

A Set of Discussion Guides

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for @This Point, fall 2010

“Touchdown Jesus:

On the Wages of Discipleship in America”

Session One

“Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America”

Jonathan Malesic

Concept

The purpose of this first session is to explore Jonathan Malesic’s claim that American Christians have contributed to public way of life in which the “distinctive witness” of Christian identity has given way to the practice of faith as a means for self-advancement and financial gain. Participants will be challenged to consider how their own Christian identity plays out in the public arena, as well as whether or not they agree with Malesic’s historically founded argument for a more solid divide between the sacred and secular realms of society.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute discussion period. Leaders are welcome to make adjustments according to the group’s needs and circumstances.

Goal

The goals of this session are a) to encourage participants to use both Scriptural and personal resources as they consider the pros and cons of Malesic’s position, b) to use Malesic’s illustration of Christian identity and professional athletics to think about other realms of public life where Christian identity may influence consumers, and c) to begin to think about what methods of discipleship are currently present in the participants’ own communities of faith, and what these methods communicate to the public about Christian identity.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Consider how their own faith community practices discipleship in the public realm.
- Use Scripture to reflect upon their personal experiences of Christian identity.
- Summarize a position that is for or against Malesic’s historically-founded argument for placing “a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church.”
- Brainstorm ways in which they have seen examples in public life of Christian identity being used for self-advancement or financial gain.
- Evaluate the practices of their own faith community in light of Malesic’s claims.

Preparation

- Participants should have read Jonathan Malesic’s lead article, *“Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America.”*

- Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to group discussion. If your group is larger than eight participants, consider dividing them into smaller groups of four to six members.
- Write one of the opening statements on the board: (If your church has a discipleship committee): *Name some of the things your church's discipleship committee does.* (If your church does not have a discipleship committee): *Name ways in which your church accomplishes the practice of discipleship.*

Materials

- Bible
- white/chalk board and markers/chalk
- paper and writing utensils

Sequence

Opening – (5 min)

- As your group gathers, use the question on the board to help participants reflect upon the ways in which their faith community goes about the practice of discipleship. Once most members have arrived, delegate an individual to record responses on the board while others share their thoughts. Then, share with the group that the Greek root of the word “*disciple*” means “*follower*” or “*to follow*”. Ask participants to consider how the acts of discipleship they have named might constitute acts of “*following*.” Before moving on, it might be helpful to read aloud the “Concept” section of this discussion guide so participants might understand the purpose of the day’s lesson.

Explore – (10 min)

- Ask volunteers to read the following Scripture verses aloud for the group.
 - Matthew 5:14-16 - “You are the light of the world...”
 - Matthew 6:5-6 - “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites...”
- Have participants consider for a moment how their own Christian identity plays out in public life. Do they identify with one of these Scripture verses more than the other? What are the challenges to “being a light in the world”? What are the challenges to “praying with your door shut”?

Encounter – (25 min)

- In his article, Malesic sets forth a historically-founded argument for placing “*a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church.*” Divide participants into two groups and have each group summarize a position that is for or against this claim (as the leader, you decide which group takes on which position.) Encourage them to use excerpts from the article, Scriptural references, and personal experiences to form their argument. After a few moments, have a spokesperson from each group share their conclusions.
- Malesic names professional athletics and politics as two realms in which Christian identity is used to exploit public support. Ask participants to think of other examples in public life where they have seen Christian identity used for self-advancement or financial gain. (Delegate one participant to record responses on the board.) Where in public life have they seen Christian identity used in positive, selfless ways?

- Consider Malesic’s claim that *“if American Christians want to reinvigorate their church’s challenge to culture, then change is necessary both at the level of the identity-producer and the identity-consumer: producers need to be less opportunistic about using Christian identity to get ahead, and consumers need to change their expectations about the visibility of a Christian identity, being less willing to provide a payoff for those opportunists.”* Taking Malesic’s charge at a personal level, what would this challenge mean within the life of your own faith community? Are there ways in which your church “provides payoffs” for opportunists? Do you yourself see ways in which your faith community may act as “identity-producers” in the public realm?

