

**GUIDING PEOPLE TO JESUS
THROUGH DISCOVERY GROUPS**

A TRAINING MANUAL

BY DR. STEPHEN BECK

1. An Unexpected Discovery

1.1 Toronto, Canada

It was not the so-called “Toronto Blessing,” to which a hundred thousand people from all over the world streamed in order to experience the blessing of the Holy Spirit. What I am going to tell you happened at the same time. Much smaller, much quieter than the Toronto Blessing. But maybe I should introduce myself first: I'm not originally from Toronto, but from New York. In spite of that, I'm no usual American, as I grew up in Germany and Austria. In 1972, I came back to the States, where I did my theological training, and met and married the love of my life, Susan. After founding and leading a congregation in the Philadelphia area for 10 years, I moved with my “harem” of one wife and 4 daughters to Toronto, Canada in 1993, in order to plant a church for people who had nothing to do with God or church in this huge, highly international city. The work in this secular city was tedious, the initial results disappointing. Then, in March 1995, something substantial happened. An older businessman showed up in our church service.

This encounter changed everything.

David was deeply moved by the gospel and after the service, asked if he could meet with me. Two days later, we sat together in a cafe. There he told me about his astonishing success in the business world which had led to a massive personal crisis. In his depression, God met him. David was looking for a fulfillment that money and fame had, in the end, not brought him. He wanted a life that was enriched by God, and that would bring spiritual riches to others. He also wanted spiritual renewal for his friend Albert, who had also been thrown into a personal crisis and alcoholism after his own success in business. That afternoon in the cafe, this man who hardly knew me asked me to start a group for his non-Christian friends. He would invite the people to his house, he and his wife would serve cake and coffee, and I would lead the discussion. So simple! And yet I found myself overwhelmed. Materials for group discussions with non-Christians, such as Alpha, didn't exist yet. But I knew that God wanted this from me and to say “no” would be disobedient. So I reluctantly agreed.

The title of the December 1994 issue of Life Magazine, “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” had stuck in my mind. I chose it for our 6-part Tuesday evening meetings. I didn't have any great expectations—maybe three guests. In Toronto, people are very cynical about religion. David had invited a few friends and I had invited Karl, a politician; my realtor, Barbara; William, one of my first non-Christian contacts in Toronto; and Tim, a successful banker and Christian from our new church community.

The first evening started off at 7:30. David stood at the door and greeted the 6 men and one woman (Barbara). David's wife and I stood at the table and welcomed everyone to enjoy coffee and cake. Then we all went into the living room, where I nervously began to explain my expectations to the group. Suddenly an agitated voice from the sofa interrupted. Karl, the politician, angrily threw back at me the accusation that the Christian belief that Jesus is the only way to God was an incredibly narrowminded, fundamentalist statement, which only the dumbest of the dumb of the human species could hold to. His curse-filled verbose tirade lasted several minutes, until he finally paused to catch his breath and start a new sentence. At this point, I interrupted him, “You know, Karl, I think it's great that you've asked this question that so many—even in this room—have, but don't dare to ask. Thank you for laying the hardest issue on the table. I already have a rough idea of what we'll talk about next time, but

how would it be if we took the third evening to talk about this question for the whole hour.” Karl felt like he had been confirmed as hero of the group.

The second evening, Karl wasn't there. Maybe God knew that we could only take one emotional outbreak per evening, because this time it turned out as follows: we had already been in discussion for a little while, when some friends of David's suddenly walked through the door into the living room, placed themselves in the middle of the room, interrupted me and said, “Hello, we are Jim and Thelma, friends of David's. I'm a good Canadian, my wife is a Jew, and we're not here to be converted. We have our own religious views, with which we are very content. We can contribute something here, but no one should try to change our minds!” With that, they sat down. I smiled at them, and welcomed them in, then asked God quietly if I had sinned in some great way so as to deserve to deal with such people and went on.

The third evening. Karl was back. This time the emotional outpouring of words from this participant was more positive. I had chosen the passage on Jesus' statement of absoluteness from John 14. After a while, Karl said in a loud voice, “I get it!” And then he explained to the group how the text had showed him that the Saviour must be both completely man and completely God, and that only Jesus was simultaneously God and man, no one else. “So there can't be any other way for people to get to God other than through Jesus, since he was the God-man. It's quite logical!” I was amazed. For one thing, even I, with my doctorate in theology, couldn't have explained it more clearly than this heathen! And furthermore, I realized that evening that the Bible is certainly not lying when it says that the gospel of the Word of God has the power to convince and save men (Romans 1:16).

At the end of the fifth week, David announced that the series would finish up after the sixth week. Albert shot out of his chair. “You can't do that to us!” There was a long pause. Then John stood up and said, “You've showed us how to get our motors started. But now you need to teach us how to fly!” I had about as much knowledge of flying as I had any idea of how to continue after the sixth unit. But I slowly realized that this discovery group was not my thing, but God's, and that I was only in the passenger seat. After the sixth week, 35 different people had come through our discovery group. The most surprising thing was that all of the non-Christians who had been at the first meeting became followers of Christ: Albert, Karl, Barbara, John and William.

What would have happened if I hadn't obediently followed God's command through David's request in a Toronto cafe?

Two weeks after the last evening, which we finished up with a barbecue, we started the series again. Again, we met up at 7:30 and had small talk with coffee and cake until 7:50. This time we split up into two groups. Even though he didn't have any materials at his disposal, my friend Tim took the newly converted people into one room to teach them the foundations of the Christian life. I took the still-unconverted people into the living room and repeated the 6 units of “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” After those 6 weeks, we started a third round. And more and more people turned to Jesus, even Jim and his Jewish wife, Thelma.

On the first evening of the second round of “Who Was Jesus”, Sean came. He was an extremely intelligent space researcher, whose team had developed the Hubble for the American space program. He had immersed himself in New Age thought for a long time but found the person of Jesus so fascinating and the group discussions so enriching that he invited his friend Karin. On her first evening, we were talking about Jesus as the Lamb of God and

the meaning of the cross. After the conversation was over and we were standing in the dining room around coffee and cake, she came up to me and introduced herself, “Hi, I’m Karin. Words come easily to me, since it’s my job. I have to talk a lot, articulate, motivate. But tonight I was speechless. What you explained about this crucified Jesus struck me very deeply.” And then she began to cry. I went with this 40-year-old woman into the living room, where she told me that she had sought after God for 12 years in the Hinduism of India, and then had moved to California where she had searched for God in various spiritual corners but hadn’t found him anywhere. One destroyed marriage and an empty heart later, she moved back—as she said—to her peaceful Canada, in the hope that she would find God here. I ventured to express to Karin her emotions: “The whole time, you’ve thought you were an orphan. But tonight you’ve learned that your spiritual Daddy is still alive, he has run to meet you from heaven in Jesus, and he’s standing around the corner with open arms. You’ll soon meet him.” The woman could do nothing but cry over her 25 years of unfulfilled longing. “Come again next week,” I said, “and we’ll look at a topic that will give you some direction.”

The theme was “Confronted with the Resurrection of Jesus”. While we examined the events of John 20, Karin was again quiet. The last question in the unit was what had especially struck people that evening. Now Karin couldn’t hold back any longer, “The way the resurrection is portrayed in John 20 makes things clear for me. The resurrection wasn’t invented. It really happened. The author was quite clearly a witness, and he reports so many facts without trying to talk us into believing anything. They’re just plain and simple facts. The whole thing seems believable to me.”

I invited Karin to come to our house and have dinner with us on Thursday. My wife Susan has the gift of hospitality, and God works through this gift whenever Susan opens the door to someone and puts a meal on the table. This time was no exception. After we’d been well-fed and had exchanged life stories, Karin asked, “Explain it to me again.” At that moment, the hit movie and musical “The Lion King” came to mind. I told the story of the young lion Simba, who had believed a lie about his father, the king. The belief in this lie drives him to leave behind the pridelands and his certain future of ruling in the name of his father. He goes into the land of “hakuna matata”, where the philosophy of carefreeness and the life of leisure are lived out. He grows up and forgets his true identity.

The first sign that he has ignored something important and buried his true roots is the surprising arrival of a beautiful lioness, his former friend from the pridelands. She has now also grown up, and her sudden appearance moves something deep in his soul, something that has to do with the source of his identity. But Simba can’t yet express it. Then the prophet of the pridelands, a baboon, comes along. He takes Simba into a deep hollow under a tree. At the command of the baboon, the young lion looks into a pool. In the water, he sees the face of his father reflected in his own face and hears his voice from the stars: “Remember who you are!” In recognizing the face and voice of the father, the lights go on in Simba’s head and his identity comes back to him. Once again, he knows who he is and where his true home is.

Simba follows the baboon-prophet back. Upon his return to the pridelands, a difficult struggle awaits Simba. Through the tyrannical rule of Simba’s Uncle Scar and his lies, the paradise of the pridelands has become a desert waste. The animals are all starving, and the life has been squeezed out of them. Simba begins to fight for law and justice, truth and freedom. The opposition is vicious, but Simba is victorious and becomes king, marries his friend and with her fathers a new “Simba”.

I explained to Karin that we are all like Simba. Through our belief in Satan's lie, we have lost ourselves in leisure and swept the truth about ourselves, God and the world under the carpet. We only find our true identity when we follow Jesus. He shows us the “pool” of the word of God, in which we can realize that we're image-bearers of God. Then we also hear the voice of God that calls us back to our true identity “in Christ”. But we must acknowledge that we are lost, and that we have searched for God and the divine in the wrong places. Only in Christ, who was sent to us from God, can we find the way back to God. Then I said, “And so you must make your way home, and accept Jesus as your Saviour and Lord and follow him. He is the way home.”

Karin began to sob. Then she asked us an unforgettable question, or was it an indictment against us Christians? “Why hasn't anyone told me this before?” She told us how at 15, she had gone to her priest after a service and asked him how she could find God. His answer was that he didn't exactly know. With this answer ringing in her ears, Karin had closed the door of the church behind her and set out on her road to a multi-religion search. One year after another! Years! Until Sean brought her to the discovery group.

Two days after this conversation, Karin woke up at 6:30 in the morning and gave Jesus her heart. She went into the kitchen and danced for joy until 8:30. Then she called us on the phone. “I've been a child of God since 6:30, I now belong to him, and I'm dancing for joy in my kitchen!” And that's how Karin began a relationship with God.

And with her, Sean and many others also came to Christ.

Through the discovery groups, God had given us a small, quiet “Toronto Blessing”.

1.2 Discovery Groups as a Bridge from the City to the Church

In the summer of 1996, the Alpha Team from Holy Trinity Brampton Church in London came to Toronto and held a 3-day seminar. I found many ideas from Alpha helpful, especially that of beginning the group with good food and fellowship. This was the impetus to move forward with the concept of the discovery group in our church as a service, where several church members could participate. In the fall of 1996, a new phase of discovery groups began.

From that time on, the discovery groups were held in our church building. Invitations for the weekly meeting were distributed to church members so that they could invite non-Christian friends from their environment. Well-thought-out organization was important, in order to really serve our guests with the discovery evening. We organized three teams.

The hospitality team was divided into several groups. One group had to be there at 6 o'clock and was responsible for setting up. A second group came at 10 o'clock to take everything down and clean up. The third team was the cooking team, that prepared a gourmet meal as directed by the team leader's planned menu. Two people were greeters, who placed themselves at the door at 6:50 to welcome people and offer them a drink. It should be a banquet.

The prayer team had several jobs. These people prayed all week long for the discovery groups, the group leaders, and the non-Christians. Our intercessors also came to the discovery evening, mixed in with the guests during the meal, and then went into a separate room during the rest of the evening in order to bring every group and each individual person before God in prayer.

I called the third team the “pastoral leadership team”, which was made up of the group leaders and their helpers. Each group should have not just one conversation leader, but also 2 or 3 Christians, who would be present to move the group discussion along with good questions or helpful statements. A further job of the leader and helpers was to have in view the spiritual needs of the non-Christians in the group, and be ready to meet individually with non-Christians to further help them with their questions.

So it started at 6 o'clock, at least for the people on the Pastoral Leadership Team. We met to concentrate on the target and goal of the evening and to ask for the working of the Holy Spirit. It was important to me to impress upon “my” pastoral leadership team, that they should be priests and shepherds of the non-Christians. So with the laying on of hands, I prayed for each one, that the Lord would fill them with his Spirit and make them into his pastoral change agents. During this time, the two other teams were making the last preparations in our meeting hall.

