

Identity of Christ

Session Focus

This session explores Gospel portraits of Jesus and how they draw people into believing in—and giving one’s heart to—Jesus. This session helps people understand that the identity of Christ as true God and true man is rooted in the Gospels. We believe in Jesus Christ who is “true God from true God” and who “suffered, died, and was buried” and rose from the dead.

Learning Objectives

This session on Identity of Christ guides learners of all ages to . . .

- identify Gospel portraits of Jesus and connect them to the identity of Christ as true God and true man
- recognize that believing in Jesus Christ means affirming the truth of his identity and giving one’s heart, one’s self at its deepest level, to Jesus Christ
- discern ways to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ through an understanding of Jesus’ identity as true God and true man

Session Overview

Part 1. (15 minutes) Gathering

Part 2. (25-30 minutes) All Ages Learning Experience: Gospel Portraits of Jesus

Part 3. (75-80 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: Exploring the Identity of Christ

- Option 1. Whole Group Format - all participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Group Format - participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (15 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (10 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group

- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service Handout
- Bible

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Bible

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- For families with children: Several sheets of 11x17 paper for each family, colored markers, crayons, pens or pencils, 8.5 x 11 sheet of card stock paper for creating a prayer card or 11x17 sheet for creating a placemat.
- For the adolescents: Bible or New Testament for each group, newsprint and markers for each group, masking tape, blank paper, colored marking pens, pens, pencils

Sharing Learning Reflections

- Handout

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service

Part 1. Gathering (15 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare a newsprint sheet or handout that lists the order of the activities or create a PowerPoint presentation that guides people through the session.

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, using the words below or your own words.

This session explores Gospel portraits of Jesus and how they draw us into believing in and giving our hearts to Jesus. This session guides us in understanding that the identity of Christ—as true God and true man—is rooted in the Gospels. We believe in Jesus Christ who is “true God from true God” and who “suffered, died, and was buried” and rose from the dead. We will examine ten Gospel portraits of Jesus to deepen our knowledge of Jesus and apply this knowledge to our lives as disciples of Jesus. We will find ways to grow in our understanding of Jesus and in our relationship with him.

Present an overview and the schedule of the program.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3) organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Set a prayer space at the front of the room with the following items:

- Prayer table with white tablecloth, candle, cross, and Lectionary.
- Paschal (Easter) Candle
- Icons, paintings, and/or statues depicting the variety of Gospel titles for Jesus

Light the candle to begin the prayer service.

Gather

As we gather to pray and learn together,
let us remember that Christ is in our midst.
We ask Christ Jesus to open our hearts and minds
so we can learn more about him,
grow in our relationship with him,
and discover new ways to live as his followers.
Amen.

Listen

Matthew 16:13-16

Respond

Jesus, you are the Messiah who brings God's love and justice to all.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Savior sent to free people from their sins and bring them back to God.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are a Prophet, a messenger of the Good News of God.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Risen Lord who offers us eternal life.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are a Servant to all those in need.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Son of God who shows us what God is really like.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Teacher of the Good News, a new way of living.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are a Healer restoring people to health in body and spirit.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd, caring for all those who follow you.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Jesus, you are the Bread of Life, nourishing our lives and our faith with your love.

Response: Help us grow in knowing you.

Go Forth

Pray the Lord's Prayer together

"Our Father . . ."

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Gospel Portraits of Jesus (25-30 minutes)

The focus of the All Ages Learning Experience is to guide the participants in identifying their understanding of Jesus' identity, and to present ten titles of Jesus from the Gospels.

Preparation

Create a PowerPoint presentation using free icons or artwork from the sources below to illustrate each of the ten titles of Jesus as described below. Match the artwork with the ten titles of Jesus and use them in your presentation. Sources of free images of Jesus include the following.

- Icons from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.
- Paintings from the Web Gallery of Art. (See the guided tours of the artwork for paintings of Jesus, especially the work of Giotto.)
- Paintings from the Vatican Museum.

You can also present the ten titles of Jesus through posters displayed around the meeting room. Check out the icons available from Monastery Icons and the artwork of John August Swanson available as posters from National Association for Hispanic Elderly. Look around the church for paintings or statues that you can use.

Select ten people to present the ten titles of Jesus. They are to present their title in the first person, reading the script on the handout, "Gospel Titles of Jesus."

