



A DARE BOOKLET

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# The School of Jesus

## A Beginner's Guide to Living as a Christian

**The first Christians**, in the time of Jesus, had a name they liked to use for themselves. Strangely enough, it wasn't the word 'Christian'—that term only comes three times in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> They preferred to call themselves 'disciples.' Disciple means learner, or student. In other words, the first Christians thought of themselves as students. For them, the point of being a Christian was to learn.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of Christians as learners prompts all sorts of questions, though. What were they learning? What and

where was their school? What was it for? What did they learn there? and how? and from whom? What happened when they graduated?

The answers are not complicated. The school in which Christians learn is the school of Jesus. It is a school which he sets up, and in which he is the teacher and his followers are the students.

*“Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”*

— Jesus  
MATTHEW:11:29<sup>3</sup>

When you are finding out about a school, however, you generally want to know what it is good for. Some have a reputation for good medical training or computer technology or journalism. Conversely, you start the other way round: you have a particular interest—molecular biology or medieval history, say—so you look around for a school that has a reputation for teaching those things well. So, in the case of Jesus’ school, it seems fair to ask: Does he teach the sort of thing I want to learn? What is this school good for? What sort of thing would I learn there? What is Jesus’ curriculum?

There are many ways to answer that question. My favourite is contained in a saying of Jesus. He once explained his mission to the world in this way:

*I have come so that people might have life, and have it in all its fulness!*<sup>4</sup>

## Really alive

In the 1940s, Dorothy Sayers wrote a series of radio plays for the BBC, based on the life of Jesus and entitled *The Man Born to Be King*. The plays, which are still in print, contain many marvellous insights into the life of Jesus,

but I specially like a speech Sayers puts into the mouth of Mary Magdalene. Mary was a historical figure, one of Jesus’ first followers. Before she met him, she thought she knew what life was all about. She knew how to have a good time. She thought she was experiencing life in all its fullness.

In the play, Mary reminisces with Jesus about the first time they met, and she says this about Jesus and life:

*Did you know? my companions and I came there that day to mock you. We thought you would be sour and grim, hating all beauty and treating life as an enemy. But when I saw you, I was amazed. You were the only person there that was really alive. The rest of us were going about half-dead—making the gestures of life, pretending to be real people. The life was not with us but with you—intense and shining, like the strong sun when it rises and turns the flames of our candles to pale smoke. And I wept and was ashamed, seeing myself as such a thing of trash and tawdry. But when you spoke to me, I felt the flame of the sun in my heart. I came alive for the first time. And I love life all the more since I have learnt its meaning. (Sayers 187)*

She thought Jesus would be ‘sour and grim,’ ‘treating life as an enemy.’ After all, Jesus was known to be religious, and her image of ‘a religious person’ was not that different from ours today. But to her amazement, Jesus was different. He had a quality of life—real life—that she had never seen anywhere else. What she saw in Jesus, says Sayers elsewhere, was ‘the blazing light of living intensely.’ (Sayers 183)

*Christ has set you free to live a free life.*

— Paul  
GALATIANS 5:1

That sums up what Jesus' school is all about: it is a school for life, a school in which you come to understand what life is all about. There you learn how to live in God's world in God's way, and how to become all God had in mind for you to become when God created you. If you want that kind of life, the only way to get it is to learn it, and the only way to learn it is in the school of Jesus.

*Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.*

– Jesus  
JOHN 8:32

## Becoming a Christian

There are many ways to describe becoming a Christian. 'Becoming a Christian' is one of them. You have probably heard some of them:

*becoming a follower of Jesus*

*being born again*

*putting your trust in Jesus*

*being saved*

*joining the community of faith*

*becoming a child of God*

*asking Jesus into your heart*

*giving your life to Jesus*

*entering the kingdom of God*

*putting your faith in Jesus*

*committing your life to God*

Now, of course, I've added another possibility to the list: registering in the school of Jesus. Probably, like me, there are some of these phrases that you can relate to more easily than others. Basically, however, they all mean the same thing, but becoming a Christian is such an amazing and multi-faceted experience that, of course,

there are many ways of describing it, each one emphasizing a different aspect of this experience.

If you have become a Christian recently, or are thinking about it, this booklet is meant for you.

One reason I like the picture of joining Jesus' school is that it conveys the idea behind this booklet—that becoming a Christian is not an end but a beginning—the beginning. My intention here is to sketch out what it means to live your life as a follower of Jesus day by day, and how you can learn, little by little, to experience 'life in all its fullness', as he offered.

