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Disciplines

Year 1

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Discussion Guide

Year 1

Disciples

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Discussion Guide

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

Acknowledgements

This study is part of *Disciples*, a comprehensive multiyear faith formation program for adults.

The first year of *Disciples* consists of five studies of five weeks each:

- Follow Me
- Called
- Created
- Crafted
- Commissioned

Subsequent years will build on this foundation to help churches produce whole-hearted disciples of Jesus Christ.

Supplementary materials for leading and participating in this study are available at www.GrowDisciples.org.

We gratefully acknowledge the following source on which this study and this series are based: *The Bible's Teaching on Discipleship* by David Holwerda, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. This comprehensive, yet concise theological work surveys and collates both Old and New Testament teachings on the topic of discipleship. It is not in print but we encourage you to read it. It is available without cost online at www.GrowDisciples.org.

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ISBN 978-1-59255-405-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Introduction

Every time we witness the baptism of an adult or a baby in our congregation we know we are witnessing more than a simple celebration of promises being made or faith being professed. If we give our imaginations and hearts some room to reflect on this wonderful event we begin to see how many deep assurances are given and life-changing actions are taking place. It's an assurance of sin being washed away. An individual is being joined to Christ's death and resurrection. The newest member of the universal church is being welcomed into the body of believers. The Holy Spirit hovers, ready to renew and empower. A new son or daughter hears the declaration of adoption into the family of God. But there's at least one more action taking place as a congregation celebrates a baptism: Jesus is creating a new disciple.

Usually when we picture the decision to answer Jesus' call to discipleship we imagine what it might have been like for Peter or John—we don't see it happening at a baptismal font!

We place ourselves on the Sea of Galilee minding our fishing nets when we are suddenly and dramatically called to cast them aside and fish for people. Or maybe we picture ourselves climbing down from a tree like Zacchaeus, or coming back to our true minds like the demoniac—wanting to leave behind every part of who we've been and become who we could be in the presence of such a healer and teacher. Even the quieter stories of

Word Alert

You will likely see a baptismal font as part of the furnishing of many Reformed Churches—anything from a nearly invisible wood structure with a covered bowl to an imposing pedestal with a receptacle for water. Some churches even have water flowing into a small pool, and a few feature an actual outdoor pond. Whatever the size, a visible font constantly reminds worshipers that our journey as Christian disciples begins in baptism. Some people want to be baptized by immersion—really dunked—which wonderfully visualizes the meaning of baptism. A trip to a local lake, river, or even someone's backyard pool will serve nicely.

the calling of the disciples in the gospels tug at our hearts with profound urgency and the irresistible challenge to “Come, follow me!”

Just as Jesus’ ministry began with his baptism in the Jordan, we hear Jesus’ call to discipleship in and through our baptism. Baptism is the sacrament of our identity—we belong to God who now sets us apart as freshly minted disciples. We’re not sinless and perfect by any means, but we are declared holy in Christ and set free from sin by his death and victorious resurrection. That freedom of a new identity makes it possible for us to climb down from the tree, to set aside the nets, to turn our backs on the past, and to take on the work of Christ and live according to the Spirit who takes up lodging in our hearts.

And that work is a glorious one—it is nothing less than being God’s presence in the world! Disciples are those who take into themselves the glory of God so that they can redirect that glory out into the world. Just as God once lived in the tabernacle and temple, God now lives in Christ’s disciples who offer themselves as living sacrifices. Our supreme purpose as disciples is to offer our lives on the altar of God’s love. Through our lives we offer to the world the knowledge of who God is and God’s love for all creation.

So how do we—ordinary, everyday men and women who have accepted the call to discipleship—get from who we are to being the glorious reflection of God’s presence in the world? This hardly ever happens overnight or in a single breakthrough moment. Maybe that’s why the gospel writers took such great care to share with us the story of Simon Peter. At the moment of his calling as a disciple, Jesus renames him Peter or “Rocky”—just as at the moment of baptism we are renamed “Son” or “Daughter” by God. But Simon Peter was hardly a rock of faith and commitment! Quick to question Jesus’ authority, easily distracted by issues of honor and rank, passionately opinionated, and unable to own up to being a disciple of Jesus when it really mattered, Peter was more like a sand dune than a rock. Peter was hardly even a dull reflection, let alone a polished mirror of God’s glory for much of his discipleship with Jesus.

