

HOW TO WELCOME FRIENDS AND INVITE PEOPLE

An eight-week study on how to extend a welcoming invitation to your friends, family members, neighbors, classmates, and coworkers.

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1. Introduction

On Wednesday, March 6, 2013, several friends and fellow church college group members gathered at a nearby apartment to hang out after our congregation’s midweek services. I had already had my eye on one of the girls in our group—who just so happened to be one of the hosts of said hangout—for some time, and I decided to stick around afterwards to ask her out on a dinner date for that weekend. Last minute, I know, but at least it was going to be a nice restaurant.

One other friend, blissfully unaware of my machinations, stayed firmly attached to the couch until he and I were the last two guests. I kept waiting and waiting and waiting for him to leave but eventually gave up, thanked the hosts for having us over, and started walking to the car. At that point, the friend followed me out the door and to the parking lot. Seeing an opportunity, I then feigned having left something in the apartment and turned around. Still totally oblivious, the friend kindly offered to help and followed me back to the door. The specifics are a bit hazy from there, but after knocking, I cobbled together some less-than-convincing explanation for having returned to the apartment and headed home for the evening.

Not too easily dissuaded, though, I texted the girl when I got home, explained why I had really come back to the door, and asked for that date. It was late by that point in the evening, and while calling would have been a mildly classier option, I didn’t want to wait any longer to ask. I also didn’t want to wake her if she was already asleep, though, and I figured that, if nothing else, she would see the text in the morning. Much to my (very pleasant) surprise, I got an enthusiastic “yes” a few minutes later.

As of the time of this writing in late November 2020, Candace and I have been married for six years, with the hope of many more to come. I’m glad I asked her out on that date, even if the actual process of asking wasn’t quite as debonair as I might have hoped to be able to recount to you now. The parallels between asking someone out on a date and asking someone to visit with you for a worship service, a service project, or a church social event should not be pushed beyond reason, but I learned a lot from the experience of asking Candace out, and I think there are at least a few lessons we can draw as we begin this study together.

1. **If I hadn’t asked, the answer would have been “no” by default.**

That discounts, of course, the possibility of Candace asking me out later, but if I hadn’t asked, we at the very least wouldn’t have gone on a date that weekend. Similarly, a friend, neighbor, or colleague could theoretically just drop in to your church for a Sunday service on a whim, but it’s not very likely if you haven’t extended an invitation.

2. **I couldn’t accurately judge the response to the invitation until the invitation was extended.**

Although Candace and I had been chatting more regularly in the weeks leading up to our first date, I still wasn't totally sure how she would respond to my asking, and when I texted her, I didn't necessarily expect to get a response any time soon. On a related note, it's easy for us to assume that those around us will be apathetic or even hostile towards a friendly invitation from us, but we will often find that our assumptions are mistaken.

3. **Have a plan, but be ready to diverge from it to get the job done.**

I would have much preferred to ask Candace out face-to-face before leaving the apartment the first time, or even the second time, but in the end, it had to be a text, and so I texted. (I do still have the conversation saved, which is a nice reminder.) In the same way, we might not always have an ideal, perfect moment to extend a welcome to a family member or coworker where the stars have aligned and a bright light shines down on us, but that doesn't mean that we can't still get the answer we hope for.

The Purposes of This Short Book

As a lifelong member of the Churches of Christ, a former college/young professionals minister, and an assistant professor at a university associated with our fellowship, I am excited about the renewed emphases on evangelism and discipleship that can be found in many corners of our movement. Although the congregations, leaders, and organizations that are prioritizing these kinds of work often differ from each other to some degree in doctrine and practice, they nevertheless share a common trait: a real ability to keep their eye on the ball, so to speak, and to keep their focus on living out the Great Commission.

However, as someone who spends time in both academic and ecclesial work, and as someone who writes for both general and scholarly audiences, I know that it is easy for insiders like me to assume that certain information is "common knowledge" or self-evident, even when it is no such thing. In my own experience as a church historian, I have found that I can't make too many assumptions about what the average person in the pew might know about the history of our fellowship, even if that person, like me, is a lifetime member. That doesn't mean that they are incapable of understanding the historical material or of making application of it to their own situations, but it does mean that I have to, say, explain what premillennialism is before I can explain its impact on Churches of Christ in the early twentieth century.

Similarly, the experiences, insights, and wisdom of leaders in evangelism and discipleship have not fully spread out through the rest of the church, even though great progress has been and is being made on that front. For us to share those kinds of materials and resources with our fellow Christians is crucial, but there may be a step that needs to take place even before that. Anecdotally, I have encountered believers who are engaging with this material, who want to do a better job of living out and sharing their faith with others, and yet still feel hesitant or unsure about the nuts and bolts of inviting someone to visit for, say, a college group devotional and game night. This anxiety is doubly the case when it comes to asking someone to sit down for something seemingly more "substantial"

like a one-on-one Bible study. Finding tangible, concrete ways to make the act of invitation less murky and mysterious and giving clear, specific goals are two of the contributions that I hope this book makes to your spiritual growth.

While I don't believe that asking someone to church is the be-all, end-all of our mission as Christians, as it is sometimes treated, I do nevertheless believe that it is a crucial skill to master for those occasions when it is the most appropriate avenue of reaching someone with the gospel. The more tools you have in your toolkit, after all, the more problems you can solve. (At least that's what I've heard; I am a Young man who comes from a long line of men with relatively little aptitude in the handyman department.) To that end, I have not found an overabundance of resources on the actual means and methods of extending an invitation to friends and family. There are certainly a number of lists and articles online with (often helpful!) tips, some of which we will evaluate later in this study. Too, Michael Harvey's 2015 work *Creating a Culture of Invitation in Your Church* covers some similar ground to this book, although Harvey's involvement with the Back to Church Sunday program in the United Kingdom likely differs markedly from the contexts that you and I work in.