*'And then they will all personally be taught by God.'*

– The Prophets  
ISAIAH 54:13

## The point of it all

I once stayed with the family of an English clergyman, where the children were twin adopted daughters who, at the age of eight, were quite a handful. One day, while I was there, one of them came running in from the yard where she had obviously been trying to explain to a friend about her adoption. 'Daddy,' she panted, 'was I adopted or adapted?' Her father grinned wryly. 'Adopted, my love. We're still working on the adapting.'

Adopting and adapting. Two separate processes. One is a legal status, settled in an instant with the stroke of a pen. The other is a long and sometimes painful process of learning to change and fit in with the history and customs of a new family.

It's the same with God. When a person becomes a Christian, that's another way of saying they are adopted into God's family. Jesus taught that God welcomes us

home with tremendous joy. He even says that the angels in heaven throw a party when someone joins the family.<sup>5</sup> We're adopted once and for all, and God will never throw us out again.

Then the second process begins—adaptation. That's the long one. God's family, like any other, has its own ways of doing things, its own understanding of right and wrong, of what's fun and what's dangerous, of what's important and what's not. As we haven't belonged to God's family before, God's ways may well be different from anything we've experienced before. It can be tough...but, believe me, it's worth it.

For one thing, in adapting us, God has an amazing goal in mind. We were all made to be like God—'in the image of God' is the way the Bible describes it<sup>6</sup>—but because we separated ourselves from God and tried to live life our own way instead of under God's leadership, that beautiful image in us was spoiled. God's experience must have been something like looking at your own face in a mirror that's cracked and crazed: you can still tell who it is, but it's badly distorted.

God's intention, now we have returned home, is to remake that image in us, to restore us to the beauty and the wholeness that our Creator intended for us to have from the beginning. And when the job is all complete, God will look at us, and see, not a distorted reflection, but perfect Godlikeness once again.

Now Christians have another name for the perfect image of God in a human being: Jesus. In Christian tradition, Jesus is both God and human—not 50% of each,

*'There's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.'*

– Jesus  
LUKE 15:7

but 100% of each. Puzzling, isn't it? One way of thinking of this is to say that when you look at Jesus, you see what God is like, but when you look at Jesus, you also see what a perfect (you might even say normal) human being can be like. Jesus is the prototype of what all human beings can be like, the perfect image of God. Once we put our lives in God's hands, God's Holy Spirit begins work in us to change us to be like Jesus—like God.

Paul, one of the earliest Christian teachers, whose writings are preserved in the Bible, expresses this idea succinctly. Here is how one modern translation expresses his words:

*Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah [Jesus], our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.<sup>7</sup>*

This is where the analogy of the school is helpful again. After all, students always become like their mentors. In the case of some teachers, of course, becoming like them means adopting their idiosyncrasies, and not just their strengths. It was said of Plato, for instance, that you could always tell his disciples because they walked with a stoop—just like their teacher. For us, however, our teacher and mentor is the one who modeled human life as it was meant to be lived—in all its fullness. To become like Jesus is not to become weird or (in a narrow sense) religious, but to become fully human, as he was. To become like Jesus is to have a renewed sense of who we are and what our place in the universe

*God, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I'm an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking. You know when I leave and when I get back; I'm never out of your sight.*

– King David  
PSALM 139:1-3

is. To become like Jesus is to learn to live with brokenness and suffering, yet with dignity and even joy.

So how does it all work? I want to focus on four aspects of the school's life that will help you get the most out of it, and put the most into it.

## 1. Jesus' school is a community

People do not normally take courses from Jesus' school by correspondence. The reason is that being part of the community is part of the program. Living and working alongside other followers of Jesus is not just one of the ways we learn, it is one of the subjects in the curriculum.

The reason, I suppose, is that God doesn't just want millions of little Christs, isolated individuals each in their little cocoon of beautiful humanness. Christians believe that in a mysterious way God is actually a three-fold community, traditionally known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who work together in joy and creativity and harmony. Thus for human beings to become like God is to become an international community of God-like harmony and co-operation. In fact, because God is community, we can't become fully like God alone: one is not enough to represent the total image of God.

