



DISCUSSION GUIDE

6 SESSIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION



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Session 1

CALLED TO FLOURISH

In chapter one Mark Labberton says, “We are to fulfill the calling of all humanity and thus point to the true purpose of human life. The Word made flesh in Jesus Christ should show through us.”

Use the following Bible study, chapter overview and book discussion questions to help your group members reflect on what it means to flourish as we answer our call.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapter one.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

1. In what ways does this passage suggest God’s desire for flourishing people in a flourishing world?
2. Where do you see yourself getting in the way of God’s desire for flourishing?
3. How are we called to participate in the light that shines in the darkness?
4. What is one specific action you can take this week to allow the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ to shine through you?

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW

1. *Call.* The heart of God’s call is this: that we receive and live the love of God for us and for the world. This is the meaning of the two great commandments, that we are made to

love the Lord our God with all we are and our neighbors as ourselves.

Calling isn't just a category for those who pursue some form of recognized ministry; it's about God's desire for all of our lives as ambassadors of God's kingdom. This is our primary call. This primary call for *all* of us leads naturally and secondarily to God's call for *each* of us.

2. *Not primarily a burning bush.* Only once does God's call come from a burning bush. As a result, people ask many questions about how their lives relate to the world. Today, in a staggeringly complex and diverse world, the overarching biblical narrative that includes creation, fall, redemption and fulfillment has frequently been rejected and denied. The issues seem too many and the evidence too little for them. The secular, street-level view seems the most reliable: humanity is here on its own.

Are we alone in the universe? Does the world have no ultimate meaning? Is love merely instinctive, evolutionary social welfare? Is there hope? These questions may sound philosophical, but they're personal and practical. In real words and real deeds, God's people are sent as God's reassuring response to these questions. But that can be evident only if we live honestly and fully before God and our neighbor.

3. *Why call matters.* The real solution [to the world's questions] is what the Bible declares is our calling: to live out genuine love that shows up in the face of real need. We lose our lives, and gain them too, in the *action* of laying them down in worship and love.

4. *Making a difference.* The gospel and the church are not the same. But, for many, they are indistinguishable. When God's people fail to live our call, the church buries the gospel. That's where we are. That's the crisis we must face.

IRS office story. There, in the midst of a warren of bureaucratic anonymity and powerlessness, I encountered a person who became my advocate, who heard my appeal and who took the initiative to do on my behalf what I could never have done for myself. This [is] a parable of what the body of Christ can be in the world. We are to be those who, in the vastness of the universe and in a context of human powerlessness, show up as advocates who represent and incarnate the presence of God, who is the hope of the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Christians "are to fulfill the calling of all humanity and thus point to the true purpose of human life." In your own words, what is the true purpose of human life?
2. What is God's primary call for all of us?

3. What does the author mean when he says that God's call seldom comes through a burning bush?

4. "When God's people fail to live our call, the church buries the gospel." Give an example of how the church might bury the gospel.

5. "The gospel and the church are not the same. But, for many, they are indistinguishable." What distinguishes the gospel from the church?

Session 2

A LOST CHURCH IN A LOST WORLD

In chapter two, Mark Labberton asks, “Here’s what I want to know: if I hang out at your church, will I meet people who are actually *like* Jesus?” Use the following Bible study, chapter overview and discussion questions to help your group discover why Mark asks this question.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapter two.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read Matthew 5:13-16.

1. What does it mean to you that we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?
2. In what ways do you see the church as a whole living up to this call or failing to live up to it?

Where do you see your own role in this?

3. Which examples of the lost church resonate with your own experience?

Which challenge your view of the church?

4. Which examples of the lost world resonate with your own experience?

Which challenge your view of the world?

CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW

1. *Put to the test.* It doesn't take research to know that many people, especially in the millennial generation, feel that the Christian church bears little resemblance to the One it claims to follow. Most of us have heard firsthand from those who think Christians act more like judgmental religious fanatics than like Jesus. This leads to labels for the church:

- *the self-absorbed church*
- *the invisible church*
- *the oppressive church*
- *the siloed church*
- *the bad-news church*
- *The no-news church*

What would it take to become *the good-news church*? For the church today to claim it knows the Way, it needs to demonstrate convincingly that it has good news deserving of that name. In a world of violence, of fear, of poverty, of injustice, it has to show up in relationships and actions of life-giving power. In other words, the church has to show a different view and practice of power than the world around us displays. It has to show it knows the Way in a time of explosive global change and confusion.

2. *The Way.* As I drive by church buildings and read Christian magazines and go to Christian websites, I'm struck by what feels like the presence of an ecclesiastical-industrial complex rather than the aroma of Jesus Christ. God intends for the church to be a community of love and hope in a lost world. But when our life is nothing more than the lost among the lost, what happens to the light and the salt?

3. *The lost world.* Despite Jesus' warning, God's people are in and of the world. The following are labels for the lost world we live in:

- *the free-floating life*
- *the vertigo life*
- *the pinged life*
- *the lonely life*
- *the imposter's life*
- *the ironic life*
- *the consumer life*
- *the fearful life*

Session 3

THE PRIMARY CALL

In chapter three Mark Labberton observes, “As Pope Francis vividly and simply portrays, the most urgent call upon the church is simply to live as followers of Jesus. Christendom no longer masks the church’s failure to live this primary call.” He calls this a “vocational crisis” and asks, “Will the church embody and articulate its only legitimate identity? Will God’s people live as followers of Jesus?” Use the following Bible study, chapter overview and discussion questions to help your group answer these questions.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapter three.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read 1 Peter 2:1-17.

1. How do you respond to the idea that we are “God’s own people” or “God’s special possession”?

What aspects of this calling feel like a gift?

What aspects feel like a challenge?

2. In what ways does your life “proclaim the mighty acts of [Christ] who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9)?

3. What are some practical steps you could take to engage this call more fully?

4. How would you like to see your church respond?

CHAPTER 3: OVERVIEW

1. *Our vocation is here and today.* The vocation of every Christian is to live as a follower of Jesus today. In every aspect of life, in small and large acts, with family, neighbors and enemies, we are to seek to live out the grace and truth of Jesus. This is our vocation, our calling. Today.

In the life of the church, this kind of Jesus-following life and love is often forgotten or demoted. This essential vocation seems to get lost. Instead, the roles associated with power, the attention to structures, the organization of programs, the advocacy efforts and other tasks define the church.

2. *Kingdom vision.* The full vocation of the church is to follow Jesus in the declaration and enactment of the kingdom. This involves all we are and all we have. It's a call into nothing less than God's work of re-creation, in which all things will be made new.

As far-reaching as this vocation is, it is played out in the small and the ordinary as well as in the large and the exceptional. Our gifts and context help shape our contributions, but even before we know what those are, even before God gives clarity to our focus or concentration in kingdom life, even before we have a namable "job" or "mission," we are called to imitate Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If someone asked you to summarize this chapter in one sentence, what would your summary be?
2. What is the same basic vocation all Christians have?
3. Explain what Mark Labberton means when he says, "vocation assumes continuity and context."
4. What do you think defines the church in the minds of people who are not followers of Jesus?
5. What is one small act you could do this week that would declare and enact the kingdom of God?

Session 4

WHERE, HOW, TO WHOM AND TO WHAT ARE WE CALLED?

In this session, which comprises chapters four through six, Mark Labberton observes, “The Christian life is to be an incarnational life. The essence of the Christian gospel is the demonstration, the enactment of God’s redeeming love. The evidence of the good news landing in peoples’ lives is a community that lives and shares its reality in practice. . . . [Y]et the church in the United States is rife with evidence that the church seeks and avoids community, just like the culture around it.” Use the following Bible studies, overview of the chapters and discussion questions to discover where, how, to whom and to what we are called.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapters four through six.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read Jeremiah 29:4-7.