At 7 o'clock it got started.

The first Thursday evening about 40 people came, most of them directly from work. Their reception was casual and inviting. With drinks in hand they made light conversation while classical music played in the background. At 7:10, the moderator of the evening broke into the conversation, welcomed everyone and introduced the menu for the evening. With plates and cutlery, the people went through the buffet line and seated themselves at a table. Those of us from the church community placed ourselves strategically at the tables, so that every guest could get to know someone from the church. It was important that the non-Christians could personally experience how normal we were. Therefore the conversation must revolve around our guests—that was a ground rule. Everyone has a story and everyone should have the opportunity to tell parts of his story. And nothing “religious” should be discussed. We must break down the stereotypes of cynical non-Christians. So we laughed a lot. And we ate like kings. The first time he came, a high-ranking politician said, “I thought that when I went to a church, they would serve us bread, butter and cheese. But I had not expected such a feast—there was Korean food this evening.”

At 7:45, I stood up and gave a 10 minute lecture about a difficult issue or frequently asked question. Relaxed and smiling, I tried to identify with the skepticism of the non-Christian, and then explain the wise biblical insights on the issue. I challenged them, but was never argumentative or offensive. Then it was time for dessert. That enjoyably consumed, we introduced the groups. At 8:15 the discussion groups got going. We were strict with each other: the groups must come to an end at 9:30 on the dot. Often, people got together afterwards for lively exchanges in the dining hall. Group leaders and helpers had to be ready to stay as long as necessary in order to have one-on-one conversations.

After this, we went through the 6-week long “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” We had 4 different group leaders, and everyone could go to the group, as well as the group leader, of their choice. In hindsight, I saw one mistake I made at the beginning: instead of immediately training the new Christians to lead a discovery group, I gave the leadership of the groups over to a few longterm Christians. This also bore its fruit, as the “old” Christians became newly excited Christians who found their first love again. However, I think we would have had an even higher dynamic and reached a faster self-development if we had been quick to equip the new Christians and brought them into the pastoral leadership circle.

After the first 6 weeks, we switched to Alpha. I wanted to try it. This change gave us some different insights. On the one hand, we found the material helpful and well-organized. Where we had theological differences with Alpha and the charismatic-Anglican movement, we explained these to people. This not only worked in us as Christians, and taught the non-Christians, a respect for brothers and sisters who were of different opinions in the non-essentials, but it was also an opportunity for us to keep from diminishing the inexplicable work of the Holy Spirit through overly hasty criticism. On the other hand, we sensed that for our situation, 10 weeks in one chunk was too long. But the most important thing we learned was that many of our guests—the count was now up to about 60—were not at all open to Christian teaching. Many were atheists and didn't believe in the existence of God. Others came from various religious backgrounds and didn't accept the Bible as God's revelation. We urgently needed a discovery group for atheists and skeptics.

Once again, I turned to my old “discovery friend”, Tim. I asked him if he could simply take the book Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis, and prepare 4 discussion questions for each chapter. We needed something that the atheists could really bite into. Anyone who knows Lewis' book knows it isn't easy. But in September 1997, when we started a new round of discovery evenings at which there were 4 groups offered (“Who Was Jesus..”--one for adults, one for teens; the atheist group; and a discipleship group for people who were new to the faith—for that we used 6 chapters of Alpha), the group for atheists was instantly the biggest. Tim had 23 people in his group. He didn't say much. Not because he doesn't talk much, but because he could hardly get a word in edgewise.

I was curious as to what was going on in Tim's group. So I ended my “Who Was Jesus...” group a bit early the second week and ran upstairs. When I arrived at Tim's group, Steve was in the process of saying something about green Martians and Nazis. No one knew what he was talking about. Not Frank, the homosexual prostitute; not Margarete, president of an airline; not Delores and not Antonio the Italian either... No one. No matter! Everyone could have an opinion and voice it, even if later, before we went home, it had us laughing heartily again.

As I observed how important “Tim's group” was, I started writing a new discovery course. Over the years I noticed that there were so many questions for atheists and skeptics that in the course of time the series expanded into two courses: “Unbelievable?” and “Doubt-Full”. But at the beginning it was one course, and I called it “Grounds for Unbelief... And Why They Aren't Enough”.

Delores was the first in “Tim's group” to decide to really get to the bottom of the Christian teaching. Here it's important to say that Delores' growing interest in Jesus—and that of other group members—didn't come about merely through the discussions in the discovery group. Out of curiosity, Delores and many others also came to our church service and community of Christians. Here they had the word of God preached into their hearts and longings, here they experienced the love and integrity of Christians, here they discovered the power of the cross of Jesus in the Lord's Supper every Sunday, even when they had to observe it “from the outside”. Delores told me one day, “You know, I was raised Catholic, soon gave up the awful, oppressive message of the church, threw myself into Buddhism and finally into New Age. Today I have so many impressions of spirituality that I hardly know what's true and what's not. Could you write a discovery course for people like me? Maybe you could call it something like 'Demythologizing Religions.’”

So I got back to work and wrote “Christianity and Other Spiritualities.” This series gave people the opportunity to compare the gospel with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Secularism, Catholicism and liberal Protestantism, and find out how unique the gospel is. This group was an immediate success. Not because crowds attended, but because Delores gave her heart to the unique Jesus with his unique gospel.

We had a choice of 4 groups until Spring 1998. More and more participants turned to Jesus. But around that time, a period of drought forced its way into in my life and ministry pressed in. But first, God wanted to finish the development of the discovery series. Some years earlier, I had ascertained through surveys in Toronto that modern, western-minded people were no longer asking, “What is true?” but, “What does it do for me?” Today authors tell us that this pragmatism is a mark of postmodernism. For Christians of our time who believe in absolute truth, this is a big challenge. How should one talk about truth with people who claim that the whole concept of “Truth” means nothing to them? But at the same time, this challenge is a huge opportunity for us.

I believe in Jesus with my whole heart because I'm convinced that he is the truth. But these days the way to lead people to the truth is not so much about our statements of the truth, but about their longings. Even Jesus knew this way to the human heart, and took it with the Samaritan woman (John 4). He starts with the vacuum in her life and promises her the thing that can fill this vacuum, before he leads her to the truth of the Messiah and identifies himself as this awaited Messiah. So I saw the need to create a discovery series that led to Jesus through our longings. In 1997, I wrote “Longings of the Heart”. The discussions about desires for love, joy, meaning, security and hope immediately became the most sought-after discovery group each week. The development of discovery series was now complete!

Frank had turned to Jesus and gotten out of his immoral lifestyle. The politician and Margaret, too. And Steve, the one who'd been talking about Martians and Nazis? One evening—I had finished the new group “Longings of the Heart” and was briefly answering the questions of a few non-Christians—I was on my way out of the building and saw Steve, a large man, sitting on the stairs. He was crying! I sat next to him. “Hey, what's up?” I asked him in a sympathetic tone. “I think I've become a follower of Jesus!” he answered, sobbing. My heart began to laugh. He told me, that in his group, a Buddhist had been attacking the trustworthiness of the Bible the whole time. Steve had become more and more irritated with this man, and soon began to defend the integrity of the Bible. Back and forth, back and forth went the arguing between the Buddhist and Steve. The politician jumped into the debate on the side of Steve. The group leader didn't say anything; Steve and the politician led the discussion forward. “When the group was over and my adrenalin stopped flowing, I suddenly realized: hey, I believe the full integrity of the Bible, I believe in the Jesus of the Bible, I believe he is the truth and I want to follow him and tell everyone about him.” And then this big man began to cry again—they were tears of relief and joy—while I laughed and prayed with him. That evening Steve ran home with joy—he ran and sang for 4 hours all the way back to his house. The next Sunday, I baptized him into the family of God. I felt extremely blessed. A small, quiet “Toronto Blessing” that I could enjoy.

1.3 Discovery Groups as Communities In Important Places in the City

In the winter of 1998-99, I fell into deep depression. On the heels of my “Toronto Blessing”, God allowed the Enemy to clobber me emotionally and psychologically through 2 leaders in our church. I had to give up some of the chief tasks of my pastoral work. Only with the love and help of my wife, the patience of my four daughters, the understanding of my co-workers,

the competence of my doctor, and above all, the grace and presence of God, did I come through two of the most difficult years of my life.

1.3.1 Through this breakdown, God put me on a new track. I didn't have the strength to lead discovery groups anymore. I was forced to train church members to press on in evangelizing through discovery groups without me. So I started a training school. Some of the course participants were people who had come to faith in Jesus Christ and been baptized through previous discovery groups. Again a huge blessing! Every Thursday evening, I sat for 2 hours with 25-30 people and taught them principles, leadership techniques and the use of the discovery group materials.

Then we split the class into groups of two or three “students” to form discovery teams. They had 3 weeks to prepare through prayer and organization. I created an invitation for all of them that they could use to invite acquaintances and coworkers to their group. The whole congregation was encouraged to pray for their “messengers” during the 6 weeks. I found it very fulfilling every Sunday to be able to make atheists, skeptics and seekers aware of the list of discovery groups led by our members and to invite them to visit the discovery group closest to their home.

Eight discovery groups ran at the same time in different parts of the city. Not every group was a success. One group had only one guest (and 3 Christians). It was a special challenge for the Christians to work together in such a way that the non-Christian got needed input and interchange without feeling isolated in the group. One group had to stop after 3 attempts because no one came. Most groups had a few guests. The biggest group was the one that was led by messianic Jews for Jews.

After 6 weeks, all the “students” got together at a big party with reports of how they had experienced God through the discovery groups and the new things he had shown them. What impressed me was that each one—whether he had led a successful group or not—had been strengthened in his faith, because he had reckoned with the Holy Spirit and had expressed himself willing to venture into new territory.

1.3.2 In connection with InterVarsity and Campus for Christ, I often had the opportunity to hold lectures at the University of Toronto. The regional leader for Campus for Christ knew about the development of the discovery groups, and organized a discovery group for university students in one of the classrooms, which I led weekly. That was difficult! University of Toronto is a spiritually dark place. About 4 to 5 non-Christians came each week, but every time it was a different group. There was no continuity and there were no “success stories”. After 6 weeks, the group was finished. The best thing I could (can) hope is that in one or another of the students, a seed was sowed that someone else will water in the future.

1.3.3 The same David who had asked me to lead a discovery group at his house in 1995, led me several years later into a new application of group evangelism. I had gotten to know several people who were interested in spiritual things, but couldn't or wouldn't come to a discovery group in the evening. David had the idea to meet them with breakfast at the workplace, in a conference room at his finance company. A new adventure awaited me on the 48th story of a bank building. We met at 7:30 in the morning for a catered breakfast and coffee. David paid for everything. Sometimes it just takes one businessman with a vision to be able to get something started in the heart of the city.

At 7:30 in the morning, I am barely functioning—before 9 o'clock, I don't think any sensible thoughts! But again, the Holy Spirit was noticeably at work. Eight to ten people were regularly there. Here a very successful financier, Fred Borgmann, came to faith. Michael Coren, a known Canadian author, radio- and later TV-host, a Jew and former atheist, also turned to Jesus and was baptized in our church.

Fred Borgmann played off his influence with the company Price Waterhouse, and together we offered the “Who Was Jesus..” group in the conference room of “his” bank building. One member of our church, a lawyer for the Toronto stock exchange, found out about it, and was motivated to get a discovery group rolling at his workplace as well. This group stayed small, but was such an inspiration to one participant that he rented a well-known pub in Toronto and held Alpha-evenings there, at which several people came to faith.

In 2002, things ran forward even more quickly. During an event in the heart of Toronto, I was introduced to the new director of the so-called “King-Bay Chaplaincy”, a small organization in the banking quarter of Toronto which tries to reach the 100,000 bank employees with the gospel. Bruce Smith was a massive man, an African-American and former professional football player (once even won the Superbowl). Everyone that met Bruce would want to convert just because of Bruce's threatening size! As we got to know each other better, Bruce got the vision to offer the discovery groups through his organization, as a meeting during lunch break.

After many invitational fliers had been distributed around the Toronto city centre, the first Wednesday came along and the group “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” got started. Fifteen people came. I was surprised. Some were Christians, some not, but all of them seemed very interested. Then we switched to the series “Longings of the Heart”. I have no idea how many people came to faith through this group. I only know that it was worth it to one woman.