Using the songs in your hymnal, identify songs that illustrate several of the titles of Jesus. Sing or listen to a song after several presentations. The music will add another way for people to learn about the title of Jesus.

Who Do We Say Jesus Is?

In intergenerational groups guide the participants through the following process using the words below or your own words.

Who do we say Jesus is? The Gospels offer us numerous titles and understandings of Jesus. Many titles we are familiar with, such as Son of God or Messiah. Others may not be as familiar. We are going to begin with our own understanding of Jesus—what we been taught and what we believe about Jesus. Then we are going to present ten titles or understandings of Jesus from the Gospels. We need to know Jesus in order to follow him and grow as his disciples.

Call to mind the many images or titles of Jesus you have learned from the Gospels, from your family and friends, from your ethnic tradition, or from your involvement in parish life, such as religious education, Sunday Mass, youth ministry, faith sharing groups, and other activities. Families with children should work together to develop a list.

From all of these images or titles of Jesus, which are the most important or meaningful for you today? Each family member should identify their own titles.

Share your titles or images of Jesus with the people at your table.

If time and facility allow, ask people to name the titles or images that they identified as most important. Ask the participants to raise their hands if they also identified this title as important for them.

Present each of the ten titles for Jesus using the script below and show the PowerPoint slide(s) and/or display the artwork (poster, statue) with each title. Sing or listen to several songs which illustrate the titles of Jesus. Play or sing one or two verses of each song.

Messiah

I am the **Messiah**, which means the “anointed one.” I came to proclaim the arrival of God’s Kingdom or Reign, to fulfill the hopes of the Jewish people just as Isaiah and the prophets in the Old Testament predicted. Many people of my day believed the Messiah would be a powerful ruler, like a King.

I was a different kind of Messiah. I came to bring God’s kingdom of love and justice to everyone. When the messengers of John the Baptism came to ask me if I was the Messiah, the one everyone was waiting for, I told them to go back to John and tell him what they had seen: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers and people with physical ailments are cured, the poor hear the good news of God’s love for them. (See Luke 7:18-23.) (See also Luke 4:16-21.)

Savior

I am the **Savior**. Jesus in Hebrew means, “God saves.” I was sent by God to offer people a new relationship with God. I came to forgive people their sins and free them from all the things that separate them from God’s love. As I forgave sins, people came to see me as the Savior God on earth.

I spent lots of time with sinners, tax collectors, and all those who felt they were outside of God’s love. Once while I was eating dinner with my disciples and many sinners, people asked me why I was eating with sinners, something that offended them. I told them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13).

In the end the religious leaders of my day rejected me as the Savior God. My death on the cross overcame sin and evil and reconciled all people to God’s friendship and love.

Prophet

I am a **Prophet**, a messenger or spokesperson for God, like the great prophets before me—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. At the very beginning of my ministry I came to Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14-15). I challenged people to hear the Good News and called them to change their lives and follow me. Once I met a man who came to me and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life with God. He knew all the commandments, but I challenged him to do one more thing: “. . . go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). Following me is hard; it demands a change in your life. I told the disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 17:24-25).

Lord

I am the **Lord**. My resurrection from the dead helped people see that I was truly God, that I was the Risen Lord. Before my death and resurrection, I raised Lazarus from the dead. I told Martha, Lazarus' sister, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Martha recognized me as Lord and God, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:27). When I appeared to the disciples after my resurrection, Thomas, after seeing my hands and side, finally believed that I was Lord and God. Because of my victory over death, I am the Lord of life and death.

Servant

I am a **Servant**. I came to serve and not be served. I cared for the poor, the weak, the ill, the mistreated—those who lived without the basic necessities of life. I taught people to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, care to the sick, and companionship to those in prison. And when you serve people in need, you are living as my disciples. I told people ". . . just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I taught the disciples the value of being a servant, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11-12). At the Last Supper I washed the feet of my disciples to demonstrate the importance of being a servant. I told the disciples: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

Son of God

I am the **Son of God**. Throughout my life it was slowly revealed to my disciples that I was the Son of God. At my baptism by John the Baptist, God revealed, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). My ministry helped my followers understand that the power I had to forgive sins, heal people of their illnesses, and proclaim the Good News was God's power. When I asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?", he replied "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 15:15-16). It was clear to me that my Father in heaven had revealed this to Peter and the other disciples. People still did not understand and believe that I was the Son of God, but after my resurrection from the dead many came to believe.

