingly, verse 19 tells us that lack of sensitivity to God leads to a corrupted sensuality. As we numb our desire for the things of God, our desire for physical things gets overly activated. The result is that people without Jesus are ignorant of the things of God, which causes an unhealthy focus on physical things. Eventually, a person's mind is affected, and they believe that the wrong things they do are actually good things.



Q: How is darkness a good metaphor for separation from God?



The problem of non-believers is a corrupted mind, so the solution is a renewing of the mind. Verse 20 is literally translated, “You did not learn the Christ this way.” How can we learn a person? Apparently, Paul is saying the Ephesians were not simply taught facts about Jesus; they were introduced to him. They knew him and the life that he offers

Verse 21 shows that Jesus is completely responsible for the education of Paul's readers. He is the teacher, the subject, and the place where learning takes place. In verses 22-24, Paul contrasts the old self with the new self.

The knowledge we gain about Christ is completely transformational. It gives us a new identity — a new version of ourselves. The new self is the result of a type of re-creation, as God renews and redeems our thoughts, emotions, and desires in Christ.



**Q: Has this study helped you “learn the Christ?”
If so, how?**



Following Jesus should trigger a response. As we observe his goodness, we should desire to live in a way that does not hinder our relationship with him. Putting on the new self not only facilitates our communion with God, but it enables the church to live united. If Jesus is the center of the church and our personal behavior, what we do will be blessed and our works will be good.

Notes

[illegible]

Following Jesus should trigger a response. As we observe his goodness, we should desire to live in a way that does not hinder our relationship with him. Putting on the new self not only facilitates our communion with God, but it enables the church to live united. If Jesus is the center of the church and our personal behavior, what we do will be blessed and our works will be good.

We will conclude this study of the church with a prayer offered by Paul for his Ephesian audience:

Ephesians 3:14-19 NIV - ¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Notes

[illegible]

? APPLICATION DISCUSSION **🕒 10 mins**

In this series, we studied Paul's letter to the Ephesians in order to better understand the church: what it is, why God created it, and how we participate in it. Hopefully, our appreciation for the church has grown along the way.

The church is not perfect. There have been periods in history where the church has gone off track. Despite this, it is still a beautiful expression of Jesus. If we submit to the leading of the Spirit, operate in our gifting, and behave like we belong to Jesus, we can help the church be what the Father destined it to be. We are the church. What more can we do to be the church?

★ **DIVINE PARTICIPATION** ⌚ 15 mins

Reflect on what you have learned in this study. How have you changed? What do you still want to change?

CLOSING PRAYER 🕒 10 mins

Popcorn Prayer: As the Spirit leads, have the members of the group offer one-sentence prayers thanking God for something they learned during the study. The leader closes in prayer when the frequency of prayers subsides.

Notes

[illegible]



THANK YOU FOR STARTING AND LEADING A NEW GCI CONNECT GROUP!

We believe Connect Groups are the perfect place for a community of believers to grow in their love for Christ and one another. In this kind of context people are transformed by God's love. Basically, we see the Faith Avenue as a place for deeper discipleship & relationships.

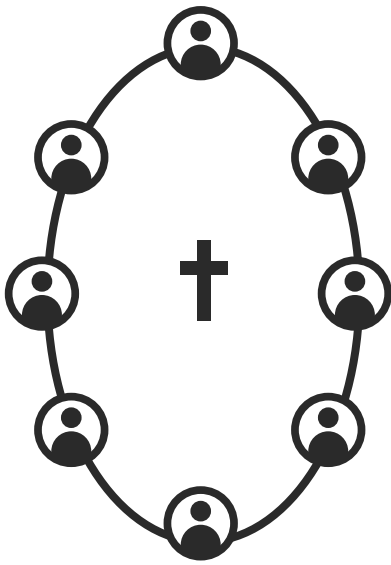
We have developed a basic curriculum to support our Faith Avenue leaders. The curriculum is meant to facilitate discussion that will help disciple new believers and veteran members. Along with the curriculum, we wanted to provide some facilitator best practices to help create a space where people feel a sense of belonging and where enriching, practical spiritual conversations can occur. Here are some best practices to help provide some additional support as you start your group.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A CONNECT GROUP?

