

Christian Body Life as Grads

FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS | WEEK FIVE

LEADER'S GUIDE

IN THIS GUIDE

1. Tips for leading this week's meeting.
2. "Including Ministry in Your Personal Academic Goals"

LEADING THE MEETING

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THE THEME OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of *Foundations for Christian Scholars* is to provide an introduction for graduate students to the idea of integrating faith and academics. This study is designed to encourage ongoing discussions about theology, faith, and their impact on your research.

THE THEME FOR THIS WEEK

This lesson emphasizes the importance of community in a Christian's life. It dives into ideas of ministry and church life. In this lesson, we have three main goals:

- For the group to understand that they are ultimately called to academia for God's use.
- For participants to leave with the idea they are part of a worldwide effort to develop a Christian worldview in their disciplines.
- For members to begin discovering their role in their own academic discipline.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

Before the Session

Before you go into the meeting, make sure you have read the following materials:

- I Cor. 12:14-31
- Ephesians 4
- "Including Ministry in your Personal Academic Goals"

Also, all participants will be reading these materials ahead of time and it would help to be familiar with them:

- "The Call to Do What You Are"

ORGANIZING THE SESSION

Here is a suggested outline of your time to follow as you begin the meeting:

Mingling (10 minutes)

Given some people will come in late anyway, allow about 10 minutes for everyone to catch up, get to know each other, and decompress before beginning the session. If people don't know each other yet, take the chance to let people introduce each other.

Prayer (2 minutes)

Open in prayer and ask God to bless the time together. You may want to ask someone else to do it. Just make sure that person is comfortable with the task before putting them on the spot.

Your Story (3 minutes)

As the facilitator for this week, open up the session by sharing your own story. What brought you into graduate school? What has God done in your life? What are you hoping to gain from Christian community at this point in your life? Check out our tips for sharing your testimony under “Tips for Success” below.

Teaching (15 minutes)

Take some time to teach through the materials, highlighting the things that stuck out to you most in the reading materials. Check out our tips for teaching under “Tips for Success” below.

Discussion (15 minutes)

Take the group through the discussion guides in their packets. Go through the questions and remember not to be scared of silence. Also, don't just move on after the first answer. Leave room for additional thoughts or even some disagreement!

Conclusion and Prayer (5 minutes)

Conclude the meeting by challenging participants with the following application points from the lesson and end in prayer:

- Grow in community by asking every person to find ONE other person from the group they can get to know; maybe go out to coffee, grab lunch or just sit down and hear their story.
- Have a vision for your (and your group's) role and contribution to the Kingdom; ask the question “What is your dream for an ideal grad community?”
- Encourage and affirm those who are brave in sharing their story, struggle or something deeper by thanking them and empathizing with them. This creates a community of closeness and safety.
- Be a healer and peace-maker. Identify any issues that need to be addressed with love and compassion. If there are none, perhaps make a pact to be open and honest with one another and agree to graciously hear the concerns of others when they bring up an issue.
- Keep evaluating and growing deeper as a community. Ask the question “What steps do we need to take to go deeper as a group?”
- Remember, others are watching! Consider how you can love and serve the greater grad community through service and outreach!

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Some General Suggestions

As you go into the session, please remember these tips:

- Take time to prepare. You are leading God's people. Take that task seriously!
- Trust the Spirit's leadership in you. You don't need to feel like you must cover everything in the lesson. Feel free to focus on whatever the group is ready to discuss, making sure to bring the topic back to the main point of the session.

- Be yourself. God has given you this opportunity. Don't imitate your professor or pastor.
- Be in prayer for yourself, your community and those who attend. You are leading, but God is doing the work in your group!
- Be sure to call on participants individually to encourage conversation if some are hesitant to speak up. People want to be heard and known.
- Start on time and end on time. As I'm sure you know time is a precious commodity to a grad student.

When Sharing Your Story

Consider following the outline below:

"Once upon a time..." (1 minute): Tell a little of your personal history before graduate school... How did you come to know Christ? How did God work in your life? What was important to you? How did you come to follow God?

"I decided to enter graduate school..." (1 minute): Why did you want to enter graduate school? Was God involved? How did you choose your field?

"But..." (1 minute): What are some obstacles that you've faced before and during graduate school? What are the failures and successes of your journey? How have you seen God shaping you in this process? What are some unresolved tensions in your life?

We tend not to share very intimate or revealing details until we know our community is safe and trustworthy but others will grow closer to you as they learn more of your story. Try to share parts of your story at your first meeting of the semester. These grads and professors will know you on a deeper level and form a community with you that will encourage you in both the good and bad days.

