



EMMANUEL

ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIP HANDBOOK

EMMANUEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIP HANDBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Do you know how I feel right now; and will feel until Christ's life becomes visible in your lives?

Like a mother in the pain of childbirth. (Galatians 4:19-20, The Message)

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 10:25)

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

What are Accountability Relationships?

Accountability Relationships are an important element of the life of any Christian, and, if Scripture and practical experience are any guide, are necessary for Christians to grow and to continue growing in Christ. As the scripture in the box above lays out, the main “job” that Jesus left for us to do (i.e., the primary means by which we glorify God and enjoy Him) is to make disciples of Jesus – by introducing people to Jesus, helping them to grow as disciples **and** by growing as disciples ourselves, in all areas of our lives. (Matthew) This disciple-making is intended to be a communal effort, with us taking an active interest in the spiritual growth of others (Galatians), and working that interest out in active, engaged relationships in which we are meeting together regularly to encourage, admonish and confess our sins to one another. (Hebrews, Proverbs and James) There are a lot of other passages of Scripture that establish this as an important part of God’s Plan for the growth of his people, but we’ve only presented a few here. Nevertheless, there has appeared in the church a “Lone Ranger” Christian mentality that is characterized by a belief that “It’s all about my personal relationship with Jesus, and all I need is my Bible and my quiet times to grow as a Christian.” It’s not necessary to cover the cultural reasons why this mentality may have developed, but we would like to point out that if one spends enough time in their Bible and in quiet times, we are convinced that the Holy Spirit will convict them that regular, accountable relationships targeted at growing in Christ are something we all are meant to be continuously engaged in.

You may have heard Accountability Relationships called two things before – “Accountability Partners” and “Discipling” Relationships. In the common terms, an accountability partnership is between Christians of roughly equal maturity, and focuses a bit more on working through struggles in spiritual growth and growth in righteousness, and keeping each other accountable for “doing” things, especially Spiritual Disciplines (which we call “Means of Grace” at Emmanuel). “Discipling” relationships typically are relationships where one Christian is more spiritually mature than the other, and they focus primarily on helping the “younger” Christian learn doctrine and grow in their Christian walk. We believe that these distinctions aren’t

necessary, and can be unhelpful. Discipling relationships that focus on doctrine without an appropriate sharing of our sins and struggles don't properly model real Christian relationships, and can lead to unhealthy spiritual dependence. Accountability partnerships that focus only on "defeating" our struggles, and not encouraging one another to grow in Christ in all areas miss Christ's continual call for us to be growing. (The reality is that there are no "mature" Christians alive on earth today. Some are just less immature than others.)

Accountability Relationships at Emmanuel are structured, intentional small group friendships whose purpose is to help their participants abide in Christ more deeply and to become more conformed to His image.

- **"Structured":** Accountability Relationships involve a disciplined commitment of time and effort. Each relationship requires *a minimum of two one-to-two hour meetings every month, although it is expected that you will meet every week.* Partnerships assume a commitment to pray regularly for each other. It is also hoped, that, whenever possible, Accountability Relationships will develop within Home Fellowship Groups. This allows for deepening Fellowship within the groups, and provides opportunities for Accountability Partners to share experiences in developing broader communities with groups of people.

Accountability Relationships also involve a structured use of time. While it is not a "hard and fast" rule that every meeting must follow the same pattern, *meetings should consistently include elements of: Prayer, Accountability, Sharing, and Study of the Word.* The objective is to enhance the conformity to the likeness of Christ of each partner through abiding in Him, and this is best accomplished through a disciplined and regular use of the Means of Grace.

Finally, it is desired that all Accountability Relationships that have not used this booklet would use and complete it. This booklet contains information and Scripture that the Session at Emmanuel believes is critical for the very basics of Spiritual formation to take place and to continue. If it seems too "basic" for you, please try to put some real effort into your study of it and its application to your specific and immediate situation, as the study of Scripture is often a deep and difficult thing that we can easily gloss over with "Christian-speak." If it seems boring, or even "too deep," remember that the Enemy is always attacking you and trying to get you to not study God's Word or to grow in your faith, and redouble your efforts to get through it, remembering that you have access to the Holy Spirit to interpret and apply the Word for you. Once you're done with the book, please study whatever you like. If you're looking for help finding something, (1) there are suggested resources in the Orchard Curriculum, (2) you can check the website www.emmanuelnyc.org, or (3) contact Scott (ssstrickman@emmanuelnyc.org) for suggestions on more materials you can use to enhance your time together. The Orchard Curriculum is a great way to guide your selection of materials, as it is designed to help you grow in Christ and to identify areas of Spiritual "malnourishment."

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Timothy 2)

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1)

- **"Intentional":** Accountability Relationships are friendships with a purpose. It is hard to grow in Christ, as Satan is continually attacking us and attempting to block that growth. Therefore, it is important to be intentional about meeting. Set a schedule that works for your group and stick to it. Commit to prioritizing your Accountability Relationship above many other things. Expect a lot of obstructions to be thrown in your way, especially early on, when your patterns are being established, and your commitment most tested. (Illness, staying up late at work the night before, schedule conflicts, cool things you'd also/rather like to do all come up. Usually in the first 2 meetings.) Choose to prioritize your Accountability Relationships over these things, even when it's painful. Pray hard against the Enemy's blocking of your time together.

Make the most of the time, for the days are evil (Ephesians 5)

- **"Small Group":** Because of the deep, personal nature of the relationships we expect to develop, the ideal Accountability Relationships are one-on-one or small groups of up to 4. This allows for the most open and trusting relationships to develop without concern for issues of "group dynamics." (The formation of larger Christian community groups is expected to occur in Home Fellowship Groups.) This could be any combination of groups. For example, two women in an accountability relationship could decide they wanted to disciple a younger (in the faith) woman, but didn't have time for a completely separate Accountability Relationship, in addition to the benefit of "modelling" a more developed Accountability Relationship to a young believer. Or, a more mature man may find one, two or three less mature believers he wants to disciple, and who he believes would get along and benefit from growing together in Christ. Or, two, three or four "mature" Christians could form an Accountability Group.

Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another. (Prov 27:17)

- **"Friendship":** Accountability Relationships at Emmanuel are not uni-directional, as if the more seasoned disciple has all the answers and the less seasoned one has none. An Accountability Relationship is a small group of friends (brothers or sisters in Christ, actually) helping each other along the same path. Because it is friendship rooted in Christian love (which we'll study in the first lesson), neither party need fear being honest about his/her own struggles. Such honesty is always crucial, for we need to see that we never grow out of our deep dependence upon Christ. If we never speak of our weakness with each other, then we are teaching that the Christian life is possible apart from Christ. Because an Accountability Relationship is a friendship, as it matures it will include laughter and celebration, tears and mourning, joy, pain and all the other things that come along with being friends.

Apart from me you can do nothing (John 15)

Confess your sins one to another, that you may be healed. (James 5)

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3)

- **"To abide in Christ more deeply and become more conformed to His image":**
An Accountability Relationship's aim is not to "complete" but to "develop". It assumes that we are all in process, that we will continue in that process until the end of our lives (and beyond), and that we are part of the process in each other's lives. We are not perfectionistic but patient with each other, bearing in mind that, if the apostles struggled with sin their whole lives long (Romans 7, 1 John 1:8), then so will we. At the same time, we are serious about nudging each other along, through honesty, encouragement, and admonition, in the right direction.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:29)

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3)

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. (Romans 7)

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1)

FAQs on Accountability Relationships at Emmanuel

1. How are Accountability Relationship connections first made?

Through a variety of means. Some will happen naturally in the context of your home fellowship group. Others may be formed at social gatherings sponsored by the church (we routinely have "Orchard Sundays" where we spend time as a congregation eating, learning about a topic of general interest, and fellowshiping; church retreats, outings, softball games and prayer meetings are also a great place to meet people). You may just meet some people at Sunday church services. Sometimes, you'll have a friend you know pretty well already. Other times, the Holy Spirit may put two people who don't know each other at all, and who are from completely different walks of life, in the same place with a conviction that they need to get into an Accountability Relationship. We'd suggest "jumping in" and seeing how it goes. Some of the members of the Session have had some of their deepest Accountability Relationships and lifetime friendships start this way.

2. What happens if the "chemistry" is bad?

Accountability Relationships are voluntary relationships, so you can end them when you want. We need, of course, to understand that chemistry is never perfect, and that one of the challenges and benefits of Christian friendship is learning how to love someone you might not ordinarily choose to befriend (especially since you'll be spending eternity with them, anyway). Often these are the most rewarding relationships and the ones in which we learn the most what it means to "not seek [our] own" (1 Cor. 13:5). If you're having trouble with chemistry or figuring out how to best proceed with dealing with issues in your Accountability Relationship, please feel free to contact Scott (sstrickman@emmanuelnyc.org) to get some "elderish" advice and counsel. He'll be happy to talk on the phone, too, if you don't want things in e-mail. Just send your phone number and an e-mail asking him to call you.

3. Are there opposite sex Accountability Relationships at Emmanuel?

We strongly recommend against it. "Chemistry" issues will be complicated enough in same sex connections! Ironically, we do believe that same-sex accountability relationships are profitable for people struggling with homosexuality. Finally, we also have found that, while marriage is certainly an Accountability Relationship unto itself, an Accountability Relationship with a member of the same sex is important for Spiritual health for married people. Please contact Scott (sstrickman@emmanuelnyc.org) if you would like to discuss any of this further.

4. What do I do in a meeting?

There are no hard and fast rules, but a pattern we've found helpful for a 1 hour meeting is:

- 1) Brief catching up – 5 mins
- 2) Opening Prayer – 5 mins
- 3) Bible Study – 30 mins
- 4) Sharing and Accountability Questions – 10 mins

5) Closing Prayer for each other – 10 mins

5. What do we study?

This is up to you. We strongly suggest you start with this book, as it lays a strong groundwork for your relationship and spiritual formation within it. Once you're done with it, we suggest you look at the Orchard curriculum, identify places for spiritual growth, and select from the resources listed there. Or, pick a book of the Bible, get a good commentary, and study it. Or, if you want more specific suggestions, please contact Scott (sstrickman@emmanuelnyc.org), and he'll be happy to help you find something.

6. Where do we meet?

Again, it's up to you. You can meet in your apartment, in a restaurant or coffee shop, in a park, at an amusement park, at the gym. Wherever you want. But, make sure you are meeting in a place where you are comfortable talking in depth about your struggles and comfortable studying the Bible and talking about theological things (that may not necessarily be very PC.)

7. What Accountability Questions should we ask in a meeting?

The questions you will ask one another will be based on what you all are going through and should be customized to your group. However, the following questions are good generic ones you can start with. The first one should always be asked:

- Did you have your Quiet Times this week? How did they go?
- Did you spend time in all the Means of Grace (Fellowship, Word, Prayer, Sacraments, Mission) this week? If not, is there excess time you spent in "entertainment" that you could redeem for spiritual growth?
- What sinful behaviours did God reveal to you this week? Have you repented?
- How are you dealing with your struggles with lust, covetousness, pride, lying, greed, etc...?
- How are you actively working to fulfil the Great Commission?
- How are you doing in fulfilling your membership vows to the church?
- How are you doing in helping bring the Kingdom of God to your workplace?

