

LESSON 1

Your First Steps as a Christian

You are probably reading this lesson because you have decided to become a Christian. Following Christ is the most important decision a person can make because it leads to forgiveness, peace, joy, and fellowship with God. Around the world thousands are receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior every day, and they are experiencing the miracle of salvation. Salvation guarantees your place in heaven when your earthly life is over. According to Romans 6:23, salvation is a gift we cannot purchase, no matter how much money we have, how much we know, or what we are able to do. Thank the Lord every day for saving you!

So, what do you do now that you are a Christian? Is it just a matter of going to church or trying to be good? No! Virtually all religions have places of worship and moral teaching. The most basic description of the Christian life is relationship. You are now in a real relationship with God through faith in Christ. You will discover that your relationship with the Lord will mature and become your most treasured life experience.

As you journey in fellowship with God, many good changes will take place in your life. You will start to think differently, your attitudes will change, and people will notice the difference. God has given you a free will—to choose Him or to choose to live after your own ways. God's favor will be with you if you do things that please Him and that are helpful for your spiritual growth. This discipleship course will help you identify some of those things.

LESSON OUTLINE

Spiritual Growth
Studying God's Word
Christian Fellowship
Celebrating the Lord's Supper
Prayer
Water Baptism
Generosity

LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

- 1: *Explain the importance of spiritual growth.*
- 2: *Identify keys to successfully study the Bible.*
- 3: *Give scriptural support for the vital role of Christian fellowship.*
- 4: *Explain the significance of the Lord's Supper or Communion.*
- 5: *Explain why prayer is vital to the Christian.*
- 6: *Discuss why new Christians should be baptized in water.*
- 7: *Identify reasons why Christians should be givers.*

Spiritual Growth

Objective 1:

Explain the importance of spiritual growth.

It is God's will for you to develop and change! When you were conceived in your mother's womb, you started growing. The cells of your body, muscles, tendons, and

organs grew and formed into what God had designed you to be. If you had not started growing, it would have been a sign that something was wrong. Your survival depended upon your growth.

The same principle is applied to your spiritual life now that you have been “born again.” You are now a spiritual baby. Do not feel insulted—babies are precious and rightly deserve a lot of attention. But just as God did not intend for you to stay a baby physically, He does not intend for you to remain a spiritual baby. It is His will for you to grow! Spiritual growth can be defined as the development of your faith, your understanding of God’s ways, your Christlike character and attitude, and your God-given gifts and talents.

Christian leaders often turn to the book of Acts to discover how the early church, comprised of thousands of individual believers, grew spiritually. The early church offers an excellent basic pattern to follow; we will follow this pattern for much of what will be discussed in this lesson.

Let us read Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Note the four important concerns the believers committed to: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, taking communion, and prayer. In this lesson, we will discuss each of these areas in greater depth, but for now, let me highlight each of these concerns.

The teaching of the apostles was based upon the Old Testament Scriptures and the life and words of Jesus Christ. The apostles had been firsthand witnesses to all Jesus said and did during His earthly ministry. Within several decades of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the apostles and their associates began to put their oral teaching into writing. This writing later became known as the New Testament.

The idea of fellowship simply meant that the early believers spent much time together. They knew that they were not saved to exist in isolation, so they met together in homes and at the temple in Jerusalem. In those days, no church buildings existed, but that did not stop Christ’s followers from spending time together.

The early believers also celebrated what we would later call Communion, or the Lord's Supper. Why? They wanted to remind themselves of the continual provisions available to them through the work of Christ on the Cross.

Finally, they prayed. Prayer is indispensable to growth. If every true Christian would dedicate himself or herself to spending quality time in prayer, greater things would happen. God expects His people to pray, and He promises to answer prayer. What happened as the early church committed themselves to the apostles' teaching, breaking bread, fellowship, and prayer? "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Now, let us explore these four ingredients to our growth in more detail.

Studying God's Word

Objective 2:

Identify keys to successfully study the Bible.

God's Word is His special revelation to us. We are told that all Scripture is "God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). God's Word is a compass or guide that shows us how we should live. King David said in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." Earlier in Psalm 119:9, David asked, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word." Studying God's Word is how we get to know God. Here are four simple recommendations that will help you in your study of God's Word.

Take the time to read the Word

Allot a few minutes each day to read the Holy Bible. Find a quiet place where you will not likely be interrupted. You do not have to read an entire chapter, just a few verses. Ask the Lord to help you understand what you are going to read; and after you have read it, ask the Lord to help you apply what you have read. You will also want to take extended times to read the Word, but you probably would not start out doing this. Be

consistent and you will discover a desire to spend more time in the Word as the days go by.