She was named Joan Dixon, and she came to the very first meeting, then was away for a long time. When she showed up the next time—now we were in the series “Longings of the Heart”—I gave a brief introduction to the person of Jesus. Joan's hand shot up, “Excuse me! Did you just say you believe that Jesus is the only way to God?” I swallowed hard, “Yes, the gospel can be downright offensive, I give you that. But there are some things about this Jesus that have pushed me to come to the verdict that even this idea that he is the only way to God is very positive and freeing.” Joan stared at me as if she was looking at a green Martian. “But how can that be? There is so much good that comes from Buddha, the Dalai Lama and many other different religions in the world. And New Age has brought me even further in the last while and showed me that much of what I'm looking for in the divine is already present in my own divinity.”

I felt like the eyes of all the group members were boring into me. “What we will see about Jesus today could bring everything into a new perspective,” I said, and for the next 20 minutes I explained how the resurrection of Jesus turns all pluralistic, multi-religious, even non-Christian thinking on its head... how the resurrection verifies all Jesus' claims to be God... how the resurrection makes his death for us effective and turns it into the source of eternal life... how his resurrection actually confirms him as ruler of all. Normally no one has a 20 minute sermon in a discovery group! Joan's raised hand interrupted my flow of words: “I would like to thank all of you for the input today. In 20 minutes, it has become clear to me that one can't put Jesus on the same level as other religious figures. He is quite different.”

I hadn't expected such a reaction. Shortly thereafter Joan left, saying, "This has really made me think. Thanks!" She left and 10 minutes later I went back to my church office with the thought, "What a flop! I didn't even get to the topic of the day because I spent the whole time answering that woman's question instead."

What I couldn't have known was that halfway back to work, Joan couldn't stand it any longer. She turned around and ran back to the King-Bay Chaplaincy. "Where's Stephen?" she asked Bruce, as she rushed into our group room. Bruce Smith explained to her that I was already gone. Joan told him, "I need this Jesus in my life. What I heard today has fully convinced me that he is the only possible answer to my longings, because he is the only one who has done something for my lostness, the only one who, through his resurrection, has overcome physical and spiritual death, the only one who can here and now bring me into a relationship with God by his power. How do I get this Jesus in my life?" Bruce explained to her the way to Jesus. Together they both went to prayer. There, in his office, she poured out her empty heart before him. There she met God in all his fullness and a new life began for her.

The King-Bay discovery group was a sort of church without a church structure. The gathering on Wednesdays at noon was made up not only of non-Christians, who came with skepticism, curiosity and questions, but also of Christians from various churches, who wanted to grow stronger and more motivated in missionary work in their neighbourhoods. Joan herself became an on-site missionary in a liberal church congregation. She won the trust of the pastor, and held weekly discovery groups in the church in order to lead non-Christian church members to faith in Jesus.

1.3.4 The aforementioned Fred Borgmann and his wife Andrea lived with their 6 kids in Mississauga, a city just outside of Toronto, where the actual "Toronto Blessing" took place and became well-known. Andrea had the idea to have a discovery group in their home. She had friends and acquaintances whom she wanted to invite. I was feeling recovered enough that I ventured to lead this group for 6 Thursday evenings. On these evenings, I drove 45 minutes from Toronto to Mississauga. Again, a blessing awaited me.

The first evening, Andrea had snacks and drinks ready at 7:30. It was to our disappointment that only one friend and Andrea's parents came. But precisely because it was such a small group, the Holy Spirit took us on an unforgettable adventure. All 3 were skeptical, Andrea's parents were even very irritated. I had given the little group an introductory description of the discovery group concept and how we would proceed. Then we began to work through one statement of Jesus about himself, then another... and then it exploded. The explosion came from deep in Andrea's father, "Andrea invited us to this group without us knowing what this whole thing was about. Now it is clear to me, and I'm not at all happy that we're here. Jesus—Light of the World? I haven't had anything to do with the church for 35 years. I don't need Jesus and the church. I'm a civilized man—I've done good, raised my kids well—and to me and all good people, this statement that people who don't follow Jesus are wandering in the dark is a lie and wrong."

I smiled pleasantly (and hoped that no one noticed how bathed in sweat I was!) and explained to the 72-year-old man and his wife that they shouldn't feel obligated to participate or come back. But their opposing viewpoints, like those that the man had just expressed, were welcome and would help us to clarify some issues. Then I used his outburst as a springboard to take up the script again, "Dennis just said that Jesus' statement about the darkness doesn't speak to the experience of civilized, rational people. Maybe it would be good then, if we ask who Jesus had in mind when he made this shocking claim. Thanks, Dennis,

you've helped us out.” That was the first step in pulling this old man along. The second step was that the Holy Spirit opened Andrea's mouth at that point and she said, “Maybe I should apologize to my parents that I didn't explain the intention of the group more clearly. And my father is right—he and my Mom raised us well and I'm thankful for that. However, I would like to say that I myself feel like this claim of Jesus is addressing me, because I've also lived a good life and despite that have come to know Jesus as the light of the world.” And then Andrea briefly spoke about her conversion to Jesus and how she first recognized the darkness of her own heart in the light of her daily relationship with Jesus.

The parents were quiet the rest of the evening. To my surprise, they came back the next week—and Andrea's friend, too. They came the third and fourth weeks as well. Most of the time they were critical, sometimes they were questioning, but always polite. They they were away for two weeks vacation in Frankfurt. In the meantime, Andrea's friend had come to the decision that she should start reading the Bible. So strongly had she been impressed by what we had already read from the Bible.

Then came the next surprise. After their vacation in Frankfurt, Andrea's parents, Dennis and Jean, showed up in our Sunday morning service. The next Thursday was the last unit of “Who Was Jesus...” and they were the only ones who came. At first I was disappointed. But in fact, it was the Holy Spirit who had so organized things. I asked Dennis and Jean how they had found the service the previous Sunday. They told me that they had decided in Frankfurt to make their way back to church, and they had noticed on Sunday that their hearts were moved by the message and the atmosphere of love. At the end of this last unit, which is about the cost of following Jesus, I did something that I had not yet tried in this way in a discovery group. I had suddenly had a strong impression from the Holy Spirit, so I turned nervously but obediently to Dennis and Jean and asked, “Would you like to take Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord this evening, and begin a new life with Jesus and as his disciple?” Dennis immediately answered, “Yes!” Jean, who only weeks before had called the resurrection of Jesus absurd, said, “Me, too!” I almost fell off my chair. “Really? Uh, okay.” Like little children, we started to pray together.

That evening, Andrea's parents came into the kingdom of God. What I didn't know at the time was that these conversions, together with Fred and Andrea, would become the core of a daughter-church in Mississauga.

Finally, my little Toronto Blessing came to an end. It was—by human measurements—no great success story. Some of the attempted discovery groups never got rolling, others staggered tediously on so that one was somehow relieved when the series was over. Not all of those who converted stayed true to Jesus' way (though most did!), but some ended in shipwreck. And at one point my own faith could have crashed into the cliffs of doubt, if God's gracious hand had not been there to hold me fast. But the amazing thing is that in the midst of the ongoing trials of life, and a second great crisis in our church, there were discovery groups for the accusations, objections and rejection of non-Christians, in which one could see the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, and through which so many people found a personal relationship with Jesus and became part of the community of Christians.

To my surprising discovery, the discovery groups, led by blessing, were enabled to be a blessing to many in Toronto.

But could I have done them better and more effectively? For sure!

1.4 What I Regret

I regret not investing more in those who were newly saved by training them to lead a discovery group. Since that time, I have learned from missiologists that the most explosive movements in the world happen where people use the 222 formula (2 Tim. 2:2): in other words, where new converts are trained, then train others, who then train others... until it becomes a dynamic movement. In my “Toronto Time”, I did know that new Christians are the best evangelists to unbelievers, because unlike many older Christians, they haven't yet been buried in a church subculture, and instead still have many non-Christian friends in their networks. I had already figured that out but had not reacted optimally to it. I gradually took a few new believers into the circle of “now doing for others as I've done for you”, but I should have done so much faster, more intentionally and more continuously.

I regret that I wasn't more flexible with the structure of the church. I believe in structure—not structure for structure's sake, but structure that serves the group (instead of the group serving the structure) in order to develop the group into a dynamic movement. The New Testament community is not reducible to a gathering in a building with a certain liturgy led by a highly educated cleric. The mistake I made was that I tried very hard to get everyone in the discovery groups into our church. On the one hand, that was motivated by pride—I wanted to be able to claim high church membership numbers, through which I could know that I was successful. That was unfortunate. I believe that is also a reason why in my first crisis, God allowed the Enemy to stick a thorn in my flesh and to let out the pus of my conceit. But on the other hand, I was not yet ready to let go of my traditional concepts of church. For me, it was important that people would come to us in the church service. The threshold was quite low, and many did come. For that I am thankful. But all that effected was a growth in church numbers. With the discovery school that I started while I was in depression, I could have brought a movement of reproduction into swing. But I soon stopped the training classes, when I let myself get pulled away by new discovery opportunities (it also brings me much joy to lead such groups). It was initially with the Wednesday discovery group at the King-Bay Chaplaincy that I started to think more openly: instead of expecting of people that they should come to us in our church, we should be able to start a new congregation with each new group in which the Christians could be trained into group leaders, soul shepherds and teachers.

Too late! I already stood with one foot and $\frac{3}{4}$ of my heart in Europe.

1.5 Frankfurt, Germany

In September 2005, my wife and I started into a new chapter of our lives: we moved to Germany (in my case, back) in order to teach practical theology at the Giessen School of Theology, where I had already begun as guest professor in 2003. We also felt called to invest ourselves in potential urban church plants. God was already at work. In January 2005, a small movement of urban church plants from different denominations had begun in Germany—congregations who were driven by the gospel to engage with their city, culture and non-Christians. The movement started in Berlin. The second church plant of this kind happened in Frankfurt. Susan and I were there from the beginning to mentor the church planter, Bodo Park.

At Frankfurt CityChurch, we began testing out “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” In the second Frankfurt church plant in the northeast part of the city, Frank Hammann and I have been holding discovery groups regularly since spring 2009. We tried out the material for the series “Doubt-Full” twice. Both times, the groups stayed small. The immediately visible success did not come in the form of a movement, but in the excitement of

one couple for the discovery concept, and in their joy of experiencing their home as a place where the transformation of atheistic Germans into passionate followers of Jesus happens.

And so the third test-run of “Doubt-Full” was born at the Trautners. Frank and I, and a student of mine, Ines, led the group together. A complicated group, and that for two reasons: first, with the exception of one woman, all the participants came irregularly, which made for a lack of common understanding and continuity. We learned that we needed somehow to communicate to the people our expectation that the whole group discussion would suffer, if from the third unit on, not all participants were able to build on the established material regularly and continuously. Second, it was a group of quite anti-Christian Germans. It was complicated, but good. Three of the participants, Kerstin, Karin and Linda, came originally from East Germany and had no belief in the existence of God. A young man was fundamentally against traditional Christian teaching because of his bad experience with the Church. Two (West German) women came with great skepticism against everything spiritual, and a former religion teacher who had been influenced by liberal theology, Dorothea, explained the first evening that her concept of God was the spirit that existed in every person and bound all people together.

The dynamite only need a short time to explode. And it exploded often.

“Anyone who claims such things of himself is an arrogant asshole!” said Kerstin, as we were reading Jesus' claim that he and the Father are one (John 10:30), and I asked the group how they react to this statement. Shocked, I held my breath and waited for a strong lightning bolt from God. It didn't come. Then I thought about how I should react to this blasphemy, and if I should caution Kerstin that such statements were inappropriate. But I had told the group that they could say whatever was on their heart. I quietly began to pray in my heart, “God, forgive her, for she knows not what she says.” A verbal reaction from me would also not have been wise. Instead, Dorothea reacted, “Unless he really was one with the Father. Then that's not the statement of an arrogant asshole. For sure, I don't believe it either, that he was one with God, but when someone authoritatively expresses who he is, then he's not being arrogant. The first time I taught a religion class, I didn't sneak cautiously into the classroom, lay my purse softly on the table and hope the class could bear me as their teacher. I mean, I *was* the teacher. So I shut the door authoritatively behind me, threw my purse and keys onto the table and said, 'Good morning, I am Mrs. Simon, your teacher.' One could understand Jesus' statement here in the same way.” I could hardly believe my ears—a non-Christian was teaching a non-Christian.