1. How do you respond to the idea that we are living in exile today?
2. What are some of the ways in which we can “build houses . . . plant gardens . . . have sons and daughters” as we seek the shalom of today’s culture?

Read Galatians 5:22-26.

1. In what ways does the fruit of the Spirit reflect our “first things” calling to love God and neighbor?
2. Does fully living into our call require cultivating all nine of these characteristics in our individual lives? Why or why not?

3. Which fruit is most evident in your life?

Which less so?

CHAPTERS 4-6: OVERVIEW

Where Are We Called?

1. *Waking to where we live. The American Dream.* The premise of God's Promised Land to Israel was not that it was a place to pluck God's benefits. It was rather where God's people were to thrive in the grace of living out the call to be God's people. For Israel, blessings were not the goal; they were the encouragement along the path of living God's way.

Meanwhile, exile—life as strangers in a strange land—is our context. We are a declining cultural force against countervailing pressures of spiritual decline. The church of Christendom is fading and flailing. We're complicit in our society's problems, while at the same time we're called to live redemptively as Jesus' followers. To do so wisely and faithfully, we must face where we live.

2. *The gift of exile.* The gift of exilic living, for Israel and now for the North American church, is that it exposes believers to the shoals of authentic faith. The images of being light in a dark world or salt in a decaying one assume the depth of the need to be great and the difference between God's people and the surrounding world to be dramatically evident.

3. *Living beyond ourselves.* Cultivating a spirituality for exile means learning to live inside-out. Living as faithful strangers in a strange land means providing an essential good for the benefit of the surrounding people or context. This was the point of exile for Israel: it was to seek the shalom of the city in which it was oppressed, for in its shalom the people would find their shalom (Jeremiah 29:7).

4. *Not about winning.* The internal irony of God's countercompetitive approach grates against the presuppositions of our winning-obsessed culture. This means shifting both the expectations of outcome and the nature of power. Power, while seldom morally neutral, can be a necessary good. Using power toward individual and social good is not only a legitimate way to live but also can and should be part of a specifically Christian way of living.

5. *Not about having it all.* Promised Land spirituality expects it all and expects it now. Exilic spirituality has to make peace with the partial rather than the whole.

6. *New cues for community.* Promised Land churches offer you everything. An exilic community offers much less and invites you to bring all you can to the community itself.

How Are We Called?

1. God's call—do we believe it or live it? Jesus does not say, “Believe me” but rather, “Follow me.” If we are going to pursue God's call, it's an act of trusting and following—of behaving and living in ways that reflect our life and purposes.

2. How do we show God's call? Jesus prays for his disciples in John 17: that just as the Father and the Son are one, so we might be one with the Father and the Son by the Spirit. This, we understand, is a spiritual communion of the heart. Prayer, then, is the engine. Being in a living conversation with God, being a person who lives a life of prayer, is a vital part of our spiritual maturity and a key to discerning God's guidance.

However, some assumptions about spiritual practice make the material world the enemy of the spiritual. Gnosticism, a shadow influence on Christian spirituality, prioritizes the spiritual over and against the material.

Jesus' followers are not spiritual escapists. We are instead to be the tangible, material demonstration of the presence, love and justice of God in the physical world that God is renewing. When seeking to heed God's call, we can't separate the inner from the outer life.

To Whom and to What Are We Called?

1. With whom are we called? [Jesus] lives and loves so that his people “may be one, as we [he and the Father] are one” (John 17:11). For in his death on the cross, he “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” and created one new humanity (Ephesians 2:14). This is the new sociology of the people of God. And yet the story doesn't play out the way Jesus intended.

