

Relational Christianity

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About Nathan:

Nathan is an ordained minister, independent missionary and founder of Mobile Word Ministry. Nathan earned a BA in History from the University of Washington and an MS in Education from Old Dominion University. While serving as a teacher and minister in South Korea, Nathan created Mobile Word Ministry to help people understand the Gospel and equip them with practical steps and resources to take their love of Jesus to others.

What is the Relational Christianity Course?

Too often we Christians attempt to run before we can walk. We are quick to execute missions and achieve goals before we've assessed or addressed the health of our own faith. The fruit of our faith in Christ can be directly traced back to the health of very specific relationships. By evaluating these specific relationships, we can successfully answer the following questions:

- Who is God and why do I need Him?
- Who is Jesus and how does He affect my life?
- Am I a disciple and how do I make disciples?
- What is the Church and what is its purpose?
- What is the Bible and how do I read it?

Our relationships with God, Jesus Christ, other people, the Church and the Bible are paramount to the health of our Christian faith. The Relational Christianity course invites us to pause and reflect on the true health of these relationships to reveal both their strengths and insufficiencies. In doing so, we can personally encounter and confidently stand upon the truth of the gospel to save, strengthen, heal, and transform.

Introduction

Keep it simple. These were the words God gave me when He called me into ministry in 2010 and they remain at the foundation of how I live out my faith and how I lead others. The world we live in and the Church we are a part of are complex, and within them lie a myriad of temptations to complicate the simplicity of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is in chasing after these distractions we find ourselves lost, confused and feeling distant from God.

The purpose of this small booklet is to help you **keep it simple**. In evaluating our relationship to God, Jesus Christ, People, the Church and the Bible, we will find our bearings for where we are and where we need to go. God already knows you better than you will ever know yourself: the task now is to ask God to help us understand ourselves by being honest about how we understand and live out these various relationships on a daily basis.

The fact that you are reading this booklet is itself evidence that God is drawing you to Himself. He wants you to be honest. He wants you to get to know Him. He desires to welcome you back home! A mustard seed of faith can move mountains, and perhaps that is what is required for you right now as you begin the journey through this booklet. Let this study be your invitation to God: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts" (Psalm 139:23-24).

God wants you to know truth. If you are willing to step forward in faith and allow the Lord to walk you through these pages with sincerity and honesty, you will find truth and freedom. "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8).

I pray that the words in the following pages contribute to a powerful encounter between you and the living God that changes your life forever. God bless you.

- Nathan

Before you start:

Remember what this course is NOT. It is NOT an in-depth exposition of the Christian faith. It will NOT detail every aspect, circumstance, scenario in the average life of a Christian. It is NOT intended to provide you with an abundance of information and knowledge about Christianity, the existence of God or the proof of Jesus as the Messiah. It is NOT a checklist for easy answers. The only right answers are the honest ones. The only wrong answers are the ones that masquerade as truth, but are grounded in insecurity and fear.

Remember what this course IS. It IS an assessment tool to evaluate the health of your faith, or lack thereof. It IS meant to emphasize quality over quantity--in other words, take your time and be deliberate with each page, section and question. Ask God to show you truth, and read each section deliberately. Take as long as you need to meditate on each section and question. There is no time limit, there is no pressure to complete the booklet in a set period of time. It IS meant to provoke thought and reflection. Ask the hard questions, and be sure to pray each time you begin a new section that God be with you in the seeking.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

God desires for you to know him and live in the reality of His love and plan for you.

Session One: Meeting God

- Faith by association
- Doubt by association
- Guilt without grace
- Love without fear

Session Two: Walking with Christ

- If Jesus lived, I have to listen.
- If Jesus died, I have to repent.
- If Jesus resurrected, I have to change.
- If the Holy Spirit is real, there is always hope.

Session Three: Making Disciples

- Teaching as a student
- Teaching as a non-believer
- Following God's schedule/plan
- Investing with empathy
- Training to sustain

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Session One: Meeting God

A Relationship with God

- Faith by association

*Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*
Psalm 34:8

Have you personally experienced the sweetness of God's love for you? Are you confident in proclaiming God's goodness?

You do not come into knowing God by living vicariously through other people. **YOU** have to encounter God. **YOU** have to know Him. This is not about other people. This is not about what you should or shouldn't do.