### Body images

This is why the New Testament uses such startling pictures to express what the Christian community is (or should be) like. Paul, for instance, tells us that the

*[The first Christians] agreed they were in this for good... They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.*

– Luke,  
the physician  
ACTS 1:14, 2:46

community is a body—the body of Jesus, to be exact—with all the parts working together to do the work that Jesus did, but on a much bigger scale. On another occasion, he says Christians are a family, implying that we should care for each other and stick with each other through thick and thin (maybe he also has in mind that we don't always have to like each other in order to do this). Another writer, Peter (a close friend of Jesus) says we should think of Christians as being as close as the stones in the fabric of a building—in fact, a temple, where people can meet and worship God.<sup>8</sup>

What does this mean? It means that if you are going to flourish and develop in your new life, you need to find others who believe as you do, who are seeking to be students of Jesus, and get involved with them. If you are a university student, you might begin by checking out whether there are any Christian student fellowships on your campus. It would be an unusual campus if there was not at least one.<sup>9</sup> Such fellowships are great, especially to begin with, because there you will find people of your age and experience, with similar joys and struggles, and at least some with more years of following Jesus under their belt than you currently have.

At some point soon, whether you are a student or not, you should also check out an adult Christian community near you—more commonly known as a church! The reason for this is that a church has many strengths a student fellowship lacks—not least, that you find a much wider range of people there—very old and very young, highly educated and not so educated, business people

*God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building.*

– Paul  
EPHESIANS 2:19

and the unemployed, artisans and artists, and so on. That makes the reality of Christian community much richer—as well as more challenging. A church also has much wider resources of history, wisdom and caring, as well as opportunities for the form of worship called ‘communion’ (more on that later—see page 24).

Maybe you have a Christian friend who can take you with them to their church and introduce you to folk and explain how things work. Or if you went to church at an earlier point in your life, you might want to start by checking out that brand of church again.

But you will find that for many serious Christians these days, denominations are not as important as the spiritual vitality of a church—whether there are people your age there, whether the preaching is faithful to the Bible and relevant to everyday life, whether the people are welcoming, whether there are small groups for Bible study, and whether the worship is lively. If you are stuck, you can write to the address on the back of this booklet, and we will try to put you in touch with a church near you.

## Getting baptized

Before too long you should also look into being baptized, if you have not done this before (or had it done to you as a baby). Baptism is a ritual by which new Christians are marked with water—either with a few drops on the head, or by complete (but brief!) immersion. The symbolism of this act is rich and ancient. My colleague, Harold Percy, points out, for instance, that the water signifies:

*We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which [Christ] has the final say in everything....this makes you more significant, not less.*

– Paul  
1 CORINTHIANS 12:14ff

- death (the end of our old, self-centered way of life)
- life (Jesus quenches our deepest thirst) and
- cleansing (from all we have done wrong). (Percy 66-67).

Since the time of Jesus, this has been the ritual by which people declare themselves serious followers of Jesus. In fact, Jesus himself was baptized in order to identify with us and to set us an example. When you find a church home, ask about how baptism is done in that tradition, and how you can be baptized. Since part of the point of baptism is that it is a public ceremony, you may like to ask if you can watch one or two as you are thinking about it.

A minister friend of mine, David Watson, used to say, ‘If the Christian life doesn’t begin on the personal level, it doesn’t begin. But if it ends on the personal level, it ends.’ We cannot make it by ourselves. Especially in a society that does not take following Jesus very seriously, it can be very tough to maintain your faith by yourself. Even on a simple sociological level, we know that people generally make changes through involvement in a community *and* that they maintain those changes in community. That seems to be how God has made us.

The Christian community provides the context in which the other activities of Jesus’ school, including those I am about to describe, take place.

*That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country.*

– Paul  
ROMANS 6:4

## 2. Jesus' school has a textbook

As soon as possible, you need to get a Bible for yourself, if you don't have one already. There are many good translations on the market (the Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew, so every English Bible is a translation). If you have a Christian friend, or you are getting involved in a Christian community, it will help to check out which version they are using before deciding.

The Bible is the basic textbook for Jesus' school, and you will want whenever possible to read at least a little bit from it every day.

### What's in the Bible

The first 80% of the Bible is what Christians call the Old Testament. It is the story of the world from its beginnings as God's perfect creation, through the story of evil entering into our world, and then the long saga of God's patient efforts to restore the world to its former glory.

Much of it may seem difficult to understand at first, especially if you are not familiar with the culture and literary genres of those times. But it is important, because it lays the foundations for Jesus. Jesus himself treated the Old Testament as authoritatively conveying the truth of God, and for that reason if no other, we should treat it with great seriousness. Thus, when Jesus speaks about God, he assumes the understanding of God that the Old Testament laid down. When he speaks of right and wrong, he builds on the understanding of good and evil that emerges through the Old Testament. And so on.