Jesus decides who our fellow disciples will be, and from all evidence of the New Testament, it will be an unlikely set of relationships. The net implication, however, is that we are prone to stay in our silos rather than to experience the risk and joy of a life intertwined with someone who is truly not like us in ethnicity, background, personality or in other ways.

2. To what are we called? We need to be sure about what we're seeking and to what end we're seeking it. That is why it's helpful to distinguish “first things” from “next things.”

First things. First things are matters of character and of faith, of obedience and of influence, of priorities. With utter confidence, we can daily pursue these first things as our primary vocation.

Next things. Next things move us in particular contexts of work or ministry. This is where the convergence of gifts, talents, education, opportunity, passion and more draw us toward jobs or service that can seem deeply rewarding.

What matters, at the moment, is to be truly and fully clear that the call of the first things is primary. Yet the temptation is to make the next things first things. We are meant to pursue and develop *first things* as we go about *next things*; we do this simultaneously, remembering that first and next things are not the same.

3. Called to lead. Jesus-following leaders are needed everywhere. In the church that finds itself in exilic times, it would be easy to think exile means impotence and the loss of a capacity to bring change or influence. Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, the Bible shows exilic leaders doing just what exile itself distinctly creates the opportunity to do. The supreme example of this is, of course, Jesus. He was clearly an exilic leader. As one without stature or role, whose life was lived with those at the margins, Jesus led. His hope-filled vision of the kingdom invited his disciples to join in the commitment and energy of faith needed to seek God's provision of a new creation.

4. Wise leaders. Biblical wisdom is the truth and character of God lived in context. When this unfolds in the context of the beloved community, with the chance to exercise the commitments and gifts God has given us with faith and hope and love, God's people act as salt and light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mark Labberton says the American Dream shapes our church identity, practice and vocation. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

2. Mark contrasts the Promised Land and Babylon (exile). How are we called to live in each?

 The Promised Land:

 Exile:
3. What does it mean to live an "incarnational life"?

4. Mark recounts the experiences of Jane, John and Ken as they knit their inner and outer lives together. Whether you are a stay-at-home mom, an accountant, a cashier or an artist, what steps can you take (or have you taken) to do the same in your life?

5. What steps could you take to get out of your silo and build "a life intertwined with someone who is truly not like [you] in ethnicity, background, personality or in other ways"?

6. What is Mark's definition of biblical wisdom?

Who in your experience exemplifies biblical wisdom? In what ways does this person do this?

Session 5

THE WAY OF THE BELOVED, OF WISDOM AND OF SUFFERING

In this session, which comprises chapters seven through nine, Mark Labberton discusses three ways Christians are called and how these “make a kingdom difference in peoples’ lives.” Use the following Bible studies, overview of the chapters and discussion questions to probe the way of belovedness, of wisdom and of suffering.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapters seven through nine.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read John 17.

1. How is our belovedness revealed in Jesus’ prayer?
2. What do we learn from this text about the things Jesus considers primary?
3. How does Jesus’ prayer strengthen “people to acts of courage in places of need”?
4. When we face opposition or suffer because of our Christian call, what encouragement do we find in this prayer?
5. How does this prayer help us to “remember where we are”?

CHAPTERS 7-9: OVERVIEW

The Way of the Beloved

1. *The first of first things.* We start recovering our call when we learn which first things are first. The love of God in Jesus Christ is the supreme first thing; no one and nothing rivals or surpasses this. We matter, and our calling matters, not because we're the supreme test of anything but because we exist for the joy and satisfaction of our Maker, whose love alone enables us to flourish. The love of God is the start and the finish of our vocation.

2. *Beloved together.* We are to live as the beloved together—with other human beings but with those in Christ's family especially. *My* vocation can be discovered only in the context of *our* vocation. We discover and live our belovedness in Christ with and for one another. This is what church means.

We rehearse [our belovedness] when we share in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism declares that our belovedness is a settled identity. The communion table enables us to go on doing this "in remembrance of him" because we go on needing to receive and to share this love repeatedly.