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do **you** say I am?" (Matthew 16:15). We can glean from the wisdom and experience of others, but there will come a point where YOU must have a faith of your own in order to experience being loved and known by the living God. Many people have spent their entire lives attending church, reciting prayers, reading their Bibles and identifying themselves as Christian who have never taken a step in the direction of a personal faith that does not rely on anyone else. When there is no one to impress, no one to appease, when it comes down to you and God, the question remains: Do YOU know Him?

We must personally taste the sweetness of the glory of the Lord. We must personally recognize the beauty in God's creation and the place he Has specifically designed for each of us in it. Each Christian must see that God has always been calling out to them, personally. God has been pursuing you this entire time, and the directive for you now is to stop, turn, and see that He has always been with you, and desires to be known by you.

Study Questions

1. Is your faith in God based on your own experience with him?
2. Does your faith change (grow, diminish) depending on the presence/absence of specific people in your life?
3. Do you "associate with" or "know" God?

Yada – to know (Hebrew)

- Doubt by Association

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:13-16

Most people who distrust Christianity or the God of the Bible actually don't distrust either. Their distrust or doubt is the result of their experience with people and circumstances, but not necessarily God. Maybe they hate church because a Sunday school teacher reprimanded them for asking too many questions. Maybe they have been repelled by hypocrisy in Christians they have known. Possibly they blame God for difficulties or traumas experienced. The list goes on. Non-Christians may reject God as the source of their hurt, even when their hurt is more a result of people or circumstances.

The only way for people to know exactly who God is is by letting Him speak for Himself. Understanding the heart of God and knowing Him personally has to come the hard way. In other words, we have to shut up and listen.

Imagine sitting down with someone for a "get to know you" chat. However, for the entire conversation, you never stop speaking. The moment the other person tries to get a word in, you interrupt, contradict, dismiss and keep talking. How fair would it be for you to leave that meeting confident that you got to know that person--at all?

Only by giving God our complete attention will we ever really know Him. Only by knowing Him will we see that our distrust can be credited to the sin of man and the sinfulness of this world, not to God.

Study Questions

1. Have you ever felt hurt or disappointed by God?
2. What causes you to doubt God the most?
3. What makes it hard for you to listen to or trust God's words?

- Guilt without Grace

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Heaven and Hell: these two words sum up what many people believe they know about God. If they do the right things, they go to the good place (heaven). If they do the wrong things, they go to the bad place (hell). For many people, this is the extent of what they know about God and His “system.”

We tend to find it much easier to understand punishment than grace. We all have an inherent understanding of right and wrong. When we do something wrong it's easy to understand the legitimate response of the almighty God to be upset and want to punish us for our behavior. What we don't understand easily is grace. We witness injustice and wrongdoing on a regular basis, but don't witness mercy and unconditional love as often.

If we truly believe in justice, there must be some standard by which justice is judged. And if there is a standard for justice, how can we be sure that we are on the right side of it? If we are honest with our thoughts, words and actions, it becomes quite clear that our record of wrongdoing far outweighs our record of “rightdoing.”

Many of us struggle to understand grace as a gift and not something we can earn. The gospel is not earned. God's love can never be earned on the basis of our goodness. Trying to earn the grace of God to undo our guilt at wrongdoing leaves us scrambling to do the right things, burdened by the weight of living righteously, never understanding that perfection is not the command for us to obey, and that forgiveness and compassion are real and as much a part of God as His rules are.

Study Questions

1. What is easier for you to accept, justice or mercy?
2. Do you feel the pressure of being perfect?
3. Does the Gospel of "grace" as a **free gift to all** challenge you? If so, how?

- Love without Fear

*But the LORD is the true God;
he is the living God, the eternal King.
When he is angry, the earth trembles;
the nations cannot endure his wrath.
Jeremiah 10:10*

"God is my dad." "God loves me." "God forgives me." All of these statements are true. On the other hand, these statements might dangerously skew a person's understanding of God. God is all of these things— but God is also a King with authority over our lives, who demands worship and obedience. As King he knows my record and my guilt. The King didn't have to save us from our impending punishment; He has the rights to our lives and doesn't owe us a thing.

However, He is also the King who, knowing our sin, chose to pardon us and gave his one and only son to die in our place. As the King's creation, each of us is utterly and fully known by our Creator. He is always present to give us advice, counsel, comfort and peace whenever we ask for it. And yet, He is still the King, and as His servants we must live to serve Him.