So over the course of the following chapters, we will work from start to finish through the process of inviting someone to visit with you. Although some of the specifics will vary with each situation, there are common patterns and principles that can guide our efforts all the same. Prayer, for instance, should precede any efforts we make, and we should always give serious thought ahead of time as to how best to approach someone we know well. We'll also, as noted above, examine some best practices in chapters six and seven, giving you new techniques to try out in the weeks that follow. We'll look at examples from scripture of figures from the early church, like Andrew and Philip, who really seemed to have a knack for the art of inviting. And we'll try to dispel some of the most common fears and myths about invitations so that we can be as confident as we can and so that we can evaluate our successes, or not, by the right standards. (Spoiler alert: it's not entirely about the answers you receive.)

Reflection Questions:

1. When was the last time you invited someone to join you for worship or another church get-together? Don't be ashamed if it's been a while, but be honest with yourself.
2. What are the major fears, hang-ups, or hesitations that you have about inviting someone to visit with you? Why can this be such a difficult thing to do, even if we know that it theoretically shouldn't be?
3. Who is one person that you regularly encounter who might benefit from an invitation, and who you think you might be able to start with? What do you need to be praying about now so that that invitation can take place?

2. A Justification for the Humble Invitation

As we noted in the previous chapter, there are a lot of exciting developments taking place within Churches of Christ right now that relate to our work in fulfilling the Great Commission—a task that, if we are honest with ourselves, we have not always been as focused on as we have needed to be. (I include myself in that generalization, of course.) While we see alarming statistics coming in from many quarters on declining membership numbers and dying congregations, the story isn't over yet.

When I look around our fellowship, I see small but growing and impressive efforts in the realms of church planting, discipleship, evangelism, and ministerial training. I see many men and women who recognize that there is a need for *every* Christian, not just the elders or the ministers or the deacons or the Bible class teachers, to do the work of the Kingdom.

These and other kinds of programs (and the individuals who make them up!) are doing great work in “equipping the saints” with the tools they need for Kingdom work, and their efforts should be commended heartily. But there is another tool—simple, humble, often taken for granted—that we need, too. This tool isn't always the right one for the job, nor can it replace the others in the kit, but it is crucial all the same.

That tool is the invitation to visit.

Objections to Focusing on the Invitation

Before making the case for the continued relevance of the invitation, I want to answer some common questions about, or objections to, focusing our time and efforts on this kind of tool in place of seemingly more substantial evangelistic tools like the one-on-one study. As we get set to do that, I want to make it clear just what kind of invitation we're talking about so we can determine which objections have merit and which ones may not.

The kind of invitation I am talking about in this book is NOT the random invitation of passers-by on the sidewalk, or even the more coordinated door-knocking campaign. Now, I've handed out campus ministry flyers to students milling about in university student centers and patrolled neighborhoods knocking on doors in many places, and I've seen both approaches bring about some measure of results. Whether or not those efforts are the most effective uses of our energies is a separate discussion for a different time and a different study. But the invitation that I have in mind for this study is the targeted invitation directed toward a specific individual, or perhaps small group,

who you have already made some effort to get to know. This isn't a cold call; it's following up on a lead.

Now, to the objections. There are undoubtedly others, but these are the two philosophical objections (as opposed to questions about the practicality or effectiveness of the individual invitation) that I have heard or read most frequently.

1. Inviting someone to a worship service or another event prevents the inviter from growing in their faith.

The mindset behind this objection is certainly understandable: if a person only learns how to invite someone to a service project or social gathering, and does not learn how to share the substance of their faith directly, that could prevent them from articulating their beliefs in coherent, compelling ways to those around them. There's nothing like teaching to reveal whether or not you know the material, after all, as I have found out firsthand—in both good and bad ways. Inviting someone to worship, where they are likely to hear a sermon, Bible class lesson, or both, could be seen as a way to offload the responsibility for Bible knowledge onto the preacher or teacher.

But while I agree that having only this tool in your toolkit is a bad idea—as 2020 has taught us, you can't always count on there being in-person services or other gatherings to physically attend—that doesn't mean that there is no place for it, either. After all, Philip offered a simple invitation to Nathanael to “come and see” Jesus (John 1:46), yet he was also an apostle who undoubtedly went on to do much more in-depth teaching and ministry in his career. He was certainly not set back in his development by his invitation to Nathanael.

2. Inviting someone to worship services makes for a shallow faith, because it puts too much emphasis on what happens on Sunday (or Wednesday) at the expense of inviting someone to a lifetime of Christian service.

Again, the objection is quite reasonable on its face. Sadly, we have all known someone who was present in the pew any time the doors were open, yet who did not model Christ-like behavior in any meaningful way throughout the rest of the week. We also know that the first believers “were together and had everything in common” and that “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts” (Acts 2:44, 46). The call to follow Jesus is a whole life commitment, not just something that happens when the body is gathered together, and we can run the risk of giving a false impression to a friend or family member that mere presence at an event or service is the only or most important thing in the Christian walk.

Yet just because a communal gathering on a Sunday isn't the sum total of our faith doesn't mean that it isn't an important part of who we are as believers. Part of being the body is, well, coming together as the body, and while worshiping together on Sunday should not be the extent of the time we spend together, neither should it be downplayed as an opportunity to extend fellowship to visitors and other interested parties. Meaningful growth can and does result from what happens when we get together, whether that is through the hearing of a powerful sermon or the moving experience of worship or the feeling of kindness and inclusion.