Respond – (5 min)

- Return to the list of discipleship activities your group created in the opening activity. Taking into account the group’s discussion, what would you say are some of the most faithful ways your church goes about living a Christian identity in the public realm? Are there any items on the list that might be considered (according to Malesic’s definition) “opportunistic”? What do the particular acts of discipleship in your faith community communicate to the world about Christian identity?

Closing –

Close with prayer, using your own words or the following:

O God who comes to us in Jesus,
 the One who lived in this world
 in ways both bold and gentle
 in ways both outspoken and kind
 in ways that now challenge us to speak truth to power
 but always in and out of Christ’s love.
 We pray that in our lives your Holy Spirit
 would give us courage to proclaim your word
 and the wisdom to do it in ways
 that renounce self-interest
 and embrace the grace and love
 you have so freely given to us.
 Amen.

Session Two

“Bushels and Lampstands, Loose Lips and Martyrs:

A Response to Jonathan Malesic”

Pamela Cooper-White

Concept

The purpose of the second session is to consider the main aspects of Pamela Cooper-White’s response to Jonathan Malesic’s lead article. While Malesic argues for greater separation (or secrecy) between Christian witness and the public realm, Cooper-White challenges readers to

explore the numerous and complex meanings of the terms “public”, “secrecy”, and “witness”. Participants will be challenged to consider how their theological perspectives, denominational traditions, and personal contexts shape their definitions of these terms.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute discussion period. Leaders are welcome to make adjustments according to the group’s needs and circumstances.

Goal

The goals of this session are a) to further explore Cooper-White’s definitions of “public”, “secrecy”, and “witness” and how they affect the interpretation of Malesic’s lead article b) to decide if, given Cooper-White’s definitions, there is need for or room in participants’ faith communities for secrecy c) to use Scriptural references and personal experience to articulate one’s perspective on what it means to be a Christian witness in public life.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Consider the various “publics” in which participants live their daily lives.
- Use Scripture to reflect upon personal and communal understandings of Christian witness.
- Reflect upon the differences between confidentiality and secrecy as experienced by participants in their own faith community’s Christian practice.
- Decide how Cooper-White’s expansion of the terms “public”, “secrecy”, and “witness” now influences their understanding of Malesic’s original argument.

Preparation

- Participants should have read Pamela Cooper-White’s response article, “*Bushels and Lampstands, Loose Lips and Martyrs: A Response to Jonathan Malesic.*”
- Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to group discussion. If your group is larger than eight participants, consider dividing them into smaller groups of four to six members.
- Write the following instructions on the board: *Fold a piece of paper into four sections. In each section, write down one “public” in which you live your life. (Suggest considering categories based in: economics, vocations, racial, ethnic, familial connections, geographic proximity, politics, leisure and civic activities, etc.) Try to pick four particularly meaningful publics.*

Materials

- Bible
- white/chalk board and markers/chalk
- paper and writing utensils

Sequence

Opening – (5 min)

- As your group gathers, make sure each participant has a sheet of paper and writing utensil to follow the instructions on the board. Once your group has had some time to reflect, ask volunteers to share which “publics” they wrote down. Does anyone consider themselves to be a witness to or within any of these publics? Do they have a public on their sheet in which they

would consider it difficult to be a witness? Ask participants which of these publics is most integral to their overall identity. Can they conceive of separating their Christian identity from this public?

Explore – (10 min)

- Pamela Cooper-White references the following Biblical texts in her exploration of the term “witness”: (have a volunteer read each text aloud for the group)
 - Romans 10:13 - “For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord...”
 - Luke 4:18 - “...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”
- Ask participants whether their faith community’s approach to witnessing aligns more with the verse from Romans or Luke. Can these two perspectives work together, or are they mutually exclusive? How do participants see these perspectives play out in the various publics in which they live their lives?