When Teaching

Try to cover each of these bases:

- Summary (2 minutes) – What is the main idea of the session and how does it fit into the structure of the entire study?
- What to KNOW (5 minutes): What are the key concepts presented in the articles and materials provided?
- How to FEEL (5 minutes): Share how the passage made you feel personally (did it bring joy, hope, conviction, or anything else?).
- What to DO (5 minutes): Practically speaking, how does this lesson relate to our lives? Select a point or two and draw out a personal example or application for your own life.
- Conclusion (3 minutes): End with a conclusion about your points.

INCLUDING MINISTRY IN YOUR PERSONAL ACADEMIC GOALS

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There is no limit to the personal stress that accompanies the pursuit of an advanced degree. It is no wonder that only 45% who begin a doctoral program ever complete the process. Over half of the Ph.D. students in the US are married, adding family pressures to the academic challenges they face. When you include finances, advisor relationships, and the isolation of many research-oriented programs, there is an endless supply of anxieties that are encountered by the average graduate student. **So why should a person add one more variable to their already full plate?** Let me suggest a number of reasons and the insights from a few students who have wrestled with that very question.

Those who are working on a Masters or Ph.D. program often see themselves as in a holding pattern for some future position. They are scholars in training who look forward to that tenured position that will afford them opportunities to teach, write, or do research in an area that may allow them to use their scholarship as a witness for Christianity. Or they are awaiting similar ministry potential as a leader in industry. While these may be admirable goals, it has been my experience that most believing professors find it personally challenging to include ministry into their busy schedule. Either they are too overwhelmed with the rigors of their discipline to devote time toward the study of worldview related issues or the time spent with colleagues and students is spent strictly doing university business. This is also true for the person trying to find time and opportunity for ministry at work. It doesn't become easier.

There is a sense in which your graduate student peers are more open today than they would be in years to come as a professor or a person in government or industry. The same pressures you face today are also causing problems in their lives and they are reflective about purpose, meaning, and their place in the world. You have those issues answered broadly in your relationship with Christ, and have the promise of a calling as you develop in your personal walk. These are trying times that make your peers more receptive now. However, they do tend to have a skeptical exterior that would put off most frontal approaches to spiritual issues. As Tim Downs states in his book, *Finding Common Ground*, "this type of sowing is an advanced ministry skill."

That is another great reason to include ministry goals in your academic program: it is a skill that will be useful for life. **The ability to connect with a skeptic or antagonist and appropriately transition a person to spiritual topics is an acquired art that is refined in the halls of your campus.** When your heart breaks for the lost but you sense a resistance to Christianity, you will probably need to connect on issues of family or financial pressures, academic or ethics issues, or some other topic of general interest before you are given an opportunity to address their personal need for Christ. Graduate students are an excellent field for sowing efforts. One can master the skills in this hostile environment and be well prepared for your neighborhoods and schools of your future sphere of influence.

Truly there is a sense in which God is the one who calls you as a student and will bring people into your path to minister to them. There is never a time when we rest from our ministry because to do so would

be to curtail our availability for His use. We are His feet as we walk through the halls and His mouthpiece when we encounter people in need. He desires our availability (1 Peter 3:15) and timely words that allow Him to use us in the lives of our peers. One student shared with me her experience of taking a semester to study, practice, and wrestle through issues concerning sowing in her department, yet with no tangible results of spiritual discussions. However, in one single week she was given opportunities to talk to the department advisor about his spiritual views, a peer who raised questions, and an undergrad who had heard she was a believer. These multiple opportunities came from extensive social discussions, casual topics and a demonstrated interest of them as persons. It is the availability that counts.

When God has your willingness, He may take your heart as well. There are numerous crises that are occurring around us to which we may be oblivious. Yet, a sensitized heart may take notice of the person who is depressed, lonely or in some other way oppressed with life. It is your consistent caring that will make you a person who will be sought out as a resource when things get tough. One friend had his roommate commit suicide in the midst of his academic pressures. While he was unable to help his friend at this critical point of despair, he began receiving emails from another grad in the lab who implied that perhaps that was an OK means of dealing with the pressures. He consulted a professional to assess the potential of another suicide, but then spent several hours addressing her spiritual condition. Very few cases give such extreme signals, but the person attuned to the needs of peers will find plenty of opportunities.

This is truly an advanced ministry skill that requires a specialized approach to such a unique audience, but it is not one without some direction. The book *Finding Common Ground* by Tim Downs (see Week 4 article) is an excellent resource for thinking through your approach to peers without damaging the ongoing professional relationship that is needed in the department. However, it is an intentional approach that is prayerfully awaiting the open door and building connections that make the step less difficult for all concerned. When one is allowed to dialog on topics of life, death, and eternity, the relationship becomes all the more transparent and fulfilling.

There is a sense in which a believer never stops growing and never ceases to be available to be used. I don't picture myself retiring from my ministry efforts though a certain life phase may cause me to slow my degree of work. In the same way, I can never picture a time when I will be set aside from doing ministry because I am awaiting a future calling. We all simply remain available for His use in whatever setting he calls us.