

Discipleship Groups

Conversations with an Unbelieving World

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Week 1: 1 Peter 3:15 “Gentleness and Respect”

Does anyone remember the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20)? What is a disciple of Jesus? Why have you chosen to be a disciple?

Do you ever get the feeling the world around you is less and less in line with your Christian faith? Although more than 70% of Americans self-identify as Christians, only 30% actually affirm evangelical beliefs (for example that only those who trust in Jesus as Savior can receive God’s free gift of salvation; Christianity Today, April 2016, p 55). Talk with your group about how you react (emotionally, mentally, behaviorally) to the decline of Christian influence in the culture around you.

Read 1 Peter 3:8-17.

What kind of culture did the Christians who received this letter live in? What kinds of consequences might they have suffered “for what is right”?

In what ways is that culture similar to ours? In what ways is it different?

Do you worry about suffering consequences for being a Christian in our culture? What kinds of consequences do you think we might realistically face?

Look at v 14 again. How does Peter say we should feel about suffering as Christians? What are some ways we tend to react when we’re afraid?

How does this passage teach Christians to react to those who treat them badly (see especially vv 9, 15, 16)?

What examples have you seen of Christians repaying “evil with evil or insult with insult” instead of “with blessing”? What misconceptions about Christians are reinforced when we respond to hostility with hostility?

Are there people who sometimes provoke you to act this way? What about them is difficult to respond to with blessing?

What do you think it means to “set apart Christ as Lord” (or “honor Christ the Lord as holy”) when you are responding to unkindness aimed at your faith?

What result do we hope that our “gentleness and respect” will produce in those who treat us badly for our faith (v 16)? Can you think of a modern example of this kind of Christian behavior?

Why should we “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”? What might cause someone who doesn’t follow Jesus to ask us about the hope that we have?

Talk about what the reason is for the hope that we have. Do you feel prepared to answer that question clearly and honestly?

What is our foremost goal in our interactions with unbelievers? What other goals do Christians sometimes get caught up in that distract us from this first goal? What is required of us as we pursue this first goal, aside from knowing the right words to say?

When people are afraid, it tends to create a defensive response, what we often call “fight or flight.” If we as Christians feel threatened by the increasingly un-Christian culture surrounding us, we might on the one hand choose “flight”: we pull away from the culture, withdraw into our own safe Christian environment where we can limit our interaction with unbelievers and their destructive ways. On the other hand, we might choose to “fight”: we compete for dominance and control in our relationships and in society, so that we can protect ourselves. In contrast to either defensive option, scripture teaches us to be like Christ, who didn’t fight to protect himself or flee from the world, but came into our world to love us and save us, even though it cost him his life.

In these six weeks, we will consider how we as Christians relate to unbelievers on a number of different subjects, more than one of which can often become volatile. It is important in the course of these discussions to remember that we are growing as disciples of Jesus. You may find that you disagree with some people in your group about how to respond to these issues; if so, this is an excellent opportunity to practice offering a different perspective with gentleness and respect. It is not our responsibility to *make* others accept our perspective, even if it is the gospel itself; it is our responsibility to become more like Christ in our character and our behavior and present the truth in love. We will find the need to build caring friendships even with those we strongly disagree with. It is doubtful that anyone will be led to salvation by an enemy, but very often they are led to salvation by a friend.

Pray together as a group that God would allow each of us to grow in our knowledge of the gospel, and also in the love and gentleness which flow from the gospel.

In preparation for next week, read Colossians 2:6-15 and the discussion questions.

During these six weeks, we will commit to memory Matt 5:14-16. Begin to familiarize yourself with the passage.

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Week 2: Colossians 2:6-15 “The Fullness of the Deity”

Memory passage: Can anyone recite Matthew 5:14?

What makes you a Christian? Why is morality an insufficient standard for defining Christian faith? What makes you different from, say, a Mormon or a Muslim or a Jew?

Read Colossians 2:6-15.

What does it mean that “in Christ the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”?

Read John 1:1. Is it possible to take this to mean that “the Word” is another God, or a godlike being (as Mormons believe)? Is it possible that the Word was created by God (what does “the beginning” mean? Cf. John 1:3)? Why or why not?

Read John 1:14. How would it be different to say, “The Word took on the appearance of flesh”?