*I'll stride freely  
through wide open  
spaces as I look  
for your truth and  
your wisdom.*

PSALM 119:45

The last 20% of the Bible is what Christians call the New Testament. This contains the four oldest biographies of Jesus (by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), plus letters (often called *epistles*) by such formative Christian leaders as Paul, Peter, John and James, plus the Book of Revelation, which deals with human history, particularly its ending, in strange and colourful symbolism.

You will probably want to do most of your reading, at least at first, in the four biographies of Jesus (known as 'the four Gospels'), then branch out into the rest of the New Testament. Along the way, you might want to dip into some of the stories in the Old Testament—in Genesis, or the Books of Samuel, or Ruth, Esther, or Ezra, for example. Read some of the Psalms (Jesus knew them well) which express the passion, the creativity, the joy and the heart-ache of believers in our God thousands of years ago, in a way which still resonates with us today. Little by little, your knowledge and understanding of God's special book will build up.

### What it does for you

The value of the Bible is expressed by the Bible writers themselves in the images they use:

*PETER says that God's message is like milk to a baby—an essential ingredient of spiritual nurture. Its stories and ideas feed your mind and your heart, and strengthen your faith.*

*JAMES says it is like a mirror, where you see yourself as you really are. Reading the Bible can reflect the truth of how special you are to God, but it can also*

*Your word has  
given me life.*

PSALM 119:50

*shed light on the weaknesses God still wants to work on.*

*PAUL says God's message is like a sword for opposing evil. It has powerful insights that can cut to the quick, or touch the heart, or confront evil.<sup>10</sup>*

There is one more reason for reading the Bible, however. An experiment was done some years ago to see if couples really grow like one another the longer they are together. The researchers mixed up photographs of dozens of married couples, using separate photographs of the two partners, and then asked people who did not know the couples to try and pair up who went with whom. When they tried this with photos of couples who had been together only a few years, there was a high degree of error in who was paired with whom. However, when they used photos of couples who had been married twenty, thirty or more years, ninety percent of the answers were correct.

Conclusion: the longer you stick around with someone you care about, the more you get to be like them. (I don't know of a parallel experiment with people and their pets, but that would be worth trying too.)

I mentioned earlier what Paul says about God's desire to transform us to be like Jesus:

*Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah [Jesus], our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.<sup>7</sup>*

*By your words  
I can see where  
I'm going; they  
throw a beam  
of light on my  
dark path.*

PSALM 119:105

One of the ways that we see God's 'face,' as Paul puts it, is by reading about what God has done in history, and especially what Jesus did and said while he was on earth. In God's hands, the Bible and its story can be one of the ways that we spend time with Jesus, 'our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful.'

## Learning together

There are many ways to get to know the Bible, to understand its story, and to make its message part of our thinking. It's tough to do it only by yourself—though there is no substitute for personal reading.

Most Christians will tell you, however, that they were helped in coming to grips with the Bible by other members of the Christian community. For example, if you find a church where the Bible is explained faithfully and practically week by week, that will form a good background for your own study. And if you find a small group of five to ten Christians who care for each other and spend regular time discussing the Bible together, that can be a marvellous context for learning from other people's insights, sharing what you are finding in the Bible, and getting some light on your questions from friends who are further down the road in the faith.

## Cracking the textbook

The poet Coleridge once advised, 'Read the Bible like any other book, and you will find it to be unlike any other book.' Not bad advice. On one level, the Bible should be read like any other book, enjoying the story line, tracing

*And when two  
or three of you  
are together  
because of me,  
you can be sure  
that I'll be there.*

– Jesus  
MATTHEW 18:20

the development of the characters, taking time to savour a particularly sweet or dramatic part, following the twists and turns of the plot.

But there is a place also for reading a small part at a time, and sucking on it as if it were candy, until all the sweetness is sucked out of it. Sometimes, for instance, I will read just one incident in the life of Jesus, and imagine I was there, maybe as a central character—Peter or Mary—or as an extra—a fisherman or a farmer. Then I ask myself questions like: What do I see from this person’s point of view? hear? smell? What is the expression on Jesus’ face as he says that? How does he move as he reaches out to that person? If I could speak to him at this moment, what would I want to say? If could he speak to me in this situation, what would he say? How do I feel in this situation?

That is one ancient way of reading the Bible. Another way, especially helpful when you are just beginning, is to use notes from an organization like the one called Scripture Union.<sup>11</sup> They produce a booklet every three months which contains a short piece from the Bible to read, followed by explanatory notes, and often a prayer to say based on what you have read. When I was a new Christian, I found their notes absolutely marvellous for beginning to read—and, even better, to understand—the Bible.

