



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 5

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Work Together

Introduction

Jesus did not attempt to do ministry by himself. Early on, he chose twelve companions to be his disciples and empowered them to proclaim the good news and heal (Luke 10:1–9; see also Matt. 10:5–8; Mark 6:8–11; Luke 9:2–5). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus also appointed seventy (or seventy-two) disciples and sent them “in pairs” to proclaim the kingdom and heal in his name. By his deliberate formation of pairs and groups, Jesus demonstrated how important it is for disciples to work together.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples often went on missionary journeys as teams: for instance, Peter and John (Acts 3–4), Paul and Barnabas (13–15), Paul and Silas (15–17). The New Testament gives glimpses of the early community of Jesus’ followers as they learned to work together as the body of Christ. Paul regularly calls fellow Christians “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ as a sign that the church is like a family (Rom. 8:12; 1 Cor. 1:10), in which divisions of gender, ethnicity, and social status are overcome (Gal. 3:27–28).

This session will explore the ways in which the disciples worked together and the ways in which they struggled to maintain unity.

Were There Seventy or Seventy-Two?

In Luke 10:1, Jesus sent disciples out in pairs. Some ancient manuscripts record that there were seventy disciples, and some say seventy-two. Both numbers have symbolic import. Moses appointed seventy elders (Exod. 24:1, 9–10), Jacob had seventy descendants (Exod. 1:5), and Israel would spend seventy years in Gentile territory (Jer. 25:11–12), where the church’s new mission field lay. There are seventy-two nations listed in Genesis 10, another example of the Gentile mission field. These symbolic numbers tie the disciples to ancient Israel’s history as they go out to spread the gospel to the nations.

The Learning Curve

While the Acts of the Apostles paints an ideal picture of the early church with its members in full unity, sharing everything in common, breaking bread together while praising God, and adding daily to their number (Acts 2:43–47), other narratives in the book of Acts and the Epistles (of Paul and other apostles) show that the historical reality was much different. The number of converts to Christianity was increasing steadily, and along with this growth came different understandings about who Jesus

was and how to live out his teachings. Christians were not unified in their beliefs or approaches to discipleship. Their diversity of backgrounds and spiritual gifts strengthened the church, but conflicts between members with many different points of view also threatened to weaken it.

Jesus taught the disciples a great deal during his ministry on earth, and yet new challenges kept coming up that Jesus had not addressed directly. Some of these questions became divisive as the church struggled to find common ground. Should Gentiles be obedient to Jewish law when they joined the church? Could Jewish followers of Jesus eat with Gentile Christians? What was the nature of Jesus now that he had ascended to heaven? Was he human or divine? When would Jesus return? How should Christians live in community while waiting for Christ's return? What should the church do when one of its members sinned? How should the church appoint leaders, and what qualifications did leaders need to have?

The apostle Paul used a great deal of parchment and ink addressing disagreements within the churches he founded, because he knew that the church would not survive if its members did not work together. He knew that disagreements were inevitable, but he had to help his congregations learn how to deal with these disagreements in a constructive way. Paul had to work hard to heal the rift in the Corinthian congregation. He tells the church that the most important thing is being of "one mind" (Phil. 1:27; 2:2). Paul pleaded with two Christians, Euodia and Syntyche, to be of one mind in the Lord (Phil. 4:2). At the same time, he praises those whom he calls his "co-workers," Christians who have worked hard to keep the church growing (Rom. 16:9–21; Phil. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phlm. 1:24).

One of the most divisive issues facing the early church was whether or not Gentiles had to convert to Judaism before they could be members of the church. At this time, the church was still a sect of Judaism, so many Jewish followers of Jesus assumed that to be part of their community, one had to be Jewish, that is, follow Jewish dietary laws (which would have prevented them from eating with other Gentiles) and be circumcised. Paul, who was an apostle to the Gentiles, saw these requirements as impediments to gaining more converts. Paul had a falling out with Peter when Peter was reluctant to resume his practice of eating with Gentiles after "certain people came from James" in the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:11–14). Paul eventually had

success persuading the Jerusalem church to ease the requirements on Gentile converts (Acts 15:23–29; Gal. 2:9), but he had to intervene when Jewish-Christians from Jerusalem convinced the Galatian Gentiles that they had to be circumcised (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:14; 5:7–12).