8. How "Deep" should our sharing be in Accountability meetings?

This will depend on the relationship. However, it should always be "deeper" than a typical Home Fellowship Group meeting, or discussion after church with people at lunch. As relationships grow, these conversations will naturally get deeper and more specific. It would be unwise to unload all your baggage in gory detail on your partner in your first meeting if you don't know each other well, but you should make yourself a little more vulnerable than you'd generally be comfortable with. Also, even for deep long-standing accountability relationships, you should always be wise in the amount of detail you provide in your struggles with sin, as it can serve as a "stumbling block" to your partner and you to spend too much time on the details. (It can border on "rejoicing in iniquity".)

9. Can my Home Fellowship Group double as my Accountability Group?

Not generally. Home Fellowship Groups at Emmanuel are intended to be the basic social unit of the church where new people get plugged in, people get to meet one another, and new teachers / leaders are trained and "raised up". Because of this, they are expected to have an element of transience to them, constantly welcoming new people and "splitting" when they grow too large. This means that the typical HFG meeting is not intended to get to the deep level of dealing with specific sins that the Accountability Relationship is intended to get to. While it's great for an HFG to get to this level of intimacy (and we encourage that), the HFG would cease to fulfil its primary purpose if it wasn't able to welcome newcomers or to divide if it got too large.

10. Does my Accountability Partner have to go to Emmanuel?

No. We recommend that you both attend Emmanuel because there are benefits to having both partners sit under the same teaching and being involved in serving Christ through the same church. But it isn't essential, and relationships across churches can even help facilitate connectedness across the body of Christ. We do, however, strongly recommend that you find an accountability partner who also lives in the New York area, since we find face-to-face relationships to be more fruitful.

LESSON 1:

LOVE, THE KEY INGREDIENT IN ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIPS

Purpose of Lesson

This lesson aims to establish the foundation for Accountability Relationships (we will call them ARs) in Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us. We will consider what it means that friendship is a sacrificial commitment, not a sure-fire technique. The lesson will also orient us to the other training sessions and discuss a variety of ways to cover in our ARs the material contained in them.

Before You Get Together

Please read through the following material and do the exercise.

The Right Approach:

The temptation in our highly technical and information driven culture is to assume that there is a technique for everything, including ARs. The first and most important lesson to learn is that there is no sure-fire technique for getting an AR right. This is so for the simple reason that an AR is a form of friendship and friendship involves people (not computers). People can be loving and rude, they can be accommodating and inflexible, they can be helpful and exhausting, they can have much in common with you and nothing at all in common. Real people show up late for lunch dates, or don't show up at all. Real people get mad when you are late. What all this means is that the best AR training is "on the job training", for ARs are about loving, and the only place to learn how to love is "on the job."

What You Can Expect:

- **You can expect to be frustrated.**

If you come into an AR expecting it to be easy and immediately transforming, you will probably be disappointed. We are all self-centered and therefore fundamentally incompatible ("bad chemistry" is bound to surface in every friendship). Why, we must ask, would the Bible be so full of admonitions to get along if it were natural for us to do so?

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends (Romans 12)

² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4)

- **You can expect to grow** through the frustration, provided you don't bail out. Love, like faith, grows only when it is tested.

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1)

Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. Love one another as I have loved you. (John 15)

- **You can expect help.**

First and foremost from God himself. God the Son died to make us one and prays continually that we will be one. God the Father, who loved us to the bitter end, lives by his Spirit inside us. Love will triumph in the church because that triumph has the full backing of God.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...(Ephesians 2)

²⁰"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17)

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

⁵"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15)

Secondly from the AR itself. When the apostle Paul wrote that "we are all baptized by one Spirit into Christ" (1 Corinthians 12), he reminded us that we have an enormously valuable resource in one another, no matter how young or old we may be spiritually. Whether you the more mature partner or the less mature one you can expect to benefit from an AR if you take it seriously.

How to use this booklet

You will notice that the lessons follow a certain logical order, beginning with love as the foundation (Lesson 1), moving on to making acquaintance (Lesson 2), then to handling big problems that may surface as you are getting to know each other (Lesson 3), and so forth.

We don't require that you follow this particular order slavishly. Nor do we stipulate how many meetings you should spend on each "lesson" area. For example, getting acquainted might require half a session or four sessions, depending on how much you each like to talk and how much time you set aside for each session. For another example, you may hit pay dirt when you start talking about preaching the gospel to yourself, or when you start talking about prayer, and decide to spend 2 or 3 sessions on that. You will no doubt find yourself cycling back to certain things—like the means of grace, or sharing your faith, or deciding about the future. This is OK. Friendship is, or should, be a flexible thing.

Nor should you feel pressure always to be using something from the training material. Though the aim of the material is to cover all the bases, you may well

discover something very important that is missing. For example, there is nothing at all in the training material about doing something together—like spending an evening walking through Riverside Park together handing out sandwiches and/or tracts to people, or going to a film together and talking about it afterwards. Such times can be enormously useful. In fact you should build them in as much as possible to the partnership.

There is, however, a reason for all of the lesson material. We all tend to stay in our comfort zones. We are lazy and do not want to grow into fuller disciples. Some of us love to talk about prayer, but never about sharing our faith. Some of us are very keen on private spirituality, but don't want at all to start thinking hard about the Lordship of Christ in our studies and careers. For this reason it is important that in the course of the first 6 months together you at least begin to touch on all the lessons.

Exercise

Make 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 your AR guideline and charter. Do so in the following ways:

1) Memorize it (take a couple of weeks to do this, reviewing it each day so that it gets into your system).

2) Study it first as a description of Jesus' love for you: Do this by inserting Jesus' name wherever the word "love" appears in the passage. Dwell upon each insertion for a few minutes, thinking of what it means that Jesus loves you in this way. Thank him as you go along.

3) Study it second as a description of what your love will be like when Jesus finishes what he has already started in you: Do this by inserting your name wherever the word "love" appears in the passage. Praise him for what he is doing and will finish in you.

4) Study it thirdly as a prescription of what your love should look like, as the Spirit helps you: Do this by, once again, inserting your name wherever "love" appears and then asking yourself, "What would it mean today for me to love my Accountability Partner (or some other person) this way today?" Pray, thanking Jesus for his forgiveness and asking for the faith and power to love this way.

5) Based on the description of love given in 1 Cor. 13, give your own definition of "Love" from a Biblical perspective. Notice, in particular, how it differs from the world's definition of love. How much of the "feeling" side of love does 1 Cor. 13 focus on? As you come up with your definition, consider these other passages of scripture:

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
(1 John 4:10-12)

And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. (2 John 6)

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me (John 14:21)

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

The Text of 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

When You Get Together

Read 1 Corinthians 13 aloud together and use it as the springboard for your discussion. Do steps 2-4 in the exercise together (Take your time—don't force yourselves to get through the whole exercise; you might take three meetings, one for each of the three steps). Be sure to pray together as each step directs.

LESSON 2:

GETTING ACQUAINTED

Purpose of the Lesson

The first step in any relationship is acquiring basic knowledge about each other's background, interests and dreams. This lesson will provide some suggestions on how to do this in non-threatening ways, beginning with some advice on how to tell one's own story.

Before You Get Together

Please read through the following material

What to expect and what to work on.

Most likely the "get acquainted" part of your AR will happen in its early stages (most likely the second or third meetings, depending on how many sessions you give to Lesson 1). Precisely because this is early on in the relationship you should not be looking for, or fearing, a Jerry Springer, confess all your deep, dark and private stuff sort of meeting. The pressure to do this, even in subtle form, could kill things right away. Even mature relationships don't share everything all the time: Paul tells us to speak "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs" (Ephesians 4:29), and Proverbs is full of cautionary advice about our speech. Bear in mind as well that no two of us have an identical comfort level when it comes to talking about ourselves—even about superficial stuff. The chances are that the level of sharing will therefore be uneven—and that is OK. If you are a talkative sort, you will need to lean against the tendency either to talk too much or to require (however subtly) that your Accountability Partner talk as much as you.

On the other hand, if you embark upon an AR, you are agreeing to an intentional friendship and such a friendship calls for an effort to be honest and open. If you are a reticent sort, you will need to lean against your tendency to let the other person do all the talking.

What to talk about.

1. Basic Biographical Stuff. Ask (and share) the following:
 - Where born and raised?
 - What did/do your parents do?
 - Any siblings—if so, what are they up to?
 - What did you study or are you studying?
 - What do you spend the bulk of your waking hours doing?

2. Identity and Interests. Ask (and share) the following:
- What are your hobbies and/or special interests? Why?
 - What were the one or two most formative influences in your life? A person? An event?
 - What are your career aspirations? What would be the ideal job?
 - Describe the perfect vacation (real or imagined). Why is this your ideal?
 - Describe one of your favorite films, books, plays, or pieces of music. Why your favorite?
 - What's right with the world? What's wrong with it?
3. Pilgrimage. Ask (and share) the following:
- Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?
 - If not, what do you believe and how did you get there?
 - If so, tell the story of your pilgrimage. What initially grabbed your attention? What circumstances did God use to bring you to faith? What keeps you going now? What's hard? What's easy?

When You Get Together

- 1) Discuss together the questions in the "What to Talk About" section above.
- 2) Pray together, giving thanks for each other and praying for one or two matters of concern that each of you has.

LESSONS 3.1-3.4:

KNOWING AND APPLYING THE GOSPEL

LESSON 3.1: THE BAD NEWS

The Apostle Paul wrote that the "gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16). These words promise dynamic growth in your AR, providing that you understand the gospel and know how to "preach" it to yourself and to your partner. The following four lessons are designed to help you do this. Lessons 3.1 and 3.2 review the actual content of the gospel message—the "bad news" (3.1) and then the "good news" (3.2). Lesson 3.3 suggests a way to bring the gospel to bear on an issue we all struggle with from time to time (failure). Lesson 3.4 provides some suggestions on how to talk honestly and helpfully with your Accountability Partner about the impact of the gospel on your life.

Each lesson should take about an hour. Understanding the gospel is so important that we recommend that you give four of your Accountability Partnership meetings to this series, preparing one section prior to each get together and then going over the same material when you meet.

3.1: The content of the Gospel (The Bad News)

Before You Meet

Please read through the following material, taking care to answer all the questions.

Exercise: If you have been exposed to Christian teaching for any length of time, you know that one of its tenants is that people are "sinners". What you may not know with either comfort or certainty is what that statement means, or what its purpose is. Take a moment in the space below to answer the following questions:

- 1) What does it mean to say that I am a sinner? Does it mean that I am as bad as I could possibly be? If not, what then does it mean? How do I define "bad"?
- 2) Why is it important to admit that I am a sinner? Isn't it just a depressing waste of time?