Encounter – (25 min)

- In her article, Cooper-White expresses a concern for the differences between confidentiality and secrecy. She describes confidentiality as “*a form of concealment whose goal is to protect the privacy, trust, and even vulnerability of a person*” and warns against secrecy that creates “*a circle of insiders*” that may “*exclude voices that might offer feedback, even criticism.*” Encourage participants to reflect upon personal experiences in which the lines between confidentiality and secrecy may have become blurred. Within the context of a faith community, are there any benefits to secrecy? What potential for harm or damage do participants perceive when secrecy is practiced in a faith community? (Note: participants should be encouraged to share only as much as they are comfortable with in this context.)
- Using concepts drawn from family systems theory, Cooper-White describes healthy differentiation as, “*being able to remain close to others while maintaining one’s own emotions, beliefs, and choices*”. Ask participants to apply this concept to the practice of witnessing: What does it look like to practice healthy-self differentiation while witnessing to those whose theological beliefs differ from your own? Are there ways your faith community does this well? Are there ways your faith community struggles with healthy differentiation?
- Cooper-White adds several nuances to Malesic’s original use of the terms “public”, “secrecy”, and “witness”. How does Cooper-White’s expansion of these terms influence participants’ reading of Malesic’s original argument (for placing “*a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church*”)? Ask participants if they are more or less apt to agree with Malesic after reading Cooper-White’s article. What reasons do they give?

Respond – (5 min)

- Ask participants to return to the four “publics” they named in the opening activity. Do any of these realms stand out to them as communities of healthy differentiation? Do any of them stand out as places where secrecy creates “*unhealthy, even destructive*” consequences? What lessons do either of these publics (healthy or unhealthy) offer to the participants’ faith communities as they consider the practice of being witnesses to Christ?

Closing –

Close with prayer, using your own words or the following:

Merciful God,
who knows all our secrets,
we pray that as we find faithful ways to share your good news,
you would be a constant source of wisdom and grace.
In the pieces of our lives that happen behind closed doors
and in the moments when we fling those doors wide open,
we pray your Holy Spirit would urge us be
ever-humble,
ever-compassionate,
ever-prayerful,
and ever-faithful,
just as Jesus, in whose name we pray, taught us to live.
Amen.

Session Three

Confrontational Secrets:

A Response to Jonathan Malesic’s “Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America”

E. Elizabeth Johnson

Concept

The purpose of the third session is to consider the main aspects of E. Elizabeth Johnson’s response to Jonathan Malesic’s lead article. As Johnson affirms Malesic’s warning against Christianity employed as “*a form of currency in our political and economic marketplaces*”, she also creates complexity within his argument by citing numerous Scriptural and historical references that demonstrate the various functions of secrecy. Participants will use both Scripture and experience to distinguish between secrets that *confront* and secrets that *protect*, exploring how secrecy functions in their own faith community versus Christian communities facing persecution for their witness.

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute discussion period. Leaders are welcome to make adjustments according to the group’s needs and circumstances.

Goal

The goals of this session are a) to explore Johnson's illustration of the various functions of secrecy with regard to Malesic's lead article b) to consider various Biblical references to secrecy as they relate to the participants' own faith community c) to imagine the implications of secrecy in contexts where Christianity is not a part of mainstream culture.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Use Scripture to examine the various functions of secrecy in the gospel texts.
- Consider how their own societal context affects the practice of their faith.
- Imagine how those who live in contexts where they are persecuted for their Christian beliefs view the mainstream (celebrity) status of Christians such as Tim Tebow.
- Think specifically about how acts of secrecy might function in positive ways in their own faith communities.

Preparation

- Participants should have read E. Elizabeth Johnson's response article, "*Confrontational Secrets: A Response to Jonathan Malesic's 'Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America'*".
- Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to group discussion. If your group is larger than eight participants, consider dividing them into smaller groups of four to six members.
- Write the following quote from Johnson's article on the board: "*I even wonder whether some trivializations of Christian faith might rise - or fall - to the level of wrongful use of the divine name and thus violate the third amendment.*" What are some examples of "trivializations" of the Christian faith in our society?

Materials

- Bible
- white/chalk board and markers/chalk
- paper and writing utensils

Sequence

Opening – (5 min)

- As your group gathers, ask participants to join in pairs or small groups to discuss the quote on the board. Once groups have had some time to gather and discuss, ask them to share their ideas. Record their examples of their trivializations on the board or butcher paper. Then read Exodus 20:3 aloud to the group:

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God,
for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”

Ask participants to look through the list they have created and decide which, if any, of these examples could be seen as violating the third commandment. What constitutes the line between practicing Christian witness and making wrongful use of God's name?