A Grocery Store Meeting

I'd like to close this chapter by sharing with you one of my favorite stories of an invitation that worked. We need to remember, of course, that what makes an invitation successful isn't necessarily the response we get, but the process we follow—how a person reacts isn't within our control, no matter how persuasive we might be, but we can control our side of the equation. Yet it's still nice to celebrate the visible wins and to give credit to God when He is at work in the expansion of the Kingdom.

My wife and I bought a house here in Tuscaloosa in the summer of 2019. Although not a mansion by any stretch of the imagination, it is substantially larger than our previous dwelling (an apartment), and thus much more conducive to hosting college/young professionals ministry events. We planned to host a devotional and meal within the first month of being in our new home, and about a week before the get-together, we ran into a fellow graduate student from the history department while we were at the grocery store. I did not know him particularly well at that point, since he had only been in town for a year, during which time I had been on a research assistantship and had not spent much time in the teaching assistant office. We chatted pleasantly for a few minutes and he mentioned wanting to see our new house sometime. Hopeful but not necessarily expecting a "yes," I mentioned the upcoming devotional and meal, and he accepted the invitation gratefully.

That devotional was only the first time that my colleague visited with us, and over the next six or seven months, he continued attending worship services, classes, and events with our college/young pros group. A few men from the congregation also began studying with him in a small group, and just a few days before the coronavirus brought a temporary end to our in-person gatherings, I had the privilege and honor of baptizing my friend. Although his graduation from the program and subsequent search for employment has since taken him elsewhere in the country, he has remained a faithful believer to this day, and it all started with a simple invitation in a grocery store parking lot. Don't forget that God can do a lot with just a little.

Oh, and simply having the church van parked in our driveway at our next devotional brought about a wonderful conversation that led to my neighbor (who grew up in the Churches of Christ) visiting

with me a few times and then returning to attending services regularly with his mother at another area congregation. But that's a story for a different time.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some of the objections you have heard about the invitation, whether they are philosophical or practical in nature?
2. Which of those objections are the most serious? How can we acknowledge those areas of concern and take steps to address them without letting them hinder us from doing the work?
3. What is the most positive response you have received regarding an invitation? The least positive? What factors might explain the differing results?

3. Prayer

As a graduate teaching assistant, then as an adjunct instructor, and then as a professor, I've taught for eight years (and counting!) at the college level. An unfortunate pairing of traits I have observed in some students is a willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to salvage a bad grade on an assignment once that grade has already been earned—complaining fiercely about said grade, asking for copious amounts of extra credit to make up the lost points, appealing the grade to a higher authority—alongside a less fervent desire to do the necessary work ahead of time to avoid the bad grade to begin with. In other words, a student might put in very little effort before the assignment is due, but then go to great lengths to make the best of a bad situation which likely could have been avoided if that time and energy had been redirected to the proper channels in the first place.

Maybe you know that student; maybe you are or have been that student. In either case, before we judge that student too harshly, we should also take stock of our own lifestyles and see if those same tendencies play out anywhere. It is all too easy, whether with school, work, or other concerns, to allow procrastination, rather than preparation, to be the guiding philosophy behind our schedules. For one reason or another, we put off working on a project or task today because it isn't due for two more weeks. We do the same thing tomorrow, and then the next day, and suddenly, our boss is expecting a presentation from us in twenty-four hours. We pull the late-nighter or all-nighter and cram to make it happen, perhaps, but did we really save any effort in the long run? Might our efforts been more productive if we had laid the proper groundwork over the preceding weeks instead of relying on heroic efforts in the final stages to cover up earlier missteps? Alternately, maybe we miss the deadline altogether and have to do extra work on the back end to make up for it. Again, did we really save any time by neglecting to prepare?

It's not an exact parallel, to be sure, but our approaches to inviting friends, family members, neighbors, and other contacts to visit with us can likewise be hamstrung by our failure to properly prepare for the occasion—most crucially, by our lack of prayer. Now, to be sure, as we discussed in the last chapter, and as we will return to later on in this study, inviting people to worship services, service projects, or social gatherings is not the be-all, end-all of evangelism—far from it. Nothing about this book should be construed as a challenge to our call to share the good news, to disciple, and to serve others, nor should it be seen as the “easy route” to evangelism. But as we know from our own lived experiences and from the stories we read about in Scripture, inviting someone to participate in a community, even if only temporarily, is an important task, one far too important to undertake without prayer.

Praying for guidance about opportunities to invite others along for some of the activities that are most special to us is not likely to lead to any literal bright lights shining down from the sky onto individual heads, nor is it likely to give us a video-game-style flashing arrow or waypoint to let us

know who might be open to an invitation. Yet at the same time, our omnipotent God is certainly capable of guiding us to the work, if we are willing to do it.

We will now look at three stories from Scripture which, I believe, can teach us much about the role of prayer in our work as inviters. To be sure, none of these stories is actually about inviting someone to a midweek service or a fall festival—and only one has an invitation of any sort—but there are some important lessons for us all the same.

Genesis 24: Abraham’s Servant Prays for Guidance

I don’t want to overstate the parallels between the invitation in this story and the experience of inviting someone to worship with you; there are a lot of differences between the marriage customs of Abraham’s day and the social norms of ours which necessitate some serious consideration. At the same time, the example of Abraham’s servant earlier in Genesis 24—a servant whose name is unrecorded in the text—is an informative one for us because of the servant’s humble request for a bit of guidance in fulfilling an important task.

Then he prayed, “Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.” (Genesis 24:12-14)

Abraham’s servant had a difficult job ahead of him: traveling to a distant town to find a wife for his aging master’s favored son. Yet the servant did not respond with despair, or with a frenzied attempt to invite each and every woman he saw on the journey to become Isaac’s wife. Rather, upon arriving in the town, the servant stopped and prayed to God for a clear sign of who he needed to speak to. He didn’t ask for a miracle, but he did pray with confidence for guidance, and that prayer was ultimately rewarded in short time by the appearance of Rebekah at the spring.