In A.D. 325, the church met in Nicea to correct the false teaching that Jesus is less than God, and affirm that he is both fully God and fully man. Why do you think the church was so concerned to clarify this biblical truth? What would be lost without it?

Look again at Colossians 2:10. To what other authorities besides Christ do people appeal to validate their religion or worldview (for example, Islam, Mormonism, or secular humanism)? That is, to whom do they claim we should listen to find truth or fulfillment?

If Christ is fully God, how should we perceive those other authorities? How should we perceive our own authority over our own lives?

Read v 11. Paul often confronted “Judaizers” in the first century church, people who suggested that Christ’s saving work was not enough, and a person also had to be circumcised and follow the Old Testament laws in order to bridge the gap between man and God. What other means do other worldviews say we need to get to God (for example Buddhist meditation, or even the priesthood in some distorted views of Christianity)? If Christ is both fully God and fully man why are those other means unnecessary? How does his death show they were insufficient?

Do you find it more humbling or comforting to know there is nothing we can do in addition to or apart from Christ to get to God (or both)? Why?

Reread vv 13-15. What do you think it means to be “dead in your sins”? Dead in what way?

I recently spoke with a Mormon who insisted that first we have to do our best to live as good a life as we can, and then the grace of God makes up for the rest. Have you heard ideas like this even among Christians? How does this view fail to take seriously that we are “dead in [our] sins”?

What did God do in order to make us “alive with Christ”?

What does it mean that you are “alive with Christ”? What can you do now that you are alive that you could not do if you were “dead in your sins”? If we have been “circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature,” why do we still struggle against sinful desires?

Because “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (v 9), if you are in Christ, “you have been given fullness in Christ” (v 10). We were created for fellowship with God, and no human being can be complete without him. So in spite of our ongoing struggles with sin and doubt and our longing for the restoration of the world (Rom 8:23), that fullness is already ours in Christ, because in Christ we enter a relationship with the true God. There is no other person, no accomplishment, no pleasure that can give us that.

What other ways do you try to feel “full” besides Christ?

What truths about Jesus will remind me of the fullness I have in him? What regular practices in my life could help me realize that fullness?

Meet with a partner. If you were talking with a person who believed that Jesus was a good teacher but nothing more, how would you explain to them from Colossians 2:8-15 why that isn’t enough?

Pray and Watch: Share with your partner the names of 1-4 people who don’t know Jesus or about whom you are uncertain, whom you particularly want to pray for. Write their names down and pray together that the Holy Spirit would work in the hearts of those people and draw them to himself. Continue to add names to this list and **pray** for them throughout the week; then **watch** to see what the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives.

Read Acts 17:16-34 and the discussion questions for next week. Continue memorizing Matthew 5:14-16.

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Week 3: Acts 17:16-34 “No Other Name”

Memory passage: Who can say Matthew 5:14-15?

Review: What makes you as a Christian different from any other monotheistic religion? What does it matter if Jesus is God?

Read Acts 17:16-23.

The first century world in which the church was born was far more pluralistic in religious views (many different religions existed in the same environment) than the United States or Europe have been in the past centuries. Do you think the current cultural atmosphere around us today is essentially a Christian environment or more pluralistic?

How did Paul feel about the religious pluralism of his day (v 16)? Why do you suppose he felt that way? How did he respond to it?

What religious views do you notice represented around you other than Christianity? How do you feel about other religions around you? How do you tend to respond when you see or hear people expressing religious views other than Christianity?

What is the difference between feeling grieved or troubled by other religions and feeling threatened by them? What is the motive in each case? How will a person respond in each case?

Read Acts 4:11-12 (see also John 14:6).

Religious pluralism can either be descriptive (that is, that many religions exist) or prescriptive (that all religions should be accepted as valid). Is Christianity compatible with a prescriptive view of religious pluralism? I. e. does it support the view that all religions (or at least the major religions) should be accepted as valid, and they all point to the same truth? Why or why not?

The idea that we can simultaneously accept all religions as true is logically inconsistent. You have to fundamentally violate the tenets of most religions to make them compatible with each other. (For example, Muslims reject the view that Jesus died on the cross, while Christians depend on it as the center of their faith.) What, then, do you think is the really respectful way of treating other religions? What does real tolerance look like?