God is a loving Father, and God is also a sovereign King who administers just consequences for disobedience. For many of us, these seem like a contradiction. The only resolution to this apparent contradiction is in the revelation of truth from the Holy Spirit.

How can God be both the God of wrath and the God of gentleness and mercy? In studying the Scriptures a person will discover the "both/and" of the infinite nature of God. In turning to Him and submitting to His voice a person will experience both sides of the coin not only being true but being totally inseparable.

Study Questions

1. Is it easier for you to see God as a friend or as a King? Why?
2. Do God's judgment and authority make you uncomfortable? If so, why?
3. What makes it difficult for you to accept God's judgment and authority?

Session Two: Walking with Christ

A Relationship with Jesus

- If Jesus lived, I have to listen.

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

2 Peter 1:16-18

While the Old Testament gives us a picture of who God is, the encounters with God recorded are difficult for the modern reader to relate to. This disconnect tells us there is no way to REALLY know God, so we force ourselves to be content with not knowing.

Most people, both nominal "cultural" Christians and those who reject the Gospel altogether, are unaware of the scholarly historical consensus that Jesus was a real man who was crucified by the Romans in the first century. Understanding the historicity of the New Testament and thus the historicity of Jesus Christ, takes inquiry and pursuit of truth, time and energy.

Lacking this understanding, many choose to get by Sunday after Sunday. We hold on to what we can about Jesus, but accept as reality that we just need to put our heads down, believe, keep doing what we do and in the end God is love and we are destined for a nice and happy ending.

But if Jesus really lived, that means that His words are true. If His words are true, the implications of those words have to be true as well. If those implications are true, those who call themselves Christians have to be all in or all out. Jesus is clear concerning our need for Him and our need to be rescued from our sin, and if we

profess faith in Jesus, we HAVE to believe that He is who he says He is and meant what He said.

Study Questions

1. Do you believe that Jesus is a historical person?
2. How does the historicity of Jesus affect your faith in him?
3. What is preventing you from taking the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as literal and historical truth?

- If Jesus died, I have to repent.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

Jesus did not die to give you the self-congratulatory energy boost needed to realize your dreams, have a happy day and find success in this life. Do you know why Jesus came, lived and died? If not, take this as a perfect time to go and read a Gospel (the Gospel of Mark is the shortest, so maybe start there). Regardless of which Gospel you choose to read, they will all testify to the same undeniable and unavoidable truth behind the identity and purpose of Jesus Christ: Jesus died on the cross to pay our debt of sin and create a supernatural bridge between justice AND mercy.

This mercy is not intended to propel us out into the world to once again live for ourselves. Rather, it creates in us a radical, supernatural heart change. Our motivation alters. Experiencing the mercy of God changes why we do what we do and opens our eyes to what really matters. The Cross, the death, the wounds, the suffering, the payment for sin, all of it was because of OUR SIN. Yours and mine. If we remove our sin from the story, the death of Jesus makes no sense at all. If we walk with Christ, we also walk with His suffering, the needed daily reminder that we ARE inherently sinful and our sins WERE assigned to Jesus as He was crucified on the cross.

With the reality of Christ's suffering comes His command for us to repent. To turn away from; to turn around. To flee from our sin and to run toward Jesus. To follow Jesus means we literally turn away from the old life and start over in the other direction, in step with the Lord, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus.

Study Questions

1. Do you believe that you are a sinner in need of saving? Why?
2. Do you see yourself as someone needing daily forgiveness? Why?
3. Does the word "repent" make you uncomfortable? If so, how?

- If Jesus resurrected, I have to change.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

If we believe in the Cross, then we have to believe in the tomb. And if we believe in the tomb, we have to believe that the women arriving at the tomb on the third day found the tomb empty. The empty tomb is as much of a commandment as any declared in the Sermon on the Mount. The command of the empty tomb is to believe that sin and death have been defeated. Believe that Jesus is who He said He is. Believe that His promises are true. Believe that with His victory over sin and death comes our victory over sin and death. They are one and the same; our new life does not begin and end at the cross. Our striving to be right with God based on our own effort ends at the Cross. Our ability to worship God with all that we have and all that we are begins at the empty tomb.