2 Kings 6: Elisha Prays for Eyes to be Opened

Much later in the biblical narrative, the people of Israel found themselves at war with the Arameans. One night, the Arameans surrounded the city of Dothan where Elisha, a prophet of God, was staying. The scene was a grim one.

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked.

“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

Although this story has nothing to do with the extension of an invitation, it does—like the preceding story—demonstrate God’s willingness to provide us the information we need to do the work he has assigned to us. Though the servant believed that he and Elisha were outnumbered and outmatched, God’s provision would be more than sufficient to win the day once the servant knew it was there. In the end, Elisha managed to lead the Arameans into Israelite territory, where they were captured and sent back home, putting a temporary end to their attacks on Israel.

John 17: Jesus Prays for Those Undertaking the Work

Not long before his death, Jesus prayed extensively for his disciples because he knew the challenges that would soon confront not only him but them as well. Crucially, he prayed for them to be protected as they did the work entrusted to them.

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:17-18)

The disciples would certainly go on to face many challenges in the work they did, as well as some self-imposed setbacks. We know from Acts and from reading between the lines of the New Testament epistles that the church faced many difficulties early on. But we also know that the church grew anyway, and we could do worse than to imitate Jesus’s prayer here to encourage and strengthen others as they prepare to invite their friends and family to visit.

Conclusion

Although many students follow the pattern I described at the beginning of the chapter, waiting until after a bad grade is earned to do the work, other students understand that the best way to get a good grade is to do the work ahead of time—taking good notes, studying for an exam, or allowing sufficient time in an essay-writing process for thorough proofreading and redrafting. These students don’t necessarily devote any more time than those who grovel for grades or extra credit work after a bad showing, but their efforts are better rewarded because of the wisdom of how their time is spent.

Whoever it is that we plan to invite and whatever the specific circumstances may be, we know from these stories and from elsewhere in Scripture that prayer is the necessary but often overlooked first step in any kind of evangelism we undertake. While we might try to take all of the responsibility on

our shoulders, we will find that our efforts will be more successful when we prayerfully seek God's guidance as we extend his invitation to those around us.

Reflection Questions:

1. How have I been doing when it comes to praying consistently for my eyes to be opened up to the opportunities around me? How can I take one step to improve here, no matter where I may find myself today?
2. What areas of your day-to-day existence seem to hold some promising opportunities? Pray for guidance about how to navigate them now.
3. Similarly, who is that "one person" you thought of in response to the first chapter's questions? Have you prayed fervently for an opportunity to share an invitation with that person? If not, do so now.

4. Living the Invitation

As we mentioned briefly at the end of our second chapter, the simple act of having the church van parked in my driveway one evening during a devotional led to a wonderful conversation with my next-door neighbor, a man who, unbeknownst to me, had grown up in the Churches of Christ. Although he had not been an active member of any congregation in quite some time, that conversation, which included an invitation to visit, led to him worshipping at our congregation a couple of times before settling in at another area congregation where his aging mother is a member.

The old “park the van in the driveway” approach is not likely to work in most cases. Most neighbors will either fail to notice or not find it worthy of comment. Some might view it as an eyesore, albeit a temporary one. And even in the above story, which I would consider a success in both process and outcome, most of my neighbors did not comment on the van one way or the other. I don’t tell that story at the beginning of this chapter to provide you a clear “how to” but rather to offer a compelling example of a useful general principle:

If there is something noticeably different about you, people will definitely notice, and they might ask you about it. Be prepared.

Sometimes, as with the above narrative, a little bit of advertising or branding can go a long way. In these cases, a logo or a name is all that is needed to spark a conversation. I once had a good talk with a doctor (I was going through physical therapy for a torn ACL and meniscus) simply because I happened to be wearing our college ministry’s most recent T-shirt during an appointment. The doctor asked about the verse reference on the shirt, we looked it up together, and we had a productive discussion, even though it didn’t lead to a visit that day. (Again, success is best measured by our adherence to preparatory prayer and best practices, not to yes-or-no results, since we can’t always control how others will respond.)

I’m also a big proponent of leaving business-style cards with your church’s or ministry’s service and contact information **ALONG WITH, NOT AS A REPLACEMENT FOR**, a generous tip, particularly if you’ve had a good rapport with your waiter during the meal. Most of these cards will likely end up in the trash, but if you’ve been polite and courteous up to that point—as you should have been anyway—there is no harm in the act.

There is, of course, always a balance to be struck when it comes to this kind of branding or marketing. Nobody likes to feel as if they are being sold something or manipulated. As such, the best way to use these kinds of promotional materials is to simply get the name of your church or

ministry out there, which creates space for the person to reach out to you with their initial inquiry. That person will then know you are connected with your church or ministry, and if they're interested in learning more, they will ask.

Of course, that whole sequence of events can only take place if you are actually living your life in a way that is noticeably different (in a positive way!) from others in your social circles. If your speech, actions, and thoughts more or less resemble those of everyone else in your office, then while you may be effective in using marketing materials to establish a link between you and your church, those around you will have little reason to ask. Even worse, if you are a particularly unpleasant person by the standards of your setting, your affiliation with the church or ministry you are advertising for will be a negative one. In other words, if you can't have a good attitude, at least try to avoid bringing the reputation of your congregation down with it!

So, what does it look like to live out the invitation? That is, at some level, the question behind this entire study, but for now, let's look at two familiar but crucial passages from Scripture.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Peter goes on from here to give a few examples of what this kind of lifestyle might look like in his context—for instance, for his readers to offer humble obedience to the emperor despite knowing that they were part of another, higher Kingdom. Regardless of the geographical and temporal distance between the apostle and us, we can doubtless think of many ways to adapt this teaching to our own circumstances.