- To create a safe space for seekers and members to connect with God and one another. To share, to grow spiritually and to build relationships with one another.



WHY START A CONNECT GROUP?



- We are sanctified through relationships. As we unpack spiritual truths and practical ways to live out our faith, the Spirit is working in and among us, purifying us and transforming us more into the image of Christ. Through these intentional and honest conversations, we experience the love of Christ through one another.

- In his ministry to and with the twelve disciples, Jesus modeled connect group ministry. He did not just preach truth to this group. He lived daily life with them, and they ministered together. He was available and provided opportunities for them to grow in leadership.

- We see connect group type ministry at the heart of who our Triune God is, and at the center of the early church.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)



WHAT ARE SOME QUALITIES OF A CONNECT GROUP LEADER?

- ✚ **Passion for Christ** – be a disciple before discipling others.
- ♥ **Passion for people** – a desire to care for and draw out participation from others.
- 🕒 **Commitment to invest the time** - reliably be available both during the set group time and for other relational opportunities.

WHAT ARE SOME CONNECT GROUP BEST PRACTICES?

When inviting others to participate in your group, have a clear purpose/shared goal and expectations set, create a format (when do you meet, how long each gathering will be, how are children included, etc.).

- Because **Connect Groups** have both spiritual and relational purposes. Our Team Based-Pastor led model recommends having one person serve as a host and another as the facilitator of the discussions. The host creates a warm welcoming environment (often in their home), and provides refreshments. Sharing food together develops relational intimacy. The facilitator prepares for the discussion and leads the group through the curriculum, drawing out participants to share and discuss making sure all voices are able to contribute.
- For group dynamics, we find that 5-15 people meeting weekly or bi-weekly are the size and frequency that work best.
- As you will notice in our curriculum, we find it best to set a six to eight-week timeframe for groups. This allows people to commit for a set time and explore if the group is a good fit for them.



• In the initial meeting discuss group norms and expectations. What will we commit to as a member of this group? How will we create a safe space for everyone? How can new members be integrated into the group? We have provided a "Shared Covenant of Care" worksheet that will allow your group to discuss and commit to your group standards or norms. Here are few suggested standards:

1. Give priority to attending each week unless unavoidably hindered.
2. Faithfully complete the weekly home study assignments.
3. Participate in the group discussion as I am able.
4. Pray by name for each member of my group during the weeks the group is meeting.
5. Refrain from discussing needs expressed in the group with anyone outside the group.

WHAT ARE SOME BEST PRACTICES FOR GROUP FACILITATION?

Please...

- ✓ Encourage participation.
- ✓ Guide the conversation around the set topic.
- ✓ Model group standards in your interactions and remind members of the standard when decisions are made that conflict with them.
- ✓ Reflect and summarize to the group the overall feelings, reactions, ideas, or solutions shared during the discussion.
- ✓ Resolve conflict by mediating differences in point of view.
- ✓ Be organized and flexible. This helps create the structure, while allowing you to respond to group needs.

Do not...

- ✗ Present yourself as the expert.
- ✗ Dominate the conversation by bringing the conversation back to your experiences, rejecting ideas without thoughtful consideration, using the group to share your personal opinions and values.
- ✗ Compete to have the deepest idea, last word, or be the favored person in the group.
- ✗ Disrupt the process of the group with excessive joking, mimicking, etc.
- ✗ Withdraw by becoming passive or overly formal.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A GROUP MEETING

- ✚ **Pray** – join with the Trinity in praying specifically for the individuals in your group and for an openness toward the movement of the Spirit in and among you.
- ✋ **Content** – to best facilitate the group, become familiar with the flow, big idea, and application of the scriptures. Consider how to contextualize the material for your group.
- 👥 **Coordinate** - connect with the host to discuss relational building opportunities and needs for creating the atmosphere.