Yet Peter’s discipleship story is exactly the journey we’re called to travel. We may start out as fearful and feeble followers, but by God’s grace the Holy Spirit will shape our lives and hone our hearts into being faithful and growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

Session 1

Created Through a New Birth

Ice Breakers

(15 minutes—give or take)

If this is a new group meeting for the first time, **take some time to get acquainted.** Distribute blank 3 x 5 cards and write down in bullet form five things about yourself that you don't mind others knowing about you. Have one person collect them and read them out loud to see if the group can guess who each card belongs to. Don't worry if you're new to the group—there's no winning or losing. The more you know or get to know about each other, the more everyone wins.

Option

If you prefer to save a tree, just go around the circle and introduce yourselves. Do include a brief, fun story of when you did something you really wished you hadn't done.

If this is a continuing group, take a few minutes to regroup. **If there are any new members, everyone should briefly introduce themselves** as in the option above. If not, invite group members to share something that happened since the last meeting that challenged or invigorated their calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We've been called to discipleship and, perhaps with only a vague idea of what we're being called to, we've answered yes. So now what? The answer to that big question leads to one of the most astonishing declarations in the Bible: "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor.5:17). The Jewish rabbis used this term to describe someone who had come from idolatry to worship the one true God. Paul uses it here to describe the even more total

transformation of a person in Christ. The Greek text literally reads, “So if anyone is in Christ: New Creation!”

We live in a new time, a new era in human history that began when Jesus completed the work of restoration between us and God through his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Before Christ: sin, judgment, and the long shadows cast by death; after Christ: grateful living, forgiveness, and the bright light of everlasting life. A genuinely new life has been created for us in Christ, and we are new creatures.

In his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg reminds us of that wonderful superhero craze of the 80s—the Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers. Within seconds, ordinary teenagers would morph into superheroes. “It’s morphing time!” they would shout as they changed into their new identities. In a sense, he points out, that’s the kind of new creation that the Bible is talking about. When we become disciples of Christ, “it’s morphing time!” We begin to morph into a new person. As Jesus told Nicodemus during a late night talk, “you must be born again.” Transformation, new birth, new creation, new life—that’s the language of discipleship.

Word Alert

Morph comes from (you guessed it) a Greek word found in the New Testament. **Morphoo** describes a radical transformation, for example, when Jesus was transfigured in glorious light before three of his disciples (Matt. 17:2) he was *morphed*.

For Starters

(10 minutes)

Ever had a time when a project you were working on—a sweater you were knitting, a bookcase you were trying to assemble, or a letter you were writing—just wasn’t going anywhere and you had to start all over again? That’s a bit like the new creation God works in us: the old “us” just wasn’t going anywhere so God decided it was time to start over. Note that

Encouragement

Sometimes others can see more clearly the ways God is creating something new in us. If you can’t name this kind of moment for yourself, perhaps you can relate how you’ve seen God at work in the life of one of the others in your group—and maybe one of them can do the same for you.

God doesn't begin completely from scratch. In fact God uses some of the same material: our personality traits, our talents, our physical DNA—but remakes us into new persons who are devoted to God. **Share with the others in your group a time or event that you now recognize God was using to “re-create” you.**

Let's Focus

(5 minutes)

Reread the introduction to this discussion and then have someone read this focus statement aloud.

New life in Christ is the big message of the New Testament. And “New Life” is one of the most popular names for churches today. But like a lot of the words and phrases we read, hear, and use, we may not really have thought much about what it truly means. “New”? Yeah, we get that. When something is new, it's bright, shiny, and sparkles with a special luster that says “I've never been used!” And all we need to do is take a deep breath to appreciate “life.” But when the Bible puts the two together, what does it really mean?

Word Search

(20 minutes)

This week we will look at several passages that describe how the new life we have as Christ's disciples is the result of our new birth. We'll start with Jesus and then move on to some of the other letters in the New Testament.

Read aloud the following Scripture passages and briefly discuss the question under each one (or formulate a better one of your own).