What the Bible says about the Bad News: One troubling fact about sin is that it is deceptive: It blinds us to its own presence, a reality that even non-religious people admit to when they speak of having "blind spots" (Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things"). This is so because sin has become our life environment: We are about as aware of it as a fish is aware of water. What we need to see things properly is an outside perspective—which is why God's analysis of us in the Bible is so important. Read thoughtfully through the following material, taking special note of the Bible passages.

- I) **The Fall:** Though God made a good world (think of how often "and it was good" appears in Genesis 1), we have spoiled it, beginning with Adam and Eve. The mysterious but evident result of our disobedience is that something is wrong with everything, including (and especially) ourselves. Death and frustration permeate every facet of life—work, nature, creativity, relationships, human behavior, and the human heart.

*¹⁷God said to Adam, "... you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."
(Genesis 2)*

¹²Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...(Romans 5)

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)

²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it... (Romans 8)

- II) **Problems on the surface of our lives** ("sin" with a small 's'): We consistently fall short of God's standard, and doubt this only because we draw our standards from the evening news.

- A. **Consider God's standard:** The Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and the Sermon on the Mount.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Matthew 7:12)

²⁷"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, (Luke 6)

³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. (Luke 6)

²¹"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5)

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5)

- B. **Compare that standard to the reality about us:**

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)

If any one says he is without sin, he is a liar and the truth is not in him (1 John)

⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3)

C. We don't even live up to our own standards—let alone God's.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (Romans 2:1)

D. Questions for reflection:

- 1) Recollect a recent moment when you were really angry with someone. What did he or she do that made you so angry?

Bearing in mind that the behavior in others that makes us the angriest is often the behavior that is closest to our own, take a close look at yourself (you may need a friend's help): In what ways are you guilty of the same crime?

- 2) Jesus says (see Matthew 5:21-22 above) that calling someone an idiot is worthy of the same punishment as flying a plane full of people and fuel into the World Trade Towers. Why?

List at least one instance recently when you have spoken contemptuously of someone.

III)

Problems beneath the surface: As unpleasant as our outward lives may appear, our real problem is below the surface, in the motivations ("Sin" with a capital 'S'). God sees the heart, being just as concerned about why we do what we do as he is concerned about what we do, and what he sees is not pretty. Our hearts are like a poison ivy root system: kill a bush and another one simply springs up somewhere else.

- A. God's standard:** It is not enough that we do reasonably good things. We must do them for the right reasons, and those reasons are: Love for God and people, trust in God, and undivided/constant allegiance to him. For example, if I say something pleasant to someone, but my motive for doing so is self-serving, then the "good word" is fatally compromised. For another example, if I sing "Praise to the Lord the Almighty" while at the same time I am worrying about some uncontrollable circumstance in my life, my heart's unbelief cancels out the value of the praise. For yet another example, if I win the state lottery and give it all away—but do so out of pride or in the hopes that by doing so I may oblige God to accept me, my heart has once again undone the spiritual value of the gift.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13)

That which is not done by faith is sin (Romans 14)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Matthew 22:37)

B. The reality about us. The World Trade Tower bombing, horrific and cruel as it was, is but a vivid concentrated expression, for the natural eye to see, of the mayhem and resentment in the human heart. That deeper mayhem continues unabated billions of times daily before the eyes of God.

- **Total depravity:** Theologians call this sad reality "Total Depravity". By the phrase they do not mean that we are all as bad as we could possibly be (thankfully); rather they mean that nothing we do is untainted by sin—there is always something wrong at the root of whatever we say, think, or do.

For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. (Mt 12:34)

O wretched man that I am—who will deliver me from this body of death! (Romans 7:24)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. ² The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. ³ All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:2-3)

- **Sinful vitality:** Sin is something like HIV in someone who is infected by it. It is there in the system (perhaps dormant), simply awaiting a set of circumstances for it to spring into action. That "set of circumstances" is exposure to God's Law. We are like infants who have no obvious interest in the electric wall sockets until that revealing day when our parents first say, "No!" (God's Law is like that parental word). Strangely and tragically that "No!" incites us to say, "Yes!" revealing an already present and deeply imbedded hatred of God and his authority.

⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment,

*deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.
(Romans 7:8-11)*

- **"Bondage of the will":** So fierce and strong is the inner impulse to disbelieve and disobey that the Bible describes it as slavery. Martin Luther called it the "bondage of the will" ("non posse non peccare", or "not able not to sin"). By the phrase he meant that, whereas we make all sorts of choices all the time, the most important choice (lovingly to align ourselves with God and his purposes, trusting in his Redeemer), this choice we cannot make. It does not lie within our power—which is why Jesus told Nicodemus (a very religious man) that he had to be born a second time, and that God had to do it.

He who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34)

*The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.
(Romans 8:7-8)*

You must be born again (John 3:7)

C. Questions for reflection

- It is wisely said that disobedience, fear, and complaining arise out of our refusal to trust that God loves us, despite all that he has done at the cross (see Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?").

Take a moment to analyze a current fear in your life. How is that fear an expression of a heart attitude of unbelief?

Do the same with a recent or present act of disobedience. With a complaint.

- The Bible often describes our heart problem as idolatry. We commit idolatry whenever we set our deepest hopes on something created—either something we have created (a business, a career, a family) or something God has created (sex, an artistic gift). Reflect on the following question: Is there anything created that either (a) I must have to be happy or (b) I cannot bear to lose (a relationship, harmony in the home, health, a job, prestige, my mind, my appearance, America, success, etc.).

Why must I have that thing—or why cannot I bear to lose it?

What effect does my preoccupation with that thing have upon my ability to love God and people?

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in

the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. (Romans 1:22-25)

- State in your own terms the meaning of the expressions "Total Depravity", "Sinful Vitality" and "Bondage of the Will".
- Recall an occasion in which you experienced within yourself the reality of one or more of these truths. What happened? How/where did you find relief and hope?
- It has been said: "If I have everything but don't have God, I have nothing; if I have nothing, but have God, I have everything." Paraphrase this statement in your own words. What makes it hard for you to believe it?

When You Get Together

Discuss together your answers to the "questions for reflection" in sections II and III above. Be sure as you do that you keep referring to the Bible texts that are cited in the material upon which the reflection questions are based. Remember that the goal of your discussion is to discover not what your perception of the human problem is, but what God's perception is.

KNOWING AND APPLYING THE GOSPEL

LESSON 3.2: THE GOOD NEWS

Introduction: The word "gospel" means "good news" and it is very good news to any who grasp how bad the "bad news" is. The "good news" comes in two parts: (1) Unconditional pardon and acceptance, and (2) Glory (or transformation and renewal beyond what we can imagine). This lesson explores both aspects of the good news and contains some questions for reflection.

Before You Get Together

Read through the following material making careful note of the Bible passages and doing the exercise at the end.

- I) **The Good News, part 1: unconditional pardon and acceptance:** God loves us more than we can imagine and has freely chosen, at immeasurable personal cost, to rescue us. He assumed our flesh as the Second Adam, living in our place the life we should live (but don't), and dying in our place the death that we deserve so that we would not have to.

A. In Jesus, God has given us a double offering:

1) First, in Jesus God died the death that we deserve, on our behalf, thus meriting for us God the Judge's pardon

- Jesus' death was an atonement—satisfying justice by absorbing the fullness of God's wrath.

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53)

³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)

²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

- By virtue of our union with Jesus, we died when he died. We have paid our debt in him. For God to judge us now would be for God to be unjust, for we have already paid.

2) Second, in Jesus God has lived the good life (loving God with all the heart... and my neighbor as myself) on our behalf, thus meriting for us God the Father's affection.

- Jesus' Life: Single minded devotion to the Father; deep and steady love for people.

⁴ One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. (Psalm 27:4-5)

³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. (John 4:34)

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22, cf. Luke 9:35)

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. (John 15)

B. Benefits and implications of God's double offering for us:

- 1) Imputed ("alien") righteousness. (I am holy with another's holiness). I am saved by good works—they just happen to be the good works of someone else.

⁹ [I want to] be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Philippians 3)

- 2) The status of children and the Spirit-given experience of adoption.

¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8)

Behold what manner of love is this, that we should be called children of God; and so we are! How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)

- 3) A proper and sufficient motive for loving people as God does.

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Summary: We have been set utterly set free (a) from guilt and (b) for love. Unconditionally accepted children, we are now free to love and serve God without the burden of having to do so perfectly (God's love for me will never depend upon my progress). Safe in God we are now also safe to love people without strings, since neither our security nor our significance depends any longer on whether people accept us.

⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10)

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

II) The Good News, part 2: glory. The Second Adam not only lived and died for us. He also rose from the dead for us by the power of his Spirit and has sent his Spirit to live in us. His indwelling Spirit is the experiential guarantee that he will fix everything, including us, beyond imagining. “Glory”, already in the works, is the place and condition where at long last nature will be in harmony, every need will be fully met, every legitimate desire fully satisfied, where we will love and be loved by others without a hint of the things that presently compromise love, where we will come to the full discovery and expression of our particular giftedness—where at last we will see and enjoy God and become like him in that experience.

Christ [is] in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is not seen. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the human mind been able to imagine what God has in store for those who love him. (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Behold, I am making all things new. (Rev 21:5)

² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall

be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

III) Exercise

1. Read Psalm 27:4-5 (quoted above) as a description of Jesus' attitude (think as you do so of Jesus in "his Father's house" at age 12 [Luke 2] and cleansing the Temple in his adult years [John 2]). Rework the psalm as a prayer to Jesus in which you praise him for being such a perfect worshiper of God. End your prayer by thanking him that he has "become your righteousness" (1 Corinthians 1:30), so that, when the Father looks at your half-hearted prayer life, he sees Jesus' (rather than yours) and therefore delights in you as fully as he delights in Jesus.
2. Read the following words from Revelation 12: 10-11: "...the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb...."
 - Make a list of the three things (attitudes or behaviors) that you feel most guilty about. Take note of the fact that the devil, your unseen enemy, is constantly ("day and night") hammering you about these things, and then tell him, "Satan, I am indeed guilty of all these things, and many more that I am not even aware of. But Jesus has paid for all of them, so you can go to Hell, where you belong!"
 - Having addressed Satan so forcefully then turn your attention to Jesus, thanking him that when he said, "It is finished" at the very end of his life, he meant that the task of paying for all your sin (known and unknown, attitude and behavior) was finished.
3. Get a hymn book and look up the hymn, "Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness". Sing it, taking special note of the fact that the hymn celebrates the double debt that Jesus has paid for you: "Jesus thy blood" (his atoning death) and righteousness (his substitute life).
4. Identify a recurring problem area in your life—a habit that you know is wrong but cannot shake, a dysfunctional relationship that troubles you, a chronic disability that gets you down and makes it hard for you to live the sort of life you know you should live. Read the following passages (all quoted above) with that problem in mind: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 1 Cor. 2:9; 1 John 3:2-3). Spend some time imagining how things will be different in this problem area when Jesus finishes his work and then pray, asking him to fill you with "living hope".