Find a Bible you like

The Bible you read is actually a translation of documents first written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Some versions of the Bible are easier to understand than others, depending on when and who did the translation work. There are many options available today, so you should be able to find a version that you can understand. Visit a Christian bookstore or talk to the pastor of your church or another mature Christian to get advice on choosing a version. We recommend the New International Version (NIV).

Have a plan

Do not just flip the Bible open, randomly point at a passage, and make that your reading for the day. God can direct you that way, but more often than not you need the discipline of a daily Bible reading plan. There are many Bible reading plans available; some Bibles even have a reading plan or plans located in the back.

Have a notebook handy to write down your thoughts. As you are reading, the Holy Spirit may give you thoughts to help you understand what you are reading. Take a moment and write those down as they will be helpful later. Also, writing notes as you study the Bible will make you less distracted. Often when you quiet your mind like this, everything you need to do will run through your mind. Do not get up and do those things; just jot down a reminder to yourself to do them after your time in the Word.

Christian Fellowship

Objective 3:

Give scriptural support for the vital role of Christian fellowship.

One of the great analogies in Scripture about the church is that we are the “body of Christ.” We know

from our own bodies that a hand cannot function alone even though it is strong. A foot cannot take us anywhere without the leg. None of these body parts can function without our brain sending messages to the nerves, muscles, and tendons. The basic message of fellowship is that we all need each other. Alone, we will not function very well. Together, however, we can function in a way that will bring honor and glory to God.

Note what Paul wrote in Romans 12:4–5: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” We need one another! Even the story of creation teaches us that man was not created to be alone. Adam needed a woman, and God gave him Eve. Likewise, Christians need the encouragement and fellowship that comes from being in relationship with other believers. Together we are stronger and can be more effective in fulfilling our God-given mission on earth.

The wisest man of ancient times, Solomon, observed, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12).

In the book of Hebrews we read, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). There are over fifty times in the New Testament where you will read the phrase, “one another.” Most of these times are instructions for us to “pray for one another,” “love one another,” “encourage one another” or something similar. Here are two specific examples: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). “But encourage one another

daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:13).

There will be times when we are discouraged and we need an encouraging word. Or there might be times when things are difficult and we need someone to come along and help us through those circumstances. That is why we need to be in fellowship at a local church, and we need to be in fellowship in small groups such as Sunday school classes or Bible studies in someone's home or at church. For those times when we do not require it, there might be someone there who needs us to come alongside of him or her for a season.

Perhaps you have seen documentaries on the feeding habits of lions in Africa. They follow herds for many days at times searching for that one animal that is straggling behind or somehow gets cut off from the rest of the herd. When the water buffalo, zebra, or antelope separates from the rest of its kind, it usually ends up as the main course for a hungry pride of lions. Similarly, our staying in fellowship with other believers will help keep us close to our heavenly Father and help us avoid the traps of our enemy.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper

Objective 4:

Explain the significance of the Lord's Supper or Communion.

Just before Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He inaugurated what we refer to as The Lord's Supper or Communion. In some churches, the term Eucharist is also used. So why do Christians practice this custom? It goes back to the night before Jesus was arrested and condemned to die. He was celebrating the Jewish Passover with His closest disciples. It was His "last supper" with them before He would be crucified. For the Jews, the Passover was a time of remembrance and joy as they recalled their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They ate a lamb and bread without yeast as their ancestors in Egypt did.

The Lord Jesus himself was about to become the sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world. His death on the Cross was going to be a once-for-all sacrifice. Today, we no longer have to bring a lamb to be sacrificed. Christ is our Passover lamb! When Jesus had that final meal with His disciples, He took ordinary bread and juice of that time and attached special significance to them. The bread that was broken, passed around, and eaten was to represent Jesus' broken body on the Cross. The juice that the disciples drank was to represent Jesus' shed blood to take away the sins of the world. Read Matthew 26:26–29 for a detailed description of that supper. Jesus told His disciples to continue to do this in memory of Him (see Luke 22:19).

Some churches today offer the Lord's Supper on a particular Sunday each month. Other churches celebrate every week. In the book of Acts, the early church broke bread on a regular basis—perhaps even daily (Acts 2:42). No matter how often, this observance served as a reminder to the believers of what God had done for them through the shed blood and broken body of Jesus Christ.

In Oriental cultures, breaking bread or eating together symbolized a bond among friends. For Christians, eating or celebrating the Lord's Supper is symbolic of the bond that exists between the Lord and those who believe and follow Him.

Prayer

Objective 5:

Explain why prayer is vital to the Christian.

