***The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith* for College Students:**

**Leader’s Guide with Discussion Questions**

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**Start here: How do we study *The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith* with college students?**

When it comes to using this material, there are many directions you can take. This resource was created as a kind of confirmation, but we’re not going to legally require you to use it that way. In fact, it makes a great curriculum for a Sunday school class, college Bible study, or any place where Christians are gathered to learn about their faith. But we realize it can be a little confusing—8 units and 16 questions. How do we tackle this? We have a few suggestions for you. These are the *absolute basics* of leading college students. So here are a few strategies for forming a successful group around your average college students, a few example group formats, and discussion questions for each unit in *The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith*.

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**Leading Groups with College Students**

College (or young adulthood) is a unique time in a person’s life. They have just left the caring wings of their parents and are ready to see the world. But they aren’t yet sure of themselves and aren’t yet established. What results is a fun time of questioning, experimenting, and being open minded. If this energy is correctly harnessed, it can be a great thing. It’s an opportunity for them to think and talk about their faith, and to honestly examine their beliefs in a fresh way. *The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith* is a great way for them to do that. Here are a few tips for leading groups with college students:

* **The must-haves.** Some things are non-negotiable for college groups. First of all, *food*. The easiest way to get college students through the door is through their belly. College students don’t have money and can sniff out a free meal from miles away. Having free food for the students to eat and socialize over makes for a hospitable time that both serves students and works as a strong incentive to attend. This is of course assuming the budget allows. Second, *co-ed groups*. College students are young and unmarried. If there’s anything that they can sniff out better than free food, it’s singles of the other sex. Last but not least, *community*. Create a space that allows for relationships and fun time, and put extra energy into investing in group members outside of group time.
* **Get them talking**. Sometimes the best conversations are discussions that have gotten off track. I was once leading a group over Romans 1. I had prepared with commentaries and questions and was ready to talk about Paul’s introduction to this letter. One of the students in my group asked the question: “So who is this Paul guy anyway?” That got us talking about the basics of the New Testament, and it took us about 15 minutes to get back on topic. But it got conversation going and opened the students up. Sometimes a warm-up such as this is helpful. Whether it’s sports, food, or the Bible, any topic to get the students talking is an advantage.
* **Don’t be afraid to go slightly off topic for the week.** While going through the curriculum is a great thing, sometimes a slight diversion needs to happen. For example, if the topic for the week is the Holy Spirit and the group discussion naturally goes in the direction of how we discern what is and isn’t Spirit, that’s ok, even if it’s not explicitly a part of the study.
* **Sit by the over-talkers**. Every group has that person who talks more than they should. Scratch that—way more than they should. What to do? We can’t promise it will solve all of your problems, but if possible, sit beside them, not across from them. This will cause less eye contact between you and them and invite them to talk less.
* **Ask controversial and/or deep questions.** College students love sharing their opinions and like thinking. Challenge them with good, thought out questions and they will appreciate it and respond. Don’t be afraid to ask controversial questions with college students. They usually have opinions about them, and a conversation about a hot topic usually flows well. Controversial topics have to be faced regardless, and if it’s not in a Christian setting, it often happens in the classroom or on campus sometime anyway.
* **Don’t be afraid of silence.** I can’t stress this enough. When you ask a question, don’t get silent for 3 seconds and then keep talking because the silence is awkward. Just let it be awkward. They hate the silence as much as you and they will be pulled to start talking unless you bail them out. I’ve sometimes asked a questions and sat silent for 15 seconds. It feels like an eternity when you’re the leader, but they will respond.
* **Don’t shy away from heady theology.** College is a time where students engage their minds about all sorts of topics. Perhaps more than any other group, college students can handle challenging theology without always needing a direct application. Always strive to give application, but allow students who want to to puzzle out the higher questions.
* **Preparing outside of group is usually not preferred.** Depending on the group, having them prepare some outside of group (whether it be watching a video or reading the Bible) can improve the discussion in group. But college students often find extra work difficult to fit in, so if possible, try to keep the work within the group time. If you would like to assign some work outside of the group time, do your best to make it easy and accessible.