When You Get Together

Discuss together your answers to the questions in the "Exercise" section above. Take time at the end to pray through Psalm 27 in the manner suggested in question 1.

KNOWING AND APPLYING THE GOSPEL

LESSON 3.3: COPING WITH FAILURE

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Introduction: The key to coping with any difficult issue in life is to understand it in the light of the gospel—both the bad news and the good news. The following lesson takes the material from lessons 3.1 and 3.2 and applies that material to the problem of failure. It suggests how to use that material in your next session together

Before You Get Together

Read through the following "coping" plan.

Notice as you do so where the good news is being applied to the problem and where the bad news is being applied to the problem.

- 1) Expect failure and don't let it throw you.** We live in a fallen world, in which "things" (employment, studies, relationships) don't work, in which we find ourselves at times having to do things that do not suit us (jobs that don't fit our gifts, studies that have little or no bearing on our "calling"), in which, by our own twisted attitudes, we sabotage our own efforts.

By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your food. (Genesis 3:19)

- 2) Repent of your worship of success.** We must get past grieving over our failures and begin grieving over our desperate need for success—which is itself the root cause of our grief over failure. How do we do this?

- Imagine the worst-case "failure" scenario: (I flunk out, I totally botch the project I was assigned and am let go...). Then ask, "Will my heavenly Father love me any less because of this? Am I any less significant to him? Am I any less safe?"
- Replace your drive to succeed with the drive to be faithful. Our call is not so much to succeed (God is in charge of that) as it is to be faithful. In the parable of the talents (Matt 25), the first and second servants—despite the fact that their level of success is different—receive precisely the same commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; come, I will put you over much. Enter now the joy of your master."

- 3) Rejoice that your labor in the Lord is not lost.** He marks the joyful, faith-filled, hard-working failure (even if no one else does) and will reward him in the end.

Your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Your Father...sees in secret. (Matt 6)

¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Eccl 12)

- 4) **Rejoice that the Lord “works everything together for good** for those who love him and are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28)—and everything includes failure. Then take note of what the “good” is—that we should be “conformed to the image of his son” (Romans 8:29).
- 5) **Look to the hope of glory**, where we will come fully into our own—where the success/failure dynamic won’t even be an issue, where, instead, there will be only the joyful and free expression of each person’s unique glory in a world of love, acceptance, safety, and mutual delight. Let that vision control your present attitudes and behavior in the face of failure.
- 6) **Recall a struggle you have had with failure.** Go back over the above “coping plan” and apply it to your particular struggle. Pray as you do so, taking note of the Bible passages that are listed.

When You Meet

Share your failure issues with each other. Be sure as you do so that you focus on at least one of the Bible passages in the above “coping plan”. This will keep God himself in the conversation.

Pray with each other over the things that surface in the time together.

KNOWING AND APPLYING THE GOSPEL

LESSON 3.4: TALKING ABOUT THE GOSPEL'S IMPACT

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Introduction: The last lesson focused on applying the gospel to the problem of failure. This lesson offers more general advice on how to apply the gospel to life issues and on how to help your Accountability Partner to do the same. The appendix contains a list of a number of issues with relevant texts from which to choose as you plan your get together. In the event that you are unsure of which issue to address, there is an exercise at the end of the appendix section dealing with relationships that you can use. [Note: Since you have probably spent the past three sessions on this general topic, you may want to save this lesson for a future session and move on to the next section. Do whatever makes the most sense to you and your Accountability Partner.]

Before You Get Together

Read through the following material, giving special attention to the Bible passages and to the questions.

How to Talk Honestly and Helpfully About the Impact of the Gospel

A. Work off a Biblical text (some texts are listed in the appendix at the end of the lesson).

It will keep you anchored in God's truth rather than in your experience. This is important for a number of reasons:

- Your experience will never be exactly like that of your Accountability Partner.
- It will give your Accountability Partner a text to take away with him or her from the conversation—and the Holy Spirit has promised to use the texts of scripture to work transformation in us
- It will encourage you (God's Word always does)

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16)

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. (Psalm 19)

B. Think and pray about the text's application to your life

(Obviously, you must be in the habit of preaching the gospel to yourself—otherwise you will have nothing to say about the process to someone else!)

1. **Pick a real issue** in your life (a career concern, an identity issue, a recurring struggle with an attitude or a behavior that you know is wrong, a relational issue at work or in your family or with a close friend).

2. Study the text, answering the following questions:

- What does it say or imply about the "bad news" (see lesson 4.1 if you need to)?
- How have I been part of this bad news—both as a contributor and as a recipient (ask the Lord to search your heart: "Am I really that badly off apart from your grace and promise? What idols of the heart are you exposing, Lord? How have I been wounded?")
- What does it say or imply about the good news (parts 1 and 2—see lesson 4.2 if you need to review)?
- How does the good news help me: How does it motivate me, or modify my perspective, or give me something specific to cling to? Most important, how does it bring me thankfully to the feet of Jesus who is my friend, advocate, and healer?

i. ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11)

1. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! If any one is in Christ...(2 Corinthians 5:17)

2. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

3. **Think through what you are going to share with your Accountability Partner when you get together.** Remember as you do that we must never be honest simply for honesty's sake. We must rather be honest for edification's sake, that is, for the sake of the other person's betterment.

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body...²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4)

When You Get Together

- 1) Read the text aloud.
- 2) Share with appropriate specificity about the text's impact on you.
- 3) Invite your Accountability Partner to reciprocate—or at least to comment: Ask if your partner struggles with the same or similar issues; ask what your partner thinks about the passage and your grasp of its meaning. Note that you each may have thought through a different issue and passage. Be sure to give each other enough time (you may need to have a second session).
- 4) Pray together at the end.

Appendix and Exercise

I) Some Gospel Texts Bearing on Common Issues:

Relationships: Romans 12:9-21, 1 Corinthians 13

Identity and Significance: Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139, Psalm 8, 1 John 3:1-3, Revelation 2:17, John 20:15-16, 2 Corinthians 5:17

Difficult trials: 1 Corinthians 10:13, Romans 5:1-8, James 1:2-4, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

Recurring sin problems: 2 Peter 1:3-11, James 5:16, John 18:15-18, 25-27, 21:15-25, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 1 John 1:1-2:2

Anxiety: Philippians 4:4-7, Matthew 6:19-34, Psalm 46

Problems praying: Romans 8:26-27, Luke 22:31-34, Hebrews 7:23-25, Matthew 6:5-15

II) Exercise on Relationships (Do this if you cannot think of another issue)

Assume that you are having a serious relational issue with someone. Decide on the nature of the issue (an oppressive boss, a difficulty with a parent, a wound from a friend).

Look together at Romans 12:9-11 (printed below) and discuss the following (space for writing down your answers is below the text):

- What does the passage imply or teach about the “Bad News” (see lesson 4.1 for review if necessary)?
- What does it teach or imply about the “Good News” (see lesson 4.2 if necessary)?
- What does the text indicate about: (a) what sort of solution to the problem you can realistically expect; (b) what sort of attitudes and perspectives you should have as you work on the problem; (c) what you should do; (d) what role Jesus should play in your thinking and acting.

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1) What does the text teach or imply about the bad news?

2) What does the text teach or imply about the good news?

3) What does the text teach or imply about what you should do reasonably expect?

- 4) **What sort of attitudes and perspectives should you have as you seek to work on the troubling relationship?**

- 5) **What, practically, should you do?**

- 6) **What role should Jesus play in your thinking and acting?**

LESSON 4:

SHARING YOUR FAITH

The apostle Paul wrote, "How are they going to hear if there is no preacher and how are they going to preach if they are not sent" (Romans 10:14-15). The apostle Peter told us: "Honoring Christ in your heart, always be ready to give an account of the hope that is within you, but do so with gentleness..." (1 Peter 3:15). We all have unbelieving friends into whose lives God has sent us. This lesson aims at helping you and your accountability partner talk simply and clearly about your faith with those friends.

Before You Meet

Please read over the following material, being sure to do the exercise.

I) Some important principles

A. God is the Savior, not you.

He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to the Father through him. (Hebrews 7)

Not by power, not by might, but by my Spirit says the Lord. (Zechariah 4:6)

For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19)

Implications:

- Pray for your friends constantly (ten words to God for every word about God is a good ratio)
- Don't think you can argue or manipulate them into faith. Of course, seek to expose them to good arguments, good fellowship, good preaching—but don't make the mistake of relying on such means.
- Don't beat yourself up, or pretend that everything is easy for you now that you believe, in the erroneous belief that their coming to faith depends ultimately on the perfection of your testimony.

B. God's gospel, not your experience, has the power to change your friend's heart.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation, to the Jew first and also for the Gentile...(Romans 1:16)

Implications:

- Don't rely on your personal story, however dramatic it may be, as the key to your friend's change of heart.

- Don't despise your personal story, however boring it may seem, when you speak of your faith (every believing heart is a miracle of grace, regardless of how that miracle took place. (No one says, "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit" 1 Corinthians 12).
- Don't require, however subtly, that your friend's conversion story be like yours.
- Make sure you can articulate the content of God's gospel, with scripture.

C. You may not be Billy Graham, but you are still responsible to speak up when asked. The apostle Peter's admonition is 1 Peter 3:15 is to all of us—not just to those with special gifts.

Always be ready to give an account for the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15)

Implication:

- Do your homework in advance (how else can you "always be ready"). Be sure you have a coherent plan for talking about Jesus that you have committed to memory. You will not need to adhere slavishly to it every time you speak, but having an outline in your mind will help you to know what eventually needs to be communicated.

D. Jesus is always the issue, for both you and your friend

This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ...(Acts 2)

Who do people say that I am...Who do you say that I am.... (Matthew 16)

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord, always being ready to give an answer (1 Peter 3)

Implications:

- If, when all is said and done, you haven't steered your friend towards Jesus, you have missed the heart of things. It is not enough to have spoken about "God-in-general" (Paul writes in Romans 10 that "there is no other name under heaven [other than Jesus] by which one may be saved). It is not enough to have talked about life-style (in fact that topic can often be a misleading dead-end, since it can easily confuse the fruit of faith with the root of faith; it can also wrongly confuse a certain sub-culture's expression of faith with what the Bible itself says faith should look like).
- Nor is it enough to have talked about issues (many of them important) that surround religious discussions—like hypocrisy in the church, or the problem of suffering and evil, or the debate between science and faith, or Christianity and pluralism. You need to be prepared to address such issues, but must not make the mistake of thinking that they are **the** issue. Such discussions often help clear the way but they are not the way. Jesus, who called himself "the way, the truth, and the life," must at some point be encountered—particularly his claims and his character (John Stott's book Basic Christianity is a great resource in this regard).

II) Exercise:

Imagine that you have just completed a summer job or an out of town project and you are waiting to board a homeward bound plane. A co-worker whom you met during the job or project and who has come down to see you off abruptly says the following: "I have noticed something interesting about you as we have worked together and I know that it has something to do with faith. Tell me, what is it that you believe?" You have five minutes before you have to board. Write below an outline of what you would say (Don't cheat by looking to the next section of this lesson).

