



Basic Doctrines: Community

iFOLLOW

Walking with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

Curriculum Development: The iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition curriculum development was lead by the **Center for Creative Ministry**. **General Editor:** Monte Sahlin; **Assistant Editor:** Debbonnaire Kovacs; **Directional Advisory:** Brad Forbes, Carole Kilcher, Ceri Myers, Cesar Gonzalez, Clayton Kinney, Curtis Rittenour, Dave Osborne, Dave VanDenburgh, Gerry Chudleigh, Jane Thayer, Jerry Thomas, John Appel, Jose Rojas, Kim Johnson, Nicole Chao, Paul Richardson, Rich DuBose, Shasta Nelson, William Sutton; **Pastoral Advisory:** Claudio Consuegra, Collette Pekar, Dave Hutman, Don Driver, Fredrick Russell, Jerry Nelson, Jesse Wilson, Leslie Bumgardner, Loren Fenton, Rebecca Brillhart; **Unit Authors:** Alberto Valenzuela, Althea Pineda, Corienne Hay, Debbonnaire Kovacs, Ed Dickerson, Gianluca Bruno, Gil Bahnsen, Greg Nelson, Jack Calkins, James Whibberding, Karen Collum, Monte Sahlin, Norma Sahlin, Pam Splawinski, Patty Ntihuka, Reinder Bruinsma, Ryan Bell; **Additional contribution** by Maria Ovando-Gibson; **Additional editing:** Dave Gemmell, Meredith Carter; **Graphic Design:** Mind Over Media; **Layout:** Paul D. Young; **Web Development:** Narrow Gate Media.

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Basic Doctrines: Community

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize that when one follows Jesus they become part of His family
2. Gain a sense of belonging within a local expression of the body of Christ
3. Find ways to do all you can to maintain unity in Christ within your fellowship

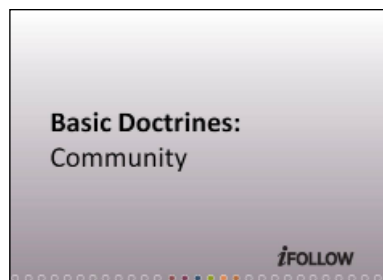
Content Outline

- A. God Wants a People in the Old Testament
- B. God Wants a People in the New Testament
- C. Being Part of the Family: Privileges and Responsibilities
- D. The Body of Christ

Background Material for the Presenter

The Bible can be viewed as a record of God's efforts to create a people who would serve as living advertisements for Him instead of for themselves. In Genesis 11:1-4, the builders of the tower formed a community with the sole intention of self-exaltation. In fact, their comments sound unnervingly similar to the language Lucifer (Satan) and the worst character of history such as Hitler and Stalin. "Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves."

Genesis 12:1-3 captures the birth of a community of an entirely different order. God calls out Abraham and promises, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you." (Verse 2, NIV) To that wonderful promise, God adds, "I will make your name great." Notice God's ultimate objective in making of Abraham a great nation: "All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you" (Verse 3). God-created communities of faith are always designed to bless the world.



Here's something to consider. Christians have preached for centuries that the reason God did not destroy Satan to begin with was because to do so would have created a government of fear. True, certainly. However, what if the deeper reason is that **God does not govern in order to lift Himself up, and so does not use violence to further His authority?**

There are two kinds of community: The one that exists for "Number One," or, at best, follows "enlightened self interest," recognizing that what is good for the group may sometimes be ultimately best for the Almighty Me, and therefore should be pursued. And there is the community that exists for the purpose of blessing others. Which do we really, at heart, want to belong to?

When God began His new community by calling Abraham, He stated clearly that it would be the latter. However, it didn't take long for Israel to lean most on its "favored status" as "chosen ones," and use that to exclude instead of bless. The Old Testament begins from that time to be a record of God **trying** to create a community that would be faithful to Him and His principles of unselfish compassion and justice, and of the people's insistence on being the other kind of community instead. But God did not give up. There were always the faithful few who did "get it," who spent their lives in the effort to build this different kind of community, which would praise God and bless all who came within its reach.