We sometimes get caught up on a particular word in verse nine, famously translated in the KJV as “peculiar.” While that word has negative connotations for us these days—and we've probably all met some peculiar Christians in that sense of the word—this word is more clearly rendered as God's “select” or “own” people. These are to be people who are distinctly His and who are to live in such a way as to bring glory to Him. Acting weird for the sake of being weird would undoubtedly be a peculiar thing to do in our modern usage of the term, but that is far from what is in view here. Our behavior should set us apart, but it should do so in a positive way, not causing others to ask about our missing tinfoil hats but about the verse referenced on our shirt.

As you may already know, Peter was not the first biblical author to explore the idea that God has set us apart as His people and called us to live differently as a result. All the way back in Deuteronomy 14:2, the Israelites were reminded that

“...you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.”

If you’ve ever read through the extensive lists of laws contained in the Torah, you’ve likely grasped the meanings behind some of them rather quickly. For instance, it should not be particularly surprising that God wanted His people to not worship other gods. But some, such as the dietary prohibitions which immediately follow the above verse, may be a little harder to reason through for us today. Equally unusual to us is the verse and a half preceding the verse quoted above. The passage altogether reads as follows:

“You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.” (Deuteronomy 14:1-2)

The prohibitions against self-harm and, well, self-hair-care may seem out of place in the larger discussions of idolatry and food regulations. But there is something deeper at work here. Some of the peoples surrounding the Israelites mourned the dead by physically cutting themselves and shaving their heads, since death was something to be upset about. The Israelites, though, were to face death with a different attitude, and as a result, their actions were supposed to reflect that peace.

Ancient restrictions against shaving one’s head may seem far removed from our discussion of inviting friends and family members to church, but there is a common principle nonetheless, a principle we mentioned earlier but which is worth reiterating here.

If there is something noticeably different about you, people will definitely notice, and they might ask you about it. Be prepared.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever tried using any marketing or branding materials to let others know you are part of your church or ministry? Did it lead to any conversations? And how did those go?

2. Does your church or ministry currently make any of these kinds of materials available for members to use? If so, what are they? If not, why not, and is there someone with the capability to make them? Is that person you?
3. Even more seriously, be honest with yourself: does your attitude in the workplace, school, or other settings you find yourself in mirror the attitudes of those around you, or does it seek to improve and transform them?

5. What is Success?

Near the end of the second chapter, I told the story of a colleague (now a dear friend) who was eventually brought to Jesus after I invited him to join us at our house for a college/young professionals ministry devotional. By any definition, I think, going from a chance encounter in a grocery store parking lot to a committed believer and involved church member would be considered a success.

But the first time that that friend came to a Sunday service, he was not the only visitor I had with me. Also in the car was a former student who our youth minister and I had invited a week or two before. The student, during a chat in the hallway, had expressed an interest in visiting and a strong desire to make some more friends around his own age. He joined us for class and worship that morning, expressing a real appreciation for the acapella singing, and noted a desire to visit again soon. I dropped him off at his apartment, returning later to bring a physical copy of the Bible to him in advance of his long flight home. He, the youth minister, and I also had dinner together around this time, and it seemed like we were making a genuine, lasting connection.

After that trip home, though, the student became increasingly hard to contact. Texts, calls, or emails that would have provoked a quick response before went unanswered for days or longer. Eventually, he and I did meet for dinner one night a couple of months later. The conversation was generally pleasant, but during the course of the evening, the student expressed to me a couple of times that he was not, in his words, a religious person, although he hoped to stay in touch with me and with those he had met at worship on a social level. I assured him I would be glad to stay connected like that, but after dropping him back off that evening, I never got another response from him.

Although the paths taken by these two visitors have, at least to date, been quite different, I still consider each case a success. Why, you might ask? Because in both situations, the visitor was extended an invitation in sincere kindness and hope, and when they visited with me, they were met with love, compassion, a warm welcome, and biblical teaching. Their divergent responses, ideal or otherwise, were not in my control, and to only rejoice in the case that led to a lasting response would be to misunderstand my role in the process of evangelism.

To be sure, we should certainly celebrate and praise God each and every time someone is added to the church. After all, Paul may plant and Apollos may water, but God makes the seed grow. Yet as far as we are told, the apostles did not throw their hands up in frustration or sulk in despair at Pentecost when the vast majority of the crowd did not respond to Peter's preaching. Rather, in celebration of those who were convicted by the message, "they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God..." (Acts 2:46-27) The trick, then, is not getting discouraged when our

invitations are not met with the responses we hoped for, but continuing to give God the glory when they are and when they are not.

Luke tells us of a powerful lesson Jesus gave during a Sabbath dinner at a Pharisee's house. Having already noted the hypocrisy of those present who had objected to him healing an ill man that day, Jesus had much more to say about how those in attendance had arranged themselves at the table.

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14:7-11)

The language of invitation is clearly all over this passage, and Jesus's point in this lesson seems to be to remind hearers (and readers) not to think too highly of themselves, particularly in comparison to others. Better to sit in coach and be invited by the flight attendant to move up to first class, we might update the analogy, than to sneak into first class but be found out and booted back to the cheap seats when the ticketholder shows up to claim their spot.

But Jesus didn't stop with just an admonition to be humble; he went on to spell out the implications of humility on our social practices, too.

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

The immediate point here appears to be that when we spend time in the company of others, our guest lists shouldn't just be filled with those who can reciprocate the offer, or maybe even throw in a little extra to make it worth our while. Rather, that kind of welcoming fellowship and hospitality should be directed towards those who are incapable of paying us back, precisely because they can't. Our invitations shouldn't be given on the basis of an expected response (in this case, of reciprocation), Jesus reminds his hearers—and us as well.