Explore – (10 min)

- In Mark’s gospel, Johnson states that secrecy, “*is a great deal more confrontational than it is protective of the church’s integrity*”. Divide into groups or partners and assign each one of the following texts:
 - Mark 1:42-44 - “Immediately the leprosy left him...”
 - Mark 3:11-12 - “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him...”
 - Mark 5:42-43 - “And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about...”
 - Mark 8:29-30 - “He asked them, ‘But who do you say I am?...””
- How do you see these particular examples of secrecy working to (as Johnson puts it) “drive the plot of Mark’s story”? Read Mark 7:36 - how do secrets sometimes fuel a greater desire to proclaim information?

Encounter – (25 min)

- Johnson names two historical examples of secret keeping (the conversion story of Izates of Adiabene and the Islamic principle of *taqiyya*) that “*concern the protection of religious people from belligerent neighbors rather than from trivialization of or wrongful profiting from their faith.*” Do you think Christians in North America have any understanding of what it is like to have a need for protection because of the way they practice their faith? Are there other groups in our society (racial, ethnic, socio-economic, etc.) that might practice secret-keeping out of concern for their own safety?
- Quoting Justo Gonzalez, Johnson warns that “*a church that follows a crucified Lord probably ought to be uncomfortable with the kind of mainstream status ours now enjoys.*” Thinking back to Malesic’s critiques of NFL quarterback Tim Tebow, imagine that you are a member of a community that faces daily persecution for your Christian beliefs. What kinds of feelings would you have toward Tebow’s celebrity status and multi-million dollar endorsements? Are Tebow’s actions an insult to Christians who practice their faith on the margins of society? Could his actions in any way offer them hope?
- Johnson notes that in the gospel according to Luke, the evangelist’s motivations for secrecy are “*not to keep one’s Christian faith hidden from one’s neighbors, but rather to hide one’s good works lest they be rewarded by human praise instead of divine approval.*” What are some examples of this kind of secrecy that you see at work in your own faith community (for example, anonymous donors)? Does this kind of secrecy help or hinder the kind of Christian witness that Luke’s gospel promotes?

Respond – (5 min)

- Return to the passages from Mark’s gospel discussed in the exploring activity. Johnson observes that “*the hiding of Jesus in Mark functions ultimately to reveal him.*” Can you think of examples within your own faith community of secrecy that ultimately fuels members’ passion or proclamation? For example: does the mystery of the sacraments function as one of the “confrontational secrets” that leads church members to proclaim the good news of Jesus in the world?

Closing –

Close with prayer, using your own words or the following:

Holy God,

Each and every day your mystery surrounds and compels us.
Though we may never fully understand your will and your ways,
in Jesus Christ you have given us the assurance
that you will never forsake us.
Today we pray for faithful Christians
whose proclamation of your good news places their lives in danger.
Let us not take for granted the many freedoms we enjoy
as ones who may worship without fear.
Help us to seek you faithfully,
please you humbly,
and love you fiercely,
so that others may be led to do the same.
In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

Session Four

A Response to Touchdown Jesus: The Wages of Discipleship in America Timothy A Beach-Verhey

Concept

The purpose of the fourth and final session is to explore Timothy A Beach-Verhey's response to Jonathan Malesic's lead article. While Malesic advocates for "*a buffer between the public life of the streets and the liturgical life of the church*", Beach-Verhey is quick to point out two significant dangers to this approach: "*arrogance and triumphalism*" among Christians as well as the abandonment of the world "*to the spirits of the age.*" Participants will explore the idea of arrogance and perfectionism in the practice of Christianity as well as how "*Christianity has been reduced to just another choice in a marketplace crammed with pleasingly packaged options.*"

Timeframe

The lesson is written for a 45-minute discussion period. Leaders are welcome to make adjustments according to the group's needs and circumstances.

Goal

The goals of this session are a) to explore the two main dangers that Beach-Verhey finds in Malesic's argument b) to understand how Christians individually and as a community struggle to resist "*the spirits of the age*" c) to use Scripture as a guide to what it means to live a life of Christian witness that is both public and faithful.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Name some of the "*spirits of the age*" that compete with Christianity as identity markers.
- Explore specific examples of how secrecy can lead to the arrogance that Beach-Verhey warns against.
- Consider the obligation that Christians have to witness in the public realm.