One month later, I had discovered something. No one was at the same place spiritually as they had been when they first stepped into the group. Even Kerstin, although she had missed three group meetings. We had just read Jesus' claim of absoluteness in John 14:6-11, and I asked how one should understand this statement. “How do *you* think one should understand it?” asked Kerstin sarcastically. “Jesus says quite clearly here, that he is the only way to God, and when one meets him, one meets God!” The tension climbed in the group. “And what do you do with that?” I asked. “I don't have a problem with that!” answered Kerstin. I wanted to call our host to strap me to my chair, because I thought I would fall right off of it. “Doesn't sound like the Kerstin of a month ago, who called Jesus an 'asshole' for such a statement,” reacted one of the other non-Christians. “I know, maybe you've just caught me on one of my tolerant days,” explained Kerstin, smiling, and we all laughed.

That evening, the discussion went long. Too long, by all my standards. But the group didn't want to stop. Dorothea especially wanted me to read the last question on the handout, instead

of leaving it out because of lack of time. So I read, “What especially impressed you in the discussion of Jesus' statement that he is the absolute truth?” Dorothea said, “I am feeling a deep emotion here tonight. Maybe it's sadness, or remorse, or something. I realize that for years I've dealt with theologians and theologies that are made up of compromises of the Biblical message. For fifteen years as a religion teacher, I've seduced young Germans into the lie that each could search out his own way, because in the end they were all the same. I don't know exactly what I should do now, but I realize that I was not true to Jesus and his teaching. I think God and I will have to have a long talk this evening.”

I also had a talk with God that evening, “Has the blessing, that you let me and others in Canada experience through discovery groups now landed in Germany?”

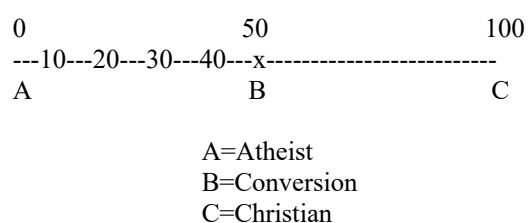
1.6 How will it go farther? Your Discovery Stories Here

Project Box

1. What especially impressed you in the account of the story of the discovery groups?
2. What principles for evangelism through discovery groups can we take from these accounts?
3. How do you respond personally to the regrets Stephen Beck registers in 1.4?

2 What You Can Expect From The Various Discovery Group Series

2.1 Each series is intended for a different point of the spiritual journey. A foundation of these series is that each person is on a spiritual journey and must be met at his point in this spiritual journey.



Imagine it like this:

0: the aggressive, religion-hating atheist

10: the doubting, lost skeptic

20: the honestly questioning, spiritually curious

30: the hungry, open seeker

40: the not yet convinced, but almost converted, awakened

2.2 Each Series has 6 Units

2.3 Each Series is written from the following worldview:

2.3.1 Each series meets the current Zeitgeist: There are people in our time who want to thoroughly search through each question of faith at of the highest intellectual level (the so-called “modern man”), and there are people who no longer search for the truth but for

experience that profits them (the so-called “postmodern man”). These series try to speak to both kinds of people.

2.3.2 Each series is theologically-driven: It is essential to encounter the lost person as an image-bearer of God. That means that we will only speak to people deeply if we meet them with a God-centred worldview and with Biblical truth.

2.3.3 Each series enters into the emotional side of our image bearing of God, in order to speak to the longings of the heart.

2.3.4 Each series shows the group participants what the practical and relevant implications of the gospel are.

2.3.5 Each series is Christ-centred: As Jesus is the fulfilment of the Scriptures, so he is the answer and liberator of life. Following him means that he gives us his Spirit, to give us the daily power to lead a life in obedience to God.

2.3.6 Each series speaks finally to the resurrection of Jesus as the central point of belief. Just as repeatedly underscored in the book of Acts, the foundation of each discovery series is that Jesus' resurrection is the foundational truth for everyone, the one objective that penetrates into our self-seeking, rebellious rejection of the truth and confirms Jesus as the universal authority. It is at the resurrection of Jesus that all religions, spiritualities and philosophies break down, and Jesus is elevated over all as “the Way, the Truth, the Life” and the only way to a relationship with God.

2.3.7 Each series is written with the assumption that the power to convince lies not in strong arguments or the human ability to communicate, but in the Word of God (the Bible) that together with the Holy Spirit affects the human heart (Romans 1:16, 1 Peter 1:23-25). Therefore, the use of the Bible or quotes from the Bible is an essential part of every series.

2.4 Each unit is intended for a 1 hour and 15 minute group discussion.

2.5 Each meeting should start with a shared meal or snacks, drinks and friendly conversation. In order to create a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere, we suggest that participants should not immediately seat themselves in the discussion circle (and onto stationary chairs), but rather stand around a table prepared with food or snacks and talk lightly. This not only creates a relaxed atmosphere, but it also means that any latecomers won't feel uncomfortable under the staring eyes of the group circle.

3 What you can expect IN the Discovery Group Series

Point 0 The Atheist

Unbelievable?

Deep Questions for Deep Thinkers

1 I don't believe that I must believe!

2 I don't believe that God exists! (Part 1)

3 I don't believe that God exists! (Part 2)

4 I don't believe in a creator of the universe

- 5 I don't believe that there are miracles
- 6 I don't believe that a good God would allow so much suffering

A discovery group for intelligent people who have problems with the existence of a personal, world-creating God

Point 10 The Skeptic

Doubt-Full **Intelligent Skeptics Wrestling With Intelligent Answers**

- 1 I doubt that the church is relevant today!
- 2 I doubt that Jesus was more than a good teacher
- 3 I doubt that the Bible is more than a book of religious legends
- 4 I doubt that the Bible is the revelation of God
- 5 I doubt that Jesus rose from the dead
- 6 I doubt that there is only one true religion

A discovery group for people who find much in the Christian teaching unbelievable or irrelevant

Point 20 The Spiritually Curious

Christianity and Other Spiritualities **Demythologizing Religious Myths**

- 1 The Search for Spirituality: Why People Seek After Spiritual Things
- 2 The Search for Righteousness: Christianity and Islam
- 3 The Search for Oneness with All: Christianity and Hinduism
- 4 The Search for Deliverance from Suffering: Christianity and Buddhism
- 5 The Search for God in You: Christianity and New Age
- 6 The Search for Grace: Catholic and Evangelical Christianity

A discovery series for people on a spiritual search, for people who are very convinced of their religion, and for people who have so much religious stuff in their heads that they aren't sure what is fact and what is myth

Point 30 The Seeker

Longings of the Heart **How God Enters Into Your Feelings**

- 1 Longings: Where do they come from—what do they mean?
- 2 The longing for love
- 3 The longing for meaning
- 4 The longing for security
- 5 The longing for joy
- 6 The longing for meaning of life

A discovery group for people who want more out of life, and want to know if and how God can fill the longings of the heart

Point 40 The Awakened

***Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?* Face to Face with the most controversial person in history**

- 1 The Astonishing Claims of Jesus
- 2 Jesus—The One Who Satisfies Longings
- 3 Jesus—Crucified Lamb of God
- 4 Confronted with the Resurrection of Jesus
- 5 Jesus, the Only Way to God?
- 6 Following Jesus Can Cost You Everything

A discovery group for people who are ready to take a hard look at Jesus and also live with the consequences

4 How You Can Invite People

4.1 Start with prayer! If you know you'll invite people to come to a discovery group in the future, make a list of non-Christians with whom you are friends, with whom you work, with whom you are related... and pray regularly for them. We suggest three times per week. Pray that God will prepare their hearts for your invitation.

At least three weeks before the beginning of the discovery groups, go personally to the people on your list (instead of sending an email or calling—personal meetings, although hard, are really the best method). Go to the person with an invitational flier in your hand and say, for example, “I don't know if this would interest you, but this discovery group is starting in 3 weeks and I would like to invite you to come with me. A discovery group is a small group where without any pressure, you can examine some spiritual ideas and questions... a discussion group where you can choose to listen quietly or share your insights, or ask your questions, and learn from others. A friend of mine is the host and the leader of the group is someone who knows a lot about faith and such, but is also very sympathetic. I've brought you a invitational flier with all the details. This group takes place on Thursday evenings for 6 weeks, is very relaxed, with coffee and cake. You can see the topics on the flier. How would it be if I ask you again in 2 weeks whether you want to come, and in the meantime you can think it over in peace!” Then you give the person the flier unless they've already declined the invitation. In that case, thank them and say something like, “That's OK... Like I said, I didn't know if you would be interested in something like this and you are certainly free to decline the invitation just as you would be free in the group to say or believe what you wanted. I'm going to go, and if you ever want to know how it was, you are welcome to ask.” Then over the next weeks, pray for the person that the Holy Spirit will somehow make them curious.

Two weeks later, meet the person (ideally, instead of phoning), remind them of the invitation and ask if they know whether they would like to come along. To make things easier, you can say that they can come to the first evening, and if they don't like it, they don't have to come back. Continuity is important though, and therefore it is asked that after the second unit one

decide whether they will be there regularly for the next 4 weeks or whether they will drop out after the first two weeks.

It isn't unusual for people to get nervous at the last minute and look for an excuse to cancel. Satan also wants to keep the person from coming to the group and will arrange one thing or another to hinder the person from coming (for example, something happens at work and employees must work late, or one suddenly feels sick, etc.). It is a spiritual battle! We must stay fervently in prayer! We can also try everything possible to fight against Satan's ruinous attempts, for example, offering to pick the person up or meet them beforehand for dinner

Everywhere there are people who are spiritually hungry. We have experienced the fact that people can react very enthusiastically when they are spontaneously invited by a stranger. In that case it's important that you can clearly show that you don't belong to a cult, but rather to a legitimate church congregation.

Here is an example of an invitational flier:

**YOU ARE WELCOME TO COME
to a
SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY EXPERIENCE**

A discovery group for you:

Sceptical?	Seeking?	Curious?
No clue about religion? Want to start over spiritually?		
lively interchange		surprising facts
open	friendly	gripping topics
no pressure	no obligation	completely relaxed

WHO WAS JESUS... AND WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

6 Thursday evenings: April 10, 17, 24
May 1, 8, 15

8:00-9:30 PM

Where?

John and Lisa Brown
152 East Maple Street
Toronto, Ontario M2P 7F9
(416) 555-5555

Topics:

The astonishing claims of Jesus
Jesus—The one who satisfies longings
Why did Jesus die on a cross?
Confronted with the resurrection of Jesus
The insane claim: one way to God?
The hard thing about Jesus—Following can cost you everything

5 Small Tips for Leading

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth... And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15, 24,25)

5.1 Start punctually (even when not everyone is there yet); stop punctually (better that people go home wanting more rather than feeling tired and overwhelmed).

5.2 Lead the group forward briskly.

5.3 Let yourself be led by the Holy Spirit. If you see that one question is pressing on a few hearts, keep the discussion going for a while before moving on to the next question.

5.4 Not every question in a unit must be answered. If you notice that time is getting short, you can skip one question or another. Look over the material beforehand and decide which questions you could skip if you run out of time. Even if you have to skip one or more questions, give the group enough time to answer the last question or to hear the last quote and react to it.

5.5 Don't start with prayer. Don't end with prayer. Instead, you and your helpers should bathe the discovery group in prayer all week long.

5.6 Keep your voice calm. Especially if the atmosphere gets tense, stay calm. If you feel righteous anger over blasphemous statements, NEVER express it in words, but pray for the person in your heart, and lead the group calmly forward.

5.7 Your clothes should be casual, as if it was a meeting of friends.

5.8 Don't allow anyone to dominate. If you notice that one person always answers immediately, although you've made the guidelines for group discussion clear, use tricks like, "For this question, we'd like to hear from someone who hasn't said anything yet" or "How would it be if for the next question, someone from this side of the room answers" or (if you estimate the age of the domineering person to be about 60) "For this question, I would like to hear the perspective of those of you who are under 55".

6 Big Tips for Leading

6.1 Start the time in a friendly and business-like way

I advise, when possible, a welcoming time of community in a room that is separate from the room where the discovery discussion will be held. The table should be prepared with cake, cookies, and drinks, the atmosphere warm, personal and relaxed. The chairs in the living room should be set up in a circle, Bibles (all the same version) lying (when possible) under the chairs, the discovery outline on the chairs or distributed separately.

When people arrive, they should be greeted warmly at the door by the host, and then led into the dining room so that they can get some refreshments and be introduced to others. Chat for 15-20 minutes.