We should think about how this would apply to our invitations more broadly. To put it simply, when we avoid prejudging someone on the basis of an expected response, good or bad, we are freed up to do our job, which is to extend fellowship and community without the fear of failure.

Moving on in the story, Jesus told those gathered for the meal a parable about a huge feast and some varying responses people gave to the host's invitation. Those who were on the initial guest list, those who were apparently closest to the host, all bowed out of the event for one purported reason or another. The host then extended the invitation to "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21) When even that gracious offer did not fully max out his generosity, he told his servant to "Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full." (Luke 14:23)

The poor, crippled, blind, lame, and random passers-by may not have been who the host originally expected to share a meal with—again, these people were not on the original guest list—but there was a feast to be had, and undoubtedly the host and his group of revelers had a wonderful time. Is our situation really that much different? You or I might invite ten people to visit in the near future. Let's say that five of them accept the first invitation, and that three return for the long haul, ultimately leading to two baptisms and one restoration. We might very well be tempted to say that we had three successes out of ten. While it is certainly true that those three cases were successes, that doesn't mean that the two who only visited once or the five who completely rebuffed us were failures. The host didn't fail when his original guests bailed on the party; their response did not change his generous nature. And neither should it ours.

Reflection Questions:

1. Has someone you expected to respond positively to an invitation ever reacted differently? What was their response? And how did that feel?
2. Conversely, have you ever offered an invitation to someone you fully expected to turn you down, only to find them accept it? How did that feel?
3. What are some of the biases and preconceptions we carry with us that shape our expectations of who is or is not "likely" to respond favorably?

6. Practical Tips, Part One

The first few chapters of this study have focused on big-picture concerns related to the invitation—our reasons for engaging in the study, answering objections to the invitation itself, the necessary steps to prepare ourselves to invite someone for a worship service or other event. These are important topics, crucial to give ourselves a better working knowledge of the *why*, if not always the *how*, of the invitation.

This chapter, however, is a change of pace. Here and in chapter seven, we will examine six helpful tips (twelve in total, then) which can help you develop into a more confident and competent inviter. Each chapter's six pointers include two pieces of advice about laying the proper groundwork before inviting someone, two regarding the content of your conversations, and two about living out the invitation day-to-day. These tips are not all of my own original creation; indeed, there are a number of helpful lists with many more floating around online in case you want to continue down this avenue. But for now, these are the suggestions that I either have had success with before, or which I suspect strongly could be helpful in the future.

Laying the Groundwork #1: If you invite someone using social media, include a piece of content, such as a video clip or graphic, along with your personalized message to preview what the person can expect.

If your church has an active social media presence, put that content to good use by sharing it with those you want to invite. Don't just forward it along without comment, of course (that is spam!) but take the time to craft a note to accompany it. For instance, "Heard this lesson the other day and I thought you might find it helpful, too. Hope you can join us in person some time!"

Laying the Groundwork #2: Use social media during services... responsibly.

On a similar note, give some consideration to when you normally post to social media. Aside from sharing news articles of whatever quality, we generally post when we are doing something that is exciting or otherwise meaningful to us. Pictures and descriptions of family gatherings and sporting events are mainstays of social media, as are favorite meals or fancy coffees. Do we convey a similar sense of appreciation for our church, though?

I want to be careful with what I'm implying here, as I don't want to sound as if I'm supporting the indiscriminate use of social media during worship or downplaying the importance of being in the right frame of mind as we worship. But, if something from a lesson or song or prayer connects with you in a meaningful way that might also be moving to others, then share it!

In the Moment #1: Don't just invite someone to worship; see if they want to join for lunch or dinner as well.

Obviously, this looks different right now because of the ongoing pandemic, but in more usual times, this simple request helps the other person understand that you are not just inviting them to church to check a box, or to hit a target number. Rather, you are interested in them as a person, not as a pew-warmer.

In the Moment #2: Help the person understand what to expect when they visit—the typical attire, the usual order of events, and so on.

Conversations about attire are fraught in many ways, and the specifics of the event will dictate what is best in each case. I include this tip here not because anyone should be made to feel badly about dressing a certain way when they visit, but instead because visitors probably don't want to stand out in a crowd because of their attire any more than the rest of us do. If your church is a shorts and sandals congregation, but your visitor shows up in a three-piece suit, they will likely feel just as out of place as if the reverse had been true. Don't tell your visitor what to wear, but do give them a sense of what their peers are likely to have on.

In terms of worship or other events, don't assume that your visitor will automatically intuit what is happening or why—for instance, what your church's musical worship practices are or why everyone has paused in the middle of the service to take something called the "Lord's Supper." Doctrinal niceties can be saved for later conversations, but you do want to help orient your visitor to their surroundings and assist them in avoiding any sort of gaffe which might make them hesitant to return—a gaffe which YOU should have foreseen, not them.

Living It Out #1: Find ways to bring up your church or ministry in everyday life.

Part of the reason many of us find inviting so difficult is that we treat evangelism as something entirely separate from the rest of our everyday experiences. But why? Would we have the same hang-ups about inviting someone to the latest *Avengers* movie if we are a Marvel fan? Do we hem and haw about telling someone about a new podcast or book we enjoyed, or sharing a restaurant recommendation? Probably not. These things just come up in conversations because we have an authentic excitement about and appreciation for them. Similarly, if we really think that our church or ministry is worth visiting, then it needs to be part of our discussions in general, not just when we are about to ask someone to visit. In other words, the invitation generally shouldn't be the first time the person hears the name of the congregation!

Living It Out #2: If you have a desk or other space at work that is definitively yours, keep a Bible or other faith-related book out. Maybe even be seen reading it.