Yet the empty tomb does not promise an easier life, or escape from the challenges of this world. On the contrary, the tomb signifies the opposite: if Jesus suffered, we too will suffer, as Jesus Himself taught us: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). However, the empty tomb is a signpost. It reminds us that regardless of our current obstacles, there is eternal hope in Jesus Christ. The empty tomb tells us that our constant peace and joy are not in our present circumstances, but in knowing that where we are now is nothing compared to where Jesus is and where we are going.

Study Questions

1. Do you believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus? Why?
2. Does the resurrection of Jesus give you hope? If so, how?
3. How does the resurrection of Jesus affect your faith and life?

- If the Holy Spirit is real, there is always hope.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.
John 14:26

It always surprises me how many people read the story of the disciples pre- and post-Christ's resurrection so casually, as if it were a common story with a common story arc. Is this because we aren't reading actively to understand what is being said? Or perhaps it's because we've heard the story so many times that we are in effect numb to the testimony. Regardless, before the death of Jesus the disciples were men and women ill-equipped to teach, preach and heal. Yet after the resurrection they changed the entire world. How? How does Peter go from denying that Jesus is the Christ, to healing a cripple, rejoicing in being flogged in the name of Jesus and preaching a sermon that brought 3,000 people to believe in the name of Jesus? How? There is only one answer.

Before Jesus left he said that after Him another would come in His place to be our Helper. The Holy Spirit is an extension of the Son and the Father. Therefore, with the Holy Spirit comes not only our counselor and our teacher but direct access to our King, our friend, our Lord and our Savior. He is the next step that Jesus commands us to accept after His work is finished. We NEED a relationship with the Holy Spirit. If we reject the presence and identity of the Holy Spirit we abandon the promises of Jesus before they can bear fruit in our lives. The Holy Spirit teaches us more than we know, shows us more than we can see and helps us when there is no one at our side. The empty tomb commands us to believe in Christ's victory over sin, and the Holy Spirit reassures us that the victory is both now and forever.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe your relationship with the Holy Spirit? Do you believe him to be a person?
2. Have you had an experience with the Holy Spirit? If so, what happened?
3. In what ways do you need the Holy Spirit?

Session Three: Making Disciples

A Relationship with People

-Teaching as a student:

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Matthew 18:2-5

You may be an adult who teaches and leads, but you will always remain a child, a student, and a disciple first. As you teach and lead others to the Gospel of Jesus you might coordinate or organize, but through all of your effort, it is the Holy Spirit who is teaching. You are called to learn what His word has proclaimed and then share that with others. You are to see for yourself the glory of the Living God and then share what you have seen. If you have not personally tasted and seen that the Lord is good, please stop telling others that you have and that they should.

You are to encounter the power of the Gospel and tell others to come and see. You are not the boss. Your boss is God and His Holy Spirit will always have authority over everything you do. One of the most common and destructive positions a Bible study leader can take is that of "The Expert," one who knows all of the answers and never admits to having any questions. The most important three words for a leader are "**I don't know.**" Many fear that this confession will be destructive to ministry. But honesty about our insufficiencies and need for guidance could not be more central to our identity as children of the living God. Having enough faith to be honest is paramount.

Because God is with us in pursuit of Him, our not knowing is never the end to the process. To God, all questions are valuable. When leaders learn, God establishes His authority over our groups and

welcomes us all as seekers of His truth, using us to sharpen one another in the process.

Study Questions

1. Is it difficult for you to take instruction?
2. Do you always gravitate towards teaching and leading Bible study groups? If so, why?
3. How can you take on the role of student more in your groups and fellowship?

-Teaching as a non-believer

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Remember when you didn't believe in Jesus? Remember when you questioned God's plan and His purpose for you? Remember when you couldn't understand something you read in the Bible? Our own past opposition to God should be enough to show us that not everyone immediately understands the Gospel. Therefore, when responding to doubts, questions or objections we must remember that in the not so distant past we said the same things. But by the patience, grace, and love of God, we are now in a position to defend the Gospel with His abundant patience, grace and love for those around us.

Too often, objections or criticisms to the Gospel of Jesus are met with hostility and defensiveness, not love and empathy. There must be a dialogue between us and those we lead. The only way for there to be a dialogue is if the leader of the Bible study fully comprehends their former alienation from and opposition to God. Only then can we begin to walk as Christ's disciples, and in the process teach others what it means to be a disciple of Jesus as saved sinners, forgiven enemies and loved children of God.