III) A Gospel Outline

The gospel is God's story about his costly initiative towards wayward and significant people, a story that calls for a response from us if we are to become a happy part of it. An adequate presentation of that story will always include: (1) something about God, (2) something about people, (3) something about Jesus, and (4) something about responding. The precise order of the presentation, the illustrations used, the Bible texts cited, and the applications made, will vary (compare Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 to his encounter with the woman at the well in John 4); but these elements will all be present.

A. Something about God:

- He is personal: real, knowable, loving, good (scarcily so—good like the sun is hot).
- He is infinite: above us and "nature", mysterious, not a projection of our need, not the "energy" of the cosmos.

B. Something about people:

- We are significant (love is not merely chemistry, nobility is not merely sublimated libido).
- We are deeply and pervasively flawed (our motives are always mixed; we seek to use God more readily than to worship him; we love ourselves more than others; we tend to set our deepest hopes in the gifts of God rather than in the Giver, thus reducing our nobility to servitude and our love to manipulation).

C. Something about Jesus

- Who he is:
 - ⇒ One of us (fully human, fully exposed to our trials and limits, yet without sin)
 - ⇒ God (evidenced by his claims and his goodness—the combination of which is unique in human history)
- His mission—to be our substitute in life and death:
 - ⇒ To fulfill all the requirements of human nobility and love, in our place, thus meriting for us God the Father's acceptance.
 - ⇒ To fulfill all the requirements of divine justice, dying in our place on the cross, thus earning for us God the Judge's pardon.

D. Something about responding

Merely knowing the material in A, B, and C above is not enough. We must embrace it if we are to make it our own. We embrace it by repentance and faith.

- **Repentance:** To repent means, literally, to change your mind. There are any number of things that someone might have to change his mind about—the existence of God, the knowability of God, the character of God, the spiritual deadness of one's heart, the corruption of one's motives, the full humanity (and therefore tenderness and accessibility) of Jesus, the full divinity (and therefore the authority) of Jesus.
- **Faith:** Faith always involves shifting one's deepest allegiance from someone/something other than the God of grace to the God of grace. It involves, in other words, the overthrow of idolatry: the idol might be a relationship, a dream, success, human acceptance, health, being good. When Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you" (Matthew 11), he assumes that we are already yoked to something else (something else, in other words, is harnessing our energy and directing our lives); to take on his yoke we must divest ourselves of the other one(s).
- **Repentance and Faith Continues:** Though one originally receives God's transforming life by repentance and faith, one also grows more and more deeply into that life by the same dynamic. It is not like we overthrow idolatry by one act at the moment of conversion.

When You Get Together

- 1) Take turns role playing the exercise (item II, above). In other words have one of you be the inquiring co-worker while the other gives "an account for the hope that is within". Then reverse roles and do it a second time.
- 2) Talk about a friend (or a couple of friends) whom you would like to see come to faith.
 - Why does he or she have difficulty trusting Christ?
 - What difficulties do you have sharing your faith with this friend?
 - How can your Accountability Partner pray for your friend?
- 3) Pray together for each other's friends.
- 4) If you are in an AR with someone who is not yet a believer, then simply devote your time together discussing each other's "faith".
 - Ask your Accountability Partner what he or she believes in and why.
 - Share your own faith and its reasons.

- Ask your Accountability Partner what reasons he or she has for not (yet) believing in Christ.
- Pray at the end of the session for your Accountability Partner's pilgrimage and invite him/her to pray as well if he/she feels comfortable doing so.

LESSONS 5.1 – 5.5

SURVEYING THE "SPIRITUAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

LESSON 5.1: The Holy Spirit

If we are going to help each other grow, we will need to help each other rely actively upon the Holy Spirit, the one who makes Jesus real to us. This lesson summarizes the ministry of the Holy Spirit and recommends an exercise for an Accountability Partnership meeting.

Before You Meet

Please read through the following, jotting down in a notebook anything that strikes you from the making a careful study of the passages from Scripture. Do the exercise from John 15. Spend some time in prayer, thanking the Holy Spirit for his ministry in your life, in the church, and in your Accountability Partner's life. Bear in mind as you pray that you owe every spiritual step forward, from conversion to fresh insights to good fellowship, to him.

I) The Holy Spirit

Who is he?

- He is the third person of the Trinity whom the Father and the Son send to Christians and to the church to change us by making Jesus and his work real to us. (Colossians 1: "Christ in you the hope of glory")

Where is he?

- He is in all who trust in Jesus and proclaim that he is Lord (Acts 2:38-39, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 1:27)

How do I receive him?

- By asking—by believing and receiving the gospel. (Acts 2:38-39, Galatians 3:1-2)

What does he do? In summary, he is the one who applies to our lives all that God has done in Jesus Christ, so that we are genuinely new creatures and a new people. In greater detail...

- He inspired the OT Scriptures and led the disciples into a true understanding of Christ's words and deeds, thus giving us an inspired NT (2 Peter 1:21, John 16:12-14)
- He convinces us that the gospel is true and that we need it. (John 16:8-11)

- He teaches us, opening to us the meaning of the Bible and especially the meaning of who Jesus is and what he did for us. (John 14:25-26, John 16:13)
- He assures us that we are safe with God because we have been adopted into his family. (Romans 8:15-16)
- He enables us to receive and worship Jesus. (1 Corinthians 12:3)
- He walks us through the Christian life, showing us what we need to know when we need to know it. (John 16:12-13)
- He helps us pray (Romans 8:26-27)
- He dwells in the midst of the church, motivating our love and worship, and equipping us with gifts for ministry (1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

How do I deepen my fellowship with him?

- I keep trusting in Jesus (John 15:5-8, Gal 3:1-5)
- I avail myself of the means that God has appointed for deepening that fellowship—namely FWPSM (fellowship, the Word, prayer, the sacraments, and mission).

II) Exercise:

Spend 30 minutes doing a careful study of John 15:1-13 (text below), answering the questions that follow. Note as you do that, though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned once in the passage, it is all about cultivating his presence: for it is only by him that we are able to dwell in Jesus and Jesus is able to dwell in us.

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

- 1) How important is it to Jesus that we "bear fruit" (list the references to fruit bearing—how many are there? How much fruit does Jesus envision ? What happens to fruitless branches)?
- 2) What is the nature of the fruit Jesus is looking for? (See Galatians 5:22-23)
- 3) Does "bearing fruit" make us pure—and therefore savable (notice vs. 3)? If not, what does (vs. 3)?
- 4) Though the notion of fruit-bearing runs straight through the passage, we are not once commanded by Jesus to bear fruit. What, instead, does Jesus repeatedly command us to do (see v. 4 and following, through v. 7)?

Why does this command make sense, given Jesus' claim to be the vine?

What does it mean to you that Jesus, by his Spirit, is your "vine"?
- 5) How, according to Jesus, do we remain in the vine?

vs. 7 (two ways)

vs. 10, 12 (one way)
- 6) What helps you to remain in Jesus in the ways specified (vs. 7, 10, 12)? What hinders you?

When You Get Together

Read John 15:1-13 together.

Discuss the above 5 questions together, focusing especially on questions 4 and 6.

Pray together, thanking Jesus for the gift of his Spirit.

SURVEYING THE "SPIRITUAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

LESSON 5.2: Fellowship As A Means Of Grace

The Holy Spirit comes to us through the means that he has appointed. To say that we want to cultivate a relationship with him, without making diligent use of his appointed means, is like saying you want to get to know a certain person and never showing up at the times and places you have agreed upon. To change the metaphor, if the Holy Spirit is the great river of God's transforming life (and he is), the means of grace are the banks over which we must continually cross if we are to get into the river. The means of grace are not gimmicks or magic tricks by which we twist the Holy Spirit's arm into helping us (the Spirit is a Person, not a computer program). Nevertheless, he sends them to us with his love and earnestly desires to meet us in them (as James puts it, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you"). To use yet another metaphor, the means of grace are like a balanced diet: we need all of them at our daily table, or we will become malnourished. If, for example, we only pray but never read the Bible, our prayers will gradually become driven solely by our needs and point of view—which means, in effect, that prayer will become a conversation with ourselves rather than with God.

Among the means of grace, the chief are fellowship, the Word, prayer, the sacraments, and mission (FWPSM). This lesson focuses upon fellowship and includes an exercise to be used before and during your time together.

Before You Get Together

Please read over the material in sections I and II below. Using a notebook write down any reflections and observations that arise from the Bible passages in the material.

Please also do the exercise in Section III.

I) Fellowship as a Means of Grace

A. The need for fellowship rests in the nature of God, in whose image we have been made.

- Broken and dysfunctional relationships hurt us so much because community reflects ultimate reality—the trinitarian nature of God himself. "Love" did not evolve. Nor did love begin when God made people, as if God were lonely and made us in order to have friends. Love has always been, rooted in the triune being of God: "In the beginning was the word; and the word was with God and the word was God."

"Within God's very nature is a divine 'rhythm' or pattern of continuous giving and receiving—not only love, but also glory, honor, life...each in its fullness. Think. God the Father loves and delights in the Son (Matt.3:17), Jesus receives that

love and pleases the Father (John 8:29). Jesus honors the Spirit (Matt. 12:31) and the Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son (John 16:14). Each person in the Trinity loves, honors and glorifies the other and receives love and honor back from the others...There is never any lack." (John Samaan, Servants Among the Poor Newsletter)

- So committed is God to building community that he described Adam's loneliness in Genesis 2 (even in an unfallen world) as "not good" and arranged, through a revealing drama, for him to have a friend who was like him ("a helper suitable" means a friend corresponding to).

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." ¹⁸ The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.²⁵ The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2)

When Adam first sees Eve he breaks into song, putting the issue in positive form: Not only is it not good to be alone, but also it is wonderful to be together.

*"Scripture could not underline better the degree to which solitude contradicts the calling of humanity"
(Henri Blocher, In The Beginning)*

"Man will not live until he loves, giving himself away (vs. 24) to another on his own level" (Derek Kidner, Genesis).

B. The marks of healthy fellowship are defined by Trinitarian love.

- Each person of the Trinity gives himself fully to the others and opens himself fully to the others; yet none is lost in the others. This is mysterious (one God in three persons), a continual dance of mutual self-giving that reveals rather than hides or diminishes the glory of each of the givers.
- Mutual love and honor flow from shared dignity (No second class citizens in the Trinity).
- That shared and equal dignity is embraced by each member of the Trinity with respect to himself and is conferred upon each member of the Trinity by every other member of the Trinity.
- Love and honor are given and received, but not taken. ("Let another man praise you and not your own lips").
- This mutual giving of love and honor is continuous.

C. The proof and hope of the gospel is seen in how well we love each other.

Father, may they be one, as you and I are one, so that the world may know that you sent me. (John 17)

- Jesus came not only to reconcile us to God, but to reconcile us to each other. The frustrated longing for a new world order, where everyone loves and lives together—a longing reflected in every utopian scheme, in the UN, even in the twisted visions of radical fundamentalism—is met by Jesus.
- When we live separately from one another, as isolated and solitary pilgrims, or when we live together dysfunctionally as a church, we deny half the gospel.