Then the host can say, "I think it's time to come to the living room and start our discussion." It's important to get people calm and relaxed in the first few minutes. Here ice-breakers can be helpful. Each discovery unit contains such a "discussion loosener". They are strategically formulated to give the participants the opportunity to talk about themselves. The host can at that point, if it is the first or second group meeting, briefly introduce the group leader.

6.2 Explain the Goal and Intentions of the Group

The group leader starts with a statement about what a privilege it is for him/her to lead the group. That can be said as follows (or similarly):

6.2.1 “It is really an honour for me to give people the opportunity to examine questions about faith more deeply in a free atmosphere and to come to their own conclusions. I am so convinced of this process, that I am of the opinion that 'if a church community can't offer such a service to their city and the people in the city, it really doesn't have grounds for existence.' Non-Christians love to hear things like this. It immediately lets them know that (a) they are important to you and (b) the church community that you are part of is a “church for others” (Bonhoeffer)

6.2.2 “We also want to have good fellowship with each another and use the opportunity to develop new friendships.” It is our experience that non-Christians are greatly impressed when their own secular, pluralistic life philosophy is fulfilled in a (Christ-centered) discovery group: everyone has their own opinion, sometimes even strongly expressed, but shows respect and love for others who don't share their opinion. That only happens if you, as the group leader, are an example of this. It is this respect and love that impart a feeling of security to the participants, and make it easier for them to come back to the group.

6.2.3 For the series “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter”, it is strategic to explain, “It is a great opportunity for us to get to know the person of Jesus. He is the most controversial man in the history of humanity. That means that Jesus is the focus of our group, not questions about morality or ethics. I think that if you decide Jesus is really who he claimed to be, you will also take his moral statements seriously. If you decide he was really nothing special, then his statements about morality and ethics won't really matter either. In either case, you'll decide on the seriousness of his statements about sexuality, divorce, marriage, relationships, politics, etc. on the grounds of what you believe about his identity. So that's where we'll start and what we'll concentrate on.” Such a statement is important in order to keep Christians in the group from getting into some ethical life issue. Morality is extremely important to disciples of Jesus. The goal of the series is to establish Jesus as Lord over every area of life before those who give their hearts to Jesus are confronted with the lordship of Jesus in every area of life. We don't want to create moralism in which we implicitly communicate to the group participants that “you (don't) do that if you are a good Christian”, but rather we want to proclaim the gospel that “because Jesus is Lord, follow him obediently in every area of your life.”

It's important that the group leader does NOT read these introductory points—that has a forced and impersonal effect. You should make yourself very familiar with these points, and then express them in a relaxed way, with some passion.

We suggest that these introductory thoughts be expressed at the beginning of the first two weeks. Often, there are newcomers at the second group meeting. From the third meeting on, the group should be determined, and participants from the first two units should be dedicated to providing continuity through regular participation.

6.3 Offer the People Guarantees

This is an important part that defines the character of the discovery group. Give the group members guarantees about their presence and participation: “First I want to give you some guarantees:

1. I guarantee that no one will be judged here for their opinion or convictions. Not by me, not by others. Everyone can believe what they want here. If someone in this group makes fun of an expressed opinion I will protect the bearer of that opinion.
2. I guarantee that everyone can ask what they want. However, that doesn't mean that we will be able to find an answer to every question immediately. If I know that the question belongs to a topic that is in another unit, I will ask the questioner to leave the question open until then. If the question strays too far from the theme, I will suggest that we discuss the question after the group interchange or during the next week over coffee and cake. At any rate, all questions are important.
3. I guarantee that no one will go home with thousand of ideas waving in the wind, but with a substantial thought, a golden nugget that you can digest during the following week, because it really impresses you. I see it as my responsibility to keep the discussion on course, in order to send everyone home with one deep thought—and that one thought can be different for each person in the group.
4. I will always find something positive in each statement and each question. Even if the content is confusing or doesn't fit the theme, or is quite different from what I believe, I will somehow take it positively and use it as a springboard to lead our discussion further and drive our thoughts on the topic deeper.
5. You will always get a handout so that you can follow what we're doing. We will only do what it says on the handout. There won't be any mean surprises here. Here the carpet won't start shaking, or people floating to the ceiling or any other unexpected things. You can be sure that we will only talk about the topic on the handout and not more.
6. I guarantee that everyone can get a word in here. As a group guideline, I would suggest that everyone keeps himself to 5 statements per unit—that shouldn't be a strict guideline—at least until we are sure that everyone has had the chance to contribute something to the topic or to ask questions. And if you say something, please keep your story or commentary to one minute. We really want to be considerate of each other, and as the group leader, I would like to make sure that no one in the group dominates, but rather that everyone has the same chance to contribute their thoughts.
7. Sometimes we will use a Bible, but I guarantee you that you won't need to feel uncomfortable. We understand that in this group we are all at different points in our spiritual journey, most are quite new to these things, don't know anything about the Bible, don't know where to find something in it. We are a group in which we are all patient with each other. If we need to find a passage in the Bible, since these Bibles are all the same version, we'll simply call out the page number, and then everyone can find the chapter and verse. No one will be asked to read the Bible passage. Either I or one of the helpers will read the passage.

It's possible, that you will feel uncomfortable spending so much time speaking by yourself at the beginning. But it's fundamental that these foundations and guidelines are established for the series. It brings everyone onto the same wavelength, relaxes the participants (note: most feel uncertain at the beginning), and provides you with the freedom and authority to break in, if someone wants to lead the group in an unproductive direction. You can tell the people that this long introduction will only occur in the first two weeks.

6.4 Follow Important Leadership Principles for a Good Discovery Experience

6.4.1 Let the Bible speak out of its own power to convince

The only common ground that Christians share with non-Christians is that both were created in the image of God. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has set eternity in the hearts of men. The result is that only the Word of God, in the convincing power of the Holy Spirit, communicates, and will convict the rebellious heart. Only the Word of God can bring an echo into the human soul that reminds the lost of a homeland far away. Logical arguments and evidences are important instruments during discussion, because God is logical and consistent, and in him exists all truth. But arguments have no power to make anyone holy. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to those that believe” (Romans 1:16). The Holy Scriptures are the instrument of the New Birth, which the Holy Spirit effects in a soul. “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). No matter how robust the arguments or how cynical the questions of group participants may be, the Bible is the sword of the Holy Spirit, which as part of our armour (Ephesians 6:17) against the strongholds of Satan—namely minds influenced by lies—takes us captive in obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). The English theologian and pastor from the 17th century, Richard Sibbes, preached that, “The Bible is the chariot in which the Holy Spirit rides to the heart.” Martin Luther commented on the awakening of his day, “I did nothing; the Word did everything.”

The result is that the confidence we have in God's Word becomes the objective with which we discuss various topics; we always want to bring the discussion and the people back to the truth claims of the Holy Scriptures. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

Here is an example of how this could play out: You have asked the question (out of “Who Was Jesus...”), “What could Jesus have meant when he said, in John 4:14, that the water that he gives would become a spring of living water in the heart of the woman?”

Silence reigns in the group. No one knows what the answer could be.

You repeat the question, but in different words. Repeating a question in different words is a good way to prompt people. “So, I don't think anyone here would say 'living water will become a spring in the soul, that will spring up into eternal water.' What could this Jew have meant by that? Sounds like something exciting, maybe refreshing... what do you think?”

Now a woman says, “Maybe it's a spiritual concept like Nirvana. Like that people somehow return to their own eternity, or something.”

A man says, “But no one would think that within Judaism! Rather, I think it could have something to do with love. Jesus always talked about love.”

Another man says, “Why does it need to be about love? I think he could mean the same thing here as we saw one other time, when he spoke of himself as water, and when someone drinks from him they won't be thirsty anymore.”

“So, something like Nirvana,” says the woman.

Now you jump in, “Interesting ideas. Especially what Dorothea means with 'Nirvana', that is completeness. I think George is right when he says that a Jew would not talk about Nirvana, but do we somehow find the thought of human completeness in these words of Jesus? Look at verse 14 again! Do you see? He, Jesus, is the one who gives the water. It's therefore not something that a person gets himself through reincarnation or something, rather in the case of Jesus it must mean something else. Maybe it would help if we looked at John 7:38, because

Jesus uses the same image there.” (You know that because the Leader's Workbook for “Who Was Jesus...?” gives you this tip.)

Everyone flips there.

“See in verse 38? Does everyone have it?... Do you see the last sentence there?”

The point is, let the people get the Word of God in front of their eyes. Let God's Word sink into their souls and do its work.

From time to time, well-intentioned Christians have suggested that one should simply write the Bible text into the outline. We suggest that we can teach people to look into their Bible, to read their own Bible—and that's the goal—when we get them used to taking the Bible into their hands, opening it and reading along in the discovery groups.

The most striking experience that I've ever had, when in one evening the powerful Word of God accomplished the saving work of God, was in the case of Karin (see 02). I have also experienced the opposite: Michael came to a discovery group in my house. Admittedly, he came hesitantly. Ruby had convinced him that he should try it once. It was the series “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” After our group discussion, Michael said to me, “Stephen, thanks for this evening. I won't be back.” I asked him why, and he said, “As we were looking at the verses tonight, one sentence jumped out of the page at me. As if the letters lifted off the paper. As if the sentence was alive. I felt something in me, too. That's much too mysterious for me. I can't take that.”

To some, the gospel is an aroma of life, to others a smell of death (2 Corinthians 2:16). We are only God's instruments. The actual sword that pierces the heart is the Word of God.

6.4.2 Find a positive springboard even in the most untrue statements

This principle was already mentioned earlier, and in the previous point, the reaction of the leader to Dorothea's statements about Nirvana was an example. It's important that the group can see how you keep your promises and guarantees. If you ask or read a question, as well as when you read, let people calmly express their thoughts for a few minutes, even if these thoughts only contain falsehood. You know that you will shortly bring them back to God's truth, and the radical opposition of God's truth to the lies expressed by group members will burrow into the souls of the people. It can even be offensive. But you yourself aren't offensive, when you take some untrue statement and use it as a springboard to lead the people to an idea of the truth.

In order to do that, you must know the truth of God to which the untruth in a statement points.

Here are some examples:

Leader: “What could Jesus have meant by the claim 'I and the Father are one'?”

Doris: “I don't think that when Jesus said 'I and the Father are one' he meant that he is God at all, only that he was similar to God, but by no means that he was God.”

Frank: “I once talked to someone—somehow I think it was a colleague at work who belonged to the Jehovah's witnesses—and he said something similar to what Doris said: Jesus wasn't God, but was like God. Maybe like the Dalai Lama or Mohammed or something.”

Leader: “I think that the opinion that Doris and Frank represented, can help us a bit further. That's exactly what is so offensive about Christianity, this claim that Jesus is God. That he is similar to God, one can swallow that much more easily. Now the question is whether there are some clues in this account in John 10:30-34 about how the Jews, who were standing there and heard this statement, would understand this claim that 'I and the Father are one'.”

Leader (reads): “The philosopher, Ron Kubsch, writes that a universe without the existence of absolute truth is impossible. Even the postmodern philosophers can make their relativistic claims...”

Frank (interrupts): “That's really irritating! Excuse me, but I just have to say that it bothers me when I hear these claims that there's absolute truth. That's just a club in the hands of fundamentalists to coerce people into their narrow-minded belief in a totalitarian God.”

Leader: “That's really helpful, Frank. I know that by your statement, you're expressing the opinion, even the fear, of many. And I think what's most important in your statement is that there are so-called Christians, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, secularists who go around with their opinions as with a club. Honestly, that's what excites me about Jesus' teaching: he claims to be the truth and to teach it, but he underlines that truth without love is absolutely useless to people. So then we should ask the question, 'What does Ron Kubsch mean here by truth?' Is there something in this quote that helps us along?”

Sally: “I think this discussion about truth is dumb. Truth is a thing of perspective. Everyone has a different truth, because everyone has a different perspective. We make the worldview that brings us something into our truth. To adopt a truth from someone else, regardless of whether it's the truth of Jesus, Genghis Khan, Karl Marx or the Marx brothers, leaves the heart empty.”