Study Questions

1. Do you remember a time when you did not believe in Jesus? Identify examples.

2. Do questions or criticisms make you uncomfortable in Bible studies? Why or why not?

3. How can you support non-believers more in your groups and fellowship?

-Following God's Schedule/Plan

*To humans belong the plans of the heart,
but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue.*

² *All a person's ways seem pure to them,
but motives are weighed by the LORD.*

³ *Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and he will establish your plans.*

Proverbs 16:1-3

It's ironic that to effectively make disciples one must hardly ever think about the act of making of disciples. A "Disciple Maker" is first and foremost committed to the study and exposition of God's Word, and the ongoing spiritual transformation occurring in his/her life.

Making disciples does not follow a template. The act of making disciples is not so much about leading someone to profess belief in Jesus Christ, but leading people into a genuine walk with Christ. To effectively lead people to a genuine walk with Christ requires obeying his directive not to take more than one day at a time, either in our own walk or with the people we meet. Our needs are in present tense, the Word is applied in present tense, and growth occurs in present tense.

Discipleship training is often reduced to pre-planned steps and programs that assume that all people will be trained in the same way, according to the same timeline and to the same effect. The reality is different. God cares personally for very unique children in often very different ways. Therefore, one who makes disciples must be flexible, aware of the current state of those being led, and in tune with the direction of the Holy Spirit. This takes a great deal of self-sacrifice, patience and faith. You don't know how to make a disciple. However, you can possess a faith in Jesus worth sharing to others and the Holy Spirit will work through you to make disciples.

Study Questions

1. Is your leadership style flexible or rigid?
2. Does the absence of a plan make you feel insecure, anxious, afraid or all three?
3. How can you become more attentive and obedient to God's sovereignty over your groups and fellowship?

-Investing with Empathy

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:8-10

Investing time and energy into the lives of others is a natural byproduct of evangelizing and leading others to Christ. It’s hard. It takes time. This process will agitate and offend your flesh. However, to genuinely lead, you must genuinely be led. In this way, all Christians must be disciples, and all Christians must be disciple-makers, perpetually.

We cannot elevate our leading as the source of what we do and why we do it. Our source must be grounded in our own need for growth and the understanding that we are simultaneously being led. The leading of others is merely a byproduct of your growth and calling as a disciple yourself. Otherwise, we simply lead for the sake of leading and inevitably make an idol out of our ministry or position. By daily resetting to the Cross, we can lead for Christ’s sake and not our own.

It was never about us, and it never will be. In Christ we are constant recipients of God’s grace, patience and enduring faithfulness. From this position we can lead others and not be annoyed or burdened with their lack of growth or persistent resistance to the Lord. We were them. We are them. As we invest in the lives of others we must always be aware of our own need for Jesus and the people God has chosen to lead us. None of us arrived at the position of salvation on our own. We all received the truest form of love from Jesus himself, and the spirit of His love at work in those who disciplined us.

Study Questions

1. Do you get impatient with the lack of progress in your groups?
2. How do you handle repeated questions?
3. In what ways can you reset to the cross of grace, love and faithfulness as a leader?

-Training to Sustain

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

Leading someone to faith in Jesus Christ means little unless it prepares them to lead others to Christ as well. We are charged to make disciples of all nations. To become a Christian and not be prepared to make new disciples opposes the Great Commission.

It is all too common that an individual completes a course on discipleship, yet does nothing with what they have learned to perpetuate the cycle by leading others. Many new disciples of Jesus don't know how to further the spread of the gospel. Leaders must seek to provide opportunities for others to lead their own Bible studies. This opportunity gives members the experience of witnessing the Holy Spirit use and lead them directly according to God's word.

The way to remove the emphasis on yourself as a disciple maker is to let the people you're leading to go out on their own and experience the process of making disciples for themselves. Often, this is when the most growth occurs. Disciple-making is our charge according to the Great Commission. God wants all people to hear the message, and when the message gets bottlenecked by a particular person or group the gospel is obstructed and not allowed to do what it is intended to do: save the lost and bring new life to those who are perishing. As followers of Jesus, we must invest in making disciples who are equipped and desire to lead others to faith in Jesus.