**Group Formatting**

**Group Size Options: Benefits and Drawbacks**

* 1. Big Group (more than 25)
  + **Benefits:** Larger numbers engaging materials. More socializing. Easy entry point for new people. Group is less bound to attendance (if a few miss, no need to cancel group).
  + **Drawbacks:** More likely people come unprepared. Students less likely to talk. Can feel like a class/lecture. Larger costs. Difficult to individually meet students.
  + **Strategies:** Let students grab food and eat. Give them time to hangout while eating, don’t do material. Either you read or watch the video to start the discussion of the material to catch up unprepared people. Put students at round tables, effectively making smaller groups within the overall group. Give each table questions to discuss with each other and time to discuss them, and then have the group leader ask for answers from the tables in the large group setting. Also have key leaders in these groups connecting to new students since meeting/hanging with them becomes tough.
* 2. Small Group (25 or fewer)
  + **Benefits:** Small and intimate. Leader can get to know the individuals. Easy for students to speak up, and it requires less structure to have good conversations. Usually doesn’t take the group leader to mediate the conversation: students speak among themselves.
  + **Drawbacks:** Not as many people getting the material. Tougher to get new students to come to. Sometimes conversations can head down long rabbit trails. Individual attendance has greater effect on group.
  + **Strategies:** Sit in a circle, making the group more conversational. Make sure you know everyone’s name. Challenge the group to invite friends into the group. Be flexible with the material, and have a group text or some messaging system to get a feel beforehand of what attendance will look like. This will remind members to come and also give you advanced notice if members can’t come so you can cancel/reschedule group.

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**Example Group Formats**

**Example 1: Study by Question (16 weeks)**

As you’re soon to find out, these videos and chapters are short and easy to read. But they are also packed with deep, sometimes difficult theological concepts. There is enough conversation to be had within each week if you’re willing to prepare for it. There are 16 individual questions with a corresponding video and chapter for each question. *This is suggested for a group of students who are unfamiliar with basic Christian doctrine, or a group that wants to go in depth on each point.* A possible way to structure such a week might be like this:

* **Start with hangout or food**. There’s no better way to get young adults comfortable and on your side than free food.
* **Ask them the question for the week.** In the case of Unit 1, Question 1, ask: “Who is God?” A question like this is likely to throw them off and be difficult to answer. But let them break off into small groups or have a large group discussion for 10 minutes or so. This will help you see where they are at and hopefully get them excited for the week.
* **Watch the video and/or have them read the corresponding chapter.** This will begin to open up some basic concepts for them. It will almost certainly need more unpacking as well. Let them process this, either verbally by discussing in groups or by writing out some thoughts and questions.
* **Ask some pointed questions.** We provided some here, but feel free to include your own.
* **Read Scripture.** Each question includes a corresponding passage of Scripture for the video. Allow the students to read, reflect, and study this passage. You could challenge the students to do their own Bible study on the passage. This is as simple as asking them to sit for 15 minutes and write out every observation they see about *one verse*. They might find this tedious, but most college students find this exercise enjoyable once finished and it gives them a format for Bible study in the future. You can also bring in other Scripture passages that are not included in the week.
* **Bring in other voices.** Most of the videos include quotations from historical Christian thinkers, such as C.S. Lewis or Anselm. Use these quotations as a springboard for deeper conversation, or invite other conversation partners into the discussion. This could be by way of more quotations, or a different video or speaker.
* **Culture connection.** Since you’ll have more time per question in this format, talk about a film, music album, or piece of culture that intersects with your topic. Discuss how that reinforces or undercuts Christian teaching. Discuss how media teaches and shapes culture, and how Christian doctrine fits in.
* **Application point.** Each week, come up with a specific challenge for the students that is tailored for their own context. Try to find a way to make this applicable throughout the group, but have at least some time each week to discuss and think about how what we’re learning effects how we’re living.

**Benefits:** Cover the material in greater detail and with more depth. Because each group is about one question, there’s more time and so more freedom to take the group in interesting directions.

**Drawbacks:** Every week will be about material, and so this is a marathon group with no water breaks. Can lead to burnout in the group, and it’s likely that during mid-terms or finals week that you’ll not have a group and won’t make it through the whole study.