Teacher

I am a **Teacher**. I used sayings, stories, parables, and instructions to teach people the Good News of salvation and how to live as disciples. At the heart of my teaching was the commandment of love: "The first is 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment great than these" (Mark 12:28-31).

Healer

I am a **Healer**. I restored people to health in body and spirit, helping people experience God's unconditional love and forgiveness and demonstrating God's power over sin and evil. I healed people who were lepers, paralytics, deaf, mute, and blind. I healed people with serious illnesses, and even brought several people back from the dead. One of my favorite stories was of a man I met in

Jericho, Bartimaeus, who was a blind beggar. When he heard that I was passing by he called out to me to have mercy on him. I asked what he wanted me to do for him. He asked me to let him see again. I told him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed me."

Good Shepherd

I am the **Good Shepherd**. Shepherds were very common in my country, so I used the image of the Good Shepherd to describe how I cared for all those who followed me, even to the point of giving my life for them. Good shepherds were kind, loving, patient, strong, and self-sacrificing. I told the people of my day, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11, 14-15)

Bread of Life

I am the **Bread of Life**. Bread was the basic food in my country, so I used bread as a way for my followers to understand me. To demonstrate how I was bread or nourishment for others I performed several miracles feeding thousands of people. I explained to the disciples that the bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I told them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). If people believe in me and follow me they will never be hungry or thirsty. Yet some did not believe in me and I had to try to convince them, ". . . whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:47-51)

At the Last Supper the night before I died, I took bread into my hands, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and give it to my disciples. I told them, "This is my body, which is given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

In intergenerational groups ask the participants to discuss questions such as:

- Which of the ten titles of Jesus were new to you?
- Which of the ten titles did you already identify as important to you?
- Would you add any new titles to your list of important titles of Jesus?
- What did you learn about Jesus from these ten titles?

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience (75-90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experience: Jesus Alive Today!

Materials Needed

- 11x17 sheets of paper, several per family
- Handouts #1 and #2
- Colored markers, crayons, pens or pencils
- 8 ½ x 11 sheets of card stock paper for creating prayer cards or 11x17 sheets for creating placemats

Preparation

Write the instructions on newsprint or create a PowerPoint presentation with the instructions. The activity is conducted within individual families.

Guide families through the following process using your own words or the words below.

How can the Gospel portraits of Jesus come alive today in your family? Through the following activity your family will have the opportunity to explore the ten Gospel portraits and select the ones that speak to your family's experience of Jesus Christ. As a family you will explore what it would be like if Jesus were here today living out your Gospel portraits. Finally, your family will explore how the different images of Jesus can nourish your faith life and draw you closer to Jesus in your daily lives.

Step 1. Review the ten Gospel titles or portraits of Jesus on Handout #1: Messiah, Savior, Prophet, Lord, Servant, Son of God, Teacher, Healer, Good Shepherd, and Bread of Life. Parents should highlight key points or a Gospel passage that illustrates the Gospel title.

Step 2. Ask each family member to select one Gospel portrait on Handout #1 that best reflects his or her understanding of Jesus today. Then, ask each family member to select one Gospel portrait that he or she needs to understand better. (Parents will need to help children make their selections.)

Step 3. Take each Gospel title that you have selected and describe what Jesus would be doing today if he lived in our world. How would Jesus be a servant, savior, prophet, teacher, good shepherd, and so on? Give specific examples today from your family, community, and world. Write each portrait on a sheet of paper. Invite the children to illustrate each Gospel portrait with a picture of Jesus in action.

Step 4. Create a family prayer for each Gospel title you have selected. Write your family prayer for each title on the table tent or placemat. Put this on your table at home and pray to Jesus each day. Here are several examples to help you get started:

- Jesus, Bread of Life, nourish our family by. . .
- Jesus, Healer, forgive us for. . .
- Jesus, Teacher, remind us that to follow you we must. . .
- Jesus, Servant, help us see those in need and serve them by . . .

Adolescents Learning Experience: Who is Jesus Today?