Of course, we always want to be on guard to not do good things simply for the sake of being seen doing good things. At the same time, people do often ask about the pictures, trinkets, and other desk contents, since these non-essentials are usually things of particular significance to us. Scripture (and other helpful books, though this one about inviting friends might be a bit too on-the-nose) could work in just such a fashion to spark a conversation. Plus, keeping a physical book on hand might help us keep up with our daily readings and avoid getting distracted by other apps on our phones.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some specific pointers or tips would you add to this list?
2. What are some specific areas of caution—or perhaps, strategies to avoid—that you could mention in the spirit of this list?
3. Have you ever used any of the above tactics in your invitations? What kinds of effects did they have? If not, how might they have helped you in the past, or help you in the future?

7. Practical Tips, Part Two

As with our previous chapter, in this chapter, we will examine six total tips or suggestions—two each on preparing for the invitation, offering the invitation to someone, and living the invitation out more broadly—which will help us become the most effective inviters that we can be. Of course, we want to be mindful that while we may plant or water, it is God who gives the increase, and in any conversation we might have with a prospective visitor, there are many factors at work that we simply have no control over. There are no sure things when we are dealing with other people, and positive responses will not always follow just because we handled the conversation well from our end. (Conversely, negative responses will not always follow just because we botched the conversation in the moment!)

Additionally, we want to avoid getting hung up on trying to figure out the “perfect” invitation ahead of a conversation. To be sure, prayer and other forms of preparation are valuable, which is why a considerable amount of this study has been devoted to them. At the same time, we have to always keep a clear picture of our goal in mind—not the crafting of a foolproof invitation, because no such thing exists, but the actual inviting of people. There is a common refrain in doctoral programs that “the best dissertation is a done dissertation.” When engaging in any kind of long-form research and writing without fixed deadlines, the temptation to put off the submission of a chapter draft in the name of perfecting it can be very strong, and many doctoral students take much longer than needed to finish their projects as a result, with some never finishing at all. Similarly, we can overanalyze and overtheorize the process of inviting someone to visit with us to the point that we never actually get on with it. Do the prep work that needs to be done, and then go have that conversation!

Laying the Groundwork #1: If the prospective visitor is someone you have an ongoing relationship with, aim to spend meaningful time with them before they come to visit with you.

Certainly, a spur-of-the-moment conversation on the way to services would not leave time for this, but if the person you want to invite is someone you encounter on a regular basis, see if you can find a way to invest meaningful time in them before they join you at church. This is sort of the inverse of one of the tips from our last chapter (the suggestion to invite the person along for a meal afterward) in that the extra time comes prior to the visit, and possibly even prior to the invitation. Either way, though, the goal is always the same—to demonstrate to the person that you are interested in them as a person, and not just as a statistic. Plus, the more comfortable they feel around you outside of church, the more comfortable they should feel with you in it.

Laying the Groundwork #2: Prepare for the second visit, too.

While we shouldn’t evaluate the success or failure of an invitation solely based on the other person’s response to it, we should still hope and pray that their involvement goes beyond a single visit. One

of the best ways to make sure that happens is to connect them with at least one or two other people while they are present at the service or event. There is a balancing act to be struck here, as trying to introduce a first-time visitor to dozens of people is likely to be incredibly overwhelming to them. But introducing them to one or two people with some sort of common ground—profession, hometown, interests, et cetera—can take the burden off of you to be the sole face of the congregation and can make it a more welcoming group for a second visit.

In the Moment #1: Ask the other person if they are part of a church before you ask them to join you for a visit at yours.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make in evangelism is conveying (or more troublingly, having) a lack of interest in the beliefs and practices of the other person. This is probably more of a concern when engaging in one-on-one Bible studies than it is in extending invitations like those under consideration in this study, but it is relevant here, too. Instead of launching directly into your invitation, take the time to ask the other person if/where they attend. If they are connected to a church or involved in some sort of religious practice, say something kind and considerate about it (follow Paul’s example from Acts 17:22-23), mention the congregation or ministry you’re involved with, and only then extend the invitation after you’ve heard from the other person about their involvement.

In the Moment #2: Be open to reciprocating.

Similarly, if the person you’re inviting accepts your invitation and then invites you to visit with them, strongly consider accepting their invitation if your conscience and schedule allow it. Again, follow Paul’s lead in Acts 17. His mere presence at the Areopagus did not mean that he personally approved of everything that was taught or discussed there. It did not mean that Paul saw the polytheism of the Areopagus as being just as good as the gospel he wanted to share. And it did not mean that Paul was ultimately persuaded by what he heard there. But it did open doors for Paul to share about the “unknown God” worshiped by those present, and those doors would not have been opened had Paul not been willing to go along with the Epicureans and Stoics who heard him in the marketplace. In any event, make sure you know what your answer to an invitation would be before you have the conversation so that you can respond graciously and avoid damaging the relationship.

Living It Out #1: Spend more time outside of your home, apartment, or dorm.

What this looks like for you will vary somewhat based on where you live—not only what kind of housing you live in, but also the weather and climate of your area—but try to find ways to spend time in your yard, or in your neighborhood more broadly, where you might actually encounter people. Engage with those who walk by, and get to know them as you see them out and about regularly. Perhaps even participate in a prayer walk for your surrounding area, or take a garbage bag and some gloves with you and tidy up the area while you walk. It is all too easy for us to silo ourselves off from those who live in physical proximity to us while staying in touch with friends,

family members, and coworkers across the continent. (I work online fulltime from home; I should know!) Yet it is likely that there is someone nearby who is looking for community—why not help them find it in the church?

Living It Out #2: Use your social media influence to share Truth, and not mistruths.