Study Questions

1. Are you currently making disciples? If the answer is no, what is stopping you?
2. Are you leading others to encounter the leading of the Holy Spirit? If the answer is no, what is stopping you?
3. Are you leading others to understand God's word more? If the answer is no, what is stopping you?

Session Four: The Bible and the Church

A Relationship with Christians

- Christians and Diversity

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Matthew 7:24

Before His death Jesus prayed to the Father that His disciples would be one. His desire was that they be united in their testimony of who He is. Bible studies provide a unique opportunity for fellowship and the pursuit of God's voice beyond a particular church or denomination. God's Word creates a middle ground for all people and establishes a level ground of sinners saved by grace. At the Cross and in the Word, there is only one dividing line: those who call Jesus Lord and those who do not. Bible studies may be composed of different backgrounds, ages, churches and nationalities.

When we live dictated by affiliations rather than Jesus, we limit the scope of God's provision for us to receive. Is God leading you to study and share the word with the people currently in your life? Accept those particular people as God's provision and lead to the fullest with those people in that capacity and pray for new life and harvest. However, if God is leading you to study the word with people outside of your comfort zone and circumstances unknown and more challenging, do not resist Him and go where he is calling you.

Study Questions

1. Do you engage regularly with members of other congregations or people outside of your comfort zone? If so, to what extent?
2. Do your Bible studies and fellowships include a variety of ages, backgrounds and ethnicities?
3. What are obstacles to diversity in your Christian community?

- Christians and Transformation

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

God gave us His one and only Son and He gave us His word to illuminate our path in pursuit of Him. He did not give us teams to divide and confuse the body of Christ, the Church. In pursuing God's Word in our fellowship we commit to the following objectives: to reveal God's Word directly to the needs of the specific people present and see the Holy Spirit refine, transform and create in us a new heart and new life in the name of Jesus.

When we prioritize study and meditation on God's Word we come to see the greater desire of God's heart to unite us and not divide us. The Word does not speak to us as members of different groups, but it identifies us collectively as sinners and children in need of rescue and love from our Father in Heaven.

With this direct approach of prioritizing the Bible in our fellowships members learn that without being honest about one's faith or doubt, nothing will change for the better. Instead of acting well and moving forward in an elaborate Christian pantomime, there must be freedom to ask hard questions, seek answers and be healed. We all are lost and need to be found. We are all sick and need to be healed, and we can't move forward until we acknowledge it.

Study Questions

1. How does your Christian fellowship emphasize and prioritize the power of scripture to transform?
2. How does your Christian fellowship emphasize and prioritize personal transformation?
3. How can your church affiliation become an obstacle to your dependence on Jesus?

- Christians and Knowledge

²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24:27

We are strengthened by meeting in groups. We learn and grow in our groups. However, in the end, the only thing that matters is if the groups are being used to further draw you closer to Jesus and give your life more completely to Him as Lord and Savior. The purpose of the groups is to draw people to Jesus. As the members overcome their doubts and grow in their faith in Jesus they will draw closer to and value one another all the more as the body of Christ.

If the group you lead is not resulting in Christ being glorified in the group members, something is wrong. Please stop, pray, assess and ask God for how this can begin to happen in your group. If you are attending a group and your faith in Jesus is not developing or growing but your wealth of knowledge about Him is, something is wrong. Please stop, pray, assess and ask God how this can begin to happen in your group and in your personal life. Christianity is all about Jesus. If your Christianity is about anything else, it is not the Christianity that came into the world in Jesus and not the Christianity that the Apostles pronounced to the world.

Ask the right questions in your groups ("How can I understand the Gospel of Jesus better?"). Seek the right target ("How is the text revealing Jesus and how can I be changed?"). Knock on the door trusting that you are being welcomed into life and away from death. God desires to know you and to see you face to face.

Study Questions

1. Do your groups often spend more time talking about the members more than Jesus or the Bible? If so, why?
2. What role does sharing personal testimony have in your groups?
3. Do you feel equipped to support/encourage a person that has not yet found a personal faith in Jesus?

- Christians and Unity

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Luke 12:6-7

"Church Member": a term that means many things to many people.

"Member" means to be joined together, united and supported.