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1, #3, and #4
- Bible or New Testament for each group
- Newsprint and markers for each group
- Masking tape
- Blank paper, colored marking pens, pens, pencils

The adolescent learning plan is designed to help adolescents reflect on who Jesus is for them personally, and who Jesus is for us today. The learning plan opens with a reflection questionnaire on the Gospel titles for Jesus and then moves to a creative project in which the adolescents will develop a portrait of Jesus that speaks to teenagers today.

So Who Do You Say Jesus Is?

Introduce the questionnaire (Handout #3), using the words below or your own words.

The worksheet contains the ten titles used in the Gospels to describe Jesus. Each title provides us with an understanding of the identity of Jesus. Which of these titles reflects your understanding and relationship with Jesus? Which of the titles have you not learned about yet? Which ones do you have a hard time understanding? Use the worksheet to identify your understanding of Jesus. See Handout #1 for descriptions of each title. There may be other titles for Jesus which are important to you. Add these to the list by writing them on the lines provided. After you have completed your work we will discuss your reflections on the Gospel portraits of Jesus.

Give the adolescents several minutes to complete the questionnaire.

When they have finished, ask them to share with the group their most important titles, the ones they have a hard time understanding, and the ones you need to learn more about. Make sure groups give each person time to share his or her titles without interruptions or discussion.

After the sharing, ask the group to discuss the concluding two questions.

Create a Portrait of Jesus Christ Today

Introduce the “Creating a Portrait of Jesus” project, using the words below or your own words.

Today you are going to be contemporary Gospel authors. The four Gospel authors—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John—faced a daunting task: how to present Jesus to their community in a way that people would understand who Jesus is and then choose to follow him. Their Gospels had to address the needs and concerns of the communities they lived in.

- **Mark** portrays Jesus as an authoritative teacher, a healer and miracle worker, and the suffering Messiah. Mark’s community of Christians were being persecuted for following Jesus. Mark stresses Jesus’ suffering: Jesus is the prophesied Messiah who comes not as a king, but as a *servant*. Mark is a storyteller who focuses more on what Jesus *did* than on what he *said*; he thus

reveals Jesus as a man of power and decisive action. Through his many miracles, Jesus manifests his divine status as God's only Son. Why is Jesus important? Because by his wisdom and example Jesus shows us a way to respond to God with courage and hope even in the midst of suffering and persecution.

- **Matthew** portrays Jesus as a lawgiver and Messiah, the great teacher of Israel. Matthew's community needed to understand how Jesus was connected to the Jewish tradition and the expectation for a Messiah. Matthew traces Jesus' origins back to the history of Israel. He shows Jesus as the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of all that the Jewish people had been waiting for, the one who would bring their liberation and salvation. Matthew's Jesus is a teacher, teaching the law and preaching the Kingdom of God.
- **Luke** portrays Jesus as a man of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion with a particular concern for the poor and outcast. His Jesus prays often, especially before important events. Though he is the son of God, Luke's Jesus is also fully human and his concern for all people makes him the universal Messiah. Luke's community was made up of people who had not heard about Jesus. Luke aims at a clear, orderly and faith-affirming presentation of the words and deeds of Jesus. Wanting his readers to know the truth and reliability of the Gospel, he pays attention to historical detail. Luke's Jesus is the glory of Israel and a light to the Gentiles, a prophet, and a martyr. Jesus provides a good example in every facet of his life. His is a teacher who is completely faithful to his own teachings.
- **John** portrays Jesus as a noble and divine figure who is the Son of God and the Word of God. Even in the passion, John's Jesus is not a beaten, tormented victim. Instead, he has stately bearing. He is peaceful, yet powerful, and fully in charge of his destiny. John is writing for a community who already heard about Jesus and needed to understand more fully who Jesus is. Jesus is the unique son of God who is himself fully God. In John, Jesus' glory and power are revealed long before the resurrection. The miracles Jesus performs serve to inspire faith in him, for they reveal Jesus as a man of authority and love. For John, the proper response to Jesus is to believe (faith) and to love (God and neighbor).

As contemporary Gospel authors you will have to address several key questions: How will you present Jesus Christ to teenagers today? If you had to create a portrait of Jesus that would address the needs and concerns of your peers, what would you write? What titles would you use for Jesus? How would you convince other teenagers that believing in Jesus and following him make a difference in today's world? As you write your portrait of Jesus, you can also include art and symbols.