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**Example 2: Study by Units (8 weeks)**

There are 8 units with two questions per unit. The questions are related to one another. For example, Unit 1 is the “Doctrine of God” that covers who God is and what God is like. You can use all of the above in terms of what to do within a particular week, but shorten the discussion a bit and cover two questions per week. This will allow your group to get through the material faster (8 sessions), but spend less time per question. *This is suggested for a more advanced group who already has a good understanding of basic Christian doctrine*. In addition to the above suggestions, here are some suggestions for how to work through a unit in a session:

* **Spend half the time on each question**. Start off watching the video for the first question in the unit. This will give many natural points of discussion for the students.
* **Watch both videos at the start**. By watching both videos at the start, it gives you the freedom to find the connections between the videos. The videos will connect with one another within the units, often explicitly. This allows the students to draw the connection between the two.
* **Discuss the importance of the unit title.** We have not created questions or material for the unit titles, but they could still be points of discussion. For example, asking: “Why is formulating a doctrine of God important?” This allows you to have a more systematic or big picture view of the study.

**Benefits:** You’ll finish in a semester. This gives you a lot of weeks to do hang outs in a standard 15-week semester and be flexible around college life—sports, tests, special events, etc. You’ll finish the entire curriculum.

**Drawbacks:** Won’t be as in depth as a longer study with meetings of the same duration, and so each topic probably won’t be explored with the same depth as in a longer study. Most of the time will be centered directly on the material, with less time to incorporate other media or discussions about related content.

**Study Online**

This material is easily accessible and there are ways to have a very successful group via the internet. In fact, you could have a great group that happens completely online. *This is recommended for groups that can’t find a common time to meet or are not in the same location.* While this can be a great way to learn the information, if possible, meeting together is still preferred. As you’ll learn in the first video, God being love gives us a reason to be deeply involved in the lives of other people. In addition to the above suggestions, here are some others for studying this online:

* **Create a forum or blog**. There are a few ways to start a forum that only the group can access. If you are the administrator, you could even start a blog. This would allow you to release the video and chapter each week and create discussion. It would also allow you to post extra resources and materials for the group to use throughout the week as well.

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**Example 3: Study outside Group, Discuss Within**

Another strategy for this study is to have the students read the chapter outside of group and show the video within group. The video is a nice summation of the chapters. You can then supplement the outside readings with the questions or other materials. This saves more time in group and allows students to begin thinking about the topic before they even arrive in group. This should create more thoughtful discussion and engagement. See above for suggestions on how to engage with the students during the week.

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**Discussion Questions for Each Unit**

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**Unit 1: Doctrine of God**

Question 1: Who is God?

* We heard the analogy of playing 3 notes on a piano that form a chord to help us think about the Trinity. This is a helpful analogy. Can you think of any analogies for the Trinity that you’ve heard that are unhelpful? How are these bad analogies?
* Where have you noticed the work of each individual person of the Trinity in your own experience with God?
* How does a discussion about the Trinity actually impact our lives? How can the Trinity be an example of how to live life in our own relationships?

Question 2: What is God like?

* Anselm, in pointing out that God was perfect, went so far as to say that any perfect being (God) must exist, for it is more perfect to exist than not exist. Some have really taken this and run with it and called it the “ontological argument for the existence of God.” Do you think this is a good argument for God?
* Everything has a nature. Even triangles, giraffes, and ice cream. God’s nature is “whatever is best.” What is the nature of a human being, or the nature of us?
* Worshipping less than perfect things is the definition of idolatry. In the Old Testament, they worshipping other gods . . . like real golden statues of gods. How do we worship other gods today and what are those gods?
* If God knows everything, does He know the future? Are we free if He does?
* How far do we emphasize God’s love? Does His love override His justice?
* John Calvin denied that love was in the essence of God in his 1 John Commentary. Does individual predestination deny that God is love?

**Unit 2: Doctrine of Creation**

Question 3: What did God make?

* God decide to create out of His own free will. That includes time and space. Why do you think God decided to make *when* He did?
* When Christians claim that God created everything, atheists are fond of responding with the question of “who created God?” How do we respond to the question of who created God? Did He create Himself?
* God has given us a very good gift by giving us creation, and our natural response is gratitude. What are the ways you normally show gratitude to someone who gives you a good gift? Is it just a feeling in our hearts? How do we show that to God? What is the wrong way to show gratitude? Is there a way that we can be well-meaning and desire to show gratitude but do it in the wrong way?
* If God is best, then does He always necessarily do what’s best? Does this mean God’s decision to create—and all other decisions—aren’t free?

Question 4: Why is there evil?