"In the fullness of time," He fulfilled the promise made at the gates of the Garden of Eden, to send a Redeemer. This Redeemer, God's one and only Son, came as Jesus Christ of Nazareth to **show** instead of **tell** what God meant His community to be like.

Lo and behold, although Jesus' followers did have problems with continuing to live as if they were part of a community that served itself, His ways began to work. Slowly but surely, a group of people who went all out for God and His lost grew. The faith of this fragile new entity was severely tested when its Leader was murdered. They first fled and hid out (watching out for Number One) but they gathered their courage to wait and watch for the Holy Spirit, and the miracle happened.

It's worth noting what made these few unlikely souls able to wait and watch for this miracle. **They were together.** We cannot fully know until we get to heaven what the first days were like. Were they united right away, or did they argue first? Did John blame Peter for running away? Did Thomas say, "I told Him so! I said he should stay away from Jerusalem!"? (John 11:16) Did the rest all scold Thomas for not believing?

No matter how they began, they stuck together, and here's how they ended: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place." (Acts 2:1, KJV) The Spirit arrived in full force, and a new thing was born on the earth.

This new community, while not perfect, supported each other through thick and thin, through persecution and famine and argument over procedure, and "were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared ev-

everything they had.” (Acts 4:32)

What was this community’s foundation? “‘Upon this rock,’ said Jesus, ‘I will build My church.’ In the presence of God, and all the heavenly intelligences, in the presence of the unseen army of hell, Christ founded His church upon the living Rock. That Rock is Himself,—His own body, for us broken and bruised. Against the church built upon this foundation, the gates of hell shall not prevail.” (White 1898, p. 413)

That’s a community worth belonging to! But it isn’t easy. With the privileges, just like any other area of life, come responsibilities.

Privileges and Responsibilities

In any community, the most important privilege is that of simple belonging. The problem is, this leads to all kinds of maneuvering and list-making and gate-keeping behavior in order to make sure the Right Ones belong and the Others are kept out. (Each one, of course, considers himself or herself to be one of the Right Ones, and has his or her own definition of Others.)



The community we call the Christian church is not immune from this. Acts 6 is a good example. It tells the story of how the Greeks worried that Jewish widows were getting favored treatment, while their widows were being left out. There are plenty of other examples, not only in the Bible but in your own congregation. If you want to join a community where this sort of thing will never happen, good luck, but it won’t be one where there are any humans!

However, the Christian community does have armor and weapons to use against these misguided notions. If we can just remember it’s the community of God, and exists to bless “all the families of the earth,” we will be better able to recognize and defeat in ourselves the desire to puff ourselves up and defend “our rights and privileges.”

The fact is the privilege of belonging to this community means the privilege of being a servant, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Honest members seek to serve God first, and others second, trusting that God and the other members of the family will care for their needs. And, insofar as the members of the community are all trying to do this, the needs of all will be met, and fear will recede.

Perhaps no other passage in Scripture captures the essence of unity and equality that ought to exist in Christ’s body, the church, than that in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27: “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. . . As it is, there are many parts,

but one body. . . . Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

All members are important no matter how seemingly insignificant their contribution to the body of Christ. Indeed, Paul argues that “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” (1 Cor. 12:22, 23, NIV) Do we really take this seriously in our church communities, treating the “weaker” ones as though they are “indispensable” (God does think so, remember) and giving “unpresentable” members “special modesty”? Do we give “greater honor” to those who lacked it, “so that there should be no division in the body”?

The privilege of belonging to this community does not go to those who follow the regulations list the best, or look the nicest, or manage to finagle their way to the front. The privilege of belonging goes to those who humbly follow the Head, bending down to wash the feet of others.