HOW TO WRAP UP A GROUP AFTER THE LAST SESSION

- **Evaluation** – create a method to get feedback for the group's experience. This promotes quality and provides accountability, and allows for next steps to be determined.
- **Continuity** – provide next steps.
 - o Has the group grown and created a need to multiply?
 - o Will the group continue to meet after the six to eight weeks?
 - o Will the group desire to take a break? If so, provide some relational opportunities to check in with each other during the break.
 - o Are there other groups starting that members can choose to join?



WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ON BEING CURRICULUM?

On Being is a four-part interactive connect group curriculum, designed for biblically-based, dynamic discussions around being a disciple.

We will be rolling out a different curriculum quarterly throughout 2021.

The four curricula are: Being a Christian Neighbor, Being the Church, Being with Jesus, and Being with the Bible. Each curriculum has a Facilitator Guide and a Participant Workbook. Included in this document is an appendix with additional resources for facilitators.

Below is the key for each icon included in the Facilitator Guide:



BIG IDEA - main theme of the lesson



SCRIPTURE - Bible passage for this week's lesson



BIBLICAL CONTEXT - additional analysis on this week's passage



CALL OUT - reminder to read this section out loud or explain the concept



APPLICATION QUESTION - questions that bring out of the participants the personal relevance of this week's passage



CALL TO ACTION - How the BIG IDEA impacts how we live our lives

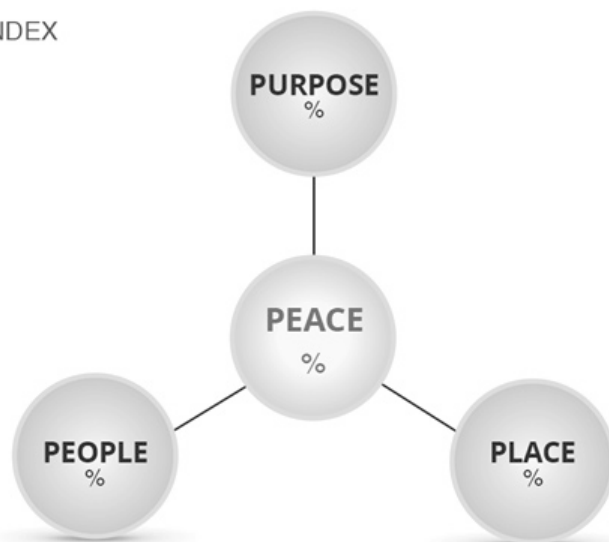
**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13**

APPENDIX

Sample Icebreakers (for consistency and variety, please rotate between 2 or 3 icebreakers throughout the course of the curriculum):

- Names of God: display or sort out on separate cards the names of God. Ask group members to choose one that answers the question, “How is God revealing himself to you this week?”, and share why.
- Examen: Go around and ask members to reflect and respond to one of the question pairs below:
 - o What was the most life-giving part of my week?
What was the most life-thwarting part of my week?
 - o What are you celebrating this week? What are you grieving this week?
 - o When did you feel most connected with God, others, and self?
When did you feel least connected with God, others, and self?
- Peace Index: Reflect on each of the following categories: your people (relationships), your purpose, and your place (environment). Combine these factors to develop your peace index. Share your percentage and a few reasons why you chose that number.

PEACE INDEX



- Looking over your week, your day, and how you feel right now, which biblical figure would you say you are and why?
 - o Abraham—A little lost but feeling God is leading me
 - o Mary Magdalene—Sickly and dependent but had an intimate friendship with Jesus
 - o Many examples!

Sample Opening Prayers:

- Begin five minutes of silence allow the group to become centered in the present moment, and then have the leader or assigned group member say a short prayer or simply say amen.
- Responsive reading or reading of a written prayer

Sample Closing Prayers:

- Ask a group member to read a scripture or quote that embodies the theme of this lesson and then pray.
- Give a few group members a descriptor of who God is (God is present, God is powerful, etc.) Ask them to read the descriptor and pause for a moment of reflective silence and then have the leader or another member of the group close in prayer.
- Read the Apostle's Creed together.



MY CONNECT GROUP SHARED COVENANT OF CARE

 Name

 Contact Info

 Prayer Need

As a member of the **Connect Group**, I will:

Signed by: _____

Date: _____