(Remembering to maintaining a spirit of charity in our discussion) What do you think is a realistic understanding of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”? Do you believe that Christian values and practices should receive privileges (in government or schools) that other

religions should not receive? How does the principle of doing to others as we would have them do to us (Luke 6:31) apply to how we treat religious minorities?

Read Acts 17:24-31.

When Paul is talking with people of another religion, what points of connection does he make with them?

On what points does he contradict what they believe? How does he say God views other religions? What expectation does Paul express about how his listeners should respond?

In whatever situation he was in, Paul never lost sight of his commission to make disciples of all nations. That remains our goal. What are some common points of discussion that you might raise with Jewish, Muslim, or other people who believe in one God? What are some connecting points you could build with people who believe in many gods or no gods?

When it comes to respectfully discussing the beliefs another person holds that need to be confronted for them to be saved, it is important to ask them what they believe, both to understand better where they're coming from and to allow them to participate in the conversation. What are some questions you could ask that help you lead to the heart of the gospel (i.e. what is essential for salvation that they might disagree with)?¹

Once the conversation is open, what scripture passages might you share that would help establish what God says?

Together with your partner, talk about one step you could take to begin building a relationship with someone you know who believes in another religion, or someone else who doesn't know Jesus (e.g. invite them over for dinner, ask them about their family, invite them for a bike ride or to play basketball or some other activity). Share any ways that you have seen the Holy Spirit working in the lives of those on your Pray and Watch list and pray for them.

Read for Romans 10:1-4 and discussion questions for next week and continue memorizing Matthew 5:14-16.

¹ Consider asking them what they believe about the deity of Christ, the meaning of his crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead, or the necessity of faith in him for forgiveness of sins.

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Week 4: Romans 10:1-4 “Muslims: Zeal without Knowledge”

Memory passage: Who can say Matthew 5:14-16?

If you form your opinions about Muslims by watching the news, what conclusions will you probably come to about them?

What Muslims do you know personally? Do you ever feel uncomfortable around them? What do you respect about them?

Read Romans 10:1-4.

This passage is of course written about Jews. In what ways did the Jews in Paul’s day demonstrate a zeal for God, but not based on knowledge? What is the difference between submitting to God’s righteousness and seeking to establish your own (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:21-24)?

Share what you know about the actual faith and practice of Muslims (e.g. prayer, pilgrimage, giving to the poor, modesty, opposition to idolatry). In what ways do they exhibit zeal for God? Do you think there are ways your faith might benefit from interaction with a Muslim?

Muslims believe that Jesus was a great prophet, but they do not believe that Jesus died on the cross, much less that he was raised from the dead (Qur’an 4:157; they believe the New Testament is an inaccurate account of him). Why, then, can they not “know the righteousness that comes from God”? In what way do they seek to establish their own righteousness instead?

Do you know any people who claim to be Christians, whose religion is about seeking to establish their own righteousness rather than submitting to the righteousness of God? Why might a false understanding of Christianity support the popular notion that all religions teach essentially the same thing?

I recently sought out a conversation with a Muslim leader in Muncie. In response, my whole family was invited to the home of a Muslim family for dinner. They were very kind hosts, happily answered all the questions I wanted to ask, and asked questions about our church as well. Our hostess and her two daughters wore *hijabs* (head coverings) while we were with them (but only when guests are present), and the daughters maintained just as lively a role in the discussion as their father. They expressed a great deal of frustration with those who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, claiming that a true observance of Islam is incompatible with that violence (Islam and Muslim are both related to the word salam, meaning “peace”), and referred to a passage in the Qur’an that says “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256).

It is important to remember that in our conversations, we are not talking to an ideology or a theoretical belief system, but to a real person. The vast majority of Muslims in this country are

taught peaceful interpretations of Islam. Whether or not you agree with what they see as “true Islam,” what can you learn from this about interacting with your Muslim neighbors? If you have the opportunity, what questions would you like to ask a Muslim living in America?

In January 2016, Muslim leaders gathering in Morocco released a declaration condemning terrorism and promoting religious liberty (Christianity Today, April 2016, 26). This peaceful resolution is encouraging, yet obviously there are many around the world who claim to be Muslims, who don’t come to such peaceful conclusions, who openly set themselves up as enemies of Christians. What do you think our attitude toward them should be?

Read 1 Timothy 1:12-16. Do you think some who perpetrate violence in the name of Islam could be compared to Paul before his conversion? Why and/or why not?