Paul defended himself in the midst of conflicts with well-spoken missionaries that he called "super-apostles" who were preaching a gospel contrary to his own (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11). He had an argument with Barnabas that caused them to part ways (Acts 15:36–39). Paul had to deal with divisions in the Corinthian church where some Christians were following Paul's teachings, some were following Peter's teachings, and others were following Apollos's (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–5).

Paul's congregations were not the only ones in conflict. The letter of 1 John indicates that there had been a schism in the Johannine community and that some members of the congregation departed over doctrinal issues having to do with how to interpret Jesus as the Christ (1 John 2:18–26). We do not know the exact nature of the disagreement, but it must have been a bitter dispute, because the letter flatly states that those who have left the congregation are "against Christ" (*antichristos*, 2:18). Second Peter 2:1–2 also warns against "false teachers" who bring "destructive opinions." Clearly, the early church was a diverse group that struggled to find common ground. That the church still exists today is evidence that these early Christians received strength from Christ to work together despite their disagreements.

Antichrists

In modern usage, "the Antichrist" (with the definite article and capital "A") often refers to a satanic being that will oppose the kingdom of God in the end times. But in 1 John 2:18 and 22, "antichrist" is not a title, and it occurs in the plural: "antichrists." Antichrists were members of the Johannine church who left the fellowship because of doctrinal disputes. They apparently disagreed with the Johannine church about the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the letter says they are "anti-Christ" (against Christ) because they "denied that Jesus is the Christ." This sort of dispute over the nature of the risen Christ would occupy church councils for hundreds of years.

Striving for Unity in a Fractious World

As the church began to settle into life together as the body of Christ on earth, the church began recognizing certain leaders as bishops (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7), deacons (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:8–13), prophets and teachers (1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11), and others.

When disputes arose over who Jesus was (like the one in 1 John) and what teachings would be normative, Christians came together to hammer out creedal statements and establish a canon of authoritative Scripture. This emerging standard was called “orthodoxy” (from *ortho*, “straight,” and *dokeo*, “to believe” or “to think”). The many church councils, like the Council of Nicea (325 CE) decided on details of orthodoxy.

For hundreds of years, the standard for discernment was called “apostolic authority.” The church acknowledged that the original apostles (including Paul) were the authorities on what Jesus said and did. Whenever there was a question about how to interpret the life of the church or how the church should proclaim Jesus, their testimony held the greatest weight.

One of the biggest threats to the unity of the church was the Protestant Reformation (begun in the sixteenth century), when Martin Luther and John Calvin questioned the apostolic authority of the pope, who by tradition was the direct heir to the apostle Peter, upon whom Jesus founded the church and gave the keys to the kingdom (Matt. 16:18–19). The Reformers believed that the Roman Catholic Church had abused its authority and fallen short of proclaiming the gospel. The ensuing conflict was bitter and cost many lives. And yet, with the grace of God, the Christian community grew from this experience and continued to be a vital presence in the world and has, in recent generations, begun to find more common ground as the church universal.

Building Up the Church

Even though we are a fractious bunch of people, Christians understand the importance of community. Jesus told the disciples that he would be present to them: “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). Particularly in American culture, where people are accustomed to thinking of themselves as individuals first, it is sometimes difficult to make a habit of relying on others and relinquishing

control to do things together as a community. But this is exactly what Jesus continually modeled in his ministry. Jesus told the disciples that whatever they agreed on, it would be done by the Father in heaven.

Paul told the Galatian church to work together and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). He exhorted the Corinthian church to be of one mind and body. He tells them that the gifts of the Spirit are manifested for the purpose of building up the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Everything Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians is to persuade this conflicted congregation that everything they do must be for the purpose of building up the church. The church follows this example by gathering regularly to break bread together in memory of Christ and celebrate his presence (Luke 24:13–35; Acts 2:42–46; 20:7, 11; 27:35) and by listening to everyone’s point of view and prayerfully coming to consensus or finding a way to work together despite their differences. The church follows this example by pooling resources and talents to further Christ’s mission in the world. One of the key factors in remaining a family of believers who disagree or fall short is mastering the art of forgiveness.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave the disciples instructions for how to deal with difficult matters as a church (*ekklesia*), and in these teachings, it becomes clear that forgiveness is of primary importance. The only way church members could stay unified as a viable witness to Jesus was to be able to forgive each other. Forgiveness was absolutely necessary, and the capacity to forgive needed to be virtually unlimited.