Many people are unsure of how to pray. But prayer is simply communicating with God. This communication is not limited to spoken words; hence, a person who is speech impaired or cannot speak still has the ability to communicate with God. Such a person can communicate with God through his or her thoughts, meditations of the

heart, and by other outward expressions like art, service, and so on.

For others who are able to speak, prayer involves—but is not limited to—talking with God. For instance, when you were young, your parents may have taught you to use three important expressions of courtesy: I'm sorry, please, and thank you. You can follow that simple outline when you talk to God. When you foul up and do wrong, tell God that you are sorry. When you need His help, ask politely. And when God answers your prayer, thank Him.

While Jesus was on the earth, He prayed to God the Father (see Matthew 14:23). Why did Jesus need to pray if He was God's divine Son? Prayer is all about relationship. Jesus was in communion with His heavenly Father. We do not know all they talked about, but during those times Jesus found direction and was even given the words to say. In Luke 18:1–8, Jesus shared the parable of the persistent widow to teach His disciples that they should always pray and never give up. Why not take time now to read that parable?

In addition to Jesus' example, others in the Bible teach us that we need to pray. The apostle Paul wrote that we are to “devote . . . to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Colossians 4:2). In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, he advised again, “pray continually.”

Prayer is learned by doing. The more we pray, the more comfortable we become and the more we learn how to pray. Our prayers can be very simple. We can begin to praise God for the gift of salvation, proceed to the needs of others, and then move on to the areas of our own lives that we need help in. We must always make sure to spend ample time giving God praise for His goodness, grace, and mercy that have been extended to us.

Now, allow me to suggest two other important things that you should add to the Bible reading, fellowship, communion, and prayer. These are water baptism and generosity.

Water Baptism

Objective 6:

Discuss why new Christians should be baptized in water.

Once we have chosen to follow Jesus Christ by accepting the gift of salvation, we should be baptized in water by immersion. There are many examples of this in the book of Acts (see Acts 2:41; 8:36–38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15). In Colossians 2:12, the apostle Paul speaks of being “buried with him in baptism and raised with him.” The symbolism of water baptism is twofold. Our being immersed in water, as Christ was in Matthew 3, symbolizes our death to self or to the old life of sin and bad habits. When we are raised out of the water, we are symbolically joining in the resurrected life of Jesus Christ and looking forward to a new, wonderful life through Him.

One of the greatest truths from Scripture is that we have been called to live for God. We have been saved in order to be fully alive. Some people who claim to be saved have no evidence of the joy that comes from knowing they are in right relationship with Jesus Christ. This should not be. As believers in Christ, we should have the joy of the Lord no matter what the circumstances might be. Nehemiah, who was going through difficult circumstances, proclaimed the joy of the Lord to be his strength (Nehemiah 8:10).

Water baptism does not save. It is simply a public proclamation that we have chosen to leave our sinful lives behind and live resurrected lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a difference between the sacrament of infant baptism as practiced by some churches and baptism by immersion as portrayed in the Holy Scriptures. Some groups incorrectly hold that God confers salvation and eternal life on a person when he or she is baptized. So, parents in some denominations are eager to have their infants baptized because they think it guarantees their children's salvation.

In evangelical churches, we believe each person must choose Christ and salvation. An infant is not capable of this and is rightly not condemned as a sinner. However, there comes a time when people do sin, reach an age of accountability, and become aware of their sinfulness and need of Christ. Only after such a person repents of sin and accepts Christ is water baptism appropriate and meaningful. Water baptism by immersion after conversion denotes a choice on our part, indicating that not only have we chosen to receive Christ as our Savior but we have also chosen to follow Him.

Generosity

Objective 7:

Identify reasons why Christians should be givers.

Just like Bible study, fellowship, communion, prayer, and water baptism, generosity is a vital part of the Christian life. Have you ever noticed that giving people tend to be happier and more excited about life than stingy people? Selfish people never seem to fully enjoy what they have. This is because “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

God’s generosity

Clearly, God is a very generous giver. He gives us life, provides for our needs, offers salvation, and helps in our times of need. If God stopped being generous, even for one moment, life as we know it would cease to exist. He holds our lives in His hands.

Like our heavenly Father, Christians must also be generous. Proverbs 11:25 notes, “a generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” Therefore, we must give of our time, talents, and material wealth to advance God’s kingdom and help others. While other lessons to come will deal specifically with each of these three areas, let me share with you two simple principles to remember.