Summary: Christian fellowship is not a take-it-or-leave-it personal option. It is commanded by God, secured by the cross, and prayed for by Jesus as the answer to the human race's desperate need for community. The church is "God's chosen people", destined to outlast every social organization on earth, destined even to outlast the earth itself.

II) Why we need Christian fellowship.

- **For self-discovery:**

Other people not only challenge our selfishness and explode our fantasies. They also bring things out of us that we did not know were there. 1 Cor. 12:7 teaches that my gifts are "for the common good", which means that they exist not primarily for me, but for you. Significant aspects of who I am, therefore, will remain hidden until the presence and needs of other people draw them forth.

"In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity. I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charlie is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline (i.e., from Charlie) joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him to myself now that Charlie is away, I have less of Ronald" (C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves).

- **To build each other up**

We need each other's encouragement in the life's discouragements and in spiritual warfare. We need each other's confessions of weakness and sin so that we won't think that we are alone in our struggles. We need each other's experience in suffering and deliverance so that we know we are not alone and help is to be found. We need each other's gifts, insights, and perspective so that we can be taught and strengthened. We need each other's prayers. We need each other's loving admonitions to keep us honest and obedient.

We need each other's worship so that we may be helped to look away from our problems to Jesus.

Confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Blessed be the God of all comfort who comforts us in our afflictions so that we may in turn comfort one another with the comfort we have received (2 Corinthians 1).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you...admonish one another. (Colossians 3:16)

Do not forsake assembling together but consider how you may spur one another on to love and good works. (Hebrews 10)

III) Exercise

Spend 30 minutes in Colossians 3:12-17 (Text below) and answer the following questions.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

- 1) What activities comprise the picture of fellowship in this text?
 - Which of these activities are routinely absent from your fellowship life (from your Accountability Partnership)? Is this a problem? Why/why not?
 - Which are present?
 - What inhibits the activities that are not a routinely part of your fellowship experience? How might you include them more?
- 2) What attitudes are you encouraged to hold in your fellowship life?
 - Why do you suppose the writer highlights these attitudes in particular?
 - Have you found a strong need for any of them recently? If so, why?
- 3) Notice how prominent Christ is in the picture of fellowship. List the graces or benefits of Christ that appear.
 - Why is Christ so vital to healthy fellowship?

- Think specifically of how his grace, or forgiveness, or word, or peace has helped you over a "fellowship hurdle" recently.

When You Meet

- 1) Talk briefly about FWPSM in the light of the opening statement at the head of this lesson (it might help to read the statement together). Which of the means of grace are you most comfortable and regular in? Why? Which do you struggle with the most and why? Map out the next 2 or 3 meetings, agreeing on which of the means of grace you want/need to focus on first, which second, and so forth.
- 2) Read the Colossians passage together.
- 3) Discuss together the questions in the above exercise, being sure to talk about the final bullets in both Q 2 and Q 3.
- 4) Pray together.

SURVEYING THE "SPIRITUAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

LESSON 5.3: The Word as a Means of Grace

Please read again the description of the means of grace at the head of section 5.2.

This lesson focuses upon the Bible as a means of grace and includes an exercise for you to use before and during your time together.

Before You Get Together

Please read through the material in Sections I and II below, and do the exercise in Section III.

I) The Bible is food—a frequent metaphor

¹⁰³ *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Psalm 119)*

The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. (Psalm 19)

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. (Isaiah 55)

Implications:

- Food is essential to life. It gets used up by living; we die without it. The realities of life (trial, worry, conflict) draw the nourishment of the Scriptures out of us. The relentless and voracious activity of evil unseen forces gobbles up the good stuff.
 - ⇒ Therefore we need to be in the Bible daily (The person who does not do this is like the child who says, "But Mommy, I don't need peas any more; I ate them last month!")
- Food is of a variety of sorts, and we need a balanced diet to be healthy. A relentless campaign of misinformation sours the food even as it goes in and feeds us an imbalanced diet (so that all we "eat" is chocolate cake, or all we eat is peas).
 - ⇒ Therefore we need to be in the whole Bible (not just favorite parts) regularly.

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. (Revelation 12)

² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2)

II) How do we feed ourselves?

A. The Big Picture: We look for Jesus and his reign (present and coming), for he alone can plant the life of God in us and he alone can restore what is damaged in our world by applying the word of God through the power of the Spirit.

Any approach to Bible "feeding" that misses this is fundamentally flawed. It is moralistic, privatized, self-help religion, not the reality that God intends for us and our world, and not what we need. A key passage: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3)

2 Timothy 3:14-17 is crucial to our feeding on the Word for a number of reasons:

- It reminds us that the whole Bible is about Jesus—more specifically about the wisdom of God that is to be found through faith in the Messiah ("holy scriptures"—v. 15— refers to what we call the Old Testament).
- It promises to change us ("to equip us for every good work"—see vs. 16-17), but only as we discover in Scripture God's "wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"—v. 15).

B. Texts showing that the whole Bible is from and about Jesus

- Jesus Messiah, by his Spirit, spoke in the prophets.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they

were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. (1 Peter 1)

- Jesus Messiah is the central focus of the Word of God

³⁹ You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5)

²⁰ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1)

- Jesus Messiah, by his Spirit, teaches us the Word

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11)

- Jesus Messiah is the King of the kingdom. What God is “up to” in the world, he is (and has been) “up to” through his anointed one.

⁶ “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.” ⁷ I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession ⁹ ... Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2)

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10)

. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1)

The Point: We must therefore learn to read all the scriptures “Christologically”—i.e., in a way that brings us to the Messiah through the help of the Messiah so that we may trust him, adore him, and serve his purposes. We must ask, every time we crack the pages of Scripture:

- "Lord Jesus, by your Spirit, show me how this text can make me 'wise for salvation through faith in you.'"
- "Lord Jesus, change me; but do it by showing me God's wise way of salvation through this text. Increase my understanding of and trust in you."
- "Lord Jesus, show me through this text what you are doing, or what you will do, to fix the world. And show me how, by the power of your Spirit, I may be a part of that great renovation."

C. A Practical Example: Finding Christ in the Psalms

Knowing that the Spirit of Christ was himself speaking in the prophets (1 Peter 1:10ff), we can often benefit immensely from seeing the primary speaker in the Psalms as the Messiah:

- We get to catch a glimpse of his perfect worship and obedience, which covers our deeply flawed worship and obedience
- We gain insight into how his sufferings felt and into how he struggled to be faithful to the heavenly Father.
- We gain insight into the wonderful love that exists between the Father and the Son.

Here is what to do:

- (1) Read the text as if it is Jesus' words, asking the Spirit of Christ to teach you;
- (2) Imagine Jesus reading the text and processing its meaning in the light of his sense of mission.
- (3) Ask, "What event(s) in his life (during his earthly ministry, before it or after it) and/or what attitudes of his heart do these words reveal or allude to?"
- (4) Ask, "What insight do these words give me as to how it felt/feels for the Messiah to do the work God gave him to do on behalf of the world?"
- (5) Ask, "What do I discover through these words about the quality of the relationship that exists between Jesus and the Father, and therefore of the quality of the relationship with God into which I am invited through my union with Christ (see John 17)?"
- (6) Ask, "How do my answers to the second, third, and fourth questions increase my appreciation for who Jesus is and what he did?" "What reasons do I discover for trusting and loving him more?" "What, in practical terms, would it mean for me to love him more?"

III) Exercise

- Reflect on your own experience in Bible reading:
 - What makes it hard to sustain the discipline; what makes the discipline easier

- What makes it hard to find Christ in your reading.
- Open to Psalm 119:33-40 (text below) and study it following the pattern found at the very end of section II above.

³³ *Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end.*

³⁴ *Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.*

³⁵ *Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.*

³⁶ *Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.*

³⁷ *Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.*

³⁸ *Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.*

³⁹ *Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good.*

⁴⁰ *How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.*

When You Get Together

1. Talk about one another's ups and downs in Bible reading. Share both difficulties and practical advice. Talk especially about the importance of meeting Christ in all the Bible and growing in faith because of that encounter.
2. Read Psalm 119:33-40 together and discuss it in the light of the Christ-focused exercise at the end of section II above.
3. Pray for each other.

SURVEYING THE "SPIRITUAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

LESSON 5.4: Prayer as a Means of Grace

The Holy Spirit comes to us through the means that he has appointed. To say that we want to cultivate a relationship with him, without making diligent use of his appointed means, is like saying you want to get to know a certain person and never showing up at the times and places we have agreed upon. To change the metaphor, if the Holy Spirit is the great river of God's transforming life (and he is), the means of grace are the banks over which we must continually cross if we are to get into the river. The means of grace are not gimmicks or magic tricks by which we twist the Holy Spirit's arm into helping us (the Spirit is a Person, not a computer program). Nevertheless, he sends them to us with his love and earnestly desires to meet us in them (as James puts it, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you"). To use yet another metaphor, the means of grace are like a balanced diet: we need all of them at our daily table, or we will become malnourished. If, for example, we only pray but never read the Bible, our prayers will gradually become driven solely by our needs and point of view—which means, in effect, that prayer will become a conversation with ourselves rather than with God.

Among the means of grace, the chief are fellowship, the Word, prayer, the sacraments, and mission (FWPSM). This lesson focuses upon prayer and includes a Accountability Partnership exercise to be used before and during at GP get-together.

I) Some Basics about Prayer

- We aren't very good at it; but we have help.

Don't feel bad if you find that your prayer life is not very good. If the apostle Paul admits to having trouble praying, then we are in good company. The temptation, upon discovering how poorly we pray, is to give up. And this we must not do. We must and can draw immense encouragement from knowing that our prayers are borne aloft by Jesus' prayers (Hebrews 7, John 17)

We do not know how to pray as we should. (Romans 8)

He always lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7)

- Our prayers are not always answered—no matter how mature we may be.

Thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12)

- Prayer is our privilege as sons and daughters.

Important implications: Prayer is not a gimmick or a formula for getting things done. It is a vital part of a relationship between God and us.

There is power in prayer to change the world and to change people (prayer gives us access to the Creator and the Sustainer of all things), but "getting things done" (even spectacular things) is not the most important thing about prayer. The chief aim of life is to know and enjoy God (John 17:3, "You shall love the Lord your God with all ..." Philippians 3 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...." Psalm 27 "I thing I ask, and this will I seek", Psalm 73)

Then your Father who sees in secret will reward (Matthew 6:6)

- It is our responsibility as God's change agents in the world.

We are a "kingdom of priests" (1 Peter 2), which means that we have been appointed by God to "rule" in the earth using the means for ruling that priests use—principally prayer.

All things by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving (Philippians 4)

Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

II) Different Types of Prayer

There are at least four different types of prayer. A helpful acrostic to keep track of those types of prayer is ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication

- **Adoration:** The least "natural" to us—since it is totally God-focused. When we adore, we tell God how great he is. We honor and praise him because of who he is.