* God put humans in the garden and asked them not to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree. We broke one of God’s only and simple commands. By creating the tree, God gave human beings the possibility to screw up by eating the fruit. Why did He even give us the chance by putting the tree there?
* There has been a lot of evil as the result of free will. Do you think that free will is worth all of the evil?
* We often think of evil as a philosophical problem (how can a good and all-powerful God co-exist with evil?) or a historical problem (there are evil events, such as the Holocaust or drunken drivers causing fatal wrecks), but how is it also a personal problem? Would you consider yourself as being a mostly good person or better than other people we would consider “evil”?
* Would you give up your free will if it meant you always did the right thing? Would you take your friend’s free will it meant that from then on he would always do the right thing? What about that cute-girl-you’ve-been-crushing-on’s free will?
* In Isaiah 55:9 God says, “my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” Is what’s evil to us good to God?

**Unit 3: Doctrine of the Incarnation**

Question 5: Who is Jesus Christ?

* Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s amazing redemptive plan. As we saw, Jesus Christ was a part of a greater historical plan that includes other covenants with the Jewish people. Why didn’t the Father just send Jesus down right after the fall?
* Why is it important that Jesus is both fully man and fully God?
* Jesus was fully man, sure, but He was also fully God. How are we supposed to relate to Him? Can we relate to Him?
* Did Jesus claim to be God? Muslims say no. Christians say yes. Who’s right?

Question 6: Why did the Son of God become human?

* The video compares the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 to our own story. How do you identify with the characters in the story—the older brother, younger brother, and father? Do you have relationships in which you identify with each of these characters?
* The story of redemption is filled with familial imagery: God came to earth to bring us back into the family of God. How do our own human families help or complicate this imagery, both on a corporate and individual level?
* God coming to earth is a bit of a plot twist in the grand story of God. As we might expect looking back (and can see for sure in history), it took a lot of people by surprise. Do you think there was any *other* way God could have restored the broken relationship?
* Why did God not just forgive us? Couldn’t He have just declared we weren’t guilty anymore? Why did Jesus have to die?

**Unit 4: Doctrine of Salvation (Part 1)**

Question 7: What is salvation?

* Jesus is the first example of what will happen to us if we are “in Christ.” What does Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection tell us about our future if we have given our lives to Christ?
* Does Jesus’ death on the cross have power to save people who are a part of other religions?
* Jesus responded to our disrupted relationship and our prospects for death in two distinct ways: reconciliation and rescue. How do we enact these two remedies in our relationships with family, friends, and people we interact with each day?
* Jesus’ death made a way for us to be forgiven. But how does the gospel *fix* us?

Question 8: What is required for salvation?

* Repentance in the Bible means to “change your mind.” In other words, you completely change the way you were living. What happens when we mess up *after* our repentance? What is the response when we make choices like we did before we “changed our mind”?
* The Greek word for the word believe in the New Testament implies not just intellectual assent to a proposition, but a level of *trust*. How can we continue to trust even when we intellectually doubt?
* The Bible lays out the two things required for salvation: repentance and belief. What are some examples of things some people add to those requirements? How is that addition wrong? What about examples of people subtracting from those requirements, and how is that wrong?
* What are some actions and habits that reflect a person that has repented and believes? Are *these* a requirement for salvation?

**Unit 5: Doctrine of Salvation (Part 2)**

Question 9: What are the benefits of salvation?

* In the analogy in the video, the rebels are given basic necessities as a part of the King’s army. How does God provide for His followers in a similar way? Are there things that God gives to His “army” that He *doesn’t* give to the other “rebels”?
* John Wesley compared living with God to joining Him inside of His house. And like any other home, there are different rules for being in His house. God gives us a new way of living. Unlike some of the rules that our friends give, *all* of God’s rules have good reasons for them. What are some examples of the new “rules” God gives us and why does He give them?
* How do we know and understand what “life in the house” looks like? Do we just open up the Bible and follow it verbatim? Or is more reflection required?
* Do some Christians overly focus on the afterlife—the benefits of salvation there? What are the dangers of this? Do some Christians overly focus on the benefits *now*—the benefits of salvation in this life? What are the dangers of this?

Question 10: What happens as we live out our salvation in Christ?