*Jesus spoke to her,  
‘Woman, why do  
you weep? Who are  
you looking for?’  
She, thinking he  
was the gardener,  
said, ‘Mister, if you  
took him, tell me  
where you put  
him so I can care  
for him.’ Jesus said,  
‘Mary.’ Turning to  
face him she  
said in Hebrew,  
‘Rabboni!’ meaning  
‘Teacher!’*

– John  
JOHN 20:15-16

### 3. Jesus’ school sets assignments

Character is formed by the things we do and the choices we make.

I once received in the mail a Bible study guide entitled, *Jesus the Teacher*. Although the theme fascinates me, I’m afraid I didn’t pay too much attention to the booklet because on the cover was a highly misleading photograph. It showed a classroom, with the teacher’s desk and a big chair behind it. There was a blackboard behind the desk, on which was written (presumably by Jesus), ‘This is how you should pray.’ On the desk itself were several books, including an open Bible. And on the wall were a calendar and a clock. I’m afraid I thought, ‘That may be how we think of teaching in our culture, but it is emphatically NOT how Jesus taught’.

Rather, Jesus’ first students learned from him by hanging out with him. He often called them to join his school with the words, ‘Follow me.’<sup>12</sup> And they did, leaving behind family and job in order to study with him. Their education then took place as they travelled together, ate together, laughed and argued together, and slept out under the stars together. They heard Jesus teach the crowds and confront the religious leaders. They watched him heal the sick, raise the dead, feed the hungry and stop the storm. From time to time, he would give them assignments, telling them to go and do the things they had seen him do. Then he would debrief with them to maximize what they learned from the experience.<sup>13</sup> This was their education—it was intensely practical and life-changing.

*[Christ] suffered  
everything that  
you would know  
that it can be  
done, and also  
know how to do  
it, step by step.*

– Peter  
1 PETER 2:21

For us too, our education in the school of Jesus involves the things we do and the choices we make. Of course, Jesus is no longer visible, but we may expect him to keep his promise to be with us in an invisible spiritual form, and to continue his teaching program.

What does it mean to receive assignments from Jesus? His first disciples learned from whatever or whoever they encountered while they were in his company, whether it was someone who was sick, or who wanted spiritual guidance, or who was recently bereaved. They did not have to go out of their way to find learning opportunities. So it will be with us. The people and the situations we meet in the course of our everyday life are the laboratory in which we carry out our assignments.

### What kind of assignments?

*THE OLD TESTAMENT SAYS, 'You shall not steal.'*<sup>14</sup> *One new follower of Jesus told me he realized his life had changed when he decided to stop pirating software because it was stealing.*

*JESUS SAID, 'If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right.'*<sup>15</sup> *More often than I care to remember, these words have caused me to apologize to someone—most often my wife, but sometimes one of my children or a colleague.*

*PETER SAYS, 'Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good*

*Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat—I am.*

— Jesus  
LUKE 9:23

*conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.'*<sup>16</sup> *In a job interview, Stuart was asked, 'Since it is clear from your resume that you are a Christian, does that mean you would not be willing to tell a lie on behalf of the company?' 'That is correct,' Stuart replied. 'Thank you, 'answered the interviewer, 'that will be all.' Stuart did not get the job...but he got a good grade from Jesus on the assignment.*

*JESUS SAID we should care for those in need as if they were Jesus himself.*<sup>17</sup> *My friend hadn't shown up for our lunch date, but as I waited, my eye was drawn to a young man panhandling just a few metres away from me on the sidewalk. I felt God nudging me, as if God was saying, 'So, what are you going to do about lunch now, eh?' A little hesitantly, I invited the young man to have lunch with me, and he accepted.*

*THE ANONYMOUS WRITER OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS URGES US, 'Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.'*<sup>18</sup> *I came home one day, and Deborah my wife said, 'I have good news and I have better news. The good news is: an old friend in England just sent us \$1,000. The better news is: I felt God wanted us to give it to Fred, down the street, because he's just lost his job.' I think she got an A+ for making a good choice. I got a C+ for attitude.*

I could multiply the examples, but I think you get the point. These examples show how there can often be a direct correspondence between what the Bible says and the action we choose.

*Offer yourselves to the ways of God and the freedom never quits.*

— Paul  
ROMANS 6:18

Some of these assignments from Jesus may seem easy, depending on our background and our natural character. My wife, for instance, is generous by nature. Other assignments will go against the grain of our nature and our nurture. If we have not been brought up to apologize, for instance, and find it the moral equivalent of root-canal treatment, it will take a long time to learn that lesson, although it is essential for building community. Fortunately, Jesus is a patient teacher, and quite willing to work with us on the same lesson over and over.