Jesus said we ought to love our enemies and turn the other cheek (Matt 5:38, 43), and personally demonstrated these things by dying on the cross for sinners and praying, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34). In contrast, Muhammad struggled for survival against those who opposed him, fortified himself in behind the walls of his city with his followers, and fought until he and his followers won. In your attitude toward Muslims, which of these ways of life do you feel like you most nearly imitate? What would it look like to imitate Jesus in relation to Muslims?

In our relationships with Muslims, as always, our task is to grow as disciples of Jesus and make disciples of Jesus. We don’t have to agree with or defend Islam, but we are not talking to “Islam”; we are talking to real people loved by God, who may subscribe to various interpretations of Islam. If we are to talk to Muslims about questions of faith, it is essential to understand what THEY believe. In many cases, they are eager to please God and talk about his mercy. Yet they don’t believe that God sent his Son to earth or loved us enough to give him to die to take away our sins. Starting with the common ground we have with Muslims—a desire to please God, the seriousness of sin, and his mercy toward us—how might you begin to talk to them about the beauty and necessity of the cross?

What evidence might you use to support what you say (personal testimony, acts of love, scriptures like Colossians 2:13-15, historical evidence)? How might you answer if they say the New Testament is an inaccurate picture of Jesus, and the Qur’an has the right story?

What effect do you expect it would have on your own faith to talk with Muslims about theirs?

Meet with your partner and share any conversations that may have come up with people on your Pray and Watch list; pray for them.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and the discussion questions for next week. Try to have Matthew 5:14-16 memorized for next week.

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Week 5: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 “Homosexual”

Memory passage: Can we say together Matthew 5:14-16?

Especially in the present cultural atmosphere, it can be nerve-racking to talk honestly about homosexuality, because so many are afraid to say the wrong thing. In a spirit of charity and recognition of our inability to understand what each other may be feeling connected to this issue, can we agree to be patient with each other during this discussion and allow a safe place to share our thoughts tactfully but openly? Can each person agree not to intentionally offend, but also not to be quick to take offense?

To your best understanding, what does God say about homosexuality? What bible passages have you heard pertaining to the subject? (e.g. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Timothy 1:8-10; Genesis 19:4-5; cf. Jude 7)

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Have you heard any interpretations of this or other passages that would make homosexual practice acceptable? What do you think of those interpretations?

The word translated “homosexual offenders” in the NIV is based on Leviticus 18:22; literally, it encompasses all male-to-male sexual intercourse. It is no more pardonable than any other of these sins listed—but neither is it any more beyond forgiveness. What does v 11 conclude?

Read Luke 9:23. Are there any parts of your personality that are so deeply engrained that you’ve said, “That’s just what I’m like. That’s who I am”? What desires or comforts would be most difficult for you to live without? What might compel you to give those things up?

What do you suppose it means when Jesus calls you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him? Do you feel like you’ve had to do that in your relationship to Christ?

For a person who are only attracted to people of the same sex, being asked to abstain from homosexual behavior feels like losing a piece of themselves. In most cases, they did not ask to experience those feelings, but our culture has taught them to embrace those feelings as their identity: that they are gay or lesbian. In contrast, Christian pastor and author Sam Allberry does not allow his struggle with same-sex attraction to define him.² Rather than allowing a person’s feelings of sexual attraction determine their identity (as a gay person), Allberry prefers to refer to that person as “someone who experiences same-sex attraction.” Therefore, what they do with those feelings is not an inevitable part of their identity but a choice. “I am far more than my sexuality.”

Yet the sacrifice is real. Some who experience same-sex attraction are able to change and develop feelings of attraction for the opposite sex, or experience both attractions, and are able to live happily in

² I cannot recommend strongly enough Allberry’s short book, *Is God anti-gay?* (The Good Book Company, 2013).

a heterosexual marriage. But many are exclusively attracted to people of the same sex for their whole lives. For those people to enter into a heterosexual marriage is usually unrealistic, which means following Jesus requires them to live their whole lives celibate and single.

Do you believe celibacy is a good option for a Christian? If you had felt that Christ wanted you to live your whole life as a single person, would you have willingly given up the right to have a spouse and children to follow him?