And with those privileges come responsibilities. There **are** rules, no getting around it. Those who wish to be members in good standing of this community must do their best (which entails leaning on each other a lot) to live up to that Great Standard of self-sacrificing love. What do we do when someone fails to do this? Galatians 6:1-3 admonishes, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

Question: Which sins are most denounced in Scripture: sins of dress, action, diet, music styles, or sins of oppression, lack of love, unkindness, ignoring the poor, pointing fingers and backbiting?

Throughout the Bible, God has had a chosen people. In the Old Testament, it was the Israelites. In the New Testament, it was the early church. Today, we are God’s chosen people. And we have the responsibility of being good stewards of God’s church.

The believers in Ephesus, to whom Paul addresses his letter, were normal, everyday folk who had come to know Christ as Savior and were learning how to make Him Lord of their lives. In Ephesians 4:1-13, the apostle Paul implores them to “live a life worthy of the calling” (vs. 1, NIV) they have received by being patient, gentle, unified, prayerful, humble, and accepting of the roles assigned them by God.

Paul rightly understood that to “prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the

body of Christ may be built up” (vs. 12, NIV), required a spirit of sacrifice. This spirit of sacrifice was one way of preparing God’s people for “works of service.” (Ephesians 4:12, NIV)

What would happen in our congregation if together we fervently engaged in the responsibilities of membership listed below?

“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:14-22)

“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1 Corinthians 16:2)

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

Outside the church: Another unit in this series focuses on Christ’s mission and the mission of the church. For now, it is important to note that God’s purpose for creating the church is not the people inside, but the people outside. Any congregation, if it is an authentic expression of God’s purpose will be focused on the service it can do for God in the world. The same principles described above go double for those outside our group.

We must remember that the purpose of God’s called and chosen community is to live a life of blessing to all within reach.

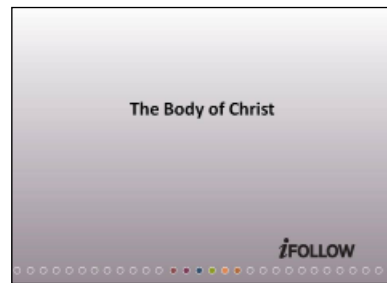
We must remember that those outside the church are also diverse, have different gifts, all given by God, whether they are presently being used for Him or not, and that the weaker are to be given the greatest honor, the less prepossessing to be treated the most special.

We must remember most of all the Great Standard. Love First, No Matter What.

We can expect to be argued with, sneered at, denied, and belittled. Not, usually, by those we are working with outside the fold, unfortunately. We can keep on bending down and washing feet. They won’t all come. Judas didn’t. They may say they will and then betray you and/or God. Peter did. (I have; have you?) God has a plan for each of them. It might include a plan that **you** would love them as no one else ever has. It may include great jobs they will one day do for God. Or it may not. Our job is to minister today, and love no matter what.

The Body of Christ

There are several passages which refer to the church community as “the body of Christ.” We have looked at one, 1 Corinthians 12. Here is another: “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 who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:4-8)



It seems that the church is doing better, in recent years, at understanding the fact that each has a different part to play in God’s work. The thing we still tend to often forget is Who is the Head. The definition, determining, and ultimate use of one person’s gifts are not up to the pastor, conference official, or conference president. They are up to the one and only Head, Christ.

It is certain that these leadership roles are also given by God, and do have a leadership role to play. God says leaders’ jobs are for equipping the saints for work, therefore seminars to define and determine someone’s gifts, small groups for training people in the use of them, and accountability partners for continuing guidance and support have important roles to play. But ultimately, the choices are up to God and the individual, and we might bear in mind that the God of the Bible tends not to call the ones we would expect, to do the jobs we would have predicted!

Each part of the body has its purpose. It is up to each one to make a lifelong study of where he or she fits in the body of Christ. It is up to the group together to study the constantly changing ways that the different parts work together. Most of all, it is up to the group together to prayerfully determine what the Head thinks they ought to do in order to work together more effectively.