*Holy, holy, holy—Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory...
(Isaiah 6, cf. Isaiah 40)*

- **Confession:** Honest self-disclosure in the light of who I am supposed to be according to how God designed me. This is the "I'm sorry", "I admit it", sort of praying. Confession is the "key" that unlocks healthy and authentic relationship between God and us and between our friends and us. A life without confession is a lie—it is a life in isolation and confusion because I am not dealing with and presenting the real me.
 - Some things to be wary of: Confession is not an end in itself. We don't "tell all" simply for the catharsis of having "told all". We confess so that we can receive forgiveness and move on. Some people draw their identity from being bad; they are never more "happy" in a twisted sort of way than when they are telling God and everybody else how bad they are. Such people are denying God's purpose for people—which is that we should stop flailing about in the mud and start living out the meaning of the new life that Jesus had planted in us by his Spirit.
 - Nor do we "tell all" in hopes that by telling enough and feeling badly enough about it we can somehow twist God's arm into accepting us. God's acceptance is not the issue (we already have it—acceptance has already been

accomplished by Jesus Christ, and for us to try to earn acceptance by confession is for us to spurn the fact and value of what Jesus has done). We confess to God, rather, in order to restore the experience of fellowship with him, which we forfeit when we are hiding something from him.

- We do not "tell all" to shock and manipulate people. Confession is not the "Jerry Springer Show". When we confess to God in the presence of other people, we must always take thought to what is edifying for the people who hear us (Ephesians 4—...but what will build up those who hear). Certain people are too young spiritually to be able to handle our darkest secrets. Some weak people might even be drawn to the sins we confess if we are too descriptive.
- We tell all so that we can be real, and so that the cross can have real meaning to us. Jesus only died for real people, with real names and real problems. When Jesus cried, "It is finished" at the end of his life, he meant that the task of paying the debt for every sin (thought, word, deed— commission, and omission) of every one of his beloved sheep was finished. We confess so that we can lay hold with specific thanks to the specific work of Jesus.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)

Confess your sins one to another that you may be healed (Hebrews 5)

- **Thanksgiving:** Thanksgiving is more natural to us than either Adoration or Confession. Whereas in adoration we tell God how wonderful and beautiful he is in himself, in thanksgiving we tell God how grateful we are for the specific things he has done for us. A helpful exercise from time to time is to take pen and paper and start to itemize God's benefits in the form of a thankyou prayer: "Lord, thanks for..."

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Bless the Lord, and forget not all his benefits...(Psalm 103)

- **Supplication:** Supplication is the sort of prayer that is most natural to us. It is the sort of prayer in which we cry, "Help". The Lord's Prayer is a great model for this sort of prayer since it covers a huge amount of ground—starting with the big picture ("Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"—such a prayer encompasses everything in life—law, governments, education, personal issues, justice issues) and moving on to all our basic personal concerns (basic physical needs, the need for forgiveness, and the need to be kept from evil).

1 Timothy 2

Ephesians 3

III) Getting Better at Prayer

- **Practice.** Praying, like any other skill, improves with practice. There is simply no better (or other) way to learn how to pray than to pray. It is like learning a new language. You just have to start talking.
- **Modeling.** The Bible is full of prayers. We can learn from Abraham (Genesis 18), Moses (Exodus 15), Hannah (1 Samuel 2), David (1 Chronicles 29:10-12), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-53), Daniel (Daniel 9:1-19), Mary (Luke 1:46-55), Jesus (Matthew 6:5-15; John 17), Peter and the Apostles (Acts 4:23-31), Paul (Romans 11:33-36, Ephesians 3:14-21), and the angels together with the saints in glory (Revelation 5:8-14).
- Perhaps the best place to look for model prayers is the psalms, for they are nearly all prayers of one sort or another.

Before You Get Together

- Read Psalm 23 aloud, changing the pronouns so that it is spoken **to** the Lord rather than **about** him ("O Lord, you are my Shepherd. Therefore I don't want anything. You make me lie down in green pastures...").

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

*⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

*⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

- With pen and paper create 4 categories: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Rework the various phrases in Psalm 23, making different ones into different types of prayers, and then jot down you modified phrases into the appropriate category. Be specific with the realities of you own life.

- **Illustration**

Adoration: I worship you O God that you are a righteous God who leads people like me into the paths that please you (vs. 3)

Confession: Lord, I confess that I am too bent on success to lie down in the green pastures (vs. 2). I don't want the rest you mean for me to have. Last Sunday I worked on that project right up until it was time to go to church—I arrived late and I was either distracted or asleep for most of the service. My work has become a god to me.

Thanksgiving: Thank you, Jesus, for feeding me in the presence of my enemies (vs. 5). Today, when my boss wailed on me because I had not finished the estimate that was due, you gave me tremendous inner peace; I knew that you loved me and that I was safe. Thanks as well, Lord, that despite my terrible preparation for church on Sunday you did speak to me very specifically during communion, reminding me that you died to pay even for my poor worship practices.

Supplication: I pray for our church, and for the folks in my Home Fellowship Group—Anoint us with your Holy Spirit (vs. 5b). Increase our love for Jesus, for each other, and for ____ who comes to our group and is asking all sorts of great questions about you.

- Spend some time praying (5 or 10 minutes), using Psalm 23 and the notes you have taken down as a guideline for your praying. Try to pray all four sorts of prayers.

When You Get Together

- Talk together about how you used Psalm 23 as a template for your praying. Share what the psalm led you to confess, how it reminded you of Jesus' love and led you to thanksgiving and adoration, and, finally, what particular requests it directed your heart to make to God.
- Pray together, using Psalm 23, or one of the biblical prayers listed under "Modeling" in Section III above as a template for your praying. As you do so, discipline yourselves to walk through the 4 different types of prayer. Begin with adoration, and then spend a moment in confession (this could be silent prayer), then on to thanksgiving, and finally supplication.

SURVEYING THE "SPIRITUAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

LESSON 5.5: The Sacraments as a Means of Grace

Among the means of grace, the chief are fellowship, the Word, prayer, the sacraments, and mission (FWPSM). This lesson focuses upon the sacraments and includes a Accountability Partnership exercise to be used before and during at GP get-together.

I) Some Basics about the Sacraments

A. The precise meaning and use of the sacraments has been a subject of much discussion and controversy for at least 1500 years. Some of the biggest issues:

- Do the sacraments contain in inherent power to change us? (Protestants say no)
- Are the sacraments necessary for salvation? (Protestants say no)
- Must faith precede baptism? (Protestants disagree; the PCA says no. We practice and honor infant baptism at Emmanuel, though we do not require it of the children of non-officers)
- Precisely how is Jesus present in the Lord's Supper? (Protestants dispute the Roman Catholic claim that Jesus becomes physically present at a certain point in the celebration; many Protestants maintain, nevertheless, that Jesus is spiritually present in a mysterious and heightened fashion)

B. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in 17th Century England, and subscribed to by ministers in the PCA, summarizes the basics at EPC well. Below are excerpts.

Q. 92: What is a sacrament?

A: A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

Q. 91: How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

A: The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue (i.e., power) in them, or in the one who administers them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in those who by faith receive them.

Q. 93: Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?

A: The sacraments of the New Testament are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Q. 94: What is baptism?

A: Baptism is a sacrament in which the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit signifies and seals our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and of our commitment to be the Lord's.

Q. 95: To whom is baptism to be administered?

A: Baptism is not to be administered to any who are out of the visible church, until they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of those who are members of the visible church are to be baptized.

Q. 96: What is the Lord's Supper?

A: The Lord's Supper is a sacrament in which, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ's appointment, his death is shown forth; and the worthy receivers are...by faith made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.

Q. 97: What is required for the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?

A: It is required of those who would worthily receive the Lord's Supper that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience, lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.

Relevant Bible texts

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ... ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11)

²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3)

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Matthew 3)

⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. (1 Corinthians 3)

¹³ *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. (1 Corinthians 12)*

¹⁹ *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28)*

²⁶ *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. ²⁷ And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; ²⁸ For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Matthew 26)*

⁴ *Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6)*

²⁷ *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Galatians 3)*

³⁸ *Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*

³⁹ *For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call. (Acts 2)*

¹¹ *In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: ¹² Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2)*

²⁸ *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. ²⁹ For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. (1 Corinthians 11)*

¹⁶ *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?*

¹⁷ *For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. (1 Corinthians 10)*

⁵ *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Corinthians 13)*

C. Some Observations About the Sacraments

- The sacraments don't save us (the point of the answer to Q. 91); nevertheless they given to us, and commanded of us, by Jesus, and we therefore ignore them at our peril. If you have never been baptized you should be.
- It is not necessary to be baptized after you believe, as long as you were already baptized in the name of the Trinity. Infant baptism is a real baptism; but it is incomplete. For it to be completed, repentance and faith need to be added—but more water is unnecessary.

- Baptism signifies many things (some of which are listed in the answer to Q. 94); it functions as the door in to the visible church, where the other means of grace are to be found (this is implicit in the answer to Q 95).

This is one of the reasons that we do not, as a rule, do private baptisms; and it is why, when we do an infant baptism, we ordinarily require that at least one of the parents be a member of EPC; it is, furthermore, why we baptize only those who choose to join our membership).

- We must take care not to come to the Lord's Supper unthinkingly (the point of the answer to Q. 97); its meaning is too profound.
- At the same time we must not deprive ourselves of the sacrament because we are not good enough, or do not feel holy enough. What makes us "worthy" of the Lord's Table is the deep acknowledgement that we can never be worthy of what Christ did for us. Not to come because we are unworthy is arrogantly to deny the sufficiency of what Jesus did for us in his substitutionary life and death (the answer to Q. 96 underscores that we are rescued by grace through faith, not by our merits).

II) Helping your Accountability Partner to Engage More Fully with the Sacraments

Before You Get Together

1. Do a personal inventory on the function of the sacraments in your own life.
 - Have you been baptized?
 - If not, what should you do about it?
 - When you take the Lord's Supper, which presumption are you more apt to be guilty of:
 - The presumption of thoughtlessness (taking it all for granted).
 - The presumption of trying to make yourself worthy.
 - Make a plan for better preparation next time.
2. Read through 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 and make a note of one verse that particularly strikes you.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³² When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

- Write the verse down—repeat it at least three times
- Ask yourself: "Why did this verse grab my attention?"
- Ask yourself: "What should I do or be to work the thought of this verse more fully into my life?"

When You Get Together

- Talk together about the function of the sacraments in your lives—about problems in both understanding and practice. Share the results of your own inventory. Encourage each other talk to a pastor or elder about any confusions.

- Look together at 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 and share the results of exercise (2) above.
- Pray for each other.

LESSON 6:

SURVEYING THE "VOCATIONAL FORMATION" LANDSCAPE

Some of us have difficulty discerning how we fit into God's plans for the church and the world. Some of us have never thought about the importance of linking our faith to what we do for a living. This lesson will present ways of challenging one another to be "holistic" disciples. It will also provide some resources for figuring out who we are and how we fit in to the scheme of things.