Guide the adolescents through this process, which is also included on Handout #4. Encourage the adolescents to use the ten Gospel portraits of Jesus from Handout #1. Use your own words or the words below.

What are the needs, concerns, and hungers of teenagers today? Make a list of the top ten needs, concerns, and hungers of young people today. Write these on newsprint.

What are the Jesus titles you would use with teenagers so they will get to know Jesus in a way that addresses their needs, concerns, and hungers? Develop several Jesus titles that you believe will speak to young people today and address their needs, concerns, and hungers. Refer to the ten

Gospel titles for assistance. Write your titles on newsprint. Then select the ones you think best respond to needs, concerns, and hungers of teenagers today.

Describe each Jesus title that you have selected. Use one or more Gospel stories to illustrate the title—include examples of Jesus' teachings and actions. Write each title and description on a sheet of newsprint. Include artwork or symbols with your description.

How will your titles and descriptions convince other teenagers that believing in Jesus and following him make a difference in today's world? Review your description to be sure it is appealing to your peers. Connect your Jesus title and description with the real world of teenagers. Add to the newsprint sheet a story, example, artwork, or symbol to make your description appealing.

Review your description to see if it includes information that will help teenagers see how following Jesus will make a difference in today's world. Connect your Jesus title and description with living as a teenage disciple today. Add to the newsprint sheet a story or example of how to follow Jesus today.

Ask one table group to share their titles and descriptions with another table group. Then ask each group to post their newsprint sheets on the wall for everyone to see. Give the adolescents time to quietly review each portrait.

Reflect and Discuss

Have the adolescents take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions and then share their reflections in their group.

- Do your portraits present Jesus as human and divine—true God and true man? Did you use any of the Gospel titles for Jesus in your portraits?
- How well did your portraits of Jesus address the needs, concerns, and hungers of teenagers today?
- How well would your portraits convince other teenagers that believing in Jesus and following him make a difference in today's world?
- What new insights about Jesus did you gain from your creative project?

Adult Learning Experience: Is Jesus Our God?

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1 and #5

The adult learning plan has been created as a self-directed small group activity. Facilitators can guide the adults through the learning activities as outlined below and on Handout #5. Write the essential instructions on newsprint or create a PowerPoint presentation with the instructions.

1. Gospel Titles of Jesus

Share the following:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' (Matthew 16:13-16)

Guide adults through the following process using your own words or the words below.

Listed on Handout #5 are ten titles used in the Gospels to describe Jesus. Each title provides us with an understanding of the identity of Jesus. Which of these titles reflects your understanding and relationship with Jesus? Which of the titles have you not learned about yet? Which ones do you have a hard time understanding? Use the questionnaire to identify your understanding of Jesus. Review Handout #1 for descriptions of each title. There may be other titles for Jesus which are important to you. Add these to the list by writing them on the lines provided. After you have completed your work, we will discuss your reflections on the Gospel portraits of Jesus.

Allow time for the adults to complete the worksheet.

Continue:

Share with your group your most important titles, the ones you have a hard time understanding, and the ones you need to learn more about. Give each person in the group time to share his or her titles without interruptions or discussion.

As a group discuss the concluding two questions. Give each person an opportunity to share his or her insights.

- What do the ten Gospel titles teach you about the identity of Jesus?
- How does your knowledge of Jesus influence your relationship with him and the way you live your Christian faith?

2. Is Jesus Your God?

Guide adults through the following process using your own words or those below.

Is Jesus really our God? Each of the Gospel titles points to Jesus—true God and true man, the God who has entered our world and lived among us. Each of us is challenged by the same question that Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Does it really make a difference in our everyday life that Jesus is the Son of the living God?

Using the excerpts from Albert Nolan’s book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, take time to answer these questions for yourself. This is an interactive essay which has built-in questions to help you reflect on the meaning of Nolan’s text. Take turns reading the text aloud in the group. Then take time to reflect alone on the questions before continuing the reading.

Jesus was experienced as the breakthrough in the history of man. He transcended everything that had ever been said and done before. He was in every way the ultimate, the last word. He was on a par with God. His word was God's word. His Spirit was God's Spirit. His feelings were God's feelings. What he stood for was exactly the same as what God stood for. No higher estimation was conceivable.