- John 3:1-6

What do you think Jesus meant by saying that a person needs to be born again?

Is there any such thing as a Christian who has not been born again?

What evidence do we need to know that we've been “born again”? *Hint:* Read on to verse 8.

Note: Nicodemus was a leading Pharisee (a religious scholar well-versed in the laws of Judaism) who came to question Jesus under cover of evening darkness rather than address him directly during daylight hours under the scrutiny of the crowd. Nicodemus's curiosity was genuine; he wasn't interested in challenging Jesus but in understanding him. We don't know if Nicodemus understood all the answers Jesus gave him, but we do know this: at the time of Jesus' burial, Nicodemus provides the spices and oils needed to prepare his body (John 19:39-40). Was that a signal that he too had been born again?

- 2 Corinthians 5:17

Does Paul say that we are reformed? Rehabilitated? Reeducated? Re-created? How do you understand the differences between these words? Describe what "new creation" might look like in your life.

- Ephesians 2:4-5, 10

What words does Paul use to describe the radical change that God intends for us? In your experience what does it look or feel like to be spiritually dead and spiritually alive?

- 1 Peter 1:3

Who is the midwife of our "new birth"? What event makes our beginning again possible? How does Christ's resurrection make it possible for us to be newly born?

Word Alert

A midwife is a health care provider who gives prenatal care to expecting mothers. They attend the birth of the infant and provide postpartum care to the mother and her infant. Both men and women are midwives (the term means "with woman").

Bring It Home

(15 minutes, or as time allows)

Choose **one** of the following options.

Option 1

Role-play a brief conversation in which one person is trying to explain to a skeptic what it means to be born again. You might call it the Nicodemus story for today.

Option 2

As time permits, choose from among these questions and discuss them.

Give each other opportunity to answer but don't put anyone on the spot. Not everyone is ready to toss out their thoughts.

- Some Christians make a distinction between being an “ordinary” Christian and a “born-again Christian.” Often they're referring to person who has had a dramatic experience of conversion. Is this kind of dramatic story the only way in which we can be born again? What was your experience like?
- What parts of us are new as a result of our new life in Christ? What evidences of new life do we see in ourselves?
- How can we describe our new life to those who have not yet experienced it?
- New can mean *novel*, *recent*, *pristine*, or *inexperienced*. How do all of these meanings of the word describe our new life?

Option 3

Some new births *are* dramatic changes like Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. John Newton, who wrote the beloved hymn *Amazing Grace*, went from being a slave trader to a devout Christian as the result of the Holy Spirit speaking to him through a storm at sea. Find this hymn in your hymnal, then **read through the text and recreate John's story. Write another stanza for the song that includes your story.**

Word Alert

John Newton's conversion happened while returning to England in 1748 aboard the *Greyhound* via the Atlantic triangle route. They encountered a severe storm that threatened to overwhelm the ship. Newton awoke in the middle of the night and, as the vessel filled with water, he prayed for God's mercy. He later marked this experience as the point of his conversion to Christianity. Even as the ship limped home in need of repair, and with little in the way of provisions, Newton began to read the Bible and other religious literature and, by the time they reached Britain, he knew he was a Christian. The date was May 10, 1748, an anniversary he observed for the rest of his life. Interestingly, it took some years for Newton to realize the evils of the slave trade, and he took three more voyages on slave ships. Later he dedicated his life to eradicating the slave trade. Fully formed disciples aren't made in a moment!

Pray It Through

(10 minutes)

Take time to suggest items to pray about together. These may be items of praise, thanksgiving, confession, or request—especially issues raised by this session. It can be helpful for group members to take a minute or so to write something for which they would like prayer on a 3 x 5 card and then share it with the group. Pray in whatever way your group feels most comfortable: one or more persons praying, popcorn style, or each member praying for the person on the right or left.

Live It Out

(5-15 minutes each day during the coming week)

Re-creation is a process, as John Newton's life shows. Reflect on the ways that God is recreating you during this next week. Consider keeping a journal of moments in which you experienced new life and dead spots in your week. If you are willing, share with the group what you discern about these experiences of death and new life during your next session.

Web Alert

Be sure to check out www.GrowDisciples.org for tips and follow-up reading for this session.