Leader: “I think that's the fear that we all come to this topic with, isn't it? Sally is right—who wants to adopt the truth claims of a person if it fills the mind but leaves the heart empty? There must be something in the person that you can trust. You must know that the person means you good when he says that such-and-such is truth. When you were a child, and Mom said that if you didn't open the door, you would hurt your face when you ran through it, you trusted her and opened the door to go play. You know your mother has a certain authority in life, more experience than you, more knowledge, and she loves you. You trust everything, instead of rebelliously running into the door. The question is, can you trust Jesus?”

For many Christians, it's hard to let false statements simply hang in the air. They have the wrong impression that they aren't being true to God if they don't immediately correct everything untrue. But what God expects from disciples of Jesus is that we use the truth wisely. That means that we help the non-Christians in a positive way, to show them the impossibility of their view or claim lovingly. The “springboard method” allows the non-

Christian to see the irrationality of their statements themselves—maybe not immediately but gradually—without you telling him he's a fool.

6.4.3 Be passionate but not argumentative

Don't hesitate to express your own convictions, even to talk about them for 1-3 minutes. Let your passion for the gospel show. Be enthusiastic about Jesus. Not comical, not eccentric, not loud, not red in the face. But passionately in love. That's good for the postmodern heathen to see and sense. He will also want to have a firm grip on something in life, to be inspired by something.

But note: you can't argue anyone into the kingdom of God. You can't win anyone for Jesus by a reactionary stance toward the evil in the world. You should, as a light in the world, hate the evil in the world, avoid it, fight against it. But “thundering” about evil in front of non-Christians does nothing. For one thing, the non-Christian sits in the circle with you and has stereotypical ideas of Christians as overreacting, negatively-minded fundamentalists who isolate themselves from the world. Before you say something, always ask if what you will say or how you will say it will confirm these stereotypes. If yes, then don't say it. Moreover, what will finally bring people to turn from the darkness, is a love of the light. What gives us a hatred of sin, from which we want to sin less, is a love for Jesus. What will enthuse people about you is not how correct you are or how much you know, but rather your enthusiasm, your love, your respect and your humble trust in Jesus and the Word of God that they observe in you over several weeks.

6.4.4 Start where the person finds himself spiritually

This leadership principle comes from the observation that each person is at a different point in the spiritual journey. The biblical principle is to meet the person at *their* point, rather than at yours.

6.4.4.1 Be aware of your choice of words. The non-Christian doesn't always understand the same thing as you do when he hears certain words. For example, if you say, “We can't come to God, unless we repent,” that means to you a turning from sins and a turning to Jesus and obedience to God's will. The group participants imagine something informed by their stereotypes, such as seeing themselves in a cathedral kneeling before a cross, or seeing themselves on the steps of St. Peter's in Rome climbing on their knees. “Repent” sounds that way to them. It's better to translate the same biblical concepts into modern words. “We can't come to God, and enjoy a deep relationship with him, unless we are ready to turn away from things that don't conform to the purity and beauty of God.” You could then explain the concept as follows: “I don't know if you've heard this word before, but the old word “repentance” has this meaning—turning away, or deciding in our hearts to turn away from something. When God calls us to himself, this call doesn't just include the positive turning to God, but also the negative turning from all that doesn't conform to God's character.”

Other words where we want to be careful:

Forgiveness: Many people have been deeply hurt by powerful or abusive people in their past. To tell people that they must forgive those who have done evil to them, without explaining what forgiveness means and DOESN'T mean, can drive them away from the gospel.

Righteousness and holiness: Humans long for justice, but many don't understand the concept. Take the time to explain to the people that righteousness and holiness express the beauty, completeness and purity of God, that is, that in everything he thinks, does and wills, there is not the slightest wrong or twisted.

6.4.4.2 Think like the non-Christians. The key is always to ask yourself, “If I hadn't grown up in a church, if I had never read the Bible, if I had never been around Christians, would I understand this concept?... Would I experience this discussion as peculiar and subcultural?... Would I feel comfortable?”

6.4.4.3 Be patient with people. If you ask the people to turn to a passage in the Bible, don't start reading until everyone in the group has opened to the right page and is ready to read the verse with you. If you ask (read) a question, and no one answers immediately, don't allow yourself to panic. People will want to be careful with their answers, especially at first. If there is a long pause, repeat the question in other words. Sometimes it helps if you place the question in a concrete situation.

6.4.4.4 Allow for anonymity. Don't ever pressure anyone to say something. It's often the working of the Holy Spirit to let someone come, sit and leave in silence. Respect this silence. As it was said earlier, don't ask people to read Bible verses unprepared. That can cause awkward moments and loss of trust. It's best if one or a few of the Christians in the group stand by as your helpers and readers. These you can always call on to read from the Bible. You can also ask from time to time, “Is there someone who would like to read this verse?” If no one volunteers freely, a Christian helper can say they're ready.

6.5 Think about the long process that the group participants must still go through, and allow this process to take place

This principle is strongly connected to the previous principle. Not only is each person in the group at a certain point in their spiritual journey, but many will take steps in the right direction. They need time, they need more content, they need more impressions, they need more opportunities for spiritual digestion. In other words, each non-Christian must go through a whole series of mini-decisions before they are ready to accept the whole gospel. This process lies in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and in his power to prepare the unconverted for conversion. Give the Holy Spirit and this process time.

In some societies and with some people in the west (we call these societies 'modern'), one must start with intellectual decisions. That means that these people want a good argument, they want to have deep intellectual questions cleared up, before they are ready to grapple emotionally with the Christian faith (for example, what it will cost them). But in many current societies (we call these 'postmodern'), people are oriented to good experiences, and are only ready to set their minds in motion about spiritual things, when they see that they have a good experience with the thing. In many of our discovery groups we'll have both types of people.

The important principle is that most people in the west don't suddenly turn to Jesus by a “macro-decision”, but through many “mini-decisions”. You can imagine the process as follows, with these examples:

THE PROCESS OF MINI-DECISIONS

- **Experience decisions** (awareness)

She is decent. She is happy and accepting.
She is religious, but surprisingly open and normal.
You can be a Christian and at the same time, intelligent.
The Bible is actually not so hard to understand.
Many statements in the Bible seem right to me.
Surprisingly, many people like this church.

- **Meaning decisions** (Human psyche and emotions)
To be a stable Christian, there must be some advantage!
It would be nice if I could believe like he does. That would help me.
Jesus seems to be the key to everything. I ask myself, “Why?”
- **Knowledge decisions** (mind)
I recognize that the Bible is historically trustworthy.
One can't use science to oppose the supernatural.
So there is a difference between Christianity and moralism!
There really were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.
It makes sense that Jesus is the only way to God.
Jesus is God.
I realize why Jesus had to die. Otherwise no one could be saved.
- **Commitment decisions** (whole life)
I am a sinner.
I need a saviour, namely Jesus.
Although it will cost me everything, I will follow him.
I give him my life, thankful that he gave me his life.

6.6 Answer questions in a way that conforms to the spiritual point of the questioner.

This point actually belongs to a previous principle (4.4). But it is so important and foundational that we want to expand it here separately and illustrate it.

The mistake we often make is that we give the non-Christian more than he is ready to believe. We forget that he is in the process of a spiritual journey and answer him with the truth that is right for a person at point 40, while he's still at point 5. We forget the command of our Lord that we should not throw the pearls of the gospel before pigs (his words!), because the pigs don't know to treasure the pearls and will simply trample on them (Matthew 7:6). That means that Jesus expects from us that we use the pearls of the truth wisely, and don't thoughtlessly lay them before people who have already shown their “pig-like intentions”.

Let's be clear: Jesus expects from us that we live in truth and speak the truth. But handling the truth wisely means that we're not being unfaithful to God if we don't explain the entire truth of a topic from A to Z. If we really care about the souls of people, we will say as much of the truth and express the truth in such a way that it will (hopefully) help the unbeliever one step further in the direction of conversion. That is the goal.

What does that look like concretely? Here are some examples:

- Imagine that in the second unit of “Who Was Jesus...?”, where Jesus meets a Samaritan, a woman in the discovery group says, “I find that Christianity in general, and Jesus in particular, are anti-women. I mean, he only chose men as disciples, and

since then the Christian church only allows men as priests and rejects women.” You immediately think that this woman has wrongly interpreted Jesus. You get the impression from her statement that she has a quite anti-Christian or anti-church attitude. Because you know how severely women have suffered under illusions of power from men, you allow it as a possibility that maybe this woman has herself suffered under the abuse of a man—*maybe*. You know that you can't change her poisoned attitudes with one or two theologically insightful sentences. She is too close to the 0 Point of the spiritual journey for that, and too far from Point 50. You think (do you see how much you must think for the non-Christians?) that it is more important to show the woman the door to several good experiences with Jesus through the discovery units, than it is to immediately correct her wrong ideas about Jesus in front of the group.

So you say, “Natalie (calling people by name automatically brings a softness to your voice), what you are saying is very important to our group, thanks! How Jesus dealt with the women of his time is actually a quite exciting topic. I think you are right, that women are often handled dishonourably and without respect in the institutional church, and I'm very sorry about that, because it's very unjust. Maybe the question for us is whether true followers of Jesus should instead relate to women respectfully. I believe the answer lies in this encounter here, between Jesus and this Samaritan.” (If this statement is made during the first unit, you could say the same as the above, and indicate that the topic is covered in the 2nd unit.)

- A radical feminist and lesbian named Nora, whom my wife got to know at work and brought to a discovery group, said in an explosive way, “I always find it offensive, how the church has dealt with homosexual people and has always egged people on to deal in a phobic way or even violently with us normal people. That's also the reason why I can never ever be a Christian.” That brought our discussion immediately to a silent stop. It was very still in the room. Until Jim Lalonde, a former practicing homosexual man, who had turned to Jesus several years earlier and was now dying of AIDS, expressed his hatred of his prior lifestyle, “Homosexuality is an aversion to God!” I almost fell off my chair! Jim was right in my opinion, but he had met the woman at HIS point of the spiritual journey. Nora was beside herself with anger. In her mind, Jim had just confirmed her point: The church has no place for women like her. She shot back, “And men like you are exactly the reason why I will never ever believe in God!”

I only had a second to think things through and avoid a battle of words. I had to explain Jim's reaction, so that people could understand why this man had reacted so badly to Nora. But I also needed to meet this lesbian woman at her anti-Christian point of the spiritual journey. I needed to restore a freedom for her, so that she would feel accepted by the group and so that over the next weeks she could take steps in the directions of repentance and conversion. The alternative would be that Nora would shut the door to the church and to a relationship with Jesus forever.

Here is what I said: “I can understand you both well. Jim speaks very strongly against homosexuality—I know him well, I'm his pastor, and I know he's ok with it if I briefly explain to you—Jim, is it ok if I tell the people who you are?” (I looked Jim hard in the eyes and winked at him to say, “Jim, we're working together here! I need to explain your scorching outburst to these people, because right now they're at the point of the spiritual journey where you were years ago. We need to meet them...” He

nodded at me.) “Many years ago, Jim had thrown himself head over heels into the homosexual lifestyle and had rampaged the scene like a dog in heat. I’ll spare you the details. I know that he has borne severe consequences from that, consequences for the rest of his life, consequences that give him great pain. So I personally understand why he reacted so strongly to Nora’s statement. Maybe you could say that he, in his 50th year, stands on the other side of the homosexual experience from you, as he must now bear wounds and thorns to the grave that you in your tender 26th year haven’t experienced yet.

“But I will also say, Nora, that you are completely right. The church, who on the one hand has talked about a love of Jesus for all people, has on the other hand reacted very negatively against homosexual people over the years, and has treated them like lepers. I have friends, and I think Jim is one of them, whose experience with the church has only driven them farther from God. I’m not saying that I think each sexual expression is healthy and normal. I think, for example, that adultery is very harmful and is in opposition to the concept of faithfulness in which we believe. What I want to make clear, however, is that in Jesus, I meet someone who wants to relate to all people, and who calls us all—homosexual, heterosexual, transsexual, bi-sexual, tri-sexual, quattosexual (some people start to laugh)—to follow him and become like him. That’s what I love so much about him. Ok, people, what do you notice...?” (And the discovery discussion goes on.)

6.7 Sympathy can break through the hardest walls

If you lead a discovery group or support one by your helpful assistance, you are a shepherd of lost sheep. Like the shepherd in Luke 19, you are leaving the safe surroundings of the converted, and are going after the lost. You are a shepherd!