Sadly, one of the greatest struggles Christians who are same-sex attracted face in the church is the same struggle all singles face: loneliness. Single people are sometimes unintentionally made to feel like outsiders in the church. Have you ever pressured someone who is single to pursue a romantic relationship? What might be better ways to affirm and support those who are single?

When those who experience same-sex attraction choose to follow Christ, they are called to deny themselves in a very tangible and difficult way. If they looked at your life of following Jesus, do you think it would be a helpful example of that same level of commitment and sacrifice? Are there ways that Jesus might be calling you to deny yourself, which you have resisted so far?

Read Mark 1:14-15. When Jesus began preaching, what did he tell people to do?

What does it mean to repent? To whom does this command apply? What does that imply about the direction they were heading when he found them? Are there things you would be willing to share that you have had to repent of to follow Jesus?

What is the good news? What makes it good news?

Before we can expect anyone to deny themselves to follow Christ, they first have to know that Christ loves them. Romans 12:1 says, we are to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices “in view of God’s mercy.” As Allberry puts it, “There is little point in describing how to live in light of God’s grace if someone doesn’t yet know God’s grace.”

If a person or couple practicing a homosexual lifestyle asked you about following Jesus, where would you begin with them? (Hint: probably not Leviticus 18:22) What are the promises of the gospel that make self-sacrifice worthwhile? What even gives God the right to tell us how to live?

Discuss with your partner: Are there sins in your life you have not repented of that make it difficult for you to call others to repent of sin? Do you have another Christian (besides your spouse) you trust enough to confess your sins to them? If a fellow Christian confessed to you in private that they struggle with homosexual feelings, what would you do for them?

Talk about any ways you’ve seen the Holy Spirit at work in people on your Pray and Watch list, and pray for them.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 for next week.

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Week 6: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 “All Things to All People”

Memory passage: Can we say together Matthew 5:14-16?

What does it mean to be the light of the world? What kind of good works would cause people to praise God? How is that connected to our commission to make disciples (and being disciples)?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

What do you think it looked like for Paul to become “like one under the law” to some and “like one not having the law” to others to save each? Does this seem hypocritical or inconsistent to you? What about this passage leads you to that conclusion?

In the past few weeks, we’ve talked about a number of different topics and people that we might be called to address as representatives of the gospel. What situations were most difficult for you to consider? What other issues in talking with unbelievers have come up in your conversations or experience that we didn’t discuss? Were there some principles you picked up along the way that might still apply in those situations?

What might it look like to become all things to all people in these situations? For example, how could I become like a person who had grown up outside the church to save those who grew up outside the church? How could that lead to their salvation?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. How might we be disqualified from the prize Paul is talking about? What do we need to do to avoid being disqualified?

How might building relationships with unbelievers for the sake of the gospel strengthen your faith? How might it challenge your faith?

During this small group study, what was the most helpful insight you came across for sharing the gospel? Have you seen progress in any of the people on your Pray and Watch list?

As with most skills, talking and studying about sharing the gospel will only take you so far; you will probably never feel comfortable actually talking to someone about the gospel until you have gotten up the nerve and done it a few times. Step out, pray for God’s power, and tell someone the message of salvation. Yet it is important to understand the gospel clearly enough to explain it to someone else briefly and appropriately.

What have been some of the most useful passages of scripture you’ve found for sharing the message of salvation? (From our discussions, consider Col 2:8-15; Acts 4:12; 17:24-31; John 14:6; Rom 10:1-4; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Mark 1:14-15. Other familiar passages might be Rom 3:23-24; 6:23; 10:9.)

What are the most important points you think you would need to talk about? Write them below:

Meet with your partner. Assuming you will continue to pray often for the people on your Pray and Watch list, what is another step you would like to take in leading someone to Christ? Mark one or two below and share them with your partner:

- Invite them to your house
- Take up a hobby with them
- Learn the name of someone you don't know
- Ask them about their faith
- Invite them to come to church with you
- Ask them if they'd be interested in reading through a book of the Bible (or other book) with you
- Share with them how you became a Christian
- Share with them what they must do to be saved
- Ask them if they are ready to put their faith in Jesus for salvation
- Other: _____

This is the end of our small group discussions on this topic, but not the end of our progress in faith. Follow up with your partner next week and see whether they have made any progress on the steps they want to take. Continue to pray and watch for the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives around you.

May you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.