All that diversity, accepted, nourished, and honored, strangely enough leads to unity. Real unity, not lockstep conformity.

Ephesians 4:13 summons God’s disjointed body to a beautiful end: “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (NIV) that the body might “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV). If this is the glorified end that God envisions for His church, then Jesus alone is the means to that end. He is the Way!

But it is critical to bear in mind that our God-given diversity ceases to be a blessing and becomes a curse when Christ is made subordinate to the mores of our cultural heritage

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and practice. We need to remember, not only to refrain from trying to do Christ's job as Head of the church, but also to let Him do it! That is, we must act as He asks us to, study the way He did things and imitate them, and meanwhile, stick together. If my brother thinks I may be giving more power to the culture with which I am surrounded than to God, and he lovingly says so, it is up to me to listen, to take the concern to God and ask for clear sight, and to be ready to change my actions if necessary.

The primary unifying element in the church is Jesus Christ. This unity thrives on support and encouragement of one another; a church with deep divisions can be doomed. In a culture of mutual support and love, even if I decide not to take the advice of my brother, he may be able to continue to love and pray for me, because he knows I heard him, and he knows God will continue to lead us both. We will both be saved from causing a community breakdown if we both honor each other and God.

As members of the body of Christ, we have the privilege of serving Him as a church family. We must strive to remember our purpose and maintain true unity in Christ. God-designed communities of faith were created to be a blessing—both to themselves and to the world.

Dwain met Gladys at the funeral of her granddaughter. Later he sought out an opportunity to encourage her and get to know her better. They talked about her granddaughter's untimely death, but then the conversation turned when he asked her about the changes she had seen in the area in which she had lived her entire life.

"Son," she began, "I've seen more changes than I'd like to see. I remember when you could walk the streets late at night and never worry. I remember that my mother and the other women would take care of new mothers when they brought their babies home. Adults would look out for kids, and kids would respect adults. People cared about one another."

Then with resignation in her voice she added, "It's not like that any more."

What Gladys was lamenting was a loss of community. As she spoke, it struck Dwain that God created His church to meet just such a need.

Which will it be? A community dedicated to serving self, or one dedicated to blessing "all the families of the earth"?

Handouts in this Package

1. Participant Notes



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Additional Resources

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Discussion Questions

1. Share a memory of a time when you experienced the healing power of a loving community.
2. How does Jesus' statement that we are the light of the world inform our understanding of the role we are to play in the world?
3. What are some of the problems Jesus had in His struggle to unify His disciples?
4. List three ways in which your local church can work in tandem with a church of another cultural heritage to serve the wider community.
5. What can we do to expose unbelievers to the joys and blessings of belonging to God's community of faith?
6. If Jesus has founded the church upon a firm foundation and empowered it to do His will, what then accounts for its lukewarm condition? (See Revelation 3:13-15.)
7. As part of the body of Christ, how can you do your part in spreading the gospel?
8. If Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches (John 15:1-17), what nourishment do we get from Him that might help us use our diversity as a strength instead of a weakness?
9. What can you do to promote unity within your local church?

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Group Activity

Purpose: To create a safe way to look honestly at some fears of community, and to celebrate some joys of community.

Preparation: Bring two hats or baskets, lots of identical slips of paper or 3-by-5 cards, and pens or pencils.

Assignment: This activity has two parts. First, have each person anonymously write (preferably print) their completion of the following sentence. (You may write it on the board, but if you do, don't put it up early.) "When I am at church, I worry most about. . ." Assure them that no one will be able to know who said what, and complete honesty will be the most helpful. Tell them, "If you draw their own slip and don't want anyone to know, simply read it in a neutral tone." When all have finished, put all the slips into a hat, mix them well, and pass them out again. Each person will read what is on the slip they draw and then elaborate on what they think the person is most afraid of. No one comments on what this person says. If the person doesn't comment, ask a question or two to get them going, but if they still don't want to elaborate, just go on to the next person. Second, after all slips have been read and commented on, have the participants finish a different sentence: "What I love most about my church is ...". Continue with the activity the same as before.