God owns it all

No matter whether we are financially wealthy or not, we do well to remember that God really owns everything we have. We cannot take anything with us when we leave this world. God simply allows us to manage certain resources for a period of time while we are on earth. So, whether we hoard or are generous, the resources actually belong to God.

Practice tithing

Many Christians practice tithing. To tithe is to set apart one-tenth of our income and give it back to the Lord. This means that we trust God to help us live on the remaining 90 percent. This is not a requirement for salvation. Eternal life is a gift we receive through faith in Christ. However, when you consider that everything we have comes from God, the idea of giving some of it back to Him does not seem absurd. Tithing Christians often report that God enables the 90 percent they keep to go a lot farther than they ever imagined.

God promised to pour out His blessing on the Israelites as they tithed: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it” (Malachi 3:10). In the New Testament, Christians are also encouraged to give generously and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7). Of course, no pastor or church organization can require a person to tithe; tithing must be done freely. Following are reasons why Christians practice tithing.

- To be free from the bondage of money

Many people live for one reason—to acquire wealth. It does not matter how they get it either. In essence, they have become slaves to money. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus teaches, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both

God and Money.” Regularly tithing helps us remember that God, not money, must come first.

- To receive God’s blessings

God is not stingy; He loves to bless His children. A prerequisite for enjoying God’s best is to be a giver. In Luke 6:38, Christ advises, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

- To further the work of God’s kingdom

It costs money to run churches, fund programs that help needy people, and send missionaries. If you care about people and want to make an impact in their lives, you will be willing to give to make sure everyone has a chance to hear the Gospel, be saved, and grow spiritually.

- To express our commitment to Jesus

Think about it—we attach our hearts to what we treasure the most. Jesus taught that we must be careful not to get too attached to material possessions. Matthew 6:19–21 records His words: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Through giving, we accumulate heavenly reward that one day will be enjoyed fully.

Conclusion

We learned in the beginning of this lesson that God wants us to grow spiritually. We also studied the four factors listed in Acts 2:42, 46–47 that led to the rapid expansion of the early church. As the early Christians continued to be faithful in these areas of their lives, the church blossomed and grew. The first Christians dedicated themselves to the Word, to fellowship, communion, and prayer. They were baptized in water,

thus identifying themselves with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. They also were very generous. The church soon increased from 120 believers (Acts 2) to thousands (Acts 6). In reality, the church, God's people, has never stopped expanding. There are more Christians today in the world than ever before. Decide to be one who makes a difference!

Suggested Verses to Memorize

Acts 2:42

Psalm 119:105

Romans 12:4–5

Colossians 4:2

Matthew 28:18–19

Luke 6:38

SELF-TEST

Please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Salvation is*
 - a) *earned by being good.*
 - b) *inherited through your family.*
 - c) *a gift from God.*

2. *The pattern for growth in Acts 2:42 included*
 - a) *study of the apostles' teaching, prayer, fellowship and communion.*
 - b) *starting a business and prayer.*
 - c) *prayer only.*

3. *The pattern for growth in Acts 2:42 is*
 - a) *reserved for special days of the year.*
 - b) *meant to become part of everyday living for new and old believers.*
 - c) *just a suggestion.*

4. *Water baptism symbolizes*
 - a) *joining the church.*
 - b) *death to the old sinful life and rising to a new life in Christ.*
 - c) *that you were more spiritual than those who had not been baptized.*

5. *We fellowship with others because*
 - a) *we need each other.*
 - b) *we have nothing else to do.*
 - c) *others are helpless without us.*

6. *Our prayer life should consist of*
 - a) *requests for our needs.*
 - b) *requests for others' needs.*
 - c) *praise to God and requests for our and others' needs.*

7. *The reason we tithe is*
 - a) *to receive God's blessings.*
 - b) *to be free from the bondage of money.*
 - c) *for God's blessings and to be free from financial bondage.*

8. *The requirement for water baptism is*
 - a) *salvation and a desire to follow Christ.*
 - b) *to be 21 years of age.*
 - c) *to have been a believer for five years.*

9. *The teaching of the apostles was based on*
 - a) *their culture.*
 - b) *Judaism.*
 - c) *the Old Testament and the life of Christ.*

10. *Celebrating Communion should be done*
 - a) *once a month.*
 - b) *only in church.*
 - c) *as often as you need, to remember and celebrate Christ's work on the Cross.*

ANSWERS TO SELF-TEST

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parentheses.

1. *c* (1.1)
2. *a* (1.1)
3. *b* (1.1)
4. *b* (1.6)
5. *a* (1.3)
6. *c* (1.5)
7. *c* (1.7)
8. *a* (1.6)
9. *c* (1.1)
10. *c* (1.4)

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