Many church members feel that the pastor or leaders of the church address the needs of the church members only in the collective and not in the personal. While a church congregation does have collective needs that the pastor must address, there must be a system in place so the members feel joined together, united and supported by other members and the overarching leadership. This is no simple task, and it is understandable why many churches struggle here. But difficulty is not an excuse.

A church must be aware of the members, care for the members and address the members personally. Not because this is how church is designed, but because that is how God created and designed His relationship to us in the beginning, resolved in Jesus on the Cross and continuing with the Holy Spirit. Simply knowing peoples' names and acknowledging them directly and specifically has a profound impact. Many members are not used to someone addressing them directly and taking their personal faith and faith issues seriously. This is why small group discipleship can have such a significant impact for the Church as a whole.

A small group or Bible study allows for the direct attention to the specific needs of members. In this setting, "their" needs become "our" needs. While we may have significant differences and perhaps attend different places of worship on Sunday, for that precious time, we are the Church.

Study Questions

1. Are you a member of a church? If so, how do you define "member"?
2. How would you identify/describe your Christian family?
3. How active are you in supporting the personal needs of others in your Christian family? Explain.

- Christians and Success

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4:16-17

Leading small groups and Bible studies gives us the unique perspective of witnessing the common ground of believers in their collective needs, beliefs and experiences. In the fellowship of believers, members realize that they are not alone, that beyond the walls of their circle of friends or church exists a world of other believers who have more in common with them than they perhaps thought.

Since Bible studies have no commitments except to Jesus and the Gospel, people feel comfortable to share their experience with the Word of God without fear that the commitment they have made to their Sunday congregation is being threatened or challenged. Church members can return to their respective churches weekly with the knowledge and testimony that there are other people in the body of Christ who can empathize with their faith life.

God accomplishes far more when we allow Him to open doors than when we weld them shut or avoid walking through them out of fear. God desires unity and growth, and by prioritizing small groups and the study of the Bible, the body of Christ grows stronger in faith in Jesus Christ alone. The body of Christ is designed to be diverse, complex and stronger together. This is the design, and when we accept and pursue that design we find that we are always stronger together than we are apart, and the common ground to all of us is the head of the body, Jesus Christ.

Study Questions

1. Are you comfortable attending Bible studies/events at other churches?
2. Is the lack of numerical growth in your fellowship a point of frustration for you?
3. As a leader, are you quick to hold onto members or are you quick to let them go?

Session Five: A.S.K.

A Relationship with the Bible

⁷ *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Matthew 7:7-8

A.S.K (Ask, Seek, Knock) is a Bible study aid to help us focus our study by asking the right questions, seeking to find the right things and knocking on the right doors (see the end of this booklet for a copy of the A.S.K. Guide).

Studying the Bible on our own or even in a group setting can be challenging. We want to have freedom to discover how the Bible speaks to us personally, but often this can lead to a Bible study that emphasizes us more than it does God. Or, perhaps we believe that a Bible study is only effective with the help of a pre-packaged Bible study guide with question prompts. This, however, can lead to a Bible study that may become rigid, boring, unrelatable and too much like a class. Reading the Bible is a discipline that must be practiced, but if we fail to learn the fundamentals to guide our practice we will build grand structures of faith and knowledge upon unstable foundations.

A.S.K. provides us with the security of structure while not inhibiting the freedom of the Holy Spirit to move and the living Word to speak. A.S.K focuses our study of the Bible by directing us to find Jesus in the text, lessons from the past, conviction of sin and strength in unity as we study the Bible. This guide is merely a tool to start the dialogue with God. It is not a checklist. It is a framework to be used in order to make the most of our time with God as He communicates to us what He wants us to hear.

Here are the steps to a typical A.S.K. Bible study:

1. Pray that the Holy Spirit guide you to a specific chapter in the Bible.

2. Choose a chapter from the Bible. A typical group cycles through choosing from the five sections of the Bible (Genesis-Esther, Job-Song of Solomon, Isaiah-Malachi, Matthew-John, Acts-Revelation).
3. Read the chapter out loud with each member reading a verse in turn. This eliminates passivity in the group members.
4. Respond to the four sections of the A.S.K. guide one at a time. This usually involves reading the question, reflecting and answering the question silently, and sharing responses with the group.

What follows here is an in-depth breakdown of the A.S.K. guide, going deeper into each of its four sections.