I) Understanding "Calling"

- A. Calling is personal.** We live our lives with and before a Person. Discerning my call, therefore, is not a simple matter of taking a vocational aptitude test to find out what I am good at and what we like, and then finding a job somewhere that more or less fits. It is, rather, a matter of working out the meaning of my relationship to the wonderful and wise Person who made me, sustains me, and died to redeem me. God "calls". And we, like the prophet Isaiah, answer, "Here I am Lord", or like Mary, "I am your servant; may it be done to me according to your word".
- B. Calling is holistic.** That is to say, it involves all that I am. Jesus said, "If any one would be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever seeks to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."
- It is a grave mistake to divide our lives up into the "sacred" and the "secular", as if certain parts of my life (prayer and Bible study) or certain types of callings ("full time Christian work", the Pastorate) have God's special attention, while others do not.

Abraham Kuyper was four years prime minister of the Netherlands, ten years a pastor, ten years a member of Parliament, seven years in the upper house, twenty years a professor at the Free University of Amsterdam, forty-two years chairman of his political party, and forty-seven years an editor of a daily and weekly newspaper. Two revealing statements:

"My calling is high, my task is glorious. Above my head hangs a crucifix, and when I look up there it is as if the Lord is asking me each night: 'What is your struggle next to my bitter cup?' His service is so exalting and glorious."

"There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me.'" (Os Guinness, The Call, pp. 164-165)

C. There are at least two aspects of calling—or two callings—primary and secondary.

- **Primary calling:** To God in Christ. We are all called into relationship with God through his beloved Son Jesus. Jesus said, "Come to **me** (not, "Come to **a career/task**") all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest." The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that the "chief end of man" is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever". Jesus prayed, "This is eternal life (i.e., this is the heart of living, now and always), that they should know you and the one whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Primary calling is the foundation upon which all other calling is built. Without it, secondary calling degenerates into lifeless idolatry—the pursuit and worship of self in the context of work.
- **Secondary calling:** This is more specific to the individual. It has to do with the special and unique "name" God gives to each of us, a name that Jesus promises to whisper in its fullness to each of us at the end of history (Revelation 2:17). We discern secondary calling by asking such questions as: "What am I good at?" "What do I love to do?" "What do other people acknowledge me to be good at?" and "What opportunities and responsibilities do my life circumstances present me with? (Called "providence").

D. Discerning and living out one's calling is not necessarily easy. This is so for a number of reasons:

- We live in a fallen world marked by oppression and injustice. It is rare that we find work that perfectly matches how we are wired. (Genesis 3:19)
- We ourselves are fallen and therefore prone to idolatry. We are drawn easily into worshipping our callings, or to worshipping the fruits that may come from the pursuit of our callings (i.e., the praise of people, or the accumulation of power and possessions). It is virtually impossible to enjoy and use our God-given gifts simply (as an expression of our delight in the Giver and of love for people), which means that the fulfillment of our secondary callings constantly threatens our primary calling.

Henry Ford, when asked, "How much is enough?" answered, "A little bit more".

Singer Marlene Deitrich kept and frequently played a recording in which each cut featured the applause she received from a different concert she had sung.

E. Christ is at work now, by his Spirit, to fulfill God's calling (both primary and secondary) in us. While the full discovery, expression,

and enjoyment of who we are must await Christ's return, we can expect in this life the beginnings of these things.

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in you to will and to work according to his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12)

Christ in you the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27)

"Oh Jenny! When I run I feel God's pleasure" (Eric Liddle)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. For the whole creation eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:18-19)

For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose...to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:28,29)

II) Discerning Your Secondary Calling

A. Assume that all of life is holy. Do not assume that your love for something "secular" (music, math, finance, drawing, teaching, leading, etc.) is an unspiritual love. Remember, what makes "work" spiritual or unspiritual is not the work itself (unless it is morally offensive to God—like being a Mafia hitman), but other things (especially motives).

B. Remember that you are a steward of your life. All of life—all my time, all of my ability, all of my relationships, and all of my resources—is given to me by God in sacred trust. I am not free to make of my life what I want to make of it. I am rather made free by Jesus to make of my life what he wants to make of it.

Thou art the Potter/I am the clay./ Mold me and make me/ in thine own way.

Whatever the vessel,/ Grant me to be/ Used in thy service/ To glorify thee.

You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will put you over much. Come, now, and enter the joy of your master." (Matthew 25)

C. Examine your motives. Ask, Why am I pursuing this particular direction in my life?

- Some inadequate reasons:
 - 1) Because my parents want me to. (I must distinguish between honoring my parents—which is good, and simply acquiescing, without serious reflection, in their view of what makes my life valuable).
 - 2) Because I want to make a lot of money. (It is not wrong to be financially successful— Abraham became very wealthy. It is wrong to make the acquisition of wealth—or power, or security— the principal reason for choosing a career).
 - 3) Because I want to make a name for myself. (It is not wrong to earn respect for hard work; but it is dangerous to make success of this sort the principal reason for working hard).
- Some better reasons (four ways of saying "yes" to God's call):
 - 1) Because I love it. (We may call this "internal calling"—the motivations of the heart).
 - This is the way that we say "Yes" to the *way the Lord has wired our hearts*.
 - 2) Because I am good at it—and others tell me so. (We may call this "external calling" and it helps to provide an objective basis for discerning the stewardship in life that the Lord has given me.)
 - This is how we say "Yes" to the *abilities the Lord has given us*.
 - 3) Because it is worthwhile.
 - This is how we say "Yes" to the *things that the Lord values*. (Philippians 4:8)
 - 4) Because I must, in order to be responsible to people (both to those I love and to the society where God has placed me). (In a fallen world, where needs are many, we will not always get to spend the bulk of our time on the sort of life tasks that ideally suit us; we may have to be patient in the name of love. Parents must often forgo or postpone career fulfillment for the sake of their children)
 - This is how we say "Yes" to the *circumstances that God has presented us with*.

*Consider Jimmy Stewart's character in "It's a Wonderful Life".
He kept missing his "big chance" to get away from his
hometown, only to discover in the end that his loving and
sacrificial choices had a huge and positive effect.*

'Tis almost 14 years since we were united [in marriage], but not more than half that time we had the happiness of living together. The unfeeling world may consider it in what light they please, I consider it a sacrifice to my country and one of my great misfortunes.'(Abigail

Adams writing to husband John about the price of public service—a price they willingly paid for many more years).

I had it in my heart to dissuade him from going [to serve in congress] and I know I could have prevailed, but our [nation's] public affairs at the time wore so gloomy an aspect that I thought that if ever his assistance was wanted, it must be at such a time. I therefore resigned myself to suffer some anxiety and many melancholy hours for this year to come."
(Abigail Adams writing to a friend about the personal cost of public service)

D. Take note of the opportunities that present themselves to you and do something.

- The best way to discern the broader future is to do the obviously obedient thing that presents itself today. (God cannot steer a boat that is not moving through the water).

III) Exercise for Accountability Partnership

Before You Get Together

- Read through the material in parts I and II above
- Do an inventory on your own life calling. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - 1) What, if anything, keeps me from seeing the whole of (legitimate) life as "holy"?
 - 2) Do I see the whole of my life as a trust from God, or are there areas that I don't consult him about?
 - 3) How developed is my understanding of my "secondary calling"? What do I love? What have other folks said I am good at? What have I done with the opportunities that God has presented me with for pursuing that calling? What responsibilities to people and society might temper my pursuit of the thing I would really love to do with my life?
- Look over Genesis 1:28 and Philippians 2:12-13 (printed below). Notice as you do that theologians have for many years referred to the Genesis passage as the "Cultural Mandate". They have seen it as expressing in the language of animal husbandry a much broader command—the command to "subdue" and bring forth, for God's honor, the whole of creation. Just as God brought order to the raw material of life—we, under him, are to bring order to all that he has made. We are, for example, to order sound and time so as to make music. We are, for another example, to study the patterns of nature so as to be able to do medicine. We are, for yet another example, to bring order to thoughts and ideas so that the meaning we give to life honors God and helps people. Education, law, language use and acquisition, government, the arts, science, philosophy, virtually everything that makes human society into a culture, are contained in this mandate.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1)

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2)

- Thank God for the dominion he has enabled you to gain over life and for the dominion that you are presently acquiring as you master new skills at school, or at work, or in relating to people.
- Note that to "work out your salvation" (Philippians 2) "means to figure out (the way we "work out" a math problem) the meaning of our whole renewed life". Where are you presently having difficulty "working out" God's plan for your life?
- Think about your Accountability Partner: What is he or she good at? What does he or she love to do? What opportunities and responsibilities are before your Accountability Partner at the moment?

When You Get Together

- Read Genesis 1:28 and Philippians 2:12-13 together.
- Share your own struggle figuring out what God wants you to do with your life and ask your partner to do the same. If the Lord has been clarifying your "calling" talk about that: How has he helped you to see things more clearly? What choices or attitude shifts have you made that have helped clarify things?
- Share with your Accountability Partner any insights you have as to his or her secondary calling. Encourage him or her to use those gifts in the church and in the world.
- Pray for one another

APPENDIX 1 –

Some Assumptions About Accountability Relationships

1) Accountability Relationships are not “the answer” to our need to build one another up. Accountability Relationships as defined in these materials are not necessarily an improvement on accountability relationships that some of us may already enjoy, although we hope the materials and resources we provide will help them. Nor are Accountability Relationships a substitute for our Home Fellowship Groups, where a different and necessary group dynamic occurs (Ideally, Accountability Relationships begin in Home Fellowship Groups—but Accountability Relationships and HFGs do not pursue precisely the same ends). Nor are they a substitute for regular church attendance, or mission or charitable works of Mercy. They are instead an intensely personal place where we can spur one another on in these other areas. In addition, there are no hard and fast rules on how to “do” your Accountability Relationships. Each relationship should reflect the people involved. We’d love to hear your stories of how you find creative ways to meet together, and work together with the Holy Spirit to encourage, admonish, teach, reprove, correct, and train each other in righteousness. Seeing how the Holy Spirit works creatively with different people is a great encouragement to us, to the congregation (through occasional personal stories), and gives helpful ideas and advice to the elder who oversees Accountability.

2) Any Christian, through the resources provided by the Holy Spirit, can help any other Christian grow. Accountability Relationships, like every thing else we do in the kingdom of God, proceed and unfold by faith in the promises of God.

³His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1)

3) Jesus expects us to help each other grow.

Love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12)

Jesus said “...do you love me? ... then feed my sheep.” (John 21:17)

4) One of the best ways to grow is to be responsible for helping someone else grow.

Give and it will be given...(Luke 6:38)

“He who seeks to save his life will lose it; he who loses it for my sake will find it. (Matt. 16:25)

5) Growing Christians, loving and being loved in Jesus' way and for his sake, will share their faith effectively with non-Christian friends. Cynical and busy New Yorkers are not interested in evangelism events; but they are hungry for authentic community and therefore will listen to a friend who loves them and has something authentic to share. Growing Christians have something authentic to share.