* The video talks about the differences of justification, regeneration, and sanctification. Reflect on all three of these and point out what someone’s life would look like with one and not the others. Can you have one without the others?
* If we had trouble being imitators of Jesus before our repentance and believing, how will we be able to be imitators after it?
* How can we tell that we are being “sanctified” or “being made perfect?” Are there lifestyle changes or actions that we will have?

**Unit 6: Doctrine of the Spirit**

Question 11: Who is the Holy Spirit?

* Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, instructs us to pray to “Our Father.” Christians in the early church, as today, often pray to Jesus as God as well. When, if ever, is it appropriate to pray to the Spirit? Why do you think this is such a rare practice today?
* Christian author and speaker Francis Chan has called the Spirit the “Forgotten God.” Why do you think that is and how does that reflect who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does?
* How do we discern if the movement within ourselves is the Spirit of God or whether it is our own thoughts . . . or yesterday’s lunch?
* Have you ever had a personal experience with the Spirit of God in a way that you feel is different than an experience with the Father or Son?

Question 12: What does the Holy Spirit do?

* How is the Spirit involved in our own salvation?
* If we receive the Spirit upon our salvation, does that mean the Spirit is absent in people who aren’t Christians?
* If we are Christians who are being changed and led by the Spirit of God, the Spirit is in some sense working in our thoughts and actions. What is the process by which the Spirit works in our minds and thoughts? If we have a thought, what percentage of it is Spirit working in us vs. our own free thinking? How is this increased or decreased?
* Montanism was an early church *heresy* that overemphasized the personal experience of the Holy Spirit. Why would this be damaging? Do we see this trend today anywhere in the church?

**Unit 7: Doctrine of the Church**

Question 13: What is the church?

* Eugene Peterson said that churches are not parlor rooms for saints, but “messy family rooms.” What do you think he means by this? How does this critique or encourage your own church family?
* Some are fond of saying that they want to be Christians and love Jesus, but don’t need church. Why is the church important? Is the church required for salvation?
* What does the theology of the church teach us about how to pick a church? If we move to a new city, what is the best way to process becoming a part of a local church?
* How might being a part of a local church affect our own Christian walk?

Question 14: What are the church’s sacraments?

* How can we contextualize our following of Jesus? Is your imitation of Jesus different than the person sitting next to you?
* The video pointed out two sacraments, or sacred actions, of the church: baptism and communion. Are there more “sacred actions” that God speaks through? How are they similar to baptism and communion? How are they different?
* Baptism and communion have a unique place in Christian history. They have been the subject of much debate, but all orthodox Christian communities recognize their importance. What affect do they have on the life of an individual Christian believer?
* Theologian Peter Kreeft said of communion: “Christ did not say ‘take and understand’ he said ‘take and eat.’” How much ought we to understand about the spiritual effect of the sacraments and how important is our understanding?
* Why do some Christian traditions have more sacraments than others? What are they? Is this good or bad, biblical or unbiblical?

**Unit 8: Doctrine of Last Things**

Question 15: What is the world’s great hope?

* Why is the story of God, as told in the Old and New Testaments, important for knowing what the future holds?
* What do God’s former acts of redemption tell us about the future act of redemption?
* J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have both written extensively on how great stories and pieces of fiction actually reflect the great story of God, many of them including signposts toward the great truth about reality, that all will be made right in the end. What stories—think of nursery rhymes, books, movies, and even music—can you think of that reflect this truth?
* Should the Christian plead for Christ’s second coming? Or should the Christian plead for more time to reach more people? Should the Christian desire death—union with Christ; or life—opportunity to work as Christ?

Question 16: What is our future?

* Why do you think the question of what happens to us after we die has gripped humanity in the way that it has?
* What characteristics of Jesus’ own resurrection reflect the resurrection that we one day will experience?
* Some theologians argue that hell is a requirement if a perfectly good, perfectly loving God is in charge, but this seems counter-intuitive. What do you think these theologians mean and how can hell be compatible with a God who is perfectly loving?
* N.T. Wright calls resurrection the “defining event of the new creation.” If we are to enter this new world, he says, we need a different kind of knowing and living. Christianity often gets mistakenly boiled down to going to heaven when we die, but we find Jesus in the Gospels is often not as concerned with what happens after we die as we are. Why do you think that is? How is our present world and life connected with God’s new creation that we will one day experience?
* What will New Creation include; what is its scope? Where in the Bible do we see hints of an answer?