- Jesus in the Text

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24:25-27

Too often we make worship about us. We read the Bible searching for something that evokes a personal response, something that relates to ME. Or, we read the Bible searching for advice for a specific situation. Both of these positions are wrong.

The purpose of Christianity and the purpose of reading the Bible is to discover Jesus as the absolute center and focal point of everything. When we read, the question should not be, "Where am I?" but, "Where is Jesus?" Unfortunately we have been conditioned to think of the Bible self-centeredly, and we have not been taught the Bible holistically. The reason we meet to study the Bible is to grow in our faith in Jesus. Period. In order to accomplish this goal we have to look for Jesus. Once we have found Him, watched Him, listened to Him, we can step out and follow Him. Jesus told the disciples that the entire scriptures pointed to Him and we must take this promise and the subsequent revelation literally and seriously.

- Lessons from the Past

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

1 Corinthians 10:11

The study of God's Word is not only to point us to Christ, but also to instruct us so that we are aware of the dangers of sin before it overtakes and consumes us. The Gospel is good news, the

culmination of a comprehensive and detailed collection of Scriptures that gives us the blueprint for the human condition of sin that has remained unchanged since the beginning. The Scriptures exist to teach and correct us, and we must seek to be taught and corrected.

It doesn't take long when reading the Bible to find someone who fits your story, to find how your Biblical doppelgänger failed to listen to the living God and was overtaken by sin. In Hebrews we are told that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. It is this collection of witnesses that we learn from in the Bible, the same witnesses cheering for us not to make the same mistakes they did. We must be honest with ourselves: we are slow learners and resistant to change. However, if we study the Bible as disciples of Jesus Christ we must appeal to God to show us our own tendencies in the lives of those who preceded us. We must call upon our Savior to show us a new way and to share in His victory over sin.

- Conviction of my Sin

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:12-13

Once we've established Jesus as the focus of our study, and that our role in a study is to be taught and corrected, we can progress to the point of personal reflection and introspection. This reflection and introspection is not primarily an opportunity to share how much we know, how much we've grown or how much we've been through.

Rather, it must reveal the wound caused by the double-edged sword of the Word at the time of reading. This is present tense conviction.

This is the active and living Word interacting directly with our sin. The Word knows more about us than we are willing to admit, and if we are sincerely studying the Bible to hear from our God, then what He decides to say might make us uncomfortable.

The Bible is filled with love, mercy, encouragement and compassion, qualities balanced by an honest reflection of our sin, pride, disobedience and injustice. When we are confronted with the depth of our sin we experience the enormity of His grace and love, that Christ shed His blood for us.

Allowing the Word to convict us does not shame us into humiliation or condemnation. The Word convicts us so that we can more fully understand the love God has for us, that He has not abandoned us, and that hope in Jesus is real. It reveals the grace He has for us, that He is willing to forgive us and help us change. Conviction does not lead to condemnation in Christ. Conviction leads us to grace and from grace we find the deepest love there is.

- Strength in Unity

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Romans 12:4-5

The Bible convicts us of our weakness and shortcomings not to separate us from Christ, but to unite us with the body of Christ. As brothers and sisters we study the Bible, seeking the voice of our Father. In doing so we observe the Father revealing to us our collective sins and not merely our personal sin.

Sharing our weaknesses with one another is the means to gaining strength as the body of Christ. Our unity against sin is the means by

which Christ strengthens us all by His blood. It is not our ethnicity, age, culture, profession, race or socioeconomic status that binds us together. It is the blood Christ shed for us that unites us to one another. His blood gives us access to our eternal hope amidst present suffering. His blood strengthens us as the body of Christ, increasingly able and ready to defend ourselves against the works of Satan, claiming victory in the name of Jesus for the sake of His Church.

We are called to be united and joined to one another in all circumstances with the sole purpose of glorifying God and reflecting the beauty and power of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

A.S.K. Guide

Scripture: _____

Luke 24:25-27

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

How does this scripture point to or relate to Jesus?

1 Corinthians 10:11

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

What warning or instruction is found in this passage?

Hebrews 4:12-13

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

How does this scripture reveal sin in my life?

Romans 12:4-5

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

How can we apply this scripture to strengthen our unity as the body of Christ?

The content covered in this booklet is an extension of
Mobile Word Ministry which can be found at:

www.mobilewordministry.com

If you would like Nathan to come and lead the *Relational
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