Some assignments—for instance, not stealing—become easier each time we do it (or, in this instance, refrain from doing it). Doing the right thing becomes a habit, and the habit becomes part of who we are, and that part of who we are is like Jesus. That is cause for celebration.

At other times, we may not know how to handle an assignment that comes our way, and we have to rely on whatever Christian instincts we have developed and the inspiration of God's Spirit at that moment.

- Perhaps a friend comes and tells you they are suicidal.
- If you are a student, you may find your faith being publicly attacked by a professor in the classroom.
- You may be asked to take on a responsibility in the Christian community that you don't feel ready for.
- Someone may ask a question about your new faith in Jesus that you haven't the first idea how to answer.

*God has called you to a free life... Use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows.*

– Paul  
GALATIANS 5:13

- Maybe you will find some people in your new Christian family obnoxious and self-righteous, when you thought they all would be wonderful models of spiritual maturity.

In some such cases, we find we know with laser-like clarity what to say or do. On other occasions, we muddle through without any conviction that we are doing the right thing, and we just have to trust that God will take care of the consequences.

There are also many cases of principle where it is not clear what a conscientious follower of Jesus ought to do. The Bible does not give neat one-sentence answers to ethical issues like nuclear arms or genetic engineering or the best form of economics, for instance. Those assignments take much longer to figure out. They require lots of discussion, weighing of different principles in the Bible, study of how Christians in other centuries and cultures have dealt with parallel questions, and much prayer. Even then there is not always a clear answer. Nobody ever said living as a Christian would be simple. And Jesus does give marks for trying.

Well, you get the picture. The assignments are many and various. Some feel as though they are way beyond our capabilities. Some feel too easy. Some, frankly, we totally blow. But the Christian life is never dull, and in any case Jesus doesn't give up on us. He is a good teacher and determined that we are going to graduate.

*These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.*

– Jesus  
MATTHEW 7:24-25

## 4. School assembly

When Christians get together, one of the things they love to do is pray and worship God. I guess, if we pursue the school image, it's a bit like school assembly, though when I was at school, assembly was one of the low points of the day, the most boring thing we ever did (except for physics, but that's another story). Prayer and worship are not boring—or at least, they're not meant to be.

*That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship.*

– Jesus  
JOHN 4:23

### What is this worship thing?

When baseball fans get together, they talk about their team. They recall the great games they have seen. They tell stories of their heroes and their batting averages. They trade opinions about the best and the worst coaches. They speculate about the next season and what the team might accomplish this year. There may even be a team song they sing. You know the kind of thing. And they come away from those sessions more convinced that their team is the best, and that they really could win the World Series—one day.

Worship is a bit like that. Followers of Jesus are also enthusiasts. They like Jesus a lot. They are learning to love God. They have stories to tell about the school. There are songs about how great the Teacher is. There are war stories about some of the tougher assignments, about successes and failures. Sometimes they recall the outstanding students who went before them and who have now graduated. And they come away from worship uplifted, with fresh enthusiasm for the week's

assignments, and a stronger sense of the wisdom of the Teacher.

How does this idea translate into everyday life? Student groups and church communities will often plan times of worship or 'services.' Often they happen on Sundays, though they can happen at other times too.

There are different components to these times of worship.

- There are usually songs—some are called hymns, or choruses, or psalms—that express the exuberance or the devotion or the longing or the pain of believers.
- There are readings from the Bible, which remind the community what God is like, what God has done in the past, and what God promises to do in the future.
- In many communities, the believers will recite a 'creed', a list to remind themselves of the principal beliefs that mark them out from the rest of the world, that unite and inspire them.
- Often there is teaching from a gifted speaker who can explain the Bible and help apply it to today's world.
- And there is prayer—speaking directly to God— often expressing appreciation for who God is and what God has done, sometimes including apology for failure, or asking God for help with various needs in the community and the world at large.

*Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.*

– Jesus  
JOHN 15:4

## Remembering the Teacher

Christian communities also practice a special form of worship called (variously) holy communion, the eucharist, the mass, or the Lord's supper. This custom is very ancient, going back to the time of Jesus himself. On the night before he died, Jesus ate one last meal with his friends, and told them to continue that kind of meal with bread and wine after his death, in order to remember him. Followers of Jesus have continued to honour that request all over the world, for two thousand years.