For many people, the convincing argument for the truth of Jesus is not your ability to defend Christian teaching (which is important in itself), and not your knowledge of the Holy Scriptures (although that is important for each Christian). The convincing argument for the truth of Jesus is your love for the people in the group. This love expresses itself through the tone in your voice when the exchange in the group gets hot, or in the respect you show someone after he’s made fun of your beliefs. Your love especially comes through in your soul-caring way with unbelievers, the way you come to the side of a non-Christian in the moment of crisis.

One evening—some of us were already in the dining room drinking coffee and eating cake—the doorbell rang and I went to the door to open it. It was Jim and Thelma, the two—him the heathen, she the Jew—who had been in David’s group early in my Toronto experience. They had already come several times, and this evening I greeted them heartily. Jim immediately went to the others in the dining room, but Thelma stayed in the entrance. “Stephen, don’t expect me to say anything this evening. I actually don’t even want to be here. I’m so upset. Angry at God. You know that I’ve suffered a lot in life. Today my 34-year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer. I can’t believe it. Why do I have to bear such a grief again!” And then the tear dam broke and she began to cry. I laid my arm on the shoulder of this 74-year-old woman and said, “Thelma, let the tears flow. Such terrible news deserves grief. Of course we don’t expect you to participate in the discussion tonight. Just sit on David’s big white sofa. I’ll sit next to you tonight and while I’m leading the discussion, I’ll grieve with you.”

And so it was. We sat together on the white sofa. Several times she started to cry quietly, so I put my arm on her shoulder and led the group further. So it went for 45 minutes. I don't remember anymore what someone said that lit the fire in Thelma. But suddenly she exploded, "That's exactly why I don't believe that this good God that you are talking about here in this group exists. How can God allow so much suffering? As a Jewish woman, I've had to bear so much misfortune in my life. Today I learned that this pathetic God has allowed my daughter to get sick with cancer. A good wife, mother of 3 small children, and they give her 1 year to live. A just God? That's a big lie."

I noticed how other people in the group nodded their heads in agreement with Thelma's statement.

Again, I put my arm on Thelma's shoulder and said to the group, "I also find that God sometimes works in completely mysterious and incomprehensible ways. And because we long for law and justice, God often seems like a big question mark to us. What can I say? I asked Thelma to stay with us this evening, so that she can be comforted by our fellowship and your presence." Suddenly, a few people began to express their empathy with Thelma. In my spirit, I sensed that we had come to a very critical point in our group experience. The Holy Spirit was pressing me to do something peculiar. We had already been together several weeks and I hoped the people trusted me. "People, I am hearing this evening through several of your comments statements, that many of us are struggling with special, even painful circumstances in life. Most of us don't believe in a personal God, and don't want anything to do with church. But might I for a short moment, ummmm, let's say, for a short moment be your priest, ummmm, and might I pray for you? You don't have to pray with me, you don't have to do what I do, you can just sit quietly in your chairs and stare at me while I pray... but may I pray for you?" To my surprise, everyone nodded in agreement.

I was nervous, closed my eyes and started to pray. First for Thelma, that God would meet her in a very calm, comforting and special way... and her daughter... Then I prayed for the person to Thelma's left... Then for the person left of her... Then I knew that I had to pray for everyone in the group... one after another... all 15, in as much detail as I knew. I prayed for 15 minutes. The gospel flowed into my prayer, how God had nailed his own son to a cross in the biggest grief of all time, and laid our sins on him, how God's own heart, although sovereign over all our pain, is grieved over our pain. Soon I heard a sob from one person, then another, then several. The room was full of the Holy Spirit. As I ended the prayer and opened my eyes, I saw how the entire group had been carried away.

A half hour later we finished the unit. On the way to the door, several people thanked me for my prayer. Someone even said it had been the most meaningful evening of their life. The person who seemed to have been most impressed by the evening was Thelma. Three weeks later she and I were talking on the phone, when I noticed that her heart and thinking about Jesus had changed. We met together that same day at a small Jewish restaurant, where we ordered coffee and bagels. "Do you really believe he's the Messiah?" I asked her. She answered, "Yes, that's become quite clear to me!" Then she prayed, right there in the restaurant. She thanked Jesus that as the Lamb of God, he had died on the cross for her, and had paid for her sins. She asked Jesus the Messiah to make her heart his home, gave him her life and promised him her allegiance.

Sympathy! Empathy! A broken heart for the broken. Weep with those who weep. Those are the tears of Jesus which flow through our sympathy to the hurting. Sympathy without truth is nothing but a cushy teddy bear, which doesn't help the child when the storm rumbles against

the window pane and casts peculiar shadows on the wall. Truth with sympathy is a stream from above, tears of Christ that break through rock-hard defenses and bring freedom.

An effective group leader brings sympathy into the discussion, even toward the most repulsive person. We don't take offense at offensive statements, but meet the longing behind the offensive statement, "I can understand that this view irritates you. What could be behind this irritation? What is the heart longing for, that expresses itself in anger at my statement?"

6.8 Take people directly to Jesus

We aren't leading people to a denomination, nor to a theological tradition, nor to a list of rules for life. We are leading people to the person, Jesus Christ. Christianity is Christ. To be a Christian is to follow Christ. The result of following is that the person who follows becomes real. This becoming real translates into becoming holy, that is, becoming more and more like Jesus. The goal of the discovery groups is not to change people so that they will be worthy of conversion, but to make their lostness without Jesus clear, to set their need for Jesus before their eyes and heart, and if they, knowing the cost, decide to follow Jesus, to help them begin the process of becoming real (becoming like Christ, sanctification).

In other words, we want to drive every topic to Jesus, we always want to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of the topic and the satisfaction of our longings.

6.9 Don't be hesitant or reserved! You stand on firm ground.

People say today that the only authority is the personal, subjective experience of each person. That means that "what is true for me is true, and what is true for you is true is true." This leads to the current pluralism that claims that everyone ought to define truth for themselves, except the truth that claims that it's the only true truth. That is a specifically western phenomenon. Without getting philosophical (F. Schaeffer, C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, and Ron Kubsch have pointed out the philosophical gaps of pluralism the best), I would like to encourage you with three thoughts with which you can enter each discovery group experience:

Within the pluralistic worldview, no one can question your own story. You have experienced in your own personal world something fascinating and spectacular: God! He has personally revealed himself to you. He has met you through the Holy Spirit and has so moved your heart with the gospel of Jesus crucified and resurrected, that you have given him your life and have declared yourself ready to follow Jesus and lay down your life for him who laid down his life for you. Jesus has changed you. He is always in the process of changing you. You are a very normal person, with every normal challenge and pain of life. But you have found freedom, because you know that in Jesus, God the Father passionately loves you and accepts you. Because you love him, the goal of your life, in everything you do (whether it be office work, changing diapers or cleaning toilets) the lordship of God's character expresses itself through your character. Your life has meaning.

No one can take your story away from you. No one can argue against it. Even within a pluralistic worldview, your story is valid. Even better, your story inspires. People are hungrier than we think. Even people from other religions long for that which you have found in Jesus. Therefore, tell your story freely and bravely. The Holy Spirit will use it (2 Timothy 1:7,8)

Secondly, no one can deny the Jesus event. There is always one attempt or another to explain away the existence of Jesus in the first century. The Jesus Event, however, is at the same level as the holocaust. There are so many people who have experienced it (him) themselves and have told about it (other than the people in the 4 gospels, there are Josephus, Philo and from the 2nd century, Polycarp), that you are standing on firm ground when you talk about Jesus. That means—at least as far as the claims of Jesus go—that God came to us. “Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14) is “God with us”, and Jesus was the fulfillment, he was the appearance of God in our midst. People from other religions either turn a deaf ear or a hard heart toward this reality. You can be fully confident, that your personal story is the truth, because in Jesus, God really came to us. Bonhoeffer consistently said that there is only one reality, and that is the Christ-Reality. Stand confidently on this reality, even when you are sitting among skeptics, blasphemers and accusers.

Third, there is one external objective voice outside of the subjective experience of every person in the world, that once and for all establishes that the Christ-Reality is the true truth—the resurrection of Jesus. The voice of reality screams at every person from the empty tomb in Jerusalem, “If your subjective experience hasn't reckoned with the resurrection of Jesus, than you've overlooked the one standard by which truth can and must be measured. 'He is not here. He is risen!'" Jesus' resurrection is not only the final answer to every question, but it is also the proof that Jesus' claim that he came from God and is God among us is true and trustworthy. As the Bible boldly claims, he who stands on the rock stands secure. He who falls against this rock will be smashed into a thousand pieces.

That is the reason why it was the “final argument” of the apostles and the church in the first century. It is also the reason why the topic of Jesus' resurrection is dealt with in every series. People will ask questions to which there is no answer, and develop arguments where you must stand by helplessly. But you know that everything comes to a point at this one point—the resurrection of Jesus. That is the foundation on which you stand securely, and that establishes your personal story—even when you don't have the answer to many intellectual questions.

7 Tasks And Tips for Group Helpers (and all Christians who want to participate in the discovery group)

- The most important: The 1-3 group helpers are shepherds of the lost sheep. That is a privilege, which brings with it not only organizational, but also pastoral responsibilities.
- Before the evening officially begins, helpers should do a room check. Is the room orderly? Are there enough comfortable chairs set up? Is the room temperature good? Are there enough copies of the same version of the Bible for everyone (To the side? Under the chairs?)? Is the lighting right?
- The helpers and leader should meet for last-minute arrangements and to pray for the discovery group.
- Before the group discussion: Greet the guests warmly. During the informal time for eating and drinking, the helpers should concentrate on the guests, that is, on the non-Christian participants. Show interest in them; ask them questions to get to know them better. Avoid discussions about spiritual topics; rather speak about interests, hobbies, experiences, background, humorous things. Helpers should make sure that no guests are left standing or sitting by themselves without being spoken to.
- At the beginning or at the end of the group discussion: One helper should make it his responsibility to collect the names and contact info of the participants. That can

happen either at the beginning, before the actual discussion starts, or at the end of the discussion, when the participants have become more comfortable and secure and won't feel as threatened by the giving out of their contact info. Explain the reason for the participant list: it is in order to keep people up to date about what will happen in the discovery group, what new discovery groups will be available, or if a group leader or one of the helpers wants to meet with one of the group participants. Don't give the list out. But make sure that everyone in the group has the contact info for the group leader and 1-3 helpers.

- During the discussion: The main people who should carry the discussion are the guests! The job of the leader is to advance the conversation. Christians in the group should remain quiet until the last question, and then answer the last question quickly and concisely along with everyone else, and they should do this in an appropriate and helpful way.

Group helpers have a special roll during the discussion:

- (a) to pray for the leader, the guests and the conversation during the discussion
- (b) to follow the discussion, and (only) jump in verbally when:
 - (i) they think that a follow-up question would be helpful, if the question can be stated openly and graciously. For example, "Lisa, I find it interesting that you have come to that conclusion. What ideas have led you there?"
 - (ii) they think that it would enrich the discussion to challenge a statement, but only if it can be done respectfully. For example, "Lisa, could you imagine that the opposite could be true, or would that be an impossible position, in your opinion?"
 - (iii) they think that the Christian truth could be made clearer through a (very) short story or illustration.
- After the group discussion: Helpers must be ready to stick around for a while:
 - (a) to clean up.
 - (b) to be available for any non-Christians who want to discuss something. Again, the rule applies that helpers should not converse with Christians, but rather with the guests (for whom these groups exist).
 - (c) Each helper will, from time to time, find himself in a pastoral conversation with a non-Christian, when it might be helpful to pray with and for the non-Christian:
 - (i) In each situation, decide whether it would be fitting to pray. But note that non-Christians often want us to pray for them far more than we think they do.
 - (ii) Sometimes a non-Christian will talk about a personal situation and ask the helper for advice, and the helper will have no idea how to answer. At that point, it is helpful to the non-Christian if the helper admits that he lacks wisdom for dealing with the situation, but explains that we can go to God to ask for wisdom, and does so at that moment. Or he promises to pray for the non-Christian every day, and if God lays something on his heart, he will contact the non-Christian right away.
 - (d) If the non-Christians head home quickly, the helpers and leader could meet for a short evaluation and prayer. Longer meetings should be avoided, though, as a lot of spiritual energy is expended in the group discussion and the leader and helpers will likely be exhausted.
- 4. During the week: The helpers and leader can contact group participants if unanswered questions or pastoral concerns require their attention.