- Use Scripture to envision different approaches to Christian witness and leadership that are simultaneously visible and humble.

Preparation

- Participants should have read Timothy A Beach-Verhey's response article, "*A Response to Touchdown Jesus: The Wages of Discipleship in America*".
- Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to group discussion. If your group is larger than eight participants, consider dividing them into smaller groups of four to six members.
- Write the following quote from Beach-Verhey's article on the board: "*We live in an age when technological innovation and market mechanisms present themselves in messianic terms. They promise to enrich the quality of our lives and interactions. But like all false messiahs, they have not and cannot save us.*" What are some of the innovations and mechanisms that you see making these promises among your own friends, co-workers, family members, and yourself?

Materials

- Bible
- white/chalk board and markers/chalk
- paper and writing utensils

Sequence

Opening – (5 min)

- As your group gathers, ask participants to join in pairs or small groups to discuss the question on the board. Once most of your group has arrived, ask them to share their answers to the opening question while a volunteer records their answers on the board. What are some of the common responses? Beach-Verhey goes on to say of these "false messiahs" that:
"...they impoverish us morally and spiritually."

Do you think this is true? How do we avoid these false messiahs (or "spirits of the age") in a world that seems so dependent upon them?

Explore – (10 min)

- In his article, Beach-Verhey draws upon Barbara Brown Taylor's study of Peter as a model for Christian witness and leadership. Have a volunteer read the following verse aloud to the group:
 - Matthew 16:13-20 "...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."
- Bearing in mind the questions and themes of witness that have been discussed throughout this study, how do participants describe Peter's *witness* in this passage? What is Peter's witness *not* in this passage? What simple lessons might a Christian community take away from Jesus' interactions with Peter in these verses?

Encounter – (25 min)

- Beach-Verhey makes the claim that "*without the corrective of critical publicity or the virtue of evangelical concern for the world*", Christians live in danger of falling prey to what he calls "*self-righteous arrogance*." Ask participants to think of specific examples they have seen of groups operating without the corrective of outside voices . Do these groups run the risk of

becoming too self-assured in their methods? How might churches or other organizations join together to avoid the dangers of this level of self-assurance?

- The students of Davidson College serve as Beach-Verhey's example of a public group in need of the church's witness in order to find language for their own experience of faith. Ask participants if they have ever felt similarly pulled between the groups Beach-Verhey describes as "overtly Christian" and "militantly secular". In this struggle, how did the church succeed (or fail) at offering language for one's experience? If participants were able to find their public voice, how do they now offer this language to others that are now in the same ambiguous position?
- "*The strategy of secrecy, I fear, would simply abandon the field to the spirits of the age in the name of an elusive and impossible purity.*" Ask participants to consider this quote from Beach-Verhey and think of times when they have seen churches or church leaders presented as examples of "*elusive and impossible purity.*" When individuals encounter such a community or leader, is it inspiring or intimidating? Would participants rather be a part of a community that strives for perfection in the life of faith, or one that confesses its brokenness openly? Why?

Respond – (5 min)

- Return to the passage from Matthew's gospel discussed in the exploring activity. Now ask for a volunteer to read the following passage aloud to the group:
- Matthew 26:69-75 - "...Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times..."
- In a church in pursuit of human purity and perfection, Peter would undoubtedly fail the test of true leadership. If Jesus was willing to make Peter the rock upon which his church would be built, what does this text say about what it means to live a life of Christian witness? How does it relate to Beach-Verhey's thought that, "*We are not called to be perfect, but to be visible?*"

Closing –

Close with prayer, using your own words or the following:

Gracious God,
we stand humbled today by the overwhelming forgiveness
you offer us in Jesus Christ.
We confess with humility that so often
we do place our identity in false messiahs
we deny you, just as Peter did.
But knowing that even Peter could serve your purposes
on this earth, however imperfectly,
we pray that you would empower us to do the same.
Help us to be visible in our witness,
however flawed it may be at times,
and to live lives that reflect
the love and gratitude we feel for you.
Amen.