3. *The freedom to make first things primary.* A big gap yawns between our values and our actions. We get distracted by the thing that's fifteenth or thirty-second on our list and fail to do what we claim is first. If we allow what is first to become primary in our lives, the rest begins to take shape. We start living the vocation for which we are made.

4. *Make what's primary pervasive.* Living as the beloved and following Jesus together is meant to pervade all that we are and do. It unfolds in neighborhoods, in schools and in art galleries. It happens over the back fence, online and in carpools. It's living Jesus' life in the midst of the ordinary. To embrace our vocation as Jesus' followers is to pervade our thoughts *and* our actions—not just one or the other. It likewise is to pervade our public as well as our private lives.

5. *Colliding expectations.* Following Jesus is no easy path for anyone at any time. It is, however, made even harder when we try to do so as though we live in one place when in fact we live in another. This is the temptation of the Promised Land delusion. If we understand that exile is now home, we embrace and live into our vocation in a far more realistic and constructive way.

The expectation that the church's voice will be resonant with the voice of the dominant culture must be surrendered. This will increasingly be the case in much of North America.

The Way of Wisdom

1. *Rehabilitating wisdom.* Wisdom is God's truth and character lived in context—Jesus.

Our world needs wise disciples who form wise communities, who live wisely in the world, not with a fix-it mentality, but with the humble and courageous vocation to listen, to see, to

engage, to act and to love. The “insights” in any claim to wisdom are only as valuable as their correspondence to reality. In biblical terms, wisdom leads people to acts of courage in places of need.

2. *A global cry.* We are in a crossroads period, a time of almost unparalleled personal and global turbulence. In this time of turmoil, people want action that makes things better. In biblical terms, this is a cry for wisdom. Biblical wisdom is character in action in the face of life’s real needs.

God’s wisdom breaks passivity and leads to action.

3. *Wisdom calls.* Wisdom calls out our identity and cheers our living response. Wisdom underscores that we are called to follow Jesus, who is wisdom incarnate, and to demonstrate wisdom by letting it become flesh in us. Following Jesus means stepping into the incarnational life in time and space. The lost way of wisdom is foundational to the way of Jesus. In it you will find your life, and you will flourish.

The Way of Suffering

1. *Remembering where we are.* Suffering is “normative for billions today.” If our vocation—hearing and living in response to the love of God for the sake of the world—is our calling, we need to grasp that it includes following Jesus into the lives and places of such suffering. To do this will mean in some way “the sharing of his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10).

Suffering is not the goal of following Jesus. It will, however, be a consequence, because it’s a call to love the real and suffering world. The “cross” we take up isn’t an accident of circumstances but a willful choice to imitate the love of Jesus, who took up his cross out of love and calls us to do likewise. In the name of Jesus Christ, we have the privilege of choosing to move toward those who suffer.

2. *Suffering because of the call.* Sometimes people suffer not because the world is suffering but because doing some things is so hard it causes suffering. For example, the creative act is frequently complex, subtle, indirect, uncertain, slow, necessary, compelling. Others who suffer in their vocations do so because they’re pursuing change that is painfully slow or has a severe cost, emotionally or otherwise. The same may be said in different terms of people who give themselves to an effort that requires saying no to many other parts of life for the sake of their commitment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to celebrate baptism and the Lord’s Supper with “unlike folks”?
2. If the recovery of Christendom isn’t the church’s goal, what is?

3. Most people think of wisdom in terms of great insight. Mark Labberton, however, sees wisdom differently—biblically. Explain Mark's view.
4. How is wisdom the answer to our present time of personal and global turbulence?
5. If someone asked you, "If we're made to flourish, why do we suffer?" how would you answer?
6. How could your church help its members make what's primary pervasive—that their vocation as Jesus' followers would pervade their thoughts *and* actions?

Session 6

SO, WHAT DOES GOD CALL *ME* TO DO?

