

Life In Christ: The Core of Intentional Spirituality

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Small Group Discussion Guide

Introduction

We are living in a new Awakening, in a time akin to the one when Isaiah wrote, "God is doing a new thing" (43:19). These times come along periodically, and our day is one of them. After declaring the new work of God, Isaiah asked, "Do you recognize it?"

That's the question. Do we see what God is doing anew in our day, or is it passing us by? Are we engaging ourselves in the new thing, or are we treading water in the status quo? One way we answer these questions is by cultivating a spiritual life that is rooted in core aspects. In the Christian tradition the main root is life "in Christ." Paul wrote that when we are "in Christ," we are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus himself said the same thing in John 15, telling us to *live in him*, and that he would *live in us*.

[Life in Christ](#) point to this reality, and it invite you to become an instrument of God's peace in the new Awakening by living "in Christ." Paul's letter to the Galatians is selected as the biblical context for the book. Paul wanted nothing more than for the Galatians to have Christ formed in them (Galatians 4:19). [Life in Christ](#) is designed to guide you into a Christ-formed life. This guide accompanies the book. You can use it as leaders and group members to direct your journey through the book. God bless you as you do so!

Steve Harper

To do: Read Chapter 1 for Session One.

Session One: Envisioning the Life

The urge to live is our strongest urge. However, we live well, not by impulses but by intentions. The spiritual life is no different. Experiences may get us started, but engagement keeps us going. A key factor for becoming engaged in something is having a vision of its important. This first session casts the vision for life at its highest level, "life in Christ."

It's a vision that brought Nicodemus to Jesus, the vision that brings us to him two thousand years later. We say with Paul that Christ is our life (Colossians 3:4). We engage in intentional spiritual formation to grow in Christlikeness. *Life In Christ* opens with this vision.

Gathering (10 minutes)

Settle into your space. Greet one another and spend the first five minutes in casual conversation.

The leader can transition the group into the session's theme by reading the Preface of *Life In Christ*. Then if desired, the group can pray together, "God, thank you for being present with us here and now. Knowing that life in Christ is our deepest desire, we pray that our times together will help us experience that life more fully. Amen."

Reflecting (30 minutes)

Begin by asking those willing to share why they decided to join this study and what they hope to gain from it.

Then move to look at the Life we are offered in Christ—*zoé* life (pp. 1-4). Then name the six dimensions used to describe this life (pp. 4-11). This way of describing the spiritual life makes Christ central, as the source and sustainer.

Ask those willing to share which of the six dimensions are most attractive, and why this is so. We are formed by our present-moment experiences, so paying particular attention to a particular dimension can be a means of connecting with the vision and living into it.

Resolving (5 minutes)

Let the group move into silence, a time for each member to decide how they will continue to pay attention to the particular aspect of life in Christ which they named during the reflecting time. For example, a person might silently resolve to explore how they can remain attentive to "life for Christ" in the coming week.

Closing (5 minutes)

End the session with the group praying together the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer,

"I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.

And may the covenant that I have made on earth,
be ratified in heaven. Amen."

To do: Read Chapters 2-4 for Session Two

Session Two: The Life Journey

By envisioning the spiritual life, a journey begins in us. We move away from some things into other things. We do this with confidence that we are God's dearly loved children, with assurance that growth is possible, and with hope that Christ is at work in us. We also journey realistically, knowing that spiritual progress includes times of dryness and discouragement, struggles that do not quickly and easily resolve themselves, and setbacks which keep us always seeking God's grace and help. This session takes us on the journey by reading Chapters 2-4 in [Life In Christ](#), through which the vision unfolds, the movement is revealed, and the atmosphere of the journey is apparent.

Gathering (10 minutes)

After a few minutes of casual conversation, the leader can transition into the session by reading the opening three paragraphs of Chapter 2 (pp. 13-14). Then, if willing, share experiences from childhood that indicated they were growing. Note how all our growth is the simultaneous movement away from something into something else.

Reflecting (30 minutes)

This session covers a lot of ground regarding our life in Christ: the movement, the atmosphere, and the struggle. Ask those willing to share which of the chapters spoke most to them--and why. Have each person read a portion from their chosen chapter and comment on how that reading was important for them.

Resolving (5 minutes)

Let the group move into silence. Ask each group member to consider how they will continue to pay attention to the particular aspect of life in Christ which they shared during the reflection time. For example, a person may have chosen the movement chapter and read John Wesley's questions on page 29. That person would silently commit to using those questions in the coming week for "letting their life speak" (Parker Palmer's phrase) a formative message.

Closing (5 minutes)

End the session with the group reading out loud these words of Paul,

"You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:25-28 CEB).

Pray the Lord's Prayer

To do: Read Chapters 5-7 for Session Three

Session Three: Growing the Life

When it comes to spiritual growth, we must recognize a never-ending process. The word for it is not *graduation*; it is *commencement*. How could it be otherwise? We are in relationship with an infinite God; we never get to the end of infinity. As Thomas Merton put it, we will be beginners all our days. [1] Centuries before him, St. Francis is reported to have started every morning facing the rising sun with upraised hands and saying, "Today, I begin with God." That is the spirit and intent of Chapters 5-7, the reading for this session. The chapters describe the design, the process, and the environment for maturing our life in Christ.

Gathering (10 minutes)

After a few minutes of casual conversation, the leader can transition by reading page 61 and the first two lines on page 62. Those willing can share any house-building experiences they've had that shed light on spiritual growth.

Reflecting (30 minutes)

Ask participants to share which of the three growth dimensions (design, process, environment) most influenced their thinking. Ask them to tell what it was about their selection that spoke to them.

Resolving (5 minutes)

Move into silence. Ask everyone to think about how they will give ongoing attention to the three dimensions of growth, and particularly how they will cultivate the one that meant the most to them. Ask them to consider how they might share what they have experienced with others.

Closing (5 minutes)

End the session by reading the following,

"We are called to grow in the spiritual life, and we are engaged in a never-ending experience of growth. There is no one-size-fits-all growth. Each of us grows in ways that are unique. We do so together, in community. And we do so with gratitude to God for the opportunity to grow in ways that enrich us and help others."

Pray the Lord's Prayer

To do: Read Chapters 8-10 for Session Four

Session Four: Living Abundantly

Some verses sum up a lot of the biblical message. John 10:10 is one of them. Jesus said he came to give us abundant life. One of the ways we describe life in Christ is in the phrase "abundant living." [2] I expand on this idea in Chapters 8-10 showing that life in Christ has an aim, a mission, and a culmination. We are formed along a trajectory of increasing Christlikeness, moving toward the goal planned from the beginning by God, to unite all things (on earth and in heaven) in Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Gathering (10 minutes)

After a time of casual conversation, transition into discussion by reading page 129 and the first four lines on page 130. Ask those willing to share what they think of when they hear the words "new creation."

Reflecting (30 minutes)

Like the other sessions, this one covers a lot of ground. Ask participants to share the "big idea" they received, and to tell why it was important for them to receive it. They may want to read excerpts from the book to describe or illustrate their choice.

Resolving (5 minutes)

Move into silence. Ask participants to think about how they can cultivate their "big idea" in the days to come. Ask them to think about how they can share their experience with others.

Closing (5 minutes)

End the session by praying this prayer attributed to St. Francis,

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

[1] Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Image Books, 1971), 37.

[2] E. Stanley Jones wrote an excellent book by the same title in 1942, [Abundant Living](#). Abingdon Press reissued the book. It would be an excellent follow-up resource for the study of [Life in Christ](#).