Building on the suggestion from last chapter to use social media during services (shocking, I know!) I want to encourage you to think about how you can use your platforms to share something beneficial with your friends and followers during the rest of the week, too. If your church's services and classes are online—much more likely now than it was pre-pandemic—or if your minister shares short devotionals and other content, take advantage of those things by sharing them from your profile. This isn't just about building large follower lists or accumulating page likes; it's about letting others know that you are connected to your church or ministry so that when you speak to them about it, it's not the first time they're hearing about it.

On a related note, this means that we also have to monitor what we share more broadly, especially in an age of mistrust and skepticism. You might not think anything about sharing a clickbait article on your page (perhaps without reading anything but the headline...) but if the information you're sharing is not true, you are damaging your authority as a reliable source. Period. Full stop. If your page is full of easily debunked conspiracy theories and “news” stories crafted (or fully made up) to inflame rather than inform, then why in the world would anyone want to listen to you about the Good News, much less put any trust what you are saying? Use your God-given common sense and critical thinking skills, and aim always to “be wise in the way you act toward outsiders,” as Paul reminds us in Colossians 4:5.

Reflection Questions:

1. Did you have a chance to try out any of the suggestions from the previous chapter? If so, how did it go?
2. Have these two most recent chapters sparked any new ideas or approaches in your mind? If so, what are they?
3. If you have accepted an invitation to visit with someone before, how did that person go about inviting you? Is there anything in that invitation that you can mirror or replicate?

8. Conclusion

As we get ready to bring this study to a close (though hopefully your involvement in inviting others is far from finished!) it seems fitting to focus in on a chapter from John's gospel which contains some of the most impressive and influential invitation work in the history of the faith. To set the stage, we know that John the Baptist had disciples of his own who followed him and who assisted him in preparing the way for Jesus. The goal was never for John the Baptist to gain power or authority for his own sake, of course, but rather to bring glory and attention to the work of Jesus. "He must increase," as the KJV famously renders John 3:30, "but I must decrease."

All the same, it still impresses me that when Jesus happened to walk by John the Baptist and two of his disciples in John 1:35-36, the evangelist's response was to point Jesus out to his disciples so that they could catch up and speak to him, which ultimately led to them leaving him and following Jesus. A few verses later, Andrew is identified as one of those two disciples, and it is quite possible that John (the author of the gospel) was the other, given that the identity of that person is not otherwise discussed. In any event, this is a quite remarkable turn of events. John the Baptist invited two of his own disciples to follow Jesus, and those two disciples would go on to be some of Jesus's most well-known disciples and closest companions in the years to come.

The story doesn't end there, though. Andrew immediately takes it upon himself to extend an invitation of his own, one with profound ramifications of its own.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. (John 1:40-42)

Right off the bat, then, a quarter of the Twelve has been added on the basis of two simple statements: "Look, the Lamb of God!" (v. 36) and "We have found the Messiah." (v. 41) Neither John the Baptist nor Andrew preached a sermon in this chain of events; all they did was to give a small nudge to someone to see Jesus.

Remarkably, a similar set of circumstances played out again the following day. In John 1:43, Jesus issues a simple invitation to Philip to "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew, accepts the invitation and then immediately passes it on to someone else. Philip's rendering of the invitation seems remarkably long-winded in comparison to the ones before it, but it still consists of a single initial sentence and a single sentence to respond to a question—two in total.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip. (John 1:45-46)

Although it took a bit more to persuade Nathanael to take that first step, he too would ultimately proclaim that Jesus was “the Son of God... the king of Israel.” (v. 49) Whether or not Nathanael was the same person identified in the lists of the apostles as Bartholomew (and there are good reasons to suspect that he was) he was among the fishermen to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection (John 21:1-14) putting him in pretty good company either way.

Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael—a sizable portion of Jesus’s closest followers was brought to him not through extended one-on-one study or powerful preaching, but by simple invitations to follow. So, what lessons might we be able to draw as we finish out our time together in this study?

1. Just because someone has some hesitations about accepting your invitation doesn’t mean that they will never accept your invitation.

Many people have had unpleasant or even abusive experiences in specific churches before; they may also be skeptical of Christianity in general because of those experiences or because of prior beliefs about the faith, well-founded or otherwise. Yet as the example of Nathanael shows, these are not always insurmountable barriers. Patience, matched with prayer, can work wonders.

2. Inviting someone who also invites others can lead to rapid growth.

For John the Baptist to invite Andrew to follow Jesus was a major gain for Jesus’s movement; for Andrew to then invite Peter along was a watershed moment. Similarly, while we may not all be persuasive preachers or scholars of Scripture—we may not even feel particularly confident inviting someone to a fellowship meal—if that person then takes that invitation to one, ten, or more people, we’ve had a far greater impact than we might ever know.

3. Our job is to point the way to Jesus.

Ultimately, the work of the inviter is to try to make a connection. We can’t literally introduce someone to the physical person Jesus today, but we can introduce them to the Body of Christ—the church. “Now you are the body of Christ,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “and each one of you is a part of it.”

There are many other things that could be written or said about the work of inviting, but at this point, the best way to learn is by doing. It’s okay if you’re still hesitant about reaching out to someone; after all, if it wasn’t important, you wouldn’t be getting nervous about it. (See also:

important tests, marriage proposals, job interviews.) But we can't let it prevent us from doing the work. We have been given a job, but we have also been given what we need to complete it. So, who will be your first, or next, person to invite?

Reflection Questions:

1. In what way have you grown or progressed the most since beginning this study? How have you seen that growth or progress reflected in your life?
2. Conversely, what are the things that still make you reluctant, or at least hesitant, to extend an invitation to someone? What are the areas that you most need to pray about?
3. Again, who will be your first, or next, person to invite? Pray for that person now, asking God to give you an opportunity and the courage to take it.