In this session, Mark Labberton says, “As members of the whole community of God, our primary call is to respond through discipleship to Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Use the following Bible study, chapter overview and discussion questions to probe how our primary call is shaped by Christian discipleship.

Before you begin this study, however, take some time as a group to reflect on your experiences with the practices at the end of chapter ten.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

Read Colossians 3:12-17.

1. What would it look like to “clothe” yourself with compassion?
2. What would it look like to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”?
3. How can carrying this love and wisdom help guide your sense of calling?
4. How might you seek to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,” even in those aspects of daily life that do not feel like a primary calling?

CHAPTER 10: OVERVIEW

1. *Call and formation.* Our lives have many parts, all of which find their deepest resolution and satisfaction in offerings of love to God. God takes who we are and makes us into who God wants us to be. Central to God’s call is the ongoing work of our own spiritual formation—that we may become “mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

2. *Call and the guidance of the Spirit.* We are guided by the truth and by the Spirit. But we must be humble and cautious in claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit. The process of understanding the Spirit's guidance is best done in community.

3. *Call and the fruit of the Spirit.* The evidence that we're hearing and living the call of God is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Fruit growing is no simple business organically, nor is it spiritually. Growing fruit that looks like Jesus is a process that takes time, seems slow and can be uncertain.

4. *Call and Scripture.* Scripture unlocks God's hopes for us and for our call. The Bible needs to form us and our theological and spiritual imaginations. Learning the Scriptures well and letting them form our confidence in the character and passions of God do as much as anything to help us hear God's call.

5. *Call and community.* We do our best discernment with other followers of Jesus.

6. *Call and the gifts of the Spirit.* Each person in the body of Christ has gifts given for the sake of the wider church community. Discernment of our gifts is a work of the Holy Spirit, of the beloved community and of our own availability.

7. *Call and personal strengths.* We have personal strengths and traits that can be very important in living out our call. It takes a community to surround and encourage us to develop and to try out what we have talent to do and what we can do despite not having much talent in it.

8. *Call and context.* All of us may be in exile, but we live in different parts of it. The part we're in affects what we think we may hear as God's call. We need to ask, "What are the realities of this local place before us in our immediate context, and what are the global realities beyond us that are part of the wider context?"

9. *Call and conviction.* Call usually arises out of our most passionate conviction. We need to ask, "What are the things about which Jesus would call me to have the greatest passion?"

10. *Call and time.* We receive all our time as a gift, and we can offer virtually all our activities as a context for living out our vocation as Christ's disciples. We need to ask, "How should we use our primary time for our primary calling?"

11. *Call and work.* People can and should be affirmed to live God's call as faithful disciples in whatever work setting they may find themselves. It means seeking to enact God's love and justice toward any we touch or know about through our work and its impact.

12. *Call and Monday morning.* Everyone's work is a setting for their call as a disciple, but not everyone's work may be their calling. Call motivates, empowers, dignifies and inspires our work.

13. *Call and money.* Money and call are frequently intertwined, and maturing disciples need to be honest and clear about how that affects them and how to remain free to hear and follow the call of God.

14. *Call and volunteerism.* Beyond the call to family, community and work, many have at least some time for volunteer effort as a further expression of call. Does every disciple need to volunteer for the wider scene? Yes. Every disciple needs to help care for the world around us in Jesus' name.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mark explains that "All kinds of things happen that can challenge or confuse us about call." Share with the group an experience you have had in which God's call was not clear.

How did you achieve clarity?

2. What does the author mean when he says that "the fruit of the Spirit has seasons"?
3. "Scripture unlocks God's hopes for us and for our call." Many Christians today are biblically illiterate. What could your church do to encourage Bible reading and comprehension?
4. What is a global concern that you could act on locally as part of your call?
5. What kind of things do you imagine would happen if the members of your church "were to seek each day simply to live our primary vocation: to love God and to love our neighbor"?