To believe in Jesus today is to agree with this assessment of him. We do not need to use the same words, the same concepts or the same titles. We do not need to use titles at all. But if we relegate Jesus and what he stands for to second place in our scale of values, then we have already denied him and what he stands for. What Jesus was concerned with was a matter of life and death, a matter of ultimate importance. Either you accept the kingdom as Jesus understood it or you don't. You cannot serve two masters. It is all or nothing. Second place or half measures are tantamount to nothing. To believe in Jesus is to believe that he is divine.

- What does Jesus mean when he says, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24)? Do you think you are serving two masters?

Everyone has a god—in the sense that everyone puts something first in his or her life: money, power, prestige, self, career, love and so forth. There must be something in your life which operates as your source of meaning and strength, something which you regard, at least implicitly, as the supreme power in your life. If you think of your priority in life as a transcendent person you will have a God with a capital letter. If you think of your highest value as a cause, an ideal or an ideology, you will have a god with a small letter. Either way you will have something that is divine for you.

To believe that Jesus is divine is to choose to make him and what he stands for your God. To deny this is to make someone else your god or God, and to relegate Jesus and what he stands for to second place in your scale of values.

- Who or what are the gods in your life? Is Jesus really the God of your life—#1 in everything, or is there something or someone else with higher priority?

I have chosen this approach because it enables us to begin with an open concept of divinity and to avoid the perennial mistake of superimposing upon the life and personality of Jesus our preconceived ideas about what God is supposed to be like . . .

By his words and praxis, Jesus himself changed the content of the word 'God.' If we do not allow him to change our image of God, we will not be able to say that he is our Lord and our God. To choose him as our God is to make him the source of our information about divinity and to refuse to superimpose upon him our own ideas of divinity.

This is the meaning of the traditional assertion that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus reveals God to us, God does not reveal Jesus to us. God is not the Word of Jesus, that is to say, our ideas about God cannot throw any light upon the life of Jesus. To argue from God to Jesus instead of arguing from Jesus to God is to put the cart before the horse. This, of course, is what many Christians have tried to do. It has generally led them into a series of meaningless speculations which only cloud the issue and which prevent Jesus from revealing God to us.

We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; we must now deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus. Thus, when we say that Jesus is divine, we do not wish to add anything to what we have been able to discover about him so far, nor do we wish to change anything that we have said about him. To say now suddenly that Jesus is divine does not change our understanding of Jesus; it changes our understanding of divinity. We are not only turning away from the gods of money, power, prestige or self; we are turning away from all the old images of God in order to find our God in Jesus and what he stood for.

- How does making Jesus the source of all our information about divinity affect your image of God?
- Who is the God that Jesus reveals to us? What does the Gospel “picture” of the life and ministry of Jesus reveal to us about divinity?

To accept Jesus as our God is to accept the one whom Jesus called Father as our God. This supreme power, this power of goodness, truth and love which is stronger than any other power in the world, can now be seen and recognized in Jesus—both in what he had to say about the Father and in what he himself was, the very structure of his personal life and the almighty power of his convictions. Our God is both Jesus and the Father. Because of their essential unity or ‘exact sameness’, when we worship the one we worship the other. And yet they are distinguishable in that Jesus alone is visible to us, Jesus alone is our source of information about divinity, Jesus alone is the Word of God.

...If we now wish to treat him (Jesus) as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, he wants to serve us; he does not want to be given the highest possible rank and status in our society, he wants to take the lowest place and to be without any rank and status; he does not want to be feared and obeyed, he wants to be recognized in the sufferings of the poor and the weak; he is not supremely indifferent and detached, he is irrevocably committed to the liberation of mankind, for he has chosen to identify himself with all people in a spirit of solidarity and compassion. If this is not a true picture of God, then Jesus is not divine. If this is a true picture of God, then God is more truly human, more thoroughly humane, than any human being.

Take a moment to reflect on the meaning of the essay for you. Review your responses to the questions contained in the essay. Then use the following questions to share your reflections with your group.

Begin your sharing by discussing your reactions to the essay:

- What feelings surfaced in you as you read the essay and reflected on the questions?
- What are your thoughts about the essay?

Now share your reflections from the essay with your group. There is no need to share everything you thought or wrote in response to the questions. Share highlights with the group. Move from one set of questions to the next, giving each person time to share his or her highlights without interruptions or discussion.

Conclude by reflecting on the following questions and then sharing your responses with the group.