Jesus drew on ancient Jewish teachings when he instructed the disciples about forgiveness. The Israelites were not to take vengeance or bear a grudge but to love their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18). Such mercy was not the norm in other nations of the ancient Near East. The earliest biblical law in regard to wrongdoing is “an eye for an eye.” This law was an attempt to curb the kind of retaliation that one clan might take out on another to avenge one of their members. A very early song or poem about Cain’s son Lamech seems to illustrate this custom of retaliation: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech [is avenged] seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:23–24). Perhaps this is the source of

Peter's question about how often one must forgive—as many as seven times? Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21–22; some translations say “seventy times seven”). Jesus instructed the church to forgive to the fullest extent.

The Jewish tradition teaches mercy, because God has been merciful to Israel. The theme of God's mercy to Israel, despite Israel's unfaithfulness, echoes through the Old Testament (a few examples: Exod. 34:6; Ps. 145:8; Isa. 49:8–16; Hos. 11:8–9; Mic. 7:18; Zeph. 3:14–15; Zech. 3:4). Reconciliation between injured parties was key to maintaining community, and Christians must forgive each other as they have been forgiven by God (Matt. 6:12; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). In Matthew, Jesus counsels the disciples about what to do if an individual sinned against someone else. Reconciliation was more important than offering gifts to God (Matt. 5:23–24). The first step was to work it out between those two people. If this did not result in reconciliation, then two or three must go together to persuade the offender to repent or to ask for forgiveness. If the matter still was not resolved, it must come before the church. Then Jesus told the parable of the unforgiving steward: If you do not forgive others, why should God forgive you? Working together requires that there be no limit on how often people forgive each other, and forgiveness must be from the heart (Matt. 18:21–35). Reconciliation was an important theme in Paul's letters, as well. He asked the church to be reconciled one to another (1 Cor. 1:10) and prayed for unity (Phil. 2:1–4; 4:2).

Restoring People to the Community

One of the lessons about community that Jesus often modeled was the need to bring inside the people on the outside. In session 4, we looked at examples of how humility entailed ministering to and becoming like “the least” in society. Jesus ate with people who were considered to be “sinners,” from people who cheated others while collecting taxes to prostitutes. We do not know the circumstances that made these people do what they did, but Jesus was ready and willing to accept them into his circle of care and forgiveness.

Another type of outsiders were those blind or paralyzed or people suffering from chronic diseases like leprosy or conditions like mental illness. Before we judge these ancestors in faith too quickly, we need to

think about the ways the church still excludes people who do not fit, despite our best intentions. Recent studies on the church and disability have shown that only a small percentage of congregations are equipped to welcome people with different sorts of physical and mental capacities. Even after the Supreme Court ruling that legalizes same-sex marriage, many churches still exclude people from full participation on the basis of sexual orientation. Churches in the United States are divided between black and white congregations. While we do not term those outside our groups “unclean,” many situations of separation persist and belie our claim to inclusiveness and openness. Many people do not join church fellowship because they have a sense of being “other,” another way of being “unclean” or separate from the whole.

Jesus made it a practice to restore people to community. He brought a tax collector named Zacchaeus back into community (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus healed lepers who had been ostracized from society because of fears that their disease would spread to others. He healed the “Gerasene demoniac” of a mental illness so fearsome that the people in his region kept him chained outside of town (Mark 5:1–20). In his dealings with these outsiders and with all the people he encountered, Jesus did not show hesitation or fear. He waded into crowds, touching and healing. He recognized the image of God in each person and demonstrated to his followers that everyone was welcome in the kingdom of God to work together for the glory of God.

Conclusion

Though the church has had to struggle to maintain unity and though Christians have not always agreed with each other, Jesus' teachings about forgiveness and restoring people to community have held the church together for hundreds of years. The standard of discipleship is working together.

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