Debrief: (Be sure this does not happen until the end.) Discuss the feelings and reactions to what was revealed. Are there suggestions for reducing fears and building joys? How can the community be affected, perhaps without knowing it, by these feelings?

Time: Allow two or three minutes for each person to write the finish to their sentence, another two minutes for drawing from the hat, and two minutes per person to read their slip and comment. Repeat this for the second round. The total time will be about 10 minutes per participant. Allow at least another 15 minutes for debriefing and discussion.

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Handout

Key Concept 12: Church

Theme Texts: Genesis 11:1-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 2:9-10

Concept: In Heaven we'll be part of one harmonious community. So why aren't we now? As God's children we need to practice love, acceptance and forgiveness toward each other. This is God's desire for the church.

Connecting with Scripture

Do you know everyday sorts of things about the other members of your church? Do you know their favorite hobbies? What country they wish they could visit, or have visited? What they are looking forward to the most in Heaven? You might be surprised to find out that you had a lot in common with some members and don't even know it. Is it possible that as a church we have many other areas in common that can strengthen unity?

Sharing and Receiving the Scripture

A. Read Genesis 11:1-4. This story is an example of the misuse of community. What are other examples of the misuse of community in churches?

1. People banding together to criticize the pastor
2. A handful of people thinking that they should run the church
3. Social cliques based on status
4. Members feeling they're not valued, resulting in them staying away
5. Gossiping among members about fellow members
6. Other....

B. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. If we as a church followed these words, we'd have a strong unity. What can we learn about our church from this text?

1. No one is better than another—regardless of social status or money
2. We need each person--no matter how small the contribution—to be a whole church body
3. We should never imply to another member that he or she isn't valued and needed
4. God appoints our positions according to our spiritual gifts & talents
5. It's too idealistic for a church to operate like a body
6. Other....

C. Read Ephesians 4:1-13. As members of the church body, are we all held accountable for anything? What's our responsibility?

1. I don't want to be so involved; I'd rather just attend once a week and then go home
2. We need to be humble, not thinking of ourselves as better than another member
3. We need to be patient and gentle with new members and ones who are set in their ways
4. We need to make every effort to keep unity—which might mean admitting our shortcomings
5. We're all needed to reach our full potential as a church
6. Other....

D. Read 1 Peter 2:9-10. How does this text bring us—different individuals with different backgrounds—into one family?

1. We're all children of the same God, yet sometimes we act like enemies.
2. Unity is attractive when we show the world that Christians don't have to agree on everything
3. We don't have to have the same color of skin to be family; which is attractive to young adults
4. We'll be unified in Heaven, so we might as well start now
5. Complete unity isn't necessary. We just need to be respectful toward each other.
6. Other....

Applying the Scripture

Choose one of the following options and work on a solution. If the opportunity arises, share your solution with someone else.

Option 1: Do you have an idea what factor might be keeping your church from being fully unified? Do you have any ideas that might help with the situation? Make a plan.

Option 2: Write down the positive things that unify your church now. Share these encouraging thoughts with the congregation. You might put it into an open letter to the church to be posted where all can read it. There is great value in such encouragement.

Option 3: Be unified as a congregation and plan a way to show God's love to your community. Make a plan, promote it well, and celebrate your success.

Valuing Scripture in Your Life

A. Are you and/or other members keeping your church from being unified? Do you need to talk with those persons? Do you need a mediator? Make a commitment to God to call and make an appointment with that person before the day is over.

B. This is between you and God, so be honest. Is there a person or group in your

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church you quietly discriminate against? Maybe it's someone of a different color, a single parent, or someone with a shady past. Ask God to give you a genuine love for them, seeing them as sisters and brothers.

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