- How has the essay and your reflections affected your understanding of Jesus? What might you need to change?

- What impact might your learning have on your relationship with Jesus Christ? What might you need to change?
 - What impact might your learning have on how you live as a follower of Jesus? What might you need to change?

3. Believing in Jesus

Guide adults through the following process using your own words or those below.

Take a moment to read this closing reflection on your handout and answer the two questions.

“I want to close by talking about a very familiar Christian phrase—*believing in Jesus*. . . . For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was important. For me, what that phrase used to mean, in my childhood and into my early adulthood, was ‘believing things about Jesus.’ To believe in Jesus meant to believe what the Gospels and the church said about Jesus. That was easy when I was a child, and became more and more difficult as I grew older.

But now I see that believing in Jesus can (and does) mean something very different from that. The change is pointed to by the root meaning of the word *believe*. *Believe* did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean “to give one’s heart to.” The “heart” is the self at its deepest level. *Believing*, therefore, does not consist of giving one’s mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of one’s self. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one’s heart, one’s self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit.

“Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one’s heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ. For ultimately, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present. Meeting that Jesus—the living Jesus who comes to us even now—will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.” (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Marcus Borg.)

- How has this session helped you to “meet Jesus again for the first time”?
- How can you believe more deeply—giving your heart to Jesus, the living Lord?

Share highlights of your reflections on the two questions with your group. Give each person time to share his or her highlights without interruptions or discussion.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (15 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. Ask the participants to rejoin their intergenerational groups from the All Ages Learning Experience.

You can conduct the group sharing from the In-depth Learning Experience in intergenerational groups by asking each person or family to share what they created or discussed in their group work. Or you can select or invite representatives from each age group to share what they created and/or learned in their activity. For example, families can share one family portrait of Jesus, adolescents can share their description of one Jesus portrait (on newsprint), and adults can share reflections on making Jesus our God all the time.

After the sharing, present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to understand the identity of Christ through the Gospel portraits and the significance of this knowledge for living as disciples of Jesus Christ today. To help us take our learning from this session and live it in our lives and homes reflect on the following questions and share your thoughts with your group.

- What is the most important “lesson” or insight you have learned about the identity of Christ? Which title or portrait of Christ was really significant for you in this session?
- How can you (and your family) grow closer to Jesus because of your knowledge of the different portraits?

Invite participants to take several minutes for small group sharing. Encourage them to pick up a copy of Handout #6 as they leave the session after prayer. Tell them the handouts can help them connect with Jesus more deeply through the Sunday Gospels.

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (10 minutes)

Preparation

Set a prayer space at the front of the room with the following items:

- Prayer table with white tablecloth, candle, cross, and Lectionary.
- Paschal (Easter) Candle
- Vine and branches (plant with branches)
- Icons, paintings, and/or statues depicting the variety of Gospel titles for Jesus.

Give each table a long piece of rope that is long enough to connect the table to a large cross/crucifix or statue of Jesus in the center of the room.

Consider putting a plant or vine on each table as a visual reminder of the Gospel reading.

Prayer Service

Gather

Ask one person from each table to connect their string from their table to the cross/crucifix or statue of Jesus in the center of the room. Sing a song about Jesus while each table gets connected. Then begin the Opening Prayer.

Jesus,
Messiah,
Savior,
Prophet,
Lord,
Servant,
Son of God,
Teacher,
Healer,
Good Shepherd,
Bread of Life.

We recognize that all of your titles are meant to draw us closer to you.
May we know you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
And follow you more nearly
All of the days of our lives. Amen.

Listen

John 15:1-10, 12-14

Respond

Jesus, you are the true vine, and your Father is the vine-grower.

Response: Remove from us any branch that does not bear fruit.

Jesus, you invite us to live in you.

Response: Help us remember that we live in you.

Jesus, you promise that in you we will bear much fruit.

Response: Help us perform the good deeds that prove we are your disciples.

Jesus, you told us that if we obey your commands, we will remain in your love.

Response: Give us the strength and courage to love one another as you love us.

Go Forth

Lord Jesus, help us to remember that
you have no body now on earth but ours;
we are the only hands with which you can do your work,
we are the only feet with which you can go about the world,
we are the only eyes through which your compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.
Give us the grace to be your body on earth now. Amen.
(Inspired by St. Teresa of Avila)