Why is this kind of worship so important? At the heart of the service, however it is performed, is the giving and receiving of bread and wine. At that first meal, Jesus gave his followers the bread, and said, 'This is my body.' When he passed the wine to them, he said, 'This is my blood.' To our ears, this may sound disgusting—in fact, the early Christians were accused of cannibalism because of these words. But of course Jesus is not inviting us to become cannibals. He is speaking metaphorically—'sacramentally' is the technical term. The bread and wine are a tangible reminder of the amazing fact that he gave his life for us—in order that, just as bread and wine give us life physically, his death might give us life spiritually. However, most Christians believe that the communion (or whatever you choose to call it) is more than just a physical symbol and reminder of what happened two thousand years ago. Because the bread and wine are not just ordinary bread and wine but represent Jesus' body and blood, they in fact do strengthen us spiritually, and not only physically.

*What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master.*

– Paul  
1 CORINTHIANS 11:26

I am trying to say in a few words what spiritual teachers have struggled to understand and to put into words over the centuries, so this is bound to be inadequate. However, what is important, I think, is to remember: one, Jesus told us to do this as a way to keep his memory fresh, and we should do what he asks, and two, this kind of worship can be a source of spiritual strength and nourishment in a unique if mysterious way.

## Praying alone

While worship with other followers of Jesus is crucial, individual worship and prayer is in order too. Many Christians combine their daily Bible reading with a time of prayer. Prayer is basically a very simple thing—talking with God. It may take the same forms as in community worship:

- expressing appreciation for all God has given us and done for us, from sunsets to soup, from friends to fireworks, from Christmas to the crucifixion.
- apologizing for times we realize we have let God down, or ways we have neglected our responsibilities as Jesus' students.
- bringing our concerns and needs, and also those of our world, to God to ask for help, healing and strength.

## A two-way conversation

As we speak to God in prayer, we may also find that God speaks to us. For instance, C.S. Lewis found that

*Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray...letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down.*

– Paul  
PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

sometimes God spoke through the way that he (Lewis) prayed. I think I have experienced what he meant. Maybe I begin, for instance, by praying for a sick friend to be healed, and yet, as I go along in my prayer, I find that I end by praying that they may have strength and even joy in the middle of their sickness. I didn't start off praying like that, in fact I had no intention of praying that, yet that is what I pray. According to Lewis, maybe it is God speaking to me, and refining my outlook to be more Christ-like, through my own prayer.

*'Speak, Lord,  
for your servant  
is listening.'*

– Samuel  
1 SAMUEL 3:10

Sometimes, as I pray, a sentence from the Bible pops into my mind in relation to what I am praying. In my experience, I always ask God's help as I prepare to give a talk. Something God once said to Paul often comes to my mind—'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.'<sup>19</sup> I receive those words as what God wants to say to me on the subject about which I am praying, and I am encouraged.

Some people hear a voice in their heads which they take to be God speaking to them as they pray. For myself, that *has* happened, but only very rarely. I try to be cautious when it does happen since I know how complicated the inside of the human mind is, and how we can convince ourselves that the voice is God's when in fact it is our own—even though it may say something we don't want or expect to hear. But on occasion, when I combine what 'the voice' says with other sources of spiritual wisdom—what I read in the Bible, or hear in church or from trusted friends—it has proved to be God speaking.

## Your first assignment

Does this sound like a lot of work? In a sense it is. At the same time, I should say that I have crammed into these pages what takes a lifetime to learn. God is not concerned that we master all these things by a week from Thursday. We don't go from God's kindergarten to God's PhD in one semester. Jesus is in charge of the curriculum and brings these lessons to our attention as and when he sees that we are ready for them. In fact, we often find ourselves working on just one thing at a time.

Thus, as you reflect on what you have read, I want to encourage you to consider what *one* thing you should do first. Ask Jesus where you should begin. Maybe establishing a habit of daily Bible reading and prayer is the starting point for you. Perhaps it is finding a Christian community to join. Or maybe there is an assignment that is painfully overdue and you know you have to tackle it before you can do anything else.

You will discover too that there is a lot of fun in the School of Jesus. There are times when we simply luxuriate in the company of God and God's amazing people. There are party times. In fact, Jesus went to a lot of parties and told people they were a foretaste of the full Kingdom of God in the future. And always there is the deep satisfaction of knowing you are becoming God's person, living in God's world in God's way, becoming all your Maker planned for you to be from before the beginning of time. That's awesome.