8 And Then What?

8.1 Even if NO ONE converts to Jesus, the group was still a success

2 Timothy 3:7-9 teaches us that there will always be people who—regardless of how often they hear the gospel—won't come to faith in Jesus. Something in them is spiritually wired in such a way that they are always looking for new ideas but *are not able* to ever come to a knowledge of the truth of the resurrected Jesus (2 Timothy 3:7). We want to deal with non-Christians gently and delicately. We want to be ready to answer their questions as well as possible. But when we've done everything to convince a non-Christian and he still isn't content with the truth of the resurrected Jesus, the problem doesn't lie in the witness of Jesus, but rather in the unbeliever.

We deal in each discovery group with people who won't turn to Jesus, even people who are happy about the gospel for a long time but in the end still refuse to accept the cost of following (Matthew 13:20,21). We even realize that this opposition to the gospel could be expressed before the first group meeting, in that all the invitees find something “better” to do than to accept the invitation of the host and come to the feast.

God turns each discovery group into a success! *He* turns it into a success. We are only servants who bring him our offerings, in that we lay the gospel on the altar for him through a discovery group. To some this gospel becomes an aroma to eternal life, to others it becomes the stench of eternal death. In both cases—this is the hard but beautiful theology of God—our discovery attempt glorifies God. To some it will be an avenue to experience the glorious grace of God. For many others, it will be an experience of the glorious justice of God. When they stand before him on the last day, and he asks whether they have known and followed his son, Jesus, and they want to argue that he never gave them the opportunity to hear about Jesus, and he reminds them that a long time ago, they were invited to a discovery group but didn't come, or came to the discovery group, but rejected the truth, God stands before the unbeliever as right and just in his sentencing of them. In that moment, your “unsuccessful” discovery group is the cause for God being glorified before the unbeliever. That is a success.

8.2 If SOMEONE turns to Jesus, here is how you can serve

Meet with the person. Sometimes it can even happen that more than one person want to convert to Jesus. In that case you could meet with them all together—which immediately establishes an accountability community for the people—or you and your group helpers could meet separately with each person. It's important that you have your Bible with you for the discussion about giving your life to Christ. Together you will actually look at God's statements and promises.

“We want to talk about it and make it clear to us what it means to devote your life to Jesus. It is a very personal thing. Why do I say that?

- It is a **PERSONAL** commitment: “If you confess with *your* mouth... and believe in *your* heart...” (Romans 10:9-10)
- It is a commitment to the **PERSON** of Jesus
 1. authentic, biblical Christianity is NOT a commitment to a form of spirituality, or to a religion, or to an institution.
 2. it is an entrusting of your whole self to Jesus

- 1:3)
- a. you are spiritually born again through the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-7, 1 Peter 1:3)
 - b. you take (receive) Jesus to yourself (John 1:12)
 - c. you are united with Christ (Galatians 2:20)
 - d. to you the eternal life of Jesus is given (John 3:15-16—“*have eternal life*”=already now!)

3. The result of this entrusting, this uniting with Jesus, is the great exchange (2 Corinthians 5:17): Your sins (both the shame and guilt) are transferred to Jesus, his perfect righteousness is transferred to you. God sentences Jesus on the cross in your place, because of your sins; God declares you “not guilty” and fully and eternally accepted, because of the righteousness of Jesus.

- How can you be certain that God has **PERSONALLY** accepted you?
God wants you to be certain that you belong to him now and forever. “*I have written these things to you, that you may know that you have eternal life, because you believe in the name of the Son of God.*” (1 John 5:13)

1. Recall the promises God has given you!

- a. Do you recognize that you are completely dependent on Jesus for healing?

The promise is Matthew 5:3.

- b. Do you hunger and thirst for an eternal relationship with God through Jesus?

The promise is Matthew 5:6.

- c. Do you believe that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9), that he is the only way to a relationship with God the Father (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1

Timothy 2:5), that he came for you, lived, died and rose again, and that he did all of that to give you forgiveness for all your guilt and failure against God (Romans 10:9-10)?

The promise is John 20:31.

2. Recall the promiser! What do the following verses say about the one who gives you his salvation? John 10:27-30, Philippians 1:6

- It is a continual commitment

Note: Doubts are normal in the personal faith. But God has given us certain ways to always bring us, in our relationship with God, back to assurance that we belong completely to God:

1. God's seal of his acceptance of your person and forgiveness of your sins is **baptism**
Plan to be baptized and through your baptism to openly acknowledge your trust in Jesus.
2. List to God's Word to you daily: **Bible**
Plan to read a bit of the Bible and to meditate on what you've read each day. Even start to memorize verses that particularly speak to you.
3. Communicate with God daily: **Prayer**
Plan to talk daily with God. It's best to do it at the same time as you read your Bible. Let your prayers look like this: Praise God, acknowledge sin, thank God for his goodness, ask for his grace and intervention in your life, and in the lives of you family, friends, church, city and world. Also pray spontaneously during the day, when the Holy Spirit lays things on your heart or shows you the needs of people.
4. Join a church community: **Church**

Involve yourself in a congregation where the truth of Jesus is preached and lived out. That could be the church that is connected to this discovery group.

5. Share the good news of God with others: **Bearing Witness**

Within the next 24 hours, tell one person that you've committed yourself to Jesus. That is a quite normal aspect of our following of Jesus—we are excited about him and tell as many people as possible why.

6. Grow in obedience to God: **Holy Living**

Where God's Word shows you that you should turn from your old lifestyle to Jesus' lifestyle (that means repentance), ask God for the grace and power to decide to do it.

Ask: are you ready, regardless of what it costs you, to commit all 6 steps to God?

Then give Jesus your life now!

Resolved: *“Jesus Christ, Lord over all, I take you as the Lord of my life. Through the Holy Spirit and through your love, you have drawn me to yourself. In humility, I accept your forgiveness of all my sins, and in gratitude for your forgiveness, I forgive those who have sinned against me. I have determined to love you with my whole being, to serve you for the rest of my life, and to deal with others in love as you have dealt with me. From eternity past, you have decided to give yourself to me. Now and for all eternity, I give myself to you. Because you came for me, I am now no longer a spiritual orphan, but am rather a child of the heavenly Father. Daddy, thank you! Amen.”*

9 Who Can Lead a Discovery Group?

Effective discovery group leaders are men and women who...

... love Jesus, who daily rejoice over their salvation in Jesus, who try, with the help of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness and grace of the Father, to daily express their love for Jesus through obedience to the Holy Scriptures and integrity that reflects God's holiness. Their passion for Jesus is authentic yet so obvious, others in the group can feel it.

... love people, especially people who are lost. That means those who see people as Jesus sees them: as lost and confused, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:38). That works in you a brokenness: “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed” (Jeremiah 8:21).

... not re-actionary but pro-active, not negative but positive. While they hate sin and evil, they understand that the seed of every sin and cruelty lies in their own heart, and that makes them humble. They never forget that Christ loved us “while we were yet sinners...while we were enemies” (Romans 5:8,10). That drives them to an adverseness toward sin, but a love for the sinner. This love for the sinner expresses itself in patience toward the sinner, a gracious and gentle spirit.

... not driven by moralistic Christianity, but by the gospel: “I am more sinful than I ever dared to believe, but in Christ I am more loved than I ever dared hope.”

... who keep the disciplines of the Christian life: regularly hearing God's voice in the Word, connecting their heart to God's heart through prayer, being joined to a community of Christians, freely and boldly giving testimony to how Jesus saved them.

... are teachable. They are themselves growing in the knowledge of God's Word. They know that they can even grow and learn through the insights of non-Christians.

...are convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity, the absolute claims of Christ, the authority and power of Scripture and openly confess to their conviction without sounding condescending, dogmatic, strident or argumentative. Non-Christians in the group may do that (and they will), but not the Christians and certainly not the leader.

...are willing to let untruth hang in the air instead of immediately challenging or correcting it, so that people can work through their false beliefs by letting Scripture convince them of the truth, and so that they can work through them over a longer process of many mini-decisions instead of one grand maxi-decision.

... are growing in sanctification, which expresses itself especially through the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:25)

... are ready to pray for the non-Christians in their discovery group regularly, that the Lord will lead them to salvation in Jesus.

... are ready to meet non-Christians outside of the regular group setting to personally help them further along.

... are a model for the apprentice leader(s) and helpers in the discovery group, so that the apprentices and helpers can learn from the leader and become leaders in a new group. Multiplication is the vision. That God is glorified through more discovery groups and through non-Christians who are brought to faith by humble Christians, is the goal.

10 What if...?

What if the Holy Spirit would surprise you, and in your discovery group, say “Doubt-Full”, one or two or several people would come to faith in Jesus?

All of heaven would throw a party!

What if someone in the discovery group “Doubt-Full” converted, and you integrated the newly converted person into your existing church, and your church was one of the few that had a discipleship infrastructure in which new Christians could grow in the practical knowledge of the Bible and the Christian life, and he would even learn how to share his faith with others and later became one of the leaders in the church?

All of heaven would throw a party, and your church would grow by one new but maturing Christian.

What if someone or several in the discovery group “Doubt-Full” turned to Christ, and were so excited that they invited several friends and you repeated “Doubt-Full” (for the friends and for the not-yet-convinced), while the new Christians started with a discipleship group at the same venue (maybe a house), that one of the helpers in the previous discovery group could lead, like Tim and I did in Toronto, only this time the material for discipling was available?

All of heaven would throw a party, and a cell in the body of Christ would reproduce.

What if everything in the previous paragraph happened.. and **if** in addition to “Doubt-Full”, a second discovery group “Who Was Jesus... And What Does It Matter?” took place at the same

place (house?), and a second discipleship group for newly-converted people needed to be organized, in order to meet them at their point of the spiritual journey... and **if** the helper of the previous discovery group became the leader of the discovery and discipleship groups?

All of heaven would throw a party, some Christians would feel strengthened by their “promotion” to leadership, the leadership of the groups would move into the hands of laypersons and out of the hands of the “educated professors”, and one street in one neighbourhood in one city would become a light in the darkness.

What if everything in the previous paragraph happened... and **if** in addition to “Doubt-Full” and “Who Was Jesus and What Does It Matter?”, a third discovery group, namely, “Unbelievable?” for atheistically-oriented people, as well as a third discipleship group needing to be started because yet more non-Christian newcomers asked for more discovery groups and the newly converted over the last few months needed relevant discipleship groups and topics... and **if** indeed now some of the recently converted people would begin to lead discovery groups in 2- or 3-person teams... **if** this dynamically growing community got too big for the house and a larger house or several houses were desired... **if** you would become a sort of “apostolic leadership team” with some others in your church, in order to give this movement direction, biblical fidelity and supporting prayer (but not lead the groups yourself)? *All of heaven would throw a party... and one part of the city would slowly be transformed.*

What if everything in the previous paragraph happened... and **if** the whole thing would start reproducing in the power of the Holy Spirit, and new Christians would grow in their faith through the discipleship groups and would also become leaders and helpers of discovery groups... **if** all 5 discovery series (“Unbelievable?”, “Doubt-Full”, “Christianity and Other Spiritualities”, “Longings of the Heart”, “Who Was Jesus... And Why Does It Matter?”) would be offered, and the discipleship groups would develop further as well (because good available material would be published)... **if** more and more people would come to the groups, that could have maximum 12-15 people, so that the entire group system now multiplied exponentially and the same group topics would now be offered in many homes in the city... and **if** the apostolic leadership team didn't just do what was mentioned above, but also started a kind of school that all future group leaders must finish before they could lead a group... **if** a second church in the city got this vision for group multiplication and conversions, and like the first church, got the whole process of group reproduction and multiplied conversions going... and **if** a third church... and **if** the churches...

...All of heaven would throw a party... and a whole city would be transformed.

What if in a second city in the country the same multiplication process started, ignited by the Holy Spirit, and thousands of people came to faith through self-reproducing discovery groups and grew dynamically through discipleship groups... and **if** in a third city... and **if** in a fourth city... and **if** an apostolic leadership team had so much joy over the coming and spreading of the kingdom of God, that it handed over the training and teaching of trainees and new Christians and moved to another city in order to start the same natural multiplication process there, like Paul, Barnabas and Silas; how it is actually being done in the last 20 years in many countries, and which has led to hundreds and thousands of conversions—even in muslim lands... and **if** the same thing in a third city... and **if** the same thing in a fourth city... and **if** in 10, then 20, then 30 cities in our country had developed these mass movements of small groups into dynamic churches, who brought the good news of Jesus to more and more people, and did their city good...

All of heaven would throw a party... and a whole country would be transformed.