*The promise of  
'arrival' and 'rest'  
is still there for  
God's people.  
God himself is at  
rest. And at the  
end of the journey  
we'll surely rest  
with God.*

HEBREWS 4:9-10

## A personal tutor

There is one more resource Jesus makes available in his school. Let me use an illustration of Archbishop William Temple's. Temple once said something like this:

*If you ask me to write plays like Shakespeare's, it is impossible. But if, by some miracle, the spirit of Shakespeare could come and inhabit my mind and inform my imagination and give me the words, then—yes—I could write like Shakespeare. In the same way, it is no use asking me to live a life like Jesus. I know I cannot do it. However, if, by some miracle, the Spirit of Jesus came to inhabit my personality, to work on my will, to shape my mind, and to free me from evil, then the impossible would become possibility.*

Temple's point is that this is exactly what Jesus has promised—that to everyone who becomes his follower, he does indeed come, in the form of his Spirit, to enter our experience, to work within our personality, and to make a lifestyle possible which we would have thought impossible before.

The Spirit of Jesus in fact enables and empowers all those aspects of the school we have thought about:

- It is the Spirit of Jesus working in us who creates Christian community, enabling us to work and worship and play with people of all backgrounds and races.
- It is that Spirit who helps us understand the Bible and figure out what to do about the things we read.

*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*

– Paul  
2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

- It is the Spirit who gives us strength of will and creativity to carry out our assignments.
- And it is that same Spirit who makes Jesus real to us in prayer and worship.

This is why Paul says, 'we are transfigured much like the Messiah [Jesus], our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.' The verb is passive—'we *are being* transfigured!' He does not say, 'we transfigure ourselves.' That would be an impossible task. But God has made it the responsibility of our personal tutor—the Holy Spirit of Jesus—to undertake that project of making us more like Jesus, more like the amazing God-like selves that we are capable of becoming—and to make sure we graduate.

## Notes

1. The New Testament is the name for the original documents of the Christian faith, the holy book of Christians. Often it is found bound together with what Christians call the Old Testament—the holy book of Jews as well as Christians. Together, Old and New Testaments make up the Bible.
2. I first came across this understanding of the Christian life as a school in the teaching and writing of Robert Brow, eg. *Go Make Leamers* (Harold Shaw, 1981), to whom I am deeply indebted.
3. Passages of scripture quoted in the margins are taken from a translation of the Bible called *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson.
4. The Gospel of John, chapter 10 verse 10.
5. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 15 verses 1-32.
6. The Book of Genesis (in the Old Testament), chapter 1 verse 26-27.
7. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3 verse 18 (*The Message*).
8. These images are found in (respectively) Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12 verse 12; the Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2 verse 19; the First Letter of Peter, chapter 2 verse 4.
9. These groups are called such things as Varsity Christian Fellowship or University X Christian Fellowship. Similar groups are Campus Crusade for Christ and Navigators. There are also denominational chaplaincies on most campuses. For more information about these groups

please contact Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of Canada, 64 Prince Andrew Place, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3C 2H4, (800) 668-9766 or [www.ivcf.ca](http://www.ivcf.ca).

10. The analogies are found respectively in the First Letter of Peter, chapter 2 verse 2; the Letter of James, chapter 1 verses 22-25; and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6 verse 17.

11. Scripture Union, 1885 Clements Road, Unit 226, Pickering, Ontario L1W 3V4. A sample of Scripture Union notes is available from the *Dare* address on the back cover of this booklet.

12. Eg. The Gospel of Mark, chapter 1 verses 16-20.

13. Eg. The Gospel of Luke, chapters 9 and 10.

14. The Book of Exodus, chapter 20 verse 15.

15. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 verses 23-24.

16. The First Letter of Peter, chapter 3 verses 16-17.

17. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25 verse 34-40.

18. The Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 13 verse 16.

19. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12 verse 9.

## For further reading

### On Jesus:

*The Man Born to be King*, Dorothy Sayers, (Ignatius).

*Who Was Jesus?*, N.T. Wright, (Eerdmans).

*The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey, (Harper/Collins).

### On Christian beliefs:

*Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis, (Fontana).

*The Big Picture*, John Bowen, (available from the Dare address, cost \$12).

### On Christian Living:

*The Journey*, Peter Kreeft, (InterVarsity Press).

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and other books in the Narnia series, C.S. Lewis, (Collier Books).

*The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis, (Fontana).

*Following Jesus: first steps on the way*, Harold Percy, (Anglican Book Centre).

*Chris Chrisman Goes to College*, James Sire, (InterVarsity Press).

*The Adventure*, Jerry Sittser, (InterVarsity Press).

*Daring to Draw Near*